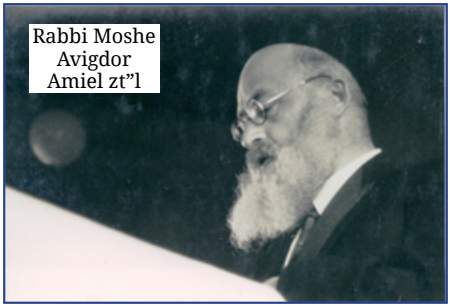


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# The Beautiful Skies Of The Land Of Israel: The Life of Rav Moshe Avigdor Amiel, Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv 1935 to 1946

The election for Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv in 1935 was arguably one of the most exciting moments in Tel Aviv's rabbinic history.

The city was growing fast, absorbing successive waves of immigration and the search for a new chief rabbi for a Jewish population approaching 100,000 would clearly be an appointment of significance for 'the first Hebrew city' in two thousand years.


Rabbi Moshe Avigdor Amiel zt"l

One of the finalists was the 29 year old Rabbi Soloveitchik who made the journey from Boston for what would be his only visit to Eretz Yisrael. The other was Rav Herzog, then chief rabbi of Ireland, and shortly after the chief rabbi of the Yishuv after Rav Kook's passing and future chief rabbi of the State of Israel. Neither of them got the job.

Instead it went to Rav Moshe Avigdor Amiel - until then the Chief Rabbi of Antwerp - who would go on to serve as Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv until his death in 1946 aged 64. In contrast to the two unsuccessful candidates, both of whom are remembered as giants of the Jewish 20th century, history has not been kind to Rav Amiel - his name is at best vaguely familiar and his Torah is known by only the very few.

Yet his biography - as a *lamdan*, as an active participant in the battle of ideas, and as an institution builder - is remarkable. Born in 1882 near Grodno he studied under a who's who of Eastern European giants - Rav Shimon Shkop in Telze, Rav Chayim Soloveitchik in Brisk, Rav Hayyim Ozer in Vilna - and received semikha from the Rogochover and the Ohr Sameach aged 18.

Unlike much of his rabbinic milieu he became a committed religious zionist and an active figure in Mizrachi circles - a commitment expressed not only in his magnificent sermons and programmatic essays on democracy, socialism and Zionism, but also as an institution builder. Upon his appointment in Tel Aviv he founded Yeshivat Yishuv HaHadash, a high school combining serious religious studies with secular education that became the model for the future Bnei Akiva high school network. His ambitious attempt to launch a Torah U'Madda style rabbinical

seminary was unsuccessful due in large part to the furious opposition of another student of Rav Hayyim Ozer who had moved to Israel at around the same time, the Hazon Ish. A potential YU or Hildesheimer style rabbinic training institute in 1940s Tel Aviv is undoubtedly one of the most intriguing 'what ifs' of an alternative history of Israeli Judaism.

An excerpt from his *Derashot El Ami*, published in 1936, in which Yaakov's ladder becomes a poetic image capturing the magic and pull of Eretz Yisrael, gives a sense of his Torah and personality.

*'A ladder rooted on the ground but whose head is in the heavens'. The land is so very small, but how great and wide are the heavens above it. The land was destroyed and became mournful, desolate, and even despised, but they did not destroy its heavens, and the heavens above the Land of Israel — how beautiful they are and how radiant! There are no heavens like the heavens of the Land of Israel, and when you come there, they draw your heart and your soul as if by magic cords, and against your will you must lift your eyes upward, calling to you, "Know what is above you." And on the other hand, the heavens there are so close to you, that you hardly feel the distance between you and them, and it seems to you that you can easily climb up to them by way of this ladder'.*

Reading this passage one gets a sense of the poetry and possibility that the young yishuv possessed for those such as Rav Amiel who moved to Tel Aviv in this period. The notion of the skies remaining unviolated even as the land below is desolate, becomes for Rav Amiel, a symbol for the role of Eretz Yisrael in world history. He continues:

*The ladder which reaches to the heavens — this is the Land of Israel's meaning for the whole world. Here is the cradle of almost all the great faiths and if all the great kingdoms have fought over it from time immemorial, they have not fought over the land itself, but over the heavenliness in it.*

Yet the image of the ladder contains a critical message for the young yishuv. Rav Amiel concludes:

*We too must remember this verse well: Every ladder must have a grip both from below and from above, and if the grip from above slips, the ladder falls and breaks completely. And it is a pity that while we now strive to improve the place where the ladder grips from below, we are letting it slip from its grip above, which is "and its top reaches to heaven"...*

Not only the physical but also the spiritual building up of the land is key to the Zionist project - so that Israel may be rooted on the earth but that her head may reach the heavens. ■

**Rabbi Joe Wolfson** is the rabbi and co-director of JLIC TLV — a new, vibrant community serving young religious olim in Tel Aviv, generously supported by the Mayberg Foundation. He and his wife, Corinne, both grew up in the UK and served as directors of JLIC NYU in downtown Manhattan from 2015 to 2022.

