

II. ISRAEL

CHAPTER 1

Grounded Zionism

Certain moments throughout the year stirred profound reflection in Rav Amital – Yom Ha'Atzmaut, Yom Yerushalayim, and Rosh Hashanah were occasions when he contemplated the immense significance of the State of Israel. His arrival in the land, on the second night of Chanukah in the shadow of World War II, became a defining moment of his life – a mythical “rebirth.” On this day, his family conducted an annual celebration granting him yet another opportunity to meditate on the miraculous restoration of the Jewish people to their homeland.

VISCERAL, NOT IDEOLOGICAL

What stood out in his approach was the way he connected Zionism to a visceral, historical experience rather than abstract, lofty ideologies. He felt that discussions about Israel and Zionism should be grounded in a more basic and

immediate manner – one that transcended theological debates or ideological arguments about its religious significance.

For Rav Amital, the question of whether there is a mitzvah associated with Israel, or whether one can directly connect it to a specific commandment, was secondary. Many would rush to the Rambam or debate whether a mitzvah exists, but Rav Amital felt this was missing the point. The significance of Israel is not defined merely by whether it fits within the framework of mitzvot as enumerated by the Rambam or anyone else; its importance runs deeper than this. He avoided getting caught up in legalistic or ideological battles about the State of Israel.

Instead, his commitment to the Land was rooted in a more personal, existential connection. It was about something more profound than the letter of the law – it was about the soul of the Jewish people and our moment in Jewish history.

INTENSIFICATION OF ANTISEMITISM

Rav Amital questioned the idealistic, high-minded visions of Zionism that were propagated by figures like Theodor Herzl, who believed that the establishment of a Jewish state would lead to the end of antisemitism and grant Jews a “normal” experience. Rav Amital saw this view as simplistic and ultimately short-sighted. In reality, the establishment of the State of Israel did not lead to the disappearance of antisemitism, but rather acted as a catalyst in many ways for its intensification. The resurgence of the Jewish people in their ancient homeland has, in some ways, fueled antisemitic sentiments around the world, intensifying rather than diminishing hatred.

He rejected the notion that Zionism’s goal was to simply remove Jewish suffering by creating a “normal” existence. Instead, Rav Amital believed that Israel’s significance was not about escaping antisemitism but about asserting the Jewish people’s connection to the Land and its Divine purpose.

CAUTIOUS ZIONISM

Rav Amital was deeply cautious about assigning redemptive expectations to the modern State of Israel, especially during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, when the Jewish population was still far more significant outside Israel than within it. At that time, many Jews in the United States and Europe were not returning to Israel in large numbers, and the demographic balance was still skewed. Rav Amital did not see the role of Israel solely as a driver of redemptive prophecies. While today, Israel is considered the cultural epicenter for Jews throughout the world, this was not as clear in the middle of the 20th century.

He believed that the essence of Israel's significance lay not in fulfilling redemptive expectations but in the fact that it was the homeland of the Jewish people. Even if one were to argue that there was no formal mitzvah related to the Land of Israel or no immediate redemptive purpose, it still had the right to be built and developed by the Jewish people.

SURVIVOR

This perspective was heavily influenced by the trauma of the Holocaust, not just the horror of the event itself but the broader historical context surrounding it. Our national suffering left a profound scar on the collective Jewish psyche, shaping Rav Amital's vision of the Jewish state as a necessary refuge and a powerful symbol of Jewish resilience.

Historically, even in places where Jews were not murdered or subjected to pogroms, pervasive antisemitism left Jews without a true home. This absence had existed for centuries, and the trauma of living as a stateless people was undeniable. Even without the Holocaust, the crisis of Jewish homelessness would have remained, because Jews had nowhere to turn.

The lack of a secure refuge was particularly poignant after the war, when Jews were turned away from ports in South America, and the limited immigration options to Palestine and the United States further exacerbated the crisis. The safe havens that many take for granted today were once closed to Jews, reinforcing the existential urgency for a Jewish state.

The Holocaust, while undeniably a catastrophic moment in Jewish history, was part of a much larger, ongoing crisis of displacement and oppression. For Rav Amital, the establishment of Israel was not merely a political or religious event; it was a critical existential necessity.

While it could be theoretically argued that someone could oppose Zionism yet still love Jews, history had already proven such a position untenable. The Jewish people had endured centuries of discrimination, and without a homeland, this suffering would continue. Denying Jews a homeland was inherently dangerous and, in practice, tantamount to promoting antisemitism.

Rav Amital's view of Israel was grounded in the trauma of the Jewish people's history. Whether or not one saw the Land of Israel as fulfilling a redemptive role or as a formal mitzvah, it was essential for the survival of the Jewish people. The very fact of a Jewish state, and the ability to immigrate freely to it, was an unprecedented achievement and, for Rav Amital, a necessary and practical solution to the crisis of Jewish existence.

PARTIAL ACHIEVEMENTS

His realism about Israel's role included accepting imperfect solutions and recognizing its challenges and limitations, yet never losing sight of its vital importance.

In 1947, as the UN's partition plan for Palestine was being debated, there was significant controversy within the Jewish community about whether to accept it, particularly among religious Jews. For those with heightened redemptive expectations, the plan seemed like a betrayal – nothing like the borders envisioned in Jewish texts, and a fragmented, insufficient solution to the question of a Jewish homeland. To many, the partition plan appeared as an abomination or a tragedy, a far cry from their hopes of a unified and expansive Israel.

Rav Amital, however, held a more pragmatic perspective. While others were strongly opposed to the plan, he understood that the reality on the ground was far from ideal, yet the establishment of the state, even in its limited form, was a monumental step. He felt that focusing on redemptive ideals might obscure

the profound significance of what was being achieved. The very existence of a Jewish state, even one that was not perfect or all-encompassing, was a miracle in itself.

This perspective was shared by some religious leaders, such as Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer, a prominent figure in the yeshiva world at the time. In the aftermath of the partition vote, he suggested that perhaps this was the way Hashem would bring about redemption, offering a more humble and hopeful view of the unfolding events. Rav Meltzer's comments reflected a readiness to accept the reality of the situation and find meaning in it, even if it fell short of idealized visions.

MERRIMENT, NOT JUST KORBANOT

A famous vort of Rav Amital reflects his realism and willingness to accept partial achievements in the Land of Israel. The familiar text of the seventh brachah of sheva brachot – “*kol sasson, v’kol simchah, kol chatan, v’kol kallah*” – the sounds of joy and gladness, of the bride and groom – is an adaptation of the pasuk in *Yirmiyahu* (31:12) that enumerates five joyous sounds, each representing a facet of happiness or rejoicing. The climactic fifth *kol* of sound in the verse speaks of the gathering of the Jewish people bringing offerings to the Beit HaMikdash. In the original pasuk, this fifth *kol*, which signifies ultimate happiness, is phrased as “*kol omrim hodu et Hashem Tzevakot*,” the sound of people offering thanks and bringing their sacrifices.

Yet in the actual text of the sheva brachot, a different “*kol*” or voice is inserted in place of “the voice that celebrates sacrificial offerings”: “*u’na’arim mi-mishteh neginatam*,” which refers to the voice of young men enjoying a festive celebration together, drinking and having a good time.

When articulating this brachah, why did Chazal replace a holy *kol* related to *korbanot* with a more mundane one, focusing on men having fun and celebrating in a more mundane fashion? Rav Amital explained that the original text from *Yirmiyahu* might imply that true joy and redemption can only be expressed through the spiritual acts of *korbanot* and through the presence of holiness. But Chazal, recognizing the distance from the ideal reality of the Mikdash, adapted

the prayer to reflect a more immediate and accessible form of redemption: joy in the Land of Israel, even in its simplest, everyday expressions.

Even without the physical presence of the Beit HaMikdash, the celebration of life, the camaraderie, and the joy of people coming together in the Land of Israel can be seen as a sign of redemption. The very fact that people can live and rejoice together in their own land – despite the absence of the Mikdash – is itself an expression of the redemptive process. The happiness and unity, even in more “secular” forms, are powerful indicators that we are living through a time of ultimate redemption.

Rav Amital’s approach to redemption, grounded in a sober, realistic understanding of Jewish sovereignty, avoided the grandiose, almost cosmic expectations associated with figures like Rav Kook. Rav Amital did not speak of redemption in the language of sweeping theological transformations, where the entire world order is restructured by Jewish sovereignty. His was a more tempered and pragmatic vision – one that recognized the significance of the Jewish return to the Land of Israel but did so without inflating it into a miraculous or excessively idealized event.

KINDERGARTENS AND PLAYGROUNDS

Rav Amital shared an anecdote that encapsulated this collective spirit while also reflecting his grounded Zionism.

Once, while reading a newspaper in a public space, he sat next to an older woman. The news article reported that a new kindergarten had opened in Jerusalem – just a small civic development. To the woman, it seemed like a trivial matter, something that could be forgotten in a month. But for Rav Amital, it was a powerful symbol.

For him, the opening of a kindergarten in Jerusalem wasn’t just a mundane piece of news. It represented a profound moment in the Jewish return to the Land. The creation of institutions like this signaled the establishment of Jewish life in the heart of Israel, an act of nation-building that was deeply meaningful. It wasn’t just about education; it was a sign of Jewish presence, vitality, and renewal in a land that had long lacked Jewish sovereignty.

This contrast – between the older woman’s dismissal of the news and Rav Amital’s recognition of its significance – highlighted a key difference in how they viewed the ongoing process of Jewish redemption. For him, the ordinary moments of life in Israel were imbued with extraordinary significance, serving as a quiet but powerful affirmation of the return to our homeland. The act of opening a kindergarten, far from being a triviality, was a tangible expression of the redemption process unfolding before their eyes.

While studying at the Chevron Yeshiva and living near Givat Mordechai, Rav Amital would often walk past a playground on his way to yeshiva. He once shared how he would stop, transfixed, watching the children play, his eyes welling with tears. For him, this simple sight was the living fulfillment of Zechariah’s prophecy: “The streets of Jerusalem will be filled with boys and girls playing in its squares” (8:5).

Those same eyes that had seen unspeakable atrocities in Europe, that had witnessed Jewish children lined up and murdered in cold blood, were now graced with the privilege of witnessing Jewish life flourish once again in the streets of Jerusalem. To Rav Amital, this transformation was nothing short of miraculous, a poignant symbol of redemption unfolding before his very eyes.

Rav Amital’s deep emotional connection to the simplest aspects of Jewish life and history speaks to his powerful grounding in the practical reality of redemption. His response to the scene of children playing in the playground wasn’t merely about the normalcy of childhood – it was an emblem of life returning after so much death and destruction.

Rav Amital reminded us that redemption isn’t always about grand, cosmic gestures but can also be found in these down-to-earth, grounded realities.

CHAPTER 2

Celebrating Flawed Sovereignty

As stated in the previous chapter, Rav Amital's Zionism was remarkably grounded, devoid of lofty ideological constructs or grand theological frameworks. It wasn't primarily rooted in the mitzvah of living in Eretz Yisrael or tied to soaring messianic visions. Rather, his Zionism revolved around pragmatic and heartfelt concerns: the establishment of a Jewish state as a home for the Jewish people, a refuge where Jews could live freely, and a place where Jewish destiny could unfold unimpeded by the constraints of exile.

CHANUKAH AND JEWISH SOVEREIGNTY

Rav Amital also recognized a second, slightly more elevated layer to his Zionist vision: the intrinsic value of Jewish sovereignty itself, even if it falls short of our ultimate aspirations. For him, any expression of Jewish self-rule, however flawed or incomplete, was a cause for gratitude and celebration, an opportunity to acknowledge Hashem's hand in our history.

This perspective was central to Rav Amital's understanding of Chanukah. He viewed the *chag* as a paradigm of what could be termed “floor sovereignty” – a baseline model of Jewish rule.

He often quoted an iconic statement of the Rambam. Interestingly, when the Rambam introduces the miracle of Chanukah, he emphasizes the military victory over the Greeks and the restoration of Jewish sovereignty, mentioning the miracle of the oil only later. The Rambam³ concludes his initial description of the Chanukah story with the words: “*V'chazrah malchut l'Yisrael matayim shanah*” – “Jewish sovereignty was restored for 200 years.”

Those two centuries of Hasmonean rule, however, were far from idyllic. They were marred by internal strife, bitter civil wars, and deep divisions within the Jewish nation. The Sadducees had infiltrated the priesthood, and the core fabric of Jewish society was often in turmoil. By many measures, this period represented one of the lowest points in Jewish history.

The divisions within the Jewish community ran far deeper than just the Sadducees and Pharisees. Several other sects, including the Essenes and Boethusians, fractured the nation.

This disunity proved fatal during the Roman siege of Jerusalem. Contrary to popular belief, the Romans did not conquer Jerusalem purely by force; internal Jewish strife paved the way for their victory. Warring Jewish factions within the city burned each other's grain stores, resources that could have sustained a prolonged defense. This self-inflicted devastation left Jerusalem defenseless, a city of starvation and despair, ultimately allowing the Romans to enter with minimal resistance.

The leadership of that period mirrored the chaos. The Hasmonean dynasty, initially heroic liberators during the Chanukah story, deteriorated over time. Leaders like Yochanan Kohen Gadol and his son Alexander Yannai (Yanai HaMelech) were embroiled in controversy. Yochanan, revered in his early years, tragically aligned with the Tzedukim toward the end of his life, a cautionary tale cited in *Pirkei Avot* (2:4) and by the gemara in *Brachot* (29a): “Do not trust

3. *Hilchot Megillah v'Chanukah* 3:1.

yourself until the day you die.” Alexander Yannai’s reign was marked by violence and discord, epitomizing the internal fragmentation of Jewish society.

Even the Hasmonean family itself was marred by tragedy and divine retribution. The Gemara³ recounts that the Hasmonean family was nearly eradicated, leaving only descendants of their servants. The Ramban⁴ explains this as punishment for their usurpation of the throne, a role designated for the lineage of the tribe of Yehudah. What began as a miraculous resurgence of Jewish sovereignty ended in bloodshed and betrayal, a sobering reminder of the dangers of internal discord and moral decline.

What, then, are we celebrating during Chanukah, given the flawed leadership and the dark chapters of Jewish history it represents? The Rambam provides an answer: the restoration of *malchut Yisrael* – Jewish sovereignty – is itself worthy of celebration. For eight days, we recite *Hallel* to honor this achievement, even though it was far from the ideal monarchy we dream of. It was – and is again – a flawed sovereignty, a fractured and imperfect one; yet the mere fact of Jewish self-rule, of holding the reins of our destiny, is reason enough for gratitude.

This sovereignty was not the *malchut* of messianic visions, nor a religious leadership rooted in Torah values. It lacked the grandeur of a divinely anointed monarchy and was marred by internal strife and spiritual decline. Still, it represented a step above mere survival – a reclaiming of self-definition and autonomy, even in its most rudimentary form. For some, the absence of a king might render the term *malchut* (kingship) meaningless, akin to living under the rule of the Turks or the Ottomans. Yet for others, sovereignty, even imperfect, carries profound significance.

This was a cornerstone of Rav Amital’s Zionism: a recognition of Jewish sovereignty both as a means of self-preservation as well as the foundation of Jewish identity. It was not the highest rung on the ladder of Jewish aspirations, but it was a firm and necessary foundation.

His vision for the State of Israel extended beyond religious aspirations. It wasn’t about achieving a society where everyone would observe Shabbat or a government with the Chazon Ish as prime minister. Rav Amital understood

the demographic realities of the Jewish people and only dreamed of a fully observant state. His vision did aspire to create a Jewish sovereign state with a government and society that would embody a rare model of fairness, one that could serve as a moral beacon – a true *or la'goyim* – a light unto the nations.

This perspective also led him to admire the kibbutz movement, despite its secular nature. The kibbutzim represented an ethos of shared resources, community responsibility, and a vision for reducing inequality – values that resonated deeply with him. Over time, as Israel shifted toward a more capitalist structure and society became plagued by corruption, scandals, and moral decay, his hopes began to wane. Rav Amital often lamented that Israel's internal societal issues mirrored those of other nations, eroding its potential to stand apart as a uniquely moral society.

REJOICING AND WEEPING

He would frequently quote the scene from *Sefer Ezra*,⁴ where the returnees to Zion rebuilt the Second Beit HaMikdash. While the younger generation celebrated, the older generation wept, remembering the grandeur of the first Mikdash. Rav Amital saw himself as embodying both perspectives: the joy of a young generation thrilled by sovereignty and the sorrow of an elder mourning unrealized dreams. He celebrated the miracle of the Jewish state but grieved its moral shortcomings.

DIVINE INTOLERANCE FOR MORAL DEGENERACY

To illustrate this tension – joy at the founding of the state but frustration at its moral failings – Rav Amital often cited a powerful teaching from the *Meshech Chochmah*, based on a Yerushalmi in *Peah*. On an individual level, Hashem judges people primarily by their mitzvot and sins. But a society is judged collectively by its moral character, not by its religiosity.

4. Ezra 3:12–13.

The Yerushalmi contrasts the generations of Dovid HaMelech and Achav. Dovid's generation, though steeped in Torah knowledge, suffered military defeats due to internal discord and interpersonal strife. Conversely, Achav's generation, despite widespread idolatry, achieved military success because they treated one another with kindness and respect.

For Rav Amital, this teaching underscored a vital principle: The survival of society depends more on moral integrity than on individual religious observance. Hashem tolerates deviations in religious practice within a community but not the collapse of basic moral decency. This philosophy shaped his Zionism: a commitment to building a Jewish state not only as a haven for Jews but as a society defined by justice, compassion, and our shared humanity.

THE “KUZARI” ACCUSATION

Rav Amital would often invoke a haunting moment from the *Kuzari*. In a dialogue between the Chacham, the Jewish representative, and the king, the Chacham defends the moral superiority of the Jewish people, claiming that unlike the violent and oppressive nations surrounding them, Jews are compassionate and refrain from murder and bloodshed. The king counters sharply: “You don’t kill because you can’t. You lack the power. What will happen if one day you wield authority? Will you remain as righteous, or will you succumb to the same moral failings you now condemn?”

Rav Amital acknowledged the piercing truth in this critique. “Look at us now,” he would say. With the privilege of sovereignty and the complexities of governance, the Jewish people have faced profound moral challenges. While Israel’s army, guided by principles like *Tohar HaNeshek* (“purity of arms”), aspires to uphold ethical warfare standards, broader societal issues – corruption, political scandals, and moral lapses – sometimes tarnish the dream of a model society. Rav Amital maintained that while Israel has not descended into the extremes of cruelty seen in many regimes, it has also not fully achieved the lofty ideals envisioned at the dawn of statehood.

Rav Amital’s moral vision shifted focus from traditional measures of religiosity to broader ethical indices. While mitzvot and Torah learning are vital,

he argued, the moral spirit of a society – its fairness, equity, and compassion – stands as an independent gauge of its greatness. He mourned what he perceived as the unfulfilled potential of the Jewish state, a society meant to embody justice and compassion.

YITZCHAK'S GAMBLE

This tension, Rav Amital believed, is embedded in Jewish destiny. He drew from the Seforno's interpretation of Yitzchak's brachah to Esav, intended initially for Yaakov. Yitzchak's plan was to shield Yaakov from the entanglements of governance and politics. Esav would take charge of material matters – economy, power, and politics – while Yaakov, free from the dirt and corruption of the physical world, would focus on spiritual pursuits. The blessings Yitzchak reserved for Esav reflected this: material success and dominion.

But Yitzchak underestimated the destructive force of human ego and violence, leading to his vision faltering in its execution. The theory may have been sound – delegating worldly responsibilities to others to preserve spiritual purity – but it relied on Esav's goodwill. History proved that Yitzchak's vision could not be realized. Esav's pursuit of power threatened Yaakov's existence rather than supporting his spiritual mission.

WAITING FOR DEMOCRACY

In a similar vein, Rav Kook framed the delay of Jewish sovereignty as being an expression of humanity's broader evolutionary process. He suggested that Jewish self-rule requires a moral framework that the world had not yet perfected. If the Jewish people had achieved sovereignty in earlier eras, such as during the 1400s, it would have simply mirrored the brutal monarchies of that time – an outcome unworthy of the Jewish mission to elevate governance.

Jews are meant to offer a higher model to the world – a vision of ethical and just leadership – but such a model depends on humanity's progress. Democracy represents a step forward in this evolution, yet it, too, remains riddled with flaws.

Sadly, modern politics reveals democracy's vulnerabilities. Mass migration, for instance, can challenge democratic systems by creating demographic shifts that subvert shared values. Similarly, polarization often reduces political discourse to tribalism, where individuals vote not for their beliefs but merely to oppose their perceived enemies. Democracy, though celebrated, can be manipulated, weaponized, or paralyzed, exposing its soft underbelly.

Rav Amital also wondered about this dilemma, questioning whether Jews should immerse themselves in political leadership. Governance, with its power struggles, ego clashes, and moral pitfalls, distracts from spiritual pursuits and exposes the nation to significant challenges.

Nevertheless, he recognized the reality: Withdrawal is not a viable option. The Jewish people must engage with the world and shoulder the responsibilities of sovereignty, even as they strive to maintain moral integrity. Rav Amital recognized that even a Jewish government, formed in an imperfect world, would inevitably face corruption, scandal, and societal flaws.

Yet the alternative – relying on the kindness of others for survival – proved tragically insufficient. The horrors of the Holocaust, in which millions of Jews were murdered while the world watched in silence, shattered any illusions of a safe existence in the Diaspora. The bilateral “arrangement” between Jews and their host nations was irrevocably broken. If the nations could not uphold their part of the pact, then Jews were compelled to secure their own future. Despite the fact that Jewish sovereignty might be morally challenging, history demanded it.

This truth has been starkly reinforced in the wake of the October 7 atrocities. The necessity of Jewish sovereignty has never been clearer. A Jewish state is not merely a philosophical aspiration but a practical imperative, providing safety, refuge, and the capacity to defend against existential threats.

Zionism, as Rav Amital understood it, is far from simplistic. Yet even as the Jewish state falls short of its moral and spiritual ideals, it remains a cause for celebration. The miracle of sovereignty, despite its challenges, represents a profound step forward in the unfolding journey of Jewish destiny.

CHAPTER 3

Challenges of Religious Zionism

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY VS. COMMUNITY AFFILIATION

Once, when visiting a community in the Diaspora, I was asked what type of Jew I am, to which I replied, “I am an ultra-Orthodox Jew,” because I try to be as Orthodox as possible. I don’t think anyone has an excuse to be anything other than an ultra-Orthodox Jew. I see my approach to religious life as the ideal religious life and hence I see it as ultra-Orthodox.

The distinction between identity and community is essential. Living in a Dati Leumi (national religious) community may shape our daily lives and practices, but our fundamental identity as *ovdei Hashem* is something far deeper and transcendent. Community provides structure, support, and resources, like schools and minyanim that individuals and families rely on to practice their faith effectively. But community labels are temporary constructs, often responses to historical contexts that can shift and evolve with time.

Ultimately, *avodat Hashem* should remain the core of our identity, beyond any specific affiliations to a group or time-period.

RELIGIOUS COERCION

Having distinguished between identity and community, we can now explore the challenges Rav Amital observed within the Dati Leumi world.

One of his most powerful beliefs was his opposition to legislating religion, or *kefiyah datit*. He argued that forcing religious observance would backfire, creating resentment rather than devotion. His proof was compelling: The one area of Jewish life in Israel that was never legislated – *brit milah* – is among the most widely embraced and least contentious. He recounted how, in 1954, there was a proposal to legally require *brit milah* before newborn boys could leave the hospital. Thankfully, this never became law, he said, because religious observance should be voluntary: a choice that flows from the heart.

In his view, Israel's identity should resonate with Jewish tradition without imposing it harshly on those who might resist. He warned against forcing religious practice, noting that it can create an “acid reflux” – a reaction of resentment and resistance.

Israel's unique setting creates challenges and opportunities in how we approach religion. For those raised in the Diaspora, keeping Shabbat or kashrut was often a private affair. But here in Israel, there's a tension between allowing individual choice and creating a public face that reflects our heritage of being a Shabbat-observant, kosher country.

Rav Amital's foresight has largely come to fruition. His perspective – that religion should not be force-fed but instead embraced voluntarily – was prophetic in its understanding of our national character. Though Religious Zionism aspires to infuse the broader secular society with religious spirit, Rav Amital did not see legislation of religious laws as a pathway to this goal.

IDEOLOGICAL SWAGGER

Rav Amital also recognized that within the national religious camp, there is a certain confidence – let's call it swagger – that some possess. They believe they understand the essence of Zionism and its perfect embodiment.

Given this ideological confidence, they proceed to define everything around them as holy, marking things as sacred based on their truths. Rav Amital once shared how, after making aliyah, he attended a gathering where even Hashomer Hatzair, a secular youth group, was considered *kadosh*. Sometimes in the worldview of Religious Zionists, everything becomes infused with holiness.

But this confidence, while powerful, sets the stage for a fall.

When events deviate from expectations, when actions fail to align with their spiritual or messianic vision, and when those deemed holy fall short of that standard, a crisis can arise. In response, Religious Zionists may at times resort to disparaging other groups with differing perspectives.

Words like “post-Zionist” or even “post-Jew” emerge, implying a disqualification of those who see the Jewish state differently. Such language is dismissive of other Jews’ sincerity and patriotism.

JOINING THE GOVERNMENT

Rav Amital exemplified a different path, rejecting the impulse to label or disqualify others. When he was asked to join Yitzhak Rabin’s government in 1996, someone criticized him for supporting a so-called “post-Zionist” regime. His response was unwavering: Secular Jews are also Zionists in their own way – and their commitment to the state and to peace, even if it means sacrificing land, is a valid expression of Zionism.

Rav Amital demanded ideological humility, to honor the diversity of Israeli society, and to resist the urge to narrow down who counts in the grand narrative of Jewish redemption.

JEWISH IDENTITY IS COMPLEX

Rav Amital encouraged us to embrace the complexity of Jewish identity, enabling us to recognize the expression of Jewish values even when it results in unsettling or challenging positions.

For instance, many Jews in America protesting against Israel since October 7 – especially those in hyper-liberal circles – are still Jews. I’m not referring to those who support Hamas or visit Tehran; they are not representing Jewish values: I’m speaking of campus Jews, who view Judaism through the lens of moral consciousness, a legacy which we know to be that of Avraham – compassion and justice.

We also hold that Judaism emphasizes moral responsibility and social justice, but there is a broader pantheon of values that Judaism upholds. For many Jews, moral justice is almost the exclusive value that defines their Judaism, leading them to incorrectly view Israel as an oppressor. In their minds, they’re fulfilling a Jewish legacy by opposing Israel. This, of course, is a warped view, but it still reflects their genuine belief that they’re living out their Judaism.

Therefore, while it’s unfortunate that their Jewish formulation has led them to oppose Israel, the state of the Jewish people, we shouldn’t dismiss them as non-Jews. They are still part of the Jewish people, but just expressing their beliefs through a distorted framework. We must learn to regard their views as attempts to support the same agenda we hold dear, even if it doesn’t align with our ideology or terms.

DESACRALIZING LANGUAGE

Another risk Rav Amital warned us about is how we communicate religious ideas and how we speak about Hashem, Torah and *kedushah*.

He was concerned that a shift in language had taken place. For example, instead of speaking about “Hashem,” religious people in Israel began using the term, “*Tzur Yisrael*” – the Rock of Israel. This was because *chilonim*, or secular Jews, wouldn’t be as receptive to hearing about God, but they might listen to the idea of *Tzur Yisrael*. Similarly, instead of speaking about Torah or *kedushat haTorah*, religious Jews began to prefer terms such as *moreshet Yehudit* or “Jewish

tradition,” focusing on the sanctity of the Jewish people rather than Torah and mitzvot proper.

Perhaps using such language makes sense when engaging with non-religious Jews, as it helps find common ground. However, the concern is that language always influences the speaker. Over time, when we use this terminology, we risk internalizing it. Such language, though not euphemistic, was a replacement for deeper, religious, and more content-driven expressions. The language we use with secular Jews could become the language we use among ourselves, potentially leading to a world without a direct connection to HaKadosh Baruch Hu. While this language may facilitate outreach, it risks seeping back into our own discourse, stripping our community of the depth of religious terminology.

ROLE-MODELING, NOT PREACHING

Additionally, Rav Amital emphasized that the most effective language in inspiring non-observant Jews is not found in lectures, articles, or pontification, but in personal example. People follow the language of someone’s actions, not their words. This focus on authentic leadership was central to his teachings.

He identified three core traits that he believed were crucial for inspiring others:

1. *Moral Integrity* – This includes being free from hypocrisy, selfishness, and deceit. Rav Kook often commented that when people sense a lack of moral integrity in religious figures, it becomes a barrier to belief. Hypocrisy turns religion into something offensive, causing people to turn away.
2. *Authenticity* – This is about being true to oneself and one’s values. People are inspired by those who live authentically, without manipulation or deceit.
3. “*Rosh Gadol*” – Literally “large headed,” this trait is about taking responsibility, being courageous, and not deferring decisions. It also demands vision and long-term planning. For Rav Amital, *rosh gadol*

meant taking responsibility for decisions in life rather than deferring them.

Rav Amital itemized these three traits as essential for inspiring religious association in secular Jews.

TORAH WITHOUT BELIEF

Rav Amital also foresaw the growth of Torah study among those without traditional beliefs, including those who might even identify as atheists. Decades ago, this trend was just in its infancy, but today secular *batei midrash* and *mechinot* programs flourish, inviting a new generation of Jews to engage with Torah, even if they don't believe in its divine origin. Is there meaning to this? Can Torah study have value for a person who does not observe, who doesn't feel bound by Jewish law?

In response to the issue of Torah study for non-observant Jews, Rav Amital relayed told the story of two legendary Chasidic brothers, Rav Zushya and Rav Elimelech. Every Friday night, Rav Zushya would experience an extraordinary elevation, his meal infused with deep spirituality – his words, the food, the blessings radiating a luminous presence of Shabbat.

But one night, he confided in his brother, telling him that he felt like a fraud. In today's terms, he was grappling with "imposter syndrome," doubting the authenticity of his Shabbat experience. Was it true holiness or merely a self-induced euphoria?

His brother Rav Elimelech offered a test: "Hold a Shabbat meal on Wednesday night. If you feel that same spiritual uplift, then perhaps it's all in your head. If not, then it's truly *kedushat Shabbat* – the sanctity of Shabbat."

Rav Zushya went through with this unusual experiment, preparing a Shabbat table on a Wednesday. To his astonishment, he felt that familiar spiritual high and, disheartened, returned to his brother, confessing, "It seems that it was all in my head."

But Rav Elimelech replied, "Perhaps I was wrong. The holiness of Shabbat is so potent that it can spill over into the week – even into Wednesday!"

Rav Amital would recount this tale to answer those who questioned the value of Torah study for those distant from belief. Just as Shabbat can transcend its boundaries, the Torah's wisdom can also extend beyond the framework of traditional observance. Its sanctity is so powerful, it can reach even into lives without faith, stirring the hearts of those who may not yet believe.

CHAPTER 4

Shifting Views on the State of Israel

Numerous ideological differences between Rav Amital and many of the disciples of Rav Kook became evident during the 1980s. While these differences were never confrontational or militant, they revealed profound conceptual and philosophical contrasts regarding the State of Israel and its emerging society and culture. Rav Amital articulated six key issues within Religious Zionism where his perspectives often diverged from the prevailing views of the movement.

1. NARROW FOCUS ON SETTLEMENTS

One significant divergence arose in the aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War, as the Jewish people returned to the heartland of Yehudah and Shomron – where, *baruch Hashem*, we find ourselves living today. This monumental event brought the settlement of Eretz Yisrael to the forefront of Religious Zionism, particularly among the followers of Rav Kook. The mitzvah of *yishuv ha'aretz* (settling the land) became central to our religious and ideological agenda, reflecting our deep-seated spiritual connection to the land.

Rav Amital believed that this singular focus on the land risked overshadowing other critical values. He feared an imbalance, where the broader spiritual mission of Am Yisrael would be diminished by over-emphasizing territorial settlement. His vision for Eretz Yisrael sought to include other ideals – moral, spiritual, and communal – to ensure a balanced and holistic approach to our return to the land.

The irony here is striking: Rav Amital himself spearheaded one of the most successful settlement enterprises, what is now known as Gush Etzion. From the establishment of Yeshivat Har Etzion in 1968 grew the flourishing communities of Efrat, Neve Daniel, Alon Shvut, Elazar, and beyond. The majestic hills and the thriving yeshiva infrastructure that visitors marvel at today were once barren, transformed under his vision and leadership.

Yet, despite his monumental contributions, Rav Amital was wary of an overemphasis on territorial settlement at the expense of other core values. He feared that the ideological fixation on settling *Eretz Yisrael HaShleimah* – Greater Israel – would obscure the equally important focus on *Am Yisrael HaShalem*. He feared that the overwhelming focus on territorial expansion had led to the neglect of vital social and moral issues, such as social justice, economic equality, and caring for the weak and vulnerable.

These values, which he saw as integral to religious identity, had been largely adopted by secular parties, leaving religious parties to prioritize land over people, so to speak. Healthy Religious Zionism must care for the needs of all Jews, addressing the social and domestic concerns that are just as central to Torah values.

In this context, Rav Amital's critique was not about the idea of *Eretz Yisrael Hashleimah* itself, but about the danger of making it the sole or even primary focus, to the exclusion of other, equally important elements of Jewish life. Sadly, our narrow focus upon territorial expansion has often caused fractures within Israeli society.

In the years before 1967, the notion of Greater Israel was less pressing, as the political reality seemed to offer only small, fragmented parts of the land. But in the aftermath of the Six-Day War, when the possibility of a united Eretz

Yisrael seemed within reach, Rav Amital warned against allowing this one vision to dominate and obscure the larger, more holistic vision of Jewish national and spiritual fulfillment.

Peace Option

In the 1970s and 80s, the question of balancing settlement activity with broader options for peace remained open. Rav Amital was among the few willing to entertain the idea of ceding territory in pursuit of peace, should such an opportunity arise. He recognized the profound moral challenges inherent in administering territories populated by millions of non-Jews, whose lives and aspirations often conflicted with the Zionist dream.

Fast-forward to 2024, and the feasibility of such discussions has dramatically shifted. With widespread hostility among many Palestinian populations within Israel, not to mention surrounding enemies bent upon our destruction and committed to our eradication, the notion of territorial concessions feels like a relic of another era. The stark realities of violence, terror, and genocidal rhetoric have slammed the door shut upon such debates.

Nonetheless, Rav Amital's sensitivity to moral complexities remains relevant. Even in the current climate, where policies of self-defense and security are indispensable, the suffering of innocent civilians cannot be entirely dismissed. While an overwhelming number of the residents of Gaza have been complicit in fostering a culture of brutality and participating in violent acts, others find themselves trapped in a grim reality.

We must always confront complexities honestly; even as we navigate perilous challenges, we must preserve our moral conscience and attune ourselves to the full scope of our values.

2. MORAL COMPLEXITIES OF OUR RETURN

Rav Amital's concern reflects a complex tension that has its roots in the earliest stages of Zionist thought. Some early Zionists, in their idealism, overlooked the existence of tens of thousands of Arabs already living in the land – people who might not welcome the new Jewish presence. While others struggled to reckon

with this reality, asking how one could return to a land already inhabited by people who might not want us there, Rav Amital emphasized that this uncomfortable truth should not be ignored. It was essential to understand the cost of our return and the conflict of values inherent in it, even if it did not necessitate a policy shift.

The reality is that settling the land promised to us by Hashem creates moral complexities, particularly in Yehudah and Shomron, as we are forced – with great legitimacy – to administer territories where the current residents do not want Jewish governance. Obviously, the harsh terms like “occupation” are distortions of truth as Israel has not “conquered” these territories for imperialistic reasons but has done so in self-defense during wars of annihilation. Despite this, the moral implications of ruling over populations that do not welcome an Israeli presence cannot be ignored.

Rav Amital often referenced the Rambam’s teaching in *Shemonah Perakim* about Dovid HaMelech, who, despite his holiness and the righteousness of his wars, was deemed unfit to build the Beit HaMikdash due to the bloodshed involved in his military campaigns. Even when the wars were sanctioned by the Torah, the moral weight of taking lives could not be ignored. For Rav Amital, this served as a reminder that even righteous acts – like fighting for the land – carry moral responsibility and cannot be detached from their consequences.

3. DANGERS OF NATIONALISM

Rav Amital also addressed the dangers inherent with the rise of Jewish nationalism. Rav Kook himself already raised the concern that Jewish nationalism, if unchecked, could devolve into narrow particularism. Rav Kook had envisioned the Jewish people as a moral example to the nations, not just as a proud and independent people in their own land. There was a risk that Zionism could lose sight of this broader mission if the emphasis shifted solely to particularistic goals.

Similarly, Rav Amital critiqued certain trends within Religious Zionism that he felt were causing an erosion of our universal vision. Some religious Zionist leaders and politicians, in their focus on Jewish nationalism, had lost sight of the

responsibility to consider the dignity, needs, and rights of non-Jews. This shift towards insular particularism, according to Rav Amital, was a deviation from the ideal of Zionism that could serve as a moral example for the world.

In today's Religious Zionist world, we sometimes see a disturbing lack of interest in non-Jews or even bigoted attitudes, which Rav Kook would have found troubling. Rav Amital's worry was that the balance between Jewish pride and the universal moral responsibility of Jews would be disrupted, something we continue to grapple with today.

4. MESSY POLITICS

Furthermore, Rav Kook struggled with the darker side of Jewish participation in politics. Throughout history, the intersection of Jewish people and political power has often led to corruption, bloodshed, and scandal, which was especially evident in the period leading up to the destruction of the Second Beit HaMikdash.

Rav Kook viewed the exile not just as a punishment but as a necessary purification – a “medicine” to cleanse us of the corruption that came with political power.

It was only after the devastation of World War I that the world had reached a point of moral and political evolution where Jews could once again take part in governance without the inherent corruption and violence that had marked it in the past. The emergence of democratic systems of government opened the door to reclaiming Jewish sovereignty, free from the inherent vulnerabilities and abuses often associated with monarchy.

Interestingly, Rav Amital slightly disagreed with Rav Kook on this issue. While he acknowledged that Rav Kook had hoped for an ideal form of government – a government free of corruption and tyranny – Rav Amital argued that the reality of the Holocaust proved that Jews could not afford to wait for the perfect government system. Even an imperfect state, like the State of Israel, was necessary for survival and for the rebuilding of the Jewish nation, despite its flaws.

In a post-Holocaust world, Rav Amital believed that Jewish sovereignty, though imperfect, was indispensable. The lessons of history and the existential threats faced by the Jewish people made it clear that a flawed but functioning government was far preferable to the vulnerability of statelessness. Rav Kook's aspirations for a noble government were still admirable, but Rav Amital understood that the reality demanded a more pragmatic approach, rooted in the lessons of the Holocaust and the urgent need for Jewish self-determination. There was no longer any room to cling to the fantasy of a perfect system; we had to settle for a "Plan B."

5. MILITANTISM

Rav Amital also expressed concern about the growing trends of militarism within the Religious Zionist camp. He observed a growing celebration of war as an essential and even redemptive component of the messianic process, with some believing that redemption was impossible without conflict. While Rav Amital obviously recognized the tragic and unavoidable necessity of war under our current circumstances, he rejected the glorification of war or its framing as a desired aspect of redemption.

There is a widespread assumption within certain circles that war is an inevitable step in the process of redemption. Rav Amital, however, strongly questioned this notion, arguing that it finds little grounding in Rav Kook's writings. While some of Rav Kook's students interpreted his teachings as supporting this view, Rav Amital contended that he rarely emphasized war as a necessary component of redemption. Instead, Rav Kook's writings are far more focused on concepts such as *mussar* – ethical refinement – and spiritual values.

It is true that Rav Kook wrote an entire work titled *Orot Milchamah* (*The Lights of War*), but this text primarily reflects his response to the aftermath of World War I. In it, Rav Kook examines the collapse of European civilization, exposing its moral and cultural decay. He viewed the war as a turning point, revealing the brutality lurking beneath the veneer of modernity, while simultaneously heralding the approaching redemption of the Jewish people. However,

Rav Kook did not present war as an inevitable or desirable path for Jewish redemption.

When addressing the prophecies of *Gog u'Magog*, which are often invoked as a justification for viewing war as central to redemption, Rav Amital offered an alternative perspective. He argued that *Gog u'Magog* is but one narrative of *Acharit HaYamim* (the End of Days), and not the only possibility.

As an example, Rav Amital would frequently cite a lesser-known prophecy from the final chapter of *Yeshayahu*, which we read in the special *haftarah* for Shabbat Rosh Chodesh. This prophecy envisions a time of universal harmony, where nations bring offerings to the *Beit HaMikdash* in cooperation and peace. Rather than depicting conflict or bloodshed, it presents a vision of redemption defined by unity and mutual respect.

Rav Amital recognized the harsh realities of conflict and the necessity of war in certain circumstances, including the ongoing struggles of the Jewish people to defend their land. Yet, he cautioned against the celebratory tone or saber-rattling that sometimes emerges within the religious community. Redemption, he believed, should not be reduced to a narrative of vanquishing enemies or a fixation on violence.

6. TWO TECTONIC SHIFTS

In general, much of Rav Amital's shift away from Rav Kook was based on the two major shifts of the 1940s.

Rav Amital wondered whether Rav Kook's thoughts about Israel and Jewish sovereignty, formulated before the Shoah, could still apply in a post-Holocaust world. His idealism, though inspirational, needed to be adapted to the new reality. We cannot simply extract Rav Kook's ideas and apply them directly to the modern era without considering the vast changes the world has undergone since Rav Kook's time.

Similarly, the emergence of a secular state also forced reconsideration.

Rav Kook had envisioned the establishment of a Jewish state as a moment of miraculous spiritual renewal, where Jewish identity would flourish universally. Secular nationalism would fuel a revival of Jewish spirit that would morph

into heightened religious commitment. However, the actual establishment of the State did not reflect this ideal; rather, it was fraught with tension and a secular-nationalist agenda, with religious voices largely sidelined or even opposed.

Rav Amital felt that the Religious Zionist community was over-simplifying issues, sometimes as a result of what he saw as a “cut-and-paste” application of Rav Kook’s teachings – teachings shaped in a very different historical era.

In the 1980s and 90s, these perspectives often placed Rav Amital at odds with prevailing sentiments within the Religious Zionist camp, leading some to label him as politically “left-wing.” This label stemmed not from a rejection of Zionist ideals but from his refusal to adopt a binary approach – settling the land at all costs, while disregarding the ethical questions it raised. He championed settling the land alongside nurturing the moral integrity of Israeli society, advocating for a balanced and thoughtful path forward.