

**Commemorating
the 25th Yahrzeit
of Rabbi Joseph B.
Soloveitchik zt"l**
The Rav on Religious
Zionism

Rabbi Shalom Carmy

Assistant Professor of Jewish Philosophy and Bible, Yeshiva College
Editor of the Tradition Journal



KOL DODI DOFEK: A PRIMER

During his many years as Honorary President of the American Mizrahi, R. Soloveitchik delivered many addresses articulating his conception of Religious Zionism. Several of his Yiddish speeches were transcribed and published in Yiddish, along with Hebrew and English translations of varying quality. *Kol Dodi Dofek* (*KDD*), delivered on Yom haAtsmaut 1956, is his most ambitious statement and the only one that he later prepared for print (in Hebrew). Bearing in mind how little the Rav published in those years, the pains he took over *KDD* testify to the importance of the essay and its message. It was quickly adopted as part of the Israeli school curriculum in Jewish thought.

In truth, *KDD* is much more than a Zionist speech. It formulates a fundamental outlook on the nature of history and Jewish peoplehood. The ideas are of great importance and the structure is also significant.

Our discussion will look at the opening section only in passing. The Rav chooses to begin with a discussion of the Holocaust. In a word, his view is that we cannot presume to discern God's intentions and purposes in history, nor does Judaism encourage us to speculate about such matters. The halakhic imperative of suffering and catastrophe is to repent. Repentance means engaging in self-examination that leads to active response. The question we must ask ourselves is

not why God has brought about this misfortune, but what we are to do about it. As fundamental as this principle is for Jewish theology, it plays an equally important role in the practical realm. Those who passed the Holocaust years in the safety of North America must examine their own hearts with respect to their actions and omissions during those years. Those who are alive today (in 1956) must likewise think about their responsibilities in the face of new challenges and opportunities. Later, the Rav points to the tasks incumbent on his American audience. In the opening section he sets the stage for that part.

The Holocaust is a dark, incomprehensible chapter in Jewish

history. The next section — the famous “Six Knocks” — seems to restore a sense of divine purpose in history. At first blush, this section seems to undercut the Rav’s skepticism about our ability to explain history. Some readers feel as if the Rav, in his Zionist exuberance, had promptly forgotten everything he said at the outset.

To understand why this is not so, we should contrast the Rav’s view of Zionism with more militant or messianic strains in Religious Zionist thinking. Advocates for Religious Zionism often claim that contemporary events, properly interpreted, provide a clue to God’s plan for history. Armed with such knowledge we can be certain that redemption, messianic redemption, is taking place. This implies optimism that history is progressing irreversibly in a favorable direction. Furthermore, the progress envisioned is not merely mundane; it is unmistakable progress toward the messianic goal foretold by the prophets.

As we have seen, the Rav is skeptical about such claims to historical understanding. Whether or not the return of the Jewish people to their land, the reestablishment of Jewish sovereignty and other blessings are irreversible, whether or not they are indisputable harbingers of the messianic age, is not our business to determine. God’s ways are not ours. Whatever the ultimate outcome, we are obligated to respond to the reality we experience here and now. The Rav’s halakhic philosophy is about how we are to *act* rather than in how we *speculate* about God.

Speaking in 1956, the Rav enumerates six dramatic developments connected with the State of Israel. Note that he

does not take these remarkable events as a guide to future divine intention. He asserts the more modest thesis that in these events God is knocking on our door, in the phrase he adopts from Shir haShirim 5.

The first two are political: the very establishment of the state and its victory in 1948 and consequent expansion beyond the narrow borders of the 1947 Partition Plan were improbable, “almost supernatural.”

The third and fourth knocks address Jewish self-awareness. One dispels the notion that the long and abject exile of the Jews was a sign of their rejection by God. He attributes this view to Christian theology. Almost certainly, he derived it from John Henry Newman’s *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, which he studied carefully in the early 1950’s; elsewhere he quotes other ideas from this book approvingly. The other is that the state of Israel forces Jews who had despairingly embraced assimilation and self-hatred to reassess their identity as Jews.

The last two knocks address the physical situation of the Jew. The fifth, “perhaps the most important,” is the discovery that Jewish blood is not *hefker* (ownerless property); in other words, Jews are no longer expected to be passive victims. They are able to fight back. The sixth is that Jews today have a homeland, a place of refuge, a place where they will be taken in during times of persecution. These two knocks are entirely pragmatic in content. Even the secularist who cares nothing for Judaism or the Jewish spirit appreciates the value of the Zionist project for sheer Jewish survival and self-respect.

The Six Knocks state what God has done for us. But the important

question is how we (in 1956, the Rav’s audience; today, his readers) will respond. Before drawing practical conclusions, the Rav must deal with the fundamentals of Jewish identity. The reason for this digression is that the leaders of the State of Israel are not religious Jews. “We have complaints against certain leaders in Israel due to their attitude to traditional values and religious observance.” For many non-Zionist Orthodox Jews, including the “Israeli” branch of the Soloveichik family, this justifies a reciprocal attitude of hostility and theoretical indifference to the state.

The Rav’s immediate reply to this argument is that we, meaning Orthodox Jewry, are not free of fault. After all, we did not go to Israel in sufficient numbers to mold the society in its formative years. Even today, he says, speaking (let us remember) to American Orthodox Jews, we do not contribute financially as much as we should to building Torah institutions in Israel. From a halakhic perspective, our task is our own self-examination and repentance, not complaints about others.

The Rav’s deeper response is to analyze the nature of Jewish identity in order to properly understand our relationship to Jews who are concerned with Jewish welfare, even while they turn their backs on religious commitment. Against the Haredi tendency to narrow Jewish solidarity to the community of the committed, the Rav champions a broad conception of shared Jewish identity. Unlike certain “messianic” strands in Religious Zionism, his assessment of secular Zionism is based on what secular Zionists actually say and do rather than on the calculation that their work unconsciously paves the way for ultimate redemption.

There are two faces to Jewish identity: the covenant of fate (*goral*) and the covenant of destiny (*yeud*).

The Rav's distinction between fate and destiny is first presented as abstract phenomenological analysis and concrete sociological observation. In philosophical terms, a group constitutes a community of fate when four conditions are met: they have historical events in common; they identify with each other's suffering; they recognize responsibility in confronting challenges; and they engage in shared action. In fact, the Jewish people meet these criteria. Regardless of the degree or nature of religious commitment, Jews share a history; they feel the suffering of their fellow Jews (here the Rav invokes the famous image of the Siamese twins who are viewed as one person because when scalding water is poured on one head, both cry out in pain); they feel responsibility for other Jews, in good times and in bad; and they are capable of concerted action.

Fate is not chosen. We may try to escape our fate, as Jonah fled from his mission, but to no avail. Destiny is about choice. A nation, like an individual, "freely chooses an existence in which it finds the full realization of its historical experience." Having defined fate and destiny philosophically, the Rav now excavates the theological basis of the duality. The exodus from Egypt constituted the Jewish people in terms of shared fate: God extracted the people from slavery unilaterally. The covenant at Sinai gives the Jewish people its destiny and it is consequently negotiated between God and the nation. The Rav distinguishes two terms for the Jewish collective in the wilderness — the camp (*mahane*),

which comes together out of fear and is organized for military protection — and the congregation (*eda*, deriving from the same root as *edut*, testimony), which expresses the covenant of destiny.

The Rav goes on to explore the laws of conversion, in particular the two stages of *gerut*: circumcision and immersion. Circumcision is what introduces the male convert into the Jewish people. It represents the covenant of Egypt, the indelible physical mark of being separated from other nations to become part of the Jewish people. Immersion represents the Sinai covenant, the "elevation from life as it is to life infused with exalted vision." This section in the essay is of particular interest to *lamdanim* because of the Talmudic reasoning the Rav uses to buttress his argument. For example, he demonstrates, following Ramban, that once circumcision is performed as a halakhic act, as it is for an *eved Kenaani* (not merely as a surgical procedure), there is no need for repetition; it is done once and for all. Immersion must be repeated whenever the individual moves from a lower level of sanctity to a higher one (as when the *eved Kenaani* becomes a full-fledged convert).

Now, having completed his discourse on the religious response to evil and to historical opportunity and his analysis of Jewish peoplehood, the Rav moves back to his assessment of our present obligation. From a purely rhetorical point of view, returning to the main object of the speech is an appropriate way to finish. It leaves the audience with a direct message.

But the Rav does not merely rehash the points he made earlier. The entire frame of reference has been altered by the sections on Jewish peoplehood.

Before that portion of the discourse, the Rav spoke primarily in terms of what might be termed "Orthodox interests," what his son-in-law R. Aharon Lichtenstein sometimes called "tallit and tefillin issues." To be sure, he laments the insufficient population in the Negev — the peace initiatives of the early 1950's did not yet recognize Israel's permanent title to these areas and proposed their transfer to Arab (not yet Palestinian) sovereignty — and he alleges that American Jewry could have expedited settlement of these disputed territories. But this question too is approached in terms of the sanctity of Eretz Yisrael, rather than as a matter of physical security.

In the peroration, after the Rav has defined the duality of Jewish identity and the essential role that the covenant of fate plays in our religious outlook, the focus is not on religion and land but on the religious mandate of survival. At this point, the Rav's thesis is that the survival of the religiously committed community throughout the world is bound up with the fate of the *yishuv* in Israel. In this respect, the threat to Israel is no different than the threat to world Jewry in the Hitler years.

The covenant of fate implies not only the responsibility of religious Jews toward secular Jews; it also implies a common bond that enables the Rav, at the very end of his presentation, to chastise secular Zionism. Some militant Zionist ideologists and activists were bent on creating a "new Jew" who had nothing in common with traditional Judaism or traditional Jews, and who disdained identification with non-Israeli Jews. Others cared deeply about Jewish fate and devoted their lives to the Jewish people yet sinned against the covenant of destiny.

They did not believe, and did not want to believe, in the singular destiny of the Jewish people. All they can offer, in effect, is the compulsory fact of shared fate not the free partnership of a shared spiritual destiny. The Rav ends with the affirmation of the Jewish people's unique vocation: we are engaged in the world yet ineluctably and gloriously set apart.

Sixty years later, the Rav's theological discussions of divine Providence and Jewish identity are part of the permanent corpus of Jewish thought. What about the practical details of his discourse?

On one level, many American Jews, especially the "Yeshiva University" types, have responded to the Rav's challenge. When the Rav chose to build so much of his discourse on the "knocks" of Shir haShirim, he knew full well that R. Yehuda Halevi, in the *Kuzari*, had cited the same verses with respect to the Jewish return after the Babylonian exile. The woman who fails to respond to the man's knocking represents the failure of the Jewish people to go up to Israel in their multitudes. In 1956, aliya was not sufficiently a live option for American Jews, even Orthodox ones. Hence the Rav limited his call to less personal kinds of support. Today the percentage of our people who have made aliya is respectable, and they have done so for a combination of religious and Zionist motives, not under pressure of persecution. They have contributed mightily to the economic flourishing of Israel and to its educational institutions and in particular to the growth of religious education. Most of us have studied at Israeli yeshivot, so that our financial commitment to them is based more on gratitude than on altruism.

The Rav refers to the accusation of "dual loyalty" levelled against American Zionists. In those years these imputations emanated from America's entrenched elites who were intent on marginalizing the Jew. The dominant anti-Zionism of the time appealed straightforwardly to American self-interest rather than moral or pseudo-moral preaching: the Arabs had oil, the Jews did not; in the Cold War era, the interests of the United States dictated appeasing the Arabs rather than catering to a vocal minority group. Even then, the Rav appreciated the courage required of American Jews to stand up for Israel. In 1977 he warned Prime Minister Begin that such support could not be taken for granted, given that most American Jews identified with America and its culture.

The Rav was right. By then the cultural climate was changing. Nationalistic "America First" attempts to neutralize support for Israel were being replaced, especially in the conformist academic and media cultures, with ideological bullying intended to delegitimize Jews who failed to move in lockstep with the progressive agenda of the moment. This challenge is both a threat to Judaism in the Western world and an opportunity for young Jews to reassess their lives. The fourth of the Rav's knocks is still heard, albeit in a different way than the Rav recorded then.

Let me make it clear that our obligation to identify with Israel and to counter anti-Israel propaganda, even at the cost of our acceptance and toleration in powerful circles, does not mean that we must eschew any compromise on maximalist territorial claims or regard every Israeli action or omission as impeccable. Surely this

was not the Rav's position. In 1968 he ruled that decisions about land for peace should be left to military experts, not to rabbis. In 1982 he demanded that Prime Minister Begin appoint a commission of inquiry to investigate Israel's failure to prevent the massacres at the Sabra and Shattila refugee camps perpetrated by the Lebanese Christian militia allied to Israel. Yet there is an enormous distance between the counsels of prudence and criticism grounded in sorrow and love on the one hand, and virtually automatic and often ostentatious allegiance to the fashionable proclamations of the herd on the other.

The Rav was also right about the difficulty secularists faced in inventing the "new Hebrew man" and a new Israeli culture. The old dream of an Israel no longer "a people that dwells alone," but a small nation like any other nation, has been refuted by history. The ideal of a new culture, incorporating some fragments of traditional lore but independent of religious commitment, yet satisfying human spiritual yearning, has not come to pass. An increasingly potent Haredi minority may still champion an insular conception of Jewishness that ignores the covenant of fate. The greater danger is the one the Rav poses in his conclusion — the narrowing of the Israeli covenant of fate to ignore the larger Jewish people and the failure of secular culture to find a place for the covenant of destiny.