YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Sephardic Rabbinical Approaches to Zionism**

By Rabbi Chaim Jachter

Based on a Talk by Rav Baruch Gigi

Delivered at Congregation Shaarei Orah, Teaneck

Shabbat Parashat HaChodesh/*Vayikra* 5778

**The Anti-Zionism of the Satmar Rav**

R. Gigi began by presenting the anti-Zionist approach of the Satmar Rav. This approach is rooted in the *gemara* (*Ketuvot* 111a) that states that *Hashem* imposed a *shevua* (oath) upon us that we would not take *Eretz Yisrael* by force (“*she-lo ya’alu Yisrael be-choma*”).

R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (the famed author of the *Meshech Chochma* and the *Ohr Samei’ach*) reacted to the League of Nations ratification of the Balfour Declaration, which granted the Jews a national home in *Eretz Yisrael*, with three words: “*Sar* *pachad* *ha-shevua*” – the concern for the oath not to take Israel by force no longer applies, since permission was granted by the international community. The *Avnei Nezer* (*Teshuvot*,YD 456) agreed. In contrast, the Satmar Rav insisted that the oath remained in effect even when permission for Jews to reside in and eventually govern part of the land was granted by the League of Nations and the United Nations. The Satmar Rav regarded the political pressure placed on the League of Nations and United Nations delegates by Zionist leaders as constituting returning to *Eretz Yisrael* by force.

This represents a fundamental opposition to Zionism, not simply a feeling of unease with cooperating with non-observant Jews. R. Gigi argues that such fundamental opposition to Zionism is virtually non-existent among leading Sephardic rabbis.

R. Gigi noted that the Maharsha on the *gemara* in *Ketuvot* clearly supports the approach of the *Meshech* *Chochma* and *Avnei Nezer*. The Maharsha explains that Nechemia was permitted to rebuild the walls of Yerushalayim (*Nechemia*, chs. 1-9) because he had permission from the Persian emperor Artaxerxes.

**R. Yehuda Alkalai**

R. Yehuda Alkalai, a great Sephardic Rav from Serbia, is counted among the founders of modern Zionism. His work supporting large scale Jewish settlement in *Eretz Yisrael*, *Minchat* *Yehuda*, predated Theodore Herzl. Moreover, in his *Goral La-Hashem*,R. Alkalai presents a detailed plan for the reestablishment of the Jewish State in *Eretz Yisrael*, which is said to have greatly influenced Herzl’s extremely influential work, *The Jewish State*.

R. Alkalai argues that natural redemption precedes the supernatural redemption. He refers to this as the Mashiach ben Yosef preceding the Mashiach ben David. A central and well-known idea of R. Alkalai (that appears in *Minchat* *Yehuda*) relates to the statement of R. Eliezer (*Sanhedrin* 97b, codified by the Rambam, *Hilchot Teshuva* 7:5): “*Ein Yisrael nigalin ela be-teshuva*,” the Jewish People will not be redeemed without *teshuva*. R. Alkalai distinguishes between *teshuva* of the individual and *teshuva* of the community. The individual must repent in the most straightforward manner; he must correct any lapses in his Torah observance. In contrast, the national *teshuva* refers to our nation returning to *Eretz* *Yisrael*. R. Alkalai proves this point from the etymology of the word *teshuva*, which means to return to one’s original place of residence, as in the *pasuk*, “*U-teshuvato ha-Ramata ki sham beito*” (*Shemuel* I 7:17).

After R. Alkalai made *aliya* in 1874, he moved to Jerusalem, where he engaged in major debates with the rabbis of the Yishuv Ha-Yashan, the traditional Jewish community in Jerusalem, which opposed activist settlement in *Eretz Yisrael*.

**Support for Zionism among Great Moroccan *Rabbanim***

The great Moroccan *Rabbanim*, ranging from Ribi Shalom Messas to the famous Babi Sali, were enthusiastic supporters of Zionism. Indeed, R. Gigi recalled from the years in which he was raised in Morocco that there was widespread support and enthusiasm for Zionism in all circles. Ribi Shalom Messas believed in reciting *Hallel* on Yom Ha-Atzma’ut even with a *bracha*. However, out of respect to the ruling of Chacham Ovadia Yosef, he ruled that *Hallel* should be recited without a *bracha* (*Teshuvot Shemesh U-Magen* 3:63:6).

The Baba Sali, in turn, asserted that the State of Israel was created in the merit of the poem composed by his son, the Baba Meir, called “*Degel Yisrael Herima*,” the flag of Israel has been raised. When the Baba Sali was told that secular Jews were building the State of Israel, he replied by citing the *tefilla* of *Nachem*, which we recite on Tisha B’Av: “*Ki Ata be-eish hitzata, u-va-eish Ata atid livnota*” – with fire Yerushalayim was destroyed and with fire it will be rebuilt. He explained that just as Jerusalem was destroyed by the fire of *avoda* *zara*, it will sadly be rebuilt by *avoda* *zara*.

Israeli agents for *aliya* were well received in Morocco. R. Yitzchak Abuchatzeira, the Chief Rabbi of Ramle, is remembered for allowing his house to serve as a place of transition for Jews making *aliya*. Although there was great debate in Moroccan communities about the Alliance schools, which brought secular studies to Sephardic communities, the debates related to the fact that these schools influenced their students to abandon Torah ways; they had nothing to do with Zionism.

Finally, R. Amram Aburbeh was a noted Moroccan Rav who was an enthusiastic supporter of Zionism and predicted Israel’s massive victory in the Six Day War with *Hashem*’s help, months before his passing in 1966.

**Chacham Ovadia Yosef**

R. Ovadia Yosef recited a *Mishebeirach* for the soldiers of *Tzahal* each time the *Heichal* was opened to remove the Torah on Shabbat morning. R. Ovadia expressed his strong support for the State of Israel in one of his *teshuvot* (*Yabia Omer* 11: CM 22), where he explains his position permitting the exchange of Israeli land for peace. Shas ministers are permitted to serve as cabinet ministers in the Israeli government, unlike the Ashkenazic Charedi members of Kenesset, who join the governing coalition but are forbidden by their rabbinic leaders to serve as cabinet ministers. The *Yalkut Yosef*, written by Chacham Yitzhak Yosef, is replete with instructions for Israeli soldiers, something (sadly) anathema in many Ashkenazi circles.

The contrast between Chacham Ovadia’s reaction to the great Entebbe rescue in 1976 with that of the Satmar Rebbe is most instructive. Whereas the Satmar Rebbe reacted with condemnation (based on the *mishna* in *Gittin* 45a), R. Yosef reacted with the utmost enthusiasm (*Yabia Omer* 10: CM 7 and *Yechaveh* *Da’at* 2:25).

R. Yosef rules (*Yechaveh* *Da’at* 5:63) that one must fully comply with Israeli tax regulations. In this responsum, R. Ovadia even endorses R. Kook’s ruling that a government accepted by the Jewish People in *Eretz Yisrael* enjoys the status of a *melekh* in certain regards. R. Yosef frequently cites R. Kook in his *teshuvot* in the most respectful and reverential manner, which sadly in not always the case among Ashkenazic *Charedim*.

**Sephardic Rabbinical Opposition to Zionism**

R. Gigi noted that there were Sephardic Rabbanim who opposed Zionism and even issued proclamations to refrain from voting in Israeli elections. He presented us with the text of their declaration. He observed, however, that the opposition was not rooted in a fundamental opposition to Zionism, but rather stemmed from disapproval of non-observant members of the Israeli government and the improper pressure placed on Sephardic *olim* to enroll their children in secular public schools, which encouraged the abandonment of a Torah lifestyle.

**R. Chaim David Ha-Levi, Chief Rabbi Ben Zion Meir Chai Uziel, and R. Ovadya Hadaya**

R. Gigi concluded by noting two great Sephardic rabbis who were enthusiastic supporters of the State of Israel and Religious Zionism, R. Chaim David Ha-Levi and Chief Rabbi Ben Zion Meir Chai Uziel.

R. Haim David Ha-Levi, who for many years served as the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, makes his support for Religious Zionism clear in his works, such as his *Teshuvot Asei Lekha Rav*. His *Kitzur Shulchan Arukh Mekor Chayim* has served for decades as the basic halakhic work taught in Religious Zionist schools.

R. Uziel served as the first Sephardic Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel and composed, together with Chief Rabbi Yitzchak Herzog and Shai Agnon, the *Tefillah* *Le-Shlom* *Ha-Medina*. R. Uziel wrote: “A great and miraculous merit has been revealed in this generation, to fulfill the words of the *nevi’im* to establish a Jewish State in *Eretz Yisrael*.” R. Uziel proceeded to implore all Jews “to return to full Torah observance and to guard the people and State of Israel.”

We should add that R. Ovadya Hadaya, a major Sephardic mid-twentieth century halakhic authority, describes the establishment of the State of Israel as “*techilat ha-geula*,” the beginning of our redemption (*Teshuvot Yaskil Avdi* 6:10). He describes the miracles of Israel’s War of Independence as comparable to the miracles of Chanuka and the splitting of the Red Sea. Although he believes that a *bracha* should not be said on *Hallel* recited on Yom Ha-Atzma’ut, his enthusiasm for *Medinat Yisrael* is set forth unambiguously.

**Conclusion**

Support for Zionism is quite strong among Sephardim, even in Chareidi circles. Fundamental opposition to the State of Israel, such as was voiced by the Satmar Rav, is virtually unheard of in the Sephardic community. Thus, I was not shocked to hear that R. Eli Mansour, a Sephardic Chareidi leader in Brooklyn, strongly encouraged his followers to attend the AIPAC policy conference in Washington.[[1]](#footnote-1)

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1. I was also delighted to see that R. Mansour writes:

   Special preference should be given to the *etrogim* of *Eretz Yisrael*. R. Yechiel Michel Epstein (Nevardok, 1829-1908), in his *Arukh Ha-Shulchan* (*Orach* *Chaim* 648), elaborates on the importance of using an *etrog* grown in *Eretz Yisrael* when such an *etrog* is available. He writes that it would be a grave affront to our land if one has the option of using an *etrog* from *Eretz Yisrael* but chooses instead to use an *etrog* grown outside the land. (<http://www.dailyhalacha.com/displayRead.asp?readID=2949>) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)