

Rav Soloveitchik on the Significance of the State of Israel

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The Two Covenants and the State of Israel

In 1935, on his only trip to Eretz Yisrael, Rav Soloveitchik submitted his candidacy for the chief rabbinate of Tel Aviv as the representative of Agudath Israel, a non-Zionist, perhaps even anti-Zionist, political-religious organization. By 1944, he was chairman of the Central Committee of the Religious Zionists of America. He testifies that his move to Mizrachi was not an easy one, as it entailed a break with his family's position and rejection by his rabbinic peers:

I was not born into a Zionist household. My parents' ancestors, my father's house, my teachers and colleagues were far from the Mizrachi religious Zionists ... My links with the Mizrachi grew gradually; I had my doubts about the validity of the Mizrachi approach ...

I built an altar upon which I sacrificed sleepless nights, doubts and reservations. Regardless, the years of the Hitlerian Holocaust, the establishment of the State of Israel, and the accomplishments of the Mizrachi in the land of Israel, convinced me of the correctness of our movement's path. The altar still stands today, with smoke rising from the sacrifice upon it ... Jews like me ... are required to sacrifice on this altar their peace of mind as well as their social relationships and friendships. (Five Addresses, 34, 36)²

A variety of factors—some related to fate and some to destiny—contributed to the Rav's support for Mizrachi and to his personal commitment to the State of Israel.

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² Actually, the Rav's father had earlier associated himself with Mizrachi when, in 1920, he became head of religious studies at the Mizrachi-affiliated Takhkemoni Rabbinical Seminary in Warsaw. The question of the exact timing of the Rav's move from Agudah to Mizrachi has been raised by R. Shlomo Pick, "The Rav: Biography and Bibliography," *B.D.D.* 6 (1998), 31–37. However, what interests us here is the Rav's self-perception. The above-cited testimony was delivered in an address to the Religious Zionists of America in 1962.

I. Fate: The last three of the famous “six knocks” described in *Kol Dodi Dofek* all deal with the State of Israel’s contribution to Jewish survival. The State of Israel is a refuge for persecuted Jews; it establishes the principle of Jewish self-defense; and it serves as a bulwark against assimilation for Diaspora Jews, many of whom maintain their sense of Jewish identity through identification with Israel and concern for its welfare.

II. Destiny: The State of Israel aids in the attainment of Jewish spiritual goals in several ways. First, by settling the land and exercising sovereignty in it, the Jewish community fulfills one of the 613 biblical mitzvot, “You shall possess the land and dwell therein” (Num. 33:53).³ Second, the Jewish state is a natural and congenial environment for Torah study, a land in which the Jewish people can transplant and rebuild the destroyed Torah centers of Europe.⁴ By helping establish Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel and building Torah institutions there, the Mizrachi paved the way for Jewish spiritual continuity following the eclipse of traditional European Jewish society in the Enlightenment and its destruction in the Holocaust. In this, the Mizrachi followed the path of Joseph, who, foreseeing the winds of change that would challenge his father’s traditional existence in the backwaters of an undeveloped country, prepared the way for Jewish spiritual continuity even in the sophisticated society of imperial Egypt. Like Joseph, the Mizrachi leaders were also shunned by their more short-sighted brothers for their convictions and actions.

Third, the State of Israel can benefit not only the study of Torah but its application as well, for within the state it is possible to apply Halakhah to a broad range of issues, including modern technology and public life. Others, whether Reform or Haredi, may feel that the Torah cannot survive a confrontation with modern society, and therefore, it must either change in accordance with the times or retreat into isolation. The Rav strongly identified with the Mizrachi’s position that Torah can and should engage the world, that it can meet any challenge and be applied in any circumstance.⁵ Thus, ideally, the State of Israel can provide a framework within which to realize the covenant of destiny by fostering Torah values and applying Halakhah to the full range of human endeavors.⁶

The Rav strongly felt the eternal connection of the Jew to the Land of Israel, and testified on many occasions that he had imbibed from his father and grandfather a love for the land and its sanctity.⁷ Furthermore, he believed that divine providence had decreed that in the dispute between Religious Zionists and anti-Zionists, the Religious Zionists had been correct.⁸ Yet when we ask ourselves which elements of Jewish destiny can be attained *only* in the Land of Israel, we see that it is just the first of them—the specific mitzvah of settlement. The Rav felt that the broader elements of destiny—building Torah institutions, striving for *kedushah*, applying Halakhah to modern society and engaging the world—were equally relevant to the Diaspora and could be achieved there as well.

³ “*Al Ahavat ha-Torah u-Geulat Nefesh ha-Dor*,” 424–25; *Five Addresses*, 137–38. See also For Further Reference, #1.

⁴ *Five Addresses*, 31–33.

⁵ *Five Addresses*, 152–57, 174–75, and “*Mah Dodekh mi-Dod*,” 90–91 (the position that the Rav cites as “some say” seems to be his own, in contrast to that of his illustrious uncle R. Velvel).

⁶ *Kol Dodi Dofek*, 70–71.

⁷ See, for example, “*Al Ahavat ha-Torah*,” 422–23; *Five Addresses*, 34–35; *Community, Covenant and Commitment*, 239.

⁸ *Five Addresses*, 31–36. This point is also apparent from the Rav’s discussion of the six knocks.

His identification with Mizrachi was based not only on its support for religious life in the State of Israel, but on broad philosophical principles with universal application: belief in anti-isolationism, human activism and creativity, and the Torah's ability to purify man and society.⁹

In *Kol Dodi Dofek* and elsewhere, the Rav expresses his strong belief that God's hand was manifest in the founding of the State of Israel.¹⁰ Yet the fact of *yad Hashem* being present in Israel's creation does not necessarily mean that the State of Israel is "the first flowering of our redemption." Nor does the fact that the State is a gift from God mean that it is a value in itself. Rather, the Rav believes that it is an opportunity—an *important* opportunity but not the *only* one—for the Jewish people to protect its existence and pursue its destiny. The goal of combining the two covenants and thereby raising a people of fate to a holy nation of destiny is not limited to the Land of Israel. The State is an instrument that serves (or should serve) the larger values of the Jewish people and the Jewish faith.

The Third Way

In short, the Rav believed that the State of Israel is nothing less than a gift from God that plays an important role in safeguarding Jews' physical survival and identity, and that has the potential to serve as a basis for attaining their destiny. Yet it is also *no more* than that. In a letter written in 1957, the Rav stakes out his position against two other Orthodox approaches:

I agree with you that there is a third halakhic approach which is neither parallel to the position of those "whose eyes are shut" and reject [the significance of the State] nor the belief of those dreamers who adopt a completely positive stance to the point where they identify the State with the [fulfillment] of the highest goal of our historical and meta-historical destiny. This third approach (which is the normative one in all areas), I would allow myself to guess, would be positively inclined toward the State, and would express gratitude for its establishment out of a sense of love and devotion, but would not attach [to it] excessive value to the point of its glorification and deification.¹¹

Those "whose eyes are shut" are the Haredim, whom Rav Soloveitchik faults for refusing to

⁹ See also *Community, Covenant and Commitment*, 201–02:

I see two elements in the Mizrachi: (1) An Israeli political party that deserves credit for most of the achievements of the religious community in Israel ... (2) A large movement committed to a specific ideology and worldview whose impact is significant both in Israel and in the Diaspora. This movement holds within its hand the answer to a serious dilemma: How can we insert our eternal [values] into the splendor of the modern world? How can we remain steadfast and strong in the very center of the modern society and sanctify the new and that which is occurring on a daily basis with utmost holiness? I cannot join up to any group or association that has emblazoned on its banner [the call]: "Separate from the vast world [and go] into dark caves and set yourselves apart from the world and the rest of the Jewish people." This retreat from the battle is the beginning of defeat and reflects a lack of faith in the eternity of Judaism and its ability to dominate the new world with its powerful currents and changing forms. According to the worldview of our movement, Judaism is immensely powerful and capable of achieving anything. The most developed society too, [even one] leaping and conquering new areas of the natural order, also requires our Torah, and only in it will it find satisfaction.

¹⁰ See, e.g., *Five Addresses*, 170–73. Regarding the question of whether to recite Hallel in response to this miracle, see *For Further Reference*, #2.

¹¹ *Community, Covenant and Commitment*, 163–64.

acknowledge the miraculous nature of the State's founding, denying its historical significance, and showing no interest in taking part in its development. The "dreamers" are the followers of Rav Kook, who regard the State as possessing inherent spiritual value and assign it an overwhelmingly important role in the unfolding of Jewish destiny. Before pinpointing where Rav Soloveitchik parts ways with them, we must first understand Rav Kook's overall approach to the significance of the State of Israel—a State that in his day was yet to be born.

Rav Kook believes that Judaism comprises two "ideas," the national and the spiritual.¹² These are not identical to fate and destiny. First, fate and destiny exist in a hierarchical relationship, while this is not so clear regarding the national and spiritual ideas. Second, the national idea means that the Jewish nation can express its inner essence only by exercising political sovereignty in the Land of Israel, while fate is a dimension of Jewish existence in all places and under all sovereignties. During the two thousand years of exile, Rav Kook believes, Judaism itself was deficient, for it lacked the national half of its identity. Secular Jewish nationalists, therefore, are to be regarded as "holy rebels," for although they reject the spiritual idea, they are helping foster a renaissance of Judaism itself through their restoration of the national idea. By reestablishing Jewish sovereignty in the Holy Land, they reconnect the Jewish nation to one of its two sources of vitality, hitherto missing, and thereby initiate an inexorable process of messianic redemption. Whether its founders are aware of it or not, the nascent State of Israel contains inherent spiritual value as "the foundation of God's seat in the world," and therefore, it constitutes "man's ultimate happiness."¹³

All such talk of deterministic historical processes, inborn essences, and holy rebellions is foreign to Rav Soloveitchik. He does not perceive any *inherent* value in sovereignty, other than fulfilling the specific mitzvah of settlement, nor does he assign any *inherent* spiritual value to the State, seeing it rather as a base from which to attain *other* objectives.¹⁴ These objectives, fate and destiny, are the same ones Jews pursued during their long exile, since they can be attained in the Diaspora as well. Professor Gerald Blidstein points out that, unlike Rav Kook, Rav Soloveitchik does not accept the Zionist critique of Diaspora Jewish life. Therefore the Rav sees no need for a renaissance of Judaism, nor does he regard the secular Zionist rebellion against religion as a necessary stage in the dialectical unfolding of the Jewish essence.¹⁵

Furthermore, I would add, the Rav believes that if one can speak of a Jewish national character, it is not one that is inborn and essential, but rather one shaped by the nation's historical experiences. Not only does the Rav not speak of the "essence" of the Jewish people, he does not

¹² For a succinct presentation of Rav Kook's views on this subject, see his essay, "*Le-Mahalakh ha-Ide'ot be-Yisrael*," in *Orot* (Jerusalem, 1985), 102–18.

¹³ *Orot Yisrael* 6:7, in *Orot*, 160.

¹⁴ In "*Yarhei Kallah*" lectures delivered in the summers of 1978 and 1981, Rav Soloveitchik suggested that the mitzvot of appointing judges in every city in Eretz Yisrael and eradicating idolatry in Eretz Yisrael are both fulfillments of the commandment of "possession and settlement" of the land. Based on these insights, R. Yair Kahn suggests that these two mitzvot are not merely additions to the literal fulfillment of "possession and settlement," but rather define its essence. In other words, mere sovereignty is not enough, but is instead a stepping-stone, or a *hekhsher mitzvah*, to the attainment of the larger goals of justice and divine worship. See his article, "*Leha'avir Gilulim min ha-Aretz*," *Alon Shevut* 145 (5755), 13–23.

¹⁵ "On the Jewish People in the Writings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik," in *Exploring the Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, ed. R. Marc Angel (Hoboken, 1997), 307–08.

even speak of the sanctity of Eretz Yisrael as an inherent metaphysical property. Professor Blidstein reports that Rav Soloveitchik considered such thinking mythological: “I recall his developing the theme that the holiness of the land was not ‘mythological’ but a function of its providing the context for a holy society—again a fundamentally Maimonidean orientation.”¹⁶ In a striking passage, the Rav writes that the idea of inherent sanctity approaches fetishism, the belief in the supernatural powers of physical objects:

*For [R. Yehudah Halevi and the Ramban], the attribute of kedushah, holiness, ascribed to the Land of Israel is an objective metaphysical quality inherent in the land. With all my respect for the Rishonim, I must disagree with such an opinion. I do not believe that it is halakhically cogent. Kedushah, under a halakhic aspect, is man-made; more accurately, it is a historical category. A soil is sanctified by historical deeds performed by a sacred people, never by any primordial superiority. The halakhic term kedushat ha-aretz, the sanctity of the land, denotes the consequence of a human act, either conquest (heroic deeds) or the mere presence of the people in that land (intimacy of man and nature). Kedushah is identical with man’s association with Mother Earth. Nothing should be attributed a priori to dead matter. Objective kedushah smacks of fetishism.*¹⁷

Clearly, Rav Kook and Rav Soloveitchik are working with very different sets of assumptions. Yet even within Rav Soloveitchik’s own school of thought, some have questioned the scant attention he paid to certain values that are consistent with and even congenial to his philosophy, and others have developed Rav Soloveitchik’s line of thought further than he himself may have. For example, one of his preeminent disciples, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, discerns in Israel the possibility of leading a more organic and integrated existence, as opposed to the fragmented nature of life in the Diaspora. Even the mundane aspects of one’s life in Israel attain social and religious value by contributing to the stability and flourishing of the Jewish state, thereby lending one’s life a greater sense of wholeness. Furthermore, without denying the validity or value of Diaspora Jewish life, Rav Lichtenstein views Israel as the epicenter of Jewish life and the locus of the Jewish future. Above all, the sanctity of the land, even when understood in halakhic and not mythological terms, lends a special quality to religious observance in Eretz Yisrael and fosters a sense of being nestled within the divine presence. Indeed, these dimensions of Eretz Yisrael and of Jewish national life within it exerted a powerful pull on Rav Lichtenstein, to which he responded by making *aliyah*.¹⁸ These elements are not foreign to Rav Soloveitchik, but neither does he highlight them. Professor Blidstein aptly comments:

This image of the State of Israel as a potential embodiment of the broadest ethical and societal

¹⁶ Ibid., 309.

¹⁷ *The Emergence of Ethical Man*, 150. See also *Family Redeemed*, 64.

¹⁸ See his “On *Aliya*: The Uniqueness of Living in *Eretz Yisrael*,” *Alei Etzion* 12 (5764), 15–22, available online at www.haretzion.org/alei.htm. In an essay exemplifying the Rav’s demand that his students think for themselves, that they be *talmidim* and not *hasidim*, R. Nathaniel Helfgot goes on to enumerate other components of Jewish national existence undeveloped by the Rav: Jewish autonomy as expressing *malkhut Yisrael*, the ability to apply Halakhah to national issues on all levels of governmental responsibility, the potential to develop a polity guided by Jewish values, and the consequent ability to serve as a “light to the nations.” See his “On the Shoulders of a Giant: Looking Back, Yet Looking Forward,” *Tradition* 39:3 (Fall 2006), 31–37.

*vocation of Judaism, a vocation based on a broad covenantal commitment, is perceived by many students of the Rav to be implicit in his teaching. Curiously (and regrettably?), this positive and challenging image does not recur frequently in the published texts available to us.*¹⁹

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik saw himself in light of the biblical Joseph. The latter's constant preoccupation was to safeguard the continuity of Abraham's tradition when relocated into a different civilization. In the Rav's reading, Canaan and Egypt are not just locations but cultures—the simple and old vs. the sophisticated and new. In our day, the Rav felt, the tasks of perpetuating and applying the Torah within new environments would inevitably need to be pursued in both Israel and the Diaspora. He devoted his untiring efforts and creative energies to pursuing these tasks in the leading country of the West. At the same time, he involved himself and expended great concern in ensuring the Torah's continuity in the State of Israel and in shaping the character and future of the young state. It is now up to the next generation to carry forward his work in both centers of Jewish life.

For Further Reference

1. **The mitzvah of settling the Land of Israel:** Rambam does not include this commandment in his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, but Ramban counts it as one of the mitzvot that should be added to Rambam's list (#4). While Rav Kook's followers make much of this Ramban, seeing it as a guiding factor for their socio-political activities and as a cornerstone of their worldview, Rav Yehuda Amital points out (in his book *Commitment and Complexity* [Jersey City, 2008], 106) that Rav Kook mentions it only once in his voluminous writings. It would seem that neither Rav Kook nor Rav Soloveitchik regards this as more than a mitzvah among mitzvot; therefore, Rav Kook bases his extraordinarily high evaluation of Jewish sovereignty upon other considerations, while Rav Soloveitchik does not assign sovereignty a privileged position among Jewish values. However, Rav Kook's disciples, with a narrower halakhic focus than their master, tethered their understanding of the overriding significance of Jewish sovereignty to this mitzvah (whose status is disputed among *Rishonim*) and thereby elevated "possession and settlement" to a preeminent place among mitzvot.

Hallel on Yom ha-Atzma'ut: There are various reports as to the Rav's position regarding the recitation of Hallel on Yom ha-Atzma'ut. However, even if we were to assume that Rav Soloveitchik opposed its recitation, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein cogently points out that one cannot derive from this ritual question any conclusions regarding the Rav's attitude toward Zionism or the State of Israel (see his "Rav Soloveitchik's Approach to Zionism," *Alei Etzion* 14 [5766], 21–24). He compares this to the opinion of the "eighty-five elders, among them several prophets," who regrettably felt that, for halakhic reasons, they could not acquiesce to Mordecai's and Esther's request to establish a new mitzvah of reading the *megillah* (*Yerushalmi, Megillah* 1:7). Does this mean that they denied that a miracle had taken place in Shushan, or that the great salvation of the Jews from Haman's plot had been unimportant? Analogously, Rav Lichtenstein suggests that Rav

¹⁹ Blidstein, *op cit.*

Soloveitchik recognized the magnitude of the miracle in his day, but did not necessarily feel that Halakhah warranted the creation of new rituals. Note also that Rav Soloveitchik felt that the true meaning and significance of events would become apparent only with the passage of time. Therefore, just as the Sages waited some time before declaring Hanukkah a holiday (*Shabbat* 21b), so too we should not be hasty in formulating new rituals after Israel's founding or after its astonishing victory in the Six Day War (reported by R. David Hartman, *Conflicting Visions* [New York, 1990], 23, 158; and *Nefesh ha-Rav*, 94)..