

An Optimistic Zionist

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גדול יהיה כבוד הבית הזה האחרון מן הראשון.

The glory of this house, the latter, will be greater than the glory of the first.¹

The Optimism of Zecharyah and Chaggai

In the early years of the second Beit haMikdash, the prophets Chaggai and Zecharyah were charged with inspiring a ragtag group of 42,000 refugees to restore the Jewish community, reestablish a Jewish commonwealth, and build the second Beit haMikdash. Many of Zecharyah's prophecies were delivered in visions, and one of his best-known visions includes the following dialogue, between Zecharyah and a malach:

And he [a malach] said to me: What do you see? And I said: I have seen a menorah formed entirely of gold, with its bowl on its head and seven lamps upon it, seven and seven channels to the lamps upon its head, and two olive trees upon it, one on the right of the bowl and one on its left.

And I declared and said to the malach who spoke to me: What are these, my master? And the malach who spoke to me declared and replied to me: You know what these are! And I said: No, my master.

And he declared and said to me: This is the word of G-d to Zerubavel, saying: Not with might and not with strength, but with My spirit, declares G-d, Lord of Hosts.

Zecharyah 4:2-6

ויאמר אלי מה אתה ראה ואמר
ראיתי והנה מנורת זהב כלה וגלה
על ראשה ושבעה נרתיה עליה
שבעה ושבעה מוצקות לנרות אשר
על ראשה: ושנים זיתים עליה אחד
מימין הגלה ואחד על שמאלה: ואען
ואמר אל המלאך הדבר בי לאמר מה
אלה אדני: ויען המלאך הדבר בי
ויאמר אלי הלוא ידעת מה המה אלה
ואמר לא אדני: ויען ויאמר אלי
לאמר זה דבר ד' אל זרבבל לאמר
לא בחיל ולא בכח כי אם ברוחי אמר
ד' צבקות:
זכריה ד:ב-ו

The dialogue between prophet and malach caught the sensitive ear of Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik. The malach would later explain the particular images of the vision, but how did his response address the question? And if a malach—whose word to a prophet must be truth—declared that Zecharyah understood the vision, how could Zecharyah contradict it? And by what right was his denial enshrined as prophetic truth as well?

Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik explained² that the malach was correct: Zecharyah did comprehend the symbols displayed to him. The prophet recognized the two olive trees as representatives of the monarchy and the kehunah [priesthood], and he realized that the olive oil represented the

¹ Chaggai 2:8

² *Chiddushei Rabbeinu haGriz Soloveitchik* [Stencil] Torah #121, and see *Nefesh haRav*, pp. 76-79

oil of anointing used in the Beit haMikdash. However, Zechariah's declaration of ignorance was also honest: these symbols were incomprehensible in a vision regarding the second Beit haMikdash, for Zechariah knew prophetically that there would be no oil of anointing in this era, and no anointed king or kohen gadol.

The malach then addressed Zechariah's confusion, saying in the name of G-d, "The second Beit haMikdash was built not with might and not with force, but with My spirit." This meant, "I put My spirit into the heart of the kings of the nations, to permit Israel to return to the Land of Israel and build the Beit haMikdash."³ The Jewish return under the Persians was not established by Jewish conquest, and therefore would not be voided by the later Roman conquest.⁴ Therefore, the sanctity of the land would persist, and the holiness of the third Beit haMikdash would be a direct extension of the holiness invested in the second Beit haMikdash, established by Zechariah's generation.

Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik explained that this answered Zechariah's question: the oil of anointing, the anointed king and the kohen gadol were appropriate visions even for his day, for their Beit haMikdash would be a product of the current structure. Zechariah and his generation could be heartened by the news that their efforts would ultimately lead to a grand Beit haMikdash and a full redemption.

This message may be discerned in a prophecy of Chaggai, too. The Jews of Chaggai's day claimed that the Beit haMikdash they were building was entirely unworthy of succeeding the first Beit haMikdash. In response to this national depression, Chaggai prophesied, "The glory of this house, the latter, will be greater than the glory of the first."⁵ As Rabbi Hershel Schachter has explained,⁶ "this house" referred to the second Beit haMikdash, and "the latter" referred to the third Beit haMikdash, which would be an extension of the second. The national frustration was justified, but if they would persevere in their efforts then they would yet see a Beit haMikdash worthy of its name.

Modern Frustration

The disappointment of 2,500 years ago has been echoed in our own day, regarding the aspirations of Religious Zionists for a full restoration of halachic Judaism to our ancient land. In the face of these challenges, many have questioned the wisdom of partnering with secular Zionists. Separatists cite the biblical criticism of the righteous King Yehoshaphat for joining forces with the wicked King Achazyahu,⁷ and they quote the lesson of Pirkei Avot,⁸ "Do not join with a wicked person." Even before the birth of the state, in 1934, Rav Elchanan Wasserman penned an open letter chastising anyone who would join with secular Zionists "in any form of union."

³ Rabbi Hershel Schachter, *B'Inyan Megilat Taanit, Or haMizrach*, Nisan 5734.

⁴ Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Beit haBechirah* 6:16

⁵ Chaggai 2:8

⁶ See note 3 above.

⁷ *Divrei haYamim II* 20:37

⁸ *Pirkei Avot* 1:7

When addressing his perspective on secular Zionism, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik counted himself among those questing Religious Zionists. In the concluding portion of his *Kol Dodi Dofek* address, Rabbi Soloveitchik identified two flaws of practical consequence in the thinking of secular pioneers:

It seems to me that political, nonreligious Zionism has committed one grave and fundamental error ... With the establishment of the State of Israel, secular Zionism declares, we have become a people like all people, and the notion of "a people that dwells alone" (Numbers 23:29) has lost its validity ... Under the influence of this spirit of indiscriminate amity, this doctrine of the sameness of all peoples, the representatives of the State of Israel have oftentimes displayed an embarrassing naiveté, improperly evaluated particular circumstances and situations, and failed to discern the hidden intentions of certain individuals. As a result of their childlike innocence, they trust the promises of people who promptly proceed to betray us and are overly impressed by flattery and blandishments...

However, the error of secular Zionism is more serious than its simply not understanding the true meaning of the covenant in Egypt, the covenant of a camp-people, which takes the form of shared fate and involuntary isolation. Secular Zionism has sinned as well against the covenant at Sinai, the covenant made with a holy congregation-nation, which finds its expression in the shared destiny of a sanctified existence...

The mission of the State of Israel is neither the termination of the unique isolation of the Jewish people nor the abrogation of its unique fate— in this it will not succeed! – but the elevation of a camp-people to the rank of a holy congregation-nation and the transformation of shared fate to shared destiny.⁹

To Rabbi Soloveitchik, secular Zionists and Religious Zionists work at cross-purposes regarding core identity and nation-shaping vision, and the state pays a frustrating, real-world price for the ideological shortcomings of the secular model. Nonetheless, Rabbi Soloveitchik mitigated his criticism, declaring that secularists were subconsciously motivated by a purity of heart that would earn their Zionist efforts favor in Divine eyes. He claimed:¹⁰

One may acquire a share in the Creator of the Universe only via construction of an altar, via "And you shall seek... [and you shall find] when you seek Him with your entire heart and with your entire spirit." All of them make this acquisition: The religious—knowingly, the chiloni—without knowledge. We, religious Jewry, believe that the Jew seeks the Creator of the Universe eternally, against his will and willingly, accidentally and intentionally. He seeks Him even at the moment that he cries out that he needs Him not. ... Therefore, all of the parties built altars, from the Mizrachi-HaPoel Mizrachi to the Mapai and Mapam, and brought

את הקנין בבורא העולם אפשר להשיג רק על ידי בנין מזבח, על ידי 'ובקשתם... [ומצאת] כי תדרשנו בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך'. ואת הקנין הזה עושים כולם: הדתי – מדעת, החילוני – שלא מדעת. אנו, היהודים הדתיים, מאמינים כי היהודי מבקש תמיד את בורא העולם, באונס וברצון, בשוגג ובכוונה. הוא מבקש אותו אף בשעה שהוא צועק כי איננו זקוק לו... לפיכך בנו מזבחות כל המפלגות, ממזרחי-הפרועל המזרחי עד מפא"י ומפ"ם, והקריבו

⁹ *Kol Dodi Dofek*, Reflections on the Holocaust (1992) pp. 100-101, translated from Hebrew to English by Lawrence Kaplan.

¹⁰ *Chamesh Derashot: Vayachalom* Yosef, translated from Yiddish to Hebrew by David Telzner.

*korbanot upon them. (And the korban of a Jew is always accepted, even when the person bringing it does not intend for the sake of Heaven.) ... Yes, rabbotai! Even the new, chiloni settlement executed the second acquisition of the land, a permanent acquisition, in heroic fashion, and in an indirect, unwitting way acquired not only a portion of the land of Israel, but also of the G-d of Israel.*¹¹

קרבתנות עליהם. (וקרבן יהודי הוא לעולם לרצון, אף אם המקריב איננו מתכוון לשם שמים.) ... כן, רבותי! אף הישוב החדש החילוני ביצע את הקנין השני של הארץ לצמיתות באופן הירוואי, ובאורה בלתי-ישיר ובלתי-מודע זכה לא רק בארץ ישראל, אלא גם באלקי ישראל.

Despite the challenges and disappointments of secularisms, the vision of a grand future did not fade from Rabbi Soloveitchik's eyes.

Engagement

Rather than preach a withdrawal of our hands, Rabbi Soloveitchik promoted the engagement of the halachic idealist with the secular reality. He envisioned a world in which Torah and halachah were applied and honored in the modern, public sphere. Toward that end, he articulated a fourteenth "Ani Maamin" declaration of faith, modeled upon the 13 identified in Rambam's teachings:¹²

What is this "Ani Maamin"? It is expressed in a simple declaration, "I believe, with complete faith, that this Torah is to be fulfilled, actualized and fully executed in every place and every era, in all social, financial and cultural circumstances, in all technological circumstances and political conditions." Torah is to be actualized, whether in the simple society and homogeneous market of the ghetto, in which the Jews existed in the manner of "consumers of manna" and the environment was saturated with Judaism and the street was an extension of the home, or in the modern, scientifically developed and designed society, in which the Jew is an integral part of his environs beyond any connection with his personal domain. Torah is to be actualized whether in exile, where it relates to the personal life of the Jew, or in the Jewish state, where it is required to

מהו ה"אני מאמין" הזה? הוא מתבטא בהצהרה פשוטה: "אני מאמין באמונה שלימה שזאת התורה ניתנת לקיום, לגישום ולביצוע מלא בכל מקום ובכל זמן, בכל המערכות החברתיות, הכלכליות והתרבותיות, בכל הנסיבות הטכנולוגיות ובכל התנאים הפוליטיים". התורה ניתנת להגשמה בין בחברה הפשוטה והמשק ההומגני של הגישו בו היו היהודים בבחינת "אוכלי מן" וכל הסביבה היתה רוויה יהדות, כשהרחוב היה המשכו של הבית; ובין בחברה המודרנית המפותחת והמתוכנן באופן מדעי, שבהם היהודי הנהו חלק אניטגרלי של סביבתו, ללא שום קשר עם רשות היחיד שלו. התורה ניתנת להגשמה בין בגלות, שם היא מתייחסת לחייו הפרטיים של היהודי, ובין במדינה יהודית,

¹¹ See, too, Rabbi Soloveitchik's address to a Mizrahi gathering in 1954, as cited by Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein in a lecture transcribed and published at www.vbm-torah.org/alei/14-02ral-zionism.htm. Rabbi Soloveitchik cited Melachim II 14:23, which depicts the sins and triumphs of Yeravam son of Yoash, wicked king of Yisrael: "Yerav'am son of Yoash 'did not turn away from all the sins of Yerav'am son of Nevat, who had led Israel astray.' Nevertheless, the Rav banged loudly on the table and continued, he 'restored the border of Israel from Levo Chamat to the sea of Arava, as the Lord, God of Israel, had spoken by the hand of his servant, Yona son of Amitai, the prophet from Gat-Chefer!' He concluded that indeed 'God had seen the affliction of Israel.' This expressed not the passive appreciation of a bystander, but rather the Rav's readiness to cooperate with the general community, proceeding from a sense of joint fate and—up to a certain level—even joint destiny."

¹² Chamesh Derashot: miTal haShamayim, translated from Yiddish to Hebrew by David Telzner. See also Rabbi Soloveitchik's eulogy for his uncle, Rabbi Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik, published under the title, "Mah dodeich midod."

address novel challenges and to encompass, as well, the structures of communal life.

שם עליה לטפל בבעיות חדשות ולהקיף גם צורות חיים ציבוריים.

Rabbi Soloveitchik took great pride in the steps taken toward fulfilling this ambition. As he declaimed before the 57th Mizrahi convention, Religious Zionism could point to significant, concrete achievements with pride:¹³

We have merited exhaustion, a constructive, creative exhaustion, due to our great labors of the 18 years since the founding of the state, when our movement—and only our movement and no other—fought tirelessly for a religious land of Israel. We achieved much through our battle: more than 200,000 students in religious schools, laws of marriage and family in the hands of rabbis and judges, a well-organized Chief Rabbinate, kashrut in the military, and also—relatively—public Shabbat observance.

זכאים אנו ליגיעה, ליגיעה קונסטרוקטיבית- יוצרת עקב פעולתנו העצומה במשך 18 שנים מאז תקומת המדינה, כאשר תנועתנו – ורק תנועתנו ולא תנועה אחרת – מאבקה ללא-ליאות בעד ארץ ישראל דתית. הרבה השגנו הודות למלחמתנו: למעלה ממאתיים אלף תלמידים בבתי ספר דתיים, דיני אישות וענינו משפחה בידי רבנים ויושבי על מדין, רבנות ראשית מאורגנת היטב, כשרות בצבא, וגם – במידה רלטיבית – שמירת שבת בפרהסיא.

Like the contemporaries of Zechariah and Chaggai, Rabbi Soloveitchik witnessed and recognized the flaws and deficiencies of his era's struggle to build a Beit haMikdash. Nonetheless, Rabbi Soloveitchik embodied the optimism his grandfather, Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik, saw in the malach's words to Zechariah. Understanding the purity in the secular Zionist's activities, committed to the ability of halachah to encompass the modern world, and valuing the religious achievements of his day, Rabbi Soloveitchik recognized that from this modern state, however troubled, could come greatness.

¹³ *Chamesh Derashot: Simchat haYetzirah*, translated from Yiddish to Hebrew by David Telzner.