

THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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"Zion's Despisers and the Book of Bereshit"

Zion has always had its despisers. Recently, their numbers have increased. Anti-Zionism has been adopted as a fervent cause by a frightening variety of individuals and groups.

What is particularly disturbing is the anti-Zionism of sectors of our own nation, including liberal or secular Jews and some elements of the so-called Ultra-Orthodox *Charedim*.

As regular readers of my weekly Torah column know very well, I often draw upon my own experiences and reminiscences to express my thoughts and opinions. But I also am careful to draw upon traditional, if lesser known, rabbinic commentators.

This week, I will reflect upon how my family and my wife's family have shaped my own ardent Zionism. I will then proceed to one example of an encounter with a group puzzled by the anti-Zionism of certain otherwise devout Jews.

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My parents and maternal grandparents were meticulously observant Orthodox Jews, a challenge in their times. In many ways, they were typical Yankees—very Americanized in their work, lifestyle, and politics. They contributed to Zionist charities and cheered the birth of the State of Israel. But Zionism was not their priority.

My paternal grandparents were different. The term "*Charedim*" was unknown then, but they were religiously devout in every aspect of their lives. My grandfather was a *shochet*, a synagogue supervisor, and a secretary and scribe for a Chassidic Rebbe of great renown. He constantly studied Torah with me, and the topics he stressed were *ahavat Torah, ahavat Yisrael, ahavat Eretz Yisrael*—love of Torah, love of fellow Jews, and love of the Land of Israel. I was, therefore, not surprised to learn at his funeral that he had invested his meager earnings in the purchase of a burial plot on Jerusalem's *Har HaMenuchot*. He passed away in 1970, a time when such an arrangement was far less common than it is today.

I turn next to my wife Chavi's grandparents. One grandfather was a famous Chassidic Rebbe with many followers whom he convinced to leave Poland and emigrate

to what was then Palestine. He visited the Land of Israel from Poland several times in the pre-Holocaust years and dedicated many of his musical compositions to themes of Return to Zion. He escaped the Holocaust and spent several years in the United States, but as soon as he could, he departed for Israel and lies buried on the Mount of Olives.

Chavi's other grandfather and grandmother are buried nearby on that holy mountain. They both came there before World War I. As a very young man, her grandfather left Poland on his own and trekked—on foot, by boat, and by donkey—through central Europe, across the Mediterranean, through Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon, until he reached Jerusalem.

All of these relatives lived fully Chassidic lives, with the observances, melodies, stories, and dress that entailed. By today's terminology, they were *Charedim*, yet they were devoted Zionists to the core.

I should add that when I was courting Chavi, her maternal grandfather insisted on interviewing me privately. He wanted to determine if I was sufficiently Zionistic to marry his "favorite" granddaughter. *Baruch Hashem*, I passed his test.

I hesitate, however, to share with you my experiences with religiously committed Jews who are anti-Zionist. I appreciate and even admire many of their beliefs and practices. But I am increasingly perturbed, especially very recently, by their anti-Zionist demonstrations and accusations. I share with you but one anecdote from when I served as Executive Vice President of the Orthodox Union.

As a matter of principle, and carefully following the guidelines set by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, of blessed memory, the Orthodox Union works closely with non-Jewish clergy to achieve certain common causes. We were instructed to avoid theological topics and carefully limited the agenda of our meetings to matters of common concern. One of our main objectives was to join in advocating state aid for parochial schools.

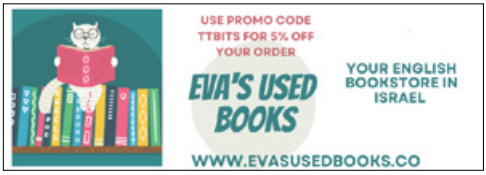
In planning for one of those meetings, the Catholic leadership asked for an explanation of the behavior, then in the news, of *Charedim*. They inquired, "How can they be anti-Zionist? After all, isn't Zionism a requirement of all who believe in the Bible? Don't the prophets foretell the Return of the Jewish people to Zion?"

It was my good fortune to be chosen by our group to educate the bishops as to the anti-Zionism of a group of fundamentalist Jews. Not an easy task!

But enough anecdotal material.

Permit me to share some traditional commentary to conclude my digression. May I introduce you to Rav Dovid Tzvi Hoffman, of blessed memory (1843-1921). He was Dean of the Hildesheim Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin, a major Halachic authority, and the author of a magnificent array of Talmudic and Biblical studies. His *yahrzeit* was recently, on the 19th day of Cheshvan.

He wrote on the various *chumashim*, notably on Leviticus/*Vayikra*. He also wrote several volumes in German, one on Genesis/*Bereshit*. That volume went untranslated for quite some time until a Hebrew



translation became available in the 1970s. The exceptionally capable translator was a man named Asher Wasserteil.

The work appears in two volumes. In his introduction to the volume, which includes this week's Torah portion, *Toldot*, the translator gathers numerous quotations of Rav Hoffmann's perspective on the book of *Bereshit*.

First, the translator's opening remarks: "It seems to me that the author's dominant theme is the centrality of the Land of Israel in the Book of Genesis. It is as if the entire book of *Bereshit* is a song of love and praise to the Glorious Land."

He then shares some quotes from Rav Hoffman's masterpiece. Here's one:

"Abraham understood the importance of his journey to this Land and to none other. It was not a random destination. The Lord chose it, and only it! It was predetermined as the ultimate destination of His people. It was the place, the only place, that His people could achieve a land from which to spread the Lord's glory to all the inhabitants of Earth. Natural beauty, diverse surroundings, fertile ground, plentiful water. The ideal environment for Divine abundant blessing."

These eloquent words are the basis of Rav Hoffman's commentary, climaxing in the request of both Jacob and Joseph to return to the Land of Israel, if only to be buried there.

For Rav Hoffman, Zionism is the opening theme of the Bible. For this leader of Central European Jewry during the turn of the twentieth century, anti-Zionism differs drastically from the sacred beginning of our Torah. ■



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