

The following essay is excerpted from an address delivered at the Midwinter Conference of the Rabbinical Council of America held in January, 1974 in Jerusalem. Rabbi Rabinovitch is the Dean of Jews' College in London, England.

THE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF ISRAEL

We have been through the euphoria of the twenty-fifth birthday celebrations and the bitter disillusionment of the *Yom Kippur* War and yet we have still not confronted, as Jews, the basic questions which the emergence of the State of Israel has raised. From the perspective of history, a quarter of a century is but a breathing space; nonetheless as individuals whom Providence has planted in an era of unparalleled turmoil we have only a single life span in which to come to terms with the challenge of our time and to respond in a manner which will be meaningful and fruitful.

Rightly may we lament the lack of explicit Divine guidance at this crucial juncture. This does not, however, relieve us of the duty to decide and to act. It is the ineluctable predicament of man that his vision is restricted, his understanding limited and his resources inadequate to master the currents of destiny. It is not that for which we can be held accountable. As believing Jews, committed to the concept of individual responsibility, we know that a human decision must be an act of faith, since we can never be completely certain that we have chosen the right. The only certainties are that we may not escape the obligation to decide for ourselves and that He above will ultimately make His will prevail.

To shrink from facing up to the perplexities and the demands of the historical situation is as much a renunciation of faith as the denial of history's God. In the words of Isaiah,

Hear, ye deaf, and look, ye blind, that ye may see. Who is blind but my servant? Or deaf, as my messenger that I send? Who is blind as

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he that is wholehearted and blind as the Lord's servant? Seeing many things, thou observest not; opening the ears, he heareth not . . . Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord and my servant whom I have chosen, that ye may know and believe me and understand, that I am He . . .!¹

On the one hand we must look with open eyes at the events that Providence brings to pass. On the other hand, we dare not fall prey to the temptation to see more than we have been shown and to hear more than has been said. The profound difficulties that beset such an approach are perhaps best described in the context of the experience of our forebears during the Babylonian Exile and the Restoration.

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: Why were they called "Men of the Great Assembly?" Because they restored the crown of the Divine Attributes. Moses had come and said: "The great God, mighty and awesome." Then came Jeremiah and said: "Strangers are revelling in His Temple — where then is His awe?" Hence he omitted [in his prayer the attribute] "awesome." Daniel came and said: "Strangers are enslaving His sons — where is His might?" Hence he omitted [in his prayer the attribute] "mighty." But they [the men of the Great Assembly] came and said: ". . . therein is manifest His awe, for but for the fear of Him how could this single nation endure among the nations!"

But how could our teachers [Jeremiah and Daniel] abolish what Moses instituted? Said Rabbi Elazar: "Since they knew that the Holy One, blessed be He, is truthful, they would not lie about Him."²

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi is concerned with a very fundamental theological question. The problem of the Divine attributes did not originate with the fierce confrontation between faith and philosophy in the Middle Ages. It is crucial to the religious experience as such. Thus we are told:

A certain (reader) went down before the ark in the presence of R. Hanina and said, "The great, the mighty, the awesome, the majestic, the strong, the powerful God." He said to him: Have you finished the praises of your Master? Even the first three, had it not been that Moses wrote them in the Law and the Men of the Great Synagogue came and ordained them, we should not recite; and you say all this! It is as if a man had thousands of thousands of *denarii* of gold and people to praise his wealth would say he had a thousand. Would it not be an insult to him?³

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

How can the infinity of the Divine be circumscribed by words? How can transcendence be imprisoned in concepts? How can the ineffable be defined? Yet faith itself is not possible unless there are words that can echo the reverberations of the infinite, unless the immediate awareness of God's Fatherhood and Kingship gives rise to a conception of Immanence that points beyond to the Unknowable and Unthinkable. Truly, no attributes can be predicated of Him who is above all understanding; yet if He chooses to seek out man and to summon him, it can only be within the realm of human experience, only in the manifestation of personal qualities.

What is faith other than the sure knowledge that the Divine Presence can touch man and that he too can reach out in response?

If God cares, then man too can shape history and give it purpose: if man is helpless and history is meaningless then he mocks and blasphemes who claims it for Providence.

Thus Jeremiah and Daniel could not utter the Mosaic formula of praise. When the sanctuary lovingly built and revered through centuries lay in ruins, when the people God Himself had chosen and made the bearers of His Name were down-trodden and enslaved, when the enemy disported himself as conqueror of the God of Israel, He chose to hide His face. Where then was His might and His awe?

In our generation more than any other, Jeremiah and Daniel would have recognized their own. We saw days which were "neither day nor night," when it seemed to every rational observer that the history of the Jewish people was almost at its close. How perilously near to victory was Hitler and how imminent the "final solution" for all of us? Even our bloody annals of slaughter and martyrdom have no parallel to the enormity that was the Nazi era, when tenfold "the number who went forth from Egypt" were brutally destroyed.

When a million Jewish children were being turned into soap could a Jeremiah or a Daniel have pronounced the words *the mighty and awesome*?

Then came the Men of the Great Synod. Though the survivors of the destruction had been pitifully few, and they and

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their descendants were reduced to abject spiritual poverty, yet they began to nourish the hope of Redemption. The restoration was, as recorded in the Bible,⁴ a miserable affair. The Olim were a minority among Babylonian Jews. Intellectually, religiously and socially they were a poor lot. The area assigned to them for settlement was a small enclave surrounding the ruin that had been Jerusalem.

They were surrounded on all sides by enemies and subject to the arbitrary whims of their Persian overlords. Internally they were hopelessly divided by social and religious strife — many of them had taken pagan wives and their children were not even Jews. Even, when after years of patient struggle they finally succeeded in realizing the pinnacle of their aspirations and the Temple was consecrated, the old men among them wept in disillusionment and frustration, for it was but a shadow of the glory which they still remembered from their youth.⁵

All this the Men of the Great Synod beheld. They saw that in the rebuilt Temple there was no *Shekhinah*. There was no Holy Ark in the Holy of Holies and there were no Tablets of the Law. The Holy of Holies was absolutely empty. The High Priest did not possess the *Urim* and *Tumim*, nor was he anointed.⁶ Of course, no one even dared to mention the promised anointed King of the House of David: on the gate of the Temple Mount was engraved the emblem of Shushan — a firm reminder that the Emperor of Persia was king and on his precarious mercy depended the fragile security of the restored Jewish Commonwealth.⁷

Yet the supremely important fact was the reality of Jewish survival. "All the nations had gathered to destroy them, but some re-established themselves."⁸ "Surely, were it not for the awesome power of the Holy One Blessd be He, how could one people endure among the nations?"⁹

This inexplicable fact which flies in the face of all the apparent laws of history, this gave the Men of the Great Assembly the courage to restore the Divine Crown to its pristine greatness. Moreover, this very fact itself, the re-assertion of a near-autonomous Jewish polity in dimensions, however small, is the concrete manifestation of the Divine greatness. To have witnessed

the ingathering of the struggling exiles, to have seen their first halting steps in rebuilding the nation, to have felt the vigor of new hope surging through the "dry bones"¹⁰ is to experience the Divine attributes of "These are the manifestations of His awesome greatness."

Nothing can explain the terrible God-forsakeness of the Holocaust years. It is not given to man to understand "Why dost Thou hide Thyself at times in trouble?"¹¹ The man of faith is also the faithful man, and so he does not mock the Hiding God by false attributes. Nor can there be any recompense in this world for the rivers of blood shed to sanctify His Name. In the face of the terrifying mystery of endless *Akedot*, when the Heavens are shut fast against both heartrending pleas for pity and outraged demands for justice, the true believer can only "sit alone in silence . . . and put his mouth in the dust."¹²

The rebirth of Israel is not an indemnity for the unspeakable horrors of the Nazi era and certainly not for the accumulated anguish of seventy-five generations of suffering.¹³ The re-establishment of the Jewish state does not solve the dread perplexity of Exile, nor does it spell the quick end of that persistent hatred of the Jew which is the mark of civilization unredeemed.

Is the State of Israel the long-awaited fulfillment of the prophecies? Surely, only a prophet can tell. Are the footsteps of the Messiah resounding over the hills? Who amongst us can presume to recognize the signs?

There is one simple basic fact which is there for all the world to see. It is so utterly simple and so totally obvious that thousands of millions of people all over the globe know it and see it. Israel *is*, and it bears God's Name, and it has restored God's crown!

In the light of this radical truth, all other questions take on a different meaning. In fact, it is only in virtue of this that they have any meaning at all, for he who "sits alone in silence" can ask no questions and give no answers.

The questions are, of course, manifold. Yet there is nothing wrong in the admission that we do not know all the answers.

The challenges are very great indeed. It has been pointed out that the existence of the state makes possible the fulfillment

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of two great aims of Torah: the Ingathering of the Exiles and the building of a just society. The achievement of these ends will require all the dedication and ingenuity that all Jews everywhere are capable of, and we hope that their accomplishment may initiate the Messianic era.

Yet it is imperative to recognize the basic truth that the religious significance of the State of Israel is not limited to its being the instrument for the attainment of religious ends or even to its being a stage in the process of redemption as we pray for it to be.

In the case of an individual man, it is true that he can be instrumental in the fulfillment of commandments and as a link in the chain of history leading to the Redemption. Yet there is a higher metaphysical significance possessed by the individual, for he is an image of God. He is that even if he tragically fails in his instrumental capacity, even if he falls into the abyss of crime beyond the hope of rehabilitation so that the death penalty must be exacted on him. Nonetheless, he commands respect as the image of God.¹⁴

In the case of the collective Jewish people too there is religious import in the very existence of Jewish self-determination besides its instrumental character. The covenant is binding not only upon us: it obligates also Him Who has chosen Israel to be His people and has pledged Himself to be our God. Though it defies understanding, yet all our accumulated historical experience demonstrates the common fate in which the dignity of the Jewish people and the glory of our God are inextricably intertwined. "... They were dispersed through the countries . . . wherever they came they profaned My Holy Name, in that men said of them, 'These are the people of the Lord, and yet they had to go out of His land'."¹⁵

We are prone to think of the twentieth century as the post-religious era. Indeed in some ways that is so. Yet it is a grievous error to suppose that indifference to religion is all that widespread. The Nazis openly proclaimed their war against Biblical religion and the God of Israel. So, of course, do the communists. It is also painfully obvious that the restoration of Israel poses a theological dilemma to many Christians. As for Islam,

the resurgence of fundamentalist zeal expresses itself unequivocally in repeated calls for a "Jihad" against the Jews.

The epic of Israel reborn spells out the renewal of the crown of *our* God not only for us but for others as well!

The man of faith is also the faithful man. Not only does he believe, he also testifies, and his testimony can be trusted to vindicate his belief. "You are my witnesses, saith God, and I am God."¹⁶ The Sages explain: "If you are my witnesses, then I am God: but if you are not my witnesses, I am not!"¹⁷ This is the ultimate paradox of faith! The revelation of God is really a disclosure only if we know it and bear witness to it. He is our Redeemer only if we hear the Promise as a Command: "He says to Jerusalem 'Let it be inhabited' and to the cities of Judah 'Let them be built'."¹⁸

The sad truth is that we are afraid. We crave to believe but we are afraid to open our eyes to see the hard intractable reality of Israel under siege. We are afraid to open our ears to hear the urgent summons to leave the Diaspora and to settle the waste places and fill the land with Jews.

Two tasks face us now. One applies to Jews everywhere. It is to cultivate the understanding that true faith requires the mobilization of all our intellectual, spiritual and physical resources for the security and the upbuilding of the state and the people of Israel. To let down our guard, to underestimate our enemies or to overlook the immense obstacles — economic, social, political and military — which beset us is not only dangerous folly but it is above all a betrayal of our witness. The crown of God has been entrusted to us for safekeeping and we dare not foist the job on anybody else, even the Almighty Himself! The shape of Israeli society for generations to come is being determined now. It must and it can be permeated with Torah, not starry-eyed otherworldly faith but the kind of unswerving trust in the God of Israel which opens our eyes to see and to bear witness to His awesome deeds.

The second compelling imperative of our time is addressed to Jews in the *Golah*.

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Hearken to me, O Jacob
and Israel whom I called
Go forth from Babylon
flee from Chaldea
Declare this with a shout of joy,
proclaim it
send it forth to the end of the earth.¹⁹

These words were intended for the generation of the Return with Zerubabel. Will we now heed and obey?²⁰

NOTES

1. Isaiah 42:18-20; 43:10.
2. *Yoma* 69b.
3. *Megillah* 25a.
4. See *Ezra* 2:64.

כל הקהל כאחד ארבע רבוא אלפים שלש מאות ושישים.

Also *ibid.* 9:1-2.

לא נבדלו העם ישראל והכהנים והלויים מעמי הארצות כתעבתיהם לכנעני החתי הפרזי היבוסי העמוני המאבי המצרי והאמרי, כי נשאו מבנותיהם להם ולבניהם והתערבו זרע הקדש בעמי הארצות, ויד השרים והסגנים היתה במעל הזה ראשונה.

5. *ibid.* 3:12.

6. *Yoma* 21b.

7. *Menahot* 98a.

8. Rashi quoted above. See note 2.

9. See note 2.

10. See *Ezekiel* 37:1-4.

11. *Psalms* 10:1.

12. *Lamentations* 3:28-29.

13. *Rosh ha-Shanah* 23a.

אמר רבי יוחנן: אוי להם לעכו"ם שאין להם תקנה שנאמר 'תחת הנחשת אביא זהב ותחת הברזל אביא כסף ותחת העצים נחשת ותחת האבנים ברזל', תחת רבי עקיבא וחביריו מאי מביאין?

14. *Deuteronomy* 21:23. See *Sanhedrin* 46b:

אומר רבי מאיר: משלו משל למה הדבר דומה — לשני אחים תאומים בעיר אחת. אחד מינוהו מלך ואחד יצא לליסמיות. צוה המלך ותלאוהו. כל הרואה אותו אומר 'המלך תלוי'. צוה המלך והורידוהו.

15. *Ezekiel* 36:19-20.

16. *Isaiah* 43:13. It is important to bear in mind that this passage is part of a message to the Jews of the Diaspora who survived the exile and to whom Cyrus' declaration was addressed.

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

17. Sifri to Deuteronomy 33:5.

18. Isaiah 44:26.

19. Isaiah 48:12-20.

20. Compare *Yoma* 9b

ריש לקיש . . . א"ל . . . דכתיב 'אם חומה היא נבנה עליה טירת כסף ואם דלת היא נצור עליה לוח ארז' — אם עשיתם עצמכם כחומה ועליתם כולכם בימי עזרא נמשלתם ככסף שאין רקב שולט בו; עכשיו שעליתם כדלתות נמשלתם כארז שהרקב שולט בו.