



Shalom Hartman Institute

The Significance of Israel
For the Future of Judaism

Rabbi Professor David Hartman



The significance of Israel for the future of Judaism

Rabbi Professor David Hartman

There were many people, both in Israel and abroad, who believed – and continue to believe – that the fundamental purpose of the State of Israel was to solve the condition of Jewish suffering by providing a national home for Jews. Treating Israel solely as a haven against persecution is, I believe, incomplete and inadequate for understanding the significance and importance of the rebirth of Israel.

Although persecution and suffering played a major role in the national quest for Jewish political independence, the Zionist revolution was also deeply infused by utopian social, political and cultural longings. Many dreamed of a new Jew, a transformation of the Jewish psyche. The return to the land was envisioned not only in terms of physical safety but also as a healing process that would liberate Jews from the negative self-image they internalized during centuries of oppression and powerlessness. For religious thinkers such as Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook the Zionist revolution was destined to release spiritual energies that had been repressed by the unnatural condition of galut, exile. Rabbi Kook looked forward to a new Jewish human type emerging as a result of the secular, often atheistic, Zionist enterprise.

Jerusalem has always been the receptacle of Jewish historical hopes and dreams. Israel invites ideological passions because it connects Jews to the historic memories and aspirations of the Jewish people. You cannot relate to or live in Israel without being affected by the visions of Isaiah and Amos, the passion of Rabbi Akiva, the age-old longing of Jews to return to Jerusalem where justice and human fulfillment would be realized.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the urgent practical questions of security and the economy do not exhaust what preoccupies Israelis. To the outsider it seems strange that an embattled, besieged country such as Israel is always embroiled in internal controversies that have little to do with security and

survival. For example, government coalitions are formed and fall over issues related to how one applies halakha to society.

It is not accidental that starting from the early years of statehood the Bible was the national literature of this country. Despite a strong disavowal of the Bible's theological foundations, there was – and, I believe, still is – a profound identification with the biblical outlook in terms of human types and values, and prophetic moral and social aspirations. I am not suggesting that a biblical religious pathos infuses the country but only that Jewish life in Israel is imbued with some of the broader historical conditions and perspectives present in the biblical outlook. In Israel, in contrast to the Diaspora, the synagogue and Jewish family life cannot generate a sufficient sense of vitality in order to make Judaism a viable option for modern Jews.

This essay will argue that our return to the land has not only recreated some of the existential conditions that informed the biblical, covenantal foundations of Judaism but also that modern Israel provides Jews with an exciting opportunity to recapture some of the salient features of their biblical foundations. The acceptance of responsibility for Jewish national existence will be understood as a progressive extension of the rabbinic understanding of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel.

Approaches to the establishment of the State of Israel

Secular Zionism in revolt

Zionism began over a century ago as a revolt against the conception of the Jewish people as a community of prayer and learning. The traditional waiting posture for liberation from exile was inspired by the biblical account of the exodus from Egypt. The exodus story served as a key paradigm of Jewish historical hope by emphasizing that despite the utter helplessness of the community the Jewish people could rely on the redemptive power of God. Zionism taught that only if Jews were to take responsibility for their future would history change. This stood in sharp contrast to the Biblical belief that Jews were not the masters of their own history. Exile was the result of sin and only through the return to God and the mitzvot (teshuvah) would their exilic condition come to an end by the grace of God. The courage of traditional religious Jews to persevere under all conditions of history was sustained by their belief that Israel was God's elect people and that God would not permanently abandon Israel. The early Zionists rejected this approach to Jewish history and hope.

Nevertheless, the early Zionists by no means rejected the Jewish heritage in its entirety. In many cases, they treated the Bible not only as the greatest literary treasure of the revived Hebrew language, but also as a major source of the ethical norms that would guide Jews in rebuilding their ancient homeland.

The early Zionists went in all imaginable directions in the theological domain. Many were avowed atheists, others wanted to restore a biblical faith untrammelled by the rabbinic tradition, and others were devotees of land mysticism or a religion of labor. Many were agreed, for example, on the need to create new formats to celebrate traditional Jewish festivals. In Israel today, there are still kibbutzim that celebrate Passover as a "spring festival" using new language and forms of ritual; but nonreligious families typically hold a traditional Passover meal with all the usual customs, yet without religious commitment.

This is not, however, perceived by most Zionists as a serious problem. If one strips away the external trappings of traditional sentimentality found in many Zionists' appreciation of Jewish customs, one discovers the belief that concern for the survival of the Jewish people and commitment to the State of Israel are the new substitutes for traditional Judaism. The mainstream of Zionist thought rejected the traditional view that the covenant with God at Sinai was constitutive of Jewish self-understanding. For many Zionists, identification with the historical destiny of the nation was not only necessary for being a Jew, it was also sufficient. Judaism during the exile had instrumental value in preserving this nation from disintegration, but the new nationalistic spirit provides a more effective instrument with which to make possible the continued existence of the Jewish people.

Religious anti-Zionism

While the security of the State of Israel concerns the vast majority of Jews, not all Jews share the same appreciation of the Jewish state's significance for Jewish life and identity. At one end of the spectrum of views are those who deny any positive religious significance to the rebirth of Israel. For them, the establishment of a Jewish state represents a serious infringement on the role of God and Torah in Jewish history.

The reaction of traditional religious circles to early Zionism was intensely hostile. The fact that various European nations were regaining their independence had no significance for them. They believed that the third Jewish commonwealth could not arise out of political developments in the secular world, but must result from God's redemptive intervention into history.

What they were waiting for was not handfuls of pioneers draining swamps, but a Jewish restoration having the assurance and finality promised by the following statement in the Jerusalem Talmud (Kiddushin 2:1): "Although your fathers were redeemed, they returned to being subjugated; but when you are redeemed, you shall never again be subjugated."

Today the same skepticism about Zionism is maintained by the Haredi population, which rationalizes its representation in Israel's parliament and its participation in coalitions by pointing to how much their educational institutions benefit from government support. In Israel as elsewhere, they cooperate with the secular powers-that-be, but this should not be taken to imply ascribing religious significance to the rebirth of Israel. Their academies of learning do not celebrate Israel's Independence Day nor do they offer prayers of thanksgiving, Hallel, for the re-establishment of Jewish national autonomy, although prayers may be offered for the safety of those fighting in Israel's defense forces.

Not only do they refuse to ascribe any spiritual significance to the State of Israel but they also regard the state per se as a threat to the future of Judaism. For them, self-government grounded in secular forms of political power and social institutions is the archenemy of traditional Jewish spirituality. As they see it, Israel offers the Jewish people a new kind of Jewish identity. Nationalism, Zionist history and folklore, the Hebrew language, Israeli culture, Israeli geography and archeology, etc., are elements of an alternative way of life meant to displace God, Torah and classical Jewish teachings. In addition, they believe that Jewish political autonomy has engendered a psychological shift towards assertiveness and self-reliance, thereby alienating Jews from their traditional obedient posture to the Jewish faith. The Zionist ethos stands in sharp contrast to the traditional attitude of waiting patiently for the Messiah.

Messianic religious Zionism

In contrast, and diametrically opposed to the religious anti-Zionist approach, are those who celebrate Israel within the context of a messianic, redemptive orientation to Jewish history. Their experience of Jewish life is filled with vitality and excitement. For them, the birth of Israel represents the end of exile and the beginning of the fulfillment of the prophetic visions of Jewish history.

When the return to the Land of Israel gathered pace, religious elements began joining the secular Zionist revolution. In order to justify their participation in the Jewish march toward political independence, some of them began claiming

that Zionism was a prelude to the coming of the Messiah. As argued above, for traditional Jews the only alternative political category to exile was the establishment of a messianic society. Consequently, any attempt to abolish the situation of exile had to be justified within the framework of the messianic promise. The best-known attempt of this kind was provided by the philosophy of Rabbi Kook. He offered an argument similar to Hegel's "cunning of reason." Although the secular Zionists believed their efforts would lead to a socialistic Jewish state where the Jewish religion would be an anachronism, God, however, would divert the course of events so as to turn Jews into "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6). Who is to judge how the Lord of history chooses to bring about His ultimate design for the world? With this argument, Rabbi Kook justified the decision of observant Jews to join forces with a secular political movement that purported to supersede Halakhah and Jewish covenantal consciousness.

Theological presuppositions of this kind enabled religious elements to forge a partnership with socialist Zionists during both the British Mandate and the early decades of the State of Israel. The political implications of such presuppositions, however, became apparent after the Six-Day War, which unleashed the potential force of these messianic longings among a considerable number of religious Jews.

The expansion of Israeli control over most of the Promised Land was seen as confirmation that the establishment of the messianic kingdom was in the process of realization. There was a rush to set up rudimentary settlements in large numbers of places on the assumption that the Ingathering of the Exiles would shortly swamp Israel. As with all previous messianic expectations, reality proved otherwise. The reverses of the Yom Kippur War, the drying up of Jewish immigration, and the disillusionment accompanying the final stages of the withdrawal from Sinai weakened their messianic fervor.

In spite of the progressive deterioration of the ecstatic mood of the Six-Day War, the dominant religious ideological perspective of religious Zionism today is still Rabbi Kook's messianic theology. The vitality of religious youth

movements is still nurtured by teachings from the Rabbi Kook tradition. How this religious community will respond to a peace settlement or a unilateral disengagement that demands territorial compromise is an acute political issue whose outcome many are hesitant and fearful to predict. Any political compromise regarding the biblical map of Israel and, by implication, the messianic redemptive destiny of Israel will undermine the legitimacy of the existing government. It is politically and spiritually urgent, therefore, that we find new channels for a religious appreciation of Israel's rebirth which do not link the significance of our return to political nationhood with the prophetic promise of messianic redemption.

A covenantal perspective on Zionism

In contrast to Rabbi Kook, I would argue that religious Zionism does not need to treat the rise of Israel as a divine ruse leading toward the messianic kingdom. There is an alternative perspective from which to religiously embrace the secular Zionist revolution, namely, the observation that Israel expands the possible range of halakhic involvement in human affairs beyond the circumscribed frameworks of home and synagogue. Jews in Israel are given the opportunity to bring economic, social and political issues into the center of their religious consciousness. The moral quality of the army, social and economic disparities and deprivations, the exercise of power moderated by moral sensitivities, attitudes toward minorities, foreign workers, the stranger, tolerance and freedom of conscience – all these are areas that challenge our sense of covenantal responsibility.

The existence of the State of Israel, from this perspective, prevents Judaism from being confined exclusively to a culture of learning and prayer. The realm of symbolic holy time – the Sabbath, the festivals – is no longer the exclusive defining framework of Jewish identity. In returning to the land, we have created the conditions through which everyday life can mediate the biblical foundations of our covenantal destiny.

At first blush, the claim that the Zionist revolution has brought the demands of the covenant of action back to Jewish spiritual consciousness seems totally unrelated to the lived reality of Israeli society. Religious self-consciousness in Israel is found chiefly in two camps: either the traditional ghetto-like spirituality that characterized Judaism for the past several centuries, or the messianic religious passion expressed by the adherents of Rabbi Kook's theology of history.

The halakhic tendencies in the former camp reflect a conscious repudiation of modernity. There is not an atmosphere of celebration of the new religious opportunities that statehood has made possible, but rather an outright disregard of them. The bulk of their halakhic responsa deal with the same halakhic questions that occupied religious leaders during our long exilic history, such as kashrut, Jewish dietary laws, and marriage. Even the sabbatical and Jubilee years, which touch on the social and economic vision of Judaism, have been reduced to questions of what type of food one is permitted to eat in the sabbatical year.

Furthermore, the establishment of the State of Israel has not in any way affected religious practices in the community. It would not be far-fetched to say that Israel is the last haven in the world for a secular Jew to feel comfortable in his or her secular perspective on life. In contrast to the Diaspora, there is a much sharper repudiation of traditional Judaism in Israeli Jewish society than in many other Jewish communities. If anything, anti-religious feeling has been growing in response to the political assertiveness of certain groups of observant Jews.

As for the second camp, those who claim that Israel is part of a necessary messianic drama need not be disturbed by the prevalence of secularism in Israel. On the contrary, Rabbi Kook's theology of history enables them to regard the secular revolution as merely a temporary phase in God's scheme for bringing about the eventual establishment of a messianic Jewish society. The belief in the inevitability of the messianic redemptive process enables many religious Zionists to minimize the importance of the widespread lack of

serious religious observance and sensitivity in the country. One can dance with Ariel Sharon on religious festivals with the same enthusiasm as yeshiva students dance with their Torah teachers. Army generals who lead us to victory serve the messianic process. What makes an act religious is not necessarily the motivation of the agent but the consequences that result from this act. Many atheists or religiously indifferent persons both in the army and in political life are perceived as pawns in the hands of the Lord of history, who has seen fit to utilize the military and political power of a secular Zionist state to bring about the triumph of the divine messianic scheme.

How then, can I give some plausibility to my own perspective in spite of what seems to be such overwhelming evidence to the contrary? My answer will present a conceptual analysis of how I believe secular Zionism has enriched Jewish covenantal consciousness, thereby providing a new framework in which to experience and develop Judaism in the modern world.

Creation, divine self-limitation and the covenant

The Creation story in Genesis provides the theological and anthropological framework for understanding the concept of the covenant at Sinai. According to the first chapters of Genesis, God initially believed that humans would reflect divinity by virtue of God's magnificent powers as Creator. Man and woman were made in God's image. Precisely this act, however, contains the seeds of alienation and rebellion against God. Because human beings are endowed with freedom of choice, mirroring God's own freedom, they are not automatons that necessarily mirror the divine hope for human history.

God's will meets no opposition in the creation of nature, but it meets opposition in the creation of humans. This is the fundamental significance of the story of the Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel, and the sequel up to the destruction wrought by the flood. The flood expresses the divine rage when God's will is frustrated.

The Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time. And

the Lord regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened. And the Lord said: "I will destroy man ... both man and beast.... (Gen. 6:5-7)

These verses should be contrasted with the earlier chapters of Genesis where the Lord takes pleasure in all of creation including human beings: "And God saw all that He had made, and found it very good." (Gen 1:31) In the Creation drama man and woman are the culmination. If they fail, all of creation loses its significance for God. After the flood, God promises Noah to separate His ongoing activity as the Creator of nature from the behavior of human beings.

Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking of every clean animal and of every clean bird, he offered burnt offerings on the altar. The Lord smelled the pleasing odor, and the Lord said to Himself: "Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the devisings of man's mind are evil from his youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease." (Gen. 8:20-22)

Nature is now endowed with intrinsic significance as a creation of God independent of human behavior. God will no longer destroy nature because of humanity. The Creator of the universe further differentiates between nature and human history by setting self-imposed limits that distance God from human beings. God moves from Creator to Covenant-Maker when He accepts that the Divine Will alone does not ensure that the human world will mirror His vision for history. This change is revealed in the contrast between Abraham and Noah.

Abraham's prayer for the people of Sodom reflects the all-powerful God of Creation's decision to become the limited Lord of History. Abraham stands at Sodom as God's responsible and dignified "other." The rabbis noted this in contrasting the behavior of Abraham and Noah. When God told Noah that He was about to destroy the world, Noah accepted God's decree passively. But when God told Abraham that He was about to destroy two evil cities, Abraham pleaded at length on behalf of the innocent who might be destroyed with the

guilty (Gen. 18:23-33). In the case of Abraham, God felt obliged to consult His covenantal partner before implementing His plan.

Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham is to become a great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him? For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right, in order that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him. (Gen. 18:17-19)

The development toward covenantal responsibility reaches its quintessential expression in the moment of Sinai, when a whole nation is commissioned to implement in its total way of life the will of God as expressed in the mitzvot. In contrast to nature where the will of God is expressed as absolute power, at Sinai the community is called to share responsibility for history. The covenant mediated by the mitzvot continues the shift of the frame of reference from a theocentric drama in which God seeks to maintain total control (the creation and exodus stories) to a covenantal drama in which a human community is charged with the responsibility of building a society that will reveal the presence of God in human life. "And I shall be sanctified in the midst of the community of Israel" (Lev. 22:32).

The covenant and human responsibility

From a Talmudic perspective in which God is mediated in halakhic action, it would be legitimate to claim that any event that challenges us to widen the application of the normative halakhic system intensifies the sense of God's presence in daily life. I wish, however, to make the stronger claim that the rejection of the traditional posture of waiting for messianic redemption can itself be seen as a further elaboration and intensification of the spirit of covenantal responsibility found in the covenantal patriarchal and Sinai narratives and, above all, in the rabbinic tradition. I am not claiming that this is what the Zionist founders intended, but that rebuilding and renewing the community's national form of life extended and developed further the rabbinic tradition's understanding of the role assigned to human beings in the covenant.

In the rabbinic tradition Israel is not only called upon to implement covenantal norms, but also to analyze, define and expand their content. No longer is God the final interpreter of His own law as in the biblical tradition. Now He is prepared to accept the verdict of scholars in the rabbinic academy who declared that Torah is “not in heaven” (Deut. 30:12). In the rabbinic tradition, revelation alone does not define how Torah is understood and applied in concrete situations.

The rabbinic tradition loosened the grip of the biblical paradigm of revelation and the need for prophecy by empowering human beings to reveal and expand the meaning of Torah through rational reflection and legal argumentation. In the classic Talmudic story of the dispute regarding the ritual status of the “oven of Aknai,” R. Eliezer invoked divine assistance in order to persuade the sages to accept his position after failing to convince them with legal arguments. After several miracles failed to win the sages over to his point of view,

...he [R. Eliezer] said to them: “if the law is as I say, let it be proved from heaven!” Whereupon a heavenly voice cried out: “Why do you dispute with Rabbi Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the law is as he says!” But Rabbi Joshua arose and exclaimed: “It is not in heaven” [Deut. 30:12]. What did he mean by this? Said Rabbi Jeremiah: “That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a heavenly voice, because Thou has long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, ‘After the majority must one incline’” [Exod. 23:2] (T.B. Baba Metzia 59b)

The rabbis understood “It is not in heaven” to mean that human beings could define and expand the meaning of God’s word without the need for prophesy or miraculous divine intervention. Yet, while firmly maintaining that Torah was not in heaven, rabbinic Judaism remained committed to the biblical idea that history was in heaven. Jewish history on the national level continued to be perceived in terms of the exodus-from-Egypt model where the all-powerful Lord of History miraculously redeems a powerless people.

The covenantal community takes upon itself responsibility for what the word of God means. Learning becomes a dominant new expression of religious passion. Rabbi Akiva, one of the forerunners of the intellectually dynamic and bold interpretative tradition of the Talmud, who in his life expressed total commitment and love for God, claimed that the paradigmatic book for understanding Israel and God was the Song of Songs. "All the books of the Bible are holy; the Song of Songs is the holy of holies" (Yadayim 3:5). In the rabbinic period, God as teacher and lover became the central metaphors of the covenantal relationship with the God of Israel.

Despite this human-oriented transformation of the roles of prophecy and miracles in mediating God's love and intimacy, the rabbinic tradition did not similarly neutralize the need for divine miraculous intervention with respect to the Jewish peoples' national political existence. Attitudes to history continued to be characterized by a prayer-like longing for divine intervention in history that would solve the suffering of Jewish exile and national insecurity. Jewish political liberation - Israel's return to its ancient national homeland - was conceived in terms of the biblical paradigm of the exodus from Egypt.

May He who performed miracles for our ancestors redeeming them from slavery to freedom, redeem us soon and gather our dispersed from the four corners of the earth... (Prayer for the New Month)

Jews waited for redemption. Liberation would come from a power beyond and independent of human initiative. In contrast to the culture of the beit midrash, the Torah academy, where Jews felt no need for revelatory intervention to know how to apply Torah, outside of the confines of the academies of learning God's power was absolute and supreme. Here Jews had to wait patiently for God's intervention. Although Torah was not in heaven, Jewish historical destiny was.

* * *

The Zionist revolution expanded the rabbinic spirit of confidence and trust in human initiative to new dimensions by liberating Jews from the traditional orientation of passivity to historical hope grounded in helpless dependency on

the Lord of history. According to what I call a covenantal approach to Judaism, the dramatic significance of the establishment of the State of Israel is not as a sign of the imminent unfolding of religious eschatology but is an exciting new stage in a process that began at Sinai where Israel was prepared to accept God's self-limiting love as the central theological principle of its religious way of life.

Today, Jews are in a position to move further in the development of the covenantal concept that began at Sinai by expanding our covenantal consciousness to include responsibility for our fate in history. The covenantal community is called upon to complete the process that began at Sinai by bearing witness to the idea that without divine self-limitation there can be no mature, responsible historical role for Israel in the covenantal relationship with God.

One can summarize the different stages of this covenantal process in the following way. The Bible liberated the will of the individual to act with responsibility. "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life – if you and your offspring would live – by loving the Lord your God, heeding His commands, and holding fast to Him" (Deut. 30: 19-20). The Talmud liberated the intellect to define the contents of Torah. Zionism liberated the will of the nation to become politically responsible, to promote the "ingathering of the exiles" and to re-establish Israel as a covenantal nation in history without relying on a divine rupture into human history.

The State of Israel is, therefore, the main catalyst to rethinking the meaning of God as the Lord of History. The future of Judaism depends on our ability to discover meaningful ways of relating to God's love and power in a world where history, and not only Torah, is not in heaven.