

The author of this essay is a prominent Israeli educator, whose thought-provoking articles have appeared in numerous Israeli and American publications.

THE MITZVOT, THE MESSIAH AND THE TERRITORIES

I

It is one of the fascinating and perplexing aspects of Israeli public life that the issues which agitate great controversy seem invariably to resolve around the destiny of the state, while people merely sigh about the critical day to day problems. Ultimately, the latter seem to stir little overt anxieties; indeed, one senses an almost stoic trust in the ability of those who must deal with them to do so successfully. Thus, observers have remarked on the almost uncanny calm that prevailed here before the Six Day War, on the atmosphere of somber confidence that the somehow magnificently efficient (and incredibly civilized) army would not fail to provide for the defense of the country.

On the other hand, and in blatant contradistinction to this curious calm, the post-war period has seen an unending and acrimonious furor over the at-the-moment theoretical question of the disposition of the held territories, a debate that features dogmatic and dramatic pronouncements on the nature of Zionism, the Biblical promises of redemption and the ideal shape of the peace that will, someday, descend upon this troubled region.

In short, Israelis tend to regard concrete political problems with the serenity that men usually reserve for philosophy, while they treat "philosophic" problems with the nervous intensity usually found in politics. The man on the street, when asked how he views the increasing Soviet penetration into the area,

The Mitzvot, The Messiah and The Territories

the headaches occasioned by the economy, or the latest threatening speech by Nasser, is most likely to calmly respond: “*yihyeh be’seder*, it will turn out all right”; he is, however, likely to have fiery opinions on the sanctity of Jerusalem or the priority of peace — even while he knows full well that not a single Arab state has declared its willingness to make a meaningful peace under any rational conditions whatever.

To a large degree, this was always so in Israel. Controversy in this society has a peculiarly spiritual intensity; at the same time it is something of a pastime, almost (*l’havdil*) like archeology. It is both playful, yet terribly serious. It concerns itself with making the present situation meaningful via the search for historic roots and conjecture about future hopes. For the past twenty years, the basic issue in Israel has been physical survival in the face of Arab threats, but the most prominent *public question* during this period has been — “What is a Jew?” Survival is more or less serenely entrusted to the government and army; the people prefer to debate whether Judaism is a religion or a nationality. The most pressing problems are little discussed but are, amazingly, successfully resolved, while the issues of public debate, always somewhat Platonic in nature, never seem to really get anywhere. That they are nevertheless kept alive and debated with unflagging gusto, shows how playful they are — and how serious.

Public figures, too, are judged not “merely” by their concrete achievements but by their views of the Jewish past and future. The appreciation bestowed on Ben-Gurion for his feats of statesmanship is expressed almost academically, but his thesis that only six hundred families left Egypt at the Exodus is (in these matters, the only tense is the existential present) hotly defended or denounced. The brilliant strategy of former Chief of Staff Yitzchak Rabin is a source of calm pride, but his address on Mount Scopus in which he dealt on the nature of the Jewish people and its army almost evokes tears. And Moshe Dayan is not liked or disliked for his administration of the territories (which is considered, almost unanimously, brilliant) but for his alleged views on “the future of the territories.” (He is, accordingly, liked and disliked most cordially.)

It makes little difference that the debate about the future of "the territories" is, politically speaking, a monologue, and that none of the Arab countries would today make a formal and secure peace with Israel on even the most "dovish" Israeli terms. The debate goes on, playfully, seriously. Not a week goes by without some public discussion of "the territories," without either the appearance of some large and much-signatured manifesto in the press demanding "not to give back an inch," or an interview with some prominent professor or novelist pronouncing his utter disinterest in "the territories," without lectures, symposia and demonstrations *ad nauseum*. The Arabs in the territories as well as to an outside observer, generally misunderstand these debates, which are couched in the language of politics. They fail to understand that the discussions are basically philosophical and deal with questions of almost abstract principle. The Arabs sometimes fail to grasp that the "hawks," in demanding "the realization of the historic dream of the Jewish people in its entire homeland" are not conscious of having any practical political designs upon them, and are, likely as not, more sensitive to Arab feelings in daily political intercourse than the "doves." (Recently, when members of the maximalist 'Land of Israel Movement' were accused of favoring the gradual expulsion of the Arabs, Natan Alterman, one of the most articulate members of the movement, expressed shock at the charge which had been levelled, he said, to libel and discredit his movement. He was not, he said, in principle opposed to the idea of an eventual "population transfer" for those who desired it, but that would obviously become possible only under conditions of a most sublime peace. Dr. Yisrael Eldad, the man who had been specifically charged with advocating an expulsion, did not, Alterman wrote, speak for his movement. Soon thereafter, Dr. Eldad, Israel's most extreme maximalist, granted an extensive interview to *Ha'Maariv* in which he stated that the imputation of such a idea to him was "a lie." It is, incidentally, no accident that the main spokesmen for both the minimalist and maximalist movements tend to be professors, novelists and rabbis, while those who wish "to wait and see" are, often as not, professional politicians.) As for the most "dovish" people who, it

The Mitzvot, The Messiah and The Territories

would appear, can hardly wait to return the territories, it must not be thought that they mean to terminate the occupation in the foreseeable future.

The entire issue has, like former center-pieces of Israeli public life, taken on the features of a too-much-performed play. But this play, unlike some of the others, is definitely a hit. One knows all the lines in advance, but there is always something stirring about it. When the play is performed with a full cast, as for example, on the floor of the Knesset, the most polished lines are spoken by the actors hugging the right and left wings of the stage. In every discussion these deliver learned, routine, but still passionate expositions on the problems of Israeli security, Arab demography, Zionist history and Jewish redemption, in ascending spiritual order and descending order of concrete political significance. There is hardly a child in Israel who is not yet versed in the main arguments. The air is thick with self-contained, logical, but curiously windowless constructions pertaining to the sanctity (or utter insignificance) of holy places; the perversity of the "cosmopolitans" (or "chauvinists") and the birth-rates of Arabs on the West Bank (or future *aliyah* waves from the West and Russia).

When pressed to the wall, both of the clearly defined groups (i.e., those who would return everything and those who would return nothing) begin to re-define their positions, in varying degrees of consciousness and self-consciousness. Almost all maximalists would agree to concessions in exchange for "a real peace" (including treaties, open borders, embassies, free trade, etc.); almost all minimalists agree that there can be no withdrawal without peace — "and, it must be granted, Jerusalem is a special case." The maximalists, in practical terms, wish for Israel to proceed as though peace had already been achieved on their terms, especially through settlement of the territories. As for the minimalists, their concern is that nothing be done to change the *de facto* situation in the territories, changes that, they fear, might create psychological or political impediments when the hoped-for day of negotiation dawns. But the former privately (though not always publicly) admit that the immediate task of controlling the territories requires tact and restraint. As for the latter, they

pretend not to notice the settlements on the Golan Heights and in the Jordan Valley that the immediate task of security requires.

The fact is that a calculated and too-drastic change of the present situation would jeopardize its relative stability by posing a direct provocation to the Arabs, while not changing it at all would be interpreted as timidity and would invite insurrection. *Hazman ose et shelo*, as the Israelis say; time makes demands and creates situations which an intelligent ideological vision can hope to channel but never to completely control. In this connection, the laying of telephone lines between Schechem and Haifa is more significant than abstract discussions on *Eretz Yisrael Hashhelemah*. The telephone lines were laid not primarily to make Israelis out of the West Bank Arabs, but rather for the sensible reason that people, forced to live together by circumstances, must be able to talk to one another. Obviously, no one who wishes to return the territories is *against* the laying of telephone lines to Schechem. Likewise, if a certain professional group of East Jerusalem joins an Israeli professional association, it is not because they are Israelis but because they are businessmen. Their protestations that they are and remain Jordanians and that the incorporation of Jerusalem into Israel is a scandal, are freely offered and casually accepted. But they are reminded that complaint is neither here nor there and that it is for statesmen to discuss, not for businessmen. Today, Israeli Jews and non-Israeli Arabs mix in the cities of Israel, but this reflects not ideological imperialism, but the demands of common sense and a distaste for apartheid. The maximalists and their opponents may be either pleased or disgruntled at this or that development and may, through various devices, encourage, discourage or occasionally manipulate a social or political situation, but they cannot ignore the complexities of society and politics. Thus, for example, the establishment of *kibbutzim* on the Golan Height furthers the interests of the maximalists, but the minimalists are not blind to the security requirements of Israel and can oppose such settlements only by advocating longer stretches of reserve duty for more men in order to patrol the Heights. Those who would oppose civilian settlements would, in our present situation, have to support Golan military camps. But, obviously, this is the last

The Mitzvot, The Messiah and The Territories

thing that will arouse the enthusiasm of the minimalist.

What happens when ideological notions of religious goals are treated as simple questions of political ends is well illustrated by the much-discussed resettlement of Hebron. This settlement, designed to "redeem in practice" the city of the patriarchs has, to date, probably complicated the task of the military occupation. After having spent several months in Hebron's Park Hotel, the settlers were given quarters in the military compound overlooking the city where, as one reporter noted, their status was more that of wards of the military government than redeemers of what is, after all, an Arab city. This is not to say that Jews should not have the right to live in Hebron which is, no matter what its demographic composition, a holy city; one, furthermore, in which there has been no Jewish population since 1929 because of a cruel pogrom. If, as is likely, a Yeshiva is re-established there, it will perhaps serve to teach the local population that pogroms do not (or should not) create social and religious facts. (For that matter, even if Hebron should, in some future settlement, be returned to Jordan or given to a possible Arab Palestinian state, there is no reason why it should be, on that account, *Judenrein*.) But the highly ideological fashion in which the present settlement was undertaken is hardly likely to decrease the yearning of Arab Hebronites for a release from the Israeli occupation — indeed, it may even have aggravated the possibility of an eventual reconciliation.

II

To the extent that the entire dispute over the territories concerns itself with the immediate political problems of Israel and not only with its destiny, the argument is readily summed up, since it revolves around two concrete questions: security and demography. The maximalists claim, with justice, that it is far better to have the avowed enemies of Israel on the far side of the Suez Canal than in the Gaza Strip, and that the Jordan River is a better frontier than the ridges of Tulkarem, fifteen *kilometers* from Natanya and the sea. To this concrete political argument, the minimalists can answer only with the 'theoretical' (for the

moment, at least) vision of peace. In the event of this vision materializing, the latter maintain, the proximity of the Egyptians will no longer be threatening. But there is no peace, nor is there any immediate prospect of any agreement that will not be suicidal for Israel.

As for the minimalists, their objective "political" argument is the so-called demographic one. They point out the predictable inability of Israel to absorb the new Arab populations without losing its Jewish character. The million and a half Arabs now under Israeli jurisdiction enjoy an extraordinarily high birth rate while the Jewish birth rate is exceedingly low and can, even by the most strenuous educational efforts, be raised only slightly. It can therefore be foreseen, say the proponents of the "small Israel," that within two decades the Jews of Israel will be outnumbered in their own state. Against this "hard" (i.e., political) argumentation, the maximalists can only respond with the vision of large-scale *aliyah*. But this, unfortunately, is at the moment almost as remote as genuine peace. And so, looking at the argument from either side as a *political* issue, we are given one strong political point which can be countered only by a "visionary" one. And since security is the most important political consideration, the maximalists clearly have the upper hand. In the absence of peace, the argument remains playful.

III

But, if the casual observer, aware of the immediate political sterility of the debate, deduces that the argument, being somehow playful, is a mere game, he may be said to misunderstand the Jewish people, the nature of Jewish realism and idealism and the place of the State of Israel in that eternal Jewish quest for significance which made Zionism such a potent yet problematical expression of modern Jewish spirituality. It is, in short, to be doubted whether he comprehends the subtle relationship that obtains between the two poles of Jewish existence, Torah and the Messiah.

The Torah is both a yoke and a joy. *Shavuot* is the day of the giving, more than of the accepting of the Torah, and we

The Mitzvot, The Messiah and The Territories

celebrate this festival with a wearying all-night vigil of study. Mount Sinai was raised over our heads and we were offered the choice of death or submission.¹ For the Jewish people there is thus no life without it, but our history records how difficult we found it to live *with* the Torah. From the days in the desert when our forefathers nostalgically recalled the fish that they ate *free* in Egypt — “free of *mitzvot*,” explains the *Sifre*² — until the various movements of assimilation of our day, we encounter, again and again, the desire of Jews to be freed from the burden of their Jewish tasks. For the Torah is an ever-present task; it makes immediate demands at every moment of our lives, never relaxing its hold — and we are often sorely tempted to seek meaning in nostalgic romanticisms of the past or in future utopias (such as those of our revolutionary assimilationists) rather than in the present situation which demands, first and foremost, not the dream but the halakhah.

And yet, even while it is a burden, the Torah is a joy and a light. Once we bind ourselves to it wholly, it brings the eternal and Divine into our everyday existence. Through the Torah, we find the spiritual stamina to perform prosaic tasks unprosaically. In the knowledge that God is to be found and obeyed in the everyday, the routine becomes sacred. When we live by the *mitzvot*, we realize that we have been blessed with a Torah of truth, through which everlasting life has been planted in our midst. This is the Torah that was given as though today, to give meaning and a redemptive quality to today's act. And then we recall that the Torah was not only imposed upon but also freely accepted by our forefathers and that the covenant was made not with our fathers alone but with each of us who is alive this day. And having realized this, we make God's Torah our own, never tiring of constant repetition, rejoicing on *Simkhat Torah* that we are privileged to begin it anew at the moment we have completed it.

The Torah is very serious and not at all playful; having a mountain held over one's head or freely entering into a solemn covenant with the Sovereign of the world is not a game. It is wearying with its incessant demands but, at the same time, the knowledge that the demands are God's and that it is fully within

our power to carry out His commandments makes it a source of courage and strength. Unlike the believer in Original Sin, whose social acts of righteousness are ridden with anxiety, for he knows that, actually, only God can do the right, the Jew rejoices and is tranquil in the knowledge that "It hath been *told unto thee*, O man, what is good . . ." (Micah 6:8)

But, while the Torah accords significance to the act, it is the waiting for the Messiah, the expectation of redemption, that gives meaning to history. Like the Torah, the vigil for the Messiah is very serious, since without redemption, the *mitzvah* might be ultimately absurd, a beautiful stitch in a non-existent tapestry. It is the promise that the entire world will some day see God's wonders just as we have "*seen the sounds*"³ of the Torah and witnessed His great deeds that assures us that the Word we have heard is not merely a delusion or an artful construction of our minds. Without the eventual coming of the Messiah, God's kingdom, which we accepted at the Red Sea, will always be foiled by Amalek. And we, the first subjects of the kingdom, will remain the citizens of an exotic principality, despised by "the Powers" for our seclusion and pretensions. Thus, as we make our way through history, from Titus to Auschwitz, armed only with the Torah that we have seen and that we hear, we wait to see, once again, God's clearly revealed Hand. And this time, all mankind, having seen His mighty deeds "will willingly receive the yoke of His sovereignty."

This vigil fills us with tension and anxiety. We must ask, in each epoch of darkness, How long, O Lord? In the ages of *Galut*, the song of redemption sung by our forefathers at the sea, "Who is like unto Thee, O Lord," is transformed into the bitter plaint of Rabbi Yishmael's disciples: "Who is like unto Thee, O Lord — Who is *silent* as You are!"⁴ Our anxiety, our endless quest for the redemption, our futile calculations when the redeemer will come (in which we persist despite the fact that the Halakhah frowns on them) derives from the fact that the advent of the Messianic era, unlike the observance of the Torah, depends on the redeeming act of God. It is for us, through the Torah, to begin the work; we cannot, by our own powers, complete it.

Thus, though the festival on which we contemplate the future

The Mitzvot, The Messiah and The Territories

redemption is "the season of our rejoicing," since we are certain that, as we read in the *Haftorah* of the first day, "God will be one and His name will be one," and all the nations will ascend, year by year, to prostrate themselves before the King, the Lord of Hosts, and to celebrate the festival of *Succot*,⁵ yet it is also the festival of sitting in huts, of wandering through the wilderness. "It is not without good cause that the book full of corroding doubt, Ecclesiastes, is assigned to be read at the Feast of Booths."⁶ For we realize that "everything having been heard," all that we can do is "to fear God and keep His commandments." But in the realm of the redemption for which we yearn, "God is in Heaven and you are on earth, therefore let your words be few."

But, because of this anxious waiting, the vision of the Messiah must also be somehow playful. Until he comes we, after all, have the Torah. And, in any case, we must remain sane. We must dream, but the Torah does not allow us to lose ourselves in dreams. In the words of Maimonides:

"No man knows how these events will occur until they have actually happened, for they are not clearly described by the prophets, and the sages have no tradition concerning them . . . One should not occupy oneself with the *aggadot* and *midrashim* dealing with these subjects and their like . . . for they lead neither to the fear of God nor to the love of Him. Neither should one calculate the dates . . . instead one should wait and believe in these matters generally as we have explained."⁷

We must wait for the Messiah with utmost seriousness, but we dare not sit idle while waiting. And we know that if we remove the element of playfulness, if we occupy ourselves with hypnotic seriousness in matters of Redemption, we may fall into a trance and awaken to the call of a false Messiah who will leave us naked, stripped bare of the Torah without which we cannot hope for the authentic redemption.

Thus it is that, while we celebrate the festival of the hope of redemption with a mingled joy and melancholy, the festival on which we were given a veiled inkling of God's redemptive power, when the king could not sleep and thus, Israel was spared, is both joyous — and comic. The joy of *Purim* has an element

of the absurd in it. True, it was a salvation but, after all, *Purim* is not *the* Redemption. Israel is still in *Galut*, its poor are still hungry, the ludicrous Ahashverosh, though he was an instrument of salvation, is still ludicrous, and he still sits on his throne. *Purim* is only a prelude and we, yearning for the full realization, to avoid crying, laugh. And, in the meanwhile, we continue to maintain our hold on the Torah, bestowing gifts upon the poor.

IV

It is in the intricate relationship between Torah and Redemption, and in the aspiration of the Jew to transform the Torah that is forced upon him into the Torah that he gladly accepts as his destiny,⁸ that both the nobility and the problematics of Zionism may be understood.

Zionism and the State of Israel represent, on the one hand, the response of the Jewish people to their fate. Deprived of security, of human dignity, often of their very lives in the lands of their dispersion, they have had, in our age as in ages past, no choice but to begin their perennial wanderings once again. The Jew was brought to *Eretz Yisrael*, as to America and Argentina, *al pi hadibbur* (following the Word of God), in the shadow of pogroms and Holocausts which threatened him with extinction. But for some of those who retraced their steps of *Eretz Yisrael*, there was the conscious decision to choose this particular refuge, because of the conscious hope that, in this land, their fate would be transfigured into a freely chosen and joyfully accepted destiny. They hoped, in Israel, to make the Torah, a light, a blueprint for a just society and a guiding pattern for an exhilarating Jewish experience, pointing the way towards ultimate redemption. They called upon their fellow Jews to escape the physical and spiritual fate that threatened in the *Galut*, believing that the demise of *Galut* existence would solve "the Jewish problem" of extermination and assimilation. And, whether articulately or not, they hoped that, with the change in the situation of the Jewish people, the world too would be "changed"⁹ — it would finally be enabled to transcend the tragedy of "la Condition humaine" and awaken to the Divine word: ". . . and He blessed them and called their

