

Rabbi Raphael Shuchat, PhD, is a lecturer in Jewish Philosophy and Mysticism at The School for Basic Jewish Studies at Bar Ilan University, as well as a research fellow at Ariel University. He lectures as well at the program for Orthodox Conversion at the Beit El Synagogue, Tel Aviv.

A LITVAK IN MONTREAL: THE THOUGHT OF RABBI ARYEH LEIB BARON

Rabbi Aryeh Leib Baron (nee Baranovich) was born in Horodok, Belarus (Lithuania) in 1912 and passed away in Telz-Stone, Israel in October 2011. He studied in the yeshiva of Rakov (today Rakaw, Belarus) under Rav Avraham Kalmanowitz, spent six months in a yeshiva in Stoiptz (Stoibtz, today Stowbtsy, Belarus) and later attended Yeshivat Ohel Torah in Baranovich for five years, where he met Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman, Rabbi David Rappaport, as well as Rabbi Yisrael Yakov Lubchanzky, the *mashgiach* of Baranovich, at whose home he was hosted for Shabbat meals.¹ He was one of two students in Baranovich who were responsible for tutoring the weaker students to prepare them for R. Wasserman's classes. He summarized each class and R. Wasserman used his notes to publish his novellae on *Yevamot*, *Kovets He'arot*.² At the age of 20, Rav Baron moved to the yeshiva in Mir (Belarus).³ In 1939, the students of the Mir yeshiva moved to Vilnius with the outbreak of the war and, in 1941, after receiving entry visas from the Japanese government, they fled Lithuania to avoid the Nazi occupation, on a journey which took place, in part, on Shabbat. They resided in Japanese-occupied Shanghai

¹ About the latter, R. Baron was particularly impressed and wrote that he must have been one of the "hidden *tsaddikim*" of the generation. See R. Leib Baron, *Netsah Yaakov* (Jerusalem: Author's Publication, 1997), introduction.

² See introduction to R. Leib Baron, *Yesammah Hayyim* (Jerusalem: Author's Publication, 1987), 17. The published book of novella is entitled *Kovets He'arot le-Masekhet Yevamot* (Los Angeles: A. S. Wasserman publisher, 1978). The book begins with the commentary of R. Shlomo ben Aderet (the Rashba) and continues with R. Elchonon's novellae.

³ For an eye witness report of the Mir Yeshiva in the late 19th century, see Shlomo Zaltman, "In the Mir Yeshiva [in Hebrew]," in *Yeshivot Lita Pirkei Zikhronot*, ed. Emanuel Etkes and Shlomo Tikochinski (Jerusalem: Mercas Zalman Shazar, 2004), 312-319.

for five years. In the summer of 1946, R. Baron came to the US and married the daughter of Rabbi Chaim Eliezer Samson of Baltimore. He used to joke that he was invited to the US by a congregation who heard he had a good sense of humor. In 1948, he was appointed the Headmaster and Rosh Yeshiva of Mercaz Hatorah in Montreal, where he worked for twenty-four years. The principal of the school was Rabbi Mordecai Rabinowitz, his brother-in-law, who had studied with him in Baranovich and at the Mir yeshiva. After the closure of the yeshiva, he established Merkaz Hatalmud, in 1973, which he led until close to his death. He wrote nine books of novellae as well as many articles, some of which were published in the *Pardes* journal and the *Yated Neeman* newspaper. His son Elchonon heads the Baranovich Yeshiva in Jerusalem.⁴

The World of the *Mitnaggedim*

What is a *mitnagged*? All *mitnaggedim* see their luminary and prototype as the Vilna Gaon (Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, GRA, 1720-1797). The world of the *mitnaggedim* underwent many changes over the past two hundred years and, despite this, many traits connect them with their spiritual roots. Two major trends emerged from the study hall of the Gaon.

The first trend saw Judaism centered on the study of Torah as the main channel of connecting Man and God. This thinking can be found already in the writings of Avraham ben Shlomo Zalman, the Gaon's brother (1722-1807) in his *Maalot ha-Torah*,⁵ in which he states that the study of Torah atones for all sins, is the beginning of all *teshuva*,⁶ and is the source of all good traits.⁷ He actually mocks those who waste their time in fasting and ascetic practice instead of studying Torah.⁸ He quotes his brother the Gaon as saying that every word in the Torah is a mitsva by itself; while the 613 commandments are the roots, the mitsvot themselves are innumerable. R. Hayyim ben Yitshak Ickovits of Volozhin (1749-1821), the central disciple of the Gaon, goes as far as to say that one's connection to God is so great during the study of Torah that it is a more opportune time to make a request from God than during prayer.⁹ The product of this

⁴ See Wikipedia in Hebrew, *ha-rav aryeh leib baron*, last modified Feb. 10, 2015. https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/אריה_לייב_בארון.

⁵ Avraham Ben Shlomo Zalman, *Ma'alot ha-Torah* (Jerusalem: Oraita Publishers, 1989).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹ See Yissakhar Ber, *Maaseh Rav ha-Shalem*, (Jerusalem: Mercaz Hasefer, 1990) Horaot ve-Hanhagot, 5.

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thinking was the establishment of the Volozhin Yeshiva in 1802, with numerous Lithuanian yeshivot sprouting in its shadow.¹⁰

The second trend was promoted by the students of the GRA from Sklov, specifically R. Menahem Mendel (d. 1827), who edited the Gaon's first book (his commentary on Proverbs) and R. Yisrael of Sklov (1770-1839), who made their way to the land of Israel, leading hundreds of followers in 1808-1809.¹¹ This trend stressed the Gaon's love for the land of Israel and his belief in the imminence of the messianic era.¹² The Israeli branch of disciples in the first half of the 18th century (who were the majority)¹³ shared the same belief in the centrality of Torah study as did their counterparts in Lithuania, and therefore their students shared many of the *mitnaggedic* traits even generations later. The messianic fervor of the Israeli faction petered out somewhat as the realities of life in 19th century Israel took over, although it remained among some families like the Rivlin family and others that originated from this early *aliyya*. Some of the love for Israel remained among prominent leaders of Volozhin like Rav Naftali Zvi Berliner (Netsiv, 1816-1893) and especially among some of his students like Rav A. I. Kook (1865-1935) and Rav Moshe Hayyim Charlap (1882-1951).¹⁴ General studies were not studied in the yeshiva and those

¹⁰ For the history of the Volozhin Yeshiva see Shaul Stampfer, *Ha-Yeshiva ha-Lita'itbe-Hithavutah*, [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mercaz Zalman Shazar, 2005). This was one of the major reasons for the opposition to the Hasidic movement, which equated prayer and devotion to the study of Torah. See Emanuel Etkes, "The Method and Activity of R. Hayyim Volozhin as an Expression of the Mithnaggedic Opposition to Hassidism [in Hebrew]," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 38-39 (1970), 159-168.

¹¹ R. Israel of Shklov actually made aliyah in 1820 after the first wave of *olim* from Lithuania and Belarus.

¹² Even though R. Hayyim supported the *aliyya* to Israel and helped obtain funding for the operation, the silence in his writings about this historic *aliyya* led some historians to think that two opposing factions developed among the GRA's disciples, an idea which I have demonstrated to be faulty. See Raphael Shuchat, *Olam Nistar Be-Meimadei ha-Zman, Torat ha-Geula shel ha-Gra mi-Vilna* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2008), 90-91; Arieh Morgenstern, "Between Sons and Disciples: The Struggle Over the GRA's Heritage and Over the Ideological Issue of Torah Versus Erets Yisrael [in Hebrew]," *Daat* 53 (2004), 83-124, Raphael Shuchat, "The Image of the Vilna Gaon According to R. Hayyim Volozhin – Polemic or Reality" [in Hebrew], *Da'at* 67 (2010), 39-54.

¹³ Raphael Shuchat, *Olam Nistar*, 75-76.

¹⁴ R. Hayyim of Volozhin shared the same love of kabbalistic study, as is demonstrated in his posthumous work *Nefesh ha-Hayim* and R. Menahem Mendel did as well. However, the study of Kabbalah was considered the task of the select few who were entitled to enter this field. There is a tendency today to doubt the interest of Lithuanian rabbinic scholars in kabbalistic literature due their opposition to the Hasidic movement. However, R. Hayyim, as all those who saw themselves as being

who needed to know them did so as autodidacts. The eventual battles to keep the yeshiva world clear of foreign elements that the government, possibly under the influence of the Russian *haskala*, was trying to force upon it became so severe that the leadership of Volozhin closed down the yeshiva in the late 19th century so as not to allow the Russian government to force it to adapt its curriculum. This is despite the positive attitude the Gaon held towards the sciences and general knowledge.¹⁵

The world of Lithuanian yeshivot now became focused on the study of Talmud. The Gaon's opposition to *pilpul* was accepted, and thus examining the Talmudic text and developing logical frames of thought to analyze it was seen as central. The Brisker method of Talmudic analysis developed out of this enterprise. The Torah was the sacred text, the word of God, and the yeshiva was sacred ground and a sort of incubator in which the future leadership was raised and groomed as well as the place where the development of Torah scholarship was taking place. The yeshiva was the new *mikdash me'at* (small Temple), even more than the synagogue. The *baburim* (students) studied and prayed in the yeshiva, and later in the 19th and 20th centuries, ate and slept there as well.

The great scholars of the *mitnaggedim* tended to be open-minded and knowledgeable.¹⁶ Despite this, their commitment to Torah study was total. It was the highest act of fulfilling the Divine will in this world. It is said that when the Netsiv went from house to house to raise money for the Volozhin Yeshiva in order to feed the students, a certain homeowner (*balabos*) argued that the mishna in Avot says: "This is the way of Torah: Bread with salt shall you eat and water from the bucket shall you drink and on the ground you shall sleep."¹⁷ So why raise money for proper meals and boarding? The Netsiv answered that the mishna was given without punctuation and the *balabos* did not understand that this

influenced by writings of the Vilna Gaon, saw kabbalistic literature as the inner works of the Torah even if more of their time was devoted to the study of the halakhic texts. See Raphael Shuchat, "Thoughts on Lithuanian Kabbalah: A Study in the Lurianic Concept of *Igulim* and *Yosher*" [in Hebrew], *Daat* 79-80 (2015), 14-15, 27-31.

¹⁵ See Raphael Shuchat "The Vilna Gaon and the Study of Secular Knowledge" [Hebrew], *Badad* 2, (1996), 89-106, and David Fishman, "A Polish Rabbi Meets the Berlin Haskalah: The Case of Rabbi Barukh Shik," *AJS Review* 12:1 (Spring 1987), 95-121.

¹⁶ R. Isaac ben Hayyim Ickovits of Volozhin (1780-1849), R. Hayyim's son, spoke several languages. See Shaul Stampfer, *Ha-Yeshiva ha-Lita'it*, 57. The *Perushim*, as they were known in Jerusalem, the students of the Gaon, were more open to the new *yishuv* than were the Hungarian or Polish Jews who came to Jerusalem in the late 19th century.

¹⁷ Baraita of Rabbi Meir known as *Avot*, 6:4.

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particular mishna from Avot was to be read with question marks at the end of each line. Despite his witty answer, the truth is that food was scarce in the Lithuanian yeshivot. Until the Second World War, students were assigned homes in the community where they ate lunch and dinner. This meal plan was nicknamed “*Essen Teg*” (lit. eating days), which referred to the days when they were placed at families. R. Baron related that in the interwar period, host families were scarce and students occasionally had to do without lunch or supper.¹⁸ In Shanghai, things were much more difficult, but the students there were the “lucky ones” who had escaped Hitler’s Europe. If God had prepared an ark for Noah to survive the flood, R. Baron and many of his peers saw the Mir yeshiva, saved from the fires of Europe, as a sort of ark of scholars.

R. Baron, in this sense, represented the same deep belief in the centrality of Torah study as did all Litvak yeshiva scholars. He also had his eyes open to the new world that was being built from the ashes of the Shoah and knew that a certain sensitivity was necessary to adapt to the new environment. His nephew Avi Rabinowitz related that, as a student at Mercaz ha-Torah, R. Baron encouraged his students to go out and bring the Torah to the community at large and not just sit in the four cubits of Torah. He had left the ark and now had the sacred duty of bringing the Torah from a destroyed Europe to the new world.

Coming to Montreal

Montreal in the post-war era was filled with newcomers, many of whom were survivors of the traumas of the Shoah. Some of them had also survived from the yeshiva world of Eastern Europe. The story of the yeshiva scholar who came to Montreal is a story within a story. As Rabbi Wilfred Shuchat writes:

The yeshivot of Mir and Slobodka, anticipating the Nazi menace, had tried to plan a program of both escape and continuity. They had attempted to gather as many of their community as possible, including students and teachers. They were joined by other Torah Jews, Hasidim and mitnagdim, all with one goal in mind: to save whatever could be saved and, if God willed it, to carry on the life of Torah elsewhere and in some fashion. They fled as a group from Lithuania via the Trans-Siberian Railway to Kobe, Japan. They were admitted to Japan because the US consul in Warsaw had guaranteed the admission of

¹⁸ See the reference to this in the introduction to *Netsah Ya’akov*.

several hundred into the United States, but the Americans later reneged. Those not admitted to Japan were forced to remain in Shanghai where they were placed in internment camps for the duration of the war.¹⁹

The rescue committee of the Agudat Yisrael movement (*Va'ad Hatzoloh*) together with the leaders of the Canadian Jewish Congress (Samuel Bronfman and Saul Hayes) and the Federation of Polish Jews (Mordechai Peters) approached the Canadian Department of External Affairs with the result of eighty certificates of immigration entry offered for “yeshiva Jews.” In the end only twenty nine of these certificates were accepted. Three of the people granted certificates had gone to the Mir yeshiva, some to Yeshivat Chachmei Lublin, others to Kletzk, nine to Lubavitch, and there were also a few special cases, including the widow and sons of R. Israel Meir Hacoheh (the Hafets Hayyim). The group included Dr. Samuel Lewin, who later became the director of the National Religious Committee of the Canadian Jewish Congress, his brother Mordechai, Rabbi Pinchas Hirschsprung (1912-1998), who became the Chief Rabbi of Montreal, and Rabbi Leib Kramer (1918-1999), the founder of the Lubavitch yeshiva in Montreal.²⁰ R. Shuchat continues:

When Dr. Mordechai Lewin arrived, his first act was to create a yeshiva named Mercaz Hatorah, the name of the Mir Yeshiva. He was joined by Moshe Cohen and Mordeh'ai Rabinovitch... When Dr. Lewin left the yeshiva in 1948 it appeared about to close. At this point, both Cohen and Rabinovitch appealed to Rabbi Leib Baron, who was among the group in Shanghai who were able to emigrate after the war. He was working with Rabbi Aharon Kotler in Lakewood, New Jersey and obtained permission to go to Montreal. The Mercaz Hatorah yeshiva was immediately reopened and functioned not only as a yeshiva, but also as a day school with a secular program as well as Torah. The yeshiva continued to function until 1978, when as a result of internal disagreements, it officially closed. However, it had demonstrated that a yeshiva could exist in Montreal and that there was a community and a desire for one.²¹

¹⁹ Wilfred Shuchat, *The Gate of Heaven - The Story of Congregation Shaar Hashomayim in Montreal 1846-1996* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2000), 156.

²⁰ Ibid., 157. For a brief history of R. Kramer's life, see <http://rabbikramerslegacy.com/about-rabbi-kramer/>.

²¹ Ibid., 157.

Jewish Montreal in the Post War Era

The Montreal into which R. Baron arrived was experiencing a period of growth. Its numbers were boosted by the post-war influx of Jews from Europe as well as Sefardic Jews who had come from North Africa and Israel. Synagogue growth was unprecedented. Before 1886 Montreal had only three synagogues: the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue; the English, German, and Polish synagogue (which became Shaar Hashomayim)²²; and Temple Emanuel (Reform). These synagogues all went through expansions and many new synagogues were established over the years.²³ In addition, many Jewish organizations were founded: Bnai Brith was the oldest, and the Canadian Jewish Congress was established in 1919. The post-World War I era saw the establishment of The Jewish Community Council (Vaad ha-Ir) with its kashrut supervisions, which put to rest the kosher meat wars of the early 1920s.²⁴ Jewish labor unions were set up to defend the rights of Jewish workers.²⁵ Women played a major role in consumerism, including boycotting kosher butcher shops in Montreal and Toronto in order to bring down the prices of kosher meat already in the 1920's.²⁶ The Federation of Zionist Organizations (ZOC, Mizrachi, Hadasa, the labor Zionists, and others) was established. The post-World War II era saw the establishment of the YM-YWHA; health care institutions (Jewish General Hospital, The Jewish Hospital of Hope, Maimonides, and the Jewish Convalescent Hospital in Chomedey); the Allied Jewish Community services, which brought together the UIA and the Combined Jewish Appeal, Hillel and various synagogue and women's organizations.²⁷ Jewish schools were also developing rapidly. The Quebec government under Education Minister Jean-Guy Cardinal (1925-1979) decided to subsidize the general studies of the private schools, including the Jewish ones. As a result, by the late 1960's The United Talmud Torah had

²² Ibid., 40. See also Yosef Eliyahu. Bernstein, *The Jews in Canada*, trans. Ira Robinson (Montreal: Hungry I Books, 2004), 7-14.

²³ Wilfred Shuchat, Ibid., 168.

²⁴ See Ira Robinson, "Towards a History of Kashrut in Montreal," in Ira Robinson and Mervin Butovsky, ed., *Renewing Our days: Montreal Jews in the Twentieth Century* (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1995), 30-41. For more on the Va'ad ha-Ir and the struggle between the European-born rabbis and the North American-born rabbis see: Steven Lapidus, "The Problem of the Modern Orthodox Rabbinate: Montreal's Vaad HaRabonim at Mid-Century," *Studies in Religion*, 40:3, 2001), 351- 364.

²⁵ See Ruth Frager, "Communities and Conflicts: Eastern European Jewish Immigrants in Ontario and Quebec," in *Canada's Jews in Time Space and Spirit*, Ira Robinson, ed. (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 59-61.

²⁶ Ruth Frager, Ibid., 62-63.

²⁷ Wilfred Shuchat, Ibid., 161-169.

established a network of day schools across the city. The Jewish People's School and Hebrew Academy followed in line.²⁸ However, the idea of a traditional yeshiva was still somewhat of a novelty. Mercaz Hatorah and the Lubavitch yeshiva were the pioneers in this field, only to be followed later by Yeshiva Gedolah and the Hasidic yeshivot of Outrement. Into this multi-faceted Jewish society, with a traditional bent but with a tremendous desire to blend into Canadian society and values, came R. Leib Baron, along with a dream of bringing the old traditional messages of the Lithuanian yeshivot to a new world.

At this point it should be mentioned that the Yiddish-speaking Orthodox rabbis who came to North America in the 20th century did not always have the easiest time with the modernized Jewish community. To illustrate this, I convey the following story:

The rabbis of Agudath ha-Rabbonim decided to go to Washington on October 6, 1943, just prior to Yom Kippur, the most solemn day in the Jewish calendar, to attempt to meet with President Roosevelt and to plead with him to do something to save the Jews of Europe. Approximately four hundred rabbis gathered in Washington to demonstrate. Nearly all of them were European-born. They were most comfortable expressing themselves in the Yiddish language, though most had lived in various North American cities for two decades and more, and many had become fluent in English as well. The group's demonstration in Washington was covered by the major newspapers and newsreels of the day. Despite this publicity, however, the rabbis did not get what they really desired – the chance to see President Roosevelt. When the president found out about the rabbis' request for an appointment, he turned to one of his most trusted advisors, Samuel Rosenman. Rosenman told FDR that he did not have to see the group, for, as he stated to the president in his memorandum, "they are a group of rabbis who have just recently left the darkest period of the medieval world. They really represent no one."²⁹

²⁸ W. Shuchat, *Ibid.*, 250. For more on the Jewish day schools in Montreal see Morton Weinfeld and Phyllis Zerkowitz, "Reflections on the Jewish Polity and Jewish Education," in *The Jews in Canada*, Robert Brym, William Shaffir and Morton Weinfeld ed. (Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1993), 142-152; and Yaakov Glickman, "Jewish Education: Success or Failure," in *The Canadian Jewish Mosaic*, M. Weinfeld, W. Shaffir and I. Cotler, ed., (Toronto: John Wiley and Sons Publishers, 1981), 113-128.

²⁹ See Ira Robinson, *Rabbis and Their Community: Studies in the Eastern European Orthodox Rabbinate in Montreal 1896-1930* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2007), 3-4.

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Robinson writes that not only the liberal Jewish leaders of the day but even the Jewish historians had a negative bent towards these rabbis and did not record their real contributions to North American Jewry.³⁰ In addition, many of these rabbis, especially before World War II, remained within their insular immigrant communities and spoke predominantly Yiddish. Those who learned English were often not fluent and this held them back from being exposed to the Montreal Jewish community at large.³¹ Therefore it is significant that each of the three immigrant rabbis who played key roles in Montreal's Orthodox immigrant community in the first quarter of the 20th century, namely Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Cohen (1862-1950), Rabbi Aaron Mordecai Ashinsky (1867-1954), and Rabbi Simon Glazer (d. 1938) were all erudite speakers of the English language and non-fundamentalist Orthodox rabbis.³² Even Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg (1859-1935), the legalist and kabbalist, despite not being fluent in English, was well-versed in secular knowledge including science, politics, and economics,³³ and argued that Kabbalah and science can harmoniously coexist.³⁴

The post-World War II era saw the Jewish community of Montreal begin to undergo significant changes in its transition from being an immigrant community to a more acculturated community of Canadian Jews.³⁵ The Holocaust survivors were not a small group. By 1960 they made up 15% of Canadian Jewry.³⁶

The turn towards Orthodoxy or traditionalism among Canadian Jews and specifically among the Jews in Montreal included many Jews who were affiliated with Orthodox synagogues but did not lead an observant lifestyle.³⁷

³⁰ Ira Robinson Ibid. 4-6.

³¹ See I. Robinson, *Rabbis*, 37. Exceptions were Rabbi Simon Glazer and Rabbi Hirsch Cohen.

³² See I. Robinson, *Rabbis*, 54.

³³ I. Robinson, *Rabbis*, 57-58.

³⁴ I. Robinson, *Rabbis*, 66.

³⁵ This transition can be seen in light of seven events: 1. The decline of immigrant neighborhoods due to the entry of Jews into more affluent suburbs. 2. The arrival of Holocaust survivors and the gap between them and the veteran Canadian Jews. 3. The creation of the State of Israel and its effect on the community. 4. The ascendancy of the Canadian born or raised Jews from the interwar period. 5. Social mobility from working class to middle class. 6. The decline of anti-Semitism of the pre-WWII era. 7. The transition from immigrant to Canadian. See Franklin Bialystok, "Post-War Canadian Jewry," in *Canada's Jews*, Ibid., 96-97.

³⁶ Frank Bialystok, Ibid., 98.

³⁷ Ira Robinson, "Orthodox Judaism," in *Canada's Jews*, Ibid., 279. For more on the Jews of Quebec, see Morton Weinfeld, "The Jews of Quebec: An Overview," in *The Jews in Canada*, 171-192; as well as Stuart Schoenfeld, "Canadian Judaism Today," in *The Canadian Jewish Mosaic*, Ibid., 141-149.

In addition, if by the mid-20th century most Jews in Montreal saw the importance of a Jewish primary school education, they did not attribute the same importance to Jewish high schools and Yeshivot.³⁸ To add to the complexity, post-war Montreal became home to the largest Hasidic community in Canada possibly due to its relative proximity to New York City.³⁹

To this new world of Montreal Jews came three rabbinic Shoah survivors from the yeshivot of Lithuania who had a profound influence on Montreal Jewry: R. Leib Kramer, who set up Chabad in Montreal; R. Pinchos Hirschprung, destined to lead the Vaad ha-Ir as its halakhic authority for the years ahead; and R. Leib Baron, who was to struggle to bring yeshiva education to the Jewish community. In this primary essay, I would like to address not R. Baron's leadership skills in the community but his thought. In order to understand his thinking I use his own written works, considering some of the underlying ideas that motivated him.

The Open-Minded Approach

Coming to an open Jewish community, R. Baron, while never leaving his Orthodox Lithuanian yeshiva perspective, took a relatively broad-minded approach to the issues of the day. In an early work,⁴⁰ R. Baron writes against the trend promoted by the Satmar Hasidim in New York forbidding women from studying the Hebrew language as part of the prohibition against Torah study for women. R. Baron writes that, even if they do not have the obligation of *esek ha-Torah* (engaging in Torah) as do men, they certainly need to study all the laws that are incumbent upon them.⁴¹ In an insightful and revealing moment, R. Baron writes:

Of course one must teach their daughter the laws pertaining to them, and especially in our times, when the power of Torah has been weakened... and what Rabbi Eliezer [in *Sota* 20a] says, that anyone who teaches his daughter Torah is as if he taught her nonsense, it appears that this refers to their time when everyone lived in the same area as their fathers and tradition was strong and all went in their father's ways... In this case we can say that she should not study Torah but just follow in her father's path; but today, due to our sins, the tradition of the fathers has weakened greatly and many do not live in their father's town, and in addition people

³⁸ See Ira Robinson, "Orthodox Jews," 279.

³⁹ See William Shaffir, "Hassidism in Canada," in *Canada's Jews*, Ibid., 282.

⁴⁰ *Birkat Yehuda*, (New York: Twersky Brothers Press, 1961).

⁴¹ Ibid., 8.

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are used to studying languages of the nations where they reside, therefore women must study Humash and Prophets and Ketuvim and ethics (*musar*) of the sages like *Pirkei Avot*, and *Menorat ha-Maor*, etc., so that they understand our holy faith because if not, they might stray from the divine path, Heaven forbid.⁴²

R. Baron actually permits women to be Torah scholars and explains the prohibition of R. Eliezer as limited to certain women. He says:

We have found that in the times of our sages many women studied Torah and were great scholars because since they studied their laws [i.e. the laws pertaining to women] they [the scholarly women] realized that they are not like most women who see Torah study as exaggerations and therefore studied more and became real scholars.⁴³

In another revealing moment, R. Baron argues that the Satmar Rebbe's idea that all women understand Torah as exaggerations and therefore are considered unworthy pupils (*talmid she-eino bagun*) is far from reality:

The Maharsha says in *Berakhot* 28 that an unworthy pupil [*sh-ein tokho ke-baro*] is one who has no fear of God, but this is not true of our women. Our sages praise the righteous women in whose merit we left Egypt, and see *Sota* 11b and the Maharsha there, who says that the Torah was given to women first. We have also witnessed with our own eyes how thousands of our daughters gave their lives in martyrdom in order not to defile themselves at the hands of the Nazis, may they be blotted out; we therefore have proof that contrary [to the Satmar Rebbe] woman fearing God ought to be praised.⁴⁴

R. Baron explains that a woman must also study the Hebrew language in order to understand Humash. This open-minded approach and sensitivity had its limits, of course. If R. Baron felt that a group was pushing an issue in a way which he interpreted as not being for Heaven's sake, he would not hesitate to oppose it. In *Netsah Ya'akov*,⁴⁵ R. Baron discusses the "women of the Kotel" demanding to hold their own service and read the Torah without a blessing. He was asked by a certain rabbi what he thought

⁴² Ibid., 15-16.

⁴³ Ibid., 12.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁴⁵ R. Leib Baron, *Netsah Ya'akov* (Jerusalem: Author's Publication, 1997), 5.

about this, and R. Baron opposed the idea, his reasoning relating more to the purity of intent than to the actual issue at hand:

Their hearts are not with the Holy One, blessed be He. The proof is that there are Reform women among them who do not keep even the mitzvot of the Torah in which a woman is commanded and certainly not the rabbinic requirements and therefore the phenomenon is quite strange. For we clearly see that they are not keeping their obligatory mitzvot, whereas the mitzva of praying in a group and reading the Torah, from which they are exempt, they want to do publicly in front of the Kotel. Therefore I say that their intention is not pure [*le-shem shamayim*] and is rather meant to publicly display equal rights for women. Therefore I quote Isaiah, who said: “Who asked you for this, you who tread in my courtyard” (Is. 1:12). [The positive things] that our sages said of certain woman who wanted to keep mitzvot contingent on time [of which a woman is exempt] such as Michal the daughter of King Saul, who donned tefillin, and Yonah’s wife, who made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem on the festivals (*Eruvin* 96, *Hagiga* 16)... these cases are not a proof [against what we have just said] since all these woman [mentioned by the sages] were righteous (see *Sanhedrin* 19b) and certainly kept all their obligatory mitzvot and only when the Sages saw that they wanted to keep the mitzvot from which they are exempt in addition to their obligations did they permit this... We should never prevent a woman from adding to her mitzvot even if she is exempt and for sure they will receive reward. However these women [of the Kotel group] do not keep their obligatory biblical and rabbinic mitzvot ... and therefore there are ulterior motives here.⁴⁶

In another case, using his creative thinking and wit to counter opposition to Torah law, R. Baron related how he received a call from a congregation in the Maritimes. They were traditional but the new leadership wanted mixed seating in the synagogue. One opposing board member called him to ask what to say to counter the movement in the synagogue. He said: “I asked this board member if he knew of Sam Bronfman. He said, ‘of course.’ I then asked him if he had heard of the Steinbergs and the Pascals. He said that they are well known in the business world. ‘Well then,’ I told him: ‘do you know that they attend a synagogue in Montreal called Shaar Hashomayim, which has separate seating? If you want to be in their league you have to act like them.’” This of course was not a halakhic answer but it was this wit and humor that helped him get his message across in a time when Orthodoxy was being contested in Canada.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 5-6.

The Centrality of Torah Study

R. Baron, like a real Litvak, did not believe that authentic Judaism was possible without scholarship. In another essay in *Netsah Yaakov* he speaks of the *teshuva* movement in Israel, which he applauds, but then hastens to criticize those who think that one can embrace the Torah without scholarship.

In our generation we are gladdened to see a happy phenomenon. Even while most of the world is materially oriented, at least a minority or our young people are involved in the *teshuva* process. Due to a multiplicity of reasons they strayed off the path and even reached extremes, finding only emptiness in their lives, some of them trying other religions with only disappointing results. Then they realized that the only true road is to go back to the bosom of our holy fathers to their true source and reconnect with the Jewish people. Many yeshivot were set up in Israel and abroad. Many students among these returnees became great scholars in the knowledge of Torah. This is definitely a miracle in our generation which did not happen in earlier generations. Even though in each generation there were returnees to Judaism, including in Talmudic times, these were individual cases. What is happening today in the form of a *teshuva* movement among the Jewish people is unprecedented and is certainly a sign of the redemption, as the Hafets Hayyim wrote in *Tsippita le-Yeshua*. However, on the other hand we are witnessing a strange phenomenon in which many of these returnees are not interested in becoming scholars, which would transform them completely, which is the goal of *teshuva* [i.e. Torah scholarship]. The goal of *teshuva* is to be reborn again and this [transformation] can be achieved only through the study of our holy Torah, ‘whose light will bring them back to the good.’ However, the returnees, instead of developing their Torah studies, find it enough to believe in some leader, and sometimes they consider his words greater than those of Hazal. They think that in this way they are keeping the whole Torah but for their entire lives they remain without the knowledge of the holy Torah, and without the knowledge of our holy Torah it is impossible to reach the level that can transform one’s character traits and nature to become a new person [of Torah]. Therefore this is not real *teshuva*.⁴⁷

Derekh ha-Limmud (The Method of Study)

The issue of *derekh ha-limmud* is a more involved matter, but a few words should be said. For R. Baron, as for all Lithuanian trained Jewish scholars,

⁴⁷ Ibid., 129.

the Torah is the word of God and the Talmud is the way in which we connect our thinking to God's word. The ultimate goal is to reach deeper and deeper levels of the text, not by casuistry (*pilpul*) but through understanding the deeper side of the simple line of argument (*peshat*).⁴⁸ As R. Hayyim of Volozhin explained, *Torah li-shemah* (Torah for its own sake) does not mean to think about clinging to God while studying, but to engage in the very act of the study of Torah, which connects one to the word of God. Therefore it is *li-shemah* [for the sake of Torah itself] and not *li-shemo* [for the sake of God].⁴⁹ This approach is followed by R. Baron as well;⁵⁰ therefore he always started his discussion of Talmud with Rashi and the simple meaning of the text. The next step for the advanced student was the Tosafot and other *rishonim*. Of the *aharonim* he was fond of the Maharsha (R. Samuel Eliezer Halevi Eidels, 1555-1631) and the Rashash (R. Samuel Ben Joseph Strashun, 1794-1872). Upon reading an essay from the *Shana be-Shana* journal about the Vilna Gaon's opposition to *pilpul* in the study of Talmud, R. Baron looked up in a bit of astonishment and said: "That's right." My interpretation of his astonishment was: "How did the author know that if he did not study in Baranovich or Mir?"

Ethics or *Derekh Erets* as the Foundation of Torah Life

In another broad-minded essay he praised an article by a Rabbi Natan Grossman, the editor of *Yated Ne'eman*, who criticized religious Jews who are dishonest in business affairs. R. Baron writes:

All the things that he [Rabbi Grossman] writes concerning the ugly deeds of certain people who display themselves as Torah observant but in monetary matters profane the name of Heaven, these things are true to the sources of Torah. As our sages write at the end of *Yoma* (86a): "What is a profanation of God's name?... One who studies Torah and works with Torah scholars but his business affairs are not just. What do the people say about him? Woe to that one who studied Torah, woe to his father who taught him Torah, woe to his rabbi who taught him Torah, see how corrupt his deeds are and how ugly his ways." And I feel in the depths of my heart that one cannot bury their head in the sand and not see or react

⁴⁸ See R. Hayyim Volozhin, *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* (Jerusalem: Private publication, 1973), 4:1.

⁴⁹ See *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, 4:2.

⁵⁰ See Introduction to *R. Leib Baron, Birkat Yehudah*, (New York: Twersky Brothers Press, 1961).

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to the corrupt deeds of such people from time to time; people who are not honest and profane the divine name. In connection to this I want to tell my readers what I have said from time to time to *ba'alei teshuva*, explaining the words of our sages that morality (*derekh erets*) comes before Torah. Can there be something from the Torah which comes before the Torah? After all, morality (*derekh erets*) is part of the Torah. Therefore I explain this according to the words of our holy rabbis in *Avot*, who began by saying: "Moses received the Torah from Sinai." Many commentators ask why it is *Avot* that starts with this saying, rather than the Talmud overall. Why is this tractate called: "Fathers" (*Avot*) and not something else? It should be called the Tractate of Ethics (*Middot*)? But when I pondered the words of our sages and the ways of men and their behavior, I understood that the goal of the Torah is the perfection of man and human perfection is not possible unless one perfects one's character traits.⁵¹

The Land of Israel

Just as he was interested in the Jewish community around him, so was he interested in the new State of Israel and everything that was happening there. He had a great love for the land. In Mercaz Hatorah, a student asked R. Baron if he could recite Hallel in the yeshiva on Israel Independence day as the Rabbinat in Israel had decided. R. Baron allowed it without a *berakha* (blessing).⁵² It appears that this was not just a decision on the spur of the moment but R. Baron had researched this issue intensely and in his *Birkat Yehuda* he came to the conclusion that Hallel can be recited on a miracle that happens in modern times to the Jewish people in the Land of Israel (i.e., salvation from peril); however, he was not sure if it can be recited if the miracle was hidden (*nes nistar*) and not obvious (*galuy*) and therefore he allowed one to recite Hallel without a blessing.⁵³ There is an ambivalence here. On the one hand, he sees the birth of the State as a hidden miracle, but is afraid to obligate the recitation of the Hallel since it is not a *nes galuy*, whereas he considers Purim a *nes galuy* because the Jews overcame their enemies. I think that he was afraid to side with the rabbanut against many of his peers in Israel.⁵⁴ Rabbi Meshulam

⁵¹ *Netsab Yaakov*, 128.

⁵² Told to me by Ruby Walbromsky of Jerusalem.

⁵³ *Birkat Yehuda*, 23.

⁵⁴ This teshuva was published in Nahum Rakover's collection of responsa about Yom Ha'atmaut, published in 1975. There R. Baron wrote similarly that Hallel may be recited but without a blessing. See Nahum. Rakover, ed., *Hilkhot Yom ha-Atmaut ve-Yom Yerushalayim*, (Jerusalem: Ministry of Religion 1973).

Roth (1875-1962) who came from a hasidic background, wrote similarly that in theory Hallel may be recited but that it's better not to say the blessing unless most of the rabbis in Israel agree.⁵⁵ In his first book, *Birkat Reuven*, (1955) R. Baron discussed the agricultural laws of *teruma*, *ma'aser*, *pe'ah*, and *shemitat kesafim*, all relating to the land of Israel. For R. Baron, the Torah is one and all matters need to be discussed.

The Mitsva to Settle the Land of Israel

In his book *Netivot Lev*, R. Baron discusses the mitsva of *yishuv Erets Yisrael* (settling the Land of Israel). He argues that the mitsva is incumbent on men and women alike. He follows Nahmanides who claims it is a mitsva in all generations but then tries to understand Rabbenu Hayyim Kohen's comment in the Tosafot in *Ketuvot* (110b) that the mitsva is not applicable today since we do not know how to keep the laws of the Land. I should point out here that the Satmar Rebbe in his *Va-Yoel Moshe* claims the mitsva to reside in the Land of Israel is not applicable today due to this statement of R. Hayyim. R. Baron argues that the mitsva according to Nahmanides could not possibly be contingent on keeping the mitsvot of the land, as Rabbenu Hayyim writes, but as always, he tries to harmonize both points of view, finding a middle road between R. Hayyim and Nahmanides.

For Nahmanides the mitsva to settle the Land is due to the holiness of the Land of Israel, and the holiness of the Land is due to that part of the Torah which connects to it. However for Rabbenu Hayyim, the main way to keep the mitsva of settling the Land is through the mitsvot relating to the Land.⁵⁶

In a nutshell, for R. Baron the halakha follows Nahmanides (*halakha ke-batrai*) but the sanctity of the Land according to Nahmanides must stem from that part of the Torah connected to the Land and the mitsvot connected to the Land (which R. Baron learns from R. Hayyim). He also compares a place of Torah learning to the Land of Israel, since the Talmud states that one cannot leave Babylon just like one cannot leave Israel. In an unusual anecdote, he mentions a rabbi in Israel who argued with him,

⁵⁵ This too was published in Rakover's book mentioned in the previous note. This idea could be supported by the mishna in *Eduyot*, 1:5, that a court cannot change the decision of a previous court unless it is greater in *minyan* (number) and in *hokhma* (wisdom). Rambam asks how it can be greater in *minyan* if the high court always has 71 judges, and he answers that it refers to a majority of rabbis in that time.

⁵⁶ *Netivot Lev*, responsa 1.

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saying that he did not check the opinions of the later rabbis (*abaronim*). R. Barons apologizes but does not change his opinion. Probably the rabbi in Israel was referring to the response of Rabbi Isaiah of Trani (Maharit), who claims that R. Hayyim's statement in the Tosafot is a mistake added by a student and not part of the Tosafot.⁵⁷

In his book *Yishrei Lev*, (1972) R. Baron argues with Rav Hayyim Eliezri in an article in *Or Ha-Mizrach*. R. Eliezri argues against R. Baron, saying that the mitstva of settling the Land of Israel has nothing to do with the mitsvot connected to it and not even with the holiness of the land, since the forefathers had this mitstva before the *kedusha rishona* of Joshua. R. Baron argues against the notion that the forefathers had this mitstva but humbly agrees that the *Mesbekh Hokhma* (R. Meir Simha of Dvinsk, 1843-1926) said that Moses had the mitstva. R. Baron brings an alternative opinion to support him. Then he addresses a second issue and says that when he equated places of Torah to the Land of Israel he did not mean that they were on the same level, but just followed the Talmud in *Berakhkot* that equated going to synagogue with living in the Land, although the place of Torah does not actually have the same sanctity as that of the Land.⁵⁸

In my opinion, R. Baron withdraws slightly from his former position in *Netivot Lev* and adopts a concept of the sanctity of the Land that is not contingent on its mitsvot, even if philosophically he connects that sanctity to the part of Torah related to those mitsvot.

In his *Mesammehei Lev* (1978), R. Baron again discusses the mitstva of living in the Land. He quotes Rabbi Moshe Meir Yashar, who argues that the reason the Talmud says that Moses wanted to enter Israel to keep the mitsvot of the Land and not just *yishuv Erets Israel* is due to the idea brought in Maimonides that the tribe of Levi is exempt from conquering the Land and therefore from the mitstva of *yishuv*. (This Maimonidean quote is often used by those arguing that if one studies Torah like the tribe of Levi one is exempt from *kibbush* and thus the army, based on Maimonides' Mishneh Torah, *Laws of Shmitta* 13:13.) R. Baron argues that the idea exempting the Levites from *yishuv ha-Arets* is ridiculous since they had cities in the Land and, besides, if women are obligated by this mitstva despite not being part of the *kibbush*, so too the Levites. In *Yesammah Hayyim* (1987) he again discusses the issue of the land (p. 60) and responds to a certain Rabbi Mandelbaum, holding his ground that

⁵⁷ *Sheelot u-Teshuvot Maharit* (Bnei Brak: Beit Hasefarim Press, 1994), *Yoreh Deah* 28.

⁵⁸ R. Leib Baron *Yishrei Lev*, (New York: Balshon Press 1972), 68.

the tribe of Levi is commanded in *yishuv* of the Land and *kibbush*, even if one understands from Maimonides that they did not go to war.

In a second essay in *Yesammah Hayyim*, R. Baron discusses *kibbush Yisrael*. He argues that if a non-Jew conquers the land it is called a regular *kinyan* (acquisition), but if a Jew conquers the land it is called *kibbush* and therefore takes effect even if the previous owners stake a claim to it.⁵⁹ He then proceeds to make an interesting comment:

The land of Israel is an inheritance from our forefathers and all the years that the seven nations lived there they occupied a foreign land that was not theirs. When the children of Israel came to the land they did not actually come to conquer but returned as the rightful heirs, banishing the inhabitants who lived there without claim.⁶⁰

In his *Netsah Yaakov* (1997), R. Baron writes: “If we find among the nations that they cherish their land, even more so should we cherish our holy land that the Holy One, blessed be He, gave to Israel. After all, that is why we bless the seven species of the Land of Israel first.”⁶¹ However, concerning why Moses wanted to enter the Land he says that it was in order to be able to keep the mitzvot of the Land and not just teach them in theory (127). He adds as well that Moses wanted to see the Land, Jerusalem, and the temple.

The Meaning of the Modern State of Israel

For R. Baron, to be a believing Jew means to look for God’s hand in every aspect of life. Even more so when God does something for Kelal Yisrael. Therefore he writes:

The return of our land to Jewish sovereignty and the establishment of a government in our day – especially in the past few years in which the influence of the Agudat Yisrael [party] can be felt – is for certain a great miracle. In my opinion this is one of the greatest miracles in the history of our people and I have no doubt that it is the finger of God, as was pointed out on various occasions by the great and righteous [Torah] leaders of our times. After close to two thousand years that we were scattered as a lamb among the nations and especially after the terrible Shoah that happened to our people in which six million of our best were murdered; and right then, those who survived by God’s mercy merited to see at least a

⁵⁹ *Yesammah Hayyim*, 91.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁶¹ *Netsah Yaakov*, 126.

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partial return of our former glory [*atara le-yoshmah*] in which the Land was returned [to the Jewish people] according to God's promise to the people of Israel. This did not happen in previous generations until now. Is this not a revealed miracle from Heaven?⁶² And this is a great wonder that picks at my brain: What made our generation different than the previous ones? What merit do we have over the previous generations [which justified our receiving the Land once again?]⁶³... If anything, our sages talk of the earlier generations as being on a higher level than ours!?! But as I pondered this question I found the answer, in my opinion, in the words of the Sages in *Megilla* 11.⁶⁴

R. Baron writes that as long as the Jewish people are in the *galut*, God sends them leaders in every generation to help that generation survive its hardships and save it from assimilation.⁶⁵

But why is the Land of Israel mentioned next to the covenant with the forefathers [Lev. 26:42]? This is surely to mention how [God] prevents Israel from assimilation in the *galut*... meaning, that if God sees that there are not good enough leaders to secure the existence [of the people], as it says in *parshat Ha'azinu*, "for He sees that they are forsaken" (Deut. 32:36)... then He brings them to the Land of Israel to settle it in order to save them from destruction and assimilation. However, this is not yet the future redemption that we wait for each day.⁶⁶

The modern State of Israel is a God-send. It is a modern day example of God caring for His people Israel. It is how He saves them from total destruction after they went through the darkest period of their exile. R. Baron is careful to steer away from too many eschatological implications concerning the Land and assures the reader that this is not yet the redemption but is still the hand of God playing in the arena of Jewish history. He adds:

This is what happened in our generation. Six million lives, among them the greatest leaders and saints, giants of Torah, and great rabbis, were all decimated by the cursed Nazis, may they be blotted out. Those who survived were like sheep without a shepherd. Then did God decide to return them to the Holy land... but it is obvious that this is not the true redemption, which we still await. For as long as we are still dependent on the

⁶² Compare to above, n. 53.

⁶³ *Yesamah Hayyim*, 148.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

whims of other [nations] we are “still the slaves of Ahashverosh” even if we are in our Land... the full redemption will be in the future when we shall merit that no nation can control us.⁶⁷

In a follow up article R. Baron writes:

I heard from the saintly *gaon*, Rav Yehezkel Levenstein, the great *Mashgiach* of blessed memory, that since the people of Israel became a nation there was no greater tragedy than this. [Who could have imagined] that an ‘enlightened’ people from the nations like the cursed Nazis; people with degrees of higher education, should raise the banner to destroy the Jewish nation and to gather engineers and architects and set up death camps and gas chambers... This we see in our own eyes that when six million saints [*kedoshim*] of our people were decimated tragically in ways indescribable in any imagination; to think that such an event might happen to a nation... and right after the war we merited to see the rebirth of our holy Land after two thousand years that it was barren and we fought wars against the wicked and savage Arabs with their sly tongues, and we won the wars in a wondrous way. Anyone who has a brain in his head can see how God did this to show their evil and to bring honor to His people as we pray for on the High Holy Days “And therefore give honor to your people.”⁶⁸

For R. Baron, the events of the rebirth of the State and the wars won there were done by the hand of God. But how does one treat the secular leadership?

However, one may ask: how can the return of our land to Jewish control be the hand of God if most of the government officers are not religious? My answer is what it says in *Sanhedrin* 102: “Why did Omri merit to rule as king? Since he added a city to Israel.” If Omri who was an idolater, who sinned and brought sin as Yeravam ben Nevat, [and the Talmud says] that by the hand of God he merited to be king for building a city [in Israel], even more so that the ministers of the Government today who have built many towns and support the Sabbath and places of Torah study – why shouldn’t they deserve to govern as well? But still, this is not the ultimate redemption as I already wrote... (And see Malbim Micah 4:8 where he explains that there will be a [Jewish] government in Israel even before the Messiah comes).⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Ibid., 149.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 151.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

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I remember one time among many, coming to his Beit Midrash on Lacombe Avenue in Montreal. He pulled out the Malbim on Micah to show me the Malbim's quote that there will be a small government before the coming of the messiah. He had a big smile on his face as he always did when he taught Torah. He told me: "I showed this Malbim to Rav Aharon Kotler [of Lakewood] and he jumped. Rav Aharon always jumped when he got excited about something."

The Peace with Egypt and the Place of Rabbis in Politics

In his *Yesammah Hayyim* (1987), R. Baron addresses the issue of land for peace in light of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's argument that even one piece of land deserves a fight since it is under the prohibition of "*lo tehonnem*" (Deut. 7:2). R. Baron was critical of Lubavitch and of the Rebbe, which is not unusual for a mitnagged. After the Rebbe died, he openly criticized the Messianic elements in Lubavitch which spoke of the Rebbe coming back as the *masiah*.⁷⁰ During the first Lebanon war, Lubavitch publicly called for the Israeli army, which was about forty kilometers from Damascus, to take over the capitol. R. Baron was angered by this and said: "Why don't they send their own troops to do this!"⁷¹

In the essay, R. Baron discusses the peace accords with Egypt (1977) and claims, as did Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, that if giving some of the land will create peace even on one border (Egypt) it is allowed as *pikkuah nefesh*. (However, I must point out in all fairness that his assumption was in 1977, in which a majority of the Knesset and the military experts were claiming that this was a sound agreement, whereas today the tone has changed due to Hamas and the Palestinian Authority). It is interesting, however, that R. Baron argues that rabbis are not to be asked questions concerning the security of the state because they are not experts and should stick to the areas of Torah and society which they understand.⁷²

Yom ha-Shoah

In another essay, Rav Baron asks why the religious community does not designate a day to commemorate the Shoah. He points out that the secularists have already done this (in Yom ha-Shoah) and wonders why this "holy task," as he calls it, was done only by the secularists? After all if there is a fast day for the murder of Gedaliah ben Ahikam why not for the

⁷⁰ *Netsah Yaakov*, 133. Prof. Allan Nadler, the well-known critic of the Chabad Movement nurtured his anti-Lubavitch side here as well.

⁷¹ He was referring to the Lubavitch youth organization "Tzivos Hashem."

⁷² *Ibid.*, 85.

murder of six million?⁷³ R. Baron says that even a day of Torah study would suffice. He does not have an answer but writes that he heard people say that the Hazon Ish (R. Avraham Yishaya Karelitz, 1878-1953) objected and he writes that if this is true, he humbly respects his decree.

In conclusion, R. Baron was very much a Litvak in the way he saw Torah study as the center of Judaism. Accordingly, no *teshuva* can be achieved without Torah study. As a scholar he was humble and quick to admit mistakes to the opposition if they were correct but also steadfast when he believed himself right. Concerning his humility, when after thirty years of teaching a weekly Talmud class at Congregation Shaar Hashomayim, it was suggested to honor him, he was embarrassed to be honored for teaching Torah but after much pressure he said, “if this will bring honor to Abbaye and Rava and the scholars of the Talmud, for this I will go.” R. Baron in his responsa is both steadfast in his commitment to Torah values and in the same breath extremely aware of the world around him and of the changes in society. He supported education for women, stressed the moral basis of the Torah, attacked the extremists, and pointed out the flaws within his own social fold. He never called himself a Zionist, but the State of Israel was always on his mind. He saw himself not as an insular Jew, as some ultra-Orthodox Jews do, but as a man of Kelal Yisrael, rising above accepted labels, and thus his scholarship was recognized beyond his natural community.⁷⁴ Despite not being aligned with the Religious Zionists, he was surprisingly close to many of their ideas. He believed in the mitzva of living in the Land, saw the Israeli army as “our boys,” agreed to reciting Hallel on Yom ha-Atzmaut, albeit without a blessing, and even called for a religious parallel to Yom ha-Shoah. Not being part of the modes of thinking created by thinkers like Rabbi A. I. Kook, who introduced the conceptual mode of thought of the Torah of Israel to the people of Israel in the Land of Israel, he struggled to understand the holiness of the Land in the mindset of the Torah-centered Judaism he had learned in the Mir yeshiva, where the Torah is the beginning and end of all. Therefore the holiness of the Land must stem from the Torah, as well. In this point R. Baron differed from his Religious Zionist counterparts. They believed in the Land and the people as absolutes, whereas for him the state was holy only if the Jews kept the Torah. When Menachem Begin became Prime Minister he allowed the members of his Minyan to say the prayer for the State of Israel on Shabbat because: “Now there is a real Jew

⁷³ Ibid., 124.

⁷⁴ He was the only private *masmikh* recognized by the RCA in Montreal. See: <http://www.rabbis.org/pdfs/ApprovedPrivateMasmichim.pdf>.

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as prime minister.” This idea of the value of the State being contingent on its religious level he shared with the Haredi elements in Israel but in others issues he was close to the Religious Zionists. He saw himself as true to Torah values and saw the Agudat Yisrael movement as those Torah Jews who were guarding the sanctity of Jewish life and continuity. Despite his personal loyalties he never addressed issues from a political standpoint; there was only the Torah to teach. Therefore in his responsa he purposely steered away from political concerns and addressed each issue objectively. This is how he saw his students as well; whether they were Haredi or Religious Zionist was not important. What was important was to be a genuine Torah Jew. Concerning the meaning of the modern State of Israel, he believed that it was brought about by the hand of God to protect the Jewish people after the Shoah when most of the leadership had been destroyed. Therefore, even if much of the political leadership of the government was far from righteous it was still a Godsend to protect the people from decimation and inter-marriage. This early government was even predicted by the Malbim, who wrote about a Jewish government that will be established prior to the messianic era. However, he cautioned, that this was not the ultimate redemption. That will happen in the future. This approach was a practical one and shared certain similarities with the thinking of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who also steered away from messianic connotations in regards to the modern State of Israel despite his positive approach towards it.⁷⁵ A comparison of these two thinkers in this area, both of whom came from scholarly Litvish backgrounds, would prove to be beneficial.

I think that those who are looking for a philosophical synthesis between a Haredi Torah scholar trained by the great luminaries of pre-war Europe and the modern issues of the twentieth century can certainly find it in the writings of R. Aryeh Leib Baron.

⁷⁵ See, for example, Aharon Rakefet-Rothkoff, “The Religious Zionism of Rav Soloveitchik zt”l: A Synthesis of Worlds,” in *Torah-To-Go* (Joshua Flug, ed., New York: YU publication 2013), 64-70 and Reuven Zeigler, “Rav Soloveitchik on the Significance of the State of Israel,” *ibid.*, 76-82.