

The Religious Zionism Debate

**Essays Regarding the Religious Significance
of the Modern State of Israel**

In honor of Israel's Sixtieth Independence Day



by

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Introduction

Sixty years ago, a relatively small group of Jews gained sovereignty over a seemingly indefensible piece of land. Rather than being destroyed, as many had predicted, with God's help the country survived, flourished, and is now an economic and military powerhouse. We have lived to witness the rebirth of the land of Israel, which is in itself an important sign that these are historic times. Rashi explains the Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 98a) as follows:

כשתתן ארץ ישראל פריה בעין יפה אז יקרב הקץ ואין לך קץ מגולה מזה.

When the land of Israel gives forth its fruit plentifully, the end [*Mashiach's* arrival] is near, and there can be no clearer sign than this.

With the continued agricultural and economic success of the land and state of Israel, it seems clear to many that we are living in remarkable times. R. Elchanan Wasserman wrote an essay prior to the establishment of the State of Israel declaring that we live in *Ikvisa Di-Meshicha*, the end of the time of the exile. Others claim that we are actually living in the initial stages of the ultimate Redemption, the *Aschalta Di-Ge'ulah*.

However, some great scholars have claimed that the State of Israel is not a wonderful and promised development but, instead, an evil institution that is preventing the Redemption. Rather than actively attempting to create a Jewish state, we must wait for *Mashiach* to initiate it himself.

In the following essays I try to sketch out some basic textual issues on which these theological debates rest. The essays in this booklet originated as part of a series on my blog, TorahMusings.com, that investigated the talmudic disagreements underlying the debate between Religious Zionists and Religious Anti-Zionists. There is still more to write but, in honor of Israel's 60th Independence Day, I have decided to publish the existing essays.

Almost nothing in these essays is new other than the presentation. However, because these debates occurred many years ago, I believe that there is value in revisiting them and making the different interpretations known to a new generation. I hope that in addition to formulating these issues clearly so that many who are not be able to access the original texts can gain entrance to these debates, those more advanced will gain a desire to follow the references and study these topics fully.

While writing these essays, I strived to maintain a balanced perspective and the utmost respect for all of the great scholars quoted. While it will become obvious to readers that I am more sympathetic to Religious Zionists than Anti-Zionists, that is because I believe that they have, overall, made a more convincing case. I leave it to readers to judge for themselves.

I thank the many people who have contributed ideas and sources to these essays, including anonymous commenters to my blog. I apologize for being unable to name them each individually. I have included at the end of this booklet pictures of great Religious Zionist scholars. R. Shmuel Jablon collected these for his series of Religious Zionist Rabbis Cards and gave me permission to reproduce them here. I thank him for that.

Page numbers for *Va-Yo'el Moshe* refer to the 5760 Ashkenazi edition, for *Derishas Tziyon* the 5762 Etzion edition, for *Em Ha-Banim Semeichah* the 5743 Mekhon Peri Ha'arets edition, and *Ha-Tekufah Ha-Gedolah* the 5761 edition.

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ב' אייר תשס"ח

Essay 1: Repentance and Redemption

I. Heresy

R. Yoel Teitelbaum, the “Satmar Rav,” in his *Va-Yoel Moshe (Ma’amar Gimmel Shevu’os*, chs. 40-42, pp. 51-57), discusses whether there can be *Ge’ulah* (ultimate redemption) without *Teshuvah* (communal repentance). He points out that this is debated in *Sanhedrin* 97b between R. Yehoshua and R. Eliezer, with the former allowing for redemption without repentance and the latter requiring repentance before the final redemption. Generally speaking, we follow R. Yehoshua over R. Eliezer. However, the Rambam (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Teshuvah* 7:5) seems to follow R. Eliezer:

וכבר הבטיחה תורה שסוף ישראל לעשות תשובה בסוף גלותן ומיד הן נגאלין שנאמר והיה כי יבואו עליך כל הדברים האלה הברכה והקללה אשר נתתי לפניך והשבות אל לבבך... ושבת עד ה' אלקיך... ושב ה' אלקיך את שבותך... (דברים ל, א-ג).

The Torah has already promised that Israel will repent at the end of her exile and will then be redeemed immediately, as it is written, “And it shall come to pass when all these things have happened... and shall return to the Lord your God... and then the Lord your God will turn your captivity, and have compassion on you, and will return and gather you from all the nations, amongst whom the Lord your God has scattered you” (Deut. 30:1-3).

The Satmar Rav explains that the Rambam is not actually taking sides in the debate between R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua. Those two sages were discussing whether repentance is required before the arrival of Eliyahu and *Mashiach*. However, all agree that repentance is required after *Mashiach* comes but before the final redemption. Redemption is, after all, a process that requires time. First *Mashiach* will come, then there will be wars, and then the redemption will take place. R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua only debate whether Eliyahu and *Mashiach* will come specifically after widespread repentance or even without such an occurrence.

The Satmar Rav (ch. 42, p. 56) takes this a step further. Since the Rambam quoted a verse to support his view that repentance must precede redemption, anyone who disputes this point is contradicting an explicit Pentateuchal verse and is, therefore, a heretic. The clear implication is that Religious Zionists, who believe that the contemporary return to the land of Israel is part of the redemption process, are heretics since widespread repentance has (unfortunately) not yet occurred.

II. Prior Responses

However, the Satmar Rav's argument had already been answered almost 100 years earlier. R. Tzvi Hirsch Kalischer, in his *Derishas Tziyon (ma'amar 1, Rishon Le-Tziyon additions, 1:10, pp. 60-61)*, addresses this issue and gives an answer similar to the Satmar Rav's. R. Kalischer explains this according to his general view that there are a number of steps within the redemption process, i.e. a number of redemptions with only the last one being the final redemption.

R. Kalischer suggests that R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua were debating whether an earlier step in the redemption requires repentance. However, both agree that the final redemption certainly requires repentance. This explanation is much smoother within the language of the debate than the Satmar Rav's because the Gemara only mentions whether redemption requires repentance; *Mashiach* is not named at all. According to the Satmar Rav, that the entire debate revolves around *Mashiach*, it is a little difficult that *Mashiach* and Eliyahu are not mentioned at all.

R. Yissachar Shlomo Teichtal, in his *Em Ha-Banim Semeichah* (ch. 1, pp. 78-80), offers a different approach. He explains that the Rambam is following a third Tannaitic view, that of R. Yehudah in *Yalkut Shimoni* (2:595), that repentance must absolutely precede redemption and if Israel does not repent, it will not be redeemed. According to R. Teichtal, the events will proceed as follows: the Jewish people will return to the land of Israel, Eliyahu will come and lead the people to repentance, *Mashiach* will come and usher in the final redemption. Thus, repentance will precede redemption but not the return to the land of Israel.

Neither of these standard Religious Zionist views, both published before the Satmar Rav's anti-Zionist book, contradict the verse quoted by the Rambam or the Rambam himself. Therefore, it seems that neither of these views can be called heretical.

III. The Sources

R. Menachem Kasher, in his *Ha-Tekufah Ha-Gedolah* (ch. 6, pp. 95-115), addresses this issue at length. He quotes (p. 104 n. 28) the Satmar Rav's view with astonishment because it seems to label the views of *Rishonim* (medieval authorities) as heretical, as R. Kasher demonstrates at length.

The Ramban, in his *Sefer Ha-Ge'ulah (Kisvei Ha-Ramban, vol. 1 p. 277ff.)*, discusses this issue at length and clearly considers R. Eliezer, the sage who said that redemption does not require repentance, to have been the winner of the debate. The Ramban continues with a discussion about how the good prophecies of redemption must come true regardless of how bad the Jewish people may or may not be, as opposed to bad

prophecies that can be annulled. At no time does the Ramban mention *Mashiach*. While he may be discussing an early stage of redemption, he is clearly speaking of redemption and not the arrival of Eliyahu or *Mashiach*.

The Ramban's student, R. David Bonfil, in his commentary to *Sanhedrin*, states clearly that "there is no condition in the future redemption and it was a decree that contained a swear [which therefore must come true]." Again, he only talks of redemption and not the arrival of *Mashiach*—and specifically without repentance. Furthermore, about this very issue he brings the verse(s) that the Rambam brings in *Hilkhos Teshuvah*.

R. David Kimchi (Radak), in his commentary to Isaiah (59:16), points out that the verses in Deut. 30 imply that repentance will precede the return from exile. However, the verses in Isaiah imply that it will not. This contradiction, he states, forms the basis of the debate between R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua. "מסופקים היו אם יהיה קבוץ גליות על ידי תשובה או לא" They were unsure whether the return from exile will be through repentance or not, and this is because of the contradiction between the verses." The Radak then offers a reconciliation of the verses, namely that most of the Jewish people will repent after they see the signs of redemption (which is R. Tzvi Hirsch Kalischer's approach—no coincidence there).

R. Kasher further brings from the Vilna Gaon (*Even Sheleimah* 11:8) and the Chafetz Chaim (*Shem Olam, Sha'ar Ha-Hischazkus* ch. 13 and elsewhere) that the ultimate redemption can occur without prior repentance. According to the Satmar Rav, one is forced to conclude the unthinkable, that these venerable sages were also heretics.

R. Kasher also quotes a *Midrash Ha-Ne'elam* that says that repentance only has to be done by the *tzadikim* (extremely righteous people) of the generation and not by everyone. This is also implied by Radak. R. Kasher then makes an interesting comparison to Exodus from Egypt, where most of the Jews were not religious, and notes that this same idea can be found in Midrash.

R. Kasher then tries to make a case that God will bring the redemption in the merit of rejecting idolatry. Surprisingly, he does not bring the Gemara at the beginning of *Chullin* that "whoever rejects [idolatry] is as if he accepts all of the Torah". However, he quotes enough sources to make a viable case.

Clearly, there were great sages throughout the ages who hold of this view that the Satmar Rav claims contradicts an explicit verse and is blatant heresy.

Essay 2: Ingathering of the Exiles

I. Early Permission to Return

R. Tzvi Hirsch Kalischer, in his *Derishas Tziyon* (*ma'amar* 1 ch. 2, p. 40), quotes from the Ramban's commentary to Song of Songs 8:13 (*Kisvei Ha-Ramban*, vol. 2 p. 516) that the beginning of the redemption will be with the help and permission of Gentile governments. R. Chaim Dov Chavel, the editor of the Ramban's collected writings, points out in a footnote to this passage that we have merited seeing this literally fulfilled.

R. Kalischer also quotes from Radak's commentary to Psalms (146:3) that, just like the Babylonian exile was ended through the Gentile king Cyrus, the final exile will also be ended through Gentile kings who will send the Jews back to their homeland.

This, R. Kalischer claims, proves that the redemption will begin with the Gentile nations giving the Jews permission to return to the land of Israel. He evidently found these two sources (and a Yerushalmi discussed in the next essay) extremely convincing, as he repeatedly referred to them and even quoted them in an 1836 letter to Baron Mayer Amschel Rothschild (printed in *Derishas Tziyon*, pp. 292-293).

R. Yissachar Shlomo Teichtal cites these two sources also, in his *Em Ha-Banim Semeichah* (1:15, p. 131), quoting the Ramban in almost the exact same language as R. Kalischer (which makes me think that he copied them right out of *Derishas Tziyon*, which is understandable given that he wrote it during the Holocaust and away from his library).

II. Late Permission to Return

The Satmar Rav, in *Va-Yoel Moshe* (*Ma'amar Gimmel Shevu'os*, ch. 68, p. 84), points out that R. Kalischer quotes the Ramban imprecisely. What the Ramban actually wrote was that there will be a preliminary and small return to Israel and then, after *Mashiach* arrives, the Gentile nations will give permission to the rest of the Jews to return to Israel. This is significantly different from what R. Kalischer understood the Ramban to mean. This is not referring to the beginning of redemption, but later in the process and subsequent to the arrival of *Mashiach* (*ben David*).

R. Teitelbaum further points to Radak's commentary to Isaiah 66 in which it is made clear that the Radak, too, was referring to permission to return to the land of Israel **after** *Mashiach* comes and not to a pre-messianic return.

In other words, these two important sources do not prove what R. Kalischer and R. Teichtal say they do.

III. Clarification

What is surprising is that R. Menachem Kasher, in his *Ha-Tekufah Ha-Gedolah* (7:1-6, pp. 116-119), quotes these sources as well, even though he certainly had read R. Teitelbaum's work (he sometimes quotes it, albeit as an unnamed source and in order to refute it). How could he do so after R. Teitelbaum clearly demonstrated that these sources are inapplicable?

The answer, I believe (and after consultation with others, this seems to be the consensus), is that while R. Teitelbaum's comments are entirely correct, they are also entirely beside the point. He is assuming that R. Kalischer *et al*'s proof is from the timeline presented by those scholars: they expect the initial return to be pre-messianic and with Gentile assistance. This, R. Teitelbaum shows, is incorrect. However, that was never the intention.

The Rambam writes in *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Melakhim* 12:2:

ייראה מפשוטן של דברי הנביאים שבתחילת ימות המשיח תהיה מלחמת גוג ומגוג ושקודם
מלחמת גוג ומגוג יעמוד נביא לישראל ליישר ישראל ולהכין ליבם... ויש מן החכמים
שאומרים שקודם ביאת המלך המשיח יבוא אליהו.

וכל אלו הדברים וכיוצא בהן לא יידע אדם היאך יהיו עד שיהיו שדברים סתומים הן אצל
הנביאים. גם החכמים אין להם קבלה בדברים אלו אלא לפי הכרע הפסוקים ולפיכך יש להם
מחלוקת בדברים אלו.

The plain meaning of the words of the prophets seems to indicate that the war of Gog and Magog will take place at the beginning of the Messianic Era. Before the war of Gog and Magog, a prophet will arise to set Israel right and prepare their hearts... There are Sages who believe that Eliyahu will appear before the coming of *Mashiach*.

Nobody knows these things until they actually happen, because the prophets couched these matters in obscure phrases, and even the Sages have no set tradition about them, just their interpretation of the verses. That is why they have different opinions about these things.

In other words, neither the Sages of the Talmud nor subsequent commentators knew the exact timeline of the Messianic Era. They attempted to discern it through analyzing the Bible, but that is not an exact science.

Therefore, R. Kalischer was not basing his view on the exact timeline of the Ramban and the Radak. He certainly did not take their assessments of the order of events leading up to the redemption as authoritative, as the Rambam instructed. His proof, however, was from the concept that both the Ramban and the Radak embraced—that the return to the land of Israel will be with the assistance and permission of Gentile nations. That this can happen before *Mashiach* arrives, he proves from elsewhere (see the next essay). However, he did prove conclusively, and even R. Teitelbaum will agree to this, that the return to the land of Israel, whenever it happens, can be with the permission of Gentile nations. Thus, rather than being disproven, his point on this matter was accepted as correct.

R. Teitelbaum could have answered that he understands the Rambam differently. In a few places in *Va-Yoel Moshe* (e.g. *Ma'amar Gimmel Shevu'os*, ch. 61, p. 75), R. Teitelbaum applies the Rambam's above statement only to events after *Mashiach* has arrived. He would not allow it to refer to pre-messianic events. However, this is very difficult because the Rambam begins by applying it to whether Eliyahu will come before or after *Mashiach*, so evidently it can refer to events prior to the messianic revelation.

Essay 3: The Rebuilding of the Temple

I. The Redemption Process

The Talmud Yerushalmi (*Berakhos* 1:1) tells the story of how R. Chiyya Rabbah and R. Shimon ben Chalafta were walking together at dawn and saw the sunrise:

אמר רבי חייא רבה לר' שמעון בן חלפתא בי רבי כך היא גאולתן של ישראל בתחילה
קימאה קימאה כל מה שהיא הולכת היא רבה והולכת.

R. Chiyya Rabbah said to R. Shimon ben Chalafta ben Rebbe, “So is the redemption of Israel. At first, little by little, as long as it continues it gets bigger and goes further.

Midrash Tehillim (18:36) states:

כתוב אחד אומר מגדול וכתוב אחד אומר מגדיל ר' יודן אומר לפי שאין הגאולה באה על
אומה בבת אחת אלא קימעה קימעה ומהו מגדיל לפי שהיא מתגדלת והולכת לפני ישראל...
ומהו מגדול שנעשה להם מלך המשיח כמגדל.

R. Yudan said: One verse says “*migdol*” (2 Samuel 22:51) and another says “*magdil*” (Psalms 18:59) because the redemption does not come to this nation at one time but little by little. What is “*magdil*” (increases)? Because it increases and continues before Israel... What is “*migdol*” (tower)? Because *Mashiach* will be like a tower for them.

In other words, there will be a long process of Redemption. The question, though, is whether this process will culminate with the arrival of *Mashiach* or will begin with it. This is one of the fundamental areas of dispute between the Religious Zionists and the Anti-Zionists.

II. Pre-Messianic Redemption

R. Tzvi Hirsch Kalischer’s most powerful argument that the Redemption will begin before *Mashiach* arises is somewhat complex (*Derishas Tziyon, ma’amar* 1 ch. 2, pp. 40-41).

The Mishnah (*Ma'aser Sheni* 5:2) tells of a rabbinic enactment regarding the bringing of fruits from the fourth year in the life of a fruit-bearing tree to Jerusalem. R. Yossi states that this post-destruction (of the Second Temple) enactment contains an internal condition that when the Temple is rebuilt, the enactment will be automatically nullified. Yet, the question begs to be asked: Why cannot *Mashiach*, with his authoritative court, merely annul the enactment? Why is there a need for the enactment to be automatically nullified? The Talmud Yerushalmi on that Mishnah quotes R. Acha who explains, “זאת דוד מלכות בית דוד” This means that the Temple will be rebuilt before the kingship of the house of David [returns].” The important *Tosafos Yom Tov* commentary to that Mishnah expands on this and states, “שבית המקדש עתיד להבנות קודם” It will be that until the kingship of the house of David, our enemies will have a little lordship over us, just like there was at the beginning of the Second Temple.”

It is clear from this Yerushalmi and *Tosafos Yom Tov* that there will be some sort of limited Jewish sovereignty in Israel and the Temple will be built before *Mashiach* arises.

There are also biblical passages that clearly imply that the Jewish people will return to the land of Israel before *Mashiach* comes. For example:

ויהי דבר ה' אלי לאמר בן אדם שים פניך אל גוג ארץ המגוג נשיא ראש משך ותבל והנבא עליו ואמרת... מימים רבים תפקד באחרית השנים תבוא אל ארץ משובבת מחרב מקבצת מעמים רבים על הרי ישראל אשר היו לחרבה תמיד והיא מעמים הוצאה וישבו לבטח כלם. ועלית כשאה תבוא... לשלל שלל ולבו בז להשיב ידך על חרבות נושבות ואל עם מאסף מגוים עשה מקנה וקנין... הלוא ביום ההוא בשבת עמי ישראל לבטח... ועלית על עמי ישראל... למען דעת הגוים אתי בהקדשי בכ לעיניהם גוג.

The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, set your face toward Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal. Prophecy against him and say: ...After many days you shall be mustered; in the latter years you shall go against a land restored from war, a land where people were gathered from many nations on the mountains of Israel, which had long lain waste; its people were brought out from the nations and now are living in safety, all of them. You shall advance, coming on like a storm... to assail the waste places that are now inhabited, and the people who were gathered from the nations, who are acquiring cattle and goods... On that day when my people Israel are living securely... you will come up against my people Israel... so that the nations may know me, when through you, O Gog, I display my holiness before their eyes... (Ezekiel 38:1-3, 8-9, 12, 14, 16)

It seems that the war of Gog and Magog, which precedes the rise of *Mashiach*, will take place in the land of Israel **after** Jews have returned to settle it.

R. Teichtal, in his *Em Ha-Banim Semeichah* (2:15, p. 132), quotes the Gemara in *Megillah* (17b) that says “וכיון שנבנית ירושלים בא דוד שנאמר אחר ישובו בני ישראל ובקשו את ה'” Once Jerusalem is built, David comes, as it says ‘Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king’ (Hosea 3:5).” Rashi explains, “After they will return to the Temple, they will seek God and David their king.” Clearly, first the Jews will return to Jerusalem and the Temple will be rebuilt, and then the king from the house of David, *Mashiach*, will arise.

R. Teichtal (2:2, p. 94) also quotes the following Rashi on Psalms (70:1), that is based on a *Midrash Shochar Tov*:

משל למלך שכעס על צאנו וסתר את הדיר והוציא את הצאן ואת הרועה אחר זמן החזיר את הצאן ובנה את הדיר ולא הזכיר את הרועה אמר הרועה הרי הצאן מוחזר והדיר בנוי ואני איני נזכר כך למעלה מן הענין נאמר כי אלקים יושיע ציון וגו' ואוהבי שמו ישכנו בה הרי הדיר בנוי והצאן כנוס והרועה (זה דוד) לא נזכר לכך נאמר לדוד להזכיר אלקים להצילני.

I saw a parable to a king who became angry at his flock, broke the pen and sent out the flock and the shepherd. After time, he returned the flock and rebuilt the pen, but did not mention the shepherd. The shepherd said, “Behold, the flock is returned and the pen rebuilt, but I am not remembered.” Similarly, above it says “For God will save Zion... and they that love his name shall dwell therein” (Psalms 69:36-37). The pen is rebuilt, the flock is collected and the shepherd (this is David) is not mentioned. Therefore, it says, “Of David, to make memorial” (Psalms 70:1).

In other words, first Israel will be rebuilt and the Jewish people gathered into it, then *Mashiach* will arise.

Bereishis Rabbah 64:10 tells of how in the time of R. Yehoshua ben Chananiah, the Jews almost rebuilt the Temple. Yet, there was no *Mashiach* at that time!

Pesikta Rabbasi ch. 37 states: “When the king messiah is revealed, he will come and stand on the roof of the Temple and speak to all of Israel and tell them, ‘O humble ones, the time of your redemption has arrived.’” Clearly, the Temple will be rebuilt before *Mashiach* is revealed.

There are many other passages indicating that either the ingathering of the exiles or the rebuilding of the Temple will take place before *Mashiach* arrives. These are taken by some Religious Zionists as an indication that parts of the Redemption can occur before *Mashiach* comes. Granted, he will come. However, the return to the land of Israel and,

possibly, the rebuilding of the Temple can take place before *Mashiach* arises.

III. Contrary Indications

There are, however, passages that indicate to the contrary. *Yoma* 5b asks a question about how the priests will don their priestly garments in the Temple and answers that, at that time, Moshe and Aharon will be there to teach it to them. The implication is that the Temple will not be built until after the resurrection of the dead. While it could be answered that the resurrection of the dead will also precede the arrival of *Mashiach*, and there is a passage in one of the Rambam's letters that can support this possibility, it seems most likely that this will not be the case and that the passage is implying that the Temple service will only start after *Mashiach*'s arrival.

Similarly, *Vayikra Rabbah* 9:6 states that *Mashiach* will come and build the Temple. It cannot be any clearer than that.

IV. Resolutions

Based on Religious Zionist writings, these can all be explained by stating either that there will be different stages in the Redemption and more than one ingathering of the exiles. Perhaps there will be one ingathering, then the Temple will be rebuilt and *Mashiach* will arise, and then a final ingathering of all the rest of the Jews. (See *Em Ha-Banim Semeichah*, p. 95ff.)

Alternately, one can say that if the Jews merit redemption, it will be speedy and *Mashiach* will arise first and cause everything to happen immediately. Otherwise, which seems to be the case today when not everyone is observant, there will be a lengthy historical process culminating in the arrival of *Mashiach* and the final Redemption.

The Satmar Rav struggles with these sources and insists that no part of Redemption can happen before *Mashiach* arises. He suggests (*Va-Yoel Moshe, Ma'amar Gimmel Shevu'os*, ch. 60, p. 72) that there was a dispute among the Sages of the Mishnah over whether the Temple can be built without *Mashiach*. While the halakhic conclusion is that it cannot, this debate explains the sources implying that it can. This is a very difficult answer, and does not explain why post-Talmudic authorities, such as Rashi (on Psalms 70:1), continued to quote the non-normative view that the Temple can be built before *Mashiach* arrives.

The Satmar Rav (ch. 61, p. 74) offers another explanation. He suggests that perhaps the Redemption is a long process that starts with *Mashiach* beginning his reign that eventually spreads out to include a vast kingdom. The sources implying that Redemption will occur before *Mashiach* arises refer to after his being crowned as king but before his reign spreads throughout the world.

Again, if the Satmar Rav's goal was to prove conclusively that Religious Zionism is invalid, indeed heresy!, he does not seem to have done so conclusively.

Essay 4: The Three Oaths

I. The Oaths

The Gemara in *Kesubos* (111a) quotes R. Yossi ben R. Chanina:

ג' שבועות הללו למה אחת שלא יעלו ישראל בחומה ואחת שהשביע הקדוש ברוך הוא את ישראל שלא ימרדו באומות העולם ואחת שהשביע הקדוש ברוך הוא את אומות העולם שלא ישתעבדו בהן בישראל יותר מדאי.

What are these three oaths? One, that Israel should not rise with (or like) a wall; another, that God had Israel swear not to rebel against the nations; another, that God had the nations swear not to subjugate Israel overmuch.

These three oaths are taken by the Satmar Rav as implying a prohibition against the Jewish people returning as a group to the land of Israel. While we may return as individuals, mass immigrations, and certainly the erection of a Jewish state, violate the oath against rising with (or like) a wall.

While this passage seems like an *aggadic* (homiletic) passage and therefore not binding in practice, there are two responses to this objection. First, there are a few authorities who cite it in an halakhic context. Second, there is no such thing as “just” an *aggadic* passage. *Aggadah* informs our religious outlook and cannot be ignored!

Most significantly, the Satmar Rav quotes the Maharal of Prague’s treatment of these oaths in his *Netzach Yisrael*, ch. 24. The Satmar Rav explains the Maharal’s difficult words as implying that these oaths represent absolute prohibitions that one must sacrifice one’s life before violating. In technical terms, these oaths are *yehareg ve-al ya’avor*. It is better to be martyred than to violate these oaths.

The Satmar Rav’s treatment of this subject is lengthy, erudite and brilliant. One can only be amazed by the breadth of his knowledge and the depth of his thinking. However, this does not mean that his analysis is conclusive. It seems he overlooked or, more likely, did not have available to him an important source that refutes his analysis.

II. The Maharal

The Maharal’s commentary to *Kesubos* was published from manuscript for the first time in, I believe, 1960. In that commentary, which is now ubiquitous and readily available for anyone to verify, the Maharal explains these oaths **allegorically**, as is his

general approach. These were not literal oaths which a biblical obligation prohibits us from violating. Rather, these are Divine decrees about the exile. The exile will last as long as God has determined, not one moment less or more. Thus, the Maharal explains (and this is all explicit), the oaths that Israel should not rise with (or like) a wall and may not rebel against the nations mean that we will not be able to shorten the exile. It will end when God has decided it will end and not any time sooner. The third oath, that the nations may not subjugate us overmuch means that they will not be able to lengthen the exile. The overmuch, evidently, refers to the length of time of the subjugation. The exile will end at the appropriate time, not sooner and not later.

This explanation is significantly different from the Satmar Rav's. Indeed, as R. Shlomo Aviner points out (*Kuntres She-Lo Ya'alu Be-Chomah* 13:5-6), this explanation of the Maharal, that the oaths represent Divine decrees and not prohibitions, might very well be the intent of the authors of the *halakhic* responsa that the Satmar Rav quoted.

For example, R. Shlomo ben Shimon (Rashbash) Duran (*Responsa Rashbash*, 2) wrote:

אמנם מצוה זו אינה מצוה כוללת לכל ישראל בגלות החל הזה אבל היא נמנעת כלל כשז"ל
בגמרא כתובות פרק האחרון שהיא מכלל שבועות שהשביע הקדוש ב"ה את ישראל לא
ימהרו את הקץ ושלא יעלו בחומה וצא וראה בני אפרים מה קרה להם שמהרו את הקץ.

However, this commandment [to move to Israel] is not a communal commandment to all of Israel in this exile, but is entirely prevented as the Sages said in the Gemara in *Kesubos* in the last chapter, that it is one of the oaths that God had Israel swear—that they would not hurry the redemption or rise with a wall. Just see what happened to the descendants of Ephraim, who tried to hurry the redemption.

It is quite possible that the Rashbash is saying that we cannot move to Israel en masse because **it will not work**. We are exempt from this communal commandment because its fulfillment is (or was) currently impossible, since the oaths are a Divine decree preventing such a mass immigration. There is no evidence that he held that such a mass immigration is forbidden, only that it is impossible. The same can be said for R. Yitzchak ben Sheshet (Rivash) Prefet (*Responsa*, 101).

The Rambam, in his *Iggeres Teiman* (ch. 4, Kafach edition, p. 55), writes:

ולפי שידע שלמה ע"ה ברוח הקדש שהאומה הזו כאשר תלכד בגלות תיזום להתעורר שלא
בזמן הראוי ויאבדו בכך וישיגום הצרות הזהיר מכך והשביע עליו על דרך המשל ואמר
השבעתי אתכם בנות ירושלים וכו'.

Because Shlomo knew with Divine inspiration that this nation, once it is ensnared in exile, will plot to awaken before the appropriate time and will be destroyed through this and will fall into troubles, he warned about this and made it vow—allegorically (*al derekh mashal*)—and said, “I adjure you, O you daughters of Jerusalem” (Song of Songs 2:7).

The Satmar Rav finds this significant: The great Rambam explicitly quotes the Three Oaths! However, the Rambam states that they are allegorical. The Satmar Rav (*Va-Yoel Moshe, Ma’amar Gimmel Shevu’os*, ch. 36, p. 47) explains the allegorical aspect of these oaths as meaning that, in truth, the oaths are only binding on the generation that took the oaths (his reasoning is actually much more elaborate). Therefore, these are not legally binding oaths, “only” allegorical but still very serious matters.

This seems, in my opinion, to be a somewhat forced reading of the phrase “*al derekh mashal*.” That is not the standard way the Rambam allegorically interprets *aggadic* passages. It seems to me more likely that he understood the oaths in a manner similar to the Maharal: The oaths are Divine decrees that the exile cannot be shortened. Our efforts to do so will only end in disaster.

While the Maharal is quite explicit in his commentary to *Kesubos*, he also has a long discussion of the Three Oaths in his book *Netzach Yisrael*, ch. 24. The discussion there is very complicated and somewhat ambiguous. This format does not lend itself to extensive textual explanation, so I encourage my readers to explore R. Menachem Kasher’s *Ha-Tekufah Ha-Gedolah*, ch. 14, where this great sage delves into the language of the Maharal and offers a much more compelling explanation of the Maharal’s words that, importantly, are consistent with his commentary to *Kesubos*. Anything to the contrary yields a contradiction within the Maharal’s own writings. Also critical is that the Maharal is no longer understood as being of the surprising opinion that Jews should choose to be martyred rather than mass-immigrate to Israel.

III. History and the Oaths

According to the Maharal, as explained above, the Three Oaths refer to a Divine decree that the exile has a pre-determined length and we cannot shorten or lengthen that time (excluding, presumably, a mass repentance). Any attempts to immigrate en masse to the land of Israel will fail **unless the time for the exile has ended**.

Evidently, if we immigrate en masse and do not fail, the time of the exile has ended! The existence today of a huge portion of the Jewish people in the land of Israel, expected to be the majority within the next 15 years, indicates that the Divine decree of the exile has been fulfilled and our punishment has ended.

One critic has suggested that Religious Zionists read the Maharal as referring only to a Divine decree, rather than a prohibition, and then they reject the Divine decree. That is not at all the case. Rather, they are saying that the Divine decree has finally, and thankfully, ended (as everyone agrees it eventually would). The reality of the State of Israel is proof of it.

Essay 5: Secular Jews

I. Achav: Wicked or Righteous?

R. Menachem Kasher, in his *Ha-Tekufah Ha-Gedolah* (ch. 2, pp. 34-39), utilizes the argument that God created miracles for Achav despite his wickedness. He points to the commentaries of Radak and Abarbanel on 1 Kings 20:14 that explain that Achav himself was surprised that God would perform a miracle on his behalf, since he was an idolater. R. Kasher also explores the miracle of Purim through Esther's intermarriage, with a lengthy note delving into the matter. Therefore, suggests R. Kasher (and he was not the first to make this argument), these examples serve as a paradigm for how God will sometimes perform great miracles through the hands of non-religious Jews. This helps us understand the establishment of the State of Israel, largely by non-observant and even anti-religious Jews.

The Satmar Rav, in his *Va-Yoel Moshe (Ma'amar Gimmel Shevu'os*, ch. 131-134, pp. 136-139), discusses Achav, the idolatrous king of Israel. The Satmar Rav argues that Achav was actually a righteous man who was overcome by his evil inclination towards idolatry. However, other than that, he was not only completely righteous but sacrificed greatly for the sake of Torah. Therefore, the fact that even after his idolatrous activities he was respected by prophets and had miracles performed by God on his behalf does not demonstrate that God will perform miracles through non-religious people. Achav is not a relevant precedent in how to relate to a largely non-religious Jewish population and government.

In a later addition to *Ha-Tekufah Ha-Gedolah* (ch. 16, pp. 336-369), R. Kasher responds to the Satmar Rav's argument. He points out that the Mishnah (*Sanhedrin* 11:1) states explicitly that Achav has no portion in the world to come. The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 102b) states that Achav had written on the gates of Shomron that he rejects (*kofer*) the God of Israel (the Satmar Rav claims that this is only a reference to his idolatry and not to actual rejection of God). Rabbinic literature, and the Bible itself, is replete with references to the tremendous extent of Achav's idolatry: e.g. *Tanchuma Yashan*, *Vaeschanan*, addition 2:

וכן אחאב חטא והחטיא את ישראל מכל הרשעים שהיו לפניו... שהיה מוכר עצמו לעבודה
זרה... והשכיח שמו של הקב"ה. האיך היה מוחק את האזכרות וכותב תחתיהם וידבר הבעל
בראשית הבעל ויאמר הבעל...

Achav sinned and caused others to sin more than all of the wicked people who preceded him... He sold himself to idolatry... He cause God's name to be forgotten. How? He erased all mentions of God's name [in the Torah] and wrote instead, "And the Ba'al spoke," "In the beginning Ba'al," "And the Ba'al said"...

Furthermore, it was not just idolatry that Achav violated. *Pesikta Rabbasi* (ch. 21) states that Achav violated the prohibition of coveting. The Rambam writes in *Mishneh Torah* (*Hilkhos Rotzei'ach U-Shemiras Ha-Guf* 4:9):

וכל מי שיש בידו עוון זה הרי הוא רשע גמור ואין כל המצוות שעשה כל ימיו שקולין כנגד עוון זה... צא ולמד מאחאב עובד עבודה זרה שהרי נאמר בו רק, לא היה כאחאב (מלכים א כא, כה) וכשנסדרו עוונותיו וזכיותיו לפני אלוהי הרוחות לא נמצא לו עוון שחייבו כליה ולא היה שם דבר אחר ששקול כנגדו אלא דמי נבות שנאמר ותצא הרוח ותעמוד לפני ה' זו רוח נבות ונאמר לה תפתה וגם תוכל (מלכים א כב, כב). והרי הוא הרשע לא הרג בידו אלא סיבב קל וחומר להורג בידו.

Whoever has this sin [of murder] on his hands is a completely wicked person and none of the commandments he fulfilled throughout his life are equal to this sin... Learn from Achav the idolater about whom it says "There was no one like Achav" (1 Kings 21:25) and when his merits and demerits were arranged before God there was no sin that required his destruction and nothing else against him except the blood of Navos, as it says "Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord"—this is the spirit of Navos—"You shall persuade him, and also prevail" (1 Kings 22:21-22). This wicked man [Achav] did not kill with his own hands but arranged it, even more so for someone who kills with his hands.

According to the Rambam, Achav was not only an idolater but also a murderer. The Gemara in *Berakhos* (61b) says:

ואמר רבא לא איברי עלמא אלא לרשיעי גמורי או לצדיקי גמורי... אמר רב לא איברי עלמא אלא לאחאב בן עמרי ולר' חנינא בן דוסא.

Rava says: The world was only created for the totally wicked and the totally righteous... Rav said: The world was only created for Achav ben Omri and R. Chanina ben Dosa.

The clear implication is that Achav was completely wicked.

Despite all this, the Sages occasionally mention his good deeds, particularly in *Sanhedrin* 102b, which states that he supported Torah scholars and respected the Torah. R. Kasher quotes the *Yad Ramah* (*Sanhedrin* 103b) which says that the kings from the kingdom of Israel are not condemned to eternal punishment because they tried to save lives, they fought obligatory wars, and they suffered along with the people in times of trouble. R. Kasher also quotes the Gemara in *Mo'ed Katan* (28b), in which R. Akiva is quoted as saying that Achav only did one good thing in his life: “The king was propped up in his chariot, facing Aram” (1 Kings 22:35). R. Chananel explains that Achav maintained his composure while dying so as not to weaken the morale of the Jewish soldiers. In other words, he was a brave and strong fighter to the very end. This trait of his, suggests R. Kasher, is what prompted the Sages to occasionally look for reasons to praise him. Even though Achav was the worst of all the kings of Israel, an idolater, and a murderer, the Sages tried to find reasons to praise him—to be *melamed zekhus* on him.

Starting on p. 358, R. Kasher quotes passages directly from *Va-Yo'el Moshe* and offers a point-by-point refutation. He points out that the Satmar Rav expands Achav's sacrifices (*mesirus nefesh*) for the Torah well beyond any sources in rabbinic literature (the Satmar Rav even suggests that the Torah greats of our generation can learn from Achav's sacrifices). He also notes the sympathy the Satmar Rav displays for idolatry and points out that our traditional attitude is the exact opposite.

II. Respect for a Wicked King

The Satmar Rav (ch. 133, p. 138) quotes the Ralbag that Achav was only treated with respect during the period when he was righteous. But when he was wicked, he was not respected by the prophets. Therefore, even if Achav is used as a precedent for today's non-religious government, there would be no reason to respect it.

R. Kasher (pp. 367-368) explains that the issue of whether a wicked king is due respect is a dispute between R. Yochanan and Reish Lakish. The Ralbag follows Reish Lakish, that he should not be respected, while the *Mekhilta* follows R. Yochanan and holds that wicked kings (such as Pharaoh, Achav and Nevukhadnezzar) must be respected (cf. *Torah Sheleimah*, vol. 9, ch. 5 no. 9; vol. 12, ch. 11 no. 41).

He further points out that the Mishnah's (*Avos* 3:2) statement that one should pray for the welfare of the government does not distinguish between a righteous and wicked government.

III. Today's Non-Religious

Earlier in the volume (ch. 6, pp. 100-101), R. Kasher argues that non-religious Jews today are different than the wicked of earlier generations. Citing the *Chazon Ish* and Rav

Kook, R. Kasher explains that because non-religious Jews in the current era were not raised and educated in a traditional Orthodox environment they have the status of *tinokos she-nishbu*, i.e. are not liable for their lack of religiosity. This is certainly relevant in the current argument. According to R. Kasher, not only was Achav wicked, he was in an entirely different category from someone today who would commit the same exact sins.

Essay 6: Zionism and Idolatry

In a series of chapters in *Va-Yoel Moshe (Ma'amar Gimmel Shevu'os*, chs. 90-98), the Satmar Rav argues that anyone who is part of the Israeli government is guilty of idolatry because the government has failed to destroy the Christian churches in the Holy Land. In a sarcastic remark, he notes with surprise that the Charedi political party Agudath Israel complained that the Israeli government failed to put the ministry of religion in its hands. How, the Satmar Rav asks, could they want to be responsible for the maintenance of religions other than Judaism in the land of Israel? However, he concludes, since they are part of the Israeli government, they are already idolators anyway.

Let us review this issue and point out other opinions.

I. The Status of Christianity

Categorizing Christianity within the Jewish framework has always been complex. Depending on how one understands the concept of the trinity, one can arrive at different conclusions over whether Christianity is monotheism or polytheism. Additionally, Christians differ over how to treat saints, icons, and transubstantiation.

For almost a thousand years, at least according to some understandings of the relevant medieval texts, Jews have disagreed over whether to classify Christianity as unquestionable polytheism/idolatry (note that this view of Maimonides would also classify some streams of contemporary Orthodox Judaism as idolatry as well), unquestionable monotheism or somewhere in between.

Surprisingly, the Satmar Rav takes the in-between position, considering Christianity to be a worship of the one true God plus additional deities, a practice that this view considers forbidden to Jews but permitted within God's general covenant with humanity. Therefore, Christians are not doing anything wrong by worshipping God through Christianity. However, to Jews this violates God's special covenant with the Jewish people and is considered polytheism and idolatry.

Therefore, since Christianity is considered idolatry to Jews, Numbers 33:52 obligates us to destroy all churches in the land of Israel. This logical step, declaring that since Jews are not allowed to follow Christianity therefore the Torah requires us to destroy Christian churches as idolatrous temples, is questionable. One could easily argue the exact opposite, that since Christians are permitted by the Torah to practice their religion then there is no obligation at all. But, as we shall see, in an unredeemed world this is all academic.

II. Inaction is Equivalent to Action

The Satmar Rav goes further. He attempts to demonstrate that refraining from destroying churches, as the Israeli government has done, is not only ignoring the supposed biblical obligation but tantamount to idolatry itself. Anyone who in any way participates in this government that commits idolatry through inaction is guilty of idolatry.

R. Menachem Kasher, in chapter 13 of his *Ha-Tekufah Ha-Gedolah*, a responsum to a soldier who liberated the old city of Jerusalem from its illegal Jordanian occupation, argued that this soldier—who refrained from destroying churches in Jerusalem—is not guilty of idolatry, as the Satmar Rav would have it.

First, he points out that the proofs that the Satmar Rav brings for extending inaction regarding idolatry to action are few and not particularly substantial. The strongest proof, from Rashi's commentary to Numbers 33:51, is understood by other commentators (e.g. Ramban) and by Rashi's supercommentators (e.g. *Gur Aryeh*) as not dealing with idolatry at all. Therefore, R. Kasher argues, there is no basis to state that refraining from destroying idolatry is equivalent to idolatry itself.

III. Idolatry in an Unredeemed World

R. Kasher further points to the wording of the obligation to root idolatry out of the land of Israel in the *Sefer Ha-Chinukh* (436). The *Chinukh* repeats three times that this obligation only applies when the Jewish people have the strength and the ability to do so. Otherwise, there is no obligation at all. In today's interconnected world, destroying churches would not only put the existence of the State of Israel in jeopardy, it would endanger the lives of Jews throughout the world.

Furthermore, I would tentatively suggest that this caveat applies to any religion trying to stamp out another. As we can see from interreligious battles throughout the contemporary world, today's society makes these fights unceasing and disastrous. There was once a time when conquered nations would adopt the religion of their conqueror. That time is long past. In an unredeemed world as it exists today, religious colonialism only begets human suffering on all sides. Until *Mashiach* comes to initiate a worldwide religious revival, it is impossible to stamp out idolatry and other religious ideas by force and, therefore, I suggest that no obligation exists to try to do so.

Essay 7: Gedolim and Zionism

I. The Many Flavors of Zionism

Until now, we have discussed two attitudes towards the State of Israel:

1. Messianic Zionism — The belief that the resettling of the land of Israel and the establishment of the State of Israel are the beginning of the Redemption. According to proponents of this view, we are **already** experiencing the beginning of the Redemption, as the Gemara in *Megillah* (17b) states: “מלחמה נמי אתחלתא דגאולה היא” War is also the beginning of Redemption.” The wars Israel is currently fighting are the wars during the Redemption. This view led to the following phrasing of the blessing for the State of Israel that is recited in many synagogues: “Our Father in heaven, the rock of Israel and its redeemer, bless the State of Israel, the beginning of the sprouting of our Redemption.”

2. Anti-Zionism — The conviction that the State of Israel is a satanic creation that is based on evil and brings destruction to this world. Proponents of this view would like to see the State of Israel dismantled, but only the (crazy) ultra-extremists want the Palestinians to have control of the land. Those who share this belief refuse to recognize the State of Israel and do not use its currency. They certainly do not serve in the government, and generally do not vote in Israel’s elections.

These are certainly not the only views on the subject. There is a spectrum of religious approaches to the State of Israel between these two extremes, and the following are only two general categories that are not meant to be exhaustive (based on R. Yehuda Henkin’s *Bnei Banim*, vol. 2 *ma’amar* 2; he then proceeds to suggest a fifth approach that I do not describe here). Every thinker has his own nuanced approach.

3. Non-Zionism — The belief that a secular state of Israel has no religious significance. It has political significance, in that Jews are generally treated well by this government and many lives have been saved by it. However, it is not a “Jewish” state in the sense that being “Jewish” requires subjugation to the laws of the Torah, which the State of Israel does not have. However, culturally and religiously, Jews have fared well under this government, even though at times the State of Israel has been antagonistic towards religion and religious Jews. Non-Zionists might be classified as Zionists by some, in that they encourage living in Israel and treasure the land of Israel. They also participate in the government, just like they would in the government of any land in which they live.

4. Hopeful Zionism — The view that the current return to the land of Israel **might** be the ingathering of exiles and the State of Israel might lead to the Messianic Era. We don’t

know. It might and it might not. We'll just wait and see. In the worst case, the State of Israel is simply a temporary respite from our long exile that we should enjoy and treasure while it exists. In the best case, it is the forerunner of the Messianic kingship that will usher in the Redemption.

In my opinion, for what little it is worth, history needs to have a voice in distinguishing between the different views. What might have seemed tenable when the State of Israel was first declared may seem quite implausible after 60 years of existence. It seems hard to me to consider the State of Israel a satanic creation when it allows, and supports!, the study and living of Torah on an unprecedented scale. I am not aware of any other country in history that has funded through tax dollars so vast a number of people studying Torah. The extent of such support is simply staggering. Additionally, there is no other country in the world where people can live and practice religion as Jews with such freedom. To someone raised in exile, the freedom to be Jewish in Israel is almost palpable and is certainly easily recognizable.

Is the state perfect? Certainly not. While there is great religious freedom, it is not absolute. The state frequently acts arbitrarily, and frustratingly, against religious causes. There are compromises that need to be made because of the large secular population. Despite all this, there is simply no place like Israel where Jews have such freedom and governmental support. I can't imagine that being merely a satanic ploy.

II. The Gedolim

To which approach do the great Torah scholars (*Gedolim*) of the past half-century subscribe? There is no single answer to that because, unsurprisingly, great thinkers often disagree. Those who wish to rewrite history and claim that all *Gedolim* were Anti-Zionists have to deal with two things. First, the explicit statements we will quote shortly that prove the contrary. Second, the following question: Who was holier and smarter—the Satmar Rav or Rav Kook? The Satmar Rav, we know, was an ardent Anti-Zionist. Rav Kook was a Messianic Zionist, on the other side of the spectrum. So who was greater?

Anyone who dares to answer that question should be kicked in the rear (figuratively; I do not advocate violence). Both scholars were great in their own ways, and no one has the right to disqualify either of them. On the occasion of Rav Kook's fiftieth *yahrzeit*, R. Nissan Alpert eulogized him and began by pointing out that both Rav Kook and the Satmar Rav were outside of the mainstream on this issue. There is no reason that one's teachings should be excluded from the community any more than the other's.

In a recent article in the journal *Modern Judaism* (24:2, 2004), Dr. Zvi Kaplan points out that the Satmar Rav "opposed the Ultra-Orthodox non-Zionists, who participated in the electoral process without sharing in the ideals of Zionism, and the Religious Zionists

with equal vigor... Rabbi Teitelbaum saw the Zionist and non-Zionist Orthodox as enemies from within” (p. 170). *Va-Yo’el Moshe* was written as much, if not more, against Agudath Israel as it was against Mizrachi!

To the point, though, the record is clear that many *Gedolim* took positions closer to the center. For example, R. Tzvi Pesach Frank and R. Isser Zalman Meltzer were sympathetic to the State of Israel. Even R. Cham Shmulevitz made public statements about the positive value of the State of Israel. R. Shlomo Yosef Zevin was a Messianic Zionist and, as a Lubavitcher, he was castigated by his rebbe for this belief. The Lubavitcher Rebbe sent him harsh letters on this subject that were eventually printed in *Likkutei Sichos*. R. Yechiel Mikhel Tukaczinsky was a Zionist, as is evident in his *Ir Ha-Kodesh Ve-ha-Mikdash*. R. Meshulam Roth was also a Messianic Zionist. Well before that, R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk and R. Shlomo Ha-Kohen of Vilna were enthusiastic supporters of Mizrachi, as were R. Chanokh Henokh Eigus of Vilna (the *Marcheshes*) and R. Moshe Shmuel Glasner (the *Dor Revi’i*). A comprehensive history of the Mizrachi movement was published in *Sefer Ha-Mizrachi (Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1946)*. The chief rabbis of Israel, in particular R. Avraham Kook and R. Yitzchak Herzog, were first class *Gedolei Torah*. Notable also was R. Shaul Yisraeli and today’s R. She’ar Yashuv Cohen, R. Dov Lior, R. Aharon Lichtenstein and R. Hershel Schachter.

R. Moshe Feinstein was asked about the prayer for the State of Israel. He said that it should be modified to indicate a Hopeful Zionist view, instead of a Messianic Zionist approach. The text, as he recommended, is as follows: “Our Father in heaven, the rock of Israel and its redeemer, bless the State of Israel **that it become** (*she-t’hei*) the beginning of the sprouting of our Redemption.”

R. Yosef Eliyahu Henkin was adamantly opposed to the position of the Satmar Rav. He wrote (as translated on the National Council of Young Israel website):

I was shocked to read in *Chomoteinu of Cheshvan 5719* the slanderous notion that we are required to give our lives (*limsor nefesh*) to frustrate and resist the efforts of the State of Israel in its struggle against those who would rise up against them. This was stated as a *p’sak din* based on what we learn that Israel is restricted from rebelling against the nations (*Ketubot 111a*)...

Now all the rabbis who were opposed to Zionism and the establishment of a state took up that position until the time that it was officially founded. Once the state was declared, anyone who plays into the hands of the nations of the world even where there is no imminent danger, is clearly a *moseir* and *rodeif*. All the more when there is danger to destruction of life in so doing... Surely, those who recently emigrated must be very weary of

the state's efforts to strip them of their Torah way of life, but to proclaim that anyone who aids the state is a *rodeif*, well such talk is the severest form of *redifa*.

If I'm not mistaken, this is Rav Henkin calling the Satmar Rav a *rodef* (pursuer)!

R. Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, author of *Seridei Esh*, wrote an essay titled "Herzl, the Man of Religion" (now in *Kisvei Ha-Gaon R. Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg*, vol. 2 p. 298ff.). After that essay, the editor of that volume (Dr. Marc B. Shapiro, who kindly sent me a copy of the book) collected a number of pro-Israel and pro-Zionist statements of R. Weinberg. One example is from the journal *Ha-Pardes* (Nissan 5726), in which R. Weinberg opposed the establishment of Israel Independence Day as a religious holiday because it was done unilaterally by the Israeli Rabbinate, without approval from other great scholars. In that letter, R. Weinberg expresses his great joy at the establishment of the State of Israel.

It is also no secret that R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik was a Zionist. While he was not a Messianic Zionist, he was a leader of the Mizrachi organization. R. Walter Wurzburger, in assaying the various approaches to Zionism, describes R. Soloveitchik's view as follows (*God is Proof Enough*, p. 90; for another discussion, with relevant citations, see R. Mayer Twersky, "A Glimpse of the Rav" in *Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik: Man of Halacha, Man of Faith*, pp. 116-119):

On the one hand, he categorically refuses to treat the establishment of the State of Israel as a Messianic event. For all his enthusiasm for an independent Jewish State, he was not prepared to accord it the preliminary status of *Atchalta De'Geulah* (the beginning of the Redemption). On the other hand, he was unequivocally opposed to the do-nothing passivity of the pietists as they await the arrival of the Messiah.

I personally saw both R. Dovid Lifschitz and R. Ahron Soloveichik recite *hallel* on Israel Independence Day. See the biographical article of R. Lifschitz by his son-in-law, Dr. Chaim Waxman (*My Yeshiva College*, p. 297): "Eretz Israel and Medinat Israel were among his greatest loves throughout his adult life." Dr. Waxman also wrote to me about the joy R. Lifschitz had when he saw his grandson, R. Ari Waxman (now a rebbe in Yeshivat [Hesder] Sha'alvim), in an Israeli army uniform: "Reb David was also incredibly proud of Ari for being a soldier in the Israeli army."

R. Ovadiah Yosef has expressed great appreciation for the State of Israel. See, for example, his responsa on whether to recite *hallel* and *she-hecheyanu* on Israel Independence Day (*Yabi'a Omer*, vol. 6, *Orach Chaim* nos. 41-42). In the journal *Torah She-Be-Al Peh* (16, 5734, pp. 19-20), R. Yosef wrote: "I wish to emphasize first that the

State of Israel and independent Jewish reign in our holy land is of the highest historical and religious significance.”

R. Yaakov Kamenetsky writes in his *Emes Le-Ya'akov Al Ha-Torah* (Exodus 12:2 n. 17):

עוד הוסיף רבנו בכמה הזדמנויות שכך עלינו להבין גם את הקמת מדינת ישראל בימינו, שלאחר החורבן הגדול והייאוש שנאחז בקרב שארית הפליטה, וכן לאור מצבם הנואש והאבוד של יהדות רוסיה, סיבב הקב"ה את הקמת המדינה כדי לחזק את הזהות היהודית ולקיים את הקשר שבין יהדות הגולה וכלל ישראל.

Our teacher [R. Kamenetsky] added on many occasions that it is incumbent on us to understand the establishment of the State of Israel in our day in this way: After the great destruction and despair that overtook the remnant, and given the desperate and destroyed status of Russian Jewry, God caused the establishment of the State of Israel in order to strengthen the connection to Judaism and to sustain the link between the Jews in exile and the Jewish nation.

R. Eliyahu Dessler has two relevant letters, from 1948 and 1949, that were published in *Mikhtav Me-Eliyahu*, vol. 3 pp. 349-353. He writes that he is hesitant to call the establishment of the State of Israel and the ensuing military victory the beginning of the Redemption, but he considers it a possibility (i.e. a Hopeful Zionist position). He also has harsh words for anyone who refuses to see God's miraculous intervention in this, considering them heretics who reject Divine Providence.

R. Avraham Yishayahu Karelitz, the author of *Chazon Ish* and a close colleague of R. Dessler's, also took the position of Hopeful Zionism according to one report. The following letter from R. Zvi Yehuda, who was very close with R. Karelitz at the end of the latter's life (he passed away just five years after the establishment of the State of Israel), was published in *Tradition* 18:1 (Summer 1979):

Based on my intimate closeness to Hazon Ish at the time, I am in the position to deny categorically such a libelous and disastrous rumor [that he predicted the destruction of the State of Israel in the near future]. Hazon Ish was the paradigm of a halakhist; he never assumed the role of prophet or soothsayer... Nor was the great sage Hazon Ish (and claims to the contrary by partisan ideologians notwithstanding) imbued with any negative or hostile attitude to the State of Israel. He genuinely loved Jews and welcomed indeed anything that may save their lives or improve their lot. The current "oral tradition" circulated within some yeshiva (or

“kollel”) coteries, that Hazon Ish was against the State, and even proclaimed its doom and decreed its fall within a prescribed span of time, is no more than a vicious lie—perpetrated by the zealots through a deliberate distortion, and received by the naive on the basis of an unfortunate misunderstanding...

Thus we examine the meaning of the State of Israel by halakhic categories: Is it really, from the point of view of our limited human judgment, the beginning of redemption? Is it certainly and clearly a positive, constructive redemptive act?

“Time will tell.” This is the gist of Hazon Ish’s response, that by malice or stupidity (or both) is now distorted and repeated as if it were a terrible pronouncement of doom.

The following is from the definitive biography of R. Eliezer Silver—R. Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Silver Era*, pp. 262, 274, 302:

Another time [R. Eliezer] Silver was in a quandary within himself and with his associates regarding a Bonds for Israel dinner in his city. Every year Silver publicly supported this event and attended the dinner. In 1964 the guest of honor was to be Nelson Glueck, the president of the Hebrew Union College. Many Orthodox Jews felt that Silver should not be present at an affair honoring such a prominent Reform Jewish personality. Nevertheless, Silver did attend, since his concern for the cause and feeling of communal responsibilities won out. At the affair, when questioned about his presence, Silver declared, “How could I stay away from a dinner aiding the State of Israel?...”

Silver also exerted his influence in the determination of Agudat Israel and *Agudat Harabanim* policy towards the formation of the Jewish State. Silver himself had always been in favor of such a state, despite his Agudat Israel ties. Following the Balfour Declaration in 1917, Silver marched in a New York Zionist parade in its support. When Chief Rabbi Abraham Kook visited the United States in 1924, the *Agudat Harabanim* invited him to address its convention...

Silver’s letter [in opposition to Satmar anti-Zionist activities] did not abate the course of action of the Satmar element. It did, however, strengthen the

more moderate forces in American Orthodoxy. His viewpoint was widely cited in Mizrahi circles. Silver later participated in a Mizrahi conference. Afterwards, at an Agudah conclave, there were those who desired to disbar Silver. It was reported that Rabbi Kotler opposed this request...

R. Pinchas Teitz's daughter, Dr. Rivkah Blau, wrote the following in her biography of her great father, *Learn Torah, Love Torah, Live Torah*, pp. 150-153:

After the Shoah the significance of whether Israel would win recognition as the Jewish state was so strong that R. Teitz left a radio on in his study over Shabbat, November 28/29, 1947, in order to hear the vote in the United Nations...

When it became clear that there would be a Jewish state of Israel again, R. Teitz thought it was time for a completely new approach.

He called his 1948 essay "A Key [or, An Opening] To Redemption" and applied halakhic analysis, in the tradition of the Rogatchover [with whom he was very close - GS], to the new situation. He began with a question: do the remarkable events indicate the Redemption, the beginning of the Redemption or a chance, with the "key" or "opening" now available to usher in a period of redemption? His response, in my translation and paraphrase, was:

First, how did our generation merit these events? The end of the exile has come because of the halakhic rule that if one deserves two punishments, one gets the harsher punishment immediately and does not have to undergo the lesser punishment. When we were sent into exile and given into the hands of Job's Satan, we would endure all kinds of affliction, but, like Job, we were supposed to survive. Between 1935 and 1945, we learned that there is no place on this globe, however cultured and democratic, to have an exile. If the world could cold-bloodedly stand by while six million were murdered, there is no safe place for Jews. The punishment of death incorporates all other punishments; the Shoah was the absolute, the maximum, and covers the end of exile as well. In ten years, we suffered a concentrated exile equal to that of all the preceding centuries. Now it is time to go to a city of refuge...

R. Teitz went further in defining how that era would register in history in an essay for the New Year 5709 [October 1948] on “The State of Israel and the Torah-Jew.” He asked, “Will we be a generation of mourners for the great destruction” or “a generation of redemption, of builders who establish the foundation for the Jewish future?”...

He thought that the founding of the state of Israel eliminated most of the differences between Agudath Israel and Mizrachi, which had centered on the question of whether there should be a Jewish state at all. Once this question had been answered with a fact, the parties should cooperate. R. Teitz met regularly in 1948-49 with a group trying to create a united religious front in Israel, but the two groups elected to remain separate.

The following is from Artscroll’s *Reb Shraga Feivel: The Life and Times of Rabbi Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, the Architect of Torah in America*, pp. 331-332, 335-336,

On Friday, November 29, 1947, the United Nations debated the issue of partitioning the British Mandate for Palestine into two countries, one Arab and one Jewish. Reb Shraga Feivel prayed fervently for partition. He had no radio in his house, but that Friday he borrowed one and set it to the news, leaving it on for Shabbos. He waited with such tense anticipation to hear the outcome of the U.N. vote that he did not come to *shalosh seudos*. When he heard the U.N.’s decision to establish a Jewish state, he stood up and recited the blessing *הטוב והמטיב Who is good and Who does good...*[3]

Four days after the United Nations vote, on 19 Kislev, Reb Shraga Feivel spoke in Bais Medrash Elyon, to present his *talmidim* with a Torah perspective on the event. He began by emphasizing that in the absence of prophecy no one could interpret the U.N. declaration with any certitude.[7] Nevertheless the whole tenor of his remarks reflected his hope that the moment was a positive one for the Jewish people.[8] He described three aspects of the final redemption: the redemption of the Land, the ingathering of the exiles, and the return of the Divine Presence to her proper place. The redemption of the Land is the first of the three...

In a similar vein, he also explained why the secular Zionists might have been chosen to play such a fateful role in the history of the Jewish people... Divine Providence might have arranged that the secular Zionists

play a major role in the redemption of *Eretz Yisrael* precisely in order to maintain their connection to *Klal Yisrael*.

In a conversation with the Satmar Rav, shortly after his talk on the U.N. declaration, Reb Shraga Feivel was subjected to the sharpest criticism for his “Zionist leanings.” Later he told his family, “I could have answered him *Chazal* for *Chazal*, Midrash for Midrash, but I did not want to incur his wrath, for he is a great man and a *tzaddik*.” He added with a twinkle, “And besides, he has a fiery temper”...

[3] In 1948, after the Arabs attacked the newly declared Jewish state and soldiers were falling on the battlefield, several *roshei yeshiva* taunted Reb Shraga Feivel for having recited the blessing. Reb Shraga Feivel turned to Rabbi Aharon Kotler, who agreed with him that the favorable U.N. resolution was indeed worthy of the blessing. *Rabbi Nesanel Quinn*.

[7] The account of this speech is based on the notes of Rabbi Yaakov Homnick, which were subsequently published in his pamphlet, “*Nitzanei Torah B’America: R’ Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz*.”

[8] Even the Brisker Rav, one of the strongest opponents of Zionism, said of the U.N. vote that it was “a smile from Heaven, but the rulers of the State ruined it.” Quoted in Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe’s *Bein Sheshet LeAsor*, p. 146.

Along these lines, I contacted a grandson of R. Mendlowitz and he reported to me the following:

My father a”h told me many times that Zeide would definitely have said *Hallel* on *Yom Ha-Atzma’ut* (he was *niftar* in Sept. 1948).

My Zeide was known to have said that when Israel was recognized as a Jewish state that there was no greater *simcha* in his life.

On his deathbed, on practically his last breath, he instructed that his son-in-law Rabbi Alexander Linchner was to go to Eretz Yisroel and “*tut epes far de Sfardishe kinder*” (do something for the Sephardi children). He knew the children were shipped off to secular Kibbutzim, and their *Tefillin* confiscated.

In other words, he knew about the anti-religious forces in Israel but still considered the state to be a major step towards the redemption, if not already a part of it. And he voiced these views in public and directly to the Satmar Rav.

Note also that R. Aharon Kotler agreed with R. Mendlowitz that the UN vote was reason to recite a blessing of *ha-tov ve-ha-meitiv* in thanksgiving!

R. Avraham Weinfeld, a prominent rabbinic authority from Monsey, wrote a long essay about the State of Israel in 1957 that was published in the journal *Ha-Ma'or* and then, along with his subsequent responses to critiques, in his *Lev Avraham* (nos. 129-131). In response to an anti-Zionist essay, he posits that it is impossible to determine who is correct over the religious status of the State of Israel. Those who think they can prove it either way are driven by their emotions and not Torah sources. Therefore, “there is no room to establish a holiday nor to decree a fast. All we can do is pray to God that it be for good.”

Interestingly, at the end of his original essay he has two “blurbs” from *Gedolim* who read his essay and shared their reactions. R. Reuven Grozovsky and R. Yisrael Weltz agreed with what he wrote.

R. Yehudah Levi writes the following in his *Facing Contemporary Challenges*, pp. 17-18 (the book has approbations from R. Zalman Nechemiah Goldberg and R. Ovadiah Yosef). Note the lack of objections due to the Three Oaths:

We lack prophets who can interpret the ways of Providence for us. Nevertheless, whoever opens his eyes will see that the establishment of a Jewish state in the Holy Land is an event of historic proportions. Anyone denying this is only deceiving himself. Even regarding the British Mandate, Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, the great leader of the old Yishuv in Jerusalem, admonished:

Where are the Torah-true Jews of the Diaspora? Do they not see here the finger of God.... Let us imagine a small cloud being seen after two thousand years without rain. Will not everyone say with great excitement: “Perhaps... perhaps after all?” Is the Mandate not at least such a cloud?

He also regarded the building of the Land through settlements throughout the whole country as *athchalta di-geulah* (the beginning of the Redemption), despite the sorry state of Torah education and observance in those settlements.[10]

After the state's founding, the "finger of God" became even more evident. Rabbi Dessler, author of *Mikhtav MeEliyahu* and distinguished *mashgiach* (mentor) of Ponevezh Yeshiva, said:

A great kindness [from on High]... our nation's settling in its own state in the Holy Land. —From this we must draw conclusions and establish *emunah* [faith] in our hearts. Woe to him who comes to the Day of Judgment still too blind to see this concrete fact.[11]

Rabbi. Y.Tz. Dushinsky, the successor of Rabbi Y.Ch. Sonnenfeld, wrote in the same spirit:

The only hope to save the situation is, if our brethren who are aware of the sanctity of the Land and want it to be built on the basis of Torah and our heritage... all of them unite to build the ruins and plant the desolate areas, to repair her moral ruins. That they participate in the settling of the Land with dedication and loyal love.... To put up new Torah-true settlements and to see to it that God's Torah be complete—covering all aspects of life and building of the Land of Israel.[12]

Even more explicit are the words of Rabbi Tzevi Pessach Frank, author of *Har Tzevi*:

It is now almost two years that we were privileged to see how God remembered His people to succor them with the beginning of Redemption.... As it was during the first redemption in the days of Joshua, thus we have seen the beginning of his final redemption.[13]

Rabbi E.M. Bloch, Rosh Yeshiva of Telz, wrote similarly:

Despite all the flaws and defects in the leadership of the State of Israel, its very existence, which came about through obvious miracles, has importance which we have to relate to with recognition and satisfaction. And this recognition we must express publicly.[14]

On another occasion he said, "The healthy elements among the Jewish people bear great responsibility regarding... the survival of the Jewish state." [15]

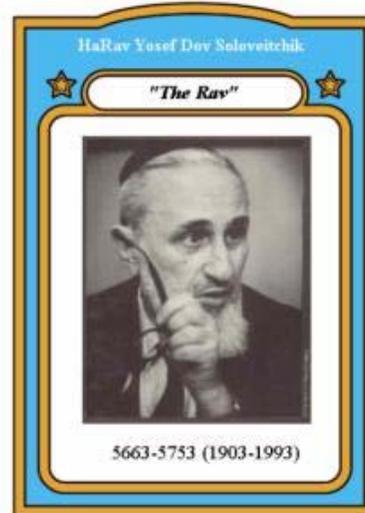
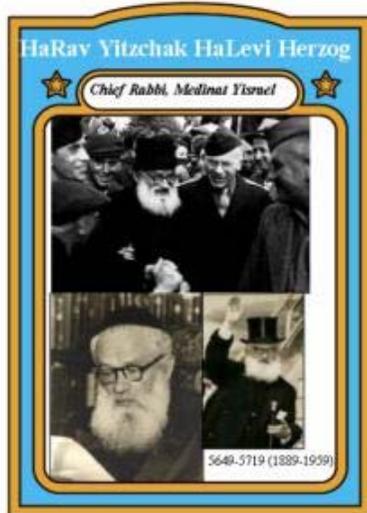
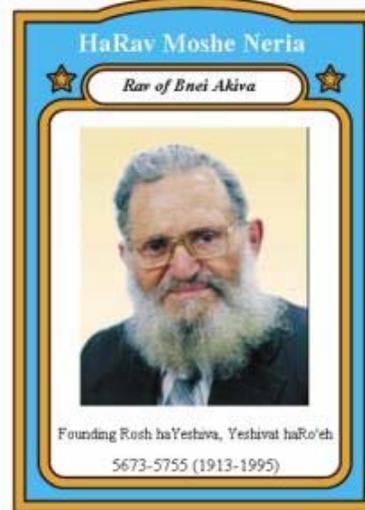
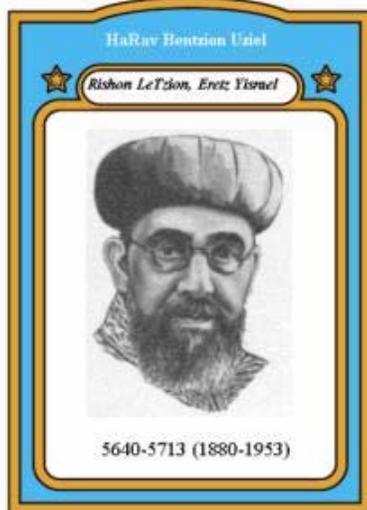
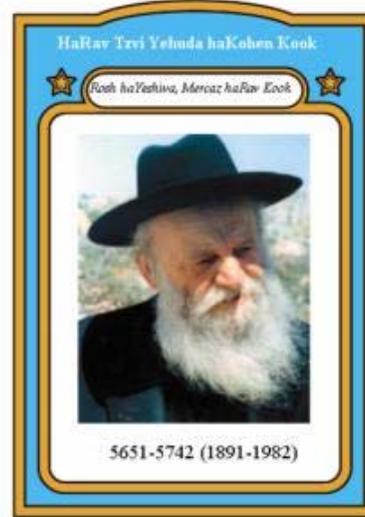
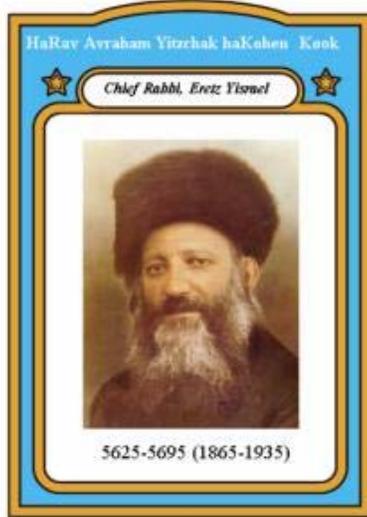
[10] *HaIsh 'al HaChomah*, Pt. 2, p.313.

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- [11] Quoted from R. E.E. Dessler, *Mikhtav MeEliyahu*, Pt. 3, p.352.
- [12] R. Y.Tz. Dushinsky, letter to *Tageblatt* (15 Shevat 5694). Facsimile published in *HaModia* (30 Tishrey 5754 / 15 Oct. '93).
- [13] R. Tz.P. Frank, *Kerem Tzion* 11:17 #1.
- [14] R. E.M. Bloch, letter of 5714, brought in *Mitzvoth HaShalom*, p. 605.
- [15] *Alumni Union of Yeshiva Telz of Cleveland, Bulletin*, Teveth 5747.

This list could continue almost endlessly. My point, which I think has been firmly established, is that the *Gedolei Torah* had different views on the subject of Zionism, with many of them taking positions throughout the spectrum. The statement that I have seen that the *Gedolim* were all opposed to Zionism is simply factually incorrect. They were, by and large, against the Anti-Zionist approach of the Satmar Rav. However, as R. Nissan Alpert said, that view is also part of Torah, just as is Rav Kook's Messianic Zionism.

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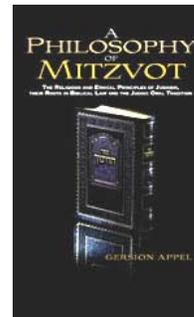
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