

The following article is excerpted from a letter sent to his daughter by Professor Yehuda, who teaches Bible and Talmud at the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies.

HAZON ISH ON THE FUTURE OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL

(From a letter responding to a question on Hazon Ish's attitude to the State of Israel.)

“. . . Your second question concerns the Hazon Ish's perception of the State of Israel and its future. The style of your question implies that Hazon Ish, so to say, "predicted" the impending destruction of the State of Israel in the near future: You just want to know the precise date: When is it going, God forbid, to happen?

"Let me make it perfectly clear from the onset: Hazon Ish never said such an ominous thing, nor was he the kind of person to do so. Based on my intimate closeness to Hazon Ish at the time, I am in the position to deny categorically such a libelous and disastrous rumor. Hazon Ish was the paradigm of a halakhist; he never assumed the role of prophet or soothsayer. In fact, he disdained any pretense of "heavenly" gifts and metaphysical knowledge. All claims to the contrary notwithstanding, the highly hailed "wondrous" acts of Hazon Ish only demonstrate his authentic and ingenious way of viewing and applying to all aspects of reality, exclusively and phenomenally, the rules and norms of Halakhah. Halakhah is concerned with human duties and responsibilities — *"ma hovato shel adam be-olamo"* —not with hazy and fanciful speculations on Divine plans: What God is going to do and exactly when—Halakhah does not engage in predictions about the fate or future of historical events, institutions or States (not even of Israel).

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“Nor was the great sage Hazon Ish (and claims to the contrary by partisan ideologians notwithstanding) imbued with any negative or hostile attitude to the State of Israel. He genuinely loved Jews and welcomed indeed anything that may save their lives or improve their lot. The current “oral tradition” circulated within some yeshiva (or “kollel”) coteries, that Hazon Ish was against the State, and even proclaimed its doom and decreed its fall within a prescribed span of time, is no more than a vicious lie — perpetrated by the zealots through a deliberate distortion, and received by the naive on the basis of an unfortunate misunderstanding.

“Let me therefore state the facts:

“Soon after the establishment of the State of Israel, there were many discussions among various rabbis and authorities as to the proper theological response and halakhic stance to this renewed state of Jewish independence in the holy land. One of the overt issues was the celebration of *Yom Haatzmaut* and the recitation of *Hallel*, with or without a *berakhah*. It is well known that the Chief Rabbinate and other rabbis close to the Zionist ideology were very enthusiastic about recognizing the State of Israel as the opening of the Messianic Era, “the beginning of redemption,” and strongly felt that a new holiday should be added to the Jewish calendar, which officially was already done by the government on a secular level, to be celebrated in a religious manner, with thanksgiving to God.

“On the other hand, the majority of the rabbis and roshei yeshivot did not accept this position. Some were hesitant, some reluctant, some opposed, and some — extremists and anti-Zionists — openly attacked the idea and reality of the State as an infringement upon and impediment to the traditional messianic conception and expectation.

“What about the position of Hazon Ish?

“It is a well known fact that Hazon Ish, who continued to live only five years after Israel’s independence, did not go along with the idea of *Yom Haatzmaut*. In this respect, he, like most rabbis of his day, did not join the decision of the Chief Rabbinate. Nor did he publish or say (to my knowledge) anything degrading against those who did follow that decision.

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“Contrary to the new myth now emerging and circulating, remodeling his image and reclaiming him to a narrow camp of State negators, Hazon Ish was neither antagonistic to the State nor opposed to its hailers. He was very positive and hopeful about the presence and prospect of the State and encouraged any way of supporting and upholding it. Nonetheless, he was not yet ready — soon after the declaration of independence, under a fierce war, harsh conditions and hazardous borders — for this revolutionary move (halakhically) of instituting a new holiday, enacting changes in ritual and liturgy, affecting the customary gloomy mood of the *Sefira* season, eliminating *Tahanun*, permitting haircuts and weddings, and requiring the saying of *Hallel*. To all this he then said no.

“At this time I wondered why. During this exciting and critical period of the establishment of the State and the War of Independence, I was very close to him; and we discussed the issues thoroughly. He was then my only teacher, and I was then totally immersed with a pervasive conviction that the realization of the State is a glorious Divine sign opening a new era of greatness and dignity for the Jewish people, and I yearned to celebrate *Yom Haatzmaut*. I asked my teacher, eagerly and point-blank, why he disagreed. In his usual manner, he gave me a precise, illuminating answer.

“Hazon Ish’s answer comprises two complementary points, each in itself significant, none of which can be fully appreciated without the other.

Halakhic Authority

“In principal, according to Halakhah, we certainly do have the authority to establish a day of joy and *Hallel* for a saving event of this magnitude. Moreover, if we appreciate the event as such, we have a duty to do so. Hazon Ish was very specific and explicit in emphasizing that there are no ‘technical’ objections to it, on the ground of the restriction of tradition or the inadequacy of our rabbinic authority.

“It is only with regard to fast days, fixing them for posterity, that Halakhah poses fundamental restraints. (That is why Ha-

zon Ish was also against instituting an official mourning day to commemorate the Holocaust.)

“As far as our inherent halakhic duty to express, properly and publicly, our gratitude to God for His redemptive providence, in ritual and liturgic ways, as enactment for future generations, we have both the right and authority to do so. Now what about our response to the State?

“Hazon Ish felt that *Yom Haatzmaut* is considered by its upholders not as a regular thanksgiving day for a specific redemptive event, but as pregnant with definite messianic meaning: as a day which heralds and constitutes an element of the Messianic Era. This is the core of the problem.

“Hazon Ish was very alarmed by undue messianic overtones. In line with the rabbinic trend, fostered and confirmed by the calamities of false messianism during the ages (especially the Sabbateanism of the 17th century), he feared and fought hasty and unqualified messianic fervor and indulgence. Historical reality, insisted Hazon Ish, must be assessed with clarity and objectivity, not with blind and willful passion. Divine promises are His domain. Divine demands are ours. Our duty must not be affected by our reliance on His promises but must express our compliance with His demands. For example: There is a Divine promise that on the Sixth year of the Sabbatical cycle, God will provide a special blessing of bounty to suffice for the Seventh (Lev. 25:20-22). Nevertheless, this blessing promised by God is of no concern for the halakhist, who must make his decisions concerning the feasibility of conducting Sheviit purely on mundane economic calculations without any reliance on any supernatural factors, even when promised by God. If the natural conditions, seen by human eyes and understood by human reason, are not conducive to the fulfillment of the Sabbatical law, we must not rely on any miracle, even if it was Divinely promised (cf., his work on Sheviit, 18:4). We are not privy to the inscrutable domain of prophetic promises, nor of the nature of their fulfillment. Our only way of evaluating reality is with cold and bold objectivity.

“Concerning *Yom Haatzmaut*, is it the beginning of messianic fulfillment or not? Here too, insisted Hazon Ish, we must apply

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hard and cautious examination. It all hinges on the way we perceive and sense the State, its historical significance and endurance for generations to come, in political, realistic terms, without being influenced one way or another by prophetic or messianic terminology. Halakhah must consider only the obvious, not the mysterious. The mysteries belong to God; we deal only with what is revealed.

“Thus we examine the meaning of the State of Israel by halakhic categories: Is it really, from the point of view of our limited human judgment, the beginning of redemption? Is it certainly and clearly a positive, constructive redemptive act?

“‘Time will tell.’ This is the gist of Hazon Ish’s response, that by malice or stupidity (or both) is now distorted and repeated as if it were a terrible pronouncement of doom. Here are the words of the great sage, the way I heard them myself from his holy mouth. They constitute the second point of his overall reply:

Historical Evaluation

“It is impossible to properly evaluate a great historical event, while we are still very much a part of it. We need the advantage and vantage of time and the benefit of its perspective.” So claimed Hazon Ish with his typical humility and remarkable insight. Who knows, mused he with grave trepidation and deep concern, what may transpire after such an unprecedented, revolutionary stage in the long history of Jewish dispersion and suffering. We are still amidst this revolution; within war and conflict. We still pay with tears and blood, with heroic victims and bereft survivors.

“Hazon Ish pointed out that political, economic and international situation is not yet closer (it was then around 1950): The recognition of the State is not yet settled; its borders insecure, and not yet finally delineated; its wars not yet over; its relations with its neighbors not yet resolved. In short, with all our joy and hope, we must be somberly aware that the present is still full of hazard and complexity.

“Objectively — and only objectively, not emotionally is the

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way the pure halakhist must respond, insisted Hazon Ish — it is very possible that the declaration of independence, we are at this moment so deeply moved to celebrate, may be just that: a declaration. In theory, we must admit, it is quite possible that after a few years we may, in tragedy and horrible disappointment, lose this independence and things will turn back the way they were, if not worse. Even while we hope and pray for the best, we must always be apprehensive and ready for the worst. We must never react to historical events euphorically or rashly.

“It is premature today, said the sage, to posit any official rabbinic position, theological or halakhic, on the validity, meaning and significance of the State of Israel. At this moment, there is no point in establishing a holiday and requiring the recitation of *Hallel*. When, then, will this be possible? Only after a decade or two may we be able to tell. Then, we hope, the wars will be over, peace achieved, the borders enlarged and secured, prosperity prevail, and the State recognized by all as an unshakable fact, unquestionable sovereignty. Meanwhile, we must wait and see, pray for redemption, but also be prepared for any other eventuality.

“Hazon Ish, contrary to current claims, did not “predict” nor “proclaim” any destruction of the State. He ardently prayed for its success and continued growth. But, clear-minded and cautious as he was, he felt we must give the State some time to prove its firmness and durability. Like good and clear wine, historical events too must undergo distillation; let the ferment calm down, and the wine emerge in its clarity and potency.

“We must never be oblivious to disastrous possibilities inherent in any new “birth” in history. Even with regard to the birth of a new human baby, Halakhah recognizes a month period of “waiting,” to make sure the infant is not a “nefel” (a premature “failure”). For the birth of the State, however, Hazon Ish allotted a reasonable waiting period of a decade or two, not in antagonistic anticipation of its disintegration, but rather with tender and fervent prayers and yearnings for its sure and safe continuity.

“Hazon Ish did not live to see his dream come true: the constant growth and progress of the State of Israel during its crucial

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formative three decades. Hazon Ish did not live to witness the glorious victory of the Six-Day War, nor the miraculous liberation and unification of Jerusalem. I can only imagine his exuberant joy. Would he have then changed his mind about *Yom Haatzmaut* and *Hallel*? Probably not. With the increased wisdom of his old age, I surmise, he would have still postponed his final decision. He would have still waited for complete peace, security, for cessation of bloodshed and danger — for which we are still yearning.

“But one thing is perfectly clear: The State of Israel successfully passed the halakhic test of Hazon Ish. It is thriving and approaching, with renewed vigor and faith, its fourth decade. It is an incontestable reality. And with trembling supplication in our hearts, we feel confident that with God’s help, it will remain so forever, until the coming of Messiah.

“Now that the State did survive the period of “waiting” assigned to it by Hazon Ish, his initial, incisive diagnosis is still valid. We must always be alert; we must constantly face historical reality with both open eyes to see the dangers and an open heart to appreciate the unfolding redemptive possibilities.

“Hazon Ish often said to me that we need not indulge in defining the era of redemption nor its exact “beginning.” If this is not included in the prohibitive category of *hishuv haketz* (eschatological calculation), it is certainly a waste of time. Since the commencement of Galut, and throughout our heroic journey on the road of the messianic ‘Two Millennia’ (AZ 9b), each and every day is a new “beginning” of redemption, leading and bringing us closer to it. Now, as far as the era of redemption itself, all definitions and theories are futile. If our eyes are open, our hearts beating, and our minds alert, when the great day will come — we will know.”