

## RECENT RELIGIOUS THOUGHT IN ISRAEL

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With this report TRADITION resumes its highly popular feature which has contributed much to a deeper understanding of the spiritual and religious problems besetting Israel. The author is a regular contributor to leading Israeli newspapers and serves as director of the Religious Section of the Jewish Agency's Youth Department.

## RELIGIOUS CRITICISM IN ISRAEL

### I

Religious life and thought in Israel has been shaped largely by Eastern European Jewry. While in recent years the North African and Asian Jewish communities have been exercising considerable influence in religious affairs in Israel, the dominant pattern of religious attitudes is still mainly Eastern European. This is noticeable both in the personal composition of the rabbinate and in the prevalent conception of rabbinical work in the community. It is equally apparent in the dominant view of religious education, which in practice includes secular studies but opposes in principle a philosophy of synthesis. The majority are probably uneasy about "worldly education"; while they accept a kind of professional training as necessary, they have not been able to integrate it into the religious scheme of things.

This attitude is rooted in the Jewish life of Eastern Europe, one wholly orientated to the spiritual and

contemptuous of *die Welt*, the external aspects of life. While the sciences and secular culture are not wholly rejected they are thought of as somehow outside religion and become relevant only insofar as they present a direct challenge and threat to religion. If not, they are relegated to that large neutralized realm of things that are necessary for making a living and retaining physical health. As a result, a practical and up-to-date synthesis is combined with the old disdain for the "worldly."

This Eastern European orientation of religious thought is presently well suited for the Israelis of the Oriental communities. During modern times they had not experienced in their own countries the kind of religious environment that affected European Jews. Abroad, they either assimilated completely into the non-Jewish culture or moved exclusively within the Jewish orbit. It is only in Israel that they have begun to face the modern Jewish dilemma of the confrontation of religion and

## Religious Criticism in Israel

modern civilization combined with a strengthening of the national consciousness.

Even opposition to religion in Israel is equally affected by an Eastern European orientation. On the whole there is nowadays very little open opposition to religion *per se*. One very rarely finds criticism of religious faith based on principle. Recent frequently publicized debates have concentrated instead on the question of what is alleged to be "religious coercion of public behavior." To the extent that there is any criticism based on principle, it, too, is of the Eastern European variety. It is criticism of a kind that used to be fashionable at the end of the nineteenth century in Western Europe, and is classically represented in the writings of T. H. Huxley and Ernst Haeckel. The immense scientific progress during the 19th century had induced the belief which was summed up by Haeckel in 1899 in his *Weltraetsel* (The Riddle of the Universe): "Our only real and valuable knowledge is a knowledge of nature itself." It has been said that the trouble with the Russian Jewish intellectuals was that the *Weltraetsel* reached Berdichev twenty years too late. By the time Haeckel excited the brilliant minds of the young heretics of the *shtetl*, his kind of atheism or agnosticism had become dated in the West.

This observation remains relevant both to religious and anti-religious thinking in Israel. Criticism of religious faith is expressed in terminology which would be regarded today in Western Europe and America as old fashioned. Conversely, the

attitude of most religious Israelis to the religious conflict and crisis is equally largely irrelevant to the real contemporary issues. Thus, while Israel has a considerable annual output of homiletic literature of the *derush* and *mussar* type, less than a half dozen of recently published books show any awareness of the nature of the real current challenge to religious faith. On the contrary, those problems which concern the contemporary young religious Israelis who study science, read literature, listen to the radio, visit the cinema (and eventually will watch television), and above all mix in the army with other young people of the most variegated backgrounds, are all ignored. Some notable exceptions spring to the mind. The works of the much lamented Rabbi Elimelech Bar-Shaul of Rehovot, who passed away recently, stand out as unique in that they represented the efforts of an Eastern European type of rabbi who managed to communicate with the new generation. He was a disciple of Rabbi Kook, and of all Rabbi Kook's disciples he best exemplified that rare twentieth century phenomenon of the deeply religious mystic evincing a radically modern interest in human affairs. More typical of the majority of the rabbis and *roshei yeshiva* in Israel is an attitude of aloofness from the spiritual upheavals of our times and the encroachments of modern culture on the traditional ways of thinking. Such an attitude is suspicious of the modern preoccupation with the external world and shows virtually no interest in understanding the religious problems engendered by new insights gained by sci-

entific methods.

This attitude and outlook is reflected in the almost wholly "behavioristic" characteristic of the work of the Israeli rabbinate. It is concerned solely with "conspicuous" religion, with the public observance of *Kashrut* and Sabbath, and with marriage and divorce. It is absolutely silent on matters of belief and thought and speaks rarely on questions of social behavior. As a result, it has been pointed out that an Israeli who is a vegetarian and at peace with his wife would never need a rabbi! This wry observation contains a good deal of truth. For the rabbinical pattern of religion is undoubtedly behavioristic; this is not due so much to a deliberate philosophy but rather to the lack of communication between a nineteenth century Eastern European or North African rabbinate and a twentieth century society.

This lack of communication inevitably undermines the growth of a meaningful religious view of contemporary issues. The nature and complexity of these issues is not realized and the attempts at solutions become irrelevant if not misleading. Due to the lack of a sophisticated understanding, a continuing effort is made to formulate a kind of general panacea to be applied to all occasions, based on a proposition which in itself is accepted by all orthodox Jews, namely that *Halakhah* is the proper guide for all problems of life at all times and in all circumstances. Unfortunately, since the problems themselves are not properly understood, the general practice is to reject anything new (*chadash assur min ha-*

*torah*).

Instinctively, the rabbinate first grapples towards a position which opposes any innovation. But frequently subsequent recognition of all the factors involved compels a revision of the first reaction. To the uninitiated this usually appears as mere wavering and compromise with the *Halakhah*. In fact, it is more accurately part of the personal and painful process of confrontation with the facts of life in a modern State.

## II

This approach is intellectually so unsatisfying that it is bound to arouse criticism. That a good deal of this criticism is voiced (often in a vociferous manner) by opponents of religion goes without saying; but what concerns us here is the criticism of religion which is advanced on religious grounds. It is not easy to define in precise terms the nature or extent of this type of criticism, for it is not organized and has no regular means of expression. Published writings are sporadic and scattered, and Israel has no periodical of stature for discussion of religious problems.

Although there are a few rabbis of the *Torah im derech erez* outlook, they are so few and have so little influence that for all practical purposes there is no rabbinic alternative to the Eastern European or North African type. There are, however, a number of synagogues run along the lines of the modern Orthodox synagogues of America and Western Europe which accept the full orthodox ritual and cus-

## *Religious Criticism in Israel*

toms, have separate seating and insist that all executive officers be Sabbath observers. On the other hand, as a rule, such synagogues have a younger membership, use the Sephardic pronunciation in the synagogue services, eliminate the announcement of gifts during the reading of the Torah, and preserve decorum and a modern type of democratic organization in synagogue affairs. Such synagogues of this type exist throughout the country but they have no contact with one another.

The typical visitor and outside observer who relies for his information upon written material or short personal visits to Israel may be forgiven if he interprets the Israeli religious situation solely in terms of a conflict between the religious and the non-religious political parties. Close observation and prolonged exposure to religious life in Israel point to a more complex appraisal. Despite its lack of organization and leadership, a religious philosophy of *Torah im derech erez* is supported by numerous Israelis whose numbers cut across party political differences and countries of origin. Such a view is concentrated mainly among university lecturers, school teachers, lawyers, scientists, and civil servants. This is not surprising, for in terms of the present "non-ideological" cultural climate of Israel, a certain degree of sophistication is a prerequisite to concern with any religious philosophy. At the same time, though, it must be emphasized that not all scientists subscribe to the *Torah im derech erez* approach. In this respect some of them are not

unlike some of their colleagues in the American "Association of Orthodox Scientists," (as recently described by Charles Liebman in the Summer 1964 issue of *Judaism*) who manage to live in two distinct worlds, never allowing their scientific insights and methods to confront their religion.

One publication does occasionally reflect those problems with which the religious intellectuals grapple: *De'ot* (Opinions), the periodical of the Israeli religious students organization (*Yavneh*). *De'ot* has all the marks of an undergraduate magazine. Its standards vary considerably from issue to issue and range from serious contributions by professors to the immature gropings of young students. The only discernible editorial policy is that of providing a forum for free discussion. This is undoubtedly a praiseworthy objective, but as a result serious and high-level essays are printed side by side with pseudo-academic and "wise-guy" articles. *De'ot*, therefore, is not representative of serious religious thought in Israel, but over the years it has published a good number of essays dealing with the problems that concern the religious intellectuals. The result of its editorial latitude in allowing virtually unrestrained means of expression is that it does reflect in some vague and some real manner the concerns of the Israeli religious intellectuals, albeit an incomplete and erratic summary. Drawing on this source, and the few other published materials available, the salient features of the religious intellectuals' concern may be summarized under several topics:

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

- (a) The rabbinate.
  - (b) The application of Torah law to legislation (*mishpat ha-Torah*).
  - (c) The relationship of Judaism to the democratic texture of society.
  - (d) The problem of tolerance and particularly the relations between religious and non-religious Jews in Israel.
  - (e) Religion and the scientific methods of research, particularly the historical and textual analysis of sacred writings, affecting the study of the Bible and the history of *Halakhah*. (It is significant that in Israel few religious intellectuals appear concerned with the problems of evolution and creation.)
  - (f) The role of woman in society. Unlike the United States, mixed seating in the synagogue is not a serious problem in Israel, but the religious education of girls is one of the most serious issues faced by Israeli educators, and this problem reverberates in discussions about the religious role of women in society. Among other things, this problem touches on the question of compulsory military and national service of girls.
  - (g) The religious attitude to social problems. On the basic assumption that Judaism is an all-embracing religious way of life, can a precise religious outlook be applied to topical problems of state and society? What religious methods should be used for working out a religious attitude to such issues? Can Halakhic sources and methods be used to adduce *Halakhah* rulings for political, social and economic problems?
  - (h) Leisure and entertainment. The majority of religious Israelis can now enjoy the modern amenities of leisure. The attitude of the rabbinate, however, is wholly negative on all modern entertainment, and religious intellectuals are concerned with this problem.
  - (i) The relation of the divine and constant elements to the human and variable elements in the *Halakhah*.
  - (j) Finally, there is considerable discussion of what Israelis term "roads to faith." Under this heading come such questions as the roots of religious faith, the dichotomy of faith and reason, and the nature of the existential commitment to God and His revelation. A favorite topic of Israeli educators is that of *Ta'amei Hamitzvot* and their utilization for pedagogical purposes.
- This attempted outline is necessarily sketchy, and its arrangement is not in any order of importance. Moreover, it would be wrong to assume that all intellectuals are concerned with all of these problems. Nonetheless, the list is fairly indicative of the ferment and critical thinking among religious intellectuals.

### III

Because of the dearth of literary sources to document any analysis we may seek to make, recourse

## Religious Criticism in Israel

must be had to private conversations and public meetings. The most important venue for such discussions is the annual Conference on Jewish Thought (*Kinnus lemachashevet hayahadut*) held in Jerusalem during *Chol Ha'moed Sukkot*. The conference, which is arranged by the Torah Culture Department of the Ministry of Education, lasts for two days and it focuses each time on a particular subject. Among subjects discussed at conferences were the religious attitude to social and economic problems, the religious interpretation of history, the role of the State of Israel in religious thought, the role of man, and the problem of a theological interpretation of the European holocaust. These conferences are attended by people from all over the country; in recent years the Israeli press has given a fair amount of coverage to the proceedings.

During the last two years another type of conference has been initiated by the Center for Religious Education. Two such conferences have taken place so far in Jerusalem during the week of *Chanukkah*, and each was devoted to some aspect of religious educational theory. The first dealt with the education of girls and the second, with education in the context of modern society. The *Sukkot* conferences attract a wide variety of participants, including the whole gamut of religious intelligentsia, ranging from university professors to teachers, professionals and merchants. On the other hand, the *Chanukkah* conferences are attended mainly by educators. Similar regional "semi-

nars" are occasionally held in other parts of the country and numerous small circles (*chugim*) meet more or less regularly in various parts of the country.

All this hardly amounts to a movement, but the meetings do bring to light that which would otherwise have been entirely submerged. More important, these sessions help to clarify the religious alternative to the "official" presentation of the religious situation in Israel, according to which all is well and the only religious "problem" is political opposition to public religious behavior. The critical religious attitude seeks to point up the internal religious issues which confront the thinking modern observant Israelis, and while this does not make for a philosophy in the sense of Rabbi Hirsch's achievement in 19th century Germany and Rabbi Soloveitchik's teachings over the last twenty years in the United States, it does present a serious attempt to work out a rationale of Jewish religious thought in full and frank confrontation with the modern situation in the new State of Israel.

### IV

An analysis of religious critical thought in Israel would be incomplete without a discussion of the remarkable influence of the religious kibbutzim (*Hakibbutz Hadati*) upon the religious life of Israel. The depth of this influence is in no way commensurate with the numerical strength of the religious kibbutzim. There are only nine of these kibbutzim and another

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

four semi-kibbutzim (which are called *meshek shitufi* where the economy is collective although there are no communal dining halls and children's houses), and their adult population does not exceed four thousand. Yet, these kibbutzim are a focal point in the life of the religious intelligentsia.

The kibbutzim serve as a rallying point of all that is new and challenging in the religious life of the country. While many persons who are suspicious of all changes regard the religious kibbutzim as a hotbed of "Reform," to most religious Israelis these kibbutzim are lively and interesting communities in which religion is "alive and kicking."

This is why religious intellectuals are attracted to the kibbutzim. While living elsewhere they seek to retain an association by proxy, avidly reading kibbutz publications, maintaining personal friendships with *kibbutzniks*, and looking to them for leadership in public issues affecting religion.

The religious kibbutz members are distinguished from other religious Israelis by their thorough and consistent application of religion to social issues. The religious kibbutz is not, however, essentially a religious "commune" in the sense that the Essenes or Anabaptists were religious "communes." For while members of *Hakibbutz Hadati* are religious and the community is run on religious lines, the prime motivations for the kibbutz are Zionism and Socialism. The religious *chalutzim* have no special theology of their own and they are not moved — as a group — by unusual

religious fervor. Theirs is not a religious movement of the hassidic type but a social movement imbued with religion. Perhaps the most telling reason for their attraction and influence is what is described in colloquial Hebrew as *ikhpat lo* — (he cares, is concerned, and personally committed). The important contribution of the religious kibbutzim is that they are constantly probing and searching, that they are vitally concerned with the human situation, and that they have a fervent urge to improve men and society.

Any analysis of modern religious thinking in Israel can do no more than present an outline of problems and attitudes. There are no coherent schools of thought and, more important, there is presently no discernible leadership in this field. The meetings and conferences and the occasional writings are too diffused to enable the formulation of a coherent philosophy. There is no center of teaching where these problems are consistently treated, and periodic conferences obviously can only raise questions and adumbrate solutions.

There is another quality which impedes the impact of the type of religious thinking which has been described. Most of the efforts are undertaken by those active in the academic disciplines with a resulting emphasis on analysis and historical research. Conference sessions will frequently present excellent expositions of some aspect of Maimonides' ideas, or the evolution of the meaning of some concept, but the same persons will hesitate to commit themselves to a

## *Religious Criticism in Israel*

new idea or even a new formulation of a religious idea. Discussions tend to be rather academic and impersonal, steeped in the rarefied atmosphere of purely analytical thinking, and appearing obsessed with the fear of commitment to a definite philosophy of religion. The preference is for analysis, criticism or suggestion, and less for implementation of an indicated approach. This weakness is accentuated by the fact that those usually involved are not teachers in the traditional Jewish sense. They lecture, write and engage in research, impart knowledge and train students in methods of research, but most

do not seem keen on educating students and shaping their thinking. The reluctance stems from uncertainty of their own philosophy. Those active and concerned are not short of ideas and are undoubtedly strong in analytical criticism of ideas of others, but do not possess a coherent philosophy of their own.

These, then, are the distinguishing features of the thinking of the religious intellectuals in Israel. It is knowledgeable, critical and thought-provoking, and it is replete with tremendous potentialities. So far, however, it has not progressed beyond the analytical stage.