

SUMMARY:

ON THE POSITION OF RELIGION IN THE STATE OF ISRAEL

by

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Spiritual values as opposed to the "Golem" of materialism

The Zionist enterprise is the outstanding example in recent generations of an abstract and spiritual idea materialised. It had its inception in hallowed writings and in secular ones, in philosophic treatises and in utopian tales. From these sprang the Zionist idea and came to life, its ultimate realisation being the State of Israel.

However, we are but at the beginning of the way towards realising the high hopes and ideals which spurred on our fathers. We may not say that because "we are here" and our physical existence is, as it were, safe, we do not have to bother ourselves about the spiritual goals of our enterprise. Without the ideal, our undertaking will be like a *Golem*, even if it might be technologically outstanding. But without the "holy name" of the ideal it will crumble. Two instances of such a *Golem*, which also were originally created by the inspiration of high ideals, are the United States and the Soviet Union. Israel, however, is much smaller and frailer; the tie that hold us together is still weak.

Having struck upon the spiritual domain, it might be well to focus our discussion on the Jewish faith and its goals and on Zionist socialism and its goals. Zionism and the Jewish society in Israel have always been nurtured by those two spiritual fountain-heads. Concerning each one of these two there is a great deal of confusion among us, many question-marks, disagreements, and dissatisfaction with the situation as it is. Also great is the will to search and find new ways.

The religious experience and the nationalistic experience

The conception and birth of the Jewish people, among pagans, somewhere in the deepest recesses of history, were bound up in two archaic and simultaneous experiences: the experience of the one God and the experience of the one land. The religious faith was founded upon faith in one God,

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the Creator of the universe, invisible, inconceivable and universal. He was first revealed, in a traumatic religious experience, to Abraham, who had himself been part of the pagan world. In order to sustain this archaic monotheism, a revolutionary religious experience in the pagan world, the patriarchs needed a "covenant" which would form a family and finally a people from the group of revolutionary believers. From this derives the experience of the promised land, promised to those who believe in the supreme God and are destined to be a living testimony to his existence. These two experiences, the religious and the nationalistic, not only came down to us from the beginning of our existence, but also became entwined with one another in the course of the centuries, forming a symbiosis.

About two thousand years ago, Jesus was born among this people. Judaism, the parent of Christianity, neither could nor wanted to renounce its pure monotheism, nor did it want to relinquish the connection between its religion, the people and the land. But in the Diaspora the nationalistic experience was transformed into longings for redemption, whereas the religious experience became an all-embracing frame of life, the Jewish way of life, binding upon every Jew. This was the *halakhah*, the Jewish law. The nationalistic experience became *aggadah* (homiletic and narrative passages in rabbinic literature) which was like a living spring in the depth of the nation. A beautiful tale, imaginary, sweet and intoxicating, which tells of "what has been" and "what will be", *aggadah* was like a soothing ointment on the tortured body of the Jewish nation in the Diaspora. Without the *halakhah* on the one hand and the Zionist *aggadah* on the other, one cannot comprehend the continuing existence of the Jewish faith and the Jewish people for two thousand years in the Diaspora.

In the nineteenth century, a rift became evident between "religious Jews" and "secular Jews", the latter having thrown off the bonds of *halakhah* together with the core of Judaism and prepared to assimilate completely. Some of these Jews, having come out of the ghetto, were among the most important philosophers and pioneers of new political and social systems, Marx being the most obvious example.

The new nationalism of the nineteenth century, as the Enlightenment before it, burst in upon the ghetto and awoke, as if with an electric current, the half-forgotten *aggadah*, creating Zionism by shock. "If you want it, it is no fairy-tale", Herzl said. The greatness of Herzl was not only in his magnetic personality but in that he gave Zionism a worldwide and international Jewish aspect and with the magic touch of a master turned it into a nationalistic movement fitting into the general nationalistic current sweeping the world.

The golden middle of the road

The early Zionists were mainly "secular" and "enlightened" and only a few were "religious" in the orthodox sense of the word. Even though they

were not atheists and heretics, their main inspiration for Zionism was nationalistic, not religious. Some of the leaders of religious Judaism in the Diaspora were violently opposed to Zionism, since they saw in it a denial of the belief in messianic redemption, reminding them of Sabbatianism and like movements whose failures had left traumatic memories in Judaism. There was, however, another part of orthodox Judaism which lent a helping hand to the Zionist enterprise from its inception. This was a stroke of luck for the people, the religion, and Zionism, for thus a rift between Zionists and orthodox Jews was avoided.

The early pioneers, especially those belonging to the labour movement, adhered to values of their own which derived from universal social theories. Their adherence to those theories did not fall short of the adherence of the orthodox to their beliefs. The creation of such socialistic communities as the kibbutz and the moshav was accompanied by a zeal and a fervour comparable to religious faith.

Only a small part of the socialistic Zionists viewed the struggle against "clericalism" as a holy one. On the other hand, there was in religious Zionism a stream which found no contradiction, conceptual or otherwise, between halakhah and socialistic Zionism. These were the founders of the religious kibbutz and moshav.

Most Zionists were not religious, some were violently anti-religious, but all found a way, the "golden" middle of the road, where they could walk together with the religious Zionists by a "live and let live" philosophy. This compromise between the non-religious and the greater part of the religious minority made it possible to reach statehood without religious wars.

In the first twenty-five years of the existence of the State, the religious minority has formed religious parties through which they obtain positions of power in the Knesset and the government by democratic means. In recent years, as Israeli legislation broadened, many points of conflict between it and the halakhah became evident and a process of erosion occurred in the historic compromise. The question "Who is a Jew?" was again raised with the immigration wave from the United States and the Soviet Union. So were questions of conversion, mixed marriages, recognition of civil marriages etc.

The orthodox Jews have salient points concerning the present condition and the future of Judaism in Israel and in the Diaspora. It would be well for the non-religious, so-called, to heed these. In our permissive society it is the orthodox community which presents the halakhah and its values as a check and curb. There is no denying that the secular community in Israel is more susceptible to all the negative influences of the outside world, and there is also no denying that those among the Israeli youth brought up on Zionist religious ideals are more immune against delinquency, drugs etc.

The difficult predicament in which the compromise now finds itself is the outcome of intolerance of the extreme religious faction, which drags the rest of the minority with it with the slogan "all or nothing". The source of the evil is even deeper. It lies in the fact that the Jewish religious leaders are either unwilling or unable to cope with the spiritual problems of the Jew as a human being in the Diaspora or in Israel, disregarding the affection most feel for the tradition and their hope for a spiritual renaissance among youth. The days when rationalism stood in opposition to religion, claiming it could answer all questions of existence, nature, society and man are long gone. It is precisely modern science which unseats man as the "crown of Creation". There is hardly a scientist who has not at one time felt a great awe as he was deep into scientific research. However, for the orthodox, no-one is acceptable unless he observes all the 613 commandments. They close the door of religious Jewish experience to all but those whom they consider orthodox.

Closeness or openness

The orthodox Jewish leadership guards the walls of the halakhah, lest secular Jews penetrate through them, or any rebel to their cause break out. It is losing a singular opportunity of reaching Jews, especially young ones, looking for a way to religion and tradition without keeping all the commandments. For it is inconceivable that all Jews might turn orthodox. An opening of the gates could come without giving up the essence of the religion.

In the United States, two new religious movements were founded in the nineteenth century, the Conservative and the Reform. Each movement tried to break out of the orthodox bulwark and to open Judaism to parts of Jewry in the United States who wanted to remain Jews, but could not stay within orthodoxy. Whether or not Reform, which has lately returned to the mainstream of Judaism, is the answer to the religious dilemma of the Israeli Jew, it answered a need in American Jews who felt themselves to be religious. The three movements, Orthodox, Conservative and Reform, finally reached a *modus vivendi* among themselves, fearing that a struggle would fatally weaken Judaism.

In Israel, regrettably, there is a centripetal process: the most extreme orthodox drawing with them those parts of the orthodox who should by rights grasp that theirs are the keys to open or close the gates of Judaism for those who want to enter. The secular Jews want the continuing co-operation with the orthodox because many of them feel the lack of Jewish tradition and faith, but their co-operation is not without its own *sine qua non*. We are willing to let the halakhah rule over the milestones of our lives – birth, marriage, divorce, conversion and death. But most of us cannot

tolerate that this readiness to comply with religious law should turn into a trap for a few exceptional cases.

The number of these exceptional cases is large in our time, since the source of their exception is in the tragedy afflicting our people. Problems of conversion, mixed marriages, uncircumcised children, *mamzerim*, marriage of a *cohen* and a divorcee, the law of levirate marriage, and abandoned wives – these were difficult cases in all times, but even more so in this day when the Jewish people has suffered from persecutions, forced conversions, wars and the holocaust. Being dispersed over all the continents, one part assimilated, another lived in societies which prevented their living as Jews and keeping the commandments.

In our day and age, in a society which wants to gather together the lost lambs and the black sheep, we cannot tolerate a harsh approach like that of *Beit Shammai*, or the claim for a separation of religion from state will grow. We all want a great influx of new immigrants. In the United States there are Jews belonging to the Reform or Conservative movements. It is inconceivable that upon coming to Israel the orthodox will tell them that they are not properly Jewish, since their marriages and divorces are invalid. It is inconceivable that an Israeli Jew who is a militant atheist would be considered a proper Jew, whereas a Reform Jew who prays to the God of Israel should be considered unfit. Regrettably, the religious leadership directs its resources and energy towards incessant factional quarrels and devotes itself too little to the ingathering of lambs into the fold. The problem of leisure time and modern medicine are two of the great questions of the future towards which religion cannot remain impassive.

I believe that the Jewish faith, which has taught the world pure monotheism, the day of rest, “love thy neighbour” and “love the stranger within thy gates”, will, in our day – now that it has been freed from the task of preserving the physical existence of the Jewish people – be able to renew itself and deal with problems in a greatly tolerant way. Abraham, Moses and the sages of the Talmud were in their time innovators. So should the contemporary religious leadership have the courage to be.

Summary by Chanah Arnon

Arie (Lova) Eliav, member of the Israeli Parliament, was Secretary-General of the Israel Labour Party, of which he is an influential member, and draws considerable attention by his appreciation of a Palestinian national identity.