YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Before Sinai: Jewish Values and Jewish Law**

**By Rav Dr. Judah Goldberg**

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**Shiur #17: Jewish Peoplehood (10): Covenantal Zionism**

In the last *shiur*, we focused on R. Soloveitchik’s essay “*Kol Dodi Dofek*,” which frames support for Zionism through commitment to the dual covenants of *Avot* and *Sinai*. In this *shiur*, we will continue this theme but suggest a variation on the relationship between *berit Avot* and Zionism, inspired by the teachings of *mori ve-rabbi* R. Yehuda Amital.

**Zionism as the Promotion of Jewish Sovereignty**

I believe that *berit Avot* can provide a strong ideological basis for contributing to the social and political infrastructure of a Jewish state. If *berit Avot* is not just a promise but a statement of joint mission, then God’s foundational vision for Avraham that “I shall make you a great nation” (*Bereishit* 12:2) requires our active participation in “nation building,” in its myriad of manifestations, aside from our adherence to Jewish law. Could it be that a potential convert is asked if he is ready to suffer sociopolitical downturns along with the Jewish people, but that he, along with native Jews, will not advance national destiny when history presents an opportunity?

True to the nature of “Jewish peoplehood” as a value and not a norm, its demands are necessarily context-dependent and will shift with changing realities. During periods of exile, commitment to Jewish peoplehood means building strong communal institutions, ensuring economic and political stability and promoting Jewish social causes, both internally and externally. But could one for whom “I shall make you a great nation” is emblazoned on his heart not revel at the reappearance of a sovereign Jewish state and not want to contribute to its flourishing?

This vision lay at the heart of R. Amital’s Zionism, at least as he expressed it in his later years. He was fond of quoting the Rambam, who includes the establishment of the Hasmonean monarchy in his description of the miracle of Chanukah (*Hilkhot Megilla Ve-Chanukah* 3:1).[[1]](#footnote-1) R. Amital observes: “Although the Hasmonean state was far from perfect, its establishment (and the return of Jewish sovereignty, albeit limited) was nevertheless a cause of celebration.” Similarly, “however imperfect, one cannot overlook the many positive elements of our independent national existence.” For R. Amital, the Second Commonwealth is an apt comparison to modern Israel specifically because its leadership strayed so far from the vision of *berit Sinai*: “Our leaders today are no worse than the Hasmonean kings, and our country is no worse than theirs was.”[[2]](#footnote-2) If the Rambam could nevertheless celebrate their sovereignty, then we have license to similarly endorse our own.

Moreover, R. Amital resisted the conflation of Jewish sovereignty with the return to Zion. He deliberately emphasized that *Yom Ha-atzma’ut*, in his mind, primarily celebrated the return of Jewish sovereignty and lamented the fact that this point seemed to have faded following the expansion of Israel’s borders in 1967. I vividly remember him declaring that in 1948, in the wake of the Holocaust, he would have been happy with a Jewish state in Uganda![[3]](#footnote-3) In contrast to others, who lamented the partition of the Land of Israel, R. Amital explains: “We—the simple Jews among whom I regard myself—didn’t know about Ramban.[[4]](#footnote-4) We knew that there was Israeli independence, Jewish sovereignty in our land—and we rejoiced over that.”[[5]](#footnote-5) This stance set him apart from many of his religious Zionist colleagues and had profound political consequences. After the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, he broke ranks with them, arguing for “the priority of the people of Israel over the whole Land of Israel.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

**The Meaning of the State of Israel**

For R. Soloveitchik, the modern State of Israel is a means to an end. It provides unique opportunities to further the spiritual destiny of the Jewish people at this particular phase in history, but not necessarily more than that. He imagined his position as a “third approach,” flanked on one side by Orthodox anti-Zionists who reject the State and on the other side by followers of R. Avraham Yitzchak Ha-Kohen Kook, who ascribe inherent spiritual significance to the very existence of the State. The middle path is one of pragmatism: It does not deny the role of Divine Providence in the founding of the State, but also does not seek to invest this event with inherent spiritual meaning.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Inspired by R. Amital, I cautiously suggest my own “third way” regarding Jewish sovereignty in Israel, a sort of fusion of R. Soloveitchik’s and R. Kook’s ideologies. Perhaps we can say that a sovereign Jewish state is indeed significant in its own right—not for *berit Sinai*,but for *berit Avot*. Regarding the spiritual destiny of the Jewish people, encapsulated by the covenant of Sinai, the State may indeed simply be a means to an end, and we need not interpret its founding in messianic or specifically spiritual terms. Regarding our national identity and ability to flourish as a people, however, political independence is critical to the ultimate vision of “I shall make you a great nation” and “I will make your name great” (*Bereishit* 12:2). Following R. Amital, we can assert that the return of sovereignty marks a milestone in the unfolding history of the Jewish nation, regardless of the relationship between this sovereign entity and values derived from Sinai.

**“To Be a Free People in Our Land”**

How do I know that political independence and other manifestations of national thriving are significant in their own right, as reflections of *berit Avot*, and not simply a means towards achieving other ends (such as the fulfillment of *berit Sinai*)? I confess that my conviction emanates, in large part, from an intuitive reading of *Tanakh* and its major commentaries, as well as from my own home-grown historical sensibilities—particularly in the shadow of the Holocaust. *Sefer Bereishit*, read plainly, presents political, economic and social strength as marks of honor for the developing Jewish people. Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya’akov are all described at various points as having amassed considerable wealth, and when Ibn Ezra suggests that Yitzchak became destitute, the Ramban sharply retorts: “But the *Avot* were all like kings, and the kings of nations came before them and entered treaties with them!”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Throughout his commentary on *Sefer Bereishit*, the Ramban, sometimes echoing earlier commentators, continues this theme. He suggests, for instance, that Yehuda was a powerful political leader in Canaan,[[9]](#footnote-9) that the *Avot*’s fame traveled far beyond their homeland[[10]](#footnote-10) and that even distant relatives distinguished themselves through their association with the *Avot*.[[11]](#footnote-11) The Ramban never suggests that this fame and fortune are merely means to pursuing a theological agenda; rather, he views them as a tangible fulfillment of God’s promise, “And I shall make your name great” (*Bereishit* 12:2; see commentary on 23:19, 40:15).

Throughout the rest of *Tanakh*, Jewish strength is a source of pride, and subservience and enslavement a cause for shame. While our national fortunes in the Bible usually correlate with our adherence to *berit Sinai*, in at least one striking passage, cited by both R. Soloveitchik[[12]](#footnote-12) and R. Amital in the context of Zionism, they explicitly diverge. On the one hand, King Yerav’am, son of Yo’ash “did evil in the eyes of God; he did not deviate from any of the sins of Yerav’am, son of Nevat” (*Melakhim* II 14:24). Nevertheless, the *Navi* continues:

He restored the borders of Israel…. For God had seen the very bitter affliction of Israel, and there were no assets left, and no one to help Israel. And God had not declared to wipe out the name of Israel from under the heavens, and so He saved them by the hand of Yerav’am, son of Yo’ash. (14:25-27)

Apparently, promoting Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel is a goal that the *Navi* attributes to God Himself, even when His people do not abide by His word. If we embrace *berit Avot* as a partnership, then we can and should similarly adopt it as an independent goal of our own.

To be sure, I am not endorsing a relentless pursuit of wealth and power, on either the individual or national level, untempered and unguided by spiritual values. Of course, We aspire to the fulfillment of *berit Avot* and *berit Sinai* together, and we should not forget that even *berit Avot* includes ethical and theological visions that any sovereign Jewish state should reflect. Broadly speaking, though, I believe we can unapologetically advance the political, economic and cultural standing of the State of Israel and take pride in its diverse achievements on the international scene. Personally, I don’t see self-contradiction in aspiring to be “a nation among nations” on the road to becoming a “people that dwells in solitude and is not figured amongst nations” (*Bamidbar* 23:9). If my heart naturally swells with pride and my eyes well up with tears when I watch the world community, who so bitterly betrayed us in our darkest hours, salute an Israeli Olympic gold medal winner, for instance, I don’t worry that I am distorting the legacy of Avraham.

**Religious, Secular, “Covenantal” and Anti- Zionism**

Zionism as an expression of *berit Avot* perhaps leads to a rethinking of religious Zionism and its relationship to its secular counterpart. If religious Zionism only means settling the Land of Israel for religious reasons, then it will find common, but not identical, purpose with secular Zionism. As long as their respective interests overlap, their deep divisions in ideology will stay masked, and the illusion of unity can be maintained. When interests begin to diverge, however, there may be little left to unite around. Thus, when religious Zionists see secularists pursuing goals that run counter to their religious ideology—say, relinquishing land or secularizing state institutions or laws—cooperation quickly disintegrates and gives way to mutual frustration. At the extreme, segments of the religious Zionist community have at times proposed “disengaging” from the State of Israel and its armed forces, claiming that, in light of their “anti-religious” policies, they can no longer be supported by religious Zionist ideologies.

In contrast, if we recognize two separate dimensions to religious Zionism—“religion” (including a vision for its manifestation in a modern Israeli state) and “Zionism” independently, as manifestations of *berit Sinai* and *berit Avot*, respectively—then the latter set of values, at least, can be shared by religious and secular Zionists alike. We can unite in our pursuit of Zionism out of a commitment to Jewish peoplehood, even if we clash with respect to our understandings of Jewish spiritual destiny and its implication for life in modern Israel.

Echoing R. Walter Wurzburger’s “covenantal ethics,”[[13]](#footnote-13) we can perhaps propose the term “Covenantal Zionism” to describe Zionism that emerges from a broad understanding of *berit Avot*. Commitment to halakhic Judaism is not a prerequisite for identification with Covenantal Zionism. All that is needed is an embrace of the core principles of *berit Avot*—a vision for a unique Jewish destiny unfolding in the Land of Israel, charged with a broad ethical mandate and inspired (though not necessarily ruled) by a particular spiritual tradition.

I am not so naïve as to imagine that every Israeli would identify with Covenantal Zionism, nor do I pretend that it would eliminate all sources of religious/secular conflict. In particular, we would continue to face situations in which upholding *berit Sinai* seems to interfere with the common-sense interests of Jewish nationhood (for example, observance of the Sabbatical year). Still, I believe that a broad swath of Israeli society, if not Diaspora Jewry, could embrace Covenantal Zionism and, in doing so, establish a better language through which to discuss both areas of agreement and points of discord. Through Covenantal Zionism, it becomes clear why Orthodox Jews should partner with secular forces in building and supporting the core institutions of a Jewish state. Furthermore, it becomes obvious why “disengagement” is never an option, no matter how frustrated one may grow with particular governmental figures or their policies.

Finally, *berit Avot* can actually highlight a small parcel of common ground between Zionists and anti-Zionists. Many anti-Zionist ideologies are deeply committed to the promotion of Jewish historical destiny; their point of argument with Zionism is whether this destiny is better pursued through active, political engagement or through perpetual, national passivity. Both seek the same thing—the rapid resolution of Jewish exile, servitude and suffering—though by very different means. Therefore, both groups can answer God’s ultimate question, “Did you anticipate salvation?” (*Shabbat* 31a), in the affirmative. What neither can countenance is apathy towards *berit Avot*—an experience of Judaism that is completely unreflective regarding the national, historical dimension of our existence.

**Conclusion**

The consequences of commitment to Jewish peoplehood, I believe, are far reaching, and a restatement of religious Zionism and endorsement of cooperation across denominations just scratch the surface. I submit that collectively, we ought to further explore the full breadth of where a strong value of Jewish peoplehood leads us. What does it demand of us in terms of Jewish social action? How diverse should our philanthropic efforts be? What does it tell us about family members who have strayed from observance or intermarried, or about non-Jews with Jewish roots? Even if Jewish law is relatively silent or possibly wary about some of these populations, might an independent value of Jewish peoplehood, rooted in *berit Avot*,fill a void or even point in a different direction? How else can a value of Jewish peoplehood help us structure our communities and define their boundaries?

In keeping with the very nature of *berit Avot*, we should not expect concrete answers. We should anticipate insights, guidelines and direction, rather than rulings, pronouncements and directives. However, with ongoing, critical reflection, we may be able to reach certain, firm expressions of what these values should mean in our lives that can further inform our personal, communal and national decisions. We can turn intuitive feelings into an actionable mandate, whose articulation can lend greater depth to and set the parameters for otherwise vague “Jewish values.” With collective hard work and dedication, we can broaden our engagement with the covenant, without relinquishing sophistication, nuance or poise.

**For Further Thought:**

1. R. Amital spoke often but wrote little about his Zionism and other ideas. In addition to the material above, other relevant references include: *Jewish Values in a Changing World*, ed. Amnon Bazak, trans. David Strauss (Jersey City: Ktav, 2005); *Commitment and Complexity*, ed. Aviad Hacohen, trans. Kaeren Fish (Jersey City: Ktav, 2008) and Y. Mirsky and R. Ziegler, “History, Humanity, and Morality in an Era of Destruction and Rebirth: Rav Yehuda Amital” (forthcoming).

2. Another element that is critical to R. Amital’s Zionism is the opportunity to sanctify God’s name: “I believe that we merited a Jewish state only because of God’s desire to sanctify His name in the aftermath of the terrible profanation of His name during the Holocaust” (*Jewish Values in a Changing World*, 155). For R. Amital, God’s glory in this world is bound up with the destiny of the Jewish people. Our exile desecrates His name, and our return to sovereignty in the Land of Israel sanctifies it. At the risk of reductionism, let me ask: Can this concern be viewed as part of *berit Avot*, or is it necessarily independent from it?

3. In 2008, a major controversy regarding conversion erupted in Israel that mainly fell along *Haredi* and religious Zionist lines (for an English language summary and discussion, see R. Yosef Zvi Rimon, “Contemporary Ashkenazi Pesak Regarding the Invalidation of Conversion,” *Tradition* 46:2 [Summer 2013], 29-56). Among the *Haredi* criticisms was that conversion judges invoke “national interests” as a reason to seek leniencies regarding conversions of non-Jews in Israel. Religious Zionistscholars, for the most part, did not deny the accusations but proudly defended this orientation. Could a framework of *berit Avot* help facilitate a dialogue between these two camps? Does a value of Jewish peoplehood necessarily lead to the religious Zionist position?

4. On September 24, 2010, *The Jewish Standard*, a Jewish newspaper serving northern New Jersey, published a wedding announcement for a same-gender couple. After protest from the Orthodox community, the paper wrote that they would no longer publish such announcements, then quickly reversed itself after backlash from non-Orthodox segments. Discussion of the parameters of tolerance within the Jewish community ensued (see a summary at <http://jstandard.com/content/item/what_do_we_do_when_we_disagree/15283>).

A subsequent statement by a local Orthodox rabbinic organization noted a diversity of responses among its own members. Some felt that the newspaper had crossed a line; others felt that “in as much as this paper does not conform, and does not claim to conform, to Orthodox standards – they do, after all, advertise non-Kosher food establishments and announce communal events which take place on Shabbat,” a same-gender marriage announcement need not be treated differently (available at <http://www.torahmusings.com/2010/10/rcbc-statement/>).

Can *berit Avot* help us navigate the limits of tolerance? Can it help us distinguish, say, between an advertisement for a non-kosher eatery, on the one hand, and one for an anti-Israel protest or for a house of pagan worship, on the other? If so, where would same-gender marriage fall? That is, should we see it as a narrow, however grave, violation of *berit Sinai*, or is it a deeper affront to the integrity of Jewish peoplehood as formulated through *berit Avot*? Is there a difference between homosexual activity and same-gender marriage? Consider, for instance, Rambam *Hilkhot Issurei Bi’a* 21:8.

1. R. Amital also referenced the blessings of the *kohen gadol* on Yom Kippur, in which the Rambam includes a prayer that God “will not remove a monarch from [the Jewish people]” (*Hilkhot Avodat Yom Ha-kippurim* 3:11). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “The Religious Significance of the State of Israel,” trans. D. Silverberg and R. Ziegler, *Alei Etzion* 14 (5766[2006]), 16-17; available at http://www.vbm-torah.org/alei/14-01rya-zion.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. a proposal considered by the World Zionist Congress in 1903. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Ramban counts conquering and settling the Land of Israel as one of the 613 commandments (Glosses to Rambam’s *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, Omitted Positive Commandment #4). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “What is the Meaning of *Reishit Tsemihat Ge’ullatenu*?” Trans. K. Fish, *Tradition* 39:3 (2006), 9-10; available at http://www.vbm-torah.org/yyerush/yeru65-rya.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Elyashiv Reichner, *By Faith Alone: The Story of Rabbi Yehuda Amital*, trans. Elli Fischer, 188. We will return to this controversy in future *shiurim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See *Community, Covenant and Commitment: Selected Letters and Communications*, 163-166. Also seeR. Aharon Lichtenstein, “Rav Soloveitchik’s Approach to Zionism,” trans. K. Fish, *Alei Etzion* 14 (5766[2006]), 21-37 (available at http://www.vbm-torah.org/alei/14-02ral-zionism.htm), as well as R. Reuven Ziegler’s excellent discussion in *Majesty and Humility: The Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, 290-296 (an adaptation is available at <http://download.yutorah.org/2013/1053/Pesach_To_Go_-_5773_Rabbi_Ziegler.pdf>). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Commentary on *Bereishit* 25:34; also see commentary on 13:17, 23:4, 26:17 and 33:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See commentary on 38:11, 12, 18 (also see R. Yosef Bekhor Shor there) and 24; also see commentary to 42:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See commentary to 40:15 (also see Radak there), 42:11 and 45:16 (also see Radak and R. Yosef Bekhor Shor there). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See commentary to 29:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See R. Aharon Lichtenstein, “Rav Soloveitchik’s Approach to Zionism,” 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. [See *shiur* #2](http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/sinai/02sinai.htm). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)