YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**SICHA FOR ASARA BE-TEVET 5777**

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In memory of Rebbetzin Miriam Wise, Miriam bat Yitzhak Ve-Rivkah *z”l*,

whose *yahrtzeit* is on 9 Tevet

by Rav Yitzchak and Stefanie Etshalom

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**"We Have Fled From You to You": Rav Amital and the Shoah**[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Rabbi Reuven Ziegler and Dr. Yehudah Mirsky**

**Israel, the *Shoah*, and Understanding History**

Rav Yehuda Amital’s perspectives on the Shoah, like other facets of his teachings, emerged from his distinctive mix of intensive Torah study, theological and moral perspectives, his engagements as an educator and public figure, reflection on the story of his own life – as Holocaust survivor, soldier, educator, and central figure in the postwar rebirth of Torah and development of Religious Zionism – and the life of his times. Here as elsewhere, his thinking was dynamic, as he unflinchingly revised and revised his ideas alongside his unswerving commitments to the Jewish people, to Torah and to embracing the challenges of Jewish statehood.

Indeed, the State of Israel – and its ethical mission for the Jewish people and all of humanity – was central to his thinking on the Holocaust.

Rav Amital’s attitude to the State of Israel rests on two foundations. 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.”[[2]](#footnote-2) 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). This universal mission creates national responsibilities; as Rav Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook taught, in order to redeem humanity from its suffering, it is necessary for this nation to forge a distinctively Jewish polity with all the accoutrements of government and culture that 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 were to be divorced from a universal moral purpose, it would lead to chauvinism, moral breakdown and reliance solely on coercive power and military strength.[[3]](#footnote-3) This vein in Rav Kook’s teaching was essential to Rav Amital’s thought. Even on those occasions (later in life) when his realism prevented him from making overly romanticizing the actual State of Israel, Rav Amital viewed the state as a vehicle for sanctifying God’s name in the world; hence his powerful sensitivity to anything involving the state that smacked of *hillul* *Hashem*.

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.[[4]](#footnote-4)

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 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.[[5]](#footnote-5)

A second foundation of Rav Amital’s philosophy of both Zionism and education is the need for perspective and proportion, especially with regard to the realms of values and history. 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 re-built.”[[6]](#footnote-6) 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.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This perspective offers him 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 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?[[8]](#footnote-8)

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.

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.[[9]](#footnote-9)

This effort to discern and interpret God’s hand in history has deep roots in the thought of Rav Avraham Yitzhak Kook.[[10]](#footnote-10) 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’” (*Tanhuma*, *Vezot HaBerakha* 12). Clearly, we do not have the tools to know the secrets of God and to know the considerations, 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.[[11]](#footnote-11)

For Rav Kook, who passed away in 1935, 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. And so the tragedy of the Yom Kippur War of 1973 struck with unnerving, near-apocalyptic force. 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.[[12]](#footnote-12)

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 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.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Rather than point a finger outward, he said, the soul-searching must begin within the yeshivot 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.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

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, Rav Kook’s son and successor at Yeshivat 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 redemption in the making in the founding of the State of Israel and in the 1967 war, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda also saw the Holocaust as part of God’s plan, at last excising Israel from exile and bringing about the creation of the state.[[15]](#footnote-15) 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.[[16]](#footnote-16)

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.[[17]](#footnote-17) 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 history (as indicated by the famous story in Makkot 24a–b) – had been mistaken when he declared Bar Kokhva to be the messiah.[[18]](#footnote-18) 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’s 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.”[[19]](#footnote-19) 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.[[20]](#footnote-20)

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” had become 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.[[21]](#footnote-21) 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.[[22]](#footnote-22)

**Divine Service, Jewish Identity and Faith 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:

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?[[23]](#footnote-23)

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.”[[24]](#footnote-24) The Jerusalem Talmud words this even more strongly: “Since they knew God is truthful, they would not fawningly flatter Him.”[[25]](#footnote-25) 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 of our divine service, it cannot serve as the entire foundation of our worship.

Rav Amital finds an alternative path of divine service at the end of *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),[[26]](#footnote-26) 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.”[[27]](#footnote-27) “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. *Knesset* *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.[[28]](#footnote-28)

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.[[29]](#footnote-29) 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 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 Avraham Yitzhak 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 Avraham Yitzhak 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.[[30]](#footnote-30) Rather, as in so many other areas, he sought a natural and human connection to them.[[31]](#footnote-31) He offers four considerations for loving even those who are not observant, despite the fact that halakha seems to mandate loveonly 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.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Second, in the past people who were suspect of Shabbat desecration were also suspect of immorality; today, many irreligious people have high ethical standards.[[33]](#footnote-33) Third, just 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 tzitzitbefore sending them to the gas chambers; should we check tzitzitbefore regarding someone as a brother?”[[34]](#footnote-34) 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.”[[35]](#footnote-35) 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,[[36]](#footnote-36) “Why do I need a quotation from Scripture? It stands to reason.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

A deep sense of God’s presence, expressed so powerfully in his natural and flowing prayer, led Rav Amital 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 it is that 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.

 Perhaps the deepest impact of the Holocaust on Rav Amital was 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.[[38]](#footnote-38)

In many ways, 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 power of rabbinic tradition and law, 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, and enabled him to explore with awe-inspiring courage the deepest religious challenges of our time.

1. Excerpted and adapted from Rabbi Reuven Ziegler and Dr. Yehudah Mirsky, “Torah and Humanity in a Time of Rebirth: Rabbi Yehuda Amital as Educator and Thinker,” in [*Torah and Western Thought: Intellectual Portraits of Orthodoxy and Modernity*](https://www.korenpub.com/maggid_en_usd/torah-and-western-thought.html), eds. Rabbi Dr. Meir Y. Soloveichik, Dr. Stuart Halpern, and Rabbi Shlomo Zuckier (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2016), pp. 179–217. Available online at:

<https://www.academia.edu/18122334/Torah_and_Humanity_in_a_Time_of_Rebirth_Rav_Yehuda_Amital_as_Educator_and_Thinker>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Guide for the Perplexed* III:51. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, briefly, Rav Kook, *Shemonah Kevatzim* 1:186, *Orot* p. 160; *Shemonah Kevatzim* 1:744, *Orot* p. 65; *Shemonah Kevatzim* 7:111. On this and other elements of Rav Kook’s thought and teaching, see Yehudah Mirsky, *Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “The Ethical Foundations of Rav Kook’s Nationalist Views,” trans. B. Caspar and R. Ziegler, *Alei Etzion* 2 (5755), 19; <http://www.gush.net/alei/2-1kook.htm>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This appears in 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Midrash Lekah Tov* toGen.6:9 uses this phrase in connection with Noah. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rabbi Yehuda Amital, “Forty Years Later: A Personal Recollection,” appendix to Moshe Maya, *A World Built*, *Destroyed and Rebuilt* (Alon Shevut, 2005), 139–40; [www.vbm-torah.org/en/forty-years-later-personal-recollection](http://www.vbm-torah.org/en/forty-years-later-personal-recollection). (This talk was given in 1985.) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “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. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “Forty Years Later,” 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 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.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “*LeMashma’utah shel Milhemet Yom HaKippurim*,” in Rabbi Yehuda Amital, *HaMaalot MiMaamakim* (Alon Shevut, 1974), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Regarding Rav Amital’s actions and reactions in this period, see Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, “*Mishan UMivtah LaShakulim*,” in Reuven Ziegler and Reuven Gafni, eds., *LeOvdekha BeEmet: LiDemuto ULeDarko shel HaRav Yehuda Amital* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2011), 331–36, and “*Azut VeAnava*,” *Daf Kesher* 1316 (*Parashat Devarim* 5772): 2–4, [www.etzion.gush.net/vbm/archive/17-sichot/ral-rya%20yahrzeit%20shiur5771.doc](http://www.etzion.gush.net/vbm/archive/17-sichot/ral-rya%20yahrzeit%20shiur5771.doc). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “*LeMashma’utah shel Milĥemet Yom HaKippurim*,” 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. “*Al Tira Yisrael Ki Itekha Ani*,” in *HaMaalot MiMaamakim*, 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. On Rav Zvi Yehuda Kook’s teachings, see the very helpful volume by Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, trans. Michael Swirsky and Jonathan Chipman (Chicago, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. “Forty Years Later,” 138–39. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Maya, *A World Built*, 36–45. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. “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’s understanding of R. Akiva’s attitude to Bar Kokhva (*Mishneh Torah*, *Laws of Kings* 11:3). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Mishneh Torah*, *Laws of Hanukka* 3:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. 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, <http://www.gush.net/alei/14-01rya-zion.htm>. Both articles can also be found at <http://etzion.org.il/en/topics/yom-yerushalayim>. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Hence his impatience with facile assumptions about *reishit tzemihat geulatenu*, which so easily forgives inhumanity because it supposedly brought (or bought) redemption. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Rabbi Elyakim Krumbein, “*HaEnoshiyut BeMaavaka im HaShoah*,” in *Ma Ahavti Toratekha*: *Maamarim Likhvod Yeshivat Har Etzion*, ed. Shaul Barth, Yitzhak Recanati and Reuven Ziegler (Alon Shevut, 2014). 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, “A Tribute to Rav Yehuda Amital,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPxq_p8L-MM>, 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. “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>. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Yoma 69b. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Y. Megilla 3:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See *Duties of the Heart* 10:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Shabbat 88b. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. “Confronting the Holocaust,” 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. 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, <http://www.gush.net/alei/2-2chilo.htm>; see also “Rebuking a Fellow Jew: Theory and Practice,” trans. Michael Berger, *Alei Etzion* 2 (5755): 47–64, <http://www.gush.net/alei/2-3rebuk.htm>; Rav Yehuda Amital, *Jewish* *Values in a Changing World*, ed. R. Amnon Bazak, trans. David Strauss (Jersey City, 2005), 173–89. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See, respectively, “*Al Bamoteinu Halalim*,” in *Maamarei HaRe’iya*,1:89–93; *Iggerot HaRe’iya*, vol. 1, no. 138, p. 171; *Orot*, 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. “A Torah Perspective on the Status of Secular Jews Today,” 42–43. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. 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 [Avraham Yitzhak] 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 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, <http://www.gush.net/alei/4-02rabin1.rtf>). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *Jewish* *Values*, 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. “A Torah Perspective on the Status of Secular Jews Today,” 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ketubot 22a. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. “A Torah Perspective on the Status of Secular Jews Today,” 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. “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, “*Be-Inyan ha-Shoah Ani Omed Bifnei Kir*,” *Eretz Acheret*, no. 50 (March-April 2009), 46-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)