

RABBI YEHUDA HAI ALKALAI

by the Chacham SOLOMON GAON

The contribution made by the Sephardim to the creation of modern Zionism is considerable. The idea of the “return to Zion” was to a great extent kept alive in the hearts of the Jewish masses by the Jewish poets in Spain, who exalted it above all other ideals, and the Sephardic Rabbis, who declared it to be one of the most sacred inspirations of Jewish life.

It is, therefore, not unnatural that from the Sephardi communities sprang two personalities who, by their pronouncements and endeavors, gave concrete expression to the Jewish love for Zion. They were Sir Moses Montefiore and Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai, who were contemporaries. Although they corresponded and maintained identical views on several problems affecting Jewry and the life of the time, there is no evidence that they influenced each other. Each came to his conclusions through his own experiences, guided by his own sense of spiritual values and by his sincere devotion to the G-d and the people of Israel. It was these qualities that brought them both, into conflict with the Reform movement which -was then raising its head. Not intolerance, but deep concern for the Jewish heritage prompted them to adopt an uncompromising attitude towards that movement. The same qualities made them realize that the return to Zion must be inextricably bound up with the cultivation of the land of Israel by the people of Israel.

During his second visit to Palestine in 1838, Sir Moses Montefiore instituted a comprehensive statistical inquiry into the condition of the Jewish population there and made elaborate schemes for their economic development. It is clear - from his Diary that his intention was to apply to the ruler of the country, Mahomet Ali, for a grant of land for 50 years, and then to form in England a company for the cultivation of the land “and the encouragement of our brethren in Europe to return to Palestine “. By degrees he hoped to induce the return to the Land of Israel of thousands of his fellow-Jews, and he was sure that” they would be happy in the enjoyment of the observance of our holy religion in a manner which is impossible in Europe.

Rabbi Yehuda Aikalai, in his publications Meoded Anavim and Mashmia Shalom, expresses almost the same ideas. The work on the land must be the first duty of

the immigrants, who although not yet accustomed to such work, would be sustained in their efforts by the generous contributions of world Jewry. There should be also a joint-stock company, which should make every effort to induce the Sultan to cede Palestine to the Jews as a tributary country, on a plan similar to that by which the Danubian principalities were governed. In time the Jewish people would become also farmers and builders like any other nation.

While Sir Moses Montefiore looked upon his work on behalf of the Holy Land and his people from a philanthropic point of view, to R. Alkalai the return to Zion was the first step towards the achievement of political independence for Jewry. This difference in outlook was the result of the difference in environment and conditions in which these two great men in Israel lived. Sir Moses lived in a country which was developing a mighty empire and which was passing through one of the most glorious and most tranquil periods of its history.

Rabbi Alkalai, on the other hand, lived in the centre of the revolutionary activity in the Balkans, where small nations were trying to win their independence, and he was probably influenced in his thinking by these national movements, He also maintained that there would be no redemption (Geulah) without preparation of the hearts of the people, and therefore propaganda was of vital importance. It is his conception of Jewish statehood and his ideas for its achievement that make him one of the most important forerunners of modern Zionism.

Yehuda Shelomo Hai Alkalai was born in 1798 in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia. There is evidence that in 5541, about fifty years after the expulsion from Spain, there were Jews residing in Sarajevo. In 1645 they received official permission from the Turkish Governor to live in a special part of the town. The Sephardic community of Sarajevo developed rapidly, and its famous Rabbis instituted Yeshivot (seminaries) in which the children and the youth were brought up in the spirit of Judaism and the Sephardic tradition. It was in one of these Yeshivot that Alkalai received his early education. In keeping with the custom of his native place, that all boys who showed promise in the study of the Torah should complete their education in the Holy City of Jerusalem, Alkalai left his home at an early age to study under Rabbi Eliezer Papo (author of Pele Yoetz), who also hailed from Sarajevo.

While in Jerusalem, R Alkalai came under the influence of the Mekubalim (mystics) and began to meditate on the redemption of Israel from the Galut. Due probably to his deep knowledge of the Bible, which in keeping with Sephardic tradition was the basis of his Jewish upbringing in Sarajevo, he did not give himself up entirely to speculative thought; the idea of Geulah assumed for him a more concrete and realistic form.

This process was helped also by the liberation movements aiming at the establishment of the national independence of the Balkan peoples, with Alkalai derives from Alkala, the name of a town in Castilia. At the time of the expulsion members of this family emigrated to Salonika, and from there one branch of the family went to Serbia and the other to Bulgaria, which Alkalai became acquainted in Zemun, where he was called as Chacham of the community in 1825.

Following in the footsteps of the Chachamim of ancient Sepharad, he devoted himself wholeheartedly to the education of youth. In a description of the position of the Chacham in the communities in Spain, a historian says: He was not only a source of emulation to the students; he was the living embodiment of their highest ideals. It was the fondest hope of a noble disciple to approximate his master in learning and religion.. For the rector was no mere schoolman; he was the sage and the scholar. Outside the walls of the academy, in the community at large he was the custodian of Judaism and a regenerating moral and spiritual force among his people. Despite the antagonisms and defeats which a fearless sage necessarily incurred often in the fight against the abuses of evil men, he was a dominating moral figure in the community and he wielded considerable legal powers. Little wonder then that the scholars of the academy saw in their master the idealization of learning and the fountain of inspiration for their self' sacrificing studies. (A. A. Neuman, The Jews in Spain, Part II).

Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai was the prototype of this ideal Sephardic Chacham. From this early period of his activity date his first two compositions Darche Noam and Shelom Yerushalaim, written in Ladino, in which there is evidence of his realistic grasp of the Jewish problem and its solution. The Damascus affair in 1840, in which Sir Moses Montefiore played such a distinguished part, convinced him that he was treading the right path. He even went so far as to try and prove in Minchat Yehuda from different Biblical passages and Rabbinic sayings that the year 5600 (corresponding to 1840) was the year "that has come to stir our hearts as to the absence of Jerusalem". This excursion into speculative mysticism

brought upon him the derision and mockery of many people, who failed to understand that Alkalai was not much concerned—as many Cabbalists were—with the fixing of the dates for the different stages whereby the Geulah would be achieved, but that he wanted to indicate the way in which it could be realized.

This reception of his work did not discourage R. Alkalai. He realized, however, that his writings alone were not sufficient, but that direct propaganda was also necessary; hence his journeys to Vienna, Berlin, Paris and London. In all these places he expounded his ideas of a Jewish Settlement in Palestine as the only way indicated by our sacred literature for the attainment of die Messianic era.

In 1852 he visited London, and founded the Society “Shelom Yerushalayim” for the colonization of the Holy Land. We do not know what influence R. Alkalai had upon the Jewish community of London as a whole or upon any particular individual. Although the Society which he established disintegrated immediately after his departure from London, there is no doubt that his enthusiasm for the cause he propounded must have left some impression and thereby to some extent paved the way for the debut of Theodore Herzl in London in 1895 and for that memorable meeting of the 13 July, 1896, when Herzl addressed the Jewish masses in Whitechapel under the chairmanship of Dr. Moses Gaster, the Chacham of the Sephardic community.

In London R Alkalai met many Jews, as well as non-Jews, who were interested in the return of Israel to its homeland. It is probable that among others he made the acquaintance also of Arthur Hollingsworth, who in that year wrote his second pamphlet urging the establishment of a Jewish State in Palestine, which would be of direct assistance to Great Britain in safeguarding the land route to India. There does not seem to be any direct reference to meetings between R. Alkalai and Sir Moses Montefiore, but they must have met and exchanged views. These encounters in all probability gave especial pleasure to Alkalai, for while in London he wrote *Mebasser Tob* and dedicated it to Sir Moses, who expressed his gratitude in a very appreciative manner.

From London R Alkalai returned to the Continent and continued in different cities his efforts to obtain the support of the leaders of the Jewish communities in Western Europe for his projects. Any sign on the part of Jewry to influence its own destiny was hailed by R Alkalai as additional proof that Providence was working steadily, if slowly towards the realization of the prophetic vision that Israel would once again be free in the home of its Fathers.

It was for this reason that he welcomed the establishment of the Alliance Israelite Universelle in 1860, On that occasion he wrote: "Today the prophecy of the prophet Hosea was fulfilled: 'Then shall the children of Judah and, the children of Israel be gathered together, and appoint themselves one head, and they shall come up out of the land..." The interpretation of these words is that the children of Israel have gathered together in the Alliance Israelite Universelle and have appointed one head: the President. This Society would deal primarily with the unification of the people of Israel, and it would concern itself with the colonization of the Land of Israel. R Alkalai was however soon to be disillusioned in the Alliance israelite, which set for itself only a limited objective; for, as he pointed out, small enterprises could have only small results. Disappointment did not prevent him from trying to find new paths for the achievement of his goal... He came to the conclusion that if Jewry of the Diaspora would not undertake seriously the work of redemption then the Jewish community in the land of Israel might show the way and give the lead to world Jewry.

R Alkalai, therefore, departed for the Holy Land in 1871. There, among the Sephardic community, he 'found support for his ideas; and even the Sephardic Chief Rabbi, Rishon Le-Zion, endorsed his activities. The Ashkenazim, however, were not enthusiastic at the beginning; but, later on, they agreed to cooperate in the Society which Alkalai founded for the colonization of the Land. When he considered his work well established, he decided to return to Zemun for the consecration of the Synagogue which had been built on his initiative. He felt sure that the leaders to whom he had entrusted his newly-formed Association in Jerusalem would do everything in their power to stir the masses of Jewry throughout the world. The proposal of the Turkish authorities in Palestine to sell a large 'portion of land between Ramleh and Jaffa, near the agricultural school of Mikveh Yisrael ", he considered to be a propitious omen from Heaven.

As he prepared himself to leave the land of Israel, a telegram reached him from Rabbi Hirsch Kalischer, another enthusiast for the colonization of the Holy Land, to come to Paris. At that time Rabbi Nathan Friedland, the collaborator of R. Kalischer, was in Paris, making propaganda for the Alliance, as well as for the foundation of settlements in Palestine, and R Alkalai was to support him in this effort. In spite of his fatigue, R Alkalai agreed to accept this new task and, without even paying a short visit to his home town, he proceeded direct to Paris. On his arrival he found that his assistance was also required in the intervention that Rabbi Friedland was making in Paris on behalf of the Jews of Shabatz (in Serbia).

In Belgrade, the capital of Serbia, there was already in 1530 an organized Jewish community. The position of the Jews in the country was on the whole good until the introduction in 1842 of the discriminatory laws forbidding the Jews to settle in the interior, During the following twenty years the situation of the Jews steadily deteriorated, and in 1864 the expulsion of the Jews of Shabatz took place. The Alliance made a protest as well as the British Consul in Belgrade, hut these efforts did not produce any concrete result, The Jews of Shabatz turned for help to the Turkish authorities and asked for permission to settle in the Land of their Fathers. R Alkalai and Friedland made every endeavor in Paris to realize the ideal of their brethren “the Jews of Shabatz, who found themselves in oppression and distress”.

R Alkalai stayed in Paris for over a month, but in spite of all his work he had to admit that he had failed in his mission. Exhausted and disillusioned, he returned to Zemun. On his return home he found a letter informing him that the Society he had founded in Palestine had come to an end because of the hostile attitude of the leaders of the Haluka. They argued that if world Jewry was going to concern itself with the colonization of the Land, the Haluka would be neglected and the livelihood of many families in Palestine endangered. Furthermore, work on the land would distract the people of Israel from the study of the Torah, which must be their main concern; and, in any case, the Holy Land was no longer flowing with milk and honey to make agriculture a profitable undertaking.

R Alkalai resolutely refuted all these arguments. The leaders of the Haluka by their attitude have sown discord, he argued, and it was their action that was calculated to bring distress and hunger to many people in Palestine As if there were no people to work on the land other than those studying in the Beth Hamedrash, and as if there were no money other than that which went into the funds of the Haluka.

Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai, now approaching the 75th year of his life, felt it imperative that he should take part in the battle against those who refused to understand that the only salvation for world Jewry, as a necessary prelude to complete Geulah, was the establishment of colonies in the Land of our fathers, In the summer of 1874 he left his post in Zemun and set out for the Holy Land, where he decided to spend the remaining years of his life. He settled in Jerusalem but there was no peace for the old warrior. He continued to propagate his ideas in the Jewish community of the Holy

Land and to impress upon them the need for a change of outlook. R Alkai maintained that there was indeed a pressing need for such a change, as there could be no redemption without the will to realize it. The desire to be free and the colonization of the Land were two indispensable conditions which the Jews must fulfill if they wanted to bring nearer the Messianic era.

The Rabbinic saying that there would be no Geulah without Teshuvah (repentance) Alkai interpreted in his own original manner. He understood Teshuvah as meaning not only return to G-d but also return to the Land, and concluded that without the return of the people of Israel to their native land, there would be no Geulah. The will for redemption would unite in reality all the people of Israel, for unity did not depend on physical proximity but on the bond that existed between their hearts. As an expression of this unity there would arise a world organization, led by the most distinguished Jews of Europe who, inspired by the spirit of G-d, would elect as their President a scion of the House of David. Through diplomacy and the intervention of Western Jewry this organization should secure the help of the rulers of Europe, especially of the more enlightened governments in Britain and France, in order to expedite the immigration of the Jewish masses into the Land of their fathers, where through purchase the land would gradually be acquired. Until the new settlements were able to become self supporting they would be sustained by the contributions of world Jewry and by funds raised through a national loan.

We may accept, or reject, the claim that Rabbi Yehuda Alkai, through his trusted friend and disciple Simon Herzl, grandfather of Theodore Herzl, had a decisive influence on the development of the latter's political thought. There is no doubt, however, that by the propagation of his ideas concerning Jewish statehood and the Jewish State, R Alkai paved the way for the emergence of 'Theodor Herzl on the horizon of Jewish history.

R Alkai did not live to see the fruits of his efforts, for he died in 5578; but a man of his caliber could not have died a disappointed man, His piety and care for his people, his burning faith in the ideals that inspired his whole life, must have made him realize that although his life was slowly drawing to its end, his plans for the renaissance of the people and the Land of Israel would eventually triumph. Like Moses of old, he must have seen in his vision the Land of Israel rebuilt and the exiles gathered within its borders.