

REVIEW ESSAY

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IF ONLY MY RABBIS . . .

Sir Immanuel Jakobovits has had a distinguished, if controversial, career as a scholar, spiritual leader and spokesman for causes which have affected him and the Jewish people very deeply. He has made a pioneering contribution to the whole field of Jewish medical ethics, particularly in the English language; he has served with distinction as the Chief Rabbi of Ireland, the first rabbi of the Fifth Avenue Synagogue in New York and, presently, as the Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth of Nations. In these areas, he has made an impressive, and possibly enduring, impact.

He has now written a new book—*If Only My People . . . Zionism in My Life*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1984; 280 pp.) which is intended to convey the author's feelings about Zionism—both secular and religious—and the State of Israel, its political leadership and its religious establishment. The first section deals primarily with three major controversies affecting the Jewish State which embroiled him with public opinion, the established religious and secular organs and the government of Israel. In the second part of the book, he presents his position on such major issues as religious and secular Zionism, the legitimacy of dissent, and "who is a Jew." The third section reprints two of the author's articles which round out his views on Zionism and the Jewish State.

Quite clearly this provocative book is both apologetic and polemical in its tone. It is intended to defend positions which the author has taken at crucial junctures in the recent history of the Jewish State, and to polemicize with those people and institutions with whom he disagrees and who have criticized his views. He has raised the issues which deserve to be raised. However, in the process he willy-nilly invites critical evaluation of his premises, propositions, actions and conclusions.

This volume reflects the positions shared by others of similar outlook. However, the author has presented his positions boldly and articulately; the book is well-written, the concepts are well-developed and Rabbi Jakobovits has endeavored to add a religious dimension in their support. What he says may not satisfy some of his readers who subscribe to differing or opposing or more conventional approaches to these issues. Nonetheless, the book should be read, evaluated and reviewed with intellectual honesty and integrity—on the basis of the merits of its arguments—even by those who may differ sharply with his assessments, statements and conclusions.

At the same time, it should be noted that the value of the book, in terms of its style and substance, its contemporaneity and its impact, is sometimes vitiated by certain problems which this reviewer encountered in the course of his evaluation. A careful reading will leave the reader with a number of paradoxical reactions. On the one hand, he will be touched by the author's genuine love for the land, the people and the State of Israel; on the other hand, he will be dismayed by Sir Immanuel's unrelenting, almost obsessively critical stance towards the government of Israel, or more accurately and precisely towards the Begin government, for whom he can barely find a good word or a supportive sentence. He will be puzzled by sophisticated insights which are sometimes intermingled with or followed by surprisingly simplistic, almost naive, statements, as well as, on occasion, by contradictory positions which require explanation. At first glance, he will be impressed by the author's scholarly use of historical allusions and analogies, which on closer analysis turn out to be not altogether accurate or fail to stand up to the analogical test.

II

Let me elaborate. No one will deny Rabbi Jakobovits's deep love for the land of Israel and his strong commitment to Zionism, or more specifically, to his brand of Religious Zionism. These feelings come through in many sections of the book. Over the years, he has championed Israel's cause in many forums, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. He has pleaded passionately with the Christian clergy to accept and to recognize the existence of Israel, to grant Jews the right to self-definition in terms of the legitimacy and sovereignty of Israel, to understand the role of Jewish peoplehood as "an integral and indispensable part of Jewish religious identity," and to accept that "any rapport with Judaism and the Jewish people must appreciate the unique combination of religion and peoplehood."¹

After Pope John Paul's meeting with Yasir Arafat, Rabbi Jakobovits wrote to Cardinal Johannes Willebrands urging the

Vatican to adopt guidelines on Israel and Zionism “bearing in mind that anti-Zionism is now a principal ferment of anti-Semitism.”² My reading of this statement leads me to the conclusion that Rabbi Jakobovits believes that there is an inherent connection between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. Why, then, does Sir Immanuel, in other sections of the book, downplay this equation and urge his flock not “to label every anti-Zionist an anti-Semite” lest it should become a self-fulfilling prophecy “by breeding anti-Semites”?³

It smacks very much of a *galut* mentality. In 1986, the President of Israel hosted a three-day international seminar on “Present-Day Anti-Semitism.” The conclusion which the hundred scholars and officials in attendance reached was clear—that anti-Zionism is a “code-word,” that below the surface of anti-Zionism lies blatant anti-Semitism, and that anti-Zionism is merely a new dress for anti-Semitism, which is not respectable in many places in the world in the aftermath of the Nazi “final solution.” Dr. Svante Hansson of Stockholm, an expert on anti-Semitism in Scandinavia, said that “the conceptual distinction between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism does not mean much to the general public, who have a hard time distinguishing between Jew, Zionist and Israeli.”⁴

The distinction, then, which the Chief Rabbi attempts to make in his definition of anti-Zionism between pro-Arab and anti-Israel is artificial, clouds the issue and ultimately serves our enemies because it can be used as a smokescreen for any and every anti-Jewish manifestation. Certainly, here and there, there are anti-Zionists who are not anti-Semites; but they are not the rule. Today, the general term for anti-Semitism in polite, civilized society is anti-Zionism. It is much more acceptable because Zionism can be passed off as a form of racism or imperialism; however, if you scratch just below the surface of your average anti-Zionist, what emerges is a full-blown anti-Semite. You do not create an anti-Semite by equating anti-Semitism with anti-Zionism; you simply expose his real credentials and intentions.

III

In his book, Rabbi Jakobovits eloquently rejects the whole thrust of secular Zionism and the idea that Zionism is just another liberation movement. Secular Zionism contended that the emergence of the Jewish State would solve “the Jewish problem,” that it would finally remove “the abnormality” of the Jewish situation and make Israel a nation like all the nations of the world.⁵ The basic principle upon which secular Zionism operated was that Jewish nationality could be

defined in conventional categories, and that within this framework the religious element would either be diminished or disappear altogether.

In fact, the premises of this position have proven to be false, and historical experience has contradicted the basic assumptions of secular Zionism. The history of the Jewish people has been, and continues to be, unique; it is not subject to the normal categories which inevitably accompany the rise and fall of nations. Non-Jewish scholars, like the late Russian Orthodox philosopher Nicholas Berdayev, have freely admitted that all the known historical theories fall down when they come to explain the continued existence of the Jewish people; and they concede that there is something special in the history of the Jewish people which allows it to defy accepted historical norms.⁶ The late professor Hugo Bergmann of the Hebrew University once acknowledged that “we need not be ashamed to admit that the history of Israel is not a secular, but a metaphysical and religious history, and that Zionism is the result and conclusion of this history.”⁷

Clearly Zionism could never have been conceived, projected or realized without the overriding importance and value of its religious elements which were and remain “absolutely indispensable and indeed paramount.” The Jewish claim to that sacred land was based then, as it is now, on the religious sources of the Bible and Jewish tradition.

More than that, the creation of the Jewish State and its subsequent history has not really solved the problem of anti-Semitism; if anything it has been exacerbated and highlighted by the existence and presence of a Jewish State.⁸ Anti-Semitism in the guise of anti-Zionism, as we have pointed out, has continued to flourish even in very civilized countries.

Even more dangerous in the ideology of secular Zionism is the attempt to “normalize” the Jewish people. In this connection, Rabbi Jakobovits cites Dr. Isaac Breuer’s felicitous analogy in which he compared secular Zionism to the early classical Reform movement. Both of these sought to solve the Jewish problem: the Reform by normalizing, or better, assimilating the individual, and secular Zionism by trying the same thing, only on a national scale. Both movements failed in this respect.⁹

Even Ben-Gurion realized that for Israel to be a nation like all other nations would be self-defeating and would only produce another Levantine state. Only an Israel based on the teachings of the Torah could make a lasting contribution to a world society. It is in this spirit that Rabbi Jakobovits writes, “But one thing the Jewish State could not and must not and never will achieve is to turn us into

a nation like all other nations losing our historical identity as a unique people. . . . Would it make sense to establish a Jewish State as the bulwark against individual assimilation only to find it turning into an instrument of national assimilation?"¹⁰

IV

At the same time, Rabbi Jakobovits expresses his deep concern for the social and religious polarization which has taken place in the Jewish State. The land of Israel, he contends, is emerging as a home for two "Jewish peoples" and "the only common denominator, apart from joint self-defense activities was intolerance of each towards the other."¹¹ Certainly recent events have underscored the validity and urgency of his concern. The ugly manifestations of extremism on both the right and the left of the political and religious spectrum, the almost hysterical attempts by secularists to stem the tide of religious return, coupled with the kind of religious triumphalism which emanates from some traditional quarters, reflect a condition which is not healthy and which could have explosive ramifications. This kind of fragmentation is indeed the stuff from which "causeless hatred" is made and which led to the destruction of the Second Commonwealth. The war amongst the Jews is altogether more frightening and disastrous than any which we will ever fight against the Arabs.

However, one of Rabbi Jakobovits' major solutions to this disturbing problem is certainly open to question and disagreement. He proposes, as a way of easing tensions between the various constituencies in the Jewish State, that there should be a separation of religion from state.¹² In effect, he calls for the dissolution of religious political parties. Whatever they may have achieved on behalf of religious Jewry, their existence is now a detriment to the cause of traditional Judaism and the unity of the Jewish people.

In support of this proposition, he makes a somewhat naive statement: "Indeed, I suspect that the majority of Israeli citizens would now be religious if this alliance (between religion and politics) had not estranged them."¹³ For someone who is as politically sophisticated and religiously attuned to reality as is the Chief Rabbi, this is a surprisingly unsophisticated remark. Certainly the Chief Rabbi is fully aware that the secularist attitude towards religious life has very little to do with the political orientation of religious parties; it is the end-result of an ideology which is either Marxist in nature or liberal in background, and which sees religion, as such, as the enemy of the kind of state which it hopes to build. Does Rabbi Jakobovits really believe that the disappearance of religious parties would have

created a situation in which “a majority of Israel’s citizens would now be religious”?

Even more astonishing is the example which he uses to support his thesis—North African Jews. One reads with disbelief his statement that the North African Jews who came to Israel steeped in tradition were lost because of the politicization of religion.¹⁴ Quite the contrary! North African Jews were not lost to traditional Judaism because of “the coercive positions”¹⁵ of religious parties but precisely because the religious establishment was not strong enough to prevent the wholesale exposure of this truly pious Jewish community to secular, or even worse, anti-religious environments.

In any case, Rabbi Jakobovits seems to be convinced that through the dissolution of the religious parties religion would be more respected and a *modus vivendi* would emerge with secularist Jews. Is that a realistic expectation? Within the constellation which Rabbi Jakobovits envisions, who will look after the religious interests of religious Jews? Who will ensure that the status quo will be maintained and that the religious legislation which has been passed (and which Jakobovits agrees is a significant accomplishment) will not now be dismantled? This reviewer finds it hard to believe that the Chief Rabbi is actually convinced that the religious needs and rights of the Torah community will be safeguarded by Mapai, which has made common cause with the Conservatives and the Reform, or even by Likud in a post-Begin era! Or is Rabbi Jakobovits suggesting that religion in Israel should be considered a private matter and that religion should be completely separated from the state?

In an address which Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik once delivered before a convention of the Religious Zionists of America, he stated: “Many people claim that Mizrachi should have been a purely cultural, educational movement not involved in political questions. . . . For a time, I was also an adherent of this policy and I thought that the religious Jew ought to keep away from politics. Let us declare unequivocally that this policy is wrong. I was mistaken, as were many of my colleagues. If Mizrachi and other religious parties were to dissolve themselves, many of their religious achievements would be dissolved at the same time.”¹⁶ The Rav’s insight here, as elsewhere, reflects his deep-seated understanding of the historical and practical realities as they exist in the Jewish State.

V

Rabbi Jakobovits declares himself to be a Religious Zionist, but he has basic reservations about one of the fundamental elements in

Religious Zionism. He is opposed to the redemptive aspect of Religious Zionism; he is upset over the conviction held by some religious leaders that the cataclysmic events which are unfolding in the State of Israel are of messianic, or pre-messianic, dimensions.¹⁷ He is haunted by the ghosts of all the pseudo-messianic movements which have appeared in Jewish history with disastrous results for the Jewish people.

Rabbi Jakobovits concedes that, in fact, Religious Zionism has always been inspired by messianic hopes. It is possible to argue that some of the leaders of the Religious Zionist movement, like Rabbi J. J. Reines, were motivated by practical rather than messianic considerations.¹⁸ However, Rabbi Jakobovits is probably right that the predominant position was reflected in the writings of Rabbi A. I. Kuk (who incidentally was never a member of Mizrachi) who projected Religious Zionism in messianic terms.

The central theme in the seminal thinking of Rav Kuk was the concept of redemption. He considered Zionism to be a vehicle in God's scheme of messianic redemption. He maintained that the bond which tied the Jewish people to the land of Israel was part of "the very essence" of their nationhood, and that the Jewish resettlement of the land was both an indicator of and a spur to the redemptive process. Within this framework, he was able to embrace all the builders of Israel, no matter what their religious inclination, as instruments of that process. Certainly Rav Kuk's thinking, and that of those who are allied with him, can sometimes spawn unacceptable extremes, as we have recently witnessed. However, that does not in any way vitiate or undermine the underlying principle which Rav Kuk advanced, and which Religious Zionism, and for that matter Zionism itself, accepted as the basis of its formulation.¹⁹

Furthermore, Rabbi Jakobovits diverges from Religious Zionism by his undue emphasis on the conditional covenant, that is, that the right of the Jewish people to the land of Israel was never absolute but always conditional, that our tenure and hold on the land is dependent upon our loyalty to the Divine Law.²⁰ Every religious Jew is aware that ultimately our right to Erets Yisrael and our ability to hold on to that land is conditioned by our commitment to God's Law. However, does that give a rabbi—even a Chief Rabbi—the license to tempt the fates, "to open the mouth to Satan," so to speak, by talking about the possible "liquidation of Israel," albeit by qualifying it with an expression of faith that "an eventual accommodation with the Arabs will not allow it to happen"?²¹ Is this the time—when Israel is still involved in a struggle for its very existence—to project the conditional covenant as a cornerstone of a Religious Zionist ideology?

Rav Kuk was also aware of the implications of the *Shema* and of other Biblical texts which elaborate on the conditional character of our possession of the Holy Land. Yet, he did not discourse on the possible “liquidation of Israel.” Rav Kuk was convinced, as an act of faith, that the emerging Jewish State was a reflection of God’s will, that God—not the Arabs—would not allow His people to be driven out of His and their land, and that the “air” or the atmosphere of the land of Israel, like that of Denver,²² would heal the spiritual sickness of the secular Jews. He called the secularists wrong in departing from the Jewish religion and from the political national concepts of Judaism; but he believed in the intrinsic holiness of Erets Yisrael, and that the process and progress of redemption would, in time, correct the secular misconception.

Rabbi Isaac Herzog, who succeeded Rav Kuk as the Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel, and who preceded Rabbi Jakobovits as Chief Rabbi of Ireland, took a different approach from that of his Irish successor. During the Second World War, when Rommel was knocking at the gates of Alexandria and Palestine was in mortal peril, Rabbi Herzog happened to be in the United States on a mission. His friends attempted to dissuade him from returning to the *yishuv* because of the catastrophic consequences which would befall him should the Germans prevail. Rabbi Herzog did not speculate as to whether a conditional covenant was operative or whether the Jews of the *yishuv* were worthy of God’s protection. He unhesitatingly rejected all the warnings and importunings and returned to Palestine to be with his people in their hour of trial. He explained that he was aware of the fact that the prophets had foretold the destruction of two Temples and the Commonwealths which accompanied them—but they did not predict a third destruction.²³

It is highly unlikely that either Rav Kuk or Rabbi Herzog, both of whom Sir Immanuel respects and admires, would have allowed his thoughts and terminology on this subject to pass their lips. There is obviously a time, a place and a circumstance for his kind of an approach. Would Rabbi Jakobovits have considered their attitudes as a “heinous betrayal of Israel and Judaism alike and as an unconscionable perversion of Zionism in its authentic formulation rooted in the Bible itself”?²⁴

On careful consideration, it may very well be that Rabbi Jakobovits’ attitude to Religious Zionism is the product of his background. He talks with sincerity and fervor about the legitimacy of Israel and urges that peoplehood is an integral and indispensable part of Jewish religious identity; yet with all of that, he finds it difficult to free himself from his Hirschian background which, after all, was indigenous to his upbringing. The German Orthodoxy in

which he was raised, by his own admission, was distinctly lukewarm towards Jewish nationalism.²⁵ While he has personally moved well beyond it, he has not succeeded in shaking himself completely loose from his past.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, who propounded the doctrine of *Torah im Derekh Erets*, and who was the father of German Neo-Orthodoxy, did not differ with his Haskalah opponents in a number of areas. What differentiated Rav Hirsch from them qualitatively was his unconditional commitment to Divine Revelation and the absolutely binding character of the *mitsvot*. However, like them, he was committed to the Enlightenment and to the emancipation which it fathered; like them, he emphasized the idea of the world-mission of the Jews and strongly endorsed the validity and the necessity of *galut* “as an indispensable means to fulfill the Jewish mission to the World.” Rabbi Jakobovits affirms, in an essay which first appeared in *Tradition*, that “Hirsch may well be regarded as a spiritual father of modern religious anti-Zionism.”²⁶

It was in this vein that Rabbi Hirsch viewed the Bar Kokhba rebellion as a “disastrous error” (as does Jakobovits himself), and that the lesson which Jews had to learn from the revolt was to “never again attempt to restore its national independence by its own power.” It was to entrust its future as a nation solely to Divine Providence.²⁷

This approach has remained a part of Rabbi Jakobovits’ own philosophy. It is reflected in his almost obsessive concern with Israel’s world-mission. Again and again, in attacking the religious leadership in Israel, he expresses his chagrin over the fact that it has neglected or overlooked the universal dimension of Judaism, particularly in its attitude towards the Arabs generally and the Palestinians in particular, that it has little concern for Israel’s image among the nations and even less for “any mission to the nations whereby Israel is held responsible for the advancing moral order of mankind.”²⁸

This mind-set accounts for his opposition to the idea of the ultimate “liquidation of *galut*” or of working towards its eventual disappearance.²⁹ It also explains his ability to subscribe to the centrality of *Erets Yisrael* in the scheme of things even as he rejects the idea of its indispensability to the future of the Jewish people.³⁰

Nonetheless, one wonders whether Rabbi Jakobovits’ characterization of the Israeli rabbinate and the religious establishment as being insensitive to the universal dimension is altogether fair or correct. He himself concedes that if Israel has not involved itself fully in the universal aspects of Judaism, it has had good reasons.³¹ The callousness of the world to the Jewish people, which led to our betrayal during the Holocaust, and the cynical double standard in the

U.N., which smacks of a world conspiracy, provide ample grounds for Israel's reservations about the world community. We could add to these accusations the reaction of the world's political and religious leadership on the eve of the Six-Day War, when Nasser threatened to annihilate Israel, as well as the moral cowardice of the nations of Western Europe, which refused to allow their American ally to fly over their air-space during the Yom Kippur War when Israel's fate hung in the balance. Indeed, why should Israel and the Jewish people be concerned by what other people think or by the moral criticism which they delight in directing against Jews?

But the truth is that Israel does have an obligation to be the moral beacon of the nations of the world—for God's sake and for our own commitment. We are obligated to try build a unique society predicated upon divine principles which will redound to the glory of God. No one will argue with Rabbi Jakobovits that *Kiddush Hashem* should be a primary theme in the projection of the Zionist ideal. However, that means building a state on the unique principles of Torah; that means becoming a "light unto the nations," not necessarily by stressing a world mission or living amongst the nations, but by building a Jewish state whose moral and ethical principles will reflect the pride of Jews and Judaism and become a model for the world community. If we do not always succeed, that does not alter the fact that this should be the goal for those, like this reviewer, who are committed to Religious Zionism.

More substantial, it seems to me, is the complaint which the Chief Rabbi levels against the religious establishment for not interpreting "the convulsive events of our times through specifically Jewish eyes," and his conclusion that the religious leadership of Israel "may have succeeded to the priestly functions of spiritual leadership . . . but the Hebrew prophets are without heirs today."³²

Unfortunately, there is some truth to these statements, certainly as far as appearances are concerned. The picture which seems to emerge, all too often, is that the spiritual leadership is so bogged down in religious minutiae that the moral and ethical dimensions of Jewish life are overlooked, neglected or simply disregarded. Sometimes these accusations appear to be warranted; statements made by some religious leaders during the Lebanon War were less than sensitive and seemed to ignore the human dimension of the tragedy. Oftentimes, the criticisms are unwarranted; the case of Ethiopian Jews and their handling by the Chief Rabbis is an instance of this. The fact is that the Chief Rabbis have endeavored to operate within a legitimate halakhic framework—and with great compassion. Their views have deliberately been undermined and distorted by others for

political and religious reasons, which are far from being “for the sake of Heaven.”

However, in our world perceptions play a dominant role, and the impression which comes across is one of a spiritual leadership which has short-changed the prophetic dimension of its calling. There is need for introspective soul-searching on the part of the religious establishment in Israel, to insure that both in reality and in appearance the total religious commitment of our spiritual mentors and guides will be projected in their classical fullness.

VI

In June of 1978, Rabbi Jakobovits conspired³³ with the editor of the *London Jewish Chronicle* to present an alternative peace plan to that of the legitimately-elected democratic government of Israel. Rabbi Jakobovits concedes that he lacks expertise in political affairs, but this did not prevent him from plunging ahead to endorse the peace plan of the *London Jewish Chronicle*—albeit from a religious perspective.³⁴

What motivated him? He himself claims that he was concerned and upset by the impression that the fervor of religious elements in the country was dictating or controlling government policies.³⁵ No one will deny that there was a substantial body of religious opinion centered around Gush Emunim that vocally opposed compromise on a whole Erets Yisrael. However, this is a far cry from the assumption that these people actually were a major element in government policy. Mr. Begin may have respected religious Jews and religious principles, but his motivations and those of his followers have always been political in substance and related to Herut ideology. Even Tehiya, which is most closely aligned with the thinking of Gush Emunim, is guided and directed by secular Jews. Does anyone seriously believe that Professor Yuval Ne’eman or Geula Cohen or General Rafael Eitan are pawns in the hands of religious elements in Gush Emunim, or that their policy is influenced by religious considerations?³⁶

Rabbi Jakobovits advances a second reason for his action. He was anxious to demonstrate that there was more than one position in the Orthodox community on the subject of the territories; that the Orthodox position on this issue was not monolithic.³⁷ This is certainly a most legitimate concern, particularly since the Orthodox community does not have to (nor does it) always speak with one voice on major political problems. Sometimes, it may be healthy to present a spectrum of opinions and positions on major issues.