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Foundations of a Political Messianic Trend in Israel

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This study sets out to present a critical analysis, based on primary sources, of a political messianic trend in Jewish religious nationalism in Israel. The basic premise underlying the dogma held by this trend maintains that since the beginning of the Zionist enterprise, and particularly since Israel's victory in the Six-Day War, the country has lived in a political reality which is transcendental. Accordingly, the military conquest in the Six-Day War is evidence of the state of metaphysical transformation in which the political reality finds itself—to a degree that the holiness of the Land of Israel, as stated by Rabbi Shmaryahu Arieli in *The Law of War*, extends even to conquered foreign lands, including the Sinai Desert, Sharm el-Sheikh and the eastern shore of the Suez Canal. This is not the beginning, but rather the midst of a messianic era, in which the Land of Israel is liberated not only from political adversaries, but also—as put by Rabbi E. Hadaya in the collection of sources 'Inherited Land'—from the *sitra aħra* (the 'other side', the 'devil's camp'), i.e., from a mystical force which embodies evil, defilement and moral corruption, and we are thus entering an era in which absolute sanctity rules over corporeality. By virtue of the war, the Divine Presence (*Shekhina*), which has rested upon the Zionist enterprise from its inception, arises

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from the dust, and is saved from the existential exile in which the Jew languished. Having raised the *Shekhina* from its debasement, the return—according to this view—of even an inch of land, would be a surrender to the rule of the '*klipa*', the concept of Jewish mysticism which symbolizes the forces of evil in the cosmos. Then, the *sitra aħra* would regain sovereignty.

In a similar vein, some of the leading spokesmen of the messianic trend express themselves in *Nekuda*, organ of the Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. In accordance with this basic premise, the 'Peace for Galilee' war was another sanctified war, i.e., a war of religious duty, and Israel's military presence in Lebanon confirmed the validity of the biblical promise in Deuteronomy 11:24: 'Every place on which the sole of your foot treads shall be yours; our border shall be from the wilderness and the Lebanon, from the river, the River Euphrates, to the Western Sea'.

The dogma is applied on two levels: time and place. With regard to the level of time, the present is defined metaphysically, as a process of redemption. This imbues the actual lived-in time (and not time as an abstract concept) with two degrees of messianic sacredness, in accordance with two interpretive explanations of the difference between this world and the messianic era.

The first degree follows the view of the Talmudic sage, Mar Shmuel, who asserts (in *Berakhot* 34b) that there is no distinction between this world and the Messiah's time except that in the former there is 'political subjugation' or the subjugation of the exiles. Consequently, the messianic era finds its empirical expression in the concrete political change Israel has wrought, the essence of which is the abolition of political subjugation, or exile. The messianic era, according to this interpretation, does not yet enter the realm of cosmic transformation, where changes in the natural order occur. Therefore, when the prophets prophesied cosmic changes and drastic alteration in the natural order ('The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid'), they were referring not to the messianic era—which, as we have seen, does exist politically in our time—but rather to the world to come.

Rabbi Shlomo Goren, in his article 'The Redemption of Israel in Light of the *Halakha*' (in '*Torat ha-Mo'adim*'), cites the authority of Maimonides in this instance: 'The messianic age is this world, and things remain

as they are' (*Hilekhot Tshuva* 9:2), the only difference between them being that in messianic times 'the Kingdom will return to Israel'. Hence, Rabbi Goren concludes, we can and must attribute absolute holiness to this world, not to the world to come, or to abstract mysticism. It is in concrete reality that the redemptive time, according to this doctrine of messianic-political realism, is actualized. Similarly, Maimonides states that 'one should not suppose that in the messianic age anything will be changed in the way of the world, or that there will be a renewed Creation' (*Hilekhot Melachim* 12:1). Hence, Rabbi Goren stresses, there is no need to search for cosmic transformations in the Creation in order to believe that the present constitutes a messianic reality of liberation from the subjugation of the exiles.

Messianic times thus constitute a period of political change, realized by force of Israel's arms and the particular aid of heavenly assistance, whereas the prophecies of peace, such as Isaiah's 'and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares', refer to the world to come. They are not to be fulfilled in this world, or in the messianic era which is now dawning.

The second degree of the sacredness of time—a more mystical approach which is becoming increasingly acceptable to *Gush Emunim*—is based on Rabbi Hiyya Bar-Abba's view, who said in the name of Rabbi Johanan (*Berakhot* 34b): 'All the prophets prophesied only concerning the days of the Messiah, but as for the world to come, "Eye hath not seen, O God, beside Thee".' Three conclusions are drawn from this interpretation of redemptive time: (a) the prophecies about the future, concerning drastic changes in the cosmic order, the nature of Creation and the process of the world, are relevant and are realized in practice in this world, in the current messianic reality; (b) the prophecies are interpreted literally, and when referring to transformations in the order of Creation, they are in fact referring to the Zionist enterprise; and thus, (c) the world to come cannot be brought about by man, yet in this world we have reached that actual prophetic-messianic age, not merely a political-messianic one.

Here we have a more poetic, lyrical notion, according to which the return to the soil, life within nature, the agricultural achievements, the secular creativity (which, according to Rabbi Abraham I. Kook, serves the coming of messianic redemption even inadvertently and unwillingly), the Zionist activity, the military victories upon the holy soil, the blood

spilt on this soil and for its sake—are all interpreted as evidence on a cosmic scale, not just a political one, of the metaphysical time in which corporeality and empirical reality (including political reality) are situated. A prominent advocate and mentor of this trend is Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, followed by leaders of *Gush Emunim* whom Kook inspired and who sprang from his Mercaz ha-Rav *yeshiva*. Kook defines the State of Israel as the Kingdom of Israel, and the Kingdom of Israel as the Kingdom of Heaven on earth; and consequently, total holiness envelops every human being, every action, every phenomenon, including secularism which will one day be engulfed by sacredness, by redemption.

A salient expression of the spiritual yearning and concrete policy of the political-messianic stream, appears in an article entitled, 'On the Significance of the Yom Kippur War', by Rabbi Yehuda Amital, published in his collection of sermons, *Ha-Ma'alot mi-Ma'amakim*. (Amital supposedly changed his position slightly following the Lebanese war, but the core of his views has not changed: In the past, the unity and uniformity of the land served as the basis of his argument, whereas now the unity and uniformity of the people do so even if the stress in content has been altered, the structure of his approach remains intact.) Amital states that 'it is forbidden to view this war in the manner we viewed misfortunes in the days of exile. We should recognize the greatness of the moment in its biblical dimension, and it can only be seen within its messianic perspective . . . only through a messianic light.' The war broke out against the background of the revival of the Kingdom of Israel, he says, which, in its metaphysical (not only symbolic) status, is evidence of the decline of the spirit of defilement in the Western world. Therefore, Amital claims, this is the focus of the Yom Kippur War: 'The gentiles are fighting for their mere survival as gentiles, as the ritually unclean. Iniquity is fighting its battle for survival. It knows that in the Wars of God, there will neither be a place for the Satan, nor for the spirit of defilement', nor for the remains of Western culture the proponents of which are, as it were, the secular Jews. The participation (direct or indirect) of all the oil-consuming countries in the struggle in the Middle East, he says, indeed, reinforces the messianic dimension of the war.

The modern secular world, according to this approach, is struggling for survival, and thus our war is directed against the impurity of Western culture and against rationality as such. It follows that the alien culture has to be eradicated because all foreignness draws us closer to the alien,

and the alien causes alienation, as is the position of those who still adhere to Western culture and who attempt to fuse Judaism with rationalist, empiricist and democratic culture. According to Amital's approach, the Yom Kippur War has to be comprehended in its messianic dimension: a struggle against Western civilization in its entirety.

Finally, Amital asks, what, then, is the point of all the affliction, why do the wars continue, if the Messiah has already come, and if the Kingdom of Israel has already been established? There can only be one reason, Amital replies: the war initiates the process of purification, of refinement, 'the purifying and cleansing of the congregation of Israel'. We thus learn that there is only one explanation of the wars, namely that the Lord performed an act of grace in giving us wars, because they refine and purify the soul. And as impurity will be removed, the soul of Israel—by virtue of the war—will as such be refined. We have already conquered the lands, and all that now remains is to conquer impurity.

The second level in which the basic premise of the political-messianic trend (namely, the metaphysical conception of political reality) finds expression is the level of the place where we live. Here again, in analyzing the approach of the main spokesmen of this trend, we must relate to the primary sources, as we are talking about a section of society for whom the logos constitutes concrete political reality: they do not quote one verse or another merely in order to justify ideology, but on the contrary, political reality itself is actually molded by the logos. Indeed, historical experience has taught us—in the twentieth century as well—how great is the strength of the logos, of ideology, not only as justification for political interests, but rather as an active factor which motivates the emergence of political, military and economic interests.

The essence of the dimension of place, in a parallel manner to that of time, lies in the total sacredness ascribed to every clod and grain of earth on which our feet tread. Rather than sacredness replacing corporeality, corporeality itself becomes increasingly refined to the point of total sanctity, until there is no refuge for man, and every place in the Holy Land on which a Jew treads is deemed holy. Historical symbols are transformed into substance: man is not holy, but rather place is, and not place as a symbol of holiness but the actual physical localities, the trees and the stones, the graves and the walls, are all holy in themselves. The concept of sanctity, when applied to place, has thus acquired a meaning

contrary to that which symbolics attaches to it, because symbolics distinguishes between an object and the meaning attributed to it, between corporeality and the significance it may reflect. In this manner, the holiness which was meant to be symbolized by physical localities has become ascribed to the localities themselves.

Thus, the concept of the holiness of the Land acquired a completely different meaning than it previously had in Jewish tradition. The main significance of the holiness of the Land was a *Halakhic* matter: according to the *Mishna*, 'The Land of Israel is holier than any other land. Wherein lies its holiness? In that from it they may bring the *omer* and the First Fruits . . .' (*Kelim* 1:6). That is to say, the holiness of the Land is due to the possibility of fulfilling the commandments which depend on the land: this is the meaning of saying that the land is holy. Yet, in the sources under discussion, physical locality becomes sanctified in place of its historical importance, and holiness is not related, as it originally was, to the fulfillment of a religious—in this case agricultural—practice, such as giving the tithe, *leket*, *pe'ah*, and other commandments depend on the Land, but rather to concrete political corporeality itself.

The primary source of this approach, often cited in the literature we are dealing with, is Nachmanides' notes to the fourth positive commandment in Maimonides' enumeration of the commandments (*Sefer ha-Mitzvot*).¹ Nachmanides writes: 'We are commanded to take possession of the land given by the Lord to our forefathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and we will not leave it in the hands of any other people or allow it to lie waste. And he said unto them (Numbers 33:53): "You must take possession of the land and settle there, for to you I have given the land to occupy".' This commandment, Nachmanides continues, was specified for us in its particular boundaries: 'and go to the mount of the Amorites, and unto all its neighboring places, in the plain, in the hills, and in the vale, and in the south, and by the seaside, to the land of the Canaanites, and unto Lebanon, unto the great river, the River Euphrates' (Deuteronomy 1:7), and this, Nachmanides claims, 'lest you yield from any place'. Place is sanctified by total holiness, and that is why we were commanded to kill those nations, the seven peoples and Amalek—in order not to place the Land in their hands.

From this point of departure an explicit policy is now entailed: relying on these sources, the Chief Rabbinate issued *Halakhic* rulings concern-

ing the holiness of the territories—and due to this, the sanctity of their borders and of the political sovereignty over them—which proclaim the existence of a religious duty, to be put into effect by political action. The Chief Rabbinate's decision of 22 *Adar* 5736 (1976), for example, states the following: 'The Temple Mount is Mt. Moriah, the site of the Temple and of the Holy of Holies, the place where the Lord God of Israel chose to house His Name, which was sanctified by ten holy blessings by David, King of Israel: the Jewish people's right to the Temple Mount and the site of the Temple is an eternal and inalienable divine right, over which there can be no concessions'. In light of this sacredness, there is no room for any compromise: neither with regard to time, i.e., concessions at least for the time being, for a year or a generation, nor with regard to place.

Another decision concerning the prohibition of handing over any part of the Land of Israel to the gentiles, dated 21 *Iyyar*, 5739 (1979), forbids the transfer of any territory, including that which was conceded to Egypt in return for peace: 'According to our holy *Torah* and the clear and authoritative law, there is a strict ban on transferring ownership to the gentiles' of any single part of the Land of Israel, because it is sanctified by the sacredness of the biblical 'Covenant between the Pieces'. This invocation of the Covenant of Abraham elucidates how an archaic and primordial symbol of the slaughtering of animals, used by primeval tribes as evidence of political union, becomes a source of authority for contemporary political policy. Returning the territories, the Chief Rabbinate ruled, would constitute a violation of the commandment, 'and thou shalt not show mercy unto them' (Deuteronomy 7:2): the gentiles should not be given the right of encampment on the soil of the Land of Israel, 'and no argument of the saving of lives (*pikuach nefesh*) can invalidate this severe prohibition'.

From everything said so far, the concrete implications of the political messianic outlook concerning human rights can be discerned. If time and place are categories of existential totality, then there cannot possibly be a place for gentiles here. As we have seen, we are not dealing with a band of crazy prophets, nor with an extreme minority on the fringe of society, but with a dogmatic school of thought and methodical doctrine, which inevitably leads to a policy which cannot tolerate the concept of human and civil rights, because the conception of the totality of the

dimensions of time and place leaves no room for tolerance. It is a movement which possesses great inner powers of mystical belief, and in light of the analysis of its ideological foundations, we find ourselves confronted with a structure familiar to us from twentieth-century political messianism. There is as yet no place for comparison of content, but with regard to the structure of the conception—as distinct from its content—it is impossible not to notice an analogy to totalitarian movements of this century.

The conclusion which follows from the epistemological structure of the dimensions of time and place as described above emerges in the form of three positions concerning the question of the non-Jew's human and civil rights, somewhat like three possible degrees of a solution: the restriction of rights; the denial of rights; and in the most extreme case—the call for genocide based on the Torah. Every one of these positions has been expressed in the sources under discussion.

The first degree is still relatively moderate: it states that equality of the rights of citizen and man is nothing but a foreign democratic principle, alien and European, which existentially alienates us from the Holy Land. Therefore, the principle of equal rights is not binding in our dealings with the Arab residents of the country, and their status can only be that of foreigners (*gerim*). Of the two kinds of *gerim*—the righteous proselyte (*ger tzedek*) and the sojourner (*ger toshav*)—only the latter is meant: namely, the non-Jew who has renounced paganism and observes the seven Noachian laws. Such a person has partial rights and duties, e.g., the duty of observing the dietary laws does not apply to him, yet he is forbidden to consume blood (Leviticus 17:13, 25:35), or according to Maimonides he is permitted to work for himself in public on the Sabbath, yet if he is employed by a Jew he cannot work for him on the Sabbath.

The second position already leads to the denial of human rights, because the actualization of our existence in the Land of Israel depends on the Arabs' emigration from it. This matter has frequently been discussed in *Nekuda*, to the point that some people within the movement have said that as the *Torah* speaks in communicable language, and one should not 'utter the unhearable', i.e., as the issue would shock the public at the moment, one should try to refrain, as a temporary measure, from explicitly talking about the expulsion of the Arabs; yet the attitude in principle is that there is no place for Arabs in the land. Therefore, the

differentiation in time of war between citizen and soldier, as accepted in enlightened countries, is unacceptable because both of them, the citizen and the soldier, belong to the category of population which *a priori* has no right to be here; both of them are enemies of Israel. The commandment to conquer the land 'is above the human and moral considerations of the national rights of the gentiles to our land', as Rabbi Shlomo Aviner claims in his article, 'The Messianic Realism' (*Morasha*, Vol. 9). Indeed, Israel was commanded in the *Torah* that 'thou shalt be holy', but we were not commanded to be moral; and the general principles of morality which have been accepted by mankind, in principle at least, do not commit the Jew, for he was chosen to be beyond them (*Nekuda*, No. 43).

The third position concerning the question of the non-Jew's human rights is based upon the positive commandment from the *Torah* of the eradication of any trace of Amalek, i.e., actual genocide. This solution was suggested by Rabbi Israel Hess in his article, 'The Commandment of Genocide in the Torah' (*Bat Kol*, the student journal of Bar Ilan University, Feb. 26, 1980), and apart from several colleagues such as Uriel Simon and other members of *Oz ve-Shalom* (the dovish religious group), we do not know of any dissenting reaction on behalf of the rabbinical teachers of this trend. Their silence is particularly significant in this instance, as we are dealing with a community for whom because of its political structure, its leaders are not just the guide, but also the ones who grant absolution, because according to their outlook, the function of the Chief Rabbinate and heads of the *yeshivot* is to react to reality and to demonstrate to man the error of his ways (the rabbis in the *yeshivot* are thus called *mashgichim*—'supervisors'). Rabbi Hess proclaims that 'the day will come when we will all be called to fulfill the commandment of this religiously commanded war, of annihilating Amalek'—the commandment of genocide. The manner of carrying this out is described in I Samuel 15:3: 'go now, attack Amalek, and deal with him and all that he has under the ban. Do not spare him but kill man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and ass.'

This duty of carrying out the annihilation of Amalek is based, according to Rabbi Hess, on two arguments: the one concerning racial purity, and the other concerning war. The racial justification is as follows: according to Genesis 36:12, Amalek is the son of Timna, who was Eliphaz's concubine. Yet according to I Chronicles 1:36, the same Timna

was the daughter of Eliphaz and thus Amalek's sister. Rabbi Hess thus concludes that Eliphaz cohabited with his wife (who herself was somebody else's wife), begat his daughter Timna by her, took his daughter as a concubine, cohabited with her, and thus Amalek was born. Thus, the rabbi tells us, it is impure blood which flows in Amalek's veins and in the veins of Amalek's descendants for all time. And as for the second argument—Amalek is the enemy who fought against Israel in a particularly cruel manner, Hess says, personifying boundless evil, because when the Children of Israel were walking along their way, exhausted, Amalek attacked and killed them, man, woman and child. According to this conception, in the opposition between Israel and Amalek there appears the opposition between light and darkness, between purity and contamination, between the people of God and the forces of evil, and this opposition continues to exist with respect to the descendants of Amalek for all time. And who are his descendants for all time? These are the Arab nations.

The last section of our discussion may serve as a summary, by means of a structural analysis, following the method of social phenomenologists such as Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann, Alfred Schuetz and others, concerning the concept of *Lebenswelt*, i.e., the world, the daily reality into which all experiential aspects are integrated, a sort of complete and encompassing web of life; and what this means with respect to one's actual way of life. As we have seen, we are confronted with an all-encompassing *Weltanschauung*, structured as a unity in which sacredness and secularism, religion and politics, heaven and earth, rights and obligations are assimilated. This unity creates what the sources under discussion call 'a mystical realism', forming a unity of a dual structure: the attribution of holiness and mysticalness to empirical reality, and therefore also to rationality and pragmatism (as this movement is not devoid of pragmatic considerations), to the extent that rationality and pragmatism are absorbed by holiness; yet rather than disappear, they are united with the mysticism and help to shape it to the same extent that they are shaped by it.

According to this dual structure, one can point out additional typological distinctions which characterize this messianic 'mystical realism', as follows: sentimentality—which is not devoid of coming to one's senses; enthusiasm—which does not lack self-restraint; spirituality—

not devoid of materialism; a great light which illuminates the whole being—yet not without darker moments, difficulties, obstacles, delays on the path to fulfillment, and the admission that in light of existing political reality and the lack of faith on behalf of the secular, time is not yet ripe for the vessels to absorb the great light; mysticism is tangible in reality—and at the same time reality encompasses all mysticalness; man's existential dimension consists of the joy of total normative commitment—yet, because this is absolute and all-encompassing dedication, it also includes movements of doubt, faintheartedness and sorrow. (Not by chance, a few of these people intended to establish a party called *Orot*—'Lights', as light is perhaps the most tangible of symbols, drawn upon to fill the existential vacuum, spark by spark, and all that has to be done is to gather the sparks, purify sanctity from any defilement, and raise the light back to its source).

Additional expressions of this dual structure are: we are in an age of miracles—yet these miracles are empirical facts, they are part of the natural order, of technology and pragmatism; nationality is cosmic to such an extent that it also absorbs and includes individuality, and thus the individual cannot attain his complete personality unless he is part of the social body, of the entire national organism; this is a yearning for greatness, for 'the wide open spaces', for penetration into the hidden secrets of the universe—to the extent that every square inch of land, every particle of earth is conceived as being part of the wide universe, and the everyday life conducted at each specific location constitutes an inseparable part of it.

Further, the conquest of the Land also implies conquering the mundane and its refinement: what is at stake is purifying the Land of all alienness, of all impurity—a purgation which is so encompassing and total that it also absorbs the personal self-purification of the individual, and as the purified land is redeemed from the aliens, the purified personality is redeemed from alienness. Paradoxically, political ecstasy is seen as the way in which the settler (*mitnahel*) settles not only his land, but also his mind, and the reality in which we are situated is one of liberation from existential alienation within the Zionist enterprise, now actualized in the concrete political reality.

In conclusion, we are presented with a political messianism in which the individual, the people and the land arrive at an organic union, bestowed with absolute holiness. It is based on a metaphysical com-

prehension of political reality, which is expressed by a conception of the totality of time and place. The danger of this totalistic outlook lies in its leading to a totalitarian conception of political reality—because it leaves neither time nor place for the human and civil rights of the non-Jew.

NOTE

1. The reference is actually to the fourth in Nachmanides' listing of the "Positive Commandments that Maimonides Forgot"—Ed.