Perceptions of the State of Israel in Modern Halakhic Thinkers

by David Hartman[1]

A great deal of my theological reflections have grown in discussion with the Ecumenical Fraternity. This discussion began when the Rev. Coos Schoneveld was here in Jerusalem, and has continued over the years. One's theological thinking can take on a different clarity when it is presented before another person. What I would like to present on this occasion, however, is not so much my own thinking at this moment, but rather the way I sense certain strands in twentieth-century Jewish theology, as exemplified by traditional halakhic thinkers. One is my own teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. The others are Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook, Yeshayahu Leibowitz and Abraham Joshua Heschel. The following reflections certainly will not exhaust the complexities of their thinking, but may suffice to provide some parameters of the variety in Jewish theology today.

Biblical Roots

How a Jew interprets Israel and makes sense of the living community in Zion is a key to making sense of that Jew's spiritual world-view. Israel is not just another issue for Jews, rather it orients one's total theological vision. How one interprets the creation of the State or places it within some sort of coherent theological picture often is a key to the way one generally builds his or her total spiritual life.

In order to grasp the complexity of this phenomenon, one has to go back to the biblical roots of Jewish self-understanding. When God spoke to the Jews in the Bible, He repeatedly reminded them: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt." Beginning with the Midrash, all have asked — and notably the Khazar king in Judah Halevi's *Kuzari* — why does

1. This article is based on a lecture given to the Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity in Israel on November 19, 1987.

God not announce Himself in history as the Creator of the Universe? Is it not more impressive to be told: "I am the Lord your God, who created heaven and earth"? Why is the Sinai revelation — the first major self-disclosure of God in a dramatic, public way in history — announced in terms of the Exodus? Much of medieval Jewish theology and already rabbinic theology centers around that question. Where does a theology of history lead as contrasted with a theology of creation?

Whatever the answer to that question, the starting point of the Bible seems to be clear. God, the ultimate spiritual principle of reality, is mediated primarily not by His power in nature, but by the living struggle of the community to which He chose to give His Torah. Although the end of the Book of Job is an exception, as we shall see, in general He does not announce His presence through the mediative principle of nature but by proclaiming: "I am the Lord your God, who can be seen, understood and reflected upon only in connection with the living struggle of this people in its attempt to move out of slavery in Egypt."

Today this starting point is familiar from liberation theology. Moreover, Michael Walzer has written a major book, *Exodus and Revolution*,[2] tracing how the Exodus has served at various times as a principle of social revolution. What is crucial in the present context, however, is that in the medieval Jewish exegesis the Exodus was the prime symbol of miracle in history. It provided the basis for the notion of radical discontinuity in historical development, the notion of the unpredictability of historical events, the notion that strict causality does not define the course of human history. The living presence of God in history was seen — again especially by Judah Halevi — as the very antithesis of the viewpoint of medieval Aristotelian philosophy, in which to know God is to understand that which cannot be changed. In the biblical perspective, to know God is to live with total wonderment and surprise. In the Greek world-view, to understand that nothing can be altered is the ultimate mediative principle of the theological quest.

To use scholastic language, the contrast between those perspectives is the difference between a theology of will and a theology of wisdom. For a theology of wisdom, the wisely ordered patterns of the world — the today and the tomorrow as they unfold the yesterday in accordance with eternal patterns of necessity — mirror the continuity of the divine mind in being. For a theology of will, the rupture between the past and the future through God's intervention to achieve His will in the present is what exemplifies His mind.

It was a verse in the Exodus story that enabled exegetes to argue between these distinct viewpoints. When God said of himself, "*ehyeh asher ehyeh*" (Ex. 3:14), did it mean "I am what I am" or "I will be what I will be"? In the first case God is seen as the uncaused being, the source of eternal necessity, existing in the plenitude and self-sufficient of His being. In the second case God can be seen as saying: "I have not yet fully disclosed My presence. I will be the principle of surprise and wonder."

2. New York, 1985.

What is clear from Exodus, however, is that this people's history would mediate the presence in the world of the God who says — throughout biblical tradition — "You cannot know Me if you do not know the people through whom I reflect My fullness." To ignore the living historical context is then to miss divinity. Whereas the road of Aristotle leads to some notion of static divine perfection, the road that is mediated by this confused, rebellious and strange people as it emerges from slavery to Pharaoh, is a life led in theological chaos. To see oneself living alternatively in God's favor and disfavor is to live as a manic-depressive in history, not knowing where one is going. It is to live with holy uncertainty.

It can be very uncomfortable to go along the tortuous road that history presents for the believer whose roots grow out of the biblical tradition. Accordingly, there has always been a deep strand in monotheistic spirituality which tries to separate the quest for God from the attempt to ascribe some sort of coherent meaning to history. History has been a stumbling block for the spiritual quest for perfection, for union (*devekut*) with God. Mystics have felt that the religious quest has to nurture itself in oblivion to history. Although this is not the dominant theme in the Bible, even there it has a reflection in the case of Job, whose story defies any attempt to build a coherent theology in which the course of the human world is taken seriously.

The book of Job is the antithesis to a theology of history. It is crucial to the book that humankind plays an utterly insignificant role in the cosmic picture of God's "speech from the whirlwind." This is not the creation story of Genesis in which the human being is the image of God. Whereas creation in Genesis is deeply linked to the historical, the Job experience — although told as a personal drama — ultimately poses the question whether any consistent theology of history can be found. Despite the "happy ending," it leaves open the question whether our deepest longing for God, for His presence and love, can find a satisfactory expression in the uncertain course of human life. It suggests rather than one must find an anchor-point beyond the vicissitudes of history.

As I pointed out in my book *A Living Covenant*,[3] Maimonides' understanding of Job is fundamental to his *Guide of the Perplexed.* Job is seen as one who moves from the anthropocentric framework where the central drama is the historical, to a theocentric framework in which he perceives divinity independent of history. There is not a resolution of evil or human suffering, but a liberation from anchoring the theological quest within the context of the historical. It is like leaping to a mountain top where the history of human beings is no longer perceptible and does not burden you in your deep longing for God.

Job can resolve his suffering only by ignoring the centrality of history that characterizes the typical biblical outlook. It suggests that one must leave the centrality of the God–human encounter in order to be able to retain the deepest longing of the human religious quest.

The degree to which history plays a central role in the theology of Maimonides remains an unsolved problem. Does Maimonides require you to have an anchorage in an eschatological redemptive scheme in order to have faith

3. New York, 1985.

in the God of Israel? To what degree does he transmute the God of Israel into the Aristotelian God of Being, thereby making our experience of God in history only a prelude to something that is much more ultimate?

No one knows the answer to those questions. The tortuous conflict of Maimonides is shown in the way he deals with messianism. In the *Mishneh Torah*, his great code of Jewish law which has shaped the normative practice of the Jewish community until today, the theme of messianism plays a dominant role in the concluding chapters. In *The Guide of the Perplexed*, by contrast, messianism hardly appears. It occurs only in a small chapter, *Guide* 3:11, where the meaning of messianism is so much changed that it is no longer historical or eschatological.

That ambivalence in Maimonides is related to my own disagreement with Rosenzweig, who regarded creation, revelation and redemption as three essentials of Judaic faith. As I argued in *A Living Covenant*, the expectation of ultimate redemption is not essential for living one's life in the spirit of the Sinai covenant. In other words, eschatological resolution is not an essential feature of Judaic spirituality. It is not that I deny the ability of God to intervene in history and bring about such a resolution. For various reasons, however, which are explained in that book, I have come deeply to question the need to regard resolution as central to the covenantal experience. Nonetheless, I take the Judaic concern with history very seriously. My religious commitment to Jewish history is shown in the fact that I have chosen as a Jew to live in Jerusalem and to anchor my spiritual quest to history in this place.

Yeshayahu Leibowitz

The religious thinker in Israel whose major aim has been to free Judaism from its anchorage in the historical is Yeshayahu Leibowitz. He makes a complete distinction between his religious commitment and his nationalist commitment. When asked why he chooses to be an Israeli, his answer is simply that he dislikes being ruled by the *goyim*, by non-Jews. This — no less and no more — is for him the meaning of Zionism, which fulfilled its great mission with the creation of a Jewish State. Is there any religious significance to that state or to the fact of its creation? Absolutely not, according to Leibowitz. On the contrary, to endow the State with religious significance is to enter into paganism.

Leibowitz's approach to Judaism certainly reflects the philosophical spiritual quest, but he has taken the Kantian critique of theology so much to heart as to exclude all natural theology or theology of history from Judaism. Accordingly, he reduces Judaic philosophical spirituality to the pure commitment to observance of Halakhah. Why do Jews pray? Simply because it is a *mitzwah*, a divine commandment that requires unconditional obedience. Can they expect anything from God as a result of their obedience? Nothing at all. To expect anything from God is idolatrous because it makes God subservient to human needs. Leibowitz's paradigm for Judaic spirituality is therefore the *akedah*, the Binding of Isaac, where a man is prepared to sacrifice life itself unquestioningly, the moment it is commanded by God. This also is the starting point for Leibowitz's deep polemic against Christianity, which he claims reverses the

whole framework by having God die for human beings. Christianity is totally human-centered, whereas Judaism is totally God-centered.

This radical distinction serves Leibowitz not only in his opposition to Christianity, but also in his battle with the Jewish establishment and especially with groups like Gush Emunim, which attempt to view Israel from a messianic political stance. The answer of Leibowitz is to separate completely the political reality of Israel, which has to be understood in purely secular terms, from the religious significance of Judaic worship, which has nothing to do with the State of Israel. The State has absolutely no religious significance. Religious significance comes from the personal decision to serve God and make God the center of one's consciousness. For a Jew, that decision is expressed by commitment to the *mitzwot.* It has absolutely no greater relevance in Israel than in the Diaspora. In any place where a Jew may be, the same commitment and the same basic decision are required, even though there may be some differences between the particular *mitzwot* in different places.

That personal decision to serve God, Leibowitz argues, has a completely different nature from the decision of the Jewish People to create a state in its own land, a decision which has no intrinsic religious significance. It is a political decision by a community to give up its status as a wandering nation, living under the political rule of other nations, and to build a social and political reality which expresses its will to achieve political independence. A strong sense of nationhood has always been deeply rooted in the self-understanding of the Jewish People. The will to implement this sense of nationhood in a contemporary political context needs no messianic legitimization, as it reflects the healthy instinct of a national group to be ruled by its own will and not to be subservient to the political will of any other nation. Sovereignty is a political category for Leibowitz and not a religious one.

Leibowitz willingly admits that the creation of a modern Jewish state has an impact upon Judaism. The Jewish halakhic tradition is now challenged to think of ways in which those Jews who have embraced sovereignty in Israel can live out a national existence while remaining loyal to the Halakhah. One cannot have a Jewish sovereign state in which the laws of the Sabbath prevent the running of a police force, fire department, border defenses, hospitals and other normal rudiments of a viable national and political existence.

Already in the 1940s and early 1950s, Leibowitz called for radical changes in the Halakhah. He saw it as totally absurd and irreligious for halakhically observant Jews who live in Israel and accept its political sovereignty to live in a way that presumes the existence of non-observant Jews to perform vital functions. For then they are taking away from those Jews the ability to choose to serve God as God demands. They must, therefore, adapt their Halakhah such that persons who, like themselves, are committed to both Halakhah and the State can perform the vital functions concerned.

All of that, however, does not for Leibowitz confer any religious significance upon a Jewish state, any more than one ascribes religious significance to other features of modern life such as technological advance, which also oblige observant Jews to rethink the Halakhah. Changes in the Halakhah would be needed wherever the Jews set up a modern state, be it in the historical home-

land of the Bible or elsewhere. Here too, there is no ground to support a Judaic theology of history.

Leibowitz, then, has attempted to neutralize completely the centrality of history in the Bible. The biblical, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt," he claims, is not the organizing framework for Judaic spirituality in the Talmud, which he regards as having absolute authority over the interpretation of the biblical text in Judaism.

Only Leibowitz among major modern halakhic philosophers has taken such an extreme position. Soloveitchik and Heschel saw the State of Israel, as Kook before them saw secular Zionism, somehow in the context of the Judaic concern with history. In so doing, however, they found it more difficult than Leibowitz to develop a smoothly consistent viewpoint. To understand why, it will be useful to take a more detailed look at the biblical framework and at how it has influenced traditional Jewish thought up to the present.

The Traditional Jewish Attitude to History

In the biblical framework, the Sinai covenant is placed in the context of the primary moment of the Exodus. Revelation of *mitzwah* is firmly anchored in the concrete historical drama of the community. The Exodus and the entry into the Promised Land are two points of the narrative that envelops the giving of one *mitzwah* after another. *Mitzwah* cannot be isolated from the prospect of the historical life of the community in its land, nor from the historical memory of the Exodus in which God is the liberator. Jewish identity, the birth of the community as well as its history, comes from that liberating experience. Also when Jews live in the Land, therefore, they are constituted by that identity. They are the property of God who redeemed them from slavery to Pharaoh.

When God says in the Bible, "To Me the children of Israel are servants" (Lev. 25:55), the Talmud comments, "And not servants of servants," before going on to explain why the Jew who voluntarily becomes a lifelong servant to another Jew must have his ear pierced: it is because he did not use that ear to hear the biblical message that God has liberated Jews from servitude (Kiddushin 22b). This is why the Bible limits servitude among Jews to seven years. It is from a similar perspective that the laws of the sabbatical and the Jubilee years seek to define the whole economic structure of Jewish life in the Land. Those laws, with their implied rejection of the institution of private property, are a constant reminder that the community was entrusted by God with the Land consequent upon that liberating experience.

Accordingly, any attempt to distinguish between history and law is absolutely mistaken in the biblical context. To polarize between the God of redemption and the God of *mitzwah* is to distort the whole biblical message. A redemptionist vision in history and a *mitzwah*-oriented image of God are linked, organically and inseparably, in the whole biblical framework.

Although *mitzwah* and the history of the community are inextricably linked, it is possible to ask which of the two is primary. Is the history primary and is the covenant of *mitzwah* a means to that end? Or is primacy given to the covenantal election-moment at Sinai, and only when that is the central feature of Judaic consciousness does the history of the community have

significance? The latter viewpoint is the one taken by the Bible. The history of the community is a mediative principle of the spiritual life only if it is an outgrowth of the community's covenantal identity.

Election and the covenant, therefore, and *mitzwah* and Torah are crucial if land and history are to play any central role in Judaic spiritual self-understanding. This is not a people born in a natural and historical evolutionary framework, but one whose whole destiny in the world is defined by its dependency upon divinity. Its existence is not defined by the normal rules that would apply to all normal nations. The antithesis to normalcy is seen in that the causality governing its existence is a divine causality. Its empirical world is defined by its relationship to God, not by its relationship to its more powerful neighbors. The prophetic critique of power is an attempt to ground the nation's existence in history in the purely covenantal principle. This guides what the prophets have to say about international negotiations with Assyria, Egypt and Babylonia. "To know who you are," they say, "you must understand your unique status in history. You were born by God's gracious redemptive event. Your life hangs upon your connection to His word, not upon political alliances."

This was the self-understanding of the Jewish People which dominated its perception of Jewish history up to modern times. It was inconceivable that this community could seek to come back to the Land and re-enter history through its own efforts or through exploiting political circumstances. It could happen only when God chose to remember His covenant with Israel, just as the Exodus story begins with God remembering His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Ex. 2:24). According to the messianic model of redemption, which mirrors the biblical Exodus model, the task of the Jews was to observe the *mitzwot* and wait until God decided once again to break the power of the Pharaohs who oppressed them. The second redemption would be like the first redemption, with God alone destroying the enemy armies. *Adonai ish milhamah* — "The Lord is a man of war."

Every year, the Passover Seder gave expression to the Jewish community's waiting for the divine rupture into history. Retelling the story of the Exodus nourished the living anticipation of a new breakthrough in redemptive history. ndreds of years, Jews cried out: "Next At the end of every Seder for many year in Jerusalem." No one started packing bags, however, because that cry was seen not as a personal statement of intent, but a hope of seeing God's redemptive power once again coming into history. "Just as He redeemed us in the past," says the Passover Haggadah, "so too will He redeem us in the future."

Those who still see Jewish history in that way refuse to ascribe to the State of Israel any spiritual significance. It is not because they make Leibowitz's total distinction between Judaism and Zionism as a purely secular political movement, but because they regard the whole Zionist enterprise as an impious attempt to return to the Land of Israel without waiting for divine intervention. They are deeply covenantal halakhic Jews who believe we can re-enter history as a sovereign nation in this land only in a framework of the total grace of God. The People of Israel's message to the world is the triumph of grace over power. Its long and patient waiting expresses its deep conviction that its reliance upon God's promises ultimately will be vindicated. As the twelfth prin-

ciple of Judaic faith says: "I believe with a perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah, and though He tarries, I will daily await His appearance." That anxious yet patient anticipation was seen as Jewish strength. Far be it from me to minimize the profundity of that conviction and spiritual understanding. What interests me here, however, is how other covenantal halakhic Jews, whose attachment to the Judaic tradition is no less deep, have nonetheless been able to find significant spiritual value in the Zionist enterprise and the creation of the State of Israel.

Zionism as "Heresy"

"Zionism" is a very strange term. In the deepest Nietzschian sense, Zionism is a total transvaluation of Jewish history. It can be seen in the important decision of the Zionists to come to Israel rather than accept the offer of territory in Uganda, which at that time might have seemed to present fewer political problems. If the concern had simply been to end Jewish wandering and the impact of antisemitism, then other countries could equally have served that purpose. Why was that suggestion not accepted by people who were in revolt against Jewish non-normalcy, whose modernistic perspective saw in history forces that human beings must master, and denied that there was any mystic law operating in Jewish history which is not operative regarding other nations?

The paradoxical message of Zionism to the Jews was: "If you want to be in history, then learn the same rules that apply to all nations, learn how they constructed their nation states, learn what it means to harness the national will, and only if you learn that Torah of the gentiles ... can you return to the Land of Israel." The Jewish socialist Bund, then a highly active force in the communities of Eastern Europe, ridiculed this deviation from socialist orthodoxy, according to which the Jews had to liberate themselves where their population concentrations were highest. As for learning Hebrew, this was the language of clerical reaction, whereas only Yiddish — the language of the oppressed Jewish masses — could be the *lingua franca* of a modern Jewish culture.

So the return to Israel was not a return to the traditional Torah from Sinai, which taught that a unique law applied to Jewish history, but its purpose was to demythologize that Torah and learn from the Torah of the world. The Jews would rebuild the Land of Israel as European immigrants had built a powerful democratic republic in the United States. They would liberate Jerusalem, as the forces of Italian nationalism had liberated Rome, and Greek nationalism had liberated Athens. Just as other nations were struggling to set up their own states and rebuild their cultures all over Europe, so would the Jews rebuild their own homeland. Few of them might be living there, but now was the time for a new Exodus from the lands of their political subjugation.

What classical Zionism did was to reverse the relationship between the Exodus from Egypt and the covenant of *mitzwah* at Sinai. Whereas the Bible and traditional Judaism, as we saw, subordinated the meanings of the Exodus and the Land of Israel to the normative moment of Sinai, now they had an independent meaning as expressing the will of the people to be free. That historical will had found expression at one time through the Mosaic vision of the Jew-

ish people as a Torah people, but in the very different modern context its proper expression was in the form of a democratic secular nation state.

This State of Israel that we live in was created by people who turned history upside down from the traditional Judaic viewpoint. They made the primary moment the national historical will, rather than the will of God for this nation, and their deepest impulse was for normalcy and being like all of the nations of the world, rather than being "a people that shall dwell alone and shall not be reckoned among the nations" (Num. 23:9).

If this is so, then Zionism is the greatest heresy from the viewpoint of Jewish spirituality, a heresy which should be radically rejected by all who accept the Sinai covenant as constitutive of Jewish self-understanding. And indeed, many did reject it. Nonetheless, some leading figures in Orthodox Judaism have discerned something welcome in that heresy, despite the ideological problems. As has been made clear, the problems were not the ones that led to the deep Bundist rejection of Zionism. Nor were they the problems that prevented Hermann Cohen and early Reform Judaism from embracing Zionism, and that created difficulties for Rosenzweig and others. Those other problems, which will not be discussed here, grew variously out of Marxist ideals or the deep universalist ideal that permeated German Jewry. The issue here is to make sense of how some twentieth century Orthodox Jewish theologians could express sympathy for this heretical movement.

Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook

The one who gave a profound lead in this direction was Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Mandatory Palestine. While coming of the East European tradition, he was one of the deepest religious mystics of the twentieth century. His mysticism enabled him to offer a dialectical perspective on the Zionist revolution. He discerned a principle of unity which will ultimately triumph as a redemptive principle in history, although the historical process goes through deep inner contradictions before it overcomes them and rises to a higher unity.

For Kook, Jewish atheism was a temporary phenomenon whose positive function was a deep purging of a limited tribal image of a terrifying punishing God. Likewise, he saw the revolutionary thrust of Marxism and the whole evolutionary forward-moving consciousness of modern secularity as a deep purging of regressive religious patterns, which would be followed by religious renewal.

Since he dealt with secularity from a larger mystic vision of unity, Kook could also see in the socialist Zionist revolution a refurbishing and renewal of the Jewish People's vital religious spirit. It was a necessary stage in the liberation of new powers of spirituality in the community. The need to survive in exile had so much absorbed the deep passionate powers in the Jewish People as to transform them into a people who made exile into a total normative stance. The wandering and waiting was soaking up all their powers of love. The Jewish return to the Land, consequently, could be made only by people who revolted against that passive spiritual attitude. It was the secular drive of the Zionist revolution that would regenerate new universal powers of love in this people. In the environment of the sanctity of the Land of Israel, however, the regenerated

powers would gradually lead those atheists to find the way back to the God of their biblical ancestors and to the faith of Israel. Through this process of purgation and renewal, a higher form of Judaic spirituality would arise than that against which they had revolted.

Deeply present in this mystical vision is the notion that the Jewish people in its essence can never escape its covenantal destiny. Secularity, atheism and the thirst for normalcy are just stages in the deeper purification and unfolding of that destiny. The People of Israel is God's elect instrument for universal redemption. That is a given which is unalterable. Only the details of how that destiny is realized may assume intricate dialectical forms.

Joseph B. Soloveitchik

Mysticism, however, is not the only path to have led a major Orthodox Jewish thinker to welcome Zionism. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the leading figure in modern Orthodoxy and my own teacher, is not a mystic, but comes out of the highly intellectual Lithuanian tradition of Torah scholarship. He equally decided to become a religious Zionist, seeing in the State of Israel a great instrument for regenerating the national will of the Jewish People to be visible in history. Israel can induce the Jewish People to overcome the Marrano-like habits that it acquired during its traumatized ghetto experiences, culminating in the Holocaust.

Also, Israel makes assimilation more difficult for those Jews who have left the ghetto and sought a place in gentile society. Soloveitchik regards the breakdown of the ghetto and the entrance of the Jewish People into Western civilization as a intoxicating experience in which the Jewish People, having waited so long for acceptance, was ready to make any sacrifice in order to feel part of the human race. It is the phenomenon pinpointed so clearly by Scholem in his classic essays on German Jews. The quickness with which they were able to cast off many centuries of religious practice was an unbelievable feat. The only way to make sense of it is to recognize that deep in the Jewish soul was a desire to share the exciting modern world with others.

Soloveitchik noticed that these Jews hiding their identity in gentile society, with their strong inclination toward assimilation and their terror of Jewish particularity, were suddenly being transformed and emerging into the open in response to the assertive dignity of Jewish particularity and power in Israel. Israel changed Jews from being easily adjustable Marranos to being a proudly visible people. For Soloveitchik, that in itself is of major religious significance, since there cannot be any Judaism without a living Jewish people.

What both Kook and Soloveitchik implicitly acknowledged is a principle that is the explicit basis of my own theological evaluation of the State of Israel, about which I have written elsewhere, especially in *A Living Covenant.* It is that if the Jewish State in some important way enables Jews to live their Judaism more fully, then this alone already enables us to see a religious significance in the creation and existence of that state. For Kook, it energizes their spiritual powers, liberates them from the inhibiting influence of exilic existence, and turns them into a powerful, forward-moving, joyful, spontaneous people. For Soloveitchik, if Israel makes Jews want to be Jewish publicly, then he is prepared

to see them living temporarily without the covenant and without *mitzwot*. For what value is there in having a covenant of *mitzwah* and not having Jews to live by it?

The significant role of Israel, for Soloveitchik, is that it refutes any approach to Judaism which sees this faith merely as some sort of ultimate spiritual ideal. It places an obstacle in the path of those who regard the Jewish people as an abstract idea, an allegory or a community of the soul alone. The return to the Land of Israel is the return of the Jewish soul to the Jewish body, which is so bruised, so beaten, so downtrodden, that anything that revives and energizes it is of major religious significance.

It is interesting that Soloveitchik takes as the paradigm for that idea the Exodus from Egypt. That earlier liberation of the Jewish body he calls *brit goral*, the covenant of destiny. The giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai is *brit yiud*, the covenant of spiritual aspiration. The Exodus shows that there is always a religious significance to uniting the People of Israel in a shared historical destiny. Anything that steels the national will to survive has therefore covenantal significance, not from the perspective of Torah, but from the perspective of the living people in history.

It seems, at first sight, that both of these twentieth-century theologians — Kook and Soloveitchik — are willing to consider the Exodus as having significance even when it is not viewed or interpreted in relation to the covenant at Sinai. They are prepared to give legitimacy to Jewish existence in history and to Jewish peoplehood even when these are not defined exclusively by the commitment to *mitzwah*. What enables them to do it, however, is their belief that the connection between Jewish historical destiny and the Sinai covenant is only temporarily suspended. In Kook's case, as we saw, he believed that the interaction between the sanctity of the biblical Land and the liberated powers of the Jewish soul would bring the atheist socialist pioneers back to God and the covenant. Soloveitchik sees the suspension as temporary because he believes that deep in the soul of the Jewish people is a longing for Torah. No matter how far Jews go away from traditional observance, they cannot destroy that essential dimension of their consciousness.

Being Jewish is an unusual experience, as Judaism is unusual, which is why modern Western thinkers have had difficulty in grasping it. Is Israel a religious country or is it a secular country? We cannot give a clear-cut answer. Israel is certainly not a theocracy, yet it is also not a secular state in the sense that most Western democracies are. Which of the latter would show as much tolerance toward any religious group as our secular authorities show toward so many anti-Zionist ultra-Orthodox Jews who are making life unbearable? Why do the secularists show so much tolerance of legislation that enforces Halakhah?

Neat modern categories do not fit Judaism. Are we a people or a faith? We are neither and we are both. If you are a Jew, you cannot remember Jewish history and ignore the prophets. You cannot touch the Land without coming across Rabbi Akiva. You cannot dig your foundations without encountering the Second Temple. As you plumb deeper in the archaeology of your soul, you discover strands which are incomprehensible if you do not have some larger covenantal religious perspective. If you speak Hebrew as your everyday lan-

guage, even your casual conversations echo Mishnaic and Biblical Hebrew. The very language then creates its own dialectic of self-transcendence. You sought normalcy, but you chose the wrong place and circumstances in which to be normal. You wanted to be like all the other nations which are forward-moving and technological, but you chose a land and a language which do not allow you to forget your anchorage in history.

A purely secular and technological consciousness is blocked by the very presence of this community in this land, where it encounters a dialectic between historical memory and the wide-open options of the modern world. Jerusalem is a city of contrasts. There are the hidden corners and quiet reflective moments in which one touches eternity, yet Jerusalem is filled with the hustle and bustle of any modern city. Some of its inhabitants desire to live wholly in modernity, others wholly outside of history. But few escape being touched by some larger spiritual drama and few escape the invasions of secularism.

For Soloveitchik, the very fact that here the Bible is being studied by secularized Jews in its original language and context, even though with the wrong interpretation, the very fact that here Jews have to encounter and live in a dialogue with millennia of Jewish history, does not allow them fully to assimilate and lose their fundamental spiritual roots. Jewish history leads them toward a convenantal self-understanding. The ineradicable core of their culture, everything about it, creates its own dialectic and self-transcending experience. So Soloveitchik does not have to appeal to mystical principles of unity and the innate powers of the Jewish soul, but rather to the empirical historical experience which does not allow the people of Israel to lose its religious identity.

Soloveitchik is so assured in this matter that he is prepared to make one of the boldest statements I have ever heard from an Orthodox Jewish theologian. It concerns a famous discussion in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 97b), where it is asked: will the redemption of the Jews depend upon their repenting or not? One teacher said that it is enough if they have been suffering. Another taught that even if they refuse to repent, God will place them under a king so cruel that they will repent because no other choice is left. Maimonides codifies the law on this point by saying that redemption will come only if the Jews repent. Soloveitchik asks: if redemption depends upon their repentance, then how can we be certain that the Messiah will come? Yet the same Maimonides wrote that one of the principles of Judaic faith is belief in the coming of the Messiah. Accordingly, says Soloveitchik, the belief in the Messiah **is** the belief that ultimately Israel will repent. The very meaning of messianism is the faith that ultimately the Jews will not become a secular people.

How does Soloveitchik have such assurance? We can imagine a conversation that might take place between him and Leibowitz, if the two should meet. Leibowitz would point at Tel Aviv with its secular lifestyle, its Sabbath desecration, its criminal elements, its centers of prostitution. "Where," he might ask, "is the slightest sign in all this that the Jews are any nearer to repentance? Compared with all this, what does it matter if here or there a handful of Israelis are going to a yeshivah for penitent Jews?" Soloveitchik would answer: "I see the same empirical facts as you do, but I also see the vast potential impetus for change in this place."

Indeed, if you ask Leibowitz whether he thinks there will be a Jewish people in 200 or 300 years, he answers that he does not know. He is a man who loves his people deeply, yet lives with the profound despair that he may be witnessing the end of Jewish history. He has no theology of history, no God of history, because the existence of God does not depend on the historical process.

For Kook and Soloveitchik, however, God is still the one who says: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt." History is tied up inextricably with divinity. It is inconceivable to imagine God and not to imagine Jewish history, for that is the very meaning of Judaism. Consequently, for Soloveitchik as for Kook, the reentry of the Jewish People into world history, even in the form of a modern and supposedly secular state, is really the beginning of redemption, since one cannot take Jewish history seriously without recognizing the redemptive role of Israel.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

The one who sensed the redemptive aspect and wrote about it for the gentile world was not Soloveitchik, who wrote about his religious Zionism exclusively for Jews. It was Abraham Joshua Heschel, in *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*,[4] who interpreted the universal redemptive significance of the Jewish people's living once again in this land. In the period immediately after the Six Day War, Heschel took upon himself the role of making Israel intelligible to all people of good faith. Unlike Leibowitz and Soloveitchik, he deeply believed in the importance of the Jewish–Christian discussion.

Heschel felt deeply that people of spiritual goodwill should understand why we have returned. His paradigm for making sense of the State of Israel was to see the biblical perspective coming alive again in the modern world:

> Pagans have idols, Israel has a promise. We have no image, all we have is hope. Israel reborn is a verification of the promise.
>
> History goes on in time as well as space, and according to Biblical faith, the promise of redemption of all people involves the presence of this people in this land.[5]

Because of that connection to the redemption of all people, this is not only a rebirth of Israel but also of broader hopes for faith and justice, although the *shekhinah* — the divine Presence — is "cloudy":

> Eretz Israel is a prelude, an anticipation.... The State of Israel is not only a place of refuge for the survivors of the holocaust, but also a tabernacle for the rebirth of faith and justice, for the renewal of souls, for the cultivation of knowledge of the words of the divine....
>
> The land presents a perception which seeks an identity in us. Suddenly we sense coherence in history, a bridge that spans the ages.
>
> Israel reborn is an explicit rendering of an ineffable mystery. The Presence is cloudy, but the challenge is unmistakable.[6]

As his book concludes, Heschel makes a marvelous statement on the relationship of Israel to the Jewish aspiration to promote universal redemption:

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4. New York, 1968.
5. p. 101.
6. pp. 121–2.

> The ultimate meaning of the State of Israel must be seen in terms of the vision of the prophets: the redemption of all men. The religious duty of the Jew is to participate in the process of continuous redemption, in seeing that justice prevails over power, that awareness of God penetrates human understanding.[7]

For Heschel, the re-establishment of the Jewish People in its biblical land, against all the historical odds, introduces once again the category of surprise that characterizes God's actions in the Bible, as we saw above. The modern world, haunted by the bleak perspectives of the twentieth century, has been given a concrete symbol of hope by the return of this people to its land.

The theology of hope has now begun to become a concrete phenomenon because of a people's ability to act on the basis of its memory. Where was it ever seen that a people staked everything on a promise? Where is there greater allegiance to the covenant with God than in the willingness of this people to return to a Middle East in which everyone says, "You are unwelcome, you do not belong, you are a post-Holocaust phenomenon." Where is the biblical word and the biblical promise given greater reality, greater cogency, greater power than in the willingness of three million people to put all their eggs into this one basket and affirm: "We will live here because we are faithful to our memory." That statement is no longer restricted to the domain of sermons and prayers — "Next year in Jerusalem" has at last become a reality. For Heschel, it means that the word of God as revealed in the biblical structure has become flesh in the living, bodily return of this people. The biblical promises have taken on greater vitality. A new echo of God's concern for history has been heard as Israel returns. It is not a loud voice, but in this age of stillness and despair and darkness, any echo of eternity is all we can hope for.

Therefore, he called his book *Israel: An Echo of Eternity.* In it, a biblical theologian and a deep religious mystic writes with passion of the return of the prophetic promise as Jews once again build bridges and roads and hospitals in the Middle East. They returned to the Middle East only because they have been haunted by a memory which was founded on a prophet's dream and a divine promise that told them: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. I am in search of you, My people. I am only if you are in history, and your return to visibility is really a return of Myself to history."

Conclusion

Heschel with his biblical emphasis on history, Kook with his mystic sense of unity and Soloveitchik with his religious existentialism were led, each in his different way, to affirm the religious value of the anti-traditional secular Zionist enterprise and of the state that it created. All three, however, were strict adherents of that tradition against which classical Zionism was in radical revolt. How could that greatest of Jewish heresies be accepted by such Jews?

The only thing I can say is that if you understand how God accepts Israel, you will understand how those Jews accepted that heresy. If you understand how God elected this simple small weak people to be His witnesses, then you can understand how deeply committed Orthodox Jews, who cannot imagine

7. p. 225.

Jewish history without Torah, are prepared to give allegiance, love and commitment to a state that was created by a people in revolt against its tradition.

Discussion

Henry Backhouse: The Exodus story conveys an immense vision of the greatness of God. Those who made the second entry into the Land — the return from Babylon — also had a great sense of the centrality of the intervention of God and the fulfillment of His promises at that time. In the third entry during our own times, however, there seems to be merely some sort of *bat kol* of the sense of the presence of God — the "echo of eternity" about which Heschel wrote. My question is: what new thing in Israel today is going to preserve the people in the Land?

Hartman: That is precisely the concern of everyone in the Shalom Hartman Institute, which I direct. Many people in this country, however, are frightened about your question, which is why there are tendencies toward return to ghetto Judaism and anti-Zionism among Orthodox Jews. Nonetheless, I still believe that out of the return of the Jewish People a new Jewish spiritual vision is waiting to be born.

What infuses all of my work as a philosopher and as a religious believer is that I think God really wants us to rethink the terrible mistakes we have made in His name in history. The creation of the State of Israel has given Jews, but also Christians and Muslims, a fresh chance to change old ways. That is why I am here. It is also why I take very seriously the Jewish–Christian discussion. My motivation in participating in it is not just to make Anti-Defamation League propaganda, although there is nothing wrong with that. Nor is it just practical politics, as when people ask me: "How do you feel about Christian fundamentalists who are only celebrating your return because they expect the Second Coming?" And I answer: "If they will support me until the Second Coming, I will come to terms with them." For although I have a deep sense of realistic politics, I deeply believe that God wants more than that from us in our radically new situation. That is why for me the Jewish–Christian discussion is so important and why I am grateful that the Ecumenical Fraternity has brought me into contact with serious Christians.

Despite being given such a great opportunity, both you and we have reason for concern that the trend today, especially in the Middle East, is rather toward a revival of dogmatism and triumphalism. For my own part, I am deeply concerned about the return to the ghetto and religious absolutism and the non-thinking repudiation of modernity that has been seeping into the religious establishment in my country. We are witnessing the deepest undermining of the power of Zionism in the "Who is a Jew?" issue and the attempted delegitimization of the Conservative and Reform movements. Precisely as an Orthodox Jew, I am fighting against that. Although I have basic disagreements with those movements, the members of the Knesset should not be those who decide the deepest Jewish theological issues of the twentieth century. How many of them would even claim to be halakhic authorities, let alone the Jewish secularists and the non-Jewish members?

I have no illusions about my ability to influence events. Yet I must be having some effect, since more people are now resentful or suspicious of me, whether in Gush Emunim or in ultra-Orthodox circles, and even the Chief Rabbinate says that "Hartman is too open." What else would one expect from them when they see that women as well as men, people without as well as with *kippot*, are all studying in our institute? Even Christians come, and the *New York Times* heads its report: "St. Paul Meets the Talmud."

What is wonderful about Jerusalem, however, is that you can do these things. When I see that people of good will and deep believers are ready to do them here, as they were not at other times and in other places, then I believe that God's love is seeking a new way for us which is not a way of division and hate. That is why I recently spoke with a moderate Palestinian for an American television network. Even though they distorted the interview, I sensed in him a man of great integrity and a sincere Muslim. It suggests that there is also something to hope for also in my seeking for a Jewish–Islamic dialogue. That is a deep wish because I deeply want reconciliation with the Palestinians, as part of a reconciliation of all different peoples.

To me, pluralism is not only a political notion but also a new way in which God's unity gets expressed in diversity. In this land, but also in many others, the monotheistic faiths are being challenged to give up their triumphalist eschatologies. In the name of the one God, we have all blundered and done great injustices. Whether we shall succeed in achieving significant changes, I do not know. But I do think it is a task for people of faith to bear witness to the need for change and allow God to finish the job. We must not ask how significant we are politically. We have to serve God in truth, showing a genuine readiness to meet and greet the other, to welcome every new understanding, every new listening, every new appreciation of the other.

It has not been easy for me. I grew up having great difficulties with Christianity, as I learned how deeply Christian theology had repudiated my people. Given that background, it is not easy really to love the other, meaning not merely in the abstract but in the concrete. Consequently, whenever I meet a serious Christian theologian in whom I sense the dignity of a concern for our real acceptance of each other, that breakthrough is a moment of holiness. What it means in terms of the official church or the official rabbinate does not interest me. Irrespective of the official power structures, we must create concrete realities of understanding.

When a person of your religion encounters a person of mine, and they have understood each other and learned to sense each other's dignity and not to feel threatened by it, they have in some small measure made the world worth saving. Then it is worthwhile to pray for the coming of the Messiah. In my experience, one such encounter has been followed by another and another. So I am not discouraged. But I am not overly optimistic. For, like Leibowitz, I do not have a theology of history, yet I differ from him in retaining a deep religious passion for history.

Because I have no theology of history, I cannot say that God will guarantee happy endings in the historical process. Tragedy is a real possibility. But I am nevertheless deeply committed to the God of history, because I believe

that even without guarantees of redemption He makes our efforts worthwhile. What God does for me is never to allow me to despair, always to keep me in the marketplace. For me, that is a sufficient sign of His love. Does He tell me: "Try your best, and if things get rough, I will join in and we will work it all out"? I do not know. If He wants to do that, I shall welcome it. My theology does not deny the possibility of messianic redemption, but I do not make my actions dependent upon it. Even if God does not come to our rescue, I still love Him and still believe that I must strive to do His will.

During the Exodus, as you said, God was the central figure in the drama. But during the second entry into the Land, in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, His role was much less manifest. It was not God acting to destroy the armed hosts of Pharaoh, but the great king of Persia coming forward as God's instrument. Nor was the prophetic vision of Jeremiah and Ezekiel fulfilled in the Judea of Ezra and Nehemiah. On the contrary, there was great disillusionment with the prophetic promise. Despite all that, those Jews who returned from Babylon were thankful for the limited opportunity that God had given them. In *A Living Covenant*, I likened it to the readiness of Jews to thank God and say the full grace after meals even though the quantity of food is as little as an olive or an egg. Before the first entry into the Land, God had sated them with manna and quails; now they were glad to eat the crumbs of history.

With our third entry, it may seem that only an echo can be heard of God's finger moving history. But this does not mean that His love and concern have weakened. Rather, I believe He is telling the Jewish people: "I have chosen you. When you were young, I was the central figure. I intervened constantly, like an anxious parent who doubts whether the child can get through school. I had to stop you from going off with strangers like the peoples that surrounded you. Now you are grown up and wed to Me in an eternal marriage. It requires you to have some real faith in yourself, because without it, you cannot act as My mature covenantal partner."

As in the book of Esther He is the hidden God of history, hoping that we are now capable of taking the opportunities that He gives us. In a deep sense, I think God is respecting us as His mature lovers. His silence is really His love, showing His faith in our ability to exercise responsibility for our lives. Whereas the Exodus exemplifies the parent model of God, I see our third commonwealth in this land as exemplifying the lover model. It is the return to centrality of the Song of Songs, of which Rabbi Akiva said: "All the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the holy of holies." (Yadayim 3:5).

Bargil Pixner: Do you need a State of Israel or do you just need a land to live in, to return to? Can you see a kind of a partnership here with the Arabs?

Hartman: I need a state because I need a home. Nor do you have a home unless you have a private key. Having our own state enables my people to celebrate the intimacy of its communal life in privacy. Although power is a necessary feature of a state, I do not see the state as a celebration of power. Power is a roof over the house, because you have to have protection from the rain. The world is not yet fully moral, so you have to have locks. It is not

the locks that I celebrate, but the intimacy that they protect, for there is no community without intimacy.

Certainly, I do not want to have my intimacy at the expense of the Palestinian people. The Land, however, is big enough to allow for two peoples to surface in their own autonomous dignity. As I stated in that television interview, the purpose of my coming home will be realized in the fullest sense only when the Palestinian people feels at home as well. But I cannot provide for them being at home at the expense of my own people's lives. I do not care to be the martyr of history. I seek not to live triumphantly over others, but I do seek to live. I deeply hope that the Palestinians may yet understand that if they would see us as indigenous to this land, as coming here because we have never left it, then we would find room for each other.

So far, however, Arab propagandists have repudiated the dignity of our return by calling us a Western imperialistic tool and a post-Holocaust phenomenon. Like Christian and Muslim theologians, they have denied our dignity by ignoring or belittling our memories, our history and our permanent attachment to this land. Whenever they give up that ideology, I am prepared to forgive, to love and accept them. I also admit that we have done things to them which were deeply humiliating and destructive of their dignity. There has grown up a mutual politics of delegitimization which creates deep pain on both sides. My hope is that we can all change direction and begin a process of increasing trust.

My writings, public statements and teaching reflect my belief that the best instincts of my people prepare them for such a fresh beginning. I do not accept Leibowitz's view that nationalism has run wild among us. I am sure that if the Jewish People in Israel were convinced there was a real possibility for peace, they would manifest a very real desire for political compromise.

The trouble is that they do not believe it. Nor is their disbelief merely subjective: it has objective grounds in Arab statements and actions. How do you then create conditions where people really trust each other? For when bridges of trust can be built between the two peoples, as happened through Sadat's imaginative breakthrough, the political possibilities will again be enormous. I live with that certainty, even though I deeply suffer the estrangement between these two peoples and the abuse that results.

My certainty does not come from being a messianic utopianist. It is based on knowing the very deep gut instinct in Jews for life and for celebrating life. Most of them are not wild ideologists. There is a certain healthy concreteness about them. They like to enjoy a good meal and to enjoy their family life. They do not like military reserve duty and they do not want their sons to be heroic soldiers. When they are convinced that the Arabs are genuinely offering peace, which means that reserve duty will fall from 60 to 15 days, and taxes will go down, and they will be able to travel more in Europe, there will be a surge of acceptance. We have never to give up the hope that that is possible.

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