

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, ztz"l, on Zionism

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1. Tovah Lichtenstein, “Countering Counter-History: Re-Considering Rav Aharon’s Road Not Taken,” *The Lehrhaus*, March 23, 2017

What if, indeed, we had stayed in the United States or—the flip side of that question—What if Rav Aharon had not come to Israel? The question, on a personal level, was one that echoed Robert Frost’s poem, that my husband, Rav Aharon, was fond of quoting: “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-I took the one less traveled by,/And that has made all the difference.” Neither he nor I were “sorry I could not travel both” roads, as we saw our move as much more than what Rabbi Eleff describes as being motivated by Rav Aharon’s statement on “the importance of moving to Israel in order to form a viable spiritual community.” Indeed, is that why a religious Jew moves to Israel? One can have viable spiritual community in Teaneck or Los Angeles. Was our move a “Zionist dream” as Rabbi Eleff terms it, or something much more essential and basic? *Eretz Yisrael* was, for us, much more than a place to come for *Yom Tov*, to send our children for a year of two of study and to be laid to rest there. *Eretz Yisrael*, *Torat Yisrael*, and *Am Yisrael* were intertwined and essential to Rav Aharon’s being...

I would like to think that if Rav Aharon had lived in the States he would have raised his voice and taken strong stands on many issues that plagued and still plague the Orthodox community. In Israel, he addressed issues as varied as the excessive bombing of Beirut in the First Lebanon War, Sabra and Shatila, conscientious objection by soldiers, making a hero of someone who had murdered Moslems at prayer, relationships to secular Jews, how to understand Jewish history, and intellectual dishonesty, to name just a few of the failings he addressed in his *sihot* and in the written media. The world about him was subject to moral scrutiny based on clear Torah values. I have no reason to think he would have done otherwise in New York...

Rav Aharon’s influence on the American Orthodox community, be it called Centrist or Modern, was *because* he had moved to Israel. He and his Yeshiva sought out and attracted the best and brightest of American young men—and, eventually, young women—to partake of his Torah at Yeshivat Har Etzion and at Migdal Oz. His students were not limited to those who might have chosen to study at Yeshiva University. He was not limited by the particular institutional structure of Yeshiva University, its dynamics and complexity. He distanced himself from the American scene as he immersed himself completely in the task of building an institution that had as its motto not Torah and Madda but Torah and army service. This combination of involvement in a Jewish polity while singlemindedly pursuing Torah learning and values had a far reach and attracted those who would later study in a variety of educational settings. These young people returned to their homes and it is they who saw Rav Aharon as their “gadol.”



2. “On Aliya: The Uniqueness of Living in Eretz Yisrael,” Alei Etzion 12 (2004), pp. 15-22.

The role and significance of *Eretz Yisrael* in one’s personal life, in its historical context, and with its many historical associations – that is certainly something which a Jew, and certainly a *ben Torah*, needs to feel. Even if later on he finds, for one reason or another (and I don’t say that there aren’t valid reasons), that he has to forgo the dream, at least he should have this dream and aspiration...

One day, I went to see *mori ve-rabbi* Rav Hutner *zt”l*, who used to spend summers in *Eretz Yisrael*. He had an attachment to *Eretz Yisrael* – he had studied in Yeshivat Chevron when it was still in Chevron. He began to ask me what are my impressions, what do I see here, what do I feel. I discussed with him the vitality of Jewish life and the sense of total community, as opposed to the Diaspora, where one’s life is more fragmented. He felt that you could have felt that wholeness and vitality in Eastern Europe as well. Then I said that I think there is a broader range of application of Halakha in Israel. In America, rabbinical courts handled only ritual law, and here they dealt with *dinei mamonot* (commercial and financial cases) as well, so here you feel the resonance of Halakha in more areas of life. He said that you could have seen that in Eastern Europe or in North Africa also.

I tried to get him to elaborate, and finally he exclaimed, “Why don’t you mention the uniqueness of being in *Eretz Yisrael*? Chazal (*Ketubot* 112a) speak of *Eretz Yisrael* as a country that Moshe and Aharon didn’t merit to enter, and we are there!” It was stunning to him to meet a *ben Torah* on an airplane flying to Israel, whose attitude was the same as if he were going to California. I walked out of there like a beaten dog. This thought, this feeling, is what I want to share with you as well... The epicenter of Jewish life today, that which ultimately is going to determine the nature of our communal existence, is in *Eretz Yisrael*. It’s not in London or New York. There are important communities there, and God forbid that we should adopt the attitude of “*shelilat ha-Gola*,” the denial of the validity and value of Jewish life in the Diaspora. Nevertheless, the vital center is here. If a person wants to be part of the action, here is where it is.

Also, on a practical level, one is able to lead here, much more than abroad, a more organic and integrated life, as opposed to a choppy kind of existence that one leads in the Diaspora. One’s life here attains a greater sense of wholeness, since there is societal and religious value even to the mundane aspects of one’s daily existence. And, of course, there is the challenge of contributing to the building of the Jewish state...

I hope that as many of you as possible, except for those who have critical roles to fulfill elsewhere, will eventually make *aliya*, and that the choice between “the land of Canaan” over “the land of your father’s dwelling” will not be too difficult. *Aliya* is certainly not as difficult as it used to be...

To conclude, *aliya* is critically important on both an individual and a communal level. Yet, at the very least, even if one feels that at the moment he must remain in “the land of his father’s dwelling,” he should feel deeply the draw of “the land of Canaan.”

3. “Diaspora Religious Zionism: Some Current Reflections,” 2008

- Four Religious Reasons to Make Aliyah

At least four [spiritual] elements, bonding residence in Eretz Israel with the performance of *mitzvot*, may be identified.

- Mitzvah to Make Aliyah

The first and most direct is the position of the Ramban, widely trumpeted and popularized by Rav Zvi Yehuda Kook, that the anticipation, at once promise and command, that we are to possess and settle Eretz Israel is to be enumerated amongst *taryag mitzvot* (613 commandments); and this, in two respects. Most fundamentally, this mitzvah is realized through the establishment and maintenance of the hegemony of *Knesset Israel* in the promised land, which is not to be left under the aegis of foreign rule, or as wilderness at the disposal of natural forces... Secondly, however,

the Ramban also subsumes *yeshivah*, mere physical residence – even in circumstances under which one's absence would in no way endanger national interests – as a personal fulfillment of the mitzvah...

- *Eretz Yisrael Offers Opportunities for Mitzvot*

A second factor: the status of the country as venue for the performance of many other mitzvot – particularly, agriculturally related *mitzvot hateluyot ba'aretz* (commandments specific to Eretz Israel). This aspect is most sharply delineated in a *gemara* in *Sotah* – strikingly, with respect to Moshe Rabbeinu's aspiration to enter Eretz Israel and his passionate pleas in this connection:

דרש רבי שמלאי מפני מה נתאוה משה רבינו ליכנס לארץ ישראל וכי לאכול מפריה הוא צריך או לשבוע מטובה הוא צריך אלא כך אמר משה הרבה מצות נצטוו ישראל ואין מתקיימין אלא בארץ ישראל אכנס אני לארץ כדי שיתקיימו כולן על ידי אמר לו הקב"ה כלום אתה מבקש אלא לקבל שכר מעלה אני עליך כאילו עשיתם (סוטה ד').

Rebbi Simlai explicated: For what reason did Moshe Rabbeinu long to enter the Land of Israel? Does he need to eat from its fruit or satiate himself by its abundance?! Rather, this is what Moshe Rabbeinu said: "Am Israel were commanded numerous mitzvot that can only be fulfilled in the Land of Israel. Let me enter the land so that I can fulfill them all." The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: "What you seek is nothing but to receive the reward; I will consider it as if you have fulfilled them"...

- *Quality of Mitzvot Observed in Eretz Yisrael*

A third factor returns us to the Ramban; and, this time, with reference to a frequently stated – and yet, surprisingly radical – position... that the halakhic regimen in its totality is geared to Eretz Israel which constitutes a metaphysical and yet natural habitat for its realization. Basing himself, in part, upon a comment of the Sifre that the mitzvot of *tefillin* and *mezuzah* should be observed even in the Diaspora as a propaedeutic device for maintaining a mindset which should ensure their observance upon return to our native land, he notes that the remark apparently applies even to *hovot haguf*, personal, as opposed to agricultural, obligations; and hence, he boldly draws the inference concerning the intrinsic bond between normative content and geographic context. This is, I repeat, a bold thesis, and one which, despite my enormous admiration and respect for the Ramban, I have great personal difficulty in digesting... In a milder version, the Ramban's position can be readily understood and fully appreciated. Without divesting Diaspora halakhic observance of intrinsic value, one could accept the notion that context and location affect the character and significance of an action, so that the identical *ma'asseh mitzvah* (mitzvah performance) could have incremental qualitative value when performed in *eretz hakodesh* (the Holy Land)...

- *Eretz Yisrael Attracts Divine Attention*

A fourth factor... Eretz Israel is conceived as a plane of paradoxical particular immanence – as a locus to which Hashem attends directly, with which He bonds, and in which, *mutatis mutandis*, He inheres. It is described, Scripturally, as, uniquely,

ארץ אשר ה' אלהיך דרש אתה תמיד עיני ה' אלהיך בה מרשית השנה ועד אחרית שנה (דברים יא:יב)

A land which the Lord your God constantly seeks out, the eyes of the Lord your God are upon it from the beginning to the end of the year. (Deuteronomy 11:12)...

To live in Eretz Israel is, to subsist and suspire in the shade and in the shadow of the Ribbono Shel Olam, over and above the norm prevalent in the Diaspora. To the sensitive religious soul, the implications for service and experience are self-evident...

- *Three Modern Reasons to Make Aliyah*

All that has been outlined heretofore could have confronted a prospective *oleh* several centuries ago no less than his contemporary counterpart. The current scene differs, however, markedly... One additional major area which the modern religious Zionist... will take into account, bears

examination. I refer to the sociohistorical reality our prospect will encounter in Israel should he reach its shores. That reality is itself, divisible into three components.

There is, first, the vertical historical axis, bonding with the full range of Jewish existence, across the millennia, from our incipient national cradle to the epiphany of our meta-historical vision. Second, we note the horizontal social axis – particularly, as manifested by the demographic reality, or, as his Shunamite hostess told Elisha – בתוך עמי אנכי ישבת (מלכים ב, ד:יג) – “I reside amongst my people” – life as part of an indigenous majority rather than of an alien minority, with all this crucial fact implies for the organic unity of state and society and for the organic unity of personal sensibility. Finally, we encounter the more narrowly Zionist dimension. I have noted elsewhere, that one of the major cruces dividing Zionist from non-Zionist Orthodoxy, concerns, at its core, a theological issue: the division, as it were, of the historical drama between providential control and human initiative. Abstract and abstruse as the point may seem, the question of the legitimacy and scope of activism bears directly upon the appraisal of the re-entry of Knesset Israel as a national entity upon the universal arena. To the extent that a religious Jew identifies with dynamic activism, he will be attracted to religious Zionism. And he will be drawn to ascending to Eretz Israel, for that is where the action in this vein lies...

- *Complications*

The halakhic discourse proper... is multifaceted. The principal issues concern the basic normative obligation of aliya – does it exist at all, and, if so, whether *mi'd'oraitha* (biblical) or *mi'd'rabbanan* (rabbinic)? Second, to what extent, if any, can it be mitigated or overridden by circumstance?¹⁷ For the most part, *poskim*, largely following the Ramban, were inclined to affirm a measure of obligation. There were, however, notable exceptions. Thus, Rav Shlomo Kluger in the nineteenth century, and Rav Moshe Feinstein, in the twentieth, both argued that if most observant Jews, including pious and saintly *kedoshim hasidei elyon*, scholarly *talmidei hakhamim* as well as the untutored, remained in the Diaspora, evidently their sojourn there entailed no clear violation... At the level of personal existential decision, the halakhic debate remains for many inconclusive, and those who desire dispensation may find a basis for it. As formulated in the bottom line of the brief teshuvah of the fifteenth-century *Terumat Hadeshen*:

לכן כל איש ישער בעצמו בהכנת גופו וממונו באוצר, דרך יוכל לעמוד ביראת השם ובשמור מצותיו כי זה כל האדם.

Therefore each person should estimate, on his own, [about] how prepared he is physically and financially, and [whether he can find] a way to maintain his fear of God and abidance to His commandments since “that is the essence of man.”

The statement focuses upon spiritual ramifications, but, on the view of many *poskim*, that material elements bear consideration as well, its differential approach can be readily adapted...

- *Reasons Not to Make Aliyah*

Many Israelis are wont to assume that the primary restraint upon aliya among religious Zionists derives from cleavage to the fleshpots of Egypt... however, I believe that other factors, of a less materialistic or hedonistic cast, figure more prominently.

These include the quest for vocational self-fulfillment, with respect to personal development, on the one hand, and potential contribution to *yishuvo shel olam* (the development of the world), on the other. In a parallel vein, many are wary about the educational climate in the dati-leumi community in Israel, and bemoan the absence of certain desired options – say, the fusion of positive haredi passion for *lomdut* (conceptual Jewish learning) with serious readiness for secular profession – as well as the presence of radical ideology which brandishes a version of religious Zionism they find narrowly fanatic and excessively aggressive.

For many, more specifically personal elements play a key role... At one terminus, the prospect of being known as a greenhorn is perturbing... Worse yet, many are concerned about a cultural gap

piggy-backed on a generational gap, opening a chasm between themselves and their children. At the other terminus, some anticipate parting as not sweet sorrow but just plain sorrow. The problem is most acute vis-à-vis family – especially, of course, parents...

- *Ambivalence about Aliyah*

For many prospective olim, the upshot of attempted assessment and decision may be ambivalence, frustration, embattlement, or, simply, dilemma... They may refrain from making the leap, but not without anguish...

Perhaps the most ambivalent about aliya, however, are spiritual protagonists who, externally and adversarially, are not embattled at all but are, rather, torn... On the one hand, they are truly desirous and even anxious to live and work in Eretz Israel – and for all the right reasons. On the other hand, they are concerned by a sense of responsibility to their native community and to the need to minister to its spiritual and educational concerns...

The issues are, in part, general and theoretical: public vs. personal priorities, the value of yishuvo shel olam as opposed to talmud Torah, etc.; and, in part, obviously entail many private variables...

Critics contend that the profession of Zionist ideology in the context of continued residence in Hendon or in Woodmere is not only innocuous but hypocritical. I confess that, in making judgments or drawing conclusions, I myself adhere to a less rigorous standard. For one thing, surprising as it may sound to some, I do not reject all strains of hypocrisy categorically, as I recall an adage Douglas Bush used to cite: “Hypocrisy is the tribute which vice pays to virtue.” In a more conventional vein, however, there is much to commend the contribution of Diaspora religious Zionism to varied sectors and different levels – national, communal, and personal – of Jewish life...

- *Seeking Tziyon*

The mishnah states that Rav Yohanan ben Zakkai instituted an innovation with respect to the mitzvah of *lulav*, and that its rationale was the quest for *zekher lemikdash*... The gemara goes on to query whence do we derive the principle of creating such memorials, and it cites a *pasuk* in *Yirmeyahu*:

מנא לן דעבדינן זכר למקדש א"ר יוחנן דאמר קרא כי אעלה ארוכה לך וממכותיך ארפאך נאם ה' כי נדחה קראו לך ציון היא דורש אין לה דורש אין לה מכלל דבעיא דרישה (ירמיהו ל:ז).

From where do we know that we should memorialize the Temple? Raban Yohanan ben Zakai said, From the verse “‘I will bring you healing and cure your wounds,’ says the Lord, ‘since they called you dejected, [and said] Zion has no seeker. “‘Has no seeker” indicates that it must be sought out (Jeremiah 30:17).

The source is cited here with respect to a very specific halakhic ordinance, and it presumably serves as the *raison d’être* for similar ordinances. Unquestionably, however, it serves equally to enunciate a principle whose scope extends beyond the explicitly normative to embrace the realm of consciousness and sensibility. To sustain the memory of mikdash, that whose locus is in Jerusalem and that which coincides with the boundaries of the concentric country, is to vivify it, to rejuvenate it via mental image and soul’s yearning.

Derishat Zion (seeking out Zion), *zekher lemikdash* – this has, traditionally and historically, been the central charge of Diaspora religious Zionism...

Nevertheless, while priority and balance cannot be ignored, our commitment to *derishat Zion* should be neither abandoned nor diminished. And this, for two reasons. First, it should be obvious that apart from attending to dividing the existing cake, the prospect for enlarging it ought to be very real. We are far from exhausting reservoirs of time, energy, and passion to be harnessed in the pursuit of spiritual goals... The second factor relates to the character and substance of *derishat Zion*. Beyond flag-waving and beyond merely exuding emotion, it is all about search and relation; about bonding and linkage; about developing a thirst for Zion and all that it represents and about seeking avenues to quench that thirst – by remembrance and reenactment of things past in conjunction with

anticipation of things future. Consequently, properly understood and experienced, derishat Zion does not compete with other Torah values, but rather reciprocally reinforces and is reinforced by them...

- *Personal Reflection*

The choice [for authorship of an article on this topic] of a person who, while residing in the United States grappled, together with his wife, with the option of aliya, who went on subsequently, to carve a niche in Israel, while retaining ties with his former bailiwick, but who never looked back in regret or reconsideration, possibly signifies the bonding power of derishat Zion. Bonding Jew and land, bonding Jew and Jew, it is the charge and prerogative of neither the Diaspora religious community, nor of the indigenous Israeli community. It is part of what links us, vertically and horizontally, with Knesset Israel.

4. Further Writing by Rav Lichtenstein on Zionism

- A. "Religion and State: The Case for Interaction," 1970 – A case for and partial warning against government imposition of religious law.
- B. "The Ideology of Hesder," 1981 – A programmatic justification of the Hesder approach of combining yeshiva study and army service, which Yeshivat Har Etzion Follows.
- C. "The Israeli Chief Rabbinate: A Current Halakhic Perspective," 1992 – Reflections on the requirement and value of a chief rabbinate in theory and their function in practice.
- D. "A Rabbinic Exchange of Baruch Goldstein's Funeral," 1994 – A harsh criticism of rabbis who praised Dr. Baruch Goldstein after he killed 29 Moslems in Chevron.
- E. "On the Assassination of Prime Minister Rabin, z"l," 1995 – A powerful call for soul-searching in the Dati Leumi community following the Rabin assassination.
- F. "A Rabbinic Exchange on the Gaza Disengagement," 2007 – A series of letters with Rav Avraham Shapira considering the permissibility of disengagement and refusing orders.

