**Halakhic Arrangements as Preservers of National Identity in Ahad Ha’am’s Doctrine –**

**A Note on Gila Stopler’s Article “The Religion-State Relationship and Its Impact on National Identity in Israel”**

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**Summary**

In her article, Gila Stopler claims that the model chosen by the State of Israel for the religion-state relationship in order to strengthen the national Jewish identity not only does not fulfill its aim, but at times even undermines its own purpose. Stopler further claims that various secular national leaders, Ben-Gurion in particular, “believed that in time, after the establishment of the state, the religious element of Judaism, which had initially served as the foundation for the creation of the national element, would gradually disappear, and an unadulterated Jewish nationalism would take its place.” Stopler argues, rightly in my opinion, that Ben-Gurion and other secular national leaders assumed **that religion was needed only until the emergence of a new doctrine, which would be nationalism**.

Ahad Ha’am believed in a national ideology that would include religion regardless of circumstance, and not only during the first days of transition, during a certain period of time, or in a manner dependent on location and/or prevalence. According to Ahad Ha’am, religion – that is, halakha and its derivatives – is not the only variable that explains the Jewish people, but rather one explanatory variable in conjunction with others. However, it is undoubtedly a significant explanatory variable. Ahad Ha’am’s approach maintains that religion has been a component of Jewish nationalism since the beginning and **will be forever**.It is a secular national approach that nonetheless attaches considerable weight to religion and its normative expressions, which are supposed to act as preservers in the construction of national identity. This may have consequences that will be perceived as “religious,” but in Ahad Ha’am’s eyes they are in fact “national.” This is not a narrow approach that attributes negligible weight to religion in the context of nationalism, nor one that seeks to use religion as a parameter in Jewish nationalism only until the growth of a new Jewish nationalism. **Ahad Ha’am believed that the preservation of national identity was at least partially founded on halakha**.

It is possible that Ahad Ha’am’s approach will bolster Stopler’s critique with regard to consequences of religious institutionalization that do not result in a strengthening of nationalism. Moreover, presumably a halakhic arrangement institutionalized by the religious establishment that operates counter to preservation, or even simply fails to contribute to the function of preservation, is not a worthy arrangement as far as Ahad Ha’am is concerned. **It is possible, however, that part of the undesirable result identified by Stopler stems from a normative controversy regarding the proper place of religion (halakhic arrangements and thought) in the (secular) nationalism of the Jewish people**; in this case, it is possible that Ahad Ha’am’s approach will not align with Stopler’s critique.

I believe that the Ahad Ha’am approach, although heretical from the point of view of the observant Jew – and perhaps precisely because it is heretical and represents a non-halakhic perspective – is a more practical approach to a compromise in Israeli politics, and can help to formulate a practical solution. The idea of religion propounded by Ahad Ha’am – as a secular, nationalist Zionist thinker, who was not motivated by observance of the commandments – differs from the stated view that religion is merely an initial necessity and destined to disappear, or even from a view that attributes to religion only negligible weight lacking normative expression. This is yet another reason that Ahad Ha’am’s approach is a more practical approach to compromise within the Israeli political context.