**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Halakha and Jewish History**

**Rav Aviad Tabory**

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**1917: Balfour Declaration**

***The three oaths and “bringing the geula”***

Lionel Walter Rothschild was a British politician and Zionist leader. In the middle of the first world war, on November 2, 1917, Great Britain’s foreign secretary, Arthur Balfour issued a statement to Lord Rothschild that declared:

His majesty’s government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object.

This statement, known as the Balfour declaration, was accepted by the nations of the world as part of the peace treaty established in San Remo, Italy following the Great War.

Between April 19-25, 1920, the victorious nations of World War I divided up the territories of the Middle East and agreed to create there 22 Arab states and one Jewish state.

The San Remo declaration stated:

Whereas recognition has been given to the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine and to the ground for reconstituting their national home in that country…

Most of the Jewish world responded with great enthusiasm; however, some communities voiced concerns that this declaration would force them to immigrate to Israel. For example, the Jewish community in England proclaimed that they did not support the declaration. The Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook, was living in England at the time (having been stranded there when World War I broke out while he was on his way to the United States), and he was furious with this reaction. He responded by passionately declaring that the English community was committing treason against their fellow Jews all over the world.

Rav Kook wrote a letter that was read in the synagogues on Shabbat. In it, he claimed that:

In this extraordinary time, in which God’s hand is seen so wondrously in world history and in our nation’s history, it is bewildering that there are people with dim minds and unfeeling hearts who have the presumption to speak out with the purpose of minimizing and dissolving the great original Jewish wholeness at this moment when the awareness of it is so necessary for our whole status in history.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Rav Kook compared the Balfour declaration to the biblical declaration of Cyrus, the King of Persia who gave permission to the exiled Jews living in Babylon to return to Israel.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This declaration appears in the book of *Ezra*:

And in the first year of Cyrus, the king of Persia, at the completion of the word of the Lord from the mouth of Jeremiah, the Lord aroused the spirit of Cyrus, the king of Persia, and he issued a proclamation throughout his kingdom, and also in writing, saying, “So said Cyrus, the king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God of the heavens delivered to me, and He commanded me to build Him a House in Jerusalem, which is in Judea. Who is among you of all His people, may his God be with him, and he may ascend to Jerusalem, which is in Judea, and let him build the House of the Lord, God of Israel; He is the God Who is in Jerusalem.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The prophet Yeshayahu referred to Cyrus as a *mashiach*:

So said the Lord to His *mashiach* (anointed one), to Cyrus, whose right hand I held, to flatten nations before him, and the loins of kings I will loosen, to open portals before him, and gates shall not be closed.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Rav Kook saw both leaders as tools of God in bringing salvation and redemption to the Jewish people. He explained that Cyrus is referred as a *mashiach* to teach us that although *Chazal* say Cyrus himself “went sour,”[[5]](#footnote-5) his declaration lives on. So, claims Rav Kook, the context of Balfour’s declaration is true and remains eternally.

**The Three Oaths**

Other rabbis around the world also welcomed the Balfour Declaration. Rav Meir Simcha Ha-Kohen of Dvinsk (1843-1926) claimed that this historical event removed the “fear of the three oaths”:

Providence has caused an order to be issued at the gathering of the enlightened countries at San Remo that the land of Israel shall be for the people of Israel. Thus, the fear of the oaths has gone… It is therefore incumbent upon every person to help in the utmost of his ability to fulfill the commandment of settling the land.[[6]](#footnote-6)

He was referring to a *midrash*, quoted in a Talmudic discussion about making *aliya*, that says God made the Jewish people (and the world) take three oaths. The Gemara mentions an opinion of Rav Yehuda that forbids Jews to leave Bavel and immigrate to Israel. He learns this rule from a verse in *Yirmiyahu*:

They shall be brought to Babylon, and there they shall be until the day I remember them, said the Lord, and I will bring them up and restore them to this place.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Although the verse in context refers to the **vessels** of the Temple, Rav Yehuda understood that the prophet was forbidding the **people** to return to Israel unless God returns them to the land. The Gemara then quotes the following *midrash*:

Why are these three [mentions of oaths][[8]](#footnote-8) needed?

1. One so that the Jews should not ascend to [Eretz Yisrael](file:///C%3A%5Ctopics%5Cisrael) as a wall, but little by little.
2. And [another] one that the Holy One, Blessed be He, adjured the Jews that they should not rebel against the rule of the nations of the world.
3. And [the last one is] that the Holy One, Blessed be He, adjured the nations of the world that they should not subjugate the Jews excessively.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Although this text is written as a *midrash* and is not mentioned in the classic books of halakha, such as Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah* and the *Shulchan Arukh*, some understood it as a source to forbid immigration to the land of Israel and to prohibit the creation of a Jewish state before the coming of the Mashiach. Several rabbis who debated questions regarding *galut and geula* (exile and redemption) mentioned this *midrash* as a source to justify non-action in the bringing of the *geula*.[[10]](#footnote-10)

However, after analyzing these texts, professor Aviezer Ravitzky concludes:

Indeed, the three oaths have not been at the crux of Jewish history, contrary to the claim of the radical religious opponents of Zionism. They were understood primarily as a theological guideline rather than as a formal halakhic prescription.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The Rebbe of the Satmar Chasidim, Rav Yoel Teitelbaum (1887-1979), dedicated an entire book (*Vayoel Moshe*) to the meaning of this *midrash*. In it, he claims that the Holocaust was God’s punishment for the attempts of the Jewish people to “bring” the *geula* in violation of these oaths.[[12]](#footnote-12) Rav Yoel also attempts in his book to explain why these oaths are so important in Judaism, and declares that:

These oaths may not be violated even on pain of death; even if they [the Gentiles] threaten you with the cruelest torture, it is no less forbidden to leave the exile [en masse] than to commit apostasy.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Much literature has been written regarding the view that the three oaths do *not* serve as a halakhic reason for preventing the establishment of a Jewish state before the coming of the Mashiach.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Rav Shlomo Goren lists three reasons the oaths are irrelevant nowadays:[[15]](#footnote-15)

1. Rav Chaim Vital, the great kabbalist, says the authority of these oaths lasts only a thousand years.
2. The oaths limited the Jewish people from conducting a war of occupation, while the wars today are defense against our enemies.
3. Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk and others, such as Rav Avraham Bornsztain (1838-1910) of Sochaczew, are of the opinion that permission from the nations of the world (like Cyrus, Balfour, and the U.N) for the Jews to return to Israel annuls the oaths.

It seems to me that the last reason is not just an explanation of why the *midrash* is not problematic; it can actually be used to prove that historical events of the 20th century are a clear indication that we are in fact in the midst of a process of redemption.

Perhaps the *midrash* is teaching us that when the nations of the world agree to grant the Jews a country, that is a sign from heaven that this is God’s will.

Rav Menachem Mendel Kasher (1895-1983) composed an entire book, called *HaTekufah HaGedolah*, in response to the Satmar Rebbe’s claims. He quotes other *midrashim* that emphasize that the agreement of the nations of the world to the return of the Jewish people to Israel serves as an indication that the time of redemption has come.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Rav Yissachar Shlomo Teichtal (1885-1945) also dedicated an entire book, *Eim Ha-Banim Semeicha*, to proving that the Zionist attempts of the 20th century to establish a state were undertaken in accordance with Jewish tradition.

It is his understanding that the declaration of Cyrus, as well as the agreement in the 2oth century, reflect the place of humans in the process of the redemption of the Jewish people.[[17]](#footnote-17)

**Religious Messages in History**

Rav Soloveitchik delivered sermons to the Mizrachi movement justifying his decision to join the Zionist movement.

Among many reasons, he makes the following fascinating observation:

God handed over technical legal matters to the authority of the sages, to rule on what is clean and what unclean, to decide between obligation and exemption, forbidden and permitted. But in historical questions, not those relating to the legal status of ovens, food, or determination of fixed monetary obligations, but those relating to destiny of the internal people, God Himself decides as to whose interpretation shall become the law (the historical development).[[18]](#footnote-18)

Rav Soloveitchik also responded to the 1947 U.N. vote o create a Jewish homeland in Israel. He saw the agreement of these nations as no less than a miracle, indicating that it was God’s intervention in bringing redemption to His people:

No one can deny that from the standpoint of international relations, the establishment of the State of Israel, in a political sense, was an almost supernatural occurrence. Both Russia and the Western countries jointly supported the idea of the establishment of the State. This was perhaps the only proposal where East and West were united. I am inclined to believe that the United Nations organization was created specifically for this purpose—in order to carry out the mission which divine providence had set for it. It seems to me that one cannot point to any other concrete achievement on the part of the U.N.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The idea alluded to above, that man must take initiative to bring the *geula* rather than remaining passive, is of great dispute in our generation and is perhaps one of the most important elements in Religious Zionist theology.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein claimed that the significance of human initiative might be one of the main reasons his father-in-law (Rav Soloveitchik) supported the Zionist movement:

There is a general point that appears, at first glance, to be very far removed from the subject of Zionism, but which actually serves as the key to everything: the status of man as initiator, as active agent, as one who makes historical processes happen and promotes the achievement of social and historical objectives. This, in fact, is the alpha and omega of all forms of Zionism. Religious Zionism believes that, even under God’s providence, it is within the ability of man and of the nation to free themselves from the passivity that characterized the life of the individual and the community in the Diaspora. Religious Zionism encourages man to lift his head with ambition, and to act accordingly.

The debate over the “three oaths” … today sounds anachronistic. But in an earlier era, the psychological barrier – perceived at the time as a halakhic barrier – was quite real. While traditional society adopted a more quietisitic and passive stance, Zionism supported – sometimes even glorified – human historical activism in general, and redemptive action in particular. It believed in man’s ability, and this was translated into both a privilege and an obligation. Zionism changed the ratio between free choice and Divine Providence in one’s life, such that, in the overall balance, man’s value rose, while the contribution of the Holy One was diminished.

… to what degree do we believe in our ability, obligation and privilege to be active partners in the act of redemption?

In approaching the subject of the Rav’s relationship towards Zionism, let us consider his position concerning this issue. It is not hard to uncover. In the Rav’s thought and activity, great emphasis was placed on human action….[[20]](#footnote-20)

Although the issue of the three oaths at first seemed to threaten the religious legitimacy of the Zionist movement, we have shown that the opposite can be argued. The historical event of the nations of the world agreeing to support the Zionist dream of establishing a Jewish State may be the proof called for by this *midrash* that it is God’s will to bring redemption to His people and time for them to act.

1. The letter appears both in Yiddish and Hebrew in *Iggrot Ha-Raiyah*, Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 3:832. It was translated into English by Tzvi Feldman in his book, *Rav A.Y. Kook: Selected Letters*, Ma’aliot Publications, 1986, pp.245-249. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rav Kook’s article on this matter originally appeared in the journal *Ha-heid* in 1930, and was published in *Mamarei Ha-Raiyah*, Jerusalem, 1984, pp.248-251. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ezra* 1:1-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Yeshayahu* 45:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. BT *Rosh Ha-shana* 4a. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The entire letter appears in Rav Menachem Mendel Kasher, *HaTekufah HaGedolah,* Jerusalem, 1969, pp. 174-175. English translation is from Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, translated by Michael Swirsky and Jonathan Chipman, University of Chicago Press, 1996, p.233. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Yirmiyahu* 27:22. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Gemara is discussing three similar verses in *Shir Ha-shirim*, each of which mentions a vow that the “daughters of Jerusalem” are called to make: 2:7, 3:5, and 8:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. BT *Ketubot* 111a. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Aviezer Ravitzky quotes many of these texts in an article dedicated to the topic; see note 6 above, pp.211-234. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. p. 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This claim is obviously difficult if not absurd because the Zionists who made *aliya* were saved while the Jews of Europe were murdered. See Rav Zalman Koren’s article *Mamlachteyut Yisraelit* in *Mamlechet Kohanim V’Goy Kadosh*, Jerusalem, 1989, footnote 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I’ve used the translation as it appears in Ravitzky’s book, p.64. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Rav Kasher’s article on this can be found online at: https://www.daat.ac.il/daat/kitveyet/shana/daat-2.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Torat Ha-medina*, Ha-idra Raba, Jerusalemת 1996, pp. 36-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *HaTekufah HaGedolah* pp.55-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Eim Ha-Banim Semeicha*, Machon Pri Ha-Aretz, 1983, pp.131-133. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *The Rav Speaks*, New York: Judaica Press, 2002, p.32. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Kol Dodi Dofek*, translated by David Z. Gordon, Yeshiva University, 2006, p.33. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. https://etzion.org.il/en/philosophy/great-thinkers/rav-soloveitchik/rav-soloveitchik%E2%80%99s-approach-zionism. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)