

# Soloveitchik the Zionist | Shalom Carmy

## *Authors*

Rabbi, if only I knew our suffering was paving the way for the Messiah,” cried a Jewish refugee to R. Hayyim Soloveitchik of Brest-Litovsk shortly before his death in World War I—era Warsaw. R. Hayyim rebuffed him, questioning whether it was self-evident that the advent of the Redeemer justified the mass carnage and horrific suffering that came with the war.

One of R. Hayyim’s grandsons was my mentor, R. Joseph Soloveitchik. The twenty-fifth anniversary of his death was commemorated this April. He became known in North America as “the Rav,” meaning the one preeminent rabbi. He devoted most of his creative efforts to advancing his grandfather’s innovative approach to Talmud study, known as the “Brisker method,” a conceptual approach to legal reasoning. But he broke with family opposition to secular studies, getting a PhD in philosophy at the University of Berlin and writing theological works that have earned the attention of Jewish and non-Jewish readers.

He never publicly acknowledged any personal doubts or misgivings about this choice, despite the controversy it provoked. The same held true privately, at least in my conversations with him. He also broke with the family’s opposition to Zionism, serving for decades as honorary president of the Religious Zionists of America. Rejection of Zionism was widespread among many great Talmudists of his father’s and grandfather’s generations. He openly allowed that going his own way caused him a great deal of soul-searching and pain. His Zionist affiliation marked a departure from those he most esteemed.

Secular journalists typically ascribe pockets of rigorously Orthodox antagonism to Zionism to the belief that Jews will only govern themselves in the land of Israel when the Messiah comes. This explanation may hold true for some Hasidic groups, but not for non-Hasidim. Lithuanian rabbis, among whom the Soloveitchiks stand very tall, objected to the Zionist movement institutionalized by Theodor Herzl in the 1890s for a straightforward reason: Its leadership was not God-fearing. The Rav’s grandfather, R. Hayyim, associated briefly with the new, strictly Orthodox Agudat Israel party, which was formed in 1912. Agudists were critical of the Zionists to varying degrees. R. Hayyim’s scions eventually turned away from Aguda, deeming it overly politicized. In the 1930s the young R. Joseph Soloveitchik served as one of Aguda’s Torah authorities in North America. If not an anti-Zionist, he did not identify openly with the Zionist movement.

During World War II and its aftermath, he shifted from Aguda to the Mizrahi, which was a religious Zionist party. This turn came about because he recognized that old-fashioned methods of safeguarding Jewish existence were not equal to twentieth-century threats. In the modern world, one cannot rely on the tolerance extended by majorities to religious minorities in their midst. It was an age of mass movements and angry mobs, and the time-tested Jewish strategy of appealing to the higher sentiments or narrower self-interest of the ruling powers did no good. The Jewish experience of Nazism naturally led to profound reassessments. The aspiration, and to

the extent possible, the achievement, of Jewish self-rule and self-defense were now thought essential to survival, and to the self-respect without which bare physical survival is undignified. The State of Israel, in the Rav's opinion, did a great deal to improve the state of the Jewish people. This practical, historically informed line of thinking is how I understand his evolution into the spokesman of religious Zionism I encountered as a young man.

Rabbi Soloveitchik's outlook remains influential among religious Zionists. But in all likelihood it is a minority position. Most religious Zionists adopt a more eschatologically tinged theology of history. The dominant figure here is the great Talmudist and mystic Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who died in 1935. He served as chief rabbi of the Ashkenazi community in Palestine. For him and for subsequent generations of acolytes, the return of the Jews to their homeland was not merely, or even primarily, a solution to the physical menace of an anti-Semitic world. It was a spiritual renaissance which could not but lead to messianic fulfillment.

Rabbi Hayyim saw secular Jewish nationalism as the sworn enemy of Orthodoxy. His grandson saw it as a valuable, creative, and useful movement with much to contribute to Jewish welfare. But the shift is perhaps less than it seems on the surface. The Rav continued to laud the positive achievements of secular Zionism although its ideology stood in conflict with adherence to God as Orthodoxy comprehends it. The more messianic tendency in religious Zionism of the sort inspired by R. Kook, by contrast, celebrated the radical transformation of Jewish spirituality. It exalted the state and its military prowess in a way that R. Soloveitchik could not. It interpreted the secularism of leading Zionist activists, many of whom were inspired by socialist or liberal-nationalist eschatologies more than by biblical ones, as unwitting agents of divine historical cunning. Its expectations of the Jewish state were and remain to this day ebullient, and the depths of disappointment when history confounds expectation are equally profound.

R. Soloveitchik liked to recount the exchange between R. Hayyim and his fellow Jew in Warsaw because he realized it provided the key to his decidedly mundane brand of Zionism. If divine providence is irrevocably committed to cosmic redemption through politics, and if being on the right side of that history is the highest moral imperative, then the price to be paid in blood and suffering is a secondary consideration. For the Rav and the tradition he continued even as he diverged from it, the human cost cannot be ignored. This led him to insist upon the distinction between judgments of political prudence and theological claims about the working out of the divine plan. He was a religious man who was a Zionist, not someone who wanted Zionism to become a religion.

On the rare occasions when he made pronouncements on Israeli affairs, the lesson of that anecdote always seemed to be in the background. In 1968, at the height of the euphoria that followed Israel's victory in the Six-Day War, he ruled that decisions about concessions of land for peace should be left to military experts, not to rabbis. He said this in spite of his conviction that most of the land taken by the Israeli army is part of the biblical land of Israel and that occupying it fulfills a divine commandment. His point: The safety of the current residents of Israel should be paramount, and Israel's military leaders are the most well-informed about the pros and cons of which positions to hold and which to abandon. Although he was skeptical about the prospects for peace, he went on the record to affirm that compromising Israeli rights was advisable for the sake of a genuine peace.

In 1982, Lebanese Christian militia allied to Israel perpetrated massacres at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. This time the Rav demanded that Prime Minister Menachem Begin appoint a commission of inquiry to investigate Israel's failure to prevent the massacres. Carnage and suffering make a claim upon a Torah-informed conscience.

Do such interventions make him a liberal, as some would say? This distorts more than it clarifies. It would be more accurate to think of R. Soloveitchik's political declarations as profoundly conservative. In the course of his life he moved from the anti-Zionist to the Zionist camp. But then, from within religious Zionism, so to speak, he criticized the transformation of politics into the anticipation of a messianic future.

The last two centuries are marked by a great thirst for messianic fulfillment. The goal has sometimes been material welfare, sometimes egalitarianism, or universal love, or national self-expression, or some combination of ideals. Often this has promoted rebellion against traditional religion, which is viewed as a brake on transformational idealism. At other times the language and passions of traditional religion have been mobilized, usually one-sidedly, on behalf of idealistic yearnings. In such times, it is vital that we keep faith with the eternal present of religious doctrine as manifest in the life of study, prayer, and interpersonal action. In this, as in so many other areas, my teacher was his grandfather's heir.

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