



En coopération avec  
In cooperation with

l'IECJ, Institut interuniversitaire d'Études et de Culture Juives  
IECJ, Interuniversity Institute of Jewish Studies & Culture

Conférence Internationale du 30 juin au 3 juillet 2013 à Aix-en-Provence  
International Conference from June 30 – July 3, 2013 in Aix-en-Provence

**La Laïcité: une chance ou un défi pour les religions?  
En France et dans le monde**

**Secularity: Opportunity or Peril for Religions,  
The French Experience and Global Perspectives**

**Wednesday, July 3, 2013 - Plenary session:**

**Promise, Land and Hope: The Holiness of the Land of Israel in Jewish Thought**

By Dr Raymond Cohen

#### Introduction

In the following paper I want to discuss the diverse views in Jewish thought about the concept around which modern Zionism arguably pivots—the holiness of the Land of Israel. It may be the hardest idea for an outside observer to swallow. But understanding its significance is essential to explaining the uncanny power of the Zionist movement to mobilize the Jewish people. I argue that holiness of the Land is at the heart of the Israeli consensus. It is the common theme uniting the Zionist triptych of Biblical promise, eternal homeland, and future hope.

For friends of Israel the main elements of the Zionist narrative are reasonably clear and comprehensible: The Jewish people's right to its own nation-state; the urgent need for a secure shelter and haven from persecution in the light of the tragic events of the twentieth century; the traditional longing for a return to the land evoked in the Hebrew Bible and liturgy; the hope for an "ingathering of the exiles"; the fervent wish to revive the Hebrew language and culture on the soil where Hebrew civilization flourished.

One feature of the Zionist narrative that tends to arouse less comprehension is the belief in the holiness of the Land of Israel or, indeed, what holiness means in this context. Yet it is the thread running through the entire Zionist enterprise since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

If "holy" means special to God, or touched by divinity, then one can grasp why certain places, people, or objects might be revered as holy. *In the Christian tradition* the term "Holy Land" refers to the land containing the holy places revered by Christianity because of their association with the life of Jesus Christ. But the assertion that a geographical area of thousands of square kilometers is holy in its very essence may be harder to understand. What quality of sanctity might infuse a landscape containing, besides places referred to in the Holy Bible, the commonplace sites of everyday life and work?

I suggest that *in the Jewish tradition* "holiness" with reference to the Land of Israel has a threefold meaning: 1. That the Land was promised by God to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their descendants who remain loyal to the Biblical covenant; 2. That it is an eternal heritage, something hallowed by memories that are passed down from one generation to the next. 3. In consequence, that it was and is the setting for the fulfillment of the ordained purpose of a people that believes itself special.

Note that all these variants of holiness have both spiritual-religious and practical-political dimensions. There is no contradiction between the two dimensions, though they can be given different emphases and interpretations at different times by different streams of Judaism. Inherent in the Jewish tradition is a seamless continuity of religion and politics, belief and practice, body and spirit.

#### Zionist theology and the holiness of the land

Shortly after the Six Day War of 1967 a cross-party movement of prominent Israeli thinkers and personalities emerged calling for settlement of the entire Land of Israel. In English it was known as the Movement for a Greater Israel. It had a tremendous psychological impact and in a short time young idealists set out to implement the ethic of settlement in the midst of a pre-existing population of Palestinian Arabs. Today, almost fifty years later, hundreds of thousands of Jews inhabit the territories beyond the borders of June 4, 1967.

Responsibility for this controversial program is commonly laid at the door of two small but highly motivated groups. The first consists of the Revisionist followers of Ze'ev Vladimir Jabotinski who make up the ideological core of *Herut*, later the Likud party of Menachem Begin and his successors. The second—Gush Emunim—consists of the disciples of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, the son of the prophetic Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Hakohen Kook.

Put in this oversimplified way, the most significant ideological development in the Zionist movement since the foundation of the State of Israel is presented as the work of a fringe minority. But to make sense of the settlement phenomenon one must look beyond Herut and Gush Emunim to the silent majority of sympathizers. In fact, the concept of *kedushat ha'aretz*, the sanctity of the Land of Israel which inspires these movements, has deep roots in the Jewish tradition. Nor has its impact been limited to a minority. Rather, it has been one of the central influences on Zionist thinking and policy, left and right, religious and secular, Ashkenazi and Sephardi, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day.

Jewish thinking about the Land of Israel can be traced back to the great Sephardic scholars and mystics of the medieval period. The great Nachmanides (1194-1270) interpreted Numbers xxxiii:53 as a direct biblical command to conquer and settle the Land: "And you shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have assigned the land to you to possess." The terrestrial land below was holy, because in a mystical sense it was connected to and identical with the heavenly land above. Rabbi Ezra of Gerona (1160-1238) did not believe that there was an enduring duty to settle the Land but was convinced that the Land had the power to redeem Israel from the sufferings of Exile. Moreover, he saw the Land of Israel as the *Axis Mundi*, the centre of the cosmos, and therefore directly linked to the Almighty. Ibn Ezra (1092-1167) argued that the Land was holy in a very literal way because it was able to receive and absorb emanations of sanctity transmitted from higher spheres. While other lands were controlled by the stars only the Land of Israel was controlled by God. As long as the Jews were in Exile they had no access to God. *Aliyah*, ascension to the Land, therefore became a supreme obligation. Not all the sages, though, assigned sanctity to the physical land. Abulafia (1240-c. 1291) saw the Land in symbolic, immaterial terms as an internal state of spirituality.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Garb, "Models of Sacred Space in Jewish Mysticism and their Impact in the Twentieth Century," in Aviezer Ravitsky (ed.), *The Land of Israel in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Jewish Thought* (Hebrew). Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 2004, pp. 5-8.

The emergence of the Zionist movement in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century confronted the rabbinical establishment with threat of internal division and heresy. Zionist activists no longer saw themselves bound by the *mitzvot* and *halacha*, the injunctions of Torah. Their aim was to escape the insular world—mental and physical—of the *shtetl*, the East European Jewish small town. Their inspiration was not the rabbis but modern thinkers like Mazzini, Darwin and Nietzsche. As far as the ultra-Orthodox were concerned these Zionists were the latest affliction in the chronicle of eroding faith and identity that had plagued the Jewish people since Napoleon pulled down the ghetto walls.

It was within this unpromising context that Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook (1865-1935), the first chief rabbi of Palestine and prophet of modern religious Zionism, developed his mystical theology of the Land of Israel. "The Land of Israel", he wrote, "thanks to its inherent qualities, is the essential element bound up with the Jewish people's being."<sup>2</sup> The sanctity of the Land, which could not be grasped by rational thought, was part of an economy of salvation in which Exile and purification paved the way for the messianic ingathering and return. Judaism in exile was a mere anticipation of the future redemption heralded by the return to the Land of Israel. Exile sucked the nourishment from the Land but also purged its uncleanness and prepared the way for the return. Only in the Land could the *mitzvot*, the ordinances of Torah, acquire their full unadulterated meaning and the people achieve redemption. If Outside-Israel is characterized by profanity and impurity, and therefore alienation from the divine light, the Land of Israel, thanks to its closeness to divine truth and the Holy Spirit, is suffused with divine light.<sup>3</sup>

Writing during and after World War I amidst the break-up of empire, revolution, and the progress of the Zionist enterprise Rabbi Kook was convinced of the practical relevance of his theology in the here-and-now. He saw the Zionist pioneers who built the *kibbutzim* and *moshavim*, the collective farms and villages, as engaged in sacred work in the cause of redemption, even if they did not always know it. Still, a most pressing need was to reconcile two seemingly incompatible dimensions of Jewish life in the Land of Israel. On the one hand there were the *mitzvot*, whose observance in the Land constituted the very fabric of redemption. On the other hand there were the practical problems that arose when it came to building a country. The trouble was that important *mitzvot* connected to working the Land—and which did not apply outside the Land—seemed to be incompatible with modern life. For instance, according to Jewish law land in Israel could not be cultivated in the seventh year. But how could a society survive which left its fields fallow for an entire year?

Rabbi Kook was able to provide halachic-legal solutions to many of these questions. His theology and legal decisions inspired not only his immediate followers, students of his rabbinical academy (*Mercaz Harav*) but also future generations. He deeply influenced the religious Zionist youth movement *Bnai Akiva* which came into its own after the 1967 war. Taken up by his son Zvi Yehuda Kook his ideas acquired a new, activist dimension at this time. Overall, Rabbi Kook the elder's thought, both mystical and halachic, was not universally accepted by observant Jews but at the very least they served as a bridge between secular Zionism and ultra-orthodoxy. This is exemplified by the cases of two important orthodox movements.

The *Chabad* chasidic movement rebuilt after World War II by its charismatic leader the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, became a strong supporter of the State of Israel and its role in the unfolding of the divine purpose. The holiness of the Land and the rights to it of the Jewish people were axiomatic. The Rebbe argued that the return to the Land naturally derived from its original ownership. "Its sanctity did not expire with the Exile but remains to the present day because the ownership of the Land of Israel by the people of Israel is eternal and cannot be conceded until all is revealed with the coming of the just messiah."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Avraham Yitzhak Hakohen Kook, *Lights* (Hebrew). Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2004-5, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 9-13.

<sup>4</sup> Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Collected Talks*, part 16 (Hebrew). Brooklyn, NY: Otsar Hachasidim, 1977-78, p. 100.

*Agudat Yisrael*, the centrist ultra-Orthodox movement founded in Europe in 1912 started out as deeply critical of Zionism but closed ranks with the Zionist movement in face of the crisis of the 1930s. It did this at a conference convened "for the sake of the holiness of the Land" held in Petach Tikva in 1934. After the Shoah the Aguda called on all Jews to settle in the Land of Israel. An offshoot workers movement, *Poalei Agudat Yisrael*, set up in 1922, established its own agricultural communities. Neither Chabad nor the Aguda endorse Kook's system of thought but today they not only avow the holiness of the Land but are strongly committed to Israel's presence in the occupied territories and have large communities living there. They are strongly attached to Rachel's Tomb between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron.

To one stream of ultra-Orthodoxy, however, Rabbi Kook's theology was and remains anathema: that led by Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum (1887-1979), the dynastic head of the Satmar Chasidic movement. Teitelbaum was an explicit anti-Zionist and avowed foe of *Agudat Yisrael*. His own theology is almost the mirror image of that of Rabbi Kook. Rejecting any injunction to settle the Land he saw aliyah, immigration to the Land of Israel, as a positive offence against God's will. Rabbi Kook's argument that the mitzvot acquired their full significance in the Land was baseless. Moreover, in an unredeemed world the performance of mitzvot special to the Land was positively sacrilegious. By talking of the holiness of the Land the Zionists merely dressed up their corrosive ideas in spurious garb in order to ensnare God-fearing Jews. Exile was a deep reality reflecting cosmic chaos that was not amenable to human manipulation, quite the contrary. The world was in a state of total darkness seen in the disarray of orthodoxy and the terrible events of modern history, culminating in the Shoah. Any willful attempt to amend this desolation resulted in the withdrawal of the divine presence from the world and a state of abandonment. The Zionists were no better than collaborators with the forces of Evil bent on delaying the Redemption. To Kook's *atchalta degeula*, the beginning of redemption, Teitelbaum opposed *ikva degeula*, the postponement of redemption.<sup>5</sup>

#### Zionist ideology and the Secularization of the Sacred

Zionist ideology has two main streams (fed by numerous tributaries) Revisionist-Likud and Socialist-Labor. For both movements, each in its own way, the Land has center stage. For the revisionist followers of Vladimir Jabotinski and Menachem Begin, however, the Land's mystical holiness is made explicit.

In an insightful analysis Arye Naor, cabinet secretary to the first government of Menachem Begin, 1977-1982, argues that for the Revisionist movement the Land had the symbolic resonances of the heavenly Land of Israel, *Yisrael shel ma'ala*.<sup>6</sup> Religious concepts had undergone a process of secularization, *the secularization of the sacred*, but retained the spiritual resonance of their source, even when their exponents were non-religious. So Revisionism had a *political theology* as much as an ideology. Even the atheistic worldview of its founder Jabotinski was tinged with the sacred. He explicitly spoke of "the holy Jordan" and of the Beitar youth movement "consecrated by suffering". In his view, Russian pogroms resulted from the estrangement of the Jewish people from their Land. So repossession of the Land was vital as an end to alienation. For the children of Israel Land preceded identity: "Eretz Israel gives the people its name and not the reverse."<sup>7</sup>

Uri Zvi Greenberg (1896-1981), the poet of the Revisionist movement, saw no barrier between the sacred and the profane. His poetry is deeply religious and intensely political. The son of a rabbi, he writes of his relationship with God alluding to liturgy and tradition while expressing a profound attachment to the Land.

---

<sup>5</sup> David Zorotzkin, "Building the Earthly and Destroying the Heavenly: The Satmar Rabbi and the Radical Orthodox School of Thought," (Hebrew). In Ravitzki, op. cit, pp. 159-61.

<sup>6</sup> Arye Naor, "On Eretz Israel in Revisionist Zionism: Between Political Theology and Instrumentality", (Hebrew). In Ravitski, op. cit., pp. 422-95.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp. 448-49.

On the other hand, Revisionist ideology is concerned not with God but with history, nationalism, and the land. By drawing on originally religious values it strengthens its political claims and mobilizes its political constituency. Political myth elevates ideology beyond the reach of rational discourse. For revisionists the Land has precedence over the state, because "the Land is holy whereas the state is not holy." In this way political values are sanctified within a secular framework. This not only legitimizes them but also means that they cannot be conceded. In political-electoral terms the use of religious symbolism and vocabulary is of great utility.<sup>8</sup>

The leading ideologue of Revisionism after the death of Jabotinski in 1940 was Yisrael Eldad (1910-1996).<sup>9</sup> He argues that Zionism was always a messianic movement and was seen as such by Theodor Herzl. Moreover, its goals were messianic, namely, to free the Jewish people, free the homeland, and gather in the exiles. (It is no coincidence that Menachem Begin chose the name *Herut*, freedom, for the political party he set up in 1948, echoing the theme of the Passover haggadah "from slavery to freedom.") Eldad accepts that Zionism is a secular movement in the sense that its followers are mostly non-observant Jews. But for him secular is not the absence of religion, where he defines Judaism as national culture rather than set belief. Within his political theology the Land acquires supreme value as the place where the Jewish people lives and shapes its culture. He sees Zionism as the continuation of religion and in its emphasis on doing—building, settling, working the soil, absorbing immigrants—an embodiment of the tradition of worship through action found in the performance of the mitzvot.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to Revisionist Zionism, Labor Zionism, the mainstream movement until it was discredited by the disaster of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, carefully avoided the vocabulary of spirituality and holiness. It always found distasteful Jabotinski and his followers' talk of a mystical bond to the Land. Labor Zionism created a broad, inclusive ideology which avowedly drew on universalistic socialist and liberal values rather than traditional religious themes. Speaking a familiar language of international community and appealing to pragmatic considerations, leaders such as Golda Meir, Yigal Alon, and Shimon Peres were welcomed as kindred spirits to the ranks of the Socialist International.

Labor leaders simply could not indulge in what they saw as unhelpful, exclusivist rhetoric. After all, they had borne responsibility for the day-to-day handling of the practical affairs of the *Yishuv*—diplomatic, political, and economic—from the beginning of Zionist settlement. They understood that to work with the Mandate authorities, mobilize international support, establish and consolidate a state, required the familiar, inclusive language of statesmanship and responsibility.

Even so, under the surface can be found the same mystical attachment to the Land of Israel found in other streams of Zionism. The historical frame on which Labor Zionism hung its ideology is the familiar biblical-prophetic trajectory—Exile, Ascent to the Land, and Redemption. Aaron David Gordon (1856-1922) was the Tolstoy-like prophet of Labor Zionism. His Zionism, no less than that of Revisionist theorists, is a secularization of the sacred. He studiously avoids religious language about the Land of Israel but maintains that the Land is the one and only place where the Jews can set down their roots and develop their national life. Exile, he argues, brought about an alienation and moral impoverishment that could only be redeemed by physical labor. In redeeming the Land, the Jews redeemed themselves. Gordon has no time for the concept of a Chosen People yet still insists that the Jews are different and special. Moreover, the rejuvenation of the Jewish people by returning to the soil would have universal significance for the rebuilding of mankind.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> The following remarks are derived from Yisrael Eldad, "There can be no retreat from the Land of Israel because there is no retreat from Zionism because there is no retreat from Judaism," (Hebrew). In *Zionism: A Contemporary Debate, Research and Ideological Approaches*. Sdeh Boker: The Center for the Legacy of Ben-Gurion, 1996, pp. 437-74.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp. 443-45.

<sup>11</sup> Yehoyada Amir, "Land, Nature, and the Individual: Taking Root in the Landscape of Eretz Israel according to the Thought of A.D. Gordon," (Hebrew). In Ravitzki, op. cit., pp. 315-345.

Other ideologues of the Labor movement such as Yitzhak Tabenkin (1888-1971) also cloaked religious concepts in socialist, secular garb. A founder and spiritual mentor of Kibbutz Ein Harod, Tabenkin was an avid proponent of the Greater Land of Israel throughout his career, opposing all proposals of partition or withdrawal from the 1930s onwards. After the Six Day War he wrote: "The goal of our entire project was then, and remains: A Greater Israel within its natural and ancient borders; from the Mediterranean to the desert and from Lebanon to the Dead Sea—as the reborn homeland of the entire Jewish people. This is the original Zionist idea." This absolute right to the Land of Israel, in which he included the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip, was consecrated by the sacrifice of its soldiers and rooted in the Bible.<sup>12</sup>

The epitome in his generation of the fervent Zionist and avowed non-believer, Moshe Dayan (1915-1981), a child of kibbutz Degania, returned in his final years to a mystical belief in the Bible. In his book *Living with the Bible* Dayan writes of his own adventurous life as a native-born Sabra, against the backdrop of the Land of Israel, its landscapes, biblical associations, and battles. He knits into one seamless web the story of the Jewish people in ancient times and at the present day. Over everything looms the Bible as the ultimate justification for the rebirth of the nation of Israel speaking Hebrew in its indivisible historical homeland.<sup>13</sup> It was therefore not on momentary impulse that when Menachem Begin formed his Likud government in 1977 Moshe Dayan accepted the post of Foreign Minister...

### Conclusion

So the wheel turned full circle and the those who had ostensibly rejected conventional Judaism for socialism and secularism could no longer disguise the true source of their attachment to the Land—a more or less mystical sense of the biblical promise and covenant.

The assertion that a land is holy may arouse disquiet if it is the basis of an exclusivist and uncompromising political agenda. Inflexible nationalism is no longer acceptable. The right of the Jewish people to a national home in part of Palestine is one thing. The denial on grounds of sacred principle of the equivalent political claims of Palestinian Arabs to a state in the rest of Palestine is quite another.

But does the belief, implicit or explicit, in the holiness of the Land rule out a two-state solution? In the past Israeli leaders accepted pragmatic arrangements when they had no other choice. In 1947 they reluctantly agreed to United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 calling for the partition of Palestine into two states because they understood that this was the inescapable condition for achieving statehood and providing a haven for the survivors of the Shoah. From 1949-1967 Israel complied with the reality of partition without forgetting the holiness of the Land. After 1967 Yitzhak Rabin and Moshe Dayan, Zionists in the Tabenkin tradition, opted for compromise. Of course, a 1947 community of 600,00 is very different from a 2013 state of eight million.

In the final analysis, whether or not an Israeli government in the future will consent to a redivision of the Land depends on alternatives, compulsions, and necessities. One thing is for sure. As time passes the problem is not getting any easier.

---

<sup>12</sup> Idith Zertal, "Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood", Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 188-189.

<sup>13</sup> Moshe Dayan, *Living with the Bible*, New York: William Marrow, 1978.