

## COMMUNICATIONS

### RELIGION IN ISRAEL

TO THE EDITOR OF *TRADITION*:

Rabbi Emanuel Feldman's article, "Israel, Torah and I" was most disturbing to me, as I'm certain it was to many other readers. While I have no quarrel with the facts Rabbi Feldman presented, I do take exception to some of his conclusions. Neither Israel, nor its people, nor even its leadership can be blamed for the unhappy situation, which Rabbi Feldman accurately describes. Rather, and it pains me to say it, we, the Torah world, must bear a major share of responsibility. The current predicament had its genesis in the antipathy and mistrust of Zionism that was shared by the majority of the Torah world during the last and early part of this century. By this attitude they abdicated the field leaving the secularists to go on *aliyah* and establish a state in their image. This they did and built it according to the socialists ideals upon which they had been weaned. Had observant and traditional Jews arrived "firstest with the mostest" they would have been able to fashion a *medin-*

*ah* according to their vision. Alas, as we all know, this was not the case.

Nevertheless, there were many opportunities for the Torah world to win the struggle for our people's hearts and minds, but, sadly, we were again found wanting. The "Tanna Debe Eliahu" delivers a stinging rebuke to the leadership of another era that is singularly appropriate to our current dilemma. The Midrash (Chap. 11), in a poignant passage, explains why seventy thousand were killed in Gibeah of Benjamin. The *Sanhedrin* should have girded itself with iron belts to demonstrate that the Israelites would be exiled in chains if they didn't do *teshuvah* and lift up their garments (so as not to impede their swift movement) and travel throughout all of Israel. "One day to Lachish, one day to Beth El, one day to Hebron, one day to Jerusalem and so on . . . and teach the Israelites *derech eretz*." This was to be repeated one year, and a second year and so on until Israel, secure in the knowledge of the Lord would also be secure in its land (since the episode of "Pilegesh B'Gibeah" was only

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shortly after the entry into Ca-  
naan).

But, alas, the *Sanhedrin* did not do so. Instead, the Tanna Debe Eliahu continues, they entered the land, went each to his vineyard and field and said "Shalom Alecha Nafshi." Therefore, in Gibeah of Benjamin where they neither occupied themselves with the study of Torah nor *derech erez*, seventy thousand were killed. And who killed them all? "None other than the Great Sanhedrin established by Moshe, and Joshua and Pinchas Ben Eleazar."

Indeed, a savage indictment against the foremost spiritual leaders of the day! They could have saved their generation, but instead chose to do nothing. Candor compels us to concede that much the same condition prevails today. There were, and continue to be, many opportunities to reach and influence the non-*dati* population of Israel. Both after the 1967 and Yom Kippur Wars, there was a receptiveness if not outright yearning for religious meaning and identification. We saw some of this first hand as we had the good fortune to spend a Sabbatical in Israel during the same year as Rabbi Feldman. We encountered numbers of young people who seemed genuinely receptive to Judaism, but who were turned off, literally, by the religious leadership of Israel. Any number of times we were told, almost wistfully, that what Israel needed were rabbis like us. The following illustration should graphically illustrate this point. On one of his visits, shortly after the '67 War, a leading Israeli establishment rab-

bi came to a Mapam Kibbutz. When he asked if they had a *Beit Knesset*, he was told no, primarily because no one had any knowledge of how to conduct services, read from the Torah, etc. However, there were six volunteers who were prepared to devote their free time to such study and when they were sufficiently educated a *shul* would be opened. What was the rabbi's response to this rare and almost unique opportunity to influence members of the left wing, anti-religious Mapam? He personally couldn't be bothered, but if they went to Hechal Shlomo (the seat of the Chief Rabbinate in Jerusalem) they might find help there. It seems the group was not turned off, even by this cold shoulder, and did indeed journey to Jerusalem. We understand that the run around they received there eventually made them give up the effort. A golden opportunity squandered and probably irretrievably lost. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident. Furthermore, the frequent scandals, wrangling and internecine struggles for power in the religious parties makes them totally irrelevant as a motivating force. The extreme politicization of Israel breeds mistrust so that even well intentioned and sincere efforts are suspect. Thus, a small Moshav in the Negev, which we visited, turned down the offer from Mizrachi to send a rabbi for *Shabbat* and occasional lectures, because, surely he would only be an agent seeking votes for his party.

Similarly, the constant bickering and dissension with the Chief Rabbinate brings disgrace and downright derision to traditional Jewry.

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The general aloofness of the rabbinate preserves and, in fact, nourishes the gap between the secularists and the Torah community.

Tragically, we must concede, that so long as our religious leaders follow the philosophy of "*Shalom Alecha Nafshi*" the direct responsibility for the situation that Rabbi Feldman laments must be placed at their door step.

Yet, having said all the above, there is another perspective from which to view the situation. During our year in Israel, two of our children attended *mamlachti dati* schools, which are totally supported by the secularist government as is the *chinuch atzmai* system. In Jerusalem we had the *zikhut* to enjoy *Shabbat* and *chagim* during which not a shop or business was open. There was no public transportation and many neighborhoods were completely closed to traffic from sunset Friday to *motzai Shabbat*. Every *shul* we ever set foot in was packed with young and old, men and women. On *Yom Kippur*, people walked in the middle of the streets as not a car was to be seen. On *Pesach* there was no *chometz* to be found except in the Arab quarters. Government buildings were adorned with *mezuzot* and *kashrut* was observed *strictly* in the army and police department. (What a thrill it was to witness the baking of *shmurah matzot* for use by the army!) All of these things and many more were and are made possible by a secularist government. It is a miracle of monumental proportions that *Yiddishkeit* prevails in Israel as much as it does in spite of the ineptness and ineffectuality

of the Torah leadership.

Rabbi Feldman understands the non-believers whose attachment to Israel is tenuous since they have no religious ties to bind them to the Holy Land. Let us speak the truth, even if it is painful, for we have no right to be critical of those who live in Israel while we ourselves remain in *galut*. We have no moral justification for lamenting the *yordim* who only seek the very same advantages that we are reluctant to give up. We cannot "worry" about Israel from the safety of six thousand miles distance. We especially ought not to use its religious shortcomings as a rationalization for our own failure to go on *aliyah*.

We are confident that Israel will become the *Eretz Yisrael* of our dreams when the vision of the Psalmist, who sang, "The Lord shall bless thee out of Zion! and thou shalt see the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life" (128:5) shall be fulfilled.

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### TO THE EDITOR OF *TRADITION*:

It is easy to find fault with the Israeli people from afar. It is more difficult to realize that these very faults exist because those who see them are not permanently here to correct them. When comparisons are made between the contemporary *Eretz Israel* scene and the period of the Judges, there is one striking difference which should be noted. At the time of the *shofetim*,

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the standard-bearers of Torah all resided in the Holy Land. The elders who received the Torah from Joshua who received it from Moses were there to guide and inspire the masses. Even so, they did not always succeed. Today not only do the majority of the Jewish people reside outside of the State of Israel, but many of the foremost Torah leaders of our generation are among that majority. The heart of Torah vision and guidance is barely available to the people who dwell in Zion. Despite these circumstances, rarely in Jewish history have so few accomplished so much.

Israel was basically built by the Second Aliyah, a movement almost totally composed of Jews estranged from Torah. The State's foundation and institutions were forged at that time. Almost all the secular leaders of the State during its formative years arrived then. Torah Jews generally stood afar during those crucial years, surrendering the construction of the State to others by default. Today the ideals of the founders are basically incapable of inspiring future growth. Secular Zionism is bankrupt. Nevertheless, people do not easily admit the error of their ways. Maimonides declared in his *Mishneh Torah* that the Karaites do not rapidly repent even when they observe proper Jews. He wrote:

Their children and grandchildren, however . . . who were raised in the erroneous doctrines of those who went astray, are to be considered as "children who were abducted and raised among gentiles." They are therefore not prompt to return to the path of *Mitzvah* observance, since their upbringing

alienated them from such a life. Even when they learn that they are Jews, and witness Jewish observances, they are not quick to come back to the fold. It is therefore proper to inspire them to repent, and to influence them with words of peace until they return to the strength of the Torah (Mamrim 3:3).

It is particularly difficult for the sinner to repent when there are few to teach and inspire him. The Israeli Torah camp is itself divided and polarized. Almost every major outlook and interpretation of Torah claims a monopoly on Truth. Effort and energies are dissipated in endless intra-group fighting, while the common goal is forgotten and ignored. Newspapers, placards, television and radio vigorously delineate the battle of Torah against itself. In the meantime, secularism maintains its hold on the State and its philosophy.

Despite these circumstances there have been giant strides of achievement made on behalf of Torah since the Yom Kippur War. Torah and its adherents have never been more respected in the history of the State. "In thy blood thou shalt live" (Ezekiel 16:6). The sacrifice and leadership provided by the *hesder yeshivah* boys have become a paradigm of valor for the entire populace. Television reports have highlighted Orthodox soldiers studying Talmud in their tanks during a lull in training and drill. And, in an address at the dedication of a memorial to fallen graduates at the Midrashiat Noam Yeshivah High School, the widely respected General Mordecai Gur, Chief of Staff, recently expressed these sentiments:

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I remember the difficulty of the religious soldiers during the early years of the Army. Then they found it hard to be accepted within the Army environment. Today the picture is entirely different. Then the military rabbinate had to convince the officers to cooperate with the observant soldiers. Today the officers seek to cajole the religious soldiers to join their units and ranks . . .

Those of us at the head of the Army refuse to allow the precedents of the past to continue. We no longer want the religious soldier to simply serve in the Army, but we also want him to accept positions of command and authority. One of the finest memorials to those fallen will be to find a path whereby the religious soldier can be integrated into all the branches of command in the Army. All the units and divisions must benefit from their leadership in both days of peace as in days of war. (*Ha-tzofeh*, February 9, 1976).

Recently Gush Emunim has captured the attention of most of the constructive elements in the country. Their dedication to the Land of Israel and Torah study has been an inspiration to tens of thousands of Israeli citizens. The secular satirist Ephraim Kishon sang the praises of this group in his article entitled "The Crocheted Kippah." (*Maariv*, February 2, 1975). The country's leading song composer, Naomi Shemer, explained in a moving television interview why she identified with Gush Emunim and described her participation in their mass demonstrations. Not one person shoved another, not one obscene word was heard, and an aura of sanctity and dedication enveloped the throng. She declared that the early generations of secular Zionists had paid a high price for their idealism; they

gave up the most precious possession of the Jewish people — its Torah. And there is no substitute for Torah.

Successful and dignified attempts have been made to reach out to the alienated and the ignorant. The traditional *yeshivot* conduct a chain of *kollelim* in outlying cities. Known as the New Settlement Torah Association, it conducts Torah classes and centers for the local inhabitants. Graduates and students of the Mercaz Harav Yeshiva have organized formal classes for *baalei teshuvah*. In addition, there are the numerous *yeshivot* which cater to Anglo-Saxon seekers of Torah. These schools, located mainly in Jerusalem, annually increase their student body. Assisted by superb faculties, their record of success is probably unmatched in recent Torah history.

An excellent and well edited full page supplement appears every other week in Friday's weekend *Maariv*, the country's most widely read newspaper. Entitled "Know thy Judaism," each issue is devoted to explaining basic Torah concepts through stories, contemporary analysis, and citations from the classical texts.

While all this is taking place, there is unprecedented study and research throughout the land. Both the traditional and *hesder yeshivot* are filled beyond capacity. Numerous *seforim* are published annually in every field of Torah study and many classic texts of the *rishonim* are being edited by contemporary scholars. The major projects of this generation such as the Talmudic Encyclopedia and *Ozar Ha-Pose-*

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*kim* continue unabated. The massive flow of responsa literature is being indexed and gradually computerized.

All this has been accomplished by so few. *Aliyah* is almost at a standstill, *yeridah* is increasing due to the severe economic problems, and Diaspora leaders have questioned their very commitment to the State of Israel since the last War. It is stated in the Talmud:

The Holy One, blessed be He, wished to appoint Hezekiah as the Messiah, and Sennacherib as Gog and Magog. Whereupon the Attribute of Justice said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of the Universe! If Thou didst not make David the Messiah, who uttered so many hymns and psalms before Thee, wilt Thou appoint Hezekiah as such, who did not hymn Thee in spite of all these miracles which Thou wroughtest for him! (*Sanhedrin* 94a).

Our generation has been vouchsafed great miracles and Divine graciousness. Have we been worthy of these events? Have we made *Aliyah* our answer to the Holocaust? Have we attempted to work constructively for the State of Israel by bringing the light of Torah to the inhabitants of the Land of Torah? Have we uttered hymns and praises to the Holy One? It is always easier to dismiss our responsibilities, stress our disappointments, and view everything in a negative light. We have already been cautioned against an "evil eye" (*Avot* 2:9). The Maharal explains that in all aspects of life there is always some evil. However, he who possesses "a good eye" will stress the positive and seek to correct the

shortcomings (*Nishmat Hayyim* to *Avot* 2:12).

Those who presently shoulder the burden of Torah dissemination in the Holy Land are thwarted. It is not their lack of success which troubles them but rather the lack of cooperation. The vision of what could be achieved if there would be a massive Torah *Aliyah* is constantly before them. The people are anxious for guidance and proper leadership. The secularists are seeking their Jewish roots and basic questions are being raised. Those who are capable of providing the answer are few in number and strength. Where are our numerous colleagues who can help us carry this burden in dignity and pride? One is reminded of the following episode:

Resh Lakish was swimming in the Jordan. Thereupon Rabbah b. Bar Hana came and gave him a hand to help him out of the water. Said Resh Lakish to him: By God! I hate you. For it is written: "If she be a wall, we will build upon her a turret of silver; if she be a door, we will enclose her with boards of cedar" (*Songs* 8:9).

Had you made yourself like a wall and had all come up in the days of Ezra, you would have been compared to Silver, which no rotteness can ever affect. Now that you have come up like a door (which has various parts, representing the sporadic *aliyah* of Babylonian Jewry), you are like cedarwood, which rotteness prevails over (*Yoma* 9b).

The time has come for Torah Jewry and its leaders to accept its historic responsibility in the Holy Land. The eyes of all Diaspora Jewry are upon Israel. The more we

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sanctify the land and the life of its inhabitants the greater will be the Torah influence upon the Jews throughout the world. To paraphrase Rabbi Israel Salanter, "the greater the Sabbath observance in Israel, the less the assimilation in the Diaspora" (Cf. Dov Katoz, *Tenuat Ha-Mussar* 1:308, n. 10).

We must recall the Divine pledge that "the peoples of the earth shall see that the name of the Lord is called upon thee; and they shall be afraid of thee" (Deut. 28:10). This has been explained to mean that the "name of the Lord" refers to the *tefillah* of the head and that it is incumbent also to influence other Jews by this *mitzvah*. This consideration even influences the practical Halakhah in determining the order of the four chapters of the *tefillah*. According to one viewpoint they are to be placed to the right of the conjectured reader facing the one wearing the *tefillin* (Men. 34b, 35b; Maim. *Yad*; *tefillin* 3:5). This sensibility for enhancing Torah life so that it will gain a hold upon others must be strengthened in the contemporary State of Israel. With proper leadership, patient insight, and Torah study, the light of Torah will shine brighter in the State of Israel. The secularists are ready for the sight of the *tefillin* which can influence them. Israel has suffered heavy casualties since the outbreak of the Yom Kippur war. Yet, its idealism still inspires its continual march with Divine destiny. The Jews have known since the dawn of their historic experience that they must at times suffer. Jacob was, according to the Midrash, injured by the

guardian angel of Esau. "And the hollow of Jacob's thigh was strained as he wrestled with him" (Genesis 32:26). Nevertheless, his idealism continued to illuminate his path. "And the sun rose upon him as he passed over Peniel" (Genesis 32:32). These are trying times, but the proper Jewish leader will meet the call of the hour. He will do his utmost to inspire others, strengthen his colleagues, and raise the banner of Torah in its homeland. He will provide the proper guidance for the "People that dwell in Zion at Jerusalem" (Isaiah 30:19).

Not always will we succeed. But even in our failures we will be strengthened by the nobleness of our goals and visions. The Talmud similarly explains an esoteric scriptural passage. "And the sons of Ephraim . . . whom the men of Gath that were born in the land slew" (Chronicles I, 7:20-22). It is explained that these Ephraimites were anxious to leave Egypt and reach the Holy Land. They erred in their count of the years of bondage, and as a result left Egypt thirty years before the rest of Israel and were killed by the inhabitants of Gath. These Ephraimites later became the ultimate symbol of the eternity of Israel since they were chosen as the dry bones to be resurrected by Ezekiel (*Sanhedrin* 92b). Even though while alive they did not entirely succeed, they were chosen as being worthy of the prime example of resurrection. Most perceptive is the rabbinic comment which links the Ephraimites dedication to the *mitzvah* of *tefillin*, the *mitzvah* which serves to inspire others.

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R. Eliezer the son of R. Jose the Galilean said: the dead whom Eze-  
kiel revived went up to *Eretz Yis-*  
*rael*, married wives and begot sons  
and daughters. R. Judah b. Bathy-  
ra rose up and said: I am one of  
their descendants, and these are the  
*tefillin* which my grandfather left  
me as an heirloom from them.

With insight, dedication, and  
proper leadership the present Is-  
raeli generation can gradually be

returned to the wellsprings of Tor-  
ah. The secular will be sanctified.  
Those ideals which nurtured our  
people since its inception as a na-  
tion will shine brighter in its natu-  
ral home. Truly, "out of Zion shall  
come forth Torah, and the word  
of the Lord out of Jerusalem"  
(Isaiah 2:3).

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