

*Religious Zionism
Post Disengagement:
Future Directions*

EDITED BY
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Israel's Impact
on
American Orthodoxy:
A Response

Leonard A. Matanky

This past Chanukah, one of my congregants called with a halakhic *sh'aila* (question). He wondered what the procedure was when lighting the *hanukiah* (menorah) outside, since this year, he and his entire “block” had decided to light their *hanukiot* outside, just as they did in Israel.

I told him that the procedure is really no different than when lighting candles inside, but I added that maybe the *sh'aila* he should ask is: *should* he light candles on the outside? After all, if for hundreds of years we Jews in the Diaspora have lit our candles inside –

whether because of anti-Semitism or fear of theft – why change now?

But of course, that question was not asked, and I believe that the reason may offer a context for my response to the two preceding papers.

For while it is without question true, as Dr. Waxman has documented, that the State of Israel, the post-high school year in Israel and the *shelihim* (emissaries) from Israel have all impacted and changed Orthodox Jewish life in America; at the very same time, I believe that we are also witnessing the emergence of a dialectic that effects the quality of that relationship.

For on the one hand, there exists the thesis, supported throughout *Hazal*, that the Land of Israel possesses a mystique and sanctity which distinguishes it from all other lands. Yet, as “globalization” effects not only world economies but also the easy access that we enjoy to the Land of Israel, an anti-thesis has emerged as this sacred place becomes familiar, approachable, and even mundane – no different than other lands – creating a sense of sameness between Israel and the Diaspora, or in the terminology of *shelihut*, used by Dr. Ferziger, a near absolute absence of the *shelilat ha-galut* (negation of the exile).

There are many examples of this dialectic, not the least of which is a desire to light Chanukah candles outside, as if the customs of Israel should automatically be transported to the Diaspora.

Yet, I would suggest that it is this dialectic, which stands behind the success and challenges of *Kollelei Torah MiTzion*.

On the one hand, there are those who seek these *kollelim*, not necessarily for the Torah study they present, but more for a sense of near “extraterritoriality” they offer – of the wonder of stepping into a *beit midrash*, whether in Capetown, Cleveland, Chicago, or Moscow, and hearing *ivrit*, seeing the flag of Israel and imagining that we *are* in Israel – that we have recaptured a bit of that sacred, mystical Land in our own backyards.

However, once established, we measure these *kollelim* no differently than any other. We expect *shelihim*, unfamiliar with American culture, language and tradition, and who, by definition are only pres-

ent for a brief time, to have the same immediate and lasting impact on communities as “right-wing kollelim” whose American-born members permanently settle into our communities; we seek in-reach, while these Israeli *avreikhim* (kollel students) seek outreach; and we pray that *aliya* won't be mentioned too often, so as not to disturb our sense of equilibrium living in the Diaspora.

Therefore, while I have personally proposed creating a hybrid kollel, as suggested by Dr. Ferziger, I do wonder if it can truly succeed; because of this dialectic.

For even if the members of Kollel Torah MiTzion came from non-Kookian yeshivot and therefore are able to cope with the reality of a Diaspora that is not yearning to make *aliya*, their *shelihut* is not a *shelihut* exclusively of *limud Torah* (learning Torah). Rather, it is a *shelihut* of Israel experience, of the experiences in which they were raised and hope to share. Combine this zeal with a group of *avreikhim* from American yeshivot, where *Tanakh* and the annual volume published by Tzomet, *Tehumin*, may be valued, but not studied with the same rigor as Talmud and Codes; where university is a given and army service unheard of, and the resulting clash of sameness vs. uniqueness, may be more than one kollel can bear.

Of course, as individuals, we may have the ability to compartmentalize our lives, to keep competing and even conflicting values at play and at bay, but an organization typically cannot.

Therefore, I believe that while Kollel Torah MiTzion has and will continue to have great value to the American Jewish scene, I believe we will see some additional kollelim close, as did Cleveland's or at least, reorganize. Instead we will see Yeshiva University Kollelim open in places which once hosted Kollelei Torah MiTzion, offering continuity, and American style Torah study, struggling to preserve a semblance of Israeli culture through a kollel member or two, or via special visiting scholars or other such program. In this case the sense of sameness will have won-out.

Of course, this does not suggest that we should not try to preserve the *shelihut* of Israeli *avreikhim*, to a hybrid model. For if successful, these Israeli scholars can add to American Modern Orthodox kollelim in a manner that *morim-shelihim* (Israeli teachers)

have added to our schools. However, the challenge will be great to find just the right combination of Israeli and American men.

An additional challenge that the Kollel Torah MiTzion movement has faced is that many who should appreciate the uniqueness of these kollelim are those who studied in Israel themselves. However, that year is no longer the same defining Zionist experience that some of us recall.

I am a product of a pioneering yeshiva for Diaspora students called Beit Midrash LaTorah or BMT. It was not a *yeshivat hesder* (a yeshiva that combines Torah learning with military service), but all of my *shiurim* (classes), save one, were taught in Hebrew, most of my teachers were Israeli, every week there was a outing somewhere in Israel, each of us were expected to volunteer for the *mishmar ezrahi* (civilian service), formal discussions of aliya were frequently held, and current events in Israel were part of our curriculum.

Compare that to the schools where most of our children and especially our daughters attend, "American schools" where the curriculum celebrates, not the uniqueness of Israel, but its sameness, offering programs which could, for the most part, take place in New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago; where Israeli teachers are in the minority, Hebrew language classes are few and far between, and the interaction with Israelis and Israeli society is infrequent. Even in some of our sacred hesder yeshivot, shiurim may be in English, and integration minimal.

Is it any wonder then that Shalom Berger in his landmark study in the 1990s found that while the year in Israel had a significant impact on the religious observance of the students, it did not have a significant impact on the Religious Zionism of our children? Or, in the terms of the dialectic I have suggested, is it surprising that the sense of sameness, of not appreciating the difference between Diaspora and Israel, is growing?

Which may also explain the challenges confronting American Religious Zionism, its apparent lack of activism, growth, and zeal-ousness. For if there is no perceived difference between Israel and the Diaspora, if the sense of sameness trumps the mystique of a Holy Land, then what purpose is there to Religious Zionism?

Perhaps what is needed for American Religious Zionism to re-emerge as a premier force in America and Israel is to reemphasize that a dialectic must exist; that while Israel is accessible, it is unique and unlike all other lands, and that these differences must be cherished and fostered in America and in Israel.

One final thought:

Dr. Ferziger noted that it is actually more likely that, other than a relationship to State of Israel, the worldview put forth in many of the Religious Zionist yeshivas has more in common with American haredism than with Modern Orthodoxy; an observation that Rav Drukman seems to strengthen with his own comments to Ferziger that for American Modern Orthodoxy the most common alternative is haredization.

Part of the reason for that is that year in Israel has become, as Dr. Finkelman noted more than six years ago, a place of *Virtual Volozhin*, where “*lomdus*” (Talmudic scholarship) and “*yeshivish* behavior” are more important than textual skills or independent growth – or what may be considered an ArtScroll versus an authentic yeshiva experience.

If only the Israel experience were at least a “Virtual Jerusalem,” a uniquely Israeli Jewish experience, perhaps then the mystique of Israel, the Sacred Land, would be preserved.

Unquestionably, Israel has impacted, effected and affected all of our lives. But that is the way it should be, because Orthodoxy reinforces these connections, through our prayer, our sacred texts, and our rituals. Yet, if that impact is to be more meaningful than a *hora* danced at a haredi wedding, a falafel stand in a Jewish neighborhood, or even a yearly family trip to the new Jewish Disneyland – called Israel, we must strive to transform our search for sameness to an understanding that Israel is unique, offering us not only another opportunity for spiritual growth, but the prime opportunity for such growth.