

# Torah and Humanity in a Time of Rebirth: Rav Yehuda Amital as Educator and Thinker

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**R**eligious virtuosi, the figures who powerfully transmit and reshape their traditions and whose life stories become their own teaching, come in many forms, but they have something in common: a combination of faithfulness and daring that is at once uniquely personal and yet at one with all they received from their own teachers. In the Jewish context, this central, defining paradox of great religious figures means faithfulness to God, Torah, mitzvot, and the Jewish people, combined with audacity in exegesis, and the willingness to engage in probing personal and communal self-criticism and to examine commonly held notions again and again in a new light.

Great religious figures also undertake distinctive quests of their own, and in the case of Rabbi Yehuda Amital (1924–2010) this quest was guided by two overriding values: truth and a bedrock humanity. He grappled as honestly as he could with God, Torah, and Israel, in all

their complexity, while being as faithful as he could to the tradition, his historical moment, and himself.

One can “explain” the emergence of such figures only with great difficulty, if at all, let alone parse their complex personalities into discrete parts. One can, however, try to trace their origins and life histories, and to mark the stations and crossroads that shaped them on their way.

Rav Amital’s teachings are not easily summarized for two reasons. The first is the sheer complexity of the man, who lived and taught a fundamental simplicity while at the same time wrapping his hands around complicated questions with no hope for easy answers – and encouraging others to do the same. The second is the fact that he did not write much, certainly not systematically.<sup>1</sup> The latter reason seems in part related to the existential immediacy of his life and ideas, his fully inhabiting the moments and encounters in which he found himself, and the fusion of thought and action in his engagements. As he put it to one of the authors, “There are those whose Torah is in their books, and those whose Torah is in their lives.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, parts of this essay will interweave discussions of his life with his thought.<sup>3</sup>

1. The primary sources for a study of Rav Amital’s thought are his books *HaMaalot MiMaamakim* (Alon Shevut, 1974); *Jewish Values in a Changing World*, ed. Amnon Bazak, trans. David Strauss (Jersey City, NJ, 2005); *Commitment and Complexity*, ed. Aviad Hacohen, trans. Kaeren Fish (Jersey City, NJ, 2008); and *When God Is Near: On the High Holidays*, ed. Yoel Amital, trans. Kaeren Fish (Jerusalem, 2015). All of his essays and books were originally written in Hebrew; wherever possible, we will refer to English translations. Dozens more essays and *sihot* appear in the various publications of Yeshivat Har Etzion and on its Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash. For a sampling of material translated into English, see <http://etzion.org.il/en/seminal-articles-harav-yehuda-amital-ztl>. (This webpage also contains links to most of the articles cited below.) Rav Amital wrote little himself, but encouraged his students to transcribe and adapt his oral discourses. Some of the fruits of his talmudic and halakhic scholarship are collected in his book *Resisei Tal*, ed. Yoel Amital (Alon Shevut, 2005), as well as in the journals of Yeshivat Har Etzion: *Alon Shevut*, *Daf Keshet*, and *Alei Etzion*.
2. This is reminiscent of the comment of Akiva Ernst Simon that there are two kinds of religious thinkers: those for whom God has a system, and those for whom God has truth. See Akiva Ernst Simon, *Ye’adim, Tzematim, Netivim: Haguto shel Mordekhai Martin Buber* (Tel Aviv, 1985), 164–65.
3. Regarding Rav Amital’s life, see Elyashiv Reichner, *By Faith Alone: The Story of Rabbi Yehuda Amital*, trans. Elli Fischer (Jerusalem, 2011). Regarding his educational and

## BACKGROUND AND INFLUENCES

Central as the teachings of Rav Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook and the internal dynamics of Religious Zionism were to Rav Amital's life and thought, as we shall see, the Hungarian-Jewish landscape of his early years was also deeply significant. This is true not only in personal terms, but, it seems fair to say, in spiritual, intellectual, and even ideological terms as well.

Rav Amital was born Yehuda Klein in 1924, in the Transylvanian city of Grosswardein (Oradea).<sup>4</sup> Its Jewish community was, as were those in much of Hungary, far more internally diverse than is generally thought. It was home to Hasidim, acculturated and assimilated Jews, Jewish-Hungarian nationalists, and a large concentration of Hungary's Religious Zionists.<sup>5</sup>

One figure from that milieu to whom Rav Amital often referred was Rabbi Moshe Shmuel Glasner. Born in Pressburg in 1856 and a great-grandson of the *Ḥatam Sofer* (hence the title of his major work and eponym, *Dor Revi'i*), Rabbi Glasner served as rabbi of Cluj-Klausenberg from 1877 until his death in 1924. Although he passed away shortly before Rav Amital's birth, Rabbi Glasner remained a living presence. He was also the grandfather of Rav Amital's own beloved teacher, Rabbi Ḥayim Yehuda Levi, himself a Hungarian alumnus of great Lithuanian yeshivas who brought their hallmark conceptual methods of study back to his native milieu.<sup>6</sup>

Rabbi Glasner's approach appealed to Rav Amital in several ways. In the lengthy introduction to his commentary on Tractate Ḥullin, he laid out a theory of the Oral Law, placing great emphasis on the need for rabbinic authorities to exercise their own independent judgment in adjudication, out of steady dialogue with their times and with the needs

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public impact, see Reuven Ziegler and Reuven Gafni, eds., *LeOvdekha BeEmet: LiDemuto ULeDarko shel HaRav Yehuda Amital* (Jerusalem, 2011).

4. Though at the time of his birth Grosswardein was part of Romania, it soon thereafter transferred back to Hungarian sovereignty.
5. On Grosswardein, see, briefly, [www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Oradea](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Oradea). The Grosswardein memorial book can be read online at [yizkor.nypl.org](http://yizkor.nypl.org).
6. Regarding Rabbi Ḥayim Yehuda Levi, see the biographical sketch written by Rav Amital in *Resisei Tal*, 335–36.

of their communities.<sup>7</sup> He also presented the notion that there are actions that – although not explicitly prohibited in the Torah – are nonetheless forbidden because they contradict human dignity and diminish one's *tzelem Elokim*, a proscription with broad ramifications that Rav Amital frequently cited when discussing ethical obligations that precede and complement formal Torah.<sup>8</sup> In his talmudic exegesis, Rabbi Glasner's method, reminiscent of the Brisker method but without its elaborate and specialized terminology, synthesized conceptual analysis with great emphasis on a close reading of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, a combination which, inter alia, retained the flavor of more traditional Talmud interpretation.

Rabbi Glasner was also one of the early supporters in Hungary of Religious Zionism, for which he faced strong opposition by his peers. In addition, while most of the rabbis affiliated with the Mizrachi movement argued that Zionism could serve only as a vessel for improving Jews' political and social situation, but nothing more, Rabbi Glasner argued – as did Rav Kook – that it could serve as a vehicle of religious and spiritual renewal.<sup>9</sup>

Although, as mentioned, Rabbi Glasner passed away shortly before Rav Amital was born, it seems that his teaching and public image were a source of inspiration for Rav Amital in several areas: his emphasis on intellectual independence, his ethical concern, and his commitment to Zionism. Rabbi Glasner's approaches in these realms were all in a somewhat different key than those of Rav Kook, whose riveting teaching and persona were soaked in longing, pathos, and not a little contradiction. It is unclear whether Rabbi Glasner was a culture hero and role model for Rav Amital throughout his life or if, in the course of his development and his working to meet the practical, moral, and spiritual leadership challenges he faced, he found himself drawn back to and learning from this prominent figure from his youth.

7. Rabbi Moshe Shmuel Glasner, *Sefer Dor Revi'i: Biur Raḥav al Masekhet Ḥullin* (Cluj-Kolozsvár, 1921).

8. See, for example, *Jewish Values in a Changing World* (henceforth: *Jewish Values*), 38–43. Unless specified otherwise, all books and articles cited below are by Rav Amital.

9. A great deal of material on Rabbi Glasner may be found at [www.dorrevii.org](http://www.dorrevii.org). A very interesting discussion of his life and ideas is found in Netanel Katzburg, "LeShitato HaToranit VeHaLeumit shel HaRav S. M. Glasner," in *Sefer HaZikaron LeYahadut Cluj-Kluzhvar*, ed. Moshe Carmilly (New York, 1970), 48–60. See also Avraham Fuchs, *Yeshivot Hungarya BiGdulatan UVHurbanan* (Jerusalem, 1987), 2:273–77.

In addition to the complex legacy of the *Dor Revi'i*, Rav Amital inherited multiple traditions during his formative years – the traditional Hungarian modes of study with their emphasis on responsa literature and the practical application of halakha, the Lithuanian conceptualism of his Rosh Yeshiva, echoes of Hungarian Hasidism, and the simple piety of the Jewish masses and of his family.

#### **HOLOCAUST AND ALIYA**

After rudimentary schooling, young Yehuda Klein spent his childhood and adolescence in yeshiva, more specifically under the tutelage of the aforementioned Rabbi Ḥayim Yehuda Levi. Rav Amital's father was a bookkeeper, and Rav Amital might well have gone into his father's profession had he not been forced to witness his culture's murder. In May 1944, he was taken away to a Nazi forced labor camp, and shortly afterwards the rest of his family was deported to Auschwitz. He managed to sneak an anthology of Rav Kook's writings into the labor camp, as he later testified:

I was seventeen when the Germans came, and I was summoned to be transported to a labor camp in an unknown location – the Siberian plains or the Carpathian mountains. I had to take leave from my parents, and our feeling was that this was to be a final farewell (for what had happened to our Jewish brethren in Poland was no secret to us). I didn't know what awaited me. I took a few small books in a bag: a Pentateuch, Prophets, Mishna, and I thought there would be a need for something else, something that would perhaps maintain the necessary morale in hard times. And so I took *Mishnat HaRav*<sup>10</sup> as well. Indeed, I received encouragement and strength from that book. The ideas and words influenced me to such a degree that I attributed to them my steadfast endurance in the labor camp, not contaminating myself with forbidden foods even when this involved great hunger.<sup>11</sup>

10. This anthology, compiled by Rabbi Moshe Zvi Neria, was first published in 1936.

11. Appendix to Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook, *Mishnat HaRav*, 3rd ed. (Beit El, 1992), 147–48.

Rav Amital had first encountered Rav Kook's thought incidentally, when he read a quotation from Rav Kook in Rabbi Ḥayim Hirschensohn's *Motza'ei Mayim*.<sup>12</sup> He was electrified by the ideas of Rav Kook, whose mix of passionate religious experience, Jewish nationalism, messianic fervor, and ethical universalism would set the terms for his later engagements. Although Rav Amital was deeply influenced by Rav Kook and, as we saw, testified that Rav Kook's thought gave him strength during the *Shoah*, it was precisely the fact that Rav Kook's vision of redemption had not grappled with the Holocaust that later led Rav Amital to question some of its premises and conclusions.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, as we shall see, Rav Amital's interpretation of Rav Kook differed from that espoused by Rav Kook's son Rabbi Zvi Yehuda and the latter's disciples.

After his liberation by the Red Army on *Simḥat Torah* in 1944, Rav Amital headed for the Land of Israel, arriving on the second night of Ḥanukka, the sole survivor of his immediate family. Having twice sworn during his time in the camp that if he survived he would study Torah in Jerusalem, he made his way there and found a place in Yeshivat Ḥevron, a leading *haredi* institution.<sup>14</sup> He threw himself into his studies, acquiring a reputation for his fervent and independent-minded spirituality and for his mastery of halakhic responsa literature. He and several other students also joined the Haganah, despite the fact that Zionism

12. *Motza'ei Mayim* (Budapest, 1924) is a commentary on the seafaring *aggadot* of Rabba bar bar Ḥana. Rabbi Hirschensohn cites Rav Kook therein at p. 120, in particular the tenth section of *Orot HaTeḥiya*, on how the quintessence of Israel's striving is rooted not in socio-economics, but in a sense of spiritual mission and longing for God.

13. Rav Kook died in 1935, four years before the outbreak of World War II.

14. Although a student at Yeshivat Ḥevron, he also studied privately with Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Ḥarlap, a close associate of Rav Avraham Yitzhak Kook, who succeeded Rav Kook as Rosh Yeshiva of Merkaz HaRav. For Rav Amital's reflections on Rabbi Ḥarlap and correspondence from the latter to him, see *Alon Shevut* 20 (Adar 5734): 18–21, and *Meimad* 3 (Tevet 5755): 23; both items have been reprinted in Aryeh Strikovsky, ed., *Daf LeTarbut Yehudit* 271 (Tishrei 5767), available online at <http://meyda.education.gov.il/files/tarbut/pirsumeagaf/kitveet/271pdf.pdf>.

While at Yeshivat Ḥevron, Rav Amital also formed a close lifelong friendship with his fellow student Rabbi Mordekhai Breuer. They later taught together at Yeshivat HaDarom in Rehovot, and when Rav Amital became Rosh Yeshiva of Har Etzion, he invited Rabbi Breuer to teach Tanakh there – a pivotal move in the “Tanakh study revolution” spearheaded by Har Etzion and its affiliated Herzog College.

was not encouraged at the yeshiva. Though a penniless, orphaned survivor from an undistinguished family, he married, by dint of his learning, piety, and personality, into one of the most prominent rabbinic families of the time, that of Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer.

The day after Israel's declaration of independence, a Shabbat, he enlisted in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). During the War of Independence he fought in Latrun and the Galilee, and founded a journal in which he published perhaps the first programmatic essay ever written on being a Jewish soldier in a Jewish army.<sup>15</sup> While savoring Jewish national self-defense in the wake of the Holocaust, he also projected Jewish law and values as a defense against the dehumanization and brutalization of wartime: "Recognition of the value of the individual within the military is in great danger if the erroneous notion that each soldier is only a number, and therefore expendable, has taken root."<sup>16</sup> He called upon religious soldiers to band together in order to help shape the image and traditions of the fledgling army, to imprint Jewish values on the army's conduct, and to sanctify God's name by upright behavior.<sup>17</sup> In the Israeli assumption of Jewish responsibility for all realms of society, which he characterized as the move from narrowly defined *religion* to the fullness of *Torah*, he saw the restoration of the primal force of biblical religion. His essay closed with Joshua's call to the people, "Make yourselves holy, for tomorrow God will work wonders with you" (Josh. 3:5). The farsighted words of the twenty-four-year-old soldier broached themes that he would develop and bring to fruition years later, as a founder of the IDF's *hesder* program and as a Rosh Yeshiva.<sup>18</sup>

15. This essay, "*LeDarko shel HeHayal HaDati BeMilhemet HaKomemiyut*" (On the Path of the Religious Soldier During the War of Independence), originally appeared in the journal *Moreshet* (published by the synagogue of the 79th Battalion) in Tevet 5709 (1949) and was reprinted in Rav Amital's *HaMaalot MiMaamakim*, 96–107.

16. *HaMaalot MiMaamakim*, 106.

17. In the essay's penultimate paragraph, Rav Amital called for religious soldiers to engage in soul-searching: "We do not pretend that everything is all right with us, and far be it from us to ignore our own faults." As Reichner points out (*By Faith Alone*, p. 146), "This call for constant soul-searching and introspection became one of the lessons most closely identified" with Rav Amital.

18. Regarding Rav Amital's views on and contribution to the Israel Defense Forces, see Aharon Ahrend, "*Sherut BeTzahal BeMishnato shel HaRav Amital*," in Ziegler and Gafni, *LeOvdekha BeEmet*, 345–52.

This early essay, writes Rav Amital's biographer, became a manifesto:

It was the first programmatic-halakhic essay to examine the IDF as a Jewish army, and it made a huge impression on the yeshiva world and religious community at the time. Most instructive in this regard is a single reaction, that of [Rav Amital's wife's grandfather,] Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer, who wept when he read it. When his confidants asked him why he was crying, he pointed to the article and said, "Until now, we have had *Orah Hayim* for the halakhot of daily life and *The Laws of Kings* for the Messianic Era. Then our Yudel comes along and tells us that *The Laws of Kings* have now also become part of *Orah Hayim!*" These words were spoken by the Rosh Yeshiva of Etz Hayim, a leading sage of the *haredi* community at the time.<sup>19</sup>

It was at this point that the passionate Religious Zionist Yehuda Klein hebraized his name to Amital, based on Micah 5:6: "And the remnant of Jacob will be among many nations (*ammim*) like dew (*tal*) from God, like droplets on the grass, that does not wait for any man nor place its hope in mortals."

Through the 1950s, Rav Amital taught in the Rehovot yeshiva of his father-in-law, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Meltzer. In those years, he developed a rich, and in some ways rare, network of deep connections with many figures in both the ultra-Orthodox and Religious Zionist worlds.<sup>20</sup> In 1959, Rabbi Meltzer and Rav Amital secured from the army the first *hesder*, literally, "arrangement," whereby yeshiva students could alternate between their studies and military service. Ever sensitive to societal needs and anticipating future developments, he foresaw the need to strengthen the Religious Zionist community with a broad cadre of

19. Reichner, *By Faith Alone*, 146.

20. For instance, he developed warm ties with both Rabbi Elazar Menachem Mann Shach and Rabbi Ovadia Yosef; he mentored another eventual *Rishon LeTziyon*, Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron, as well as the future Rosh Yeshiva of Har HaMor, Rabbi Zvi Tau.



*talmidei hakhamim* and simultaneously to prevent alienation between yeshiva students and the state. The *hesder* yeshivas eventually grew into a network that decisively shaped Religious Zionist society and whose contribution to Israeli society and to the IDF was collectively acknowledged by the state's highest honor, the Israel Prize.

After the Six-Day War, Rav Amital was asked to become the head of a new *hesder* yeshiva being established in Gush Etzion, the Etzion Bloc, in the Judean hills near Bethlehem. The site of a number of *kibbutzim* (three religious and one secular) in the years preceding Israel's independence and of bitter fighting and massacres in 1948,<sup>21</sup> the area loomed large not only in biblical history but in Israeli memory as well. After 1967, the children of the victims of the 1948 massacre – now adults and demobilized soldiers – returned, and Yeshivat Har Etzion was established in abandoned Jordanian army barracks in Kfar Etzion.<sup>22</sup> It was through Rav Amital's four decades of leadership of Yeshivat Har Etzion, soon to become a flagship institution of Religious Zionism and a counterweight to the dominance of Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav, that he made his greatest mark.

#### **BUILDING AN INNOVATIVE INSTITUTION**

Early on, Rav Amital told his students at Yeshivat Har Etzion that while intensive and rigorous Torah study was the heart of their enterprise, the yeshiva would also remain attentive to the outside world and especially to the needs of the Jewish people. As was his wont, he conveyed this by means of a story:

When the first group of students came to the yeshiva, they asked me, "What's special about this yeshiva?" I told them the hasidic story about the Baal HaTanya, who was sitting and studying in the inner room of the house. His grandson, the *Tzemaḥ Tzedek*, sat in the middle room. In the outer room there was a baby in a cradle.

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21. These included the massacre of the *Lamed Heh*, thirty-five soldiers on their way to reinforce the defenders of Gush Etzion, and culminated in the massacre of the vastly outnumbered residents and defenders of Gush Etzion after their surrender on the day before Israel's declaration of statehood.

22. The yeshiva moved in 1970 to a nearby site and founded the town of Alon Shevut.

The baby suddenly awoke from his sleep and began to cry. The *Tzemaḥ Tzedek* was so immersed in his study that he did not hear the baby crying, but the Baal HaTanya, whose room was further away, did hear. He stopped learning and emerged from the room to calm the baby. On his way back, he passed the room where the *Tzemaḥ Tzedek* sat and told him, “When a person studies Torah and does not hear a cry for help, something is deficient in his learning.”<sup>23</sup>

In an interview years later, he elaborated:

Every generation has its own cry, sometimes open, sometimes hidden; sometimes the baby himself doesn't know that he's crying, and hence we have to try to be attentive to the hidden cries as well.<sup>24</sup>

Related to this, as well as to his appreciation of the new historical reality presented by the State of Israel, was his articulation of *hesder* as an ideal. Even within the Religious Zionist world, many yeshivas regarded military service with ambivalence and preferred that their students not serve at all. Rav Amital declared that the IDF is not the Czarist army, but rather something that had not been seen since the time of R. Akiva: a Jewish army. He further cited the talmudic passage: “For a yeshiva, there is none better than an old man (*zakein*); for war, there is none better than a young man (*baḥur*).”<sup>25</sup> If so, the term “*yeshiva baḥur*” would seem to be an oxymoron; one should speak only of a *zekan yeshiva* (elder of the yeshiva) or *baḥur milḥama* (young man of war). As opposed to those who viewed *hesder* as second best, an option for those who aren't studious, Rav Amital stated that, in light of the teaching of the Gemara, only *hesder* students are worthy of the title *yeshiva baḥur*.<sup>26</sup>

23. “*Lishmo'a Kol Bikhyo shel Tinok*,” *Alon Shevut Bogrim* 1 (5754): 83.

24. This interview was conducted for a film marking Rav Amital's eightieth birthday. Portions of the interview can be viewed online: “A Tribute to Rav Yehuda Amital,” [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPxq\\_p8L-MM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPxq_p8L-MM) (the above quote is at 12:40).

25. *Hagiga* 14a.

26. Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun, “*Ma Zeh Baḥur Yeshiva?*” in Ziegler and Gafni, *LeOvdekha BeEmet*, 33–37.

This declaration had deeper roots in Rav Amital's philosophy. Torah, he insisted, is not meant to cut one off from life and desensitize a person to his historical and social surroundings, but rather to guide him in engaging his milieu and uplifting it. It can be said that not only did he advocate "*hesder lekhatehilla*" – the union of army and yeshiva study not as a concession, but as the preferable option from the start – he also advocated "life *lekhatehilla*," an engagement of the world by the student of Torah. This approach may seem obvious to many today, but at the time it was bold and surprising. The yeshivas viewed themselves as "Noah's ark." Parents, especially in the Religious Zionist world, feared sending their sons to yeshiva, lest they remove themselves from life, ignore the surrounding world, and remain in yeshiva forever. Rav Amital believed that the Torah is a Torah of life, and that it is meant to be lived and not to remove one from the world.<sup>27</sup> This relates to his belief in naturalness, which will be explored later, as well as to his belief – articulated as early as the 1950s – that especially after the *Shoah*, we should strive to follow a *lekhatehilla* path in all our activities.<sup>28</sup>

While some yeshivas were headed by figures who served mainly as spiritual guides, administrators, and fundraisers, Rav Amital viewed the foremost task of a Rosh Yeshiva as delivering in-depth lectures on Talmud and halakha, and especially the weekly *shiur kelali* to the entire student body. His talmudic methodology reflected his capacious personality, synthesizing a foundation of Lithuanian-style analysis with traditional *lomdus*, grounded in wide-ranging *bekiyut* (erudition), and mixing conceptual analysis with more harmonistic interpretation and very close reading of texts, as well as a classic Hungarian approach to grasping the *sugya* (subject under study) as a whole. His conceptualization

27. Rabbi Uziel Friedlich, "*Hayim Lekhatehila*," in Ziegler and Gafni, *LeOvdekha BeEmet*, 65–68; see also Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, "*Ahi, Ahi*," in *LeOvdekha BeEmet*, 247–49.

28. The context of this declaration is noteworthy. When some parents complained that his father-in-law's yeshiva in Rehovot accepted too many students of Sephardic background, Rav Amital replied that the equal treatment and admission of Sephardic students (uncommon in those days) was not a concession but *lekhatehilla*, that in Israel after the *Shoah* everything should be done *lekhatehilla*, and that great things would come of the yeshiva's Sephardic students. Many indeed did go on to become distinguished figures in Israeli public life; see the tribute by Rav Amital's student Prof. Moshe Bar-Asher, the president of the Academy of the Hebrew Language (Ziegler and Gafni, *LeOvdekha BeEmet*, esp. 286–87).

was thus guided by fidelity to the text and to straightforward thinking, never becoming overly abstract. His scholarship was enriched by great erudition, both in the responsa literature and in the writings of latter-day halakhic decisors and commentators – the former reflecting his aforementioned belief in the necessity of linking Torah to life, and the latter reflecting his deep sense of tradition. Especially noteworthy was his willingness, inherited from Rav Kook, to incorporate theological ideas into talmudic and halakhic discussions.

As a *posek*, he was called upon to answer not only conventional questions, but to deal with many issues arising for the first time in military, state, and societal contexts. His approach to *pesak* was characteristically non-doctrinaire, but rather attentive to the factual and moral specifics of each situation, within a framework of overall commitment to halakha, to the Jewish people, and to basic ethical and spiritual principles.<sup>29</sup>

Rav Amital made clear to his students that he was there to challenge and be challenged, that he expected his students to forge their own religious paths, and that he had no intention of creating “little Amitals.”<sup>30</sup> He invited discussion, dissent, and independent thought, decrying the frequently authoritarian spirituality of the yeshiva world and declaring to his students that he was “not a hasidic rebbe” who would make their decisions for them. He was, though, richly charismatic, a warm and fatherly presence to his students, and possessed of exuberant humor and *joie de vivre*.

Rav Amital imparted lessons not just through his teachings but, even more powerfully, through his actions. In 1968, in a mix of humility and self-confidence practically unheard of in yeshiva circles (and most elsewhere too), he invited Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, an outstanding talmudist at New York’s Yeshiva University (and holder of a doctorate in English

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29. For a brief survey of Rav Amital as talmudist and halakhist, see the articles in *LeOvdekha BeEmet* by Rabbis Mosheh Lichtenstein, Shmuel David, Yosef Zvi Rimon, Shmuel Reiner, Yitzhak Brand, and Yoel Bin-Nun. A full study of Rav Amital’s *pesak*, drawing on the many *teshuvot* and writings contained in the Torah journals of Yeshivat Har Etzion over the decades, is a worthy desideratum, as is an oral history of the many military commanders and public officials with whom he came into contact over the years.

30. For more on the quest for authenticity, see the next section of this essay.

literature), nine years his junior and different from him in most every way, to head the yeshiva in his place, offering to serve beneath the newcomer as *mashgi'ah*, spiritual tutor. Rabbi Lichtenstein accepted in 1971 – on the condition that Rav Amital continue alongside him as co-head of the yeshiva.

The harmonious and deeply respectful collaboration of such wildly different figures – an astonishing partnership that spanned nearly four decades – was perhaps the most powerful lesson their yeshiva ever imparted. The two shared not only ardent religious and moral commitments, but the conviction, rare in the yeshiva world, that it was their job not only to transmit the tradition, but to teach their students to think for themselves. By bringing in a Rosh Yeshiva so different from himself, Rav Amital ensured that his students would learn to see the merits of differing positions, and to think broadly and with complexity. This is also the reason he declared that although the writings of Chabad, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, and Rav Kook would be taught in his yeshiva, they would not be taught by “hasidim” of these approaches, since the latter tended to believe that their way is the exclusive truth and all other approaches are less legitimate.

Upon nearing eighty, Rav Amital proved his unconventionality once again, announcing his intention to step aside and letting a search committee appoint his successor before his retirement. In the end, two rabbis were needed to replace him, and they served alongside him until his full retirement in 2008. In a yeshiva world regularly wracked by bitter succession struggles, often waged among sons and sons-in-law, this was truly a final instance of “his sober and realistic vision,”<sup>31</sup> as well as one last, resounding lesson for his students in the moral power of humility.

#### **HUMANITY, NATURALNESS, AND MORALITY**

Two fundamental principles in Rav Amital’s approach are humanity (*enoshiyut*), and the striving for truth and authenticity. In a sense, these are two sides of the same coin. In elaborating the principles of his religious-educational outlook in his book *Jewish Values in a Changing World*, Rav Amital points to four dimensions of what he means by *enoshiyut*:<sup>32</sup>

31. Reichner, *By Faith Alone*, 316.

32. The original Hebrew title of this work translates as *And the Earth He Has Given to Humanity*, which points to the centrality of *enoshiyut* in Rav Amital’s religious, educational, and moral worldview.

- (a) “The worship of God, in whatever form, cannot wipe out simple human feeling.”<sup>33</sup> As an example, he cites the obligation of a *kohen* to defile himself and mourn for close relatives, despite his calling to serve in the Temple.<sup>34</sup> Even Aaron the High Priest, who was not permitted to desist from his service, received Moses’ approval when he asserted that he still mourned his sons in his heart (Lev. 10:16–20).
- (b) *Enoshiyut* further entails the recognition of fundamental human traits – human weakness and frailty prominently among them. This applies even to great individuals and extends to our revered canonical figures, as we find them depicted both by the Tanakh and by the sages:

There has been a tendency in recent years to idealize great rabbis, to the point of total disregard of their human feelings and weaknesses. The Torah presents the opposite approach: Every person has a human side, which must not be denied. Even the prophets had doubts and difficulties. The Torah recognizes that man lives in this world, and has no expectation that he behave as if he were living in an ideal and unreal universe.<sup>35</sup>

- (c) A further dimension is accepting the inevitability of prosaic motivations in our ethical and religious lives. In turn, this means that we cannot expect widespread adoption of asceticism and detached equanimity.<sup>36</sup>

33. *Jewish Values*, 193.

34. See *Zevahim* 100a.

35. *Jewish Values*, 195.

36. This realism extended to many realms, including prayer. Despite his high estimation of the power of prayer, he also taught that there is value even to rote prayer, and that *kavana* (intention) is elusive. He liked to recount that when the students of the Baal Shem Tov asked him how they could know whether a certain person was a true *tzaddik* or a charlatan, the Besht answered, “Ask him whether he has a *segula* against foreign thoughts intruding on prayer. If he says yes, you can be sure he is a charlatan.” Nevertheless, even though Rav Amital opposed *segulot*, shortcuts, and magical solutions, he advocated the hasidic technique of “raising” foreign thoughts: “You must translate the problem which occupies your thoughts into the language of

- (d) A final expression is the assertion in the *piyut* recited on Yom Kippur, *Asher Eimatekha*, that God longs precisely for the prayers not of angels, but of human beings, with all their weaknesses and limitations. In this vein, Rav Amital frequently cited the Kotzker Rebbe's comment on the verse, "And you shall be to Me holy people" (Ex. 22:30) – God, as it were, is saying, "Angels I have in sufficient quantity; I seek *human beings* who will be *holy people*."

This set of ideas is connected to another in that same volume – the importance of "naturalness" in the life of mitzvot. Rav Amital's favorite song was "and purify our hearts to serve You in truth." In explaining this prayer, he writes:

A person's performance of mitzvot should correspond to his internal state of loving God, fearing Him, and seeking His closeness. There should be no disproportion between the quantity of his actions and his internal values.<sup>37</sup>

The acceptance of human frailty does not dictate sufficing with low levels of spiritual achievement; rather, it means that one should not deceive oneself about one's level and should make sure that actions (especially stringencies, *humrot*) are consonant with inner levels of spirituality.<sup>38</sup> Inauthentic forms of *hitzoniyut* (externality), he said, are akin to writing checks without sufficient funds to cover them.

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prayer. Whether you are thinking about business or family or anything else, God is certainly able to help you in solving the problem. Don't banish this 'foreign thought' from your mind; on the contrary – keep it with you, and turn that very thought into a prayer" (*Jewish Values*, 127).

37. *Ibid.*, 88.

38. "I was once asked by one of my students why I do not observe a particular stringency, which the *Mishna Berura* recommends that a God-fearing person should practice. I replied, 'When you read a section in the *Mishna Berura* that is directed at a "God-fearing person," you are convinced that he is referring to you. I have no such presumptions.' It should also be noted that the *Mishna Berura* says that it befits one who fears Heaven to practice stringency, but he does not say that such stringency leads a person to fear of Heaven!" (*Ibid.*, 94).

A further consequence of naturalness is the avoidance of “religious anxiety.” On the one hand, the human ideal according to Judaism is not, as in some Eastern teachings, the attainment of tranquility, but rather perpetual aspiration, activity, and growth. Yet, on the other hand, excessive tension and anxiety in the worship of God is abnormal and counterproductive, often leading to paralysis.<sup>39</sup> Fear of God should be natural, like fear of one’s parents.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, prayer should be natural, a “conversation” with God.<sup>41</sup> What is natural is not necessarily holy, but what is holy should be natural.

Thus, throughout Rav Amital’s teachings one finds fundamentally positive outlooks on the world and on people as they are. He not only sees value in the naturalness emerging from the human tapestry, but sees it as a source, a quarry, for values and norms in and of themselves.

It is natural, then, that Rav Amital’s views on *enoshiyut* affirm natural morality. This stance is of a piece with a central theme in the teachings of Rav Kook. A well-known passage in Rav Kook’s *Orot HaKodesh* states:

Piety must not displace man’s natural morality, for such piety is impure. The sign of pure piety is when natural morality, implanted in man’s naturally just nature, ascends at piety’s direction to greater heights than it would otherwise have attained.<sup>42</sup>

Rav Kook wrote this around 1910 – and indeed the biblical verse cited perhaps most often in his writings in that time is “God has made man upright, but they sought many reckonings” (Eccl. 7:29). In those years Rav Kook was striving to make sense of the flood of thoughts and feelings – regularly contradictory – sweeping over his generation and himself. In this effort, the idea of the fundamental goodness of God’s creation and humanity’s God-given nature emerged for him both as a means of making sense of the fundamental rightness of the moral

39. Ibid., 107–13.

40. Ibid., 14–15.

41. This follows from the rabbinic interpretation of Gen. 24:63, according to which *lasuah basade* refers to prayer, from the root *s-y-ḥ*, meaning “to converse” (Berakhot 26b).

42. *Orot HaKodesh* 3:11, p. 27; *Shemona Kevatzim* 1:75.



intuitions of his time and as an assertion of faith that, indeed, “the earth is full of His glory” (Is. 6:3), or, in the classic words of the Zohar, “There is no space that is empty of Him.”<sup>43</sup> This recognition, in turn, yields a fundamentally positive outlook toward the natural world, the body, and human sentiments, which, in Maimonidean philosophy as understood by Rav Kook, are the bridge between the physical body and the ethereal mind.<sup>44</sup> As a result, the role of natural morality, of fundamental human moral intuitions, as a vital foundation for divine ethics is rooted in the very structure, physical and metaphysical, of the world.

A related idea with roots in the teachings of Rav Kook and the *Dor Revi'i*, and with antecedents going back to the Maharal,<sup>45</sup> is the need to fulfill ethical obligations out of desire and not merely due to a command. This speaks not only to motivation, but also to the scope of ethical demands. Many moral duties are not mentioned explicitly in the Torah but are nevertheless obligatory. Nahmanides famously wrote that since the Torah could not possibly spell out every contingency, it established general directives such as “You shall be holy” and “You shall do the right and the good.”<sup>46</sup> Rav Kook, however, offers a different reason: Many moral duties are not included in formal halakha because the individual and the nation should perform them out of inner desire and as an expression of *hesed*.<sup>47</sup> The animating ideal of moral self-cultivation is thus to keep Torah as the Patriarchs kept it – out of inner cognition, not command. Ethics is a natural capacity of the soul and not merely a derivative of halakha.<sup>48</sup>

43. *Tikkunei Zohar* 57, p. 91b.

44. For a lengthier discussion of the roots of Rav Kook’s mature thought on these matters, see Yehudah Mirsky, *An Intellectual and Spiritual Biography of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhaq Ha-Cohen Kook from 1865 to 1904* (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2007), esp. chs. 3–4.

45. *Gur Arye* to Ex. 20:21, cited in *Jewish Values*, 47–48.

46. Nahmanides to Lev. 19:2.

47. See *Iggerot HaRe’aya*, vol. 1, no. 89, 92–101.

48. See Rav Amital’s seminal essay, “The Ethical Foundations of Rav Kook’s Nationalist Views,” trans. Bernard Caspar and Reuven Ziegler, *Alei Etzion* 2 (5755): esp. 22–27; *Jewish Values*, 95–106. See also Moshe Maya, *A World Built, Destroyed and Rebuilt: Rabbi Yehudah Amital’s Confrontation with the Memory of the Holocaust*, trans. Kaeren

Thus, *enoshiyut*, as conceptualized and put into practice by Rav Amital, cuts deeper and reaches farther than good counsel and pedagogy. It is a theological assertion about God's goodness, reflected in the goodness of creation, and, above all, in human beings. The affirmation of *enoshiyut* is, in other words, an affirmation of faith.

Moreover, one can perhaps read this affirmation as the closest one can come to a post-Holocaust theology – not as a matter of post-Holocaust theodicy (an enterprise Rav Amital rejected as an insult to the memory of the victims), but rather as a way of asserting the faith that remains after the Holocaust. In response to the *Shoah*, we must heighten our sense of natural morality, a morality that reflects faith. To go on believing in God is to believe in the fundamental goodness of creation, irrational or a-rational as that may be – which is to say, to believe in *enoshiyut*.

Yet Rav Amital's belief in humanity is not that of secular humanism, some resemblances and points of contact notwithstanding. Secular humanism attempts to enshrine human dignity without recourse to God. This attempt may be said to have run entirely and desperately aground in the Holocaust. Once again, Rav Amital resolutely opposed any attempt to "explain" the Holocaust by way of one theological formula or other, be it that of Satmar or of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook.<sup>49</sup> To the contrary,

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Fish (Jersey City, 2004), 121–29, and the valuable discussion in Alan Brill, "Worlds Destroyed, Worlds Rebuilt: The Religious Thought of Rabbi Yehudah Amital," *The Edah Journal* 5, no. 2 (2006): esp. 4–9.

49. The proximity of two overwhelming events – the Holocaust, in which six million Jews were systematically murdered, and the birth of the State of Israel, in which Jewish sovereignty was restored in the Land of Israel following nearly two thousand years of exile – almost begged one to connect them. At the extremes, some saw the connection in terms of strict causality. For example, the Satmar Rebbe believed that the Holocaust was a divine punishment for the sin of attempting to establish Jewish sovereignty before the coming of the Messiah, and the success of the Zionists in establishing the State of Israel was to be attributed to the *sitra a'hara*, the metaphysical forces of evil; see Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, *VaYoel Moshe*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1961), 122–25. At the opposite end, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook believed that the Holocaust was divine "surgery" necessary to sever the Jews' connection to the Diaspora and bring them to the Land of Israel as part of an inexorable process of national revival and messianic redemption; see Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, *Si'hot HaRav Zvi Yehuda al HaMo'adim*, ed. Rabbi Shlomo Aviner (Jerusalem, 2006), 2:230–49; in English, see *Torat Eretz Yisrael: The Teachings of HaRav Tzvi Yehuda HaCohen Kook*, ed. Rabbi

the Holocaust placed an eternal question mark over any claims that one could read God's mind. Yet this epistemological humility, this religious submission before the unknowable, accompanied by acceptance of God's ethical charge and spiritual demands on us, is precisely that which can give us the strength and guidance to go on living after the Holocaust. By contrast, humanism, lacking such a foundation, cannot endure, its good intentions notwithstanding.

Thus, Rav Amital's ethics were not a function of the procrustean bed of one abstract theory or other; they emerged from his fundamental humanity, intuition, and existential stance. While avoiding the extreme dialectical tendencies of Rav Kook or Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, he embraced complexity as a reflection of reality. Though he often expressed his ideas with profound conviction and primal, prophetic force, he sought to engage a wide range of experiences and people, in all their complexity, exaltations, and tragedies. His profound *enoshiyut* was intertwined with his search for authenticity, leading him to embrace people who strove for truth – his students above all.

#### COMMUNITY AND COMMITMENT

Rav Amital's striving for truth was far from solipsistic, but rather anchored in deep interpersonal commitment, which stood at the base of his educational argument with the neo-hasidic trends of the 1990s and early twenty-first century. Rav Amital was ahead of his time in introducing these currents – *devekut* (cleaving to God), joyous worship, fraternity – into Religious Zionist education, and ahead of his time in grasping their excesses.<sup>50</sup>

It is worth noting that his own interpretation of hasidic teachings – about *devekut*, the raising of sparks, and *avoda begashmiyut* (worship through corporeality) – was removed from mysticism, magic, and

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David Samson (Jerusalem, 1991), 259–74. For penetrating discussions of both, as well as other thinkers in these veins, see Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Chicago, 1996), and the numerous studies of Orthodox responses to the Holocaust by Prof. Gershon Greenberg.

50. Regarding his dispute with neo-Hasidism, see his *Between Religious Experience and Religious Commitment: Five Addresses on Youth in Crisis*, ed. Reuven Ziegler (Alon Shevut, 5763). These essays can be found on the website referenced above in n. 1.

personality cult, and rather conveyed as events occurring within dialogic frameworks between people, and between them and God. He once remarked to a student that he diminished his study of Kabbala when he realized that it often espoused a mechanical approach to the influence of man's actions on the upper realms.<sup>51</sup>

Although he acknowledged that neo-Hasidism expressed a legitimate critique of the dryness of much contemporary religiosity and that it was driven by a desire for authenticity, he also felt that it manifested several problems: too much emotion and too little reason, impatience in seeking results, and turning to wonder-working. Most seriously, he felt that it often devolved into a form of spiritual thrill-seeking that ignored the needs of society and lacked a firm commitment to mitzvot.<sup>52</sup> Rav Amital's own understanding of Polish Hasidism was that it advocated individualism only *after* immersion in community and that it did not forfeit intellect in the quest for experience. Rav Amital wanted to cultivate the individual, but only within the context of commitment to the community and with reason ascendant.<sup>53</sup>

Rav Amital's grounding in reality made him acutely sensitive to all forms of self-deception, including escapist mysticism. Religious experience is only occasional and can often be artificial and external. He objected to forms of religiosity that remove one from reality, constricting life and closing one to the world and to broader society. Although halakha untethered from reality can become "autistic" and lead to widespread alienation among religious youth,<sup>54</sup> the solution is not to be found

51. Rabbi Elyakim Krumbein, "HaHitraḥashut HaRuḥanit SheBiVrakhot," *Alon Shevut* 160 (5762): 132n5.

52. His educational disagreement with Religious Zionist neo-Hasidism is in a sense rooted in differing inheritances – that of Polish Hasidism à la Przysucha-Kotzk-Izbica-Gur, for whom the encounter between the lone individual and God is at the center; and that of Maimonides and Rabbi Moshe Ḥayim Luzzato (Ramḥal), as mediated by Rav Avraham Yitzhak Kook, for whom the search for *devekut* must always entail deep communal and societal responsibility, without which *devekut* simply cannot take place.

53. See Brill, "Worlds Destroyed," 11–13. Two additional influences on contemporary neo-Hasidism are Breslov and New Age, but a discussion of their interplay with other influences lies beyond the scope of this article.

54. "Lo HaKol Halakha," *Alon Shevut Bogrim* 13 (5759): esp. 97–98.

in self-absorbed enthusiasm that is, to his mind, equally disconnected from reality.

In this context and in others, Rav Amital frequently quoted a lost midrash cited in the introduction to the *Ein Yaakov*, according to which the Torah's most encompassing principle, the cornerstone of Judaism, is neither *Shema Yisrael* nor "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," but rather, "You shall bring one lamb in the morning and one lamb in the evening" (Num. 28:4). The daily sacrifice, the routine of commandments, normal life: these – rather than peak experiences – are the foundations of religious existence.

This emphasis on daily sacrifice introduces one of his best-known aphorisms: *ein patentim* – there are no shortcuts, no tricks, and no magic solutions in religious existence, in education, or in any other area of life. There is just hard work and commitment to slow, gradual improvement. He decried what he called *akhshavism*, the desire to attain everything immediately: "Peace Now," "Mashiah Now," and so on. Nothing is that simple: change is a process, issues are multifaceted, and reality can be recalcitrant. He had nothing but disdain for quick, easy, black-and-white solutions to complex problems.

Yet, although he emphasized the importance of routine and of incremental change, he nevertheless sought and found the poetry within the prose, the beauty and freshness that suffuse Torah study and observance of mitzvot.

### **ISRAEL, THE SHOAH, AND UNDERSTANDING HISTORY**

Rav Amital's attitude to the State of Israel rests on two foundations of his thought. The first is the ethical: Jewish nationalism has a universalistic moral orientation. Maimonides writes that Abraham's goal was "to found a nation that would know God and serve Him."<sup>55</sup> This goal derives from Abraham's trait of *hesed*, from the desire to do good to all, for this nation would convey to mankind "the way of God, to do righteousness and justice" (Gen. 18:19). However, explains Rav Kook, in order to redeem humanity from its suffering, it is necessary for this nation to possess a state and all the accoutrements of government and

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55. *Guide of the Perplexed* 111:51.

culture. The Jewish polity will thereby demonstrate that not only pious individuals, but whole nations as well, can live by the light of the divine idea. Rav Kook feared that were the Zionist idea to be divorced from a universal moral purpose, it would lead to moral breakdown and to reliance solely on strength. Even on those occasions (later in life) when his realism prevented him from making such a high-flown assessment of the State of Israel, Rav Amital viewed the state as a vehicle for sanctifying God's name in the world; hence his sensitivity to anything involving the state that smacked of *hillul Hashem*, desecration of God's name.

A second foundation of Rav Amital's philosophy is the need for perspective and proportion, especially with regard to the realms of values and history.<sup>56</sup> Regarding historical perspective, he marveled at what he had witnessed:

My beard has not turned white with age, and yet during the course of my life I have seen, as our sages have said, "a world built, destroyed, and rebuilt."<sup>57</sup> I have seen Jews being led to Auschwitz; I have seen Jews dance at the establishment of the State of Israel; I have seen the great victories of the Six-Day War; I have traveled with soldiers to the Suez Canal. I have lived through an epoch, in the shortest span of time. It is hard to believe that in such a short lifetime one could witness so many changes.<sup>58</sup>

This perspective offers insight into the famous words of the prophet:

"Old men and old women shall yet again dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand because of his old age; and the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets" (Zech. 8:4–5). This describes simple, normal life. Only someone with a deep historical awareness can

56. We will discuss below the question of proportion and perspective regarding values in the context of his views on *Eretz Yisrael*.

57. *Midrash Lekah Tov* to Gen. 6:9 uses this phrase in connection with Noah.

58. "Forty Years Later: A Personal Recollection," appendix to *A World Built*, 139–40. (This talk was given in 1985.)

understand the significance of such a scene. Miracles are one-time events. But Jews living a normal life in *Eretz Yisrael* after seventy years [of the Babylonian exile] during which the country was empty and desolate – someone looking with historical perspective can only be astonished. Of him the prophet says, “If it will be wondrous in the eyes of the remnant of this nation in those days, it will also be wondrous in My eyes, says the Lord of hosts” (v. 6).... After two thousand years, children play in the streets of Israel and old people sit in the squares of Jerusalem! Can this be a natural phenomenon?<sup>59</sup>

As one who was a “remnant of this nation,” Rav Amital tried to convey to his students the enormity and wonder of seeing old people and children living a normal life in the streets of Jerusalem. While a historical perspective on the sweep of Jewish history highlighted the enormity of apparently small things, it also put seemingly large obstacles and problems into proper proportion, calming his students’ fears and giving them hope.

Rav Amital’s senses of ethics and of perspective, combined with a Kookian reading of the workings of divine providence within history, led to sensitivity to the charge of the hour:

Today, the State of Israel stands at the focal point of world history. It is clear that we are living in a period of great change and, as such, it demands of us great deeds. It necessitates sacrifice; it hungers for creativity; it requires accomplishment; it compels us to take action.

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59. “This Day God Has Made – Let Us Rejoice and Be Glad in It” (Yom HaAtzma’ut 1994), <http://etzion.org.il/en/topics/yom-haatzmaut>; reprinted in *The Koren Mahzor for Yom HaAtzma’ut and Yom Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem, 2015), 111–20. It is worth noting that one of Rav Amital’s educational innovations was his insistence that Tanakh be studied in the beit midrash, as an integral part of the yeshiva’s course of study. This was due to a number of factors, not least among them the fact that he saw a biblical dimension to his own times. In his writing and speaking, he regularly expressed himself in simple biblical cadences, to stunning effect.

From day to day, from year to year, changes take place. To live in such a period, to really and truly live it; to see and understand the dynamics and intensity of Jewish history as it unfolds before us; to gaze upon the great events – upon each one, in and of itself, and upon all of them combined – while we maintain the correct perspective, knowing that it is just a part of the whole; to sense the process of redemption as it unfolds before our very eyes; to know our responsibility in this world, at this time and in this place; to perceive what it is that God demands of us, here and now – all this creates a grave responsibility which one can neither escape nor ignore.<sup>60</sup>

The attempt to discern and interpret God's hand in history has deep roots in the thought of Rav Avraham Yitzhak Kook.<sup>61</sup> It exerted a strong impact on Rav Amital, as it did on many other Religious Zionist thinkers:

A Jew who believes that events touching on the life of *Am Yisrael* are guided by divine providence will naturally inquire as to their meaning and significance. The Torah and the prophets command us unceasingly to pay attention. It is also a natural intellectual inquiry for one based in faith. If events pass one by without one attempting to penetrate the depth of their true meaning, the sages consider such a person dead. "A wicked person is considered dead even during his lifetime, since he sees the sun rise but does not recite the blessing 'who creates the lights'; he sees it setting, but does not recite the blessing 'who brings evenings'" (*Tanḥuma, VeZot HaBerakha* 12). Clearly, we do not have the tools to know the secrets of God and to know the considerations,

60. "Forty Years Later," 140.

61. See, for example, *Iggerot HaRe'aya*, vol. 2, no. 737, p. 334: "We are a nation that knows the letters in the Book of God... like the book of Creation and the history of the world and of mankind; we also know how to read – through select individuals and their light that lives among us – that blurred script of the causes of these events... In our heart of hearts there is not the slightest doubt concerning the wondrous precision of the Supreme Wisdom in the processes of the evolution of history."



motives, and intentions of divine providence, “for My thoughts are not your thoughts” (Is. 55:8). However, this does not exempt us from our obligation to observe and to delve. It is Torah, and we must study it.<sup>62</sup>

For Rav Kook, the hand of God revealed within history, and especially within the Zionist enterprise, pointed in the direction of “the revealed end.” Influenced by Rav Kook and by his own experience of ascending from the pit of the *Shoah* to the birth of an independent Jewish state, Rav Amital also saw current events in light of redemption.

The Six-Day War of 1967 elicited in Israelis, and especially in Religious Zionists, not only euphoria, but also a sense of the biblical magnitude of the victory and a feeling of messianic imminence. But this was followed by the tragedy of the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Eight students of Yeshivat Har Etzion fell in battle, and Rav Amital was torn between personal anguish and the need to strengthen and give hope to his students, as well as to understand the meaning of this seeming reversal in the process of redemption. His grief and his commitment to his students found expression in action, as he took a hiatus from his duties as Rosh Yeshiva and spent months visiting military bases, field hospitals, and outposts.<sup>63</sup>

His theological response to the war appeared in a slim volume, *HaMaalot MiMaamakim* (The Ascents from the Depths), which became a chief theological text of the settler movement due to its argument that Israel’s triumphs and travails are both part of the process of redemption. His redemptive reading of events was darkened, but unshaken. The fact that the war had almost resulted in a US-Soviet nuclear confrontation was further proof that Israel was at the center of God’s inscrutable plan for world history. At the same time, he noted, the war called for new

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62. “*LeMashma’utah shel Milhemet Yom HaKippurim*,” in Rav Amital, *HaMaalot MiMaamakim*, 11.

63. Regarding Rav Amital’s actions and reactions in this period, see Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, “*Mishan UMivtah LaShakulim*,” in Ziegler and Gafni, *LeOvdekha BeEmet*, 331–36, and “*Azut VeAnava*,” *Daf Keshet* 1316 (*Parashat Devarim* 5772): 2–4, <http://etzion.org.il/he/download/file/fid/7127>.

introspection, and the Holocaust was, as ever, a standing caution against too confident a reading of God's workings in history.

"It is clear that we are in the process of redemption through the path of suffering," he wrote, adding that "this obligates us in the mitzva of crying out, of introspection, of contemplating our actions, so that we know that God awaits our repentance."<sup>64</sup> Rather than point a finger outward, he said, the soul-searching must begin within the yeshivas themselves, and especially as regards ethics: "The necessary conclusion is to search for identity with no preconceptions. Not 'who is a Jew?' but 'what is a Jew?'... to ask questions bravely, with the bravery of the battlefield."<sup>65</sup>

The war quickened the messianic energies of the settler movement, which crystallized into *Gush Emunim* (the Bloc of the Faithful), many of whose leaders and activists had been Rav Amital's early students at Har Etzion. *HaMaalot MiMaamakim*, by framing the disastrous Yom Kippur War in eschatological terms, seemed to offer a way forward from the despair of the war, onto the hilltops of Judea and Samaria.

And yet, sympathetic though he was to the settlement movement and to *Gush Emunim*, Rav Amital never actually joined the latter, arguing that while his Zionism was "redemptive," it was not meant to be "messianic." The distinction was subtle at first, but became clearer over time. What was certainly clear was his refusal to accept the authority of *Gush Emunim*'s unchallenged leader, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook (who had succeeded his father as head of Merkaz HaRav), because of what Rav Amital perceived as Rabbi Zvi Yehuda's prioritizing of the Land of Israel above almost every other religious value, draining his father's teachings of their universalistic elements, and his functioning as a spiritual and halakhic authority when it came to politics – a realm, in Rav Amital's view, where things are meant to be decided not by charisma or halakhic writ, but through deliberation and debate.

One of the strongest points of disagreement between Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook and Rav Amital concerned the understanding of history. While both of them discerned a redemptive process at work in the founding of the State of Israel and in the Six-Day War, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda also

64. "LeMashma'utah shel Milhemet Yom HaKippurim," 13.

65. "Al Tira Yisrael Ki Itekha Ani," in *HaMaalot MiMaamakim*, 39.

saw the Holocaust as part of God's plan, at last excising Israel from exile and bringing about the creation of the state. Rav Amital refused to view those horrors the same way.

The Holocaust certainly deepened Rav Amital's sense of awe at the times through which he was living. While the *Shoah* did not shake his faith in God, it eventually came to place an unanswerable question mark on any attempt to read His mind. Rav Amital steadfastly refused to interpret the *Shoah* as part of any divine plan, let alone as justification for anything, even for the Jewish state. But he also did not attribute the Holocaust to *hester panim*, the "hiding of [God's] face."

I clearly experienced the hand of God during the Holocaust – only I did not understand its meaning. It was so clear – so abnormal, so unnatural, so illogical. I was not in Auschwitz, but I saw Jews being taken there. I saw regiments of Germans who were not going to the Russian front, but rather guarding the trainloads of Jews headed to the death camps. It went against all military logic and interests. Can one possibly begin to understand such madness? I saw the hand of God in everything. It was not natural; it was not human. I saw the hand of God, but I did not understand its significance.<sup>66</sup>

Moshe Maya, author of an important monograph on Rav Amital's perspective on the Holocaust, writes that Rav Amital came to realize that our inability to understand the meaning of such an overwhelming event undermines our ability to understand God's communication through history in general.<sup>67</sup> Even when we perceive God's hand acting in history, this does not mean that we can understand His plan. Therefore, beginning in the 1980s, Rav Amital began to retreat from a redemptive interpretation of Zionist history. Rav Avraham Yitzhak Kook and others before him had spoken of "the beginning of the flowering of our redemption," he said, but even R. Akiva – the greatest of *Tanna'im*, and someone with a profound understanding of the intricacies of Jewish

66. "Forty Years Later," 138–39.

67. Maya, *A World Built*, 36–45.

history (as indicated by the famous story in Makkot 24a–b) – had been mistaken when he declared Bar Kokhba to be the messiah.<sup>68</sup> Rav Kook never had to grapple with the *Shoah*.

But even as Rav Amital diminished his talk of the redemptive dimension of the State of Israel, he highlighted the sheer value of Jewish sovereignty, of Jews ruling themselves and having a homeland. He frequently cited Maimonides' introduction to the laws of Hanukka, which emphasizes that the events of that festival are worthy of celebration because "Jewish sovereignty was restored for over two hundred years."<sup>69</sup> Sovereignty itself was significant even though many members of the Hasmonean dynasty were unworthy – and all the more so is self-determination valuable when it serves as a basis for morality practiced at a national scale.<sup>70</sup>

While Moshe Maya understands Rav Amital's retreat from a redemptive understanding of history as a delayed reaction to the *Shoah*, perhaps precipitated by the tragedy of the Yom Kippur War, Rabbi Elyakim Krumbein suggests a different factor. It is not so much that Rav Amital changed his position on redemptive history; rather, the moral valence of this position changed over time such that he could no longer identify with it. Immediately after the *Shoah*, a redemptive reading of the birth of Israel gave the Jewish people hope that they had not been abandoned by God. The return of Jewish sovereignty after two thousand years was a massive sanctification of God's name after the inconceivable desecration of His name brought about by the *Shoah*. Seeing God's hand in the creation of the state was both heroic for the survivors, as well as therapeutic. However, for the next generation, raised in dramatically easier conditions, belief in "the beginning of redemption" was

68. "Sing to Him, Praise Him, Speak of All His Wonders" (1996), trans. Kaeren Fish, <http://etzion.org.il/en/topics/yom-haatzmaut>. Rav Amital relies here on Maimonides' understanding of R. Akiva's attitude to Bar Kokhba (*Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings* 11:3).

69. *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Hanukka* 3:1.

70. See, for example, "What is the Meaning of *Reishit Tzemihat Geulatenu*?" trans. Kaeren Fish, *Tradition* 39, no. 3 (2006): 7–14; "The Religious Significance of the State of Israel," trans. David Silverberg and Reuven Ziegler, *Alei Etzion* 14 (5766): 9–19. Both articles can also be found at <http://etzion.org.il/en/topics/yom-yerushalayim>.

comfortable and undemanding. They could maintain the illusion of an idyll by ignoring the *Shoah*, explaining that it was part of pre-redemptive reality or was necessary for redemption to come. Rav Amital refused to countenance all those who claimed to condone, explain, or understand the *Shoah*, for he insisted that *avodat Hashem* (divine service) flow from human morality and integrity, and that these reflect the ways of divine providence.<sup>71</sup> Thus, the moral cost of the certainty of redemption was now too high, and it was perhaps the moral criterion more than the actual historical-theological question that forced Rav Amital to abandon his certainty of redemption.<sup>72</sup>

### DIVINE SERVICE AND JEWISH IDENTITY AFTER THE SHOAH

Confronting the *Shoah* affected Rav Amital's thinking in a number of other areas as well, some of them very fundamental, such as the foundations of divine service and the halakhic attitude to those who lack belief in God.

Regarding the former, Rabbeinu Bahya ibn Pekuda, in his *Duties of the Heart*, developed the notion that service of God is based on gratitude to Him. Despite the moral and religious importance of the quality of gratitude, asked Rav Amital, can it still serve as the basis of *avodat Hashem* after the Holocaust?

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71. Hence his impatience with facile assumptions about *reishit tzemihat geulatenu*, which so easily forgives inhumanity because it supposedly brought (or bought) redemption.

72. Rabbi Elyakim Krumbein, "HaEnoshiyut BeMaavakah im HaShoah," in *Ma Ahavti Toratekha: MiToratah UmiDarkah shel Yeshivat Har Etzion BiMelot Mem Heh Shanim LeHivasdah*, ed. Shaul Barth, Yitzhak Recanati, and Reuven Ziegler (Alon Shevut, 2014), 283–301. As Rav Amital once put it, with characteristic verve, "Nothing in the world can justify the hundreds of thousands of children who were killed, burned, nothing in the world – not the State of Israel, not the Messiah, not all the Jewish people doing *teshuva*, nothing in the world... and yet Jews have faith" (viewable in the video mentioned above, n. 24, at 3:20). A substantial discussion of Rav Amital's views appeared shortly after the present essay was completed; see Motti Inbari, *Messianic Religious Zionism Confronts Israeli Territorial Compromises* (Cambridge, United Kingdom, 2012), 72–80; see also, briefly, Yehudah Mirsky, *Rav Kook: Mystic in an Age of Revolution* (New Haven, CT, 2014), 229.

On my first Yom Kippur after being liberated from a Nazi labor camp, I prayed with other survivors in a cramped cellar. I cannot fully describe the storm of emotion that I felt then, but I will try to reconstruct some of that feeling.

I was young then. I had no children. My parents had been murdered, along with most of the population of our town. Among the survivors in that small room, there were people who had lost their children, parents, spouses, and siblings. They prayed, and I with them. Was their worship of God based on gratitude? Can a Jew who has lost his wife and children possibly serve God on the basis of recognition of His kindness? Can a Jew whose job was the removal of the charred remains of corpses from the crematoria of Auschwitz be capable of serving God on the basis of gratitude? No, not in any way, shape, or form! But where, then, does that leave us?<sup>73</sup>

Rav Amital cites the talmudic statement that in the wake of the destruction of the Temple, Jeremiah and Daniel could no longer address God as “awesome” and “mighty,” for “since they knew that God is truthful, they would not lie to Him.”<sup>74</sup> The Jerusalem Talmud words this even more strongly: “Since they knew God is truthful, they would not fawningly flatter Him.”<sup>75</sup> Divine service, Rav Amital concludes, “must be built on truth, not on falsehood or fawning flattery (*hanifa*).” Hence, “within the era that saw the greatest destruction in the history of the Jewish people, it is impossible to base our divine worship” on the foundation of gratitude alone:

Of course, we must always remain aware of God’s daily acts of kindness, and must sincerely pray, “We are grateful to You”.... But, while gratitude should certainly constitute one component

73. “Confronting the Holocaust as a Religious and a Historical Phenomenon,” appendix to Maya, *A World Built*, 146; also at <http://etzion.org.il/en/topics/jewish-tragedy>.

74. Yoma 69b.

75. Y. Megilla 3:7.

of our divine service, it cannot serve as the entire foundation of our worship.<sup>76</sup>

Rav Amital finds an alternative path of divine service at the end of Rabbenu Bahya's *Duties of the Heart*, one based not on gratitude but on love and faith, as expressed by the verse, "Even if He kills me, I will still trust in Him" (Job 13:15),<sup>77</sup> and in the talmudic passage, "A bundle of myrrh (*tzeror hamor*) is my beloved to me, and he will sleep between my breasts' (Song 1:13) – our sages said, by way of derivation: Though He constricts and embitters me (*meitzer li umeimer li*), He will sleep between my breasts."<sup>78</sup> "In the wake of the *Shoah*," asks Rav Amital, "to whom can we still flee? To where can we flee? The answer is clear: 'We have fled from You to You.'" He concludes:

The verse "Were Your Torah not my delight, I would have perished in my misery" (Ps. 119:92) has a broader meaning. *Kneset Yisrael* wonders, "How could I ever have persevered without God?" How can anyone survive without God? Without God, one simply could not cope with all the problems besetting him. It is not in spite of undergoing a test of this magnitude, but rather because of it, that we need our faith in order to survive.<sup>79</sup>

Rav Amital likewise asserts that both the *Shoah* and the widespread secularization of the modern era compel a reassessment of our attitude toward Jews who do not accept the Torah.<sup>80</sup> He concedes that in principle halakha's approach toward those who violate it is harsh (though this is often more a matter of principle than practice). However, before applying the sages' harsh statements regarding sinners and heretics to

76. "Confronting the Holocaust as a Religious and a Historical Phenomenon," 147–148.

77. See *Duties of the Heart* 10:1.

78. Shabbat 88b.

79. "Confronting the Holocaust as a Religious and a Historical Phenomenon," 149.

80. See esp. "A Torah Perspective on the Status of Secular Jews Today," trans. Moshe Kohn, *Tradition* 23, no. 4 (1988): 1–13; reprinted in *Alei Etzion* 2 (5755): 29–45; see also "Rebuking a Fellow Jew: Theory and Practice," trans. Michael Berger, *Alei Etzion* 2 (5755): 47–64; *Jewish Values*, 173–89.

secular Jews today, we must ask ourselves if those pronouncements are still pertinent in light of our vastly different circumstances. He marshals halakhic sources to distinguish between deniers and skeptics, and argues that according to contemporary epistemology, disbelief is not warranted and skepticism is the most that is possible. More powerfully, he says that after the Holocaust, we cannot blame people for having difficulty with faith. If the *Hazon Ish* and Rav Kook spoke before the *Shoah* of secularists as being “coerced” by the zeitgeist, what are we to say after?

However, although he was a disciple of Rav Kook, Rav Amital was not satisfied with finding categories by which to understand contemporary secularists, whether by classifying them as wicked, as “coerced innocents,” as “whole in their *nefesh* but lacking in their *ruah*,” or any other category.<sup>81</sup> Rather, as in so many other areas, he sought a natural and human connection to them.<sup>82</sup> He offers four considerations for loving even those who are not observant, despite the fact that halakha seems to mandate love only for “your brother in mitzvot.”

First, “the mere fact that so many Jews have forsaken God calls for a more lenient attitude to them and a special effort to find their good points and plead in their defense.”<sup>83</sup> Second, in the past, people who were suspect of Shabbat desecration were also suspect of immorality; today, many irreligious people have high ethical standards.<sup>84</sup> Third, just

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81. See, respectively, “*Al Bamoteinu Halalim*,” in *Maamarei HaRe’aya*, 1:89–93; *Iggerot HaRe’aya*, vol. 1, no. 138, p. 171; *Orot*, 84.

82. Indeed, over the years he developed warm friendships with a number of leading Israeli thinkers and educators outside the ambit of Orthodoxy, such as Eliezer Schweid and Zvi Zameret, with literary figures such as Abba Kovner and Hayim Gouri, as well as with less-known secular Jews and the many secular military commanders with whom he came in contact. He also had mutually respectful relationships with a number of leading political figures, most notably Yitzhak Rabin.

83. “A Torah Perspective on the Status of Secular Jews Today,” 42–43.

84. For this reason, Rav Amital objected to the idea of *ahavat hinam*:

After the assassination of the prime minister [Yitzhak Rabin], we hear many people quoting Rav Kook *zt”l*, who said that just as the Second Temple was destroyed because of *sinat hinam*, baseless hatred (Yoma 9b), so will the Third Temple be built because of *ahavat hinam*, baseless love. But why call it *ahavat hinam*? Are there not many others – yes, even among the non-religious – who have earned our love? There are many dedicated members of our society who



as anti-Semitism is directed at Jews today not because of their beliefs but because of their identity, so too should we love any Jew, regardless of beliefs or practices: "In Auschwitz, they did not check people's tzitzit before sending them to the gas chambers; should we check tzitzit before regarding someone as a brother?"<sup>85</sup> Finally, the State of Israel is a haven for Jews, a *kiddush Hashem* and a gift from God; if we want it to survive, all Jews have to treat each other as brothers: "The State of Israel is not going to endure if cordial relations do not prevail between all sectors of the nation . . . . Otherwise, we live under a threat of destruction."<sup>86</sup> While Rav Amital cites halakhic and aggadic sources to support many arguments in his essay, he highlights the natural sense of fraternity and the value of straightforward thinking by concluding:

I do not have to adduce any source texts to support these latter two considerations. Concerning such instances, the sages have already said,<sup>87</sup> "Why do I need a quotation from Scripture? It stands to reason."<sup>88</sup>

#### **POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT**

Alone among the thinkers discussed in this volume, Rav Amital was also a participant in national politics and state affairs, although it must be admitted that his involvement, as befitting his personality (though not his role as the head of a party), was more educational than political. His political positions, although surprising to many in the Religious Zionist community and even to many of his students, actually flowed from his educational and ideological guidelines as set forth above.

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certainly fall into that category: members of the security services who vigilantly protect us, boys who give three years to the army, doctors who work for meager wages rather than seek their fortunes overseas, and many others. If someone does not share our religious commitment, it does not mean he has no values, and it does not mean that he has no just claim to our love. ("On the Assassination of Prime Minister Rabin," *Alei Etzion* 4 [5756]: 16)

85. *Jewish Values*, 188.

86. "A Torah Perspective on the Status of Secular Jews Today," 45.

87. Ketubot 22a.

88. "A Torah Perspective on the Status of Secular Jews Today," 45.

As long as I feel that I am able to say something that will be to the benefit of the Torah, to the benefit of *Am Yisrael* or of *Eretz Yisrael*, I will not refrain from speaking out. As long as I believe that I am able to diminish the desecration of God's name, to increase the glory of Heaven, to bring individuals closer, to save Jews from bloodshed, or to save something of *Eretz Yisrael* – I have not refrained from speaking out, for I too was taught that one must listen to the sound of a baby's cry.<sup>89</sup>

Before reluctantly entering the political fray, his political involvement began with public pronouncements widely reported in the press. He posited that there is a hierarchy in the scale of Jewish values, with the proper order being: the People of Israel, the Torah of Israel, and the Land of Israel: "Anyone who fails to distinguish *bein kodesh lekodesh* (between one level of holiness and another) will end up unable to distinguish *bein kodesh lehol* (between the holy and the profane)."<sup>90</sup> Thus, despite his great love for and attachment to the Land of Israel, he regarded it as subordinate to the first two values. This statement had educational significance, but its operative conclusion was that if lives could be saved and the state preserved, parts of the land could be sacrificed.

The importance of *Eretz Yisrael* is not dependent on any outline of its borders, but rather in its being a platform for sovereignty, for kingship, for a state – a platform for the realization of the personality of the individual and of the collective. Our people's destiny is to be "a light to the nations" (Is. 49:6), not as singular individuals, but as a "singular nation" (Deut. 7:6). Beyond the day-to-day social, economic, and military problems, we must be an ethical example, a moral example. *Eretz Yisrael* is meant to be the land of an exemplary Jewish society.<sup>91</sup>

In 1982, his anguish over his students again going to war flared into outrage with his discovery, first, of Ariel Sharon's lying to the government

89. "Lishmo'a Kol Bekhyo shel Tinok," *Alon Shevut Bogrim* 1 (5754): 83.

90. "Meser Politi o Meser Hinnukhi," *Alon Shevut* 100 (5743): 42.

91. "Am Yisrael Lifnei Eretz Yisrael," *Sevivot* 22 (5749).

about the war's aims and prosecution – Rav Amital publicly opposed the IDF's assault on Beirut – and then the IDF's inaction in face of the massacres at Sabra and Shatila. He issued a public statement:

We now stand four days before Yom Kippur. My entire being quakes and trembles out of fear for the Day of Judgment, for, as is known, Yom Kippur does not atone for the sin of the desecration of God's name.

He and Rabbi Lichtenstein, along with Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik in America, were practically the only rabbis to call for the inquiry that eventually arose as the Kahan Commission. Although Religious Zionists, especially the rabbinic establishment dominated by the school of Merkaz HaRav, increasingly viewed Rav Amital as a renegade, he could not remain silent in the face of what he saw as a desecration of 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 desecration of His name during the Holocaust. The establishment of the state and its victories in war against the Arab armies that rose up against it constitute a response of sanctification of God's name. Precisely for this reason, the obligation to sanctify God's name has special significance in our time for those of us who live in the State of Israel, the entire establishment of which stemmed from this principle. This is why, on various occasions over the years, I have felt obligated to protest against instances of the desecration of God's name. This was the only cause for which I felt a need to speak out publicly.<sup>92</sup>

While Rav Amital's move from the right to the left perplexed many, his close associates countered that the same mix of prophetic intuition and lucid realism that had led him up to then was still guiding him. His universalistic vision and hierarchy of values, they asserted, had been consistent throughout; now, his sensitivity to a changing social

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92. *Jewish Values*, 155.

and historical reality had dictated new practical conclusions.<sup>93</sup> The explanations for this shift have been many, reflecting his multifaceted and non-doctrinaire character: his discomfort at the Religious Zionist community's coming to be seen as forbiddingly monolithic; its increasing disconnection from Israeli society and its growing inclination to support the use of force; his deep grief at the loss of his students in combat and his hope that future wars could be avoided; and more. His shift also expressed a deep moral sense that without a bona fide attempt to make peace – with the painful sacrifices that would entail – Israel would not only run the risk of further war, but also do an injustice to Arab populations, also created in God's image, and thus disfigure their own *tzelem Elokim*.

On the left he was as unconventional, unpredictable, and free of clichés as he had been on the right. In December 1982, he addressed the founding meeting of *Netivot Shalom*, a religious peace movement, and inveighed against what he said were the three false messianisms stalking the land – *Gush Emunim*, Peace Now, and Ariel Sharon. All, he said, presume to solve complex questions with simple answers – faith, good intentions, and force, respectively. None by itself provides the answer. We need all three, he said, and the wisdom of balance.

In 1985, at a conference marking Rav Kook's fiftieth *yahrzeit*, he laid out the theological foundations of his position. Like Rav Kook's, Rav Amital's Zionism was not a response to anti-Semitism:

It is not [the Jewish people's] terrible suffering that is the source of its longing for redemption, but rather its striving to do good to mankind, for this is the essence of its soul.<sup>94</sup>

This, from a Holocaust survivor, was astounding. Promoting a universal ethical vision must be of the essence of Zionism, he said, not only to save it from the moral hazards of violent chauvinism, but precisely because the ethical message is itself the divine word that Israel is

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93. See the thorough analysis of Rabbi Daniel Tropper, "*Mishnato HaTzibburit shel HaRav Amital*," in Ziegler and Gafni, *LeOvdekha BeEmet*, 273–84.

94. "The Ethical Foundations of Rav Kook's Nationalist Views," 19.

charged with spreading in the world. As he later explained in an interview, the difference between his conception and Ben-Gurion's vision of Israel as "a light unto the nations" was that, to his mind, without a divine foundation, ethical universalism will not survive.<sup>95</sup>

In 1988, at the urging of supporters, Rav Amital founded a party, Meimad, offering a centrist religious voice on both political-diplomatic issues and relations between religious and secular Israelis. Everything that made the party appealing to well-wishers and observers – its non-dogmatic stance, the manifest absence of political ambitions on the part of its leaders, its mix of religious conviction with political liberalism – made it an electoral disaster in the rough-and-tumble of Israeli politics, and it failed to receive even one Knesset seat. Rav Amital returned to his yeshiva and abandoned political life – until late 1995 when, in the wake of the Rabin assassination, he was asked to join Shimon Peres' short-lived government as a minister without portfolio.<sup>96</sup> This he did, hoping that his presence would ease, even a little, the terrible fissures then rocking Israeli society and ease the desecration of God's name wrought by the *kippa*-wearing assassin. He pursued various initiatives in public health, education, Israel-Diaspora relations, and the ever-elusive goal of fostering dialogue within Israeli society. When the Peres administration was over, he returned to Yeshivat Har Etzion. His leftward moves cost him many supporters, and his natural role as the premier leader of Religious Zionism. But he was at peace with the course he had taken.

#### **THE RIGHTEOUS MAN WILL LIVE BY HIS FAITH**

The essential faith and piety of Rav Amital's Hungarian childhood never left him. Many of the questions bedeviling and thus defining modern Jewish thought simply did not preoccupy him. God's existence and providence, the divine origin of the Written and Oral Torah, the binding

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95. See the interview with him published as "Am Yisrael Lifnei Eretz Yisrael" in *Sevivot* 22 (1989): 6–14. (*Sevivot* was the journal of Midreshet Sdeh Boker.) The interview is worth reading in full for its focused exposition of Rav Amital's ideas on a number of crucial issues.

96. Shimon Peres explained, "Every government needs inspiration. I believe that Rav Amital provides the inspiration necessary to maintain the nation's unity, diversity, and internal dialogue" (Reichner, *By Faith Alone*, 269).

power of rabbinic tradition and law, and the Jews' unique role and destiny were all for him simply axiomatic. It was perhaps this unaffected, almost guileless faith and deep identification with what he called "simple Jews" that freed him to embrace complexity, even as he expressed his ideas with powerful conviction.

A deep sense of God's presence, expressed so powerfully in his natural and flowing prayer, led him to discern God's hand not only in the restoration of Jewish sovereignty after two thousand years, but also in the unfathomable depths of the Holocaust. Yet the absolute human inability to fathom the meaning of the Holocaust ultimately led him to a position of epistemic humility. Another part of his response to the Holocaust was, almost paradoxically, redoubled commitment to a universalistic ethics. Rav Amital, following Rav Kook, saw "natural morality," an innate sense of justice and mercy, as the very foundation of religious life. If after the Holocaust one can no longer believe in humanism, our acting on our ethical impulses is the deepest assertion of faith, if not in man, then in God and His world. Thus, a central category for him, and one which he said motivated many of his more controversial stances, was *hillul Hashem*, the need to avoid the desecration of God's name and, conversely, to instantiate God in this world through Torah and especially its social message – ethics.

It was this twinned commitment to epistemic humility and to ethics that drove the deepest wedge between Rav Amital and *Gush Emunim* and therefore disqualified him for leadership in the eyes of some members of his own Religious Zionist community. Yet it was these same qualities, along with his deep piety, scholarship, and charisma, that acquired for him many devoted students who brought his message and values to all corners of Israeli society and even to many communities in the Diaspora. Perhaps the deepest impact that the Holocaust made on him was to engender and fortify his sense of personal mission, the burden of fulfilling the dreams and hopes of his many peers who did not survive – a sense that, as he testified, gave him the strength and drive to initiate, to lead, and to accomplish things beyond his natural abilities.<sup>97</sup>

97. "A Sense of Mission" (1995), <http://etzion.org.il/en/sense-mission>. For Rav Amital's last public reflections on the Holocaust, see the interview with him conducted by Yair Sheleg, "BeInyan HaShoah Ani Omed Bifnei Kir," *Eretz Aḥeret* 50 (March–April 2009): 46–48.

## *Torah and Humanity in a Time of Rebirth*

Alan Brill, a scholar of Modern Orthodoxy and of contemporary religiosity, summarizes Rav Amital's contribution as follows:

No other Modern Orthodox theologian in our age has written with the emotion, imagination, and depth of character that Rav Amital has. His writings are a complex body of ingrained reactions, memories, hopes, and visions. He has had less influence in the United States than in Israel, primarily because his Modern Orthodoxy consists of state-building, army service, the creation of a liberal democracy, and the writings of Rav Kook combined with Torah study. It also does not tackle the American concerns of secular studies, particularism, ritualism, suburbanization, and professionalism. Rav Amital's thought is particularly valuable in our world of education, textuality, and programmatic ideologies, for it allows us to return to a natural sense of morals, piety, and sovereignty.<sup>98</sup>

Indeed, Rav Amital did not leave behind him a system or set of doctrines, but rather a cluster of powerful, provocative ideas, and an example from which we can learn as we each go about building our moral and spiritual lives.<sup>99</sup>

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98. Brill, "Worlds Destroyed," 18–19.

99. Parts of this essay are excerpted from Yehudah Mirsky, "The Audacity of Faith," *The Jewish Review of Books* 2, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 29–31, as well as from the authors' essays in *LeOvdekha BeEmet*. We thank the publishers for their permission to use the material.



# TORAH AND WESTERN THOUGHT

INTELLECTUAL PORTRAITS OF  
ORTHODOXY AND MODERNITY

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