

# **ZIONISM AND THE SYNAGOGUE**

## **by Rabbi Dr. Joseph Litvin**

**ZIONISM and the Synagogue may be regarded as synonymous. Indeed, in the Talmud the Synagogue is called the “Little Temple”, replacing the Great Temple of Zion. It is due to the Torah, the Synagogue and the prayer-book that our people have not forgotten Zion during their exile. This truth was recognized by many great men, including Disraeli, who wrote:**

**A race that persists in celebrating their vintage, although they have no fruits to gather, will regain their vineyards. The Jewish people was bled white in its struggle against the Romans. The Rabbis, to whom the preservation of the Jewish people was most important, even taking precedence over the Torah itself, and who enjoined that wherever there was the slightest danger to lift all the commandments of the Torah, except three (adultery, murder and idolatry), might be infringed, therefore prohibited further attempts to liberate Palestine by forces. The hope of liberation by force was replaced by the strengthened faith in the Messiah. In the Dark Ages, it was inconceivable for Jews to participate in a struggle for Eretz Israel, as this would only have caused the greatest catastrophe.**

### **The Halacha, the Kabbalah, and the Holy Land.**

**Of the numerous references in the Halachah to the belief in the Messiah and Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel, it must suffice here to give a few. Maimonides did not include the Mitzvah of settling in Palestine in the 613 commandments of the Torah;**

**NACHMANIDES, ON THE OTHER HAND, REGARDED THIS MITZVAH AS ONE OF THE HIGHEST AND SET AN EXAMPLE BY SETTLING IN ERETZ ISRAEL. THE ESTEEM IN WHICH THE LAND AND ITS JEWISH INHABITANTS ARE HELD IN RABBINIC AND CABBALISTIC LITERATURE IS DIFFICULT TO EXAGGERATE.**

**Palestine is the centre of the world, there can be no proper Hebrew Congregation (Kahal) outside Eretz Israel there can also be no Semichah (ordination of a Rabbi or Judge) outside the Holy Land (Hilchot Sanhedrin 4) Maimonides, in his Book of Commandments (Mitzvah 153), states that one of the principles of our creed is that Eretz Israel can never be without Jews, for otherwise we would be deprived of the Jewish Calendar and could not celebrate any festival; this would mean the**

end of the existence of our Torah, which is contrary to the promise of the Almighty.’ According to the Talmud, he who tries to fix the Jewish Calendar outside the Holy Land is practicing a denial of Judaism. (Berachot 63)

**MAIMONIDES STATES: ‘IT IS FORBIDDEN TO LEAVE ERETZ ISRAEL EVEN TEMPORARILY, THOUGH ONE MAY LEAVE THE HOLY LAND TO STUDY THE ‘TORAH, TO MARRY OR FOR BUSINESS PURPOSES, BUT ONE MUST RETURN AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. ONLY IN CASE OF FAMINE IS IT PERMISSIBLE TO SETTLE OUTSIDE PALESTINE, YET PIOUS MEN PREFER TO REMAIN EVEN DURING SUCH A CALAMITY (HILCHOT MELACHIM 5).’**

And he continues: Our sages have stated that he who is buried in Eretz Israel is without sin. A Jew should, always prefer to live in the Holy Land, even in a town whose inhabitants are mostly Gentiles. A Jew should not live in the Diaspora even in a town whose inhabitants are mostly Jews. He who emigrates from the Holy Land is regarded as an idol worshipper.” According to Nachmanides and some other great Talmudic authorities, the proper observance of the Torah, even of the commandments which are not dependent on the Holy Land, like Tefillin and Sabbath, is possible only in Eretz Israel; in the Diaspora it is only a rehearsal for the Holy Land.” (Ramban Devarim 4:5) This view is shared by Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham Aderet (Rashba). (Teshuvah 134)” The Rabbis stated: ‘The commandment to settle in the Holy Land is equal in importance to all other commandments of the Torah taken together (Sifri Devarim 12:29) The blowing of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah and the use of the Lulab on Succot are forbidden if they Fall on a Sabbath, the reason being to avoid a possible though not inevitable desecration of the Sabbath. Yet the Talmud permits one on a Sabbath to buy a house or land from a non- Jew in Eretz Israel and to ask a Gentile to write and sign the document.” (Orach Chayim 306) It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this example.

**To strengthen the bonds of family life is one of the dominant commandments of Judaism. Yet not only may the husband divorce his wife, hut also the wife her husband (i.e., the Jewish Court has to compel either to accept a divorce), if she or he refuses to settle in Eretz Israel together with the other.(See Rambam Hilchot Nissuin 13) Our Rabbis declare: ‘ Better to dwell in a desert in Eretz Israel than in a palace in the Diaspora (Bereshit Rabba 16) and “ there is no wisdom like the wisdom of the Holy Land and no beauty like that of Jerusalem” (Avot de Rabbi Natan 28) A Jew**

entering Eretz Israel must kiss its stones. Sir Moses Montefiore kept under his pillow a stone from Jerusalem so as 'to fulfill the commandment: "For thy servants take pleasure in her stones and favor the dust thereof".'

No less outspoken is the Kabbalah, Only in the Holy Land can a pious Jew achieve holiness, only there can he penetrate the mysteries of the Torah and reach perfection. There is a Jerusalem in Heaven opposite the spot where the earthly Jerusalem stands it is also deserted, and the Almighty will return there only after the restoration of the Holy Land to Israel. All prayers ascend to Heaven through the Temple which, although in ruins, remains the gate through which prayers reach the Almighty. In a word, there are no hounds to the glorification of Eretz Israel and Jerusalem in the Rabbinic and Cabbalistic writings. These were diligently studied in the Synagogue. Not only the prayers composed thousands of years ago are fish of Zion and Palestine, but the Piyutirn and lamentations, supplications and anthems, composed throughout the ages by Rabbis and poets such as Gershom, the "Light of the Diaspora ", Rashi, Yehuda Halevi and others, are full of passion for Zion.

### **Practical Zionism and the Synagogue.**

The Synagogues not only preached and prayed Zion, they also acted for Zion by raising funds. This fundraising frequently involved much suffering, as, when the Land was under Moslem rule, the Christians used to accuse the Jews engaged in it of high treason. In the 15th century, the Chief Rabbi of Constantinople, Kapsali, was severely attacked for refusing to authorize fundraising for the Holy Land, as it was then occupied by Egypt, which was at war with Turkey. Some Rabbis were even sent to prison for such fund-raising.

**THE WHOLE LIFE OF THE SYNAGOGUE JEW WAS INTERWOVEN WITH ZION. FOR ZION HE PRAYED BEFORE AND AFTER HIS MEALS, AND AT LEAST THREE DAYS IN THE YEAR HE FASTED FOR ITS LOSS AND DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE. PIOUS JEWS MOURNED ZION EVERY MIDNIGHT AND SOME ALSO AT NOON. IN EVERY JEWISH HOUSE THERE WAS A DARK GREY SPOT ON THE WALL FACING THE ENTRANCE; ASH WAS PUT ON THE HEAD OF THE BRIDEGROOM AT WEDDINGS, AND A GLASS IS STILL BROKEN AT JEWISH ENGAGEMENTS AND WEDDINGS IN COMMEMORATION OF THE LOSS OF JERUSALEM.**

Children in the Cheder knew the geography of Palestine much better than that of their own districts. Rightly wrote Mendele Mocher Sforim: "They could not tell you the name of the river flowing ten miles from their town, nor did they know the

kinds of trees which grew in their parks, neither had they any knowledge of the villages or the history of their own district, Yet the towns rivers, villages, animals, trees and fruits of Eretz Israel were very familiar to them.” When the Synagogue Jew died, he was buried facing the East, and whenever possible earth from the Holy land was sprinkled over his dead body. From the cradle to the tomb, the observant Jew was linked to the Holy Land.

### **The Aliyah of Rabbis.**

From the days of Ezra Rabbis, scholars and pious Jews left the Diaspora for Eretz Israel. Hillel (110 BCE.) left Babylon for Eretz Israel and became leader in Israel. Rabbi Ze'era (3rd century C.E.) risked his life refusing to await the return of the ferry, so that he might arrive a few hours earlier in the Holy Land. This caused a Christian onlooker to make the remark about Jews, “A people in a hurry”. To which the Rabbi replied: “Moses himself was refused the privilege of entering the Promised Land and you expect me to be patient on its threshold”. (Ketubot 112) In the 4th century the Palestinian Talmud was completed, but did not become the main source of Jewish laws as did the Babylonian Talmud. The reason was that the Jews of Eretz Israel were subject to chronic persecution whereas those in Babylon were free to study the Torah almost without hindrance; hence the Babylonian Academies became the religious centers of Judaism. The last Jewish rebellion in the Holy Land took place in 352, when under the leadership of Patricius the Galilean Jews revolted against Byzantium. This revolt was suppressed, and in 429 the post of Nasi (Patriarch) in Eretz Israel was abolished by decree, and all moneys collected by Jews in the Diaspora were ordered to be paid to the Emperor's Treasury. The last Nasi, Gamliel VI, seems to have died without heirs. In 614 the Persians with the help of Jewish soldiers entered the Holy Land and conquered Jerusalem. The Byzantine Emperor, Heraclitus, promised the Jews all kinds of privileges, hut when he reconquered Jerusalem in 628 the promises were disregarded. Jews were murdered or forced to embrace Christianity. Happily ten years later the leader of the Arabs, Omar, conquered the Holy City. Jews again flocked to the Holy Land, and again it became the centre of Talmudic studies.

At the beginning of the tenth century the Palestine Talmudic Academy rivaled the Babylonian Academies, and its leader, Ben Meir, in 921—922, conducted the famous controversy with the Babylonian Geonim regarding the Jewish Calendar. In 960 the communities on the Rhine addressed the Palestinian Academy regarding certain religious problems. According to some historians the Ashkenazim had close connections with the Palestinian Academies, whilst the Sephardim were under the influence of those of Babylon. These historians think

that the Ashkenazi pronunciation is of Palestine origin, while the Sephardic pronunciation is Babylonian. The Arab traveler, Mukadassi, stated in the second half of the tenth century: "People from West and East, Jews as well as Christians, flock to Jerusalem to visit their Synagogues and Churches". The Persian traveller, Nasim Chasaru, who visited Jerusalem in 1047, writes: "From different countries Jews and Christians come to Jerusalem to visit their shrines." In 1025—1051 the great scholar, Solomon Hacoen, was the head (Gaon) of the Palestinian Academy. In 1051 David ben Azarya, a member of the family of the Exilarchs of Babylonia, was proclaimed both Gaon and Patriarch (Nasi); but he died in 1062, and soon a further catastrophe befell the Holy Land. In 1099 Jerusalem fell into Christian hands again and the local Jews were massacred in their thousands. As soon as parts of the country were reconquered by Moslems, or the Crusaders became more favorably inclined to Jews, Rabbis and scholars again. flocked to the Holy Land and tried to revive the study of the Torah. About 1140 YEHUDA Halevi went to the Holy Land, where he was slain by an Arab. In 1138 Ibn Ezra probably visited Palestine; in 1165 Maimonides was there; five years later Benjamin of Tudela visited the land; and in 1180 Petachia of Ratisbon settled in Jerusalem, where he found only one Jew. In 1211 about 300 Talmudic scholars and Rabbis from England and France, on the invitation of Rabbi Samuel ben Shimshon, settled in Eretz Israel. The famous Rabbi Yechiel of Paris followed in 1259.

A new chapter in the development of the Holy Land started with the settlement there in 1260 of Nachmanides, whose work of reorganization stimulated further immigration, In 1322 the scholar Esthori Farhi, who migrated from Southern France, wrote in his Kaftor Vaferah: "We and our brethren of Tripoli, Hamet, Damascus, Cairo, Alexandria and Aleppo, visit Jerusalem during our Festivals to see the site of the Holy Temple and to lament its destruction". The number of Jewish pilgrims became so great that in the 14th and 15th centuries Venetian captains were chary of accepting them, and Jews were compelled to undertake roundabout journeys to reach their destination. In 1488 the commentator on the Mishna, Obadiah Bertinoro, settled in Jerusalem, which then had only 70 Jewish families.

**A TURNING-POINT OCCURRED AFTER THE EXPULSION OF JEWS FROM SPAIN IN 1492, AND FROM PORTUGAL IN 1497, AND THEIR ADMITTANCE TO TURKEY. FOR IN 1517 THE HOLY LAND BECAME A TURKISH PROVINCE, AND MANY SEPHARDIM FROM DIFFERENT COUNTRIES, INCLUDING TURKEY ITSELF, MIGRATED TO ITS SHORES.**

Some of them preferred to settle in Safed, as it did not possess either Christian or Moslem shrines and became a purely Jewish city, a centre of Talmudic study and a citadel of the Cabbala.h. Among the many famous scholars who flourished there were Jacob Berab Rabbi of Safed from 1538, Rabbi Joseph Karo (1488—1575), author of the Shulchan Aruch, and Isaac Luria (1535—1572), founder of the new Kabbalistic system. Jacob Berab wished to restore the Sanhedrin and, renewed the ordination of Rabbis (Semichah). One of the four Rabbis whom he ordained 'was Karo, an act that caused a vehement controversy. The chief opponent of Berab was Levi Ben Chabib, and as a result the Sanhedrin was not established, and the institution of Semichah petered out. Karo, it may be noted, was the first Rabbi who permitted Jewish land workers to till the fields of Arabs even during the Shmittah (Sabbatical year).

This revival of Eretz Israel was 'caused mainly by Jews from Spain and Portugal as well as from other Southern European countries and, the Orient. But soon other Jews also began to follow, and in 1621 the famous Chief Rabbi of Frankfort, Isaiah Horowitz, the author of Two Tablets of the Covenant (Sheloh Hakadosh) settled there. The journeys of those who traveled from Central and Eastern Europe were beset by all sorts of perils, both on land and sea, and were rendered particularly dangerous by the reign of violence during the Thirty Years' War and the Chmielnitzki massacres (1648--'1659). Nor did the upheaval caused by Sabbatai Zevi (1666) in any way assist the hazardous undertaking. Later, however, the movement of Eastern European Jews to Eretz Israel was resumed, and it has continued 'to the present day. In 1700 hundreds of Polish and Hungarian Jews, under the leadership of' Yehuda Chassid of Shiedlietz (Poland), migrated and suffered terrible privations both on their journey and after their arrival. Yehuda Chassid himself died soon after reaching the Holy City: the famous Jerusalem Synagogue, the -Churbah, destroyed by the Arabs in 1948, was named after him.

In the 18th century Turkey was entering the period, of its decay. The Yishuv was frequently decimated by pestilence, famine, and earthquake. Commerce and industry almost ceased to exist, and the poverty was indescribable. Most of the Jews lived on charity (Haluka), the money collected in the Diaspora. Sephardim also lived on this, bin: they were more accustomed to the country and some of them were even wealthy. In order to obtain increased funds Shiluchim were sent abroad to preach in. the synagogues. They played. a large part in the life of the communities, whose enthusiasm for Zion was thus fostered. Many of them were learned Talmudists, such as the prolific scholar, Chaim Joseph Azulai (1725---1.807), who visited Europe and whose works are still studied with interest. Rabbi Ziskind of Horodno risked his freedom to raise funds for the Holy Land; and the

**Hasidic Rabbi, Shneur Zalman, was arrested by the Russian Government at the end of the 18th century for the “crime” of sending money to Eretz Israel.**

**In the 18th century three movements started in Jewry. Two of them, connected with the synagogue, those of the Hasidim and the Mitnagdim, stimulated the desire to serve the Holy Land, whilst the third, Haskalah, resulted in assimilation and apostasy. The Hasidic movement was founded by Israel Baal Shem-Tov, whose brother-in-law, Gershon of Kitob, settled in the Holy Land, followed in 1776 by one of Israel’s disciples, Mendel of Vitebsk, with a considerable entourage. The antagonist of Hasidism, the Vilna Gaon, also set out for the Holy Land, but did not go beyond Koenigsberg. In the 19th century there was an uninterrupted stream to Eretz Israel from Eastern and Central Europe of Rabbis, leaders of Hasidism and pious people.**

**Some Talmudic authorities have declared that it is permissible to disinter the body of a Jew for the purpose of burial in the Holy Land, though others objected in principle. The Talmud relates that two Rabbis, Huna and Ula, who died in Babylon, were taken to Palestine for burial. (Moed Katan 25, Ketubot 111) Maimonides, though he died in Egypt, was likewise buried in the Holy Land.**

**IN THE 19TH CENTURY THE SEPHARDIC RABBI YEHUDA ALKALAI (1798—1878) AND THE ASHKENAZI RABBI, HIRSCH KALISCHER (1795—1874), ADVOCATED THE ESTABLISHMENT IN ERETZ ISRAEL OF JEWISH AGRICULTURAL COMMUNITIES AND INFLUENCED BARON EDMOND DE ROTHSCHILD TO BUY LAND THERE FOR THE PURPOSE. MOSES MONTEFIORE (1784—1885) VISITED THE HOLY LAND SEVEN TIMES AND PLANTED GARDENS IN JERUSALEM AND JAFFA, BESIDES AGRICULTURAL SETTLEMENTS AT SAFED AND TIBERIAS.**

#### **Political Zionism and Orthodoxy.**

**In the second half of the 19th century several Rabbis together with, lay leaders founded the movement of the Chovevei Zion, which prepared the ground for political Zionism. Why then did orthodox Jewry under the leadership of famous Rabbis oppose political Zionism so fiercely? As has been pointed out already, the authors of the Talmud forbade the use of force in any attempt to secure the restoration of the Holy Land; the emergence of false Messiahs had been very harmful; but above all, it was the results of the Haskalah which engendered in the minds of orthodox Jews suspicion of Zionism.**

The adherents of Haskalah started with mild words, but in the end found their destiny to be assimilation and desertion. Orthodox Jewry was afraid that Zionism might lead to similar results, In their own days the orthodox Rabbis witnessed how the Socialists tried to draw Jewish youth from Judaism. Non-orthodox Jews flocked to Zionism in their masses.

The religious indifference of some Zionist leaders was repugnant to observant Jews, although Herzl, despite his upbringing having been anything but orthodox, proclaimed that the return to Zion must be preceded by the return to Judaism. But Herzl was almost alone in this point of view, and he had so much to do in his brief life.

Orthodox Jewry remained on the whole hostile to Zionism during the first decades of the movement, and it must dearly regret it. Who knows how many Jews would have been saved from Hitler's death-camps if the orthodox Rabbis had supported the Zionist Movement?

A few orthodox Rabbis did indeed join the movement soon after its beginning and created the Mizrachi, Events of the last fifty years, the extermination of European Jewry in particular, have proved to thinking Jews the fallacy of programs taken from other nations. Indeed, the European civilization which resulted in Auschwitz and Treblinka has to be replaced by something better and nobler if humanity is to continue to exist.

Jews of many camps are beginning to alter their attitude to the Torah: some tend to show greater tolerance towards practicing Jews; others manifest a higher respect for our ancient inheritance; others again are led to practice some of the tenets of Judaism; and still others become completely orthodox, if not in practice, at least in theory. This movement has brought about the creation of orthodox wings in the Mapai, the Histadrut, General Zionism and Revisionism, and it is beginning to assert itself even in the ranks of Mapam.

## **The Synagogue Council in Great Britain.**

To claim the Torah as the monopoly of one political organization is against the important doctrine of Judaism: "The Torah given to us by Moses is the heritage of the congregation of Jacob." The problem of creating within Zionism a movement loyal to the Torah, without making it a party issue, has perhaps in a way been solved by the Zionist Federation of Great Britain. This Federation, which embraces Zionist societies comprising General Zionists, Poale Zion, and Mizrachi, established in 1917 a Synagogue Council consisting of representatives

of Synagogues affiliated to the Federation. This Synagogue Council, whose past Chairman was the late Paul Goodman and whose present Chairman is the Rev. J. K. Goldbloom (with Dr. I. S. Fox as Hon. Secretary and the author of this article as Secretary), was established on the eve of the Balfour Declaration by the late Nahum Sokolow as the result of a Conference in which Friendly Societies and Synagogues participated. Among the 130 Synagogues affiliated to the Zionist Federation are some extremely orthodox Synagogues of the Adath Yisrael type; many belong to the Federation of Synagogues, and several to the United Synagogue; while in some provincial towns all synagogues are affiliated. A quarterly review, *The Gates of Zion*, is published, containing articles in Hebrew and English; its pages, while defending the principles of orthodoxy and political Zionism, are open to all Jews interested in the study of Judaism and Zionism.

It may be, as has happened with other institutions born on the soil of Great Britain, that the idea of the Synagogue Council will spread among Zionists all over the world and particularly in Israel, thus attracting every Jew who is convinced of the eternal wisdom of the Torah and the Talmud, and whose desire it is to serve the Jewish people by helping to build a Jewish State based upon the Torah.

In conclusion, I would quote the dictum of a Rabbi whose words I read in my early youth: “We Jews do not need the culture of the Gentiles, we need culture based on kol Torah” (the voice of the Torah.), or as the Rabbi put it not Kultura, as it is called in Haskalah Hebrew, hut Kol Torah.”