

Rabbi Yosef Blau is *Mashgi'ah Rubani* at Yeshiva University and president of Religious Zionists of America.

THE IMPACT OF *KOL DODI DOFEK* FIFTY YEARS AGO AND NOW

In the spring of 1956 I was a freshman at Yeshiva University and active in Bnei Akiva. My interest in religious-Zionism was unusual, as my generation was intensely American. I was still disappointed because I had not received permission a year earlier to participate in a new program of the Torah education department of the Jewish Agency which had arranged for ten students to study at a yeshiva in Israel for a year. Sensing that the new State of Israel was a turning point but never having even visited it, I needed to root my feelings in an intellectual framework.

Most of my friends viewed positively the emergence of the State of Israel as a haven for refugees and for the Jews of the Arab countries, but they did not see it as relevant to American Jewry. The fact that the political leadership of the State and the majority of pioneers were not observant was confusing. It was a time when many prominent Rashei Yeshiva challenged the existing relationship of Orthodox Jews with the non-Orthodox movements in America as well as with the secular in Israel.

We were aware of the destruction of European Jewry by the Nazis but had no real sense of the enormity of the Holocaust. The survivors, including some of our teachers in Yeshiva, did not talk about what had occurred. However, the theological questions relating to that destruction and the conflicting uses of Zionism as either cause or solution were in the air.

The talk of the Rav *zt"l* on *Yom ha-Atsma'ut* in 1956 dealt authoritatively with all three issues. His approach to suffering and to the dual covenant between Hashem and the Jewish people was as important as his description of a non-messianic religious-Zionism. It changed the entire nature of the discussion and, for me, became the intellectual framework for my outlook.

The debate about whether the behavior of European Jewry should be blamed for its destruction, which made the survival of American Jewry difficult to justify, was no longer the focus. In other words, the lesson of

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the book of Job was not to explain suffering but what to learn from it. Attempting to explain evil is not productive; the task is to grow spiritually from experiencing pain. Job learned to care about the suffering of others, that the essence of Jewish prayer is the prayer for his friend.

We have no answer for the question of the suffering of the righteous. Blaming victims will not justify theodicy. The Rav foresaw that the birth of the State of Israel would not eliminate anti-Semitism. It did, however, create opportunities and demands upon us. The powerful image—taken from *Shir ha-Shirim*—of the beloved knocking on the door was applied to the changed reality.

The six knocks on the door reflected the multifaceted nature of Jews having our own state. In mixing the theological and the political, the impact on the Jewish psyche as well as the practical existence of a place of refuge, the Rav showed how an important event had occurred without claiming that it had messianic implications.

By introducing the dual covenant—that of Egypt and that of Sinai—the parameters defining Orthodox interaction with those who share the covenant of *goral*, fate, if not the covenant of *ye'ud*, purpose and goal, became clear. Fleshing out these themes gave new insight into what it means to be a Jew. While not excusing the failings of secular Jewry, the Rav focused on observant Jews' responsibilities and acknowledged our mistakes as well.

There are additional elements to this rich talk, including a broadening of the definition of Amalek. This limited expansion has led to its misuse by extremists to identify all of our enemies as Amalek in order to justify their eradication. The Rav's moderate position on the territories after the Six Day War and his response to the events at Sabra and Shatilla support my impression that he did not intend to justify extreme actions against the Arabs. Nevertheless, this is one part of the talk that has troubled me.

A significant halakhic analysis of the nature of conversion, most of which is in the footnotes of the article, and probably not in the talk, has important ramifications. The Rav concludes by integrating the major themes and, while emphasizing that the fate of the *yishuv* in Israel is ours as well, he posits that our goal is ultimately spiritual.

It is now fifty years later and much has changed. The State of Israel is on the verge of becoming the home of more Jews than any other country. The ingathering of the exiles has exceeded any possible expectations. Yet there have been many disappointments and new crises. Religious-Zionism did not follow the approach of the Rav.¹ The mes-

sianic vision of the Rabbis Kook,² father and son, has dominated in Israel and many see the movement, because of the current political situation, threatened and starting to dissolve.

Fifty years later, unfortunately, evil continues to exist and we have witnessed the emergence of a terrorist philosophy that justifies random killing. During this past year the world also witnessed the apparently random suffering caused by the tsunami. Attempts in the name of religion to explain why various groups or societies have been targeted makes the Rav's approach to suffering as compelling and necessary today as when he originally articulated his remarks. If anything, relationships between different segments of the Jewish community have become more strained and the model of the dual covenant has retained its relevancy.

As in *Shir ha-Shirim*, the original source of the imagery, with the passing of a half-century the knocks reflect a sense of missed opportunities. Is anything left from the Rav's article that can help us to redefine religious-Zionism in the present climate? Minimally, the notion that one can find religious significance in a Jewish state without seeing it in messianic terms is a start.

A closer examination reveals that a number of the "knocks" are still relevant and that other opportunities and challenges have emerged. The theological significance of Jews returning to Israel and creating a state, which—while threatened by terror—is basically secure, remains. The reversal by the Reform movement of its classical anti-Zionism and the given that Orthodox young men and women spend at least one year studying in Israel reflect the centrality of Israel in Jewish life even in America.

Focused on the external enemy, Israel has not yet determined the exact nature of its Jewish character. Integrating the Russian and Ethiopian immigrants, Ashkenazim and Sefardim, and religious and secular into one society is a daunting task. Even if the religious-Zionist community in recent years has been focused primarily on the land of Israel, we remain the best hope for bridging the gaps. Is the political arena still the best way to preserve public adherence to halakha? The Rav, in many articles and public talks, stressed the role of education over legislation.

A basic tenet of religious-Zionism is the viability of a modern Jewish state based on adherence to halakha. Seeing a non-religious Jewish state as only the first step, we have only begun to work on fleshing out the Rav's fourteenth article of faith: that Judaism is not limited to any particular society, time, and place. Some progress has been made in responding to technological change but other areas have been neglected. Our concern is not only that observant citizens be able to maintain religious

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life, but that a level of Jewish tradition should be built into the broader society. Judaism is perceived by the secular community as mere adherence to rituals and as unconnected to questions of social justice.

Jews living in the Diaspora are not responsible for the broader society. Judaism is primarily focused on the individual. The situation changes radically when we have a Jewish state; the term Jewish community has a totally new meaning.

A religious-Zionism that recognizes the validity and significance of the state (once a truism) strives to create a religious framework for the entire community. Our goal has always been an army that maintains the standards of kashrut, not merely special provisions for the observant. Moreover, the character of the state becomes our concern. If in the United States or Europe assimilation simply makes our numbers smaller, in Israel the challenge is to our national survival.

The profound gap between the religious and secular communities in Israel threatens our remaining one people. Some are tempted to emulate the Israeli haredim, withdrawing to a ghetto and using the political process to protect our interests. The need for a religious-Zionism that is committed to bridging the gap has never been greater. The present political climate makes the task extremely difficult but no less critical.

Facing the issues of today requires new approaches. Trying to speculate what the Rav would have said is not productive. However, those of us who have been exposed to his thinking should have absorbed his way of viewing issues. The ongoing influence of *Kol Dodi Dofek* is in its perspectives, which have created a framework for confronting the developing reality.

NOTES

1. To properly analyze the Rav's complex attitude toward religious-Zionism, the significance of the state, and that of the land of Israel requires a close reading of many of the writings of the Rav, including material that did not appear during his lifetime. This paper relates only to *Kol Dodi Dofek*.
2. I am aware that scholars differ about messianic and non-messianic elements in the thought of R. Avraham Yitshak Kook. However, in the world of religious-Zionism in Israel, the messianic basis for his views is taken for granted.