

TRANSLATION OF ARTICLE

A CRITICISM OF "MESSIANIC" POLICY

by

Zvi Yaron*

In recent years the opinion has taken root in Israel that religious Zionism is committed to a political view which is identical with the most extreme opinions of the Land of Israel Movement. We hear and read that the borders are sanctified with a divine holiness, that it is forbidden by the Torah to withdraw from them, that one has to act with great dedication to avoid any possibility of compromise, and that this is a case where the Torah enjoins one to be killed rather than to transgress. However, it is well known that there are many religious Zionists who reject this viewpoint, but their voice is lost in the midst of the tumult of noisy demonstrations and trumpeted publicity.

Recently the discussion about territories and borders has been sharpened, and in the near future we shall doubtless confront a crucial decision with regard to negotiations with the neighbouring states. Therefore it is appropriate at this time to elucidate and publicise the view which challenges the politico-religious conception which has been promoted recently with such dogmatic certainty.

What basis is there for the assumption that the religious believer has to reject any compromise with regard to the borders of the Land of Israel? The main argument is that Zionism and the establishment of the State of Israel are to be regarded as the dawn of redemption (*atchlta de-ge'ulah*), the first glimpse of realisation of the messianic vision. From this is derived the political conclusion that one must hold all the territories which were included in biblical *Eretz Israel*, and that any withdrawal is a heinous sin.

It is impossible to ignore the fact that the belief that our time is the dawn of redemption was not common in early religious Zionism. At the founding of the *Mizrachi* movement in 1902 no reference was made to redemption; the argument for religious Zionism given in the first declaration of the *Mizrachi* was that "in the lands of the exile it is no longer possible for the spirit of our nation, which is the holy Torah, to survive in full strength". The redemptionist religious view has been fostered mainly by Rav Abraham Isaac Hacohen Kook, who was chief rabbi of Eretz Israel (d. 1935), but this opinion was not widely accepted during his lifetime. Only after the

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establishment of the State did the redemptionist belief receive public sanction, in the prayer for the welfare of the State composed by the chief rabbinate: "Our Father in heaven, rock and redeemer of Israel, bless the State of Israel, the beginning of the growth of our redemption". This formulation implies that the State of Israel is the beginning of the process from which the messianic redemption springs.

Nevertheless, not all religious Zionists adopted this view. In his essay on Zionism and the State of Israel, *Qol Dodi Dofeq*, Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, the greatest living religious thinker of our generation, says that the rise of the State of Israel is an event of grace attended by divine miracles, but he does not link to the State of Israel the dawn of messianic redemption.

The popularity of the messianic conception came mainly after the Six Day War, in the wake of the amazing victories and the liberation of the holy city of Jerusalem and the extension of the area of the State. In the wake of all these things there came an intensified conviction among many that these events were manifestations and signs of man's coming nearer to the messianic redemption. Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren, who was the chief army chaplain in 1967 wrote at that time that "before our eyes the messianic vision is being realised in its first stage, which is the military, political and territorial stage".

It is well known that the rabbis of *Agudat Israel* reject all religious significance of the State of Israel and therefore do not agree with the messianic evaluation of the Six Day War. But there are also many rabbis who are prominent Zionists who have likewise contested this. Rabbi Isaac Yehuda Untermann, chief rabbi in 1967, described the victories in the Six Day War as undoubted miracles, but did not discern in them a realisation of the messianic vision. According to this view, the State of Israel and all the events connected with it are viewed as manifestations of divine providence, but it is impossible to know whether we have entered into the era of messianic redemption. Redemption is hidden and enveloped in mystery and it is not within the scope of man, unaided by prophetic vision, to state anything about it.

Rav Kook also raised the question of how we could know we have indeed entered the era of redemption, since we have no prophet who stands in the secret council of God. His answer was that the plan of God is revealed in history through events which are plainly seen, and we have to interpret these events according to guidelines which were handed down by the Sages in Talmudic tractate *Sanhedrin* 98a: "There can be no more manifest sign of redemption than this: viz. what is said, 'But ye, O mountains of Israel, ye shall shoot forth branches and yield your fruit to my people of Israel' (Ezek. 36:8)". In the opinion of Rav Kook, the most prominent sign that the beginning of the messianic era has indeed revealed itself in

our generation is that Jews have returned to the Land of Israel and are cultivating it, so that the Land yields fruit and is being rebuilt. The renewed settlement is the "fulfilment of this prophecy in which we see the dawn of redemption". Also according to Rav Kook's view of redemption, it is not in our hands to boast and say that we know more than this, that in our generation the dawn of redemption is taking shape. Sometimes he surrounds his view with caution, writing in 1935 about "slight beginnings of the commencement of the beginning of redemption". There is thus no basis for the assumption that from the teaching of Rav Kook with regard to the redemption, the political conclusion is necessarily drawn that it is forbidden to withdraw today from the borders which were established in the Six Day War, even when the matter is connected with negotiations about a cease-fire and disengagement of forces in a prospective peace agreement.

Anyone who sincerely believes that the beginning of the growth of redemption is indeed manifesting itself before our eyes has no grounds at all for drawing from this any conclusion with regard to political and security decisions of the State of Israel. It must be emphasised that, despite the fact that Rav Kook is called in as their authority, there is no single hint or reference to this in his writings. With regard to political and security problems, the believer must be guided by criteria which take into account both principles and practical possibilities, and above all consider the question of danger to human life which is connected with any political and security decision. According to the halakhah, nothing takes precedence over preservation of life, except avoidance of idolatry, incest and shedding of blood, and only with regard to these things has it been stated that one should rather be killed than transgress. From a religious point of view it is impossible to accept the view that the borders are sacrosanct, and that it is forbidden to compromise on them, to the point where one would rather suffer death than transgress. On the contrary, a religious Jew who supports the stand which rejects any yielding and withdrawal can do this only because he is convinced that such a stand is reasonable and realistic from a political and security point of view; it is forbidden for him, from a religious point of view, to oppose compromises on borders if he has reason to believe that stubbornness in this regard is liable to endanger human life through the breakdown of negotiations for a peace settlement.

Moreover, in the whole unceasing flood of publications backing the politico-messianic view, the fact that within the territories beyond the pre-1967 lines there are about one million Arab inhabitants is conspicuously ignored. This total disregard and absolute refusal to relate to this problem in a serious manner raises the thought that here we confront a harmful phenomenon from a moral point of view. A redemptionist argumentation cannot gloss over this disregard of facts. Whoever assumes that his religious belief commits him to hold on to all the territories which were liberated in the

Six Day War must consider the reality of the million Arabs who are living in these areas. His religious and moral belief must disturb his peace of mind, and he is required to answer the moral question of what will be the status of the million Arabs within these borders.

Those who want to adhere to the system of Rav Kook regarding the dawn of redemption must study his moral teaching. "It is forbidden that the fear of God should supersede natural human morality, for then the fear of God is no longer pure. The sign of a pure fear of God is that the natural morality inherent in the plain nature of man is steadily rising to greater heights than would be reached without that fear".

When we encounter a religio-political standpoint impervious to such a crucial moral problem which will affect so many human beings, then we must feel amazement and alarm with regard to the damaging educational influence of such a view. The danger is greatly intensified because of recent signs that increasing numbers of young people are drawn to this view.

It is precisely in days of political tension and dangers for the security of the Jewish people that no religious Jew is entitled to formulate his stand according to the messianic promises regarding the Land of Israel. He is obliged to weigh his decision with complete sobriety according to realistic criteria which will enable the people of Israel to live in security and peace, and according to the moral imperatives of this reality. When one ignores such considerations and replaces them with the view that the era of redemption over-rules, as it were, the factual reality then the fear arises that the holder of such views is approaching a "messianism" which is fraught with dangers for the future of the nation and the religion.

Translated by Coos Schoneveld

Zvi Yaron is the author of a recent book (in Hebrew) on the philosophy of Rav Kook.