

The Significance of Israel for the Future of Judaism



Throughout the history of modern Israel, many people, both living in the state and abroad, have believed that the fundamental purpose of creating the State of Israel was to solve the condition of Jewish suffering by providing a national home for Jews. Although persecution and suffering played a major role in the quest for Jewish political independence, treating Israel solely as a haven against persecution is, I believe, incomplete and inadequate for understanding the significance and importance of the rebirth of the Jewish state.

{ By **DAVID HARTMAN**





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The Zionist revolution was 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 had internalized over 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 the emergence of a new Jewish prototype as a result of the secular, often atheistic, Zionist enterprise.

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.

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

It is therefore not surprising that the urgent practical questions of security and the economy are not the sole preoccupations of Israelis. To the outsider it seems strange that

an embattled, besieged country such as Israel should always be embroiled in internal controversies that have little to do with security and survival. For example, entire government coalitions are formed and in turn collapse over issues related to how one applies halacha (Jewish law) to society.

It is not accidental that starting from the early years of statehood, the Bible was the national literature of Israel. Despite many Israelis' strong disavowal of the Bible's theological foundations, they always had – and, I believe, still have – 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, 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.

Not only has the return to the land recreated some of the existential conditions that informed the biblical, covenantal foundations of Judaism, but it has also provided Jews with an exciting opportunity to recapture some of the salient features of their biblical foundations. The acceptance of responsibility for Jewish national existence can be understood as a progressive extension of the rabbinic understanding of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. In order to explore this topic, I will first describe the three main approaches to the establishment of the State of Israel and then outline my own understanding of a covenantal perspective on Zionism.

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 their 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 *teshuvah* (a return to God) and observing the mitzvot 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 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 spanned every imaginable direction of 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 agreed, for example, on the need to create new formats with which 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, yet non-religious families typically hold a traditional Passover meal with all the usual customs, even without religious commitment.

If one strips away the external trappings of traditional sentimentality found in many Zionists' appreciation of Jewish customs, one

discovers that concern for the survival of the Jewish people and commitment to the State of Israel became substitutes for traditional Judaism. The mainstream Zionist thinkers 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 in the exile had instrumental value in preserving this nation from disintegration, but the new nationalistic spirit provided 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 most 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 a third Jewish commonwealth could not arise out of political developments in the secular world, but should only result from God's redemptive intervention into history. They were not waiting for handfuls of pioneers to come drain the swamps, but for a Jewish restoration of the sort described in the Jerusalem Talmud: "Although your fathers were redeemed, they returned to being subjugated; but when you are redeemed, you shall never again be subjugated" (Kiddushin 2:1).

Today the same skepticism about Zionism is maintained by the *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) population, which rationalizes its



Physicians and nurses
at the country's first
Kupat Holim clinic,
Ein Harod, ca.1924

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 their 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 reestablishment of Jewish national autonomy, although prayers may be offered for the safety of those fighting in Israel's defense forces.

Not only do these religious anti-Zionists 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, Jewish self-government grounded in secular politics 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, 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 toward 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

Diametrically opposed to the religious anti-Zionist approach are those who celebrate Israel within the context of a messianic, redemptive orientation to Jewish history. For them, the experience of Judaism in a Jewish nation-state, located in historical Israel, is filled with vitality and excitement. The birth of Israel represents the end of exile and the beginning of the fulfillment of the prophetic visions of Jewish history.

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.

When the return to the Land of Israel gathered pace, a number of 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 Judaism would be an anachronism, Rabbi Kook believed that God would divert the course of events so as to turn Jews into "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). Who was to judge how the Lord of history would choose 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 halacha 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. 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 being realized. There was a rush to set up rudimentary settlements in a large number of places on the assumption that the Ingathering of the Exiles would shortly swamp Israel. As with all previous messianic expectations, reality proved otherwise; and yet 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 Kook tradition. How this religious community might respond to a peace settlement or another unilateral disengage-

ment 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.

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.

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 embrace the secular Zionist revolution religiously, namely, the observation that modern Israel expands the possible range of halacha's 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 ethical sensitivities; attitudes toward minorities, foreign workers, and the stranger; tolerance and freedom of conscience – all these are areas that challenge traditional Jews' 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 the Jewish people's 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 in the traditional ghetto-like spirituality that characterized Judaism in the past or the messianic religious passion expressed by the adherents of Rabbi Kook's theology of history.

The halachic 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 halachic responsa deals with the same halachic questions that occupied religious leaders during our long exilic history, focusing, for example, on the laws of marriage or kashrut. Even the sabbatical 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. Furthermore, the establishment of the State of Israel has not in any way affected religious practices in the larger community. In fact, it would not be far-fetched to say that Israel is the best 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 around the world. If anything, antireligious sentiment 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 widespread lack of serious religious observance and sensitivity in the country. One can dance with a secular prime minister on religious festivals with the same enthusiasm as yeshiva students dance with their Torah teachers. Army generals who lead us to victory serve the same messianic process. What makes an act religious is not necessarily the motivation of the agent but the consequences that result from the 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, contained 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.

The Zionist rejection of the traditional posture of waiting for messianic redemption can itself be seen as an elaboration and intensification of the spirit of covenantal responsibility found in the in the rabbinic tradition.

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 expressed the divine rage when God's will was 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." (Genesis 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” (Genesis 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 that He will separate His activities as the ongoing 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.” (Genesis 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 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.” 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 (Genesis

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. (Genesis 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, the community at Sinai is called to share responsibility for history. The covenant mediated by the mitzvot continues the shift of the text 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” (Leviticus 22:32).

The Covenant and Human Responsibility

From a Talmudic perspective in which God is mediated in halachic action, it would be legitimate to claim that any event that challenges us to widen the application of the normative halachic system intensifies the sense of God’s presence in daily life. I wish, however, to make the stronger claim that the Zionist 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 patriarchal and Sinai narratives and, above all, in the rabbinic tradition. I am not claiming that this is what the Zionist founders intended. But, in fact, rebuilding and renewing the community's national life extended and developed further the rabbinic tradition's understanding of the role assigned to human beings in the covenant.

The establishment of the State of Israel 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.

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." 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" (BT Baba Metzia 59b), Rabbi Eliezer fails to convince the other sages of his position by using his legal, halachic arguments, and so he calls for several miracles to occur, hoping thereby to persuade the sages. When this approach fails too, he asks for direct divine assistance:

[Rabbi 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" (Deuteronomy 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.'" (Exodus 23:2)

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 prophecy 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 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. Torah study 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, and who in his life expressed total commitment and love for God, claimed that the paradigmatic book for understanding the relationship between Israel and God was the Song of Songs: "All the books of the



Jerusalem in the snow,
2008



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 people’s national political existence. Attitudes to history continued to be characterized by a prayerful 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*, where Jews felt no need for revelatory intervention to know how to apply Torah and where God’s power was absolute and supreme, in the temporal realm Jews had to wait patiently for God’s intervention. Although Torah was not in heaven, Jewish historical destiny was.

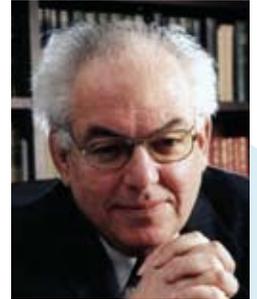
The Zionist revolution expanded the rabbinic spirit of confidence and trust in human initiative to new dimensions by liberating Jews from the traditional passive orientation to historical hope grounded in helpless dependency on the Lord of history. According to what I call a covenantal approach to Judaism, the dramatic significance of the establishment of the State of Israel is not 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 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 with the words, “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” (Deuteronomy 30:19–20). The Talmud liberated the intellect to define the contents of Torah, and Zionism liberated the will of the nation to become politically responsible, to promote the “ingathering of the exiles,” and to reestablish 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 for 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.



David Hartman, Co-Director of the Shalom Hartman Institute, is a leading contemporary Jewish philosopher and internationally renowned author of *The Living Covenant* and many other works. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Avi Chai and Guardian of Zion prizes.