

The Zionism of Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi

During the course of his shi'urim in the Yeshivah on the Kuzari, Maran HaRav Kook ZTz"l addressed the places of thought and action in general, and their applications to the concepts of Am Israel and Eretz Israel. Based on those principles he explained the difference between the Zionism of Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi and Modern-Zionism. This lecture was first transcribed by Rabbi Mordekhai Asher Glubman Z"l, and was rewritten with permission.

There is an ongoing argument between the Materialist philosophers and the Idealists. The Materialists claim that the physical is that which is important, and that the purpose of ideals is measured by how those ideals materialize into action. The world progresses as more material is born. The ideals which appear in every generation are the results of material, and there is a physical reason for having each of them. A pure ideal without any connection to action, though, is meaningless. The Idealists (Spiritualists) claim the opposite. In their eyes, it is the ideals which are important. They are the living spirit of the human species. Things which materialize are only of secondary and minor importance compared to the ideal itself, which is the purpose of the material and all that branches out from it.

At first glance, we who observe the Torah seem to fit in better to the Materialist philosophy. In truth, many foreign philosophers have criticized us for this, especially those who observe their religion. They attempt to degrade our Holy Torah, as appears in Sefer Ha'Ikkarim, "I was asked by one of their philosophers..." The content of the philosopher's question concerns the minimal amount of thought/belief-oriented Mitzvot and the large amount of physical action-oriented Mitzvot. Those criticisms are really the same: that our Torah is concerned with the physical and material. They forget that the essential principle, the reason of all reasons, the central point of the Torah is Divine revelation and clinging ("deveikut") to G-d. That is the ideal of ideals of the Torah; all the rest of the Torah and its Mitzvot is mere commentary, outward extensions from the central point.

Even so, our Torah is concerned with actions. The Torah found the true mixture of the two - the synthesis of the two philosophies (materialist and

idealist) in accordance with the pasuk, "The judgments of the Lord are true and are righteous altogether." (Psalms 19:10) This is the greatness of our Holy Torah, which can be described with the pasuk, "A ladder based on earth...", meaning that it begins with the earthly world, demanding seemingly material and physical observance, "...whose top reaches Heaven", meaning that in the end its observance allows one to reach the lofty highs of the highest ideal, Divine revelation.

According to the outlook of the Torah, the intellect thinks, but it isn't the thought alone which is important, rather it is the way the thought materializes into actions. Good actions are the results of good thoughts, and result in good thoughts; the opposite applies for bad actions. The true life is the thoughts; the actions are the causes of the life-flow - "...that the man should do and live by them." (Leviticus 18:5) It is true that action is limited in contrast to will and desire which are boundless. The will can be described as infinite, "Thought cannot perceive You at all" (Introduction to Tikkunei HaZohar, p. 17a) but the will of the heart perceives it. The ideal is above existence. But we, made of material, connected to the world of actions, only have the ability to function within the boundaries of the world.

The world of thought consists principally of thoughts, as does the act of improving that world. But those thoughts do not gain completion until they materialize through some physical action. The result is that the main aspect of thought is revealed in the world of actions, and the great and strong holiness is only the longings which are revealed in the world of thought. We see that the thirst and longings of man are all-inclusive, and directed towards the thought/idea portion, not to specific details or the action portion. This phenomenon is due to the fact that after the "break-down", the world of action fell from its previous high level, and even though the desire is weak and minimal in the action portion, still, we see that it is impossible to remove completely the constant thirst that is in man, unless it is done with actions.

The longings themselves do not satisfy the will; man's will finds satisfaction only in actions. This idea is exemplified by the soul of the convert, who travels from far, and, upon purification of his soul, begins to experience longings for holiness.

Therefore, the king of the Kuzars, who was a convert, couldn't satisfy his thirst through intellectual pursuits alone. His whole desire was directed towards the world of actions - i.e. to know the action which is desired. This is the basis of the whole book, the Kuzari - to reveal the greatness of the action section of the Torah. From the action section one elevates himself to the thought section, and not the other way (which is the opinion of the philosophers). This is the greatness of our holy Torah. And at Sinai, when all Israel reached the highest reachable spiritual level, they perceived all the greatness and Divine light that is in the world of actions as it was before the sin and the break-down, "the shining of the first man", and on this level, they said "na'aseh" - "we will do" before "nishma" - "we will learn".

It is impossible to accept completely the light contained in the action section of the Torah outside Eretz Israel. This is due to the fact that the nature of Eretz Israel is not affected by break-down and spoilage. (Because of this, the flood, which was the result of break-down and sin, did not occur in Eretz Israel - Zevachim 113a.) In the diaspora, there is only the shade of the idea of the mitzvot, as they said, "He who lives in the diaspora is like one who has no G-d" (Ketubot 100b) because in the diaspora it is hard to perceive the G-dly side of the action-oriented mitzvot. This is the praise and virtue of Eretz Israel - that the original G-dly shine that was prevalent throughout the world before the break-down remains in Eretz Israel even today. There, the senses, the intellect and prophecy all have the same weight. This is the foundation of the mitzvot that are dependant on the Land, and the secret behind the Righteous ones' longings for Eretz Israel.

For the Kuzari, a convert, it was hard to understand the advantage of the holiness of the Land even after the destruction of the Temple, for in his opinion the Land and the Temple are the source of holiness, and after their destruction the Divine Presence and Prophecy ceased. Similarly, it was difficult for him to understand the greatness of Am Israel after the destruction and its dispersion among the nations during its exile. To explain, the Chaver tells the Kuzari that if the holiness of Eretz Israel had

only been due to agreement and imagination, then agreement alone would be sufficient to take the Jew out of exile, similar to how we build synagogues and study halls wherever we please, and the people who enter them to pray to their Creator are elevated there from their mundane lives to lives of holiness, due to the influence of the place. But the holiness of Eretz Israel is not dependant on outside forces; it lies in its very being. Pieces of its soil are the most precious non-living creations in the world. This is the meaning of the verse, "For your servants hold her stones dear, and cherish her very dust" (Psalms 102:15). Similarly the air and atmosphere in Eretz Israel are the best that can be found, as they said, "The air of Eretz Israel makes one wise" (Bava Batra 158:2)

There is a connection between human perception and the nation's geographical location, between every nation and its land, every people and its perception and enlightenment. The perception of G-dliness and holy devotion ("deveikut") are connected only with Am Israel and Eretz Israel. The ultimate purpose is to purify one's belief in the unity from all traces of quantity, to free one's desires and to become a free man connected only to one desire, one service, one Creator, as it is said about a person's life, "Someone in need of human assistance is like someone being judged in fire and water, as the verse says 'You have caused men to ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water' (Psalms 66:12)"(Berakhot 6b). Similar is the general goal of Israel, unreachable in exile under physical and spiritual oppression. This goal is only attainable through the revelation of the Divine Presence which is only possible in Am Israel and Eretz Israel, as it says, "'For to Me the children of Israel are servants' (Leviticus 25:55) - they are my servants, not servants to other servants."

We are not speaking only about the spiritual aspects of Eretz Israel, but also of the "physical" aspects. The nature of the non-living and vegetable creations of Eretz Israel also comes from the perfect world of before the break-down. This is the foundation of the Mitzvot which are dependant on the Land, concerning which Chazal said, "Why did our master Moses desire entrance into the land?"; their answer was that he desired to be able to fulfill those Mitzvot which depend on the Land (Sotah 14a). The meaning of this is that Moses' perception came from the holy root, from the original shine, but this was only in the world of thought; he desired to materialize it into action, which is only possible in Eretz Israel through the Mitzvot that depend on the Land.

Just as it is insufficient for the Jew to be connected and devoted to the G-d of Israel and the Torah of Israel in thought alone without action, one cannot fulfill his obligation of Eretz Israel through thought alone. We see that other nations experience instinctive desire for Eretz Israel (this is a sign of its inherent holiness), but the true connection and the soul's desire of Eretz Israel belong only to Israel, and they are only revealed in all their purity and glory in someone who is prepared to physically give his life for it, to leave the land of his exile with all its benefits and pleasures and live in the Land, even if it means living a life of pain and poverty.

Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi was the first Zionist who perceived through the depth of his G-dly perception that the G-d of Israel, the Torah of Israel and the Nation of Israel all embrace, hold and cling to the mighty connection which will never be severed, and that this connection is only revealed in the Land of Israel. Only there is it revealed with all its light. He tried to materialize his deep and great wisdom, the source of his life, notwithstanding all the dangers and difficulties.

Modern Zionism must, after all its twists and turns, return to the Zionism of Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi, the creator of the original Zionism. Modern Zionism, with all its desires, goals and ways, whether physically or spiritually, must be penetrated with the idea of holiness, its essence being contained in the statement "The following three are interconnected, the Holy One Blessed Be He, the Torah, and Israel" (Zohar, Acharei, p. 73a), and all this is possible only in Eretz Israel. The congregation of Israel must be connected with and have possession of Eretz Israel, not only in thought but also in action, in building and rebirth, to revive souls and re-erect ruins in order to perfect themselves and all the human species and the whole world, as the Chaver said at the end of the book, the Kuzari, "Through the awakening of man and the awakening of love of that holy place, the desired will be materialized, and with it there will be great reward, as it says, 'You will rise and have mercy on Zion, for it is time to favor her, for the set time has come' (Psalms 102:14)", meaning that

Yerushalayim will be rebuilt when Benei Israel long for it with all the longing possible, causing the stones and soil to be pardoned.

The awakening of the great love of Eretz Israel in the heart of the nation, which is necessary for its rebuilding, and the awakening of the true desire which is necessary for its rebirth - this love and desire is only possible through Zionism, which took upon itself or was given this holy duty. And it must be penetrated and full with the idea of holiness, as we already said; to go to the nation and awaken it out of the lowliness and bondage, physical and spiritual, with the idea of the banner of holiness, alone. For only in the idea of holiness lies the power necessary to awaken it to the rebuilding and to rise to the rebirth.

(Translated by Hillel Chayim Israel. Inaccuracies are the fault of the translator alone.)