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Theodore Herzl and Contemporary Zionism in the Context of Joseph and His Brothers^{1*}

**IN MEMORY OF THE RAV ZTZ" L
SHELI VESHLO, SHELO HU**

Rabbi Rakeffet's article was first published in 'Maaseh HaRav' by Rabbi Mendi Gopin which honors Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's 30th yahrzeit.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Torah People have constantly been confronted with the urgency to reach decisions and accommodations to enable them to endure and thrive. Many times, the conclusions and resolutions which came about impacted on the mortal and communal survival of the Jewish nation. The notables who are challenged to evolve the guidelines must constantly query the efficacy of their judgment. How do they know that their guidance is correct and that it reflects the divine mandate and legacy?

Rabbi Joseph R Soloveitchik evoked this

dilemma in an address that he delivered to the annual convention of the American Mizrahi (Religious Zionist) movement in the early 1960s. The Rav interpreted the discord between the Biblical Joseph and his brothers as a dispute regarding the appropriate Jewish lifestyle at that point in time.¹

Joseph revealed his dreams to his siblings and their enmity towards him intensified. In one vision, the brothers were binding

1*. This essay is a component of a broader study, part of which will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Hakirah*.

1. Between 1962 and 1967, the Rav addressed the Mizrahi conventions. These talks were delivered in Yiddish. Five of these lectures were later published in Hebrew by Rabbi David Telsner, titled *Hamesh Derashot* (Jerusalem: Tal Orot Institute, 1973). An English version appeared with the title, *The Rav Speaks: Five Addresses* (Jerusalem: Tal Orot Institute, 1983). This English edition was republished by the Toras HaRav Foundation in 2002. The talk about the Biblical Joseph is titled "And Joseph Dreamt a Dream." The portion cited in this study appears on pages 25-33. The Biblical portion analyzed by the Rav is from Genesis 37:1-11.

sheaves in the middle of the field. Joseph declared:

Behold! — my sheaf arose and remained standing; then behold — your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf. (Genesis 37:7)

In a second revelation, Joseph asserted:

Look, I dreamt another dream: Behold! — the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me (Genesis 37:9).

The brothers responded: ‘Would you then reign over us? Would you then dominate us?’ (Genesis 37:8). His father declared: “What is this dream that you have dreamt! Are we to come — I and your mother and your brothers — to bow down to you to the ground?” (Genesis 37:10).

The Rav explained that Joseph was apprehensive that the sons of Jacob would soon be exposed to an alien environment, far from the Land of Canaan.

The Rav stated:

What in truth had disturbed Joseph’s peace of mind? In regard to such matters, our Sages have said: “A man’s dreams bespeak his innermost thoughts and feelings” [*Berakoth* 55b]. What did Joseph seek? To what did he aspire? What foreboding troubled him? The answer is: an obscure feeling of insecurity frightened him. What were the elements of this insecurity? — the Biblical Joseph was not persuaded that “and Jacob dwelt in the land of his father’s wanderings” (Gen. 37.1) would endure for long. The words “for your seed shall be a stranger in an alien land” (Gen. 15:13) kept tolling in his ears. He saw himself and his brothers in an alien environment, far from the land of Canaan, in new circumstances and under new conditions

of life. In his dream he saw “behold we are binding sheaves” (Gen. 37:7): we are no longer in Canaan; we are in the land of Egypt and can no longer be shepherds. We are integrated into a new economy, with new styles of living, characteristics, and laws. We can no longer support ourselves by pasturing sheep. The sons of Jacob have to learn new occupations such as farming, building, stone-cutting, and woodwork, and become skilled in gold, silver, and brass, which are adapted to the new conditions. Basically, he dreamt of a new framework within which the unity of the family could be preserved, even in the far places where the Creator of the universe would scatter them. His constant preoccupation was the continuation of Abraham’s tradition amidst a new economic structure and civilization.

The brothers did not understand him, for they looked upon the future as a continuation of the present. They perceived all problems from within the framework of their life in Canaan, the land of their father’s wanderings. In the traditional surroundings, in the thoroughly familiar habitat of the Patriarchs, they did not need new frameworks or novel economic methods.

The Biblical Joseph relates: “and behold the sun and the moon and the eleven stars bow down to me” (Gen. 37:9) — there is secular culture, great and powerful technology creating wonders and changing the foundations of our life. Even if it is true that in Canaan, we can get along without it — this secular culture entails destructive elements, many negative and perverse aspects; it may be a blessing and a curse simultaneously, and thus as long as one can live without it, so much the better for

the spirit — finally we will have to relate to it. The confrontation will not take place in Canaan, however, where life flows serenely, but in a new and alien land where the tempo of life is greatly accelerated, and fundamental changes occur daily. God's decree "your seed will be strangers in a land not their own" (Gen. 15:13) will be fulfilled sooner or later. In "a land not their own," I fear, we will not be able to maintain a separation between us and the surroundings. If we will not be prepared for new conditions, the environment will swallow us! Our intellectual forces will completely assimilate. On the other hand, if we think of the future, we can plan for binding the sheaves, for "the sun and the moon and the eleven stars" — for a new economic and social order. We can render Abraham's heritage triumphant in the alien surroundings too! Abraham's Torah is very powerful, but only when we are prepared for the conflict and know exactly what to do in the new environment.

Joseph's brothers, however, answered him: "Why do you meddle in the secrets of the All-Merciful? [*Berakoth* 10a]. Why do you get involved with the secret plans of God? We do not know when God will execute His decree of "your seed shall be a stranger" (Gen. 15:13). Meanwhile we are in Canaan. We live our lives in holiness and purity; we support ourselves by pasturing sheep. We do not have to worry about the future — we will get by without binding sheaves, without the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars." But Joseph stood fast; he was not at all secure regarding the political and economic status quo of Jacob's house in Canaan, and he never ceased warning his

brothers. "And his brothers were jealous of him" (Gen. 37:11) — the more he tried to convince them, the more their stubbornness grew — "and they hated him still more because of his dreams and words" (Gen. 37:8).

Did Joseph quarrel with his brothers? Certainly! Was their dispute for the sake of Heaven? Most certainly!! Joseph perceived the fate of the sons of Jacob from the perspective of a bleak future, lacking in security and mysterious, when would be fulfilled the decree of "your seed shall be a stranger" (Gen. 15:13); and he demanded preparedness to meet that future. The brothers, however, were unanimous in their opinion that it is forbidden to gaze too intently into the mirror of the future: "do not probe that which is wondrous for you;" that one must judge the future by the present. We live in Canaan. It is unnecessary and forbidden for us to make preparations for a land that is unknown to us, and a future that is hidden.

In this dispute in the name of Heaven, Divine Providence decided in favor of Joseph, and the house of Jacob was saved from destruction only due to Joseph's dreams. What would the brothers have done without him when "the famine was intense in the land, and they finished the food" (Gen. 47:13)? Were it not for Joseph's dreams, the entire house of Jacob would have perished of starvation. If not for "God sent me before you to ensure your survival in the land and to sustain you for a momentous deliverance" (Gen. 46:7), the heritage of Abraham would have perished and the choosing of Israel would not have been realized.

II. APPLICATION OF THE RAV'S EXPOSITION

The Rav compared the dilemma confronted by Jacob and his brothers to the crises which challenged the Mizrachi and the Agudah in the modern world. By the dawn of the twentieth century, the Zionist movement had become an ever more popular undertaking in the Jewish world. Many of the leading Zionist visionaries and theorists were not religious and were unlearned in classic rabbinical studies. Theodore Herzl, the founder of the Modern Zionist movement thus envisioned the future Jewish state:

I believe that a wondrous generation of Jews will spring into existence. The Maccabees will rise again. Let me repeat once more my opening words: The Jews who wish for a State will have it. We shall live at last as free men on our own soil and die peacefully in our own homes. The world will be freed by our liberty, enriched by our wealth, and magnified by our greatness. And whatever we attempt there to accomplish for our own welfare will react powerfully and beneficially for the good of humanity.²

The Agudah chose to look askance at the nascent Zionist organization. This was in contrast to the standpoint of the Mizrachi party which was organized in 1902 (5662) as a religious faction in the World Zionist Organization. The Rav explained their dispute in the context of the viewpoints of Joseph and his brothers.

The Rav stated:

What was the dispute between the “Joseph” of 5662 and his brethren, the great Torah leaders? These our brothers, great leaders, rabbinical giants of Israel, men of holiness and piety, evaluated the future from the standpoint of a peaceful, tranquil, and satisfied present when the communities of Brisk, Mohilev, Khaslavichy, and Lubavitch were still intact — an era when hundreds and thousands of synagogues were filled with worshippers and Torah students. Although the fire of revolution had even then already seized part of the encampment, and some of the youth had rebelled against our traditional way of life, those of true faith comprised the overwhelming majority of the Jewish people; and of the Jew on the street and the Jew in the house of study it could justifiably have been said “How good and beautiful it is when brothers dwell together (Ps. 133:1). Therefore, they believed that joining together with Western European Jews who were generally non-observant and not overly pious, would be dangerous for Judaism. Our brothers cited the verse “when you joined the wicked, God destroyed your acts” (see 2 Chron. 20:3), and they categorically rejected all dealings with the secular. Their entire pattern of thought, motivation, and feeling was permeated with sanctity, the environment within which they lived was laden with holiness, tradition, and Torah.

The Joseph of 5662 (the Mizrachi) was as one who “prophesies and does not know what he prophesies” [see Rashi to Genesis 45:18]. He agreed with his great brothers that if the future is viewed only through

2. The concluding words of Herzl's *The Jewish State* (1896).

the telescope of the present, there was no justification for joining the so-called “freethinkers.” But within the Joseph of 5662, there gnawed a dark foreboding of something terrifying, an apocryphal vision of catastrophe, of cataclysm, of tempest and imminent destruction. Although he could not verbalize it in clear grammatical sentences, the Joseph of 5662 felt that those very Jewish cities of Brisk, Minsk, Vilna, Warsaw, Mohilev, Humel, and Yekaterinoslav [Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine], together with their houses of study, yeshivot, and effervescent religious life, would be first to succumb to secularism, and then be wiped off the face of the earth. The Joseph of 5662 instinctively sensed that the relative tranquility, peace, quiet, and security in which his great brethren lived, was only a phantasm. The Joseph of 5662 saw in his dream “and behold we were binding sheaves” (Gen. 37:7) — that we would be enveloped by a new economic order.

The lion’s share of Jewry would be centered in the Western world, and society would be based on science, where “the sun and the moon and the eleven stars” (Gen. 37:9) will radiate scientific learning and technology; where every scientific discovery will be publicized in the newspapers as the greatest sensation, where all professions will be linked to higher education. The Joseph of 5662 unconsciously sensed that it was forbidden to rely on a continuation of the status quo, that great changes were about to occur in Jewish life for which we would have to be prepared. He sensed the advent of an era when there would be no yeshivot in Brisk, Vilna, and Minsk; when America would be turned into a

place of Torah; and when Israel, the State of Israel, would become the core center of Torah.

The Rav probed and investigated how a human mortal person can be certain that his thoughts and theories are correct. The Rav differentiated between halakhic rulings and hashkafic-philosophic decisions. Concerning Halakhah, the Almighty invested the rabbinical Sages with the exclusive authority in deciding the law in accordance with the guidelines revealed to Moses at Sinai. It is the Almighty’s will that the Sages apply the principles of the Torah to the best of their human understanding. God will never interfere with the judicial process through which the Halakhah is determined. This is in contrast to Hashkafic and temporal guidance. Here the rabbinical savants may lead, direct, and show the way for their disciples and followers. Yet the Sages must constantly evaluate their teachings and certify that their results are in accordance with the Almighty’s will and blessing. To accentuate this dissimilarity, the Rav cited the impassioned episode related in the Talmud regarding the ritual status of the “oven of Akhnai” (*Baba Metzia*, 59b). The Soncino translation of the Talmud thus elucidates the controversy regarding this oven:

This refers to an oven, which, instead of being made in one piece, was made in a series of separate portions with a layer of sand between each. R. Eliezer maintains that since each portion in itself is not a utensil, the sand between prevents the whole structure from being regarded as a single utensil, and therefore it is not liable to uncleanness. The Sages however hold

that the outer coating of mortar or cement unifies the whole, and it is therefore liable to uncleanness (p. 352).

The Talmud explains that this oven was called “Akhnai” which can be translated as “the coiled serpent.” It means that the Sages surrounded the oven with discussions like this coiled snake, and then declared it susceptible to uncleanness. R. Eliezer then sustained and certified his viewpoint that the oven was virtually pure with many supernatural confirmations. The Talmud taught:

On that day R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them. Said he to them: If the halakhah agrees with me, let this carob tree prove it! Thereupon the carob tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place — others affirm, four hundred cubits. No proof can be brought from a carob tree, they retorted. Again, he said to them: If the halakhah agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it! Whereupon the stream of water flowed backward — No proof can be brought from a stream of water, they rejoined. Again, he urged: If the halakhah agrees with me, let the walls of the study hall prove it, whereupon the walls inclined to fall. But R. Joshua rebuked them, saying: When scholars are engaged in a halakhic dispute, what right do you have to interfere? Hence they did not fall, in honor of R. Joshua, nor did they resume their upright position in honor of R. Eliezer; and they are still standing thus inclined. Again, he said to them: If the halakhah agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven! Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: Why do you dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in

all matters the halakhah agrees with him! But R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: It is not in heaven (Deuteronomy 30:12). What did he mean by this? — Said R. Jeremiah: That since the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because Thou hast long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai: “According to the majority the issue shall be decided” (Exodus 23:2). And since the majority of the Sages reject R. Eliezer’s viewpoint, his position is rejected in practice.

The Rav analyzed the halakhic implications of this Talmudic saga. He declared:

We all know the story of the “oven of Akhnai.” When in the course of a Talmudic dispute, a legal discussion over a question of ritual impurity, R. Eliezer ben Hyrkanus tried to adduce miraculous proofs for his view, to the extent that a Heavenly voice proclaimed him to be in the right, the other Sages refused to accept his opinion and ignored those signs. When he then refused to accept the majority view, they banned contact with him — and he remained in that bitter state until his death. Subsequently, the death and suffering of colleagues and students were attributed to their treatment of him. We still remember the days when we had learned, trembling and with tears in our eyes, about R. Joshua b. Hanania (colleague and opponent of R. Eliezer) standing up and proclaiming: “The Torah is no longer in Heaven!!” God handed over technical legal matters to the authority of the Sages to rule on what is clean and what is unclean, to decide between obligation and exemption, forbidden and permitted. But in historical

questions, not those relating to the legal status of ovens, food, or determination of fixed monetary obligations, but those relating to the destiny of the Eternal People, God himself decides as to whose interpretation shall become the “law” (the historical development). Nor can anyone dispute the ruling of God in this domain. In the controversy between Joseph of yore and his brothers thousands of years ago, God decided in accord with Joseph’s interpretation of the historical process. In our days, the Creator of the universe similarly decided that the (historical) “law” will be as the Joseph of 5662 (religious Zionists) had predicted — in accord with the view of him who had little faith in the future of East European Jewry and who dreamed of another land and other conditions.

I would like to ask a simple question: what would the yeshivot and Torah scholars rescued from the Holocaust — these burning embers taken from the fire — have done if the Joseph of 5662 had not trod a path for them in the land of Israel, and had not made possible the transplanting of the Tree of Life of Lithuania and other lands in the Holy Land?

I sometimes think that were the great brethren of the “Joseph” of 5662, world-renowned genius personalities in Torah and sublime saints, living today, they would also discern the Divine miracle in the establishment of the State of Israel, and they would utter song and praise to the Holy One, blessed be He. Let us dispel an illusion: We cannot pin much hope on the diaspora. Assimilation grows daily; the number of mixed marriages is constantly rising. Even in those circles (separatist religious) that

logically should be immune, like a fortress wall standing fast against this plague, mixed marriages are also already to be found. True, there is a bit of Torah in the diaspora; however, the number of Torah students is proportionally very low, and it is impossible to forecast what will happen to the succeeding generations. We are in a small ship that maneuvers slowly and clumsily in a stormy sea, whereas in that very non-observant Israel, the future of Torah and traditional Judaism is far more secure.

In order to have a share in the new Israel, where the Torah that was driven from Lithuania and Poland found a home, the Joseph of 5662 began to build Israel together with all the “freethinkers” from whom he was as ideologically and spiritually removed as were his brothers, the Torah greats. However, to our great sorrow, while the Tribes of God thousands of years ago finally admitted Joseph’s righteousness, and begged his forgiveness, “please forbear the wrong of your brothers and their sin, for they caused you evil” (Gen. 50:17), today a segment among our brethren still lack the capacity to see reality as it is and the courage to admit their error. Even today, after Treblinka and Auschwitz — as assimilation putrefies a great portion of diaspora Jewry and the State of Israel is occupied in protecting the Jewish settlement in the holy land from the Arab Amalek — they hold fast stubbornly against their brother “Joseph” (religious Zionists): “and they viewed him from a distance” (Gen. 37:18).³

3. The Rav’s homiletical interpretation of this Biblical episode was later critiqued by Rabbi Eliezer Menachem Shach, the head of

III. FROM AGUDATH ISRAEL TO MIZRACHI

The practical implications of this perception of the dispute between Joseph and his brothers enable us to understand the spiritual journey of the Rav from Agudath Israel to Religious Zionism. The Rav's grandfather, Rabbi Chaim Soloveichik of Brisk, disapproved not only of Zionism but even of Agudath Israel. He considered the latter overly innovative in its ideology. Rabbi Moshe Soloveichik, the Rav's father, was more open to the Mizrachi movement. He taught at the Tachkemoni Rabbinical Seminary of Warsaw, a Mizrachi institution. Afterward, Rav Moshe headed the rabbinic faculty of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary from which Yeshiva University later evolved. After the Rav arrived in the United States in 1932, he became an intimate follower and associate of Rabbi Eliezer Silver of Cincinnati. In 1937, R. Silver intensified his efforts to revitalize the American branch of Agudath Israel. R. Silver was joined by the Rav who became the chairman of its national executive committee. In 1941, the Rav became a member of the newly formed American Council of Torah Sages.⁴ In retrospect, the

the Ponevezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak. See his *Mikhtavim ve-Ma'amarim* (Bnei Brak, 1990), Vol. 4, pp. 35-40. Rabbi Shach evidently sensed the negative impact that the Rav's theology would have upon the philosophy and outlook of Agudath Israel.

Cf. Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, Vol. 1, pp. 54-55, and p. 76 n. 62. For a detailed analysis of religious opposition to Zionism, see Benjamin Brown, *Madrach le-Hevrah ha-Haredit* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishers, 2017), pp. 184-264.

4. For details of this aspect of the Rav's life,

Rav discerned that what came to pass as a result of the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel indicated that the Almighty was guiding the world in a view and manner that justified the Mizrachi vision. Joseph's viewpoint was correct, and his brothers were misguided! From 1946 until his death, the Rav publicly identified with the Mizrachi movement which later became known as the Religious Zionists of America. He subsequently delivered an address in which he delineated some of the monumental accomplishments of the Zionist movement. This talk was to become the Rav's most widely known essay on the State of Israel. It is studied on both secondary and collegiate levels and in many yeshivot. This discourse was thus portrayed by a student of the Rav who was among the attendees that evening:

On Israel Independence Day in 1956, Rabbi Soloveitchik delivered the main address at a public convocation at Yeshiva University. Later published under the title "Kol Dodi Dofek" ("It is the Voice of My Beloved that Knocketh"), this essay gained

see the author's *Rakafot Aharon*, Vol. 4, pp. 227-36; *The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, Vol. 1, pp. 52-56; *The Silver Era*, pp. 155-85; and the six audio tapes issued by the Orthodox Union Department of Community and Synagogue Services entitled "The Rav and Religious Zionism;" presented by Rabbi Aaron Rakeffet, no date.

Also see Seth Farber, "From the Pages of Tradition: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik: Early Zionism," *Tradition*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (Spring 2020), pp. 127-32; Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Jewish Sovereignty and the Redemption of the Shekhina," *Tradition*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (Winter 2021), pp. 1-26; and Heshey Zelcer and Mark Zelcer, *The Philosophy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 173-97.

renown as a seminal statement of religious Zionism in the post-Holocaust era. Delivered in Yiddish and published in Hebrew, the essay was later translated into English and Russian. Utilizing the metaphor of the Song of Songs, the Rav spoke about the six knocks of the Almighty on the door of the Jewish people when the State of Israel was born. “Hark, my beloved knocketh — *kol dodi dofek*” (Song of Songs 5:2).

First, the knock of the Beloved was heard in the political arena. The establishment of the State of Israel, in a political sense, was an almost supernatural occurrence. Both Russia and Western countries jointly supported the establishment of the state. This was perhaps the only proposal on which East and West were united during this period.

Second, the knocking of the Beloved can be discerned on the battlefield. The small Israeli army of 1948 defeated the vastly larger armies of the many Arab countries.

Third, the knock of the Beloved was heard on the theological level. The stand of Christian theologians that God had deprived the Jewish people of its right to the Land of Israel was publicly refuted by the establishment of Israel.

Fourth, the Beloved is knocking on the hearts of the perplexed and assimilated Jewish youth. The very fact that Israel is always in the news has awakened latent Jewish feelings among the masses, and, in particular, among Jewish young people.

The fifth knock of the Beloved is that Divine Providence, for the first time in the history of our exile, has shown our enemies that Jewish blood is not free for the taking; it is not *hefker*! The honor of every

community, like the honor of every individual, is a function of its ability to defend its existence and honor. A people that cannot ensure its own freedom and security is not truly independent. The State of Israel has enabled its citizens, with the help of God, to defend themselves.

The sixth knock was heard when the gates of Israel were opened to all Jews. Following the restrictive immigration policies of the British Mandate, the State now eagerly welcomes every Jew who seeks lodging in the Holy Land. Jews can now direct their steps unto Zion, and she, like a compassionate mother, will gather in her children.⁵

IV. THEODORE HERZL

In retrospect, the decision of Agudath Israel to invalidate the Zionist viewpoint would appear to be rational and wise from a Torah perspective. Theodore Herzl, the founder of Zionism as a modern, functional movement, was neither a learned nor an observant Jew.⁶ Herzl was not the first to speak publicly about practical Zionist endeavors. Contemporary rabbinical leaders such as Rabbis Judah Alkalai, Zvi Hirsch

5. *The Rav*, Vol. 1, pp. 53-54. The initial English translation of “Kol Dodi Dofek” was published in *Theological and Halakhic Reflections on the Holocaust*, ed. Bernhard H. Rosenberg and Fred Heuman (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 1992), pp. 51-117. It was translated from the Hebrew by Lawrence Kaplan. A second translation with annotations by David Z. Gordon was published by Yeshiva University in 2006.

6. For Herzl’s biography, see Alex Bein, *Theodore Herzl: A Biography*, translated from German, by Maurice Samuel (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1945).

Kalischer, and Samuel. Mohilever were all precursors of modern Zionism.⁷ They were the spiritual guides and leaders of Jewish communities, and publicly preached about Zionism and returning to the Land of Israel. They established Zionist societies and authored articles and books to disseminate these doctrines. Nevertheless, Zionist activities were to remain only one component of their endeavors. This was contrary to the deportment of Herzl who became totally consumed by the Zionist breadth of view. He neglected his family, financial responsibilities, and social life. Herzl's health declined as a result of the anguish, heartache, and rejection he experienced. He would pass away in 1904, at the young age of forty-four.

Herzl's address to the first Zionist Congress was delivered at Basel (Basle), Switzerland, on August 29, 1897. The original official plan of action of the Zionist organization thus became known as the "Basel Program." Herzl's address and vision inspired the assembled delegates. The participants and events were thus described by the biographer of Theodore Herzl.⁸

The delegates began to arrive several days before the date set for the opening. Every train brought new ones, from

Russia, from Germany, from Austria-Hungary, from Bulgaria and Roumania, from England and Holland and Belgium, from Palestine, from the Scandinavian countries, from America, and Algeria. There were veteran leaders of the Hoveve Zion and recent converts to the movement; there were orthodox Jews and atheists, well-to-do members of the middle classes and representatives of the socialist movement, white-haired septuagenarians, and young students. Many came out of sheer curiosity, others as opponents. The total number of delegates on the opening day was one hundred and ninety-seven.

The majority of them saw Herzl for the first time. Until then they had only heard of him or had read his articles and his appeal for the election of delegates. In the latter, he had drilled into their minds the necessity of imparting to the Congress, by the representative character of its delegates, by the weightiness of its deliberations, a dignity that would make a lasting impression on the world at large. "This Congress," he had instructed them, "is to be the greatest council which must and will be followed by greater acts."

His call to pride and dignity, his double invocation of a glorious past and a more glorious future was repeated in all the details of his preparations. The delegates' cards carried the two-fold symbol of the ancient Wailing Wall and of the new Jewry of modern Palestine. Over the portals of the Casino which Herzl had designated for the sessions, a large sign displayed the Star of Zion and the word: ZIONISTEN-KONGRESS. At one side hung a flag: a white field with two blue stripes and the Star of David.

7. For details on these rabbinic leaders, see Arthur Hertzberg, *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1997), pp. 101-14 regarding Rabbis Alkalai and Kalischer, and pp. 398-405 regarding Rabbi Mohilever. For R. Mohilever's role in the evolution of the Mizrachi movement, see Yehuda Leib Fishman (Maimon), "Toldot ha-Mizrachi ve-Hitpatchuto," *Sefer ha-Mizrachi*, ed. Yehuda Leib Fishman (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1946), pp. 5-19.

8. Bein, *Theodore Herzl*, pp. 228-33; 243. Cf. Hertzberg, *The Zionist Idea*, pp. 226-30.

Wolffsohn,⁹ clever, practical, and steeped in tradition, had chosen the colors of the tallit, or prayer shawl, and the majority of the delegates actually took it for granted that this was the old Jewish flag.

The deliberations took place in a dignified concert hall with grey, unadorned walls. “The long green table on the platform, with the raised seat of the President, the green decorations, the table for the journalists and the stenographers” made a striking picture, and Herzl notes that he himself was deeply impressed when he went to the back of the hall at a moment when Nordau was presiding and glanced over the scene. How much deeper must have been the impression on the delegates, whose sensitivity had, not been dulled by participation in the preparations. To emphasize the solemnity of the occasion, Herzl had prescribed — and it was printed on the delegate’s cards — that every delegate must wear a frock coat and a white tie. “The people must accustom themselves to associating the Congress with everything that is festive and dignified,” he told Nordau,¹⁰ when the latter came in

an ordinary suit of clothes and was persuaded to go back to his hotel and put on the official uniform. There were of course some who laughed at all these externalities and cracked jokes about Herzl’s theatrical experiences and impulses. Yet behind the instructions lay something deeper than the mockers understood. Something was needed to symbolize for the delegates the break with the ordinary, the proclamation of something great and beautiful in the dream which had brought them together....

When Herzl rose to speak, without loss of words he set forth, in a single sentence, the task of the Congress: “We are here to lay the foundation stone of the house which is to shelter the Jewish nation.” The community of destiny of the Jewish people had long been shattered, even though a community of suffering had been its lot everywhere. It was only now that “the wonders of modern methods of communication” had made possible a bringing together of the divided and dispersed. “In this epoch, in other respects one of such high achievement,” the Jews were everywhere surrounded by

9. David Wolffsohn later became the second President of the World Zionist Organization. He was an observant and learned Jew.

10. Max Nordau was a co-founder of the World Zionist Organization. He was widely known as a philosopher, writer, orator and physician. Arthur Hertzberg related an engaging story about Herzl and Nordau, two assimilated Jews who returned to Jewish Zionist identity. Hertzberg wrote:

At the zenith of his career Nordau regarded himself as a European, personally not involved in any national allegiance, who was equally concerned for the downtrodden of all nations and religions. As an old friend, he was the first to whom Theodore Herzl came to expound his Zionist ideas. There is even a

perhaps apocryphal story that Herzl came to Nordau not only as friend, but also to consult him as psychiatrist, in the fear that he was out of his mind. After several days of conversation Nordau supposedly stretched out his hand to Herzl to say: “If you are crazy, so am I.” Nordau, at any rate, had also been present at the degradation of Dreyfus on the parade ground of the Ecole Militaire and had also been deeply affected emotionally by the anti-Semitic outcries which attended that scene. Nordau had even deeper roots than Herzl in the Jewish tradition, even though he had been alienated from Jewish concerns for all his adult life, because his father who was a teacher of Hebrew by profession, had provided him with a good early education in the sacred tongue (*The Zionist Idea*, p. 234).

the ancient Jew-hatred in modern form — anti-Semitism. It had hit hardest just those Jewish elements which it had probably not wanted to reach primarily: “The modern, educated, de-ghetto-ized Jew, who felt himself stabbed to the heart. Today we can say this calmly, without being suspected of making a play for the tearful compassion of our enemies. Our conscience is clear. The world has always been badly misinformed about us. The feeling of unity among us, which the world so often and so bitterly throws up to us, was in the process of dissolution when the tide of anti-Semitism rose about us. Anti-Semitism has given us our strength again. We have returned home.” Then came the sentence which has been so long and so widely discussed, and to which we shall have to return in another connection: “Zionism is the return of the Jews to Judaism even before their return to the Jewish land.” Zionism, he went on, had already brought about that which till then had been considered impossible: the uniting of the most modern with the most conservative elements, without unworthy spiritual and intellectual compromises on either side. The basis of unification was the recognition of the fact that the Jews were a people....

On his return to Vienna Herzl made the following entry in his diary: “If I were to sum up the Basle Congress in a single phrase — which I would not dare to make public — I would say: In Basle I created the Jewish State. Were I to say this aloud I would be greeted by universal laughter. But perhaps five years hence, in any case, certainly fifty years hence, everyone will perceive it. The state exists as essence in

the will-to-the-state of a people, yes, even in that will of a single powerful person.... The territory is only the concrete basis, and the state itself, with a territory beneath it, is still in the nature of an abstract thing.... In Basle, I created the abstraction which, as such, is invisible to the great majority.”

A few weeks later he stated publicly: “In order to achieve the homeland secured by international law we must first present to the world the evidence of our existence as a people. If the people is there, then the piece of land which it needs comes of itself.”

Herzl’s vision of a Jewish State had become a concrete entity for the Jewish masses. The “Zionist Idea” was now a source of inspiration and consolation for the Jewish people. In 1903, less than a year before his death, Herzl was returning from political meetings and negotiations in Saint Petersburg. On his homeward journey, Herzl made a stop in Vilna on August 16, 1903. This city was popularly known as the “Jerusalem of Lithuania.” The reception accorded Herzl illustrated his stature among his people and nation. The Vilna visit was thus described:

His visit to Vilna was announced in advance. A tremendous ovation awaited him; the streets through which he rode were almost impassable because of the throngs of spectators. The terrified police forbade all demonstrations, listened in on all his telephone conversations, and kept a close watch on all his movements. His projected tour of the Jewish quarter, the banquet in the town hall, and the visit to the Great Synagogue had to be abandoned on instruction from the police. He did however ride through “tumultuous Jewish

streets” to the community house, where a dense crowd of representatives and deputations awaited him. One of the leaders greeted him as “the greatest son of the Jewish people,” and then read out a Hebrew address from a parchment scroll which he afterward presented to him. Old Reb Shlemele lifted his hands over the Zionist leader and pronounced the Priestly Benediction. The historian W. Javitz presented him with a small Torah scroll in a carved holder as a gift of honor from the Vilna community.

“There was in all these greetings a spirit which so moved me that I managed to keep back my tears only by thinking of the newspaper reports. The numerous addresses overpraised me fantastically, but the wretchedness of these oppressed people was genuine enough.” Deeply touched, he thanked the deputations for the honors which, unfortunately, he had not yet merited, for the great work which he saw as the sole solution of the Jewish problem had not yet been completed, though he did not doubt its ultimate success.

The evening of that day a secret banquet was tendered him in the village of Verko, eight kilometres from Vilna. On the journey Herzl asked his companions, I. Goldberg and V. Katzenelson, to show him the houses of the poor Jews. The sight so shook him that this time he could not keep back his tears. He was not less moved when a poor Jew refused with thanks the gold coin which he offered him, saying that he had only wanted to see Herzl. While the banquet in Verko was in progress, there suddenly appeared, outside the house, Jewish boys and girls of Vilna, who had made

a pilgrimage through the night to see and hear him. They sang Hebrew songs. One young worker proposed a toast in which he spoke of the time when “King Herzl” would reign.

At one o’clock in the night, Herzl went from the hotel to the train. The city was awake. Thousands of Jews were in the streets and on the balconies of the houses. At the station, there was a dense throng. The police appeared. Brutally they dispersed the crowd. Herzl was aghast. Deathly pale, completely broken, he reached the station, which had been roped off. A number of Zionists managed to get past the guard as “passengers with baggage.” Herzl forbade any kind of demonstration; he did not want his visit to add to the sufferings of a single Jew. His last words to the Vilna Jews were: “Gentleman, do not lose courage; better times are coming, they must come; that is what we are working for.”¹¹

Divine Providence truly shone upon Herzl. Exactly fifty years after the first

11. The Vilna visit was described by Bein, *Theodore Herzl*, pp. 451-52. The “Old Reb Shlemele” was Rabbi Shlomo Cohen, a member of the Vilna Belt-Din. He granted approbation to Rabbi Israel Meir HaKohen on the publication of his *Mishnah Berurah*. For “Reb Shlemele’s” biographical details see *Sefer Gedolei ha-Dorot*, ed. Yehiel Michel Stern (Jerusalem: Machon Minchat Yisrael, 1996), Vol. 3, pp. 888-89.

Zev (Wolf) Javitz was a Jewish historian who was active in the formation of the Mizrachi movement in Russia. At the time of Herzl’s visit, Javitz resided in Vilna. Isaac Goldberg was a Vilna businessman and philanthropist. Nissan Katzenelson was one of Herzl’s close aids and made the preparations for his 1903 Russian journey. Katzenelson accompanied Herzl and became his personal representative in all negotiations with the Russian authorities

Zionist Congress in 1897, the United Nations recommended Partition in 1947. To the surprise of all, even the Soviet delegate, Andrei Gromyko, expressed his government's support for the right of the Jews to establish their own state in Palestine. Exactly as Herzl predicted: "In Basle I created the Jewish State." This reality created a significant and far-reaching quandary for Torah Jewry. How could Divine blessing accrue through the efforts of an assimilated Jew? The State of Israel would become the foundation for Jewish survival after the Holocaust. A state that was created as a result of the vision and activities of Theodore Herzl. Perhaps this reality can be comprehended on the basis of an insightful Midrash regarding Moshe Rabbenu. One of the thirteen principles of the Jewish faith as delineated by Maimonides is the belief in the unique greatness of Moses our Teacher.

Many declare at the conclusion of their daily prayers:

I believe with complete faith that the prophecy of Moses our Teacher, peace be to him, was true and that he was the father of the prophets — those who preceded him and those who followed him.¹²

Nonetheless, Moshe Rabbenu was raised in alien environments and not among the Jewish people. At first, he was in the Court of Pharaoh. At an early age, he had to depart to Midian. The Midrash accentuates this aspect of his life and relates that at the age of twelve, Moshe Rabbenu was uprooted from his father's house. The

Midrash explains that Moshe Rabbenu's message of redemption would have been dismissed if he was merely another member of the Jewish community. Because Moshe Rabbenu emerged from an elevated and noble background, the Children of Israel consented to his message. They did not dismiss him as simply restating traditional Jewish concepts.¹³

This Midrash was stressed by Rabbi Isaac Stollman in his expository analysis of these efficacious results of Herzl's outlook. Rabbi Stollman was a graduate of the Radin, Slobodka, and Novardok yeshivot. He immigrated to the United States in 1924 and became a prominent spiritual leader in Detroit, Michigan. In his *Minchat Yitzchak* on Shemot,¹⁴ Rabbi Stollman declared:

When we recount the early history of the Zionist movement, we notice that many of the early leaders were totally European. They knew very little about their nation and its core outlooks. These pacesetters were uprooted from their Jewish roots at an early age like Moshe Rabbenu. They

13. The Midrash is recounted in *Shemot Rabbah*, 5:2. It does not appear in all editions of the *Shemot Rabbah*. It appears in Israeli versions such as that of Machon Ha-Midrash Ha-Mevuar, 1990 and Vagshal Publishing, 2001. This Midrash is cited by the Ramban to Exodus 3:18.

14. Rabbi Isaac Stollman published four volumes on the Pentateuch entitled *Minchat Yitzchak*. The citation of this Midrash and its analysis appears in Vol. 2 (Shemot), p. 53. The first edition of Shemot was published in 1941 and was reprinted in 1979 when Rabbi Stollman resided in Jerusalem. The *Minchat Yitzchak* volumes have an approbation from the Rav. The Rav's letter of blessing was published at the start of the Devarim section (in Volume 4). This volume was first published in 1956 and reprinted in 1979. What follows is a translation of the original Hebrew text.

12. Translation of *Siddur Avodat HaLev* of the Rabbinical Council of America, Nusach Ashkenaz (First Edition, 2018), p. 207.

spent many of their most fruitful years in alien atmospheres. Yet they were among the first to be roused by the Zionist vision of redemption and rebirth. Is this not the expression of Divine intervention in the Jewish saga!? Among these pioneers, there were individuals who rejected religion and sanctity. Their bodies were never adorned by tefillin. They were apparent candidates for assimilation and withdrawal from Jewish identity. Yet the Zionist movement inspired them to return to their brethren and homeland. They were among the first to defend the honor of their people and to aspire to rebuild our homeland. Is this not an incredible phenomenon in our generation!?

The Jewish State was instrumental in revitalizing Jewish identity and commitment after the Holocaust. Since it was more than solely a religious perception, it was not rejected by the alienated Jewish common people. Divine sanction has accompanied the State of Israel and it has engendered the renaissance of the Jewish nation.

V. RABBI YISACHAR SHLOMO TEICHTAL

Rabbi Yisachar Shlomo Teichtal, a victim of the Holocaust, was a prominent rabbinical personality who recognized this concept. Born into a family of well-known rabbis and Jewish leaders, R. Teichtal was raised in a traditional religious environment and was imbued with the prevalent strong, fervent opposition to Zionism. In 1921, R. Teichtal became the spiritual leader of Pishtian, a mid-size city in Czechoslovakia. The local Jewish community lived

quite comfortably at the time, so much so that people often referred to the area as “Little America.” He remained in Pishtian for twenty years and even established a yeshiva called Moriah for outstanding students. With the outbreak of the war, the Teichtal family wandered from place to place. He vowed that if he should survive, he would write a volume in honor of the Land of Israel. His seminal work, entitled *Eim HaBanim Semeichah: On Eretz Yisrael, Redemption, and Unity*, was published in Budapest in 1943. R. Teichtal would later perish on a train on the way to the Mauthausen concentration camp in early 1945.

Rabbi Teichtal wrote:¹⁵

During the past few decades, the irreligious have opened their eyes and recognized their mistake in thinking that they will find their heart’s desire here in exile. They have seen that hostility surrounds them from all sides. In response to their love, the Gentiles hate them and persecute them without reason. Hence, they opened their eyes and recognized that their hopes of finding peace and quiet here in exile are

15. *Eim Habanim Semeichah* was translated into English by R. Moshe Lichtman (Mevaseret Tzion: Idol Mevaser Publications, 2000). Rabbi Teichtal’s biography is detailed in the “Historical Introduction,” pp. 17-24. All quotations from his writings are cited from this English edition of the *Eim Habanim Semeichah*. An earlier edited translation by Pesach Schindler was published under the title *Em Habanim Semecha: Restoration of Zion as a Response During the Holocaust* (Hoboken, NJ.: KTAV, 1999). A Ph.D. dissertation on the theology of Rabbi Teichtal was authored by Isaac Hershkovitz at Bar-Ilan University (2009). It is entitled: “The Vision of Redemption in Rabbi Yissakhar Shlomo Teichtal’s Writings: Changes in his Messianic Approach During the Holocaust.”

futile. The desire to return to the Land of our forefathers awoke within them, and they began working towards this goal.

Those who tremble at the word of HaShem, however, stood on the side and refrained from sharing in the work. They stood by their age-old claim, "It is preferable to sit and do nothing." In the meantime, these "initiators" began rebuilding our Holy Land (so may it continue and prosper), while the Orthodox Jews and the tzadikim stood aloof. It is clear that he who prepares prior to the Sabbath will eat on the Sabbath [Avodah Zarah 3a], and since the Orthodox did not toil, they have absolutely no influence in the Land. Those who toil and build have the influence, and they are the masters of the Land. It is, therefore, no wonder that they are in control, for He who guards the fig tree will eat its fruit (Proverbs 27:18).

Now, what will the Orthodox say? I do not know if they will ever be able to vindicate themselves before the heavenly court for not participating in the movement to rebuild the Land.... Had the God-fearing, religious Jews been involved in this undertaking, our Holy Land would have a completely different, more sanctified, appearance and form than it has now. In truth, though, our Father in Heaven desires and is pleased with the current appearance and form. All agree, however, that if the Orthodox would have cooperated with and participated in the building effort, it would have been exceedingly lofty and holy. Now that they kept themselves at a distance, they should not wonder or question the situation, for they are at fault (pp. 22-23).

Now, today, when even the lowest Jews

have decided to return to our inheritance, and they dedicate their lives to it, refusing to covet any other land, the Holy One Blessed be He certainly considers this repentance. The fact that they do not fulfill the commandments of the Torah is because they were not raised and educated in this spirit. They are like infants who were kidnapped by Gentiles, as the Rambam writes [Hilkhos Mamrim 3:3]. But the act of aliyah is undoubtedly considered repentance, and through it, they fulfill the positive commandment of teshuvah (repentance)... (p. 165).

Moreover, they cherish the Land and refuse to desire any other land besides that of their forefathers. They sacrifice their lives for it, as is well known. Many have even died for the sake of the Land. We heard that during the Arab uprisings, many Jews who were killed in battle said with their last breaths, "There is nothing better than to die for the sake of our Land" [Yosef Trumpeldor].

The Chatam Sofer cites the Talmud in Sanhedrin (47a) which states that a Jew who is killed by Gentiles is called holy (*kadosh*) even if he was wicked.¹⁶ This is certainly true of today's pioneers who risk their lives for the sake of our Land. Is there any doubt that they are destined for the World to Come [*Olam HaBa*]?! Is this not a clear testimony that even though they do not "see," their inner Jewish souls "see" and yearn to return to their roots?! (p. 169).

This is actually happening today! Many of

16. *Teshuvot Chatam Sofer: Yoreh Deah*, responsum 333. For an analysis of this viewpoint, see the author's *Rakafot Aharon*, Vol. 2, pp. 141-51.

our Jewish brethren came to the Land and built cities, villages, gardens, and orchards. They transformed great expanses of disease-infested swamps into dry land and fertile, prosperous fields. They sacrificed and endangered themselves to build the Land and make it fit for living. Is there even a shadow of a doubt that this is the wondrous work of HaShem and that it is a sign that our salvation is soon to come?! This is undoubtedly the beginning of redemption! (p. 183).

Even though today's workers in Eretz Yisrael are extremely materialistic, their actions will lead to great spiritual heights. We must not alienate them nor hinder them from their work, God forbid. On the contrary, we must bring them near in any possible way and assist them. For it is God's will that events proceed specifically in this fashion. The essence and foundation of this process originate in the pinnacle of holiness. Its purpose is to produce from these laborers something awesome and lofty: the essence of our grand future and the elevation of our holy nation's pride, about which all of our holy prophets prophesied (p. 189).

They consider them wicked because they do not see them as God's messengers, with foundations in the apex of sanctity. But I, myself, disagree. In my opinion, these builders are not wicked. They are genuine descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov, the progeny of those confirmed in their religious devotion. They are simply like infants who were kidnapped by Gentiles, as I explained above. It is a mitzvah to love them and bring them near, as the Rambam writes. Our mentor, R. Mende'le of Rymanov, refrained from calling the

second son of the Haggadah a *rasha* (wicked). Instead, he called him "the second son."

Let this be a lesson for all those who are quick to call their fellow Jews "*rasha*." God forbid to do such a thing, for they are all descendants of HaShem's loved ones! HaShem will shower upon them a purifying spirit from above to purify their hearts, and He will draw them near to His service by virtue of the mitzvah of *Yishuv Eretz Yisrael*, for which they sacrifice themselves. Amen, so may it be God's will (p. 193).

Rabbi Teichtal cited a sermon about the Zionist movement that was delivered by Rabbi Aharon Fisch, the head of the rabbinical court in Yudess, Hungary. The latter was revered as "a giant among giants" by R. Teichtal. Although many of Fisch's contemporary Torah leaders strongly opposed Zionism, Rabbi Fisch declared:

Leave them alone! We do not truly know how the redemption will unfold. In one place the Zohar states that Jerusalem will be rebuilt, and the exiles will be gathered before the redemption. Elsewhere the *Zohar* states that redemption will occur without our intervention. Thus, it is unclear what the Creator of the Universe wants. Therefore, if we see that many Jews desire to rebuild the Land, even if they are the greatest sinners, who could be so brazen and arrogant as to interfere with their work?! Perhaps HaShem wants the rebuilding to be done specifically by people like these. Why must you involve yourself with God's hidden matters?! [*Berakhot*, 10a] God, the Cause of All Causes, knows how to cause things to happen. Leave them alone! (pp. 206-07).

Rabbi Teichtal's viewpoint was in consonance with the Rav's exposition of the dispute between Joseph and his brothers. The rabbis must constantly evaluate their outlook on non-Halakhic issues in accordance with reality and the aftereffects of their viewpoints.

VI. RABBI HANS ELCHANAN BLUMENTHAL

A dilemma confronting Rabbi Hans Elchanan Blumenthal resulted in another occasion when the Rav's perspective was emulated. Rabbi Blumenthal was born in Fulda, a town in the Hesse region of Germany, in 1915. He later moved to Lithuania to study at the Telshe Yeshiva. Blumenthal continued his studies at the Kelm Talmud Torah and visited the Slabodka and Mir yeshivot. In 1938, he succeeded in reaching London. From there he was deported to Australia and interned as an "enemy alien." After rabbis in England and Australia intervened, Rabbi Blumenthal was released. He soon began his productive lifework as a rabbi and educator in Australia and South Africa.¹⁷

In 1952, R. Blumenthal was studying for his doctorate in Psychology. He received a fellowship to continue his research at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. It was his first visit to the Holy Land. There was a widespread economic recession in Israel at the time, and R. Blumenthal felt he could not find gainful employment. He was quite

satisfied with his rabbinical responsibilities in Cape Town. Yet his wife enjoined him to examine the aliyah possibility. R. Blumenthal decided to consult well-known Israeli rabbis. R. Blumenthal first consulted Rabbi Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz in Bene Berak. The latter was known as the "Hazon Ish," after the title of his published writings. R. Blumenthal explained to the "Hazon Ish" that he discharged important Torah functions in South Africa. He was both a communal rabbi and a *dayan* on the Cape Town Beit-Din. Rabbi Karelitz responded that these were not considerations and that he was obligated to come on aliyah. R. Blumenthal returned to Jerusalem and sought the advice of Rabbi Eliezer Yehudah Finkel. The latter was the dean of the Mir Yeshiva in both its previous Polish and now Jerusalem locations. The "Mirrer Rosh Yeshiva" responded incisively and right to the point:

Chanan (the diminutive of Elchanan), listen carefully. I was present when the rabbis consulted with Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzenski about accepting the Kovno visas and going up to the Land of Israel. His advice was to remain behind and stay in Europe. I did not listen. Thank the Almighty I am in Israel, and you know what has been accomplished here.¹⁸

18. *Bechol Derachecha Daehu*, pp. 62-63. The conversation with Rabbi Eliezer Yehudah Finkel was also repeated to the author on many occasions by R. Blumenthal.

For details of Rabbi Finkel's life, see Mordechai Porush, *Orot MeMir* (Jerusalem: 1996). The successful escape from Europe is detailed on pages 49-61. The reference to visas by Rabbi Finkel pertains to the help extended by Chiune (Sempo) Sugihara, the Japanese consul in Kovno. For more details, see the author's "Rabbinic Authority and Leadership on the

17. For details of Rabbi Elchanan Blumenthal's life, see his autobiography, *Bechol Derachecha Daehu* (Jerusalem: Carmel Publishing, 1995). An earlier edition in English, entitled *Trials and Challenges*, was published by Yeshivat Dvar Yerushalayim.

Rabbi Blumenthal would later state that “it was impossible at that moment not to realize the historic mistake of those who stayed behind and the resulting catastrophe.”

VII. MAIMONIDES AND ISRAEL

Rabbi Blumenthal returned to Cape Town and resigned from his various positions. Later that year he came to Jerusalem as an *oleh* and commenced his lifework in Jewish education in the Holy City. Here too we can observe the Rav’s emphasis on the dialogue between Joseph and his brothers as a foundation for belief and action. It may be that this sagacious comprehension is the premise for the pronouncement of Maimonides towards the conclusion of his *Mishneh Torah*. While summarizing and codifying the laws and doctrines of the Messianic Era, the Rambam declared:

There are some Sages who say that Elijah’s coming will precede the coming of the Mashiach. All these and similar matters cannot be definitely known by man until they occur, for these matters are undefined in the prophets’ words and even the wise men have no established tradition regarding these matters except their own interpretation of the verses. Therefore, there is a controversy among them regarding these matters.

Regardless of the debate concerning these questions, neither the order of the occurrence of these events nor their precise detail are among the fundamental

principles of the faith. A person should not occupy himself with the *Aggadot* and homiletics concerning these and similar matters, nor should he consider them as essentials, for the study of them will neither bring fear nor love of God.¹⁹

The accentuation of Maimonides’ exposition has profound contemporary insight. “All these and similar matters cannot be definitely known by man until they occur.” Is this not a reverberation of the dialogue between Joseph and his brothers!? The theological stance must be evaluated by reality and the facts of existence. Rabbi Moshe Taragin, a Yeshivat Har Etzion faculty member, cited his mentor Rabbi Yehuda Amital conversing about this topic. In an essay entitled “*Geulas Yisrael: How Do We Know This is Redemption*,” R. Taragin wrote:

Redemption can be very, very confusing. On his deathbed, Ya’akov decided to provide a detailed roadmap of Jewish redemption. When it would happen, how it would unfold, and what omens would assure us that redemption was at hand. Recognizing the dangers of uncontained redemptive fervor, Hashem withdrew Yaakov’s prophetic visions and denied his descendants this important information. It is difficult enough to redeem history. It is even more challenging redeeming it while blindfolded.

So our generation faces a haunting question: How do we know? How do we know that this process is the intervening hand of G-d? How do we know that the Spring

Contemporary Scene” which will be published in a forthcoming issue of *Hakirah*.

19. *Hilkhot Melachim* 12:2, translated by R. Eliyahu Touger for the Moznaim English edition of the *Mishneh Torah*.

of geulah has begun? No one knows how long it will last or what arc it will follow, but we have a profound sense that history has shifted and that we are living in the final era of Jewish history. How do we know this is real and not a façade or, even worse, an illusion? In 1952 the Satmar Rebbe authored his scathing work known as *Vayo'el Moshe* in which he lodged this very claim. The Zionist return wasn't the hand of G-d but the deception of Satan. The Jewish people were being misled into an illegal and unwanted redemption whose time hadn't yet arrived. How do we know?

My Rebbe, HaRav Yehuda Amital, assured us that this question was posed at an earlier point in history — by Shimshon's parents. Shimshon's parents were twice visited by an angel who informed them that the child they would bear would rescue the Jews from Midyan. They received detailed instructions about raising him as a nazir, their korban offering was engulfed in heavenly fire, and they witnessed the angel ascending to Heaven. The distrustful father named Manoach continued to worry that perhaps they would perish before these prophecies unfolded. His wife assured him: Had G-d desired our demise He would not have invested in these miracles. The grand miracles they witnessed proved that this prophecy was legitimate and this future assured. G-d doesn't toy with human beings and the impressive miracles they experienced confirmed that they had been chosen.

Sometimes ideological debates are resolved in the *beit midrash* or around the discussion table. Other times, history resolves our ideological debates for us. The

State of Israel had very humble beginnings. In 1948 around 600,000 Jews gathered in a fledgling state which was quickly invaded by numerous Arab legions. In its incipient decade, the Jewish state suffered diplomatic isolation and economic austerity. Under those meager conditions the question “How do we know that this is real” felt very legitimate. In the 70 years since, our small state has witnessed uncountable miracles. Israel has miraculously morphed into a superpower in almost every imaginable sector — economically, militarily, culturally, technologically, and academically just to name a few. We have drained the swamps, converted the desert into a flowering bloom, and have begun to export water and water management capabilities to the parched lands in our neighborhood. Torah is flourishing in a manner that it hasn't in over 3000 years. All this while absorbing Jews from across the globe and from across diverse demographic “lines.” It pays to listen to Shimshon's mother: G-d would not perform all these miracles as a delusion — this is real, and it is happening!²⁰

Indeed, the Rav's homily regarding the controversy between Joseph and his brothers would be in total consonance with this assessment. The Rav declared:

I sometimes think that were the great brethren of the “Joseph” of 5662 (1902), world-renowned genius personalities in Torah and sublime saints, living today, they would also discern the Divine miracle in the establishment of the State of Israel,

20. *Torah Tidbits* (OU ISRAEL: Issue 1417, Parshat Emor, May 1, 2021), pp. 36-37. The Shimshon saga is detailed in Judges (Shoftim), chapters 13-16.

and they would utter song and praise to the Holy One, blessed be He.²¹

21. Cf. n. 1. This topic was also discussed by the Rav in a Yiddish *drasha* delivered at the 1948 national convention of the Mizrahi Organization of America. An English translation was published in *Tradition*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (Winter 2021), pp. 1-26. Herzl is discussed on page 17. The Rav interposes a penetrating hypothesis. He declared: “However, he (Herzl) died too young to become a full-fledged *ba'al teshuva*.” Perhaps an analogy could be made to Nathan Birnbaum (1864-1937), an early exponent of Zionism. The latter is credited with coining the term “Zionism.” Birnbaum played a prominent role in the First Zionist Congress and was elected Secretary-General of the organization. He gradually became a fully observant Orthodox Jew and active in Agudath Israel.

For an analysis of this 1948 talk, see R. Aton Holzer, “Halakhic Zionism? A New Text and Its Possible Implications.” (TraditionOnline.org). Also cf. the exposition of this topic by R. Yehuda Herzl Henkin, *She'alot U'Teshuvot Benei Banim* (Jerusalem: 1992), pp. 212-14.

