**Uncompromising Zionism in North Africa**

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**Abstract**

Rabbi Yahya Ben Harosh, a 20th-century Moroccan rabbi, wrote a letter to his students on 25 July 1950. In the letter, the rabbi sharply criticized his students, who had been exposed to ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionist influences, for disparaging and denigrating Zionist leaders and the founders of the State of Israel. In this article, I discuss the historical background to the writing of this letter. Secondly, the letter itself is presented in its entirety. Thirdly, I discuss the ideological foundation of the rabbi’s vigorous protest, from his position regarding the messianic concept to the religious affirmation of Zionism as a national liberation movement. I aim to stimulate a new methodological and historiographical discussion.

**Keywords**: Rabbi Yahya Ben Harosh, Rabbi Gershon Liebman, Morocco, ultra-Orthodox currents, Lithuanian yeshiva, Zionism, anti-Zionism, messianic concept, State of Israel, historiography, Sephardic, Ashkenazi

Rabbi Yahya Ben Harosh (1913-2000), rabbi of the city of Kenitra (Port-Lyautey) and rabbinic judge (*dayan*) of the cities of Casablanca and Rabat (Morocco), wrote a letter on 25 July 1950 in which he sharply chastised his students, who had been exposed to ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionist influences, for disparaging and denigrating Zionist leaders and the founders of the State of Israel.

The rabbi expressed his views in strong, colorful and unequivocal language: ‘I believe with all my heart that Benjamin Theodor Herzl of blessed memory was a true prophet and that David Ben Gurion and his faction are the redeemers, of whom it is written (I Samuel 18:14) “And David was successful in all his ways, and the Lord was with him.” Anyone who speaks derogatorily of our president, Chaim Weizmann, and David Ben Gurion is as if, Heaven forbid, he speaks of the Almighty and is banned from the seven firmaments.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

In this article, I discuss, first of all, the historical background to the writing of this letter. Secondly, the letter itself is presented in its entirety, with clarifications and emphases. Thirdly, I discuss the ideological foundation of the writer’s vigorous protest, from his position regarding the messianic concept – based on a normative historical construct of striving for the reestablishment of Jewish sovereignty in *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel) – to his religious affirmation of Zionism as a national liberation movement. Finally, I hope to stimulate a new methodological and historiographical discussion.

1. **Historical background**

At the beginning of the 20th century and following the Second World War, ultra-orthodoxy began to penetrate the Jewish educational system in Morocco. School networks such as *Em Habanim* (Rabbi Zeev Halperin, 1910) and *Otzar HaTorah* (Rabbis Avraham Kalmanovitch and Raphael Akko, 1947) were opened with the aim of challenging the existing educational network. *Kol Yisrael Chaverim*, founded in Morocco in 1862, was, up to that point, the dominant Jewish school network in the country, with the largest number of students and an educational approach that was clearly modern and secular.[[2]](#footnote-2) The *Otzar HaTorah* network took under its wing the *Em Habanim*, which was new to Morocco, and shouldered the responsibility of 10% of school-age Jewish children in Morocco. In the years 1947 to 1962,[[3]](#footnote-3) thousands of exceptional Moroccan students[[4]](#footnote-4) were sent to study in Lithuanian yeshivas in France, England, Israel and the United States, with the encouragement of Otzar HaTorah’s founders, who saw this as a way of rehabilitating and rescuing the Torah and yeshiva world that had been brought to the brink of destruction by the Holocaust. They presented this as ‘an action intended to rescue students from the clutches of the Enlightenment and Zionism,’ to save them from the dangers of modernization[[5]](#footnote-5) and ‘other predatory animals,’ in the words of Rabbi Gershon Liebman, about whom I will say more later.[[6]](#footnote-6) This was a deeply-rooted socio-cultural process that began during the period of the French protectorate in Morocco and shaped Sephardic-Mizrachi religious students as Lithuanian *B’nai Torah*.

In France, the migration of close to 35,000 refugees from Eastern Europe was a significant boost to Lithuanian yeshivas: *Chachmei Tzorfat* *Yeshiva* in Aix-les-Bains, the Pepinière Yeshiva[[7]](#footnote-7) near Versailles, Saint Germain en Laye, and Fublaines, in the eastern suburbs of Paris, which I discuss at greater length later. It is worth noting that the *Chachmei Tzorfat Yeshiva* in Aix-les-Bains and *Or Yosef* in Fublaines struck deeper roots than any other Lithuanian yeshiva in France.

The Lithuanian yeshivas aspired to recruit the cream of Moroccan students – an aspiration that directly conflicted with the interests of the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC, or the Joint).[[8]](#footnote-8) The Joint, a Jewish American organization that invested extensively in building long-term educational-communal infrastructures, stood by helplessly as the most promising students in Morocco were sent away with no intention of returning. Paradoxically, this educational policy, adopted by the heads of Jewish education in Morocco, harmed that education in the long run.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Moroccan Jewry, more than the other North African Jewish communities, was targeted for recruitment by the Lithuanian yeshivas for several reasons: 1) It was the largest Jewish community in North Africa; 2) It was in the worst economic state of all the North African communities; 3) Accordingly, there was a prevalent feeling in this community that their future was shrouded in uncertainty; and, finally, 4) Moroccan Jewry had the reputation of being the most observant, traditional community of the Jewish communities in the French Maghreb (Northwest Africa).

Later on, as part of a general Jewish phenomenon, ultra-orthodox Sephardic Jews made their way to Diaspora communities throughout the world – France, Canada, the United States, and South Africa[[10]](#footnote-10)– where traditional Sephardic customs and ways of learning would be abandoned in favor of a new approach to *halacha*, a new style of dress, and a hostile attitude towards Zionism and the State of Israel.[[11]](#footnote-11) Without a doubt, the establishment of *Shas* (a Sephardic religious political party) in Israel in 1984 served to strengthen this process. However, as mentioned, the roots were planted, *inter alia*, in the events that took place in Morocco several decades previously.

Rabbi Yahya Ben Harosh’s letter notes that his students went to learn in the *Or Yosef Yeshiva* founded by Rabbi Gerson Liebman (1905-1997) in Fublaines. Rabbi Liebman established a yeshiva in France in the style of the Novardok yeshivas, which combined Gemara studies with *mussar* (ethical teachings). After a tortuous journey - from Novardok, via Vilna, the Vilna Ghetto, Bergen Belsen (Nazi concentration camp), and Selsheim near Frankfurt - Rabbi Liebman arrived in France in 1948. There he founded the Or Yosef-Novardok Yeshiva, which grew into a network of close to 40 Novardok institutions[[12]](#footnote-12) open to all ages and both sexes[[13]](#footnote-13) with branches in Morocco and Tunisia. It is estimated that about 1000 Moroccan students attended its schools in the 1950s and 1960s.[[14]](#footnote-14) The ascetic nature that characterized the Or Yosef-Novardok yeshivas and the fact that Yiddish was the language of instruction caused tension and division among the Moroccan students. These factors did not, however, detract from the prestige of the Lithuanian yeshiva in the eyes of the students.

1. **The letter’s content[[15]](#footnote-15)**

It has already been stated that Rabbi Yahya Ben Harosh felt it necessary to remind his students about some fundamental tenets that had developed among the Jews in Morocco from the days of Islamic ascendancy (Dar al-Islam), the period of the *Gaonim* (6th–11th-century Sephardic rabbis) and, especially, after the Spanish Expulsion (1492). These tenets concerned the yearning for the revival of Jewish sovereignty in Eretz Israel,[[16]](#footnote-16) which had diminished since the students joined Or Yosef Yeshiva. It is fascinating to read how Rabbi Ben Harosh applied these traditional tenets to the new reality of the establishment of the young State of Israel.

My dear friends and pleasant, wise and discerning students, […] your brother and admirer sends warm greetings; convey my respects to the Gaon **Rabeinu Gershom**[[17]](#footnote-17) and to his followers *shlita* [title of respect usually given to rabbis]. […] Forgive me for not answering your letters immediately, as *derekh eretz* [courtesy] requires; I was occupied […].

When I received your letters, I was happy and sad,[[18]](#footnote-18) happy that you are diligent in your learning, especially the Talmud, that great sea, source of living waters; there is no water but Torah that gives life to those who find it […] don’t let up and don’t be corrupted, because the generation is lacking.[[19]](#footnote-19)

It grieved me that you spoke ill *[lashon hara*] of the pillars of the Jewish people, as it says in the Torah: ‘You shall not curse a judge, neither shall you curse a prince among your people’ (Ex.22:27). I believe with all my heart that Benjamin Theodore Herzl of blessed memory was a true prophet and that David Ben Gurion and his faction are the redeemers, of whom it is written ‘And David was successful in all his ways; and the Lord was with him’ (I Samuel 18:14). Anyone who denigrates our president, Chaim Weizmann, and David Ben Gurion is as if he speaks of the Almighty and is banned from the seven firmaments, Heaven forbid.

And, what is it to you? Why should you get involved and ask whether they are religious or not? Our sages said, ‘Do not judge your friend until you have stood in his place’ (Avot, 2, 4).[[20]](#footnote-20) You’ve done enough; do not continue to denigrate G-d’s emissary lest you be scorched by hot coals. Bless the Lord and give thanks that He has redeemed us and removed the shame of the nations from us; thanks be to the Holy One in whose hand is all living things, and also to his servants Weizmann and Ben Gurion and others, through whom He desires to redeem and raise the banner of Israel; the Jewish people live and will live forever, Amen.

Take this to heart: whoever is not a Zionist is not Israeli.[[21]](#footnote-21) Have you forgotten the six-and-a-half million murdered by Hitler of cursed name? If so, what do you want - that we will be wiped out and the name of Israel forgotten, Heaven forbid?

I can state with certainty that anyone who speaks ill of our exalted government is none other than of Korach’s faction, who is called evil and whose prayer is considered an abomination; even if he prays extensively, the Holy One will not listen. Our sages of blessed memory said, Issachar was occupied only with the study and practice of Torah, and Zevulun only with trade, dwelling on the seacoast, and each had a part in the other’s portion - in this world and in the world to come. I am astonished that you have not yet studied the *mussar* writings,[[22]](#footnote-22) which are replete with the punishment of one who speaks *lashon hara*, whose sin is too heavy to carry. How you have spoken against the Lord’s emissaries - Weizmann, Herzl and Ben Gurion *shlita*. I, who am young and put on *tefillin* (phylacteries) every day, ask G-d to let my portion be with them; I only wish and hope to be their servant in the next world.

Leave this path that you are on. Be assured that the Lord G-d has raised up Israel’s destiny, in the merit of truly righteous men who have given their lives to sanctify Him, and they are: Herzl of blessed memory, Weizmann, Ben Gurion and their cohorts. About these, it is said: ‘Happy is he who saw their face in a dream,’ holy and pure are they; not only pure but pure of heart - this is said of he who loves his land and his people and does not ask for greatness for himself.

Be among those who have a clear conscience; don’t be counted among the pious fools. This author has many times examined their words and their intentions. Anyone who (in future) slanders any of our leaders, again, will be cast out by the Supreme G-d, the Lord of Hosts.

Rabbi Ben Harosh expresses himself in a particularly sharp manner for what I would call **didactic** purposes.[[23]](#footnote-23) He makes it very clear that his unqualified support of the Zionist leaders and the renewed State of Israel is based on an analysis of the historical and national events, and the ‘righteousness’ of those people is not due to their personal qualities but to their crucial contribution to the fundamental change experienced by the Jewish people in the modern era. Rabbi Ben Harosh purposefully cites laws and Torah principles in order to persuade his students of the magnitude of their error in interpreting events, which they learned from their teachers.

1. **The ideological basis of Rabbi Yahya Ben Harosh’s protest**
2. **The normative messianic concept as reflected in Zionism**

I would like to take a look at the year 1517 – the year the Land of Israel came under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. It was also the period in which western Christianity was divided and weakened, challenged by Lutheranism, Calvinism, and the Anglican Church and the enhanced status of the English monarchy, which showed a strong interest in the Bible and the Land of Israel. In that year, a new era began, laying the foundation for a normative concept of messianism and, as a consequence, for the concept of Zionism in its ideological as well as practical aspects. I would argue that the 16th century set in motion a fundamental process worthy of being the departure point of Zionist historiography. In my view, this argument could focus the research on the history of Zionism and resolve historiographic issues that have animated and continue to animate the research.

The messianic concept, at its source, is none other than a normative historical construct prescribing the revival of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel. A paradigm, which the Rambam (Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon - Maimonides, 1138-1204) proposed in *The Laws and Wars of Kings*, according to which the King-Messiah is a political figure, who, when Jewish sovereignty is reestablished, will act through earthly, rational, concrete ways. The Rambam held in contempt those who understood the Messiah as an abstract, utopian ideal connected to miracles and wonders: ‘Do not think that the King-Messiah needs to perform signs and wonders and new creations in the world, or raise the dead, or other things said by idiots.’[[24]](#footnote-24) The messianic concept, which was a central element throughout Jewish history and the basis of the Jews’ aspirations for redemption as a vector for universal redemption, became more prevalent following the expulsion from Spain in 1492. The collapse of the largest, most glorious Jewish community of the Middle Ages took on a cosmic dimension of Jewish exile and human exile. Soon after, the Jews in the Spanish Diaspora, as well as the Jews in 16th century Safed and *Eretz Israel*, began to interpret these events as ‘the birth pangs of redemption,’ the beginning of the era of redemption in Jewish history. The eminent leader of the exiled Spanish community, Don Yitzhak Abarbanel, who wrote the trilogy *Migdal Yeshuot – Tower of Salvation* (*Mayanei Hayeshua, Yeshuot Meshiho*, and *Matzmiah Yeshua*), together with the great 16th-century Kabbalists (mystics)–R. Luria Ashkenazi, R. Haim Vital, R. Shlomo Alkabetz, R. Yosef Caro, and R. Menashe Ben Yisrael–brought hope and strength to face the crisis of the Spanish Expulsion. Events in the 16th century deriving from the attachment to *Eretz Yisrael* in the Diaspora, as well as in *Eretz Yisrael* itself, were seen as a renaissance and rehabilitation of the Jewish nation. They confirmed and validated the perception that Jewish sovereignty was being reestablished and the normative messianic concept was being realized. A flurry of activities in a variety of spheres resulted: **Political-military actions**–aiming for a military conquest of the land (David Hareuveni and Shlomo Malkho); **settlement activity**–immigrating and settling the land (Don Yosef Nasi and Doña Gracia); fortifying cities in *Eretz Yisrael* by building walls around them (Avraham Kastro in Jerusalem and Don Yosef Nasi in Tiberias); **political-economic activity**–the Ankara boycott (Doña Gracia), the Safed weaving and Tiberias silk industries, and the lower Galilee tourist industry; **the revival of the Hebrew language** in administration, education and religious literature and Hebrew printing that spread the writings of Safed and *Eretz Yisrael*, including the poetry of R. Shlomo Alkabetz and Yisrael Najara throughout the Jewish Diaspora; **political-messianic-legislative activity** in the form of the renewal of the Sanhedrin and of *semikha* (rabbinic ordination), together with national halachic codification in the form of the *Shulhan Arukh* (Rabbis Yaakov Berab and Yosef Karo). Pride of place was given to the ten tribes, which were added to the vision of redemption and to the future Sanhedrin. And finally, a minor ‘ingathering of the exiles’ took place, as Jews made *aliya* (immigrated to *Eretz Yisrael*) from Spain, the Ottoman Empire, North Africa, Italy and Germany,[[25]](#footnote-25) while, from the Netherlands to Poland, the Jewish liturgy was profoundly influenced by the magnetic pull that the *Eretz Yisrael* communities have always exerted on the Jewish Diaspora. The messianic concept at the base of all these activities was not an abstract, philosophical, meta-historical ideal but rather a practical, operative, and historical concept.[[26]](#footnote-26)

During the 19th century, the Zionist enterprise, which aimed to reestablish Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel, adopted, as a matter of course, all of the elements of the 16th century: sovereignty and conquest of the land, settlement, ingathering of the exiles, the work ethic, and the Hebrew language. Indeed, in the 19th century, the views of Marco Yoseph Baruch and Rabbi Dr. Yehuda Bibas, Zionist leaders in the Sephardic Diaspora and Muslim countries, dovetailed naturally and directly with the 16th-century vision of Jewish revival in *Eretz Yisrael*. They believed that this was the way to realize the basic messianic concept, and they saw Zionism as a modern phenomenon deeply connected to ancient traditions.[[27]](#footnote-27)

* 1. **Continuity and disconnection in the Diaspora communities between the normative messianic concept and Zionism**

The real reason for the essential difference between the Sephardi and Ashkenazi Diaspora communities was the Sephardi emphasis on studying the Bible and Kabbala, as opposed to the Ashkenazi emphasis on the Oral Tradition (the Talmud), throughout the period under discussion. Bible and Kabbala studies in their spiritual and educational orientation shape an identity of aspiration and anticipation of the redemption of the Jewish people and the entire human race. The difference between the Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities is apparent in the way they related to four parameters of continuity and disconnection between the 16th and the 19th centuries: 1) the crisis caused by Shabtai Zvi; 2) the shaping of Jewish identity; 3) attitudes towards the Three Oaths; and 4) attitudes towards the concept of *Mashiah Ben Yosef* (Messiah son of Joseph). I will attempt to show that, throughout the period, in contrast to the Ashkenazi Jews, the Sephardic communities maintained the link between the messianic concept and Zionism.[[28]](#footnote-28)

* 1. **The Sabbatean crisis**

Shabtai Zvi’s conversion to Islam in 1666 shocked the Jewish world and led most of his followers to abandon faith in him. The betrayal of the [self-proclaimed] Messiah left many in despair, and thousands of Jews converted to Christianity or to Islam. As the shock waves receded, Jews in the various Diaspora communities began to adopt diametrically opposed views concerning the concept of the Messiah. The crisis became a watershed in modern Jewish history. In general, because of the importance of the normative messianic concept as a central element of national identity, the Sephardic communities adopted a position that called for rehabilitating and redefining the messianic concept, following the Biblical meaning ­as a historical, political and earthly concept. In contrast, in Ashkenazi communities, the mainstream wanted to erase all memory of the shameful subject. Community records were destroyed or obliterated, and it was forbidden to mention the name of Shabtai Zvi. In order to prevent another case in which a person would declare himself to be the Messiah, the Committee of the Four Countries in Eastern Europe imposed restrictions on the study of the Kabbala; only those who were proficient in Talmud and *halacha* were permitted to study this mystical branch of knowledge, to protect Jews from being led astray. As a rule, the subject of Messiah was postponed to ‘the End of Days’ and ceased to be a concrete concept due to the terror felt by the Ashkenazi Jews that another false messiah would make an appearance. This very real anxiety created a ‘model of division’ that was at the heart of the intrinsic dichotomy that characterized Jewish society in the Ashkenazi communities in the modern era: secular vs. religious; the Hassidic movement vs. the *Misnagdim*; orthodoxy, neo-orthodoxy and ultra-orthodoxy vs. ‘enlightenment,’ reform and the Conservative Movement; tradition vs. modernity. This divided, dichotomist world would apply also to the conflict between Zionism and anti-Zionism. Indeed, the anti-Zionist worldview was born in the religious, Ashkenazi context. In order for Zionism to flourish in the Ashkenazi Diaspora, it had to rebel against the religious norm. This was not the case in the Sephardic Diaspora. In the Sephardic communities, the Sabbatean crisis did not put an end to the continuum of the normative messianic idea of the 16th century and the attraction to Zion of the 17th & 18th centuries, on the one hand, and the Zionism of the 19th & 20th centuries, on the other.

* 1. **Shaping of Jewish identity in different Diaspora communities**

While in Christian countries, Jewish identity was on the defensive, as Christianity professed to be *Verus Israel*–the true Israel–and proclaimed that the Messiah had already come, in Muslim countries, the Jews had no problem with national identification since Islam was more of a threat to the status of the Jews than to their identity. While Judaism was perceived by the Jews living in Christian countries as a religion, or as an ancient religious community, in Muslim countries, the Jews saw themselves as a nation. Accordingly, the Jews living in Muslim countries continued to anticipate the Messiah, as they always had. Furthermore, the Sephardic Jews were not put off by secular Zionism, which was compatible with their emphasis on the reestablishment of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel.[[29]](#footnote-29)

* 1. **The Three Oaths**

According to ‘the Three Oaths,’ Jews were forbidden to take the initiative and immigrate to *Eretz Yisrael* ‘like a wall’ (i.e., en masse or against the will of the nations), thereby ‘forcing the end.’ However, none of the great legal authorities (*poskim*) stated that this was *halacha* (law) – neither Rabbi Yitzhak Ben Yaakov Alfasi (the *Rif*) nor the Rambam, nor Rabbeinu Asher, nor his son, nor Rabbi Yaakov Ben Asher, nor Rabbi Yosef Caro. It is not even hinted at in the discussion on the issue by the early sages in Tractate *Ketubot* – not by the Ramban (Rabbi Moshe Ben Nachman - Nachmanides), or Yom Tov Ben Abraham of Seville, or Menachem ‘Hameiri’ in France. Also, Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Ben Yitzhak, the great medieval commentator in France), in his commentary on Canticles –the Song of Songs– does not mention the three oaths. Rabbi Zera [a student of Rabbi Yehuda in Babylon, who taught that the oaths prohibited *aliya*] changed his views when he immigrated to *Eretz Yisrael*, as told by Rabbi Mordechai Atiya (1895-1978) in his booklet, *The Secret of the Oath*. According to Atiya, Rabbi Yohanan and other sages in *Eretz Yisrael* taught that it is [not only allowed but] obligatory to immigrate to *Eretz Yisrael* “like a wall,” i.e., en masse.[[30]](#footnote-30) Among the Sephardic Jews, the three oaths were not considered an obstacle at all during any period. In contrast, the three oaths continued to deter the ultra-orthodox community leaders in Europe from immigrating to *Eretz Yisrael*. They were not moved by the words of Rabbi Meir Simcha HaCohen of Dvinsk, author of *Meshekh Hokhma*, following the 1920 San Remo Conference, who stated, ‘The fear of the oaths has been removed and, with the permission of the monarchs, the mitzvah (commandment) of settling the land, which is equal to all the mitzvahs in the Torah, has returned.’[[31]](#footnote-31)

* 1. **Mashiah Ben Yosef**

Israel’s revival (*komemiyut*) is a gradual, dialectic process comprising two stages, one built upon the other.[[32]](#footnote-32) Both stages have independent vitality and ‘equality’ from a historical perspective. Indeed, *Mashiah Ben Yosef* (the Messiah son of Joseph) precedes *Mashiah Ben David* (the Messiah son of David), not because it is secondary in importance to the era that follows; rather, because of the nature of the development and essence of the process of national revival. *Mashiah Ben Yosef* is an era in which the earthly, sovereign, administrative, military, economic and institutional messianic entity will be built, whereas *Mashiah Ben David* is a spiritual era in which the Hebrew identity becomes complete and encompassing, with universal validity. For the Jews living in Europe, under the religious influence of Christianity, messianism became part of the hidden knowledge. This was the result of a decision made by Ashkenazi sages to stop teaching the subject in order to prevent confusion between the Christian concept of messianism and the Jewish one. In contrast, for the Jews in Muslim countries, the study of messianism was part of the revealed knowledge. The result was that, in Christian countries, *Mashiah Ben Yosef* was quickly forgotten, whereas, in Muslim countries, it was understood that the abovementioned gradual process should and would take place.

Rabbi Kook, in his eulogy of Herzl in July 1904, expounded a ‘great *hidush* (new interpretation)’ for the Ashkenazi Diaspora, an idea that had been included in the Sephardic prayers for many years. Rabbi Kook spoke of *Mashiah Ben Yosef*, alluding to Herzl’s activities as laying the physical foundation for Israel’s renewed sovereignty (*komemiyut*).[[33]](#footnote-33)

All of this served as the source and inspiration for Rabbi Ben Harosh’s position regarding Israel’s revival, in all of its shades of complexity. Rabbi Ben Harosh focuses on the national aspiration and its realization as obligatory and, at this point, does not enter into controversial issues.

1. **Religious affirmation of Zionism as a national liberation movement**

Rabbi Yahya Ben Harosh shared the position of the majority of rabbis in the Muslim world who viewed the Zionist movement, despite its secularity, as necessary and supported it for religious reasons. By and large, the establishment of the State of Israel was seen as the fulfillment of prophetic vision and, at the very least, the achievement of national objectives, which have religious value.[[34]](#footnote-34)

1. **Window to a renewed methodological and historiographic discussion**

Rabbi Ben Harosh’s letter invites a multi-layered, direct confrontation between the two main Jewish Diasporas in the modern era and opens a new methodological and historiographical window to Jewish history – in the complex period of Holocaust and revival.

Engraved in the minds of graduates of the Israeli educational system is the strict distinction made between the terms ‘attachment to Zion’ and ‘Zionism’ – a dichotomous terminology employed in academic research for many years. Gershom Scholem and Benzion Dinur set the standard for the historiography of Zionism. Both chose to ignore the 16th century: in their view, the starting point of the Zionist enterprise was the 17th century, featuring the Sabbatean crisis and its consequences, on the one hand, and the aliya (immigration to *Eretz Yisrael*) of Rabbi Yehuda the Hassid (1700), on the other. Dinur was more moderate than Scholem, arguing that Zionism was not a clean break with Jewish history but rather a complete realization of Jewish history. In his view, Zionism was an original expression of an ancient national consciousness, the natural and necessary consequence of Jewish history. However, he did not address the 16th century, although he should have. In contrast, Gershom Scholem believed that the Sabbatean debacle allowed for a process of secularization, and for modern movements –the Enlightenment and the Reform Movement– to infiltrate traditional Jewish society. Secular ideologies followed, such as socialism, Communism, and Zionism, which could not have taken root in Jewish society if the walls of the spiritual ghetto had not been breached in the days of Shabtai Zvi. Zionist historiography portrayed Zionism as a Diaspora revolution founded on ‘crisis consciousness.’ In addition, while the ‘attachment to Zion’ characterized a traditional, passive worldview, ‘Zionism’ constituted rebellion against tradition that resulted in activism. Is this true? Not among the Sephardic Jews, but it seems to be the case in the Ashkenazi communities, where a sharp sociological schism developed between tradition and crisis, in the words of Yaakov Katz. Zionist historiography is consistent in its desire to stress change, fracture, and revolution, as opposed to continuity, continuum, and development. Furthermore, it attempts to differentiate between messianic aliya (immigration) with the goal of redeeming and being redeemed, and Zionist aliya with the goal of building and being built. I contend that the messianic concept, at least as it is perceived by the Sephardic Diaspora, the symbiosis between ‘to redeem and be redeemed’ and ‘to build and to be built,’ is natural and organic, and the distinction between them is artificial. [[35]](#footnote-35)

The ‘attachment to Zion’ is none other than that same longing for the revival of Israeli sovereignty. While the Sephardic Diaspora was steeped in organic consciousness, characterized by continuity, continuum, and development, in the Ashkenazi Diaspora, a crisis consciousness was formulated that eventually influenced the historiography of Zionist history characterized by schisms, splits and built-in dichotomies. For instance, the following word pairs: attachment to Zion vs. Zionism; the old Yishuv (referring to the traditionalist communities existing in *Eretz Yisrael* before the secular Zionists arrived in the late 1800s) vs. the new Yishuv; the Holy Land vs. the Land of Israel.

The Sabbatean syndrome seeped into academic research, blurring the distinction between the normative messianic concept of the 16th century and the chaotic and apocalyptic one of the 17th century, manipulatively distorting the normative messianic concept and giving preference to a chaotic narrative over the normative one. Research was given political clout, ridiculing certain researchers as ‘messianic’ while cultivating ‘messianism-free’ historical theories, leading to the ‘normalization’ of history. Israeli academic research is characterized by a dialectical and paradoxical approach: on the one hand, it views messianism as a mythological, allegorical, abstract and metaphysical phenomenon, while, on the other hand, it normalizes the concept of Zionism in its secular form, removing any hint of redemptive inspiration. Thus, academic research attempts to blur the dualism of messianism –normative vs. chaotic– and normalize Zionist history and present Zionism as just one of many national liberation movements in the modern era.

I would like to challenge the ‘crisis historiography’ that has dominated Zionist historiography until now and examine the roots of Zionism in the Sephardic Diaspora communities. The purpose of Zionist historiography in disconnecting the 16th century from the 19th century is to take credit for *Shivat Zion* –the great return-to-Zion movement that began in the 16th century, the century that announced a new era in Israel’s history. It wants to take exclusive credit for national activism and to ‘normalize’ history, leaving out any element of redemption. This explains the historiographical dispute taking place in recent decades among historians concerning messianism and the history of the Jewish Yishuv in *Eretz Yisrael* in the modern era.[[36]](#footnote-36) Nineteenth-century Zionism is none other than a stage in the abovementioned process, a reflection of the normative messianic concept, declaring a monopoly on the entire intellectual process. The unprecedented success of Zionism distracts from the shades and stages of the process of its development. Historical research has ignored the stages that preceded Zionism by many years, which nonetheless contained the elements of the Zionist endeavor: spiritual foundations, conquest and settlement of the land, and nationalist legislation.

I would like to stress that the wellsprings of traditional Jewish wisdom were ever, and still are, the source from which Zionism was nourished,[[37]](#footnote-37) and it is inaccurate to settle for the triple paradigm that supposedly shaped Zionism exclusively: the Emancipation/secularization, antisemitism, and modern nationalism. This paradigm is correct concerning the communities in Christian countries but less relevant in the Jewish communities in Muslim countries. At the end of the 19th century, these were the immediate factors that shaped the national ethos of Zionism in the Christian countries in eastern, central and western Europe. However, the deep roots that led to the birth of Zionism were always the cultural roots. The Zionism nourished by the messianic concept embodies the aspiration for its destined land, which also has a universal destiny. Also, the Zionism that arose from pogroms and crises, which aspired to a land of refuge and an answer to existential distress, was nourished by cultural roots. The essential difference between the approaches discussed above concerns the quality and the motivations of the Zionism that developed in the different Diasporas.

Furthermore, it should be noted that Jewish nationalism preceded modern European nationalism, having its origins in the Biblical period–nationalism that confronted and challenged the imperialist regimes of the Ancient Near East. Essentially, Jewish nationalism is rooted in the Biblical period, in which the Israelite nation lived as the ‘first true nation,’ in the words of Adrian Hastings.[[38]](#footnote-38) In the same vein, Gershom Scholem saw in Zionism and Hassidism, dialectically and paradoxically, a reflection of ‘Shabtaism’ and, in this respect, drew from the wealth of Jewish wisdom independent of European nationalism. He saw in mysticism the national power of Judaism and, in Zionism, the factor that added a political aspect to Diaspora mysticism.

In contrast, recently, there has been some movement away from the dominant theme of ‘crisis historiography’ towards a minor tone of ‘organic historiography,’ certainly regarding Zionism in the Sephardic Diaspora: Prof. Alon Gal describes it as ‘a movement of national continuity rooted in Jewish civilization and the cultural-political Jewish tradition,’ as well as ‘the Zionism of tradition, continuum and rebirth with a high Zionist potential.’[[39]](#footnote-39) In the same vein, in the title of his research study, Dr. Yitzhak Bezalel quotes Nahum Sokolov, who said to the Sephardic Jews in *Eretz Yisrael*: ‘We became Zionists, and you were born Zionists.’[[40]](#footnote-40) I’d like to mention the last book written by historian Yaakov Katz, in which he follows Jewish communities in Christian countries from the Middle Ages up to contemporary times. The methodology of his historical study of dispersed Jewish communities is worthy of attention. Just as Katz examined and focused on the development of two ongoing phenomena –the tension between the Jews and the Christian nations and the Jewish attempt to preserve and maintain its collective identity– likewise, the development of the messianic concept over 500 years in different Diaspora communities should be studied. Just like Katz, who saw in these two phenomena the historical roots of both the Holocaust and the rebirth of Israel, so too must we examine the roots and the factors that shaped the attitudes of the different Diaspora communities towards Israel’s rebirth.[[41]](#footnote-41)

In summary, Rabbi Yahya Ben Harosh’s stimulating letter is not an isolated event but rather evidence of deep processes, sometimes intersecting and sometimes coming into conflict. More historical research is needed for a deeper understanding of the dialectical tension in these processes.

1. Rabbi Haim Amsellem, *Reah Nihuah (Sweet Savor),* a collection of documents and articles from the archives of Rabbi Yahya Ben Harosh, Av Beit Din (Head of religious court) in Morocco, including writings dealing with conversion issues entitled ‘The converts of Kenitra’ (Jerusalem, 2017), pp. 92-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Michael Lasker, “Jewish Education in Morocco,” *Paamim* 9, 1980-1, pp. 78-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Already in 1945, students from Morocco began arriving at the *Chachmei Tzorfat Yeshiva* in Aix-les-Bains, the first yeshiva to be established after the Holocaust, due to the efforts of Rabbi Chaim Yitzchok Chaikin (1907-1993), aided by Rabbi Yedidya Monsonego, rabbi of Fez. The yeshiva combined religious and secular studies, as mandated by the government of France. The great wave of students who left Morocco for Europe and the United States began in 1947, urged on by Rabbi Avraham Kalmanovitz, Head of Mir Yeshiva in New York. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dr. Jacob Loupo estimates that the number of students was 3,000 - 4,000. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jacob Loupo, ‘The rescue of Moroccan Jewry for Torah’ - –sending students from Morocco to Lithuanian yeshivas after the Holocaust, *Paamim* 80, 1999, pp. 112-128; Loupo, *Shas of Lithuania* -– the Lithuanian takeover of b’nei Torah (religious students) from Morocco, (Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2004): Loupo argues that beyond the ethnic group crisis in modern Israeli society, *Shas* (a Sephardic political party) was born out of those days of the Lithuanian ‘takeover’,takeover,’ in his words, at the beginning of the 20th century. He claims that ‘Jerusalem of Lithuania’ took over ‘Jerusalem of the West’West (Meknes, a city in Morocco).' [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Loupo, ‘The rescue of Moroccan Jewry for Torah,’ p. 116. Liebman is referring to the Alliance Israélite Universelle, the liberal camp in Eretz Yisrael, the kibbutzim, the youth aliya - –all of which he perceived as ‘spiritual annihilation’, ‘destruction’, ‘loss’, ‘incitement’,annihilation,’ ‘destruction,’ ‘loss,’ ‘incitement,’ etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Rosh Yeshiva was Rabbi Yitzhak Bezalel Orlansky; the students came from the Slabodka, Telshe and Mir Yeshivas. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Represented by Stanley Abramowitz, appointed by the JDC to be in charge of Jewish education in Morocco during the 1950s and 1960s. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Loupo, ‘The rescue of Moroccan Jewry for Torah,’ p.117 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Ponevezh and Slabodka yeshivas in B’nei Brak and the Porat Yosef yeshiva in Jerusalem were involved in this broad, ongoing process, especially after Morocco became independent, up to the 1960s. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jacob Loupo, *Comment des Séfarades sont devenus Ashkénazes*, (Harmattan, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Beit Yosef Yeshiva, Gateshead, England, is considered a branch of the French yeshiva. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Immanuel Etkes and Shlomo Tikochinski, ed., *Memories of the Lithuanian Yeshiva*, (Zalman Shazar Center and the Dinur Center, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Loupo, ‘The rescue of Moroccan Jewry for Torah,’ p.124 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. With thanks to Rabbi Haim Amsellem for permission to use the rabbi’s picture and reproduction of the original letter. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. From ‘lead us speedily to sovereignty in our land’ (from the liturgy and the blessings after a meal) to Yehuda Halevy’s poems התייצבי אל ארץ הצבי"” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Emphasized in original, hinting that Rabbi Gershon Liebman is no less important than Rabbeinu Gershom, who is called the light of the exile. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This ambivalence is reminiscent of the attitude of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook (the RAYAH) towards the founding of the Hebrew University. R. Kook quoted Isaiah: ‘”Then you shall see and be radiant, and your heart shall be startled and become enlarged.”’ The opening of a Hebrew college in Jerusalem, on Mt. Scopus, with such a glorious ceremony, a festive event full of radiance, where thousands and tens of thousands of our sons and daughters are gathered together from all corners of Eretz Yisrael and the Diaspora, presents us with the holy prophetic vision come to life, in a small way […] and that, my beloved, is a reason to fear.’ (See *The Writings of the RAYAH*, Part 2, (Jerusalem, שדמ"ת? if the date is backwards, then it’s 1984), pp. 306-308. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Rabbi Ben Harosh is certainly aware of the enormous upheaval in the Torah world caused by the Holocaust. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Here R. Ben Harosh shows his awareness of the radical changes that occurred in the Ashkenazi communities in the modern era. See below. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. This is similar to a saying of Rabbi Y.L. Ashkenazi (‘Manitou’). Zécharia Zermati, *Une Kabbale de Vérité*, (Jérusalem, 2002), p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Here the author is referring to the moral, ethical teachings of Novardok Yeshiva [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. R. Ben Harosh’s rhetoric seems at times naïve, even idealistic. This allows him to make strong arguments and, at the same time, to undermine the arguments that his students learned in Novardok against Zionism and against the establishment of the State of Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Chapter 11, Law 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The Jewish population in Eretz Yisrael in the mid-1500s stood at 10,000, out of a total population of 300,000. See: Minna Rozen, ‘The Story of the Jewish Yishuv,’ Amnon Cohen, ed., *The History of the Land of Israel* under *Mamluk and Ottoman Rule (1204-1804*), Vol. 7 (Yad Yitzhak Ben Zvi, Keter Publ., 1980) , pp. 201-217; Yosef Hacker, ‘The attachment and aliya/immigration of the Spanish Jews to the Land of Israel,’ *Katedra* 36, 1984, pp. 3-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Nahon Gérard, *La Terre Sainte au Temps des Kabbalistes*, (Albin Michel, 1997), pp. 79-93, 137-152, 155-167, 169-172. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. In this context, it is interesting to note the comments of Mordechai Breuer, which reinforce my position: ‘In the history of the yeshivas - –and, it could be said, in other aspects of Jewish history -– the 16th century can be seen as the beginning of the new era. Centers of Torah proliferated in areas in which they had not been consistently active, and the yeshiva was perceived in a new light, in its form as well as its style of learning. In this century, the number of yeshivas in Eretz Yisrael increased, […] that is to say, in Jerusalem and in Safed. And this phenomenon was part of the yeshiva movement that appeared among the Spanish exiles in the countries of the Ottoman Empire in which they found refuge. With every wave of immigration to Israel, more yeshivas and study halls were opened, especially after the Ottoman conquest (c.1517), due to the ideal of learning Torah “in holiness and purity” in the Holy Land, which was a strong factor in the desire to make aliya and settle the land.’ (See: Mordechai Breuer, *Ohalei Torah - The yeshiva, its form and history* (Jerusalem:, the Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2003), pp. 38-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See my article, to be published in a collection of studies of Portuguese Jewry: ‘From Doña Gracia to Marco Yosef Barukh - from the normative messianic concept to Zionism.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Batnitzky Leora, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought*, (Princeton University Press, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. ‘Rabbi Yohanan quoted The Holy One Blessed be He: ‘I will not enter the heavenly Jerusalem until I have entered the earthly Jerusalem.’ Rabbi Elazar (a student of Rabbi Yohanan) commented on this: ‘The Holy One Blessed be He said to Israel, “If you fulfill the oath, well and good; but if not, I will allow your flesh [to be devoured] like [that of] the gazelles and the hinds of the field”’ (Tractate Taanit, Amud 5:71). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. According to Rabbi Mordechai Atiya, this is a reference to the Holocaust. See Mordechai Atiya, *The Secret of the Oath*, (Jerusalem, 1964), pp. 15-20; See also Abraham Livni, *The Return of Israel and the Hope of the World*, (Jerusalem, 1995), p. 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. The verse ‘and led you upright (*komemiyut*)’ [after G-d freed the Hebrew slaves in Egypt] hints at these two stages. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Yossef Charvit; Hebraism and Beyond: An Intellectual Portrait of a Spiritual Leader in a Revolutionary Era Rabbi Yéhouda Léon Askénazi (Manitou), (Idra, 2018), pp. 237-268. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Zvi Zohar, ‘Zionism and the State of Israel as viewed by leading Sephardic-Oriental rabbis,’ in *On Both Sides of the Bridge: Religion and State in the Early Years of Israel*, ed. Mordechai Bar On and Zvi Zameret (Jerusalem, Yad Yitzhak Ben Zvi, 2002), pp. 320-349; Zohar, ‘Religious Affirmation of Zionism as a National Liberation Movement: Aspects of the Thought of Rabbi Khalfon Moshe Hacohen,’ in *Israel* Issue 2, 2002, pp. 107-125; Shalom Razbi, ‘Religious Thinkers on the Secular State,’ in *Studies in the Rebirth of Israel*, Vol.11, 2001, pp. 1-26. [in English: *Israel Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2008, Indiana University Press, pp. 114-136] <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30245834>. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Mor Altschuler, ‘Against all Odds: on the debate between Ben-Zion Dinur and Gershom Scholem on the question of messianism in the beginning of Hassidism,’ in *Gershom Scholem (1897-1982) in memoriam, Vol. 1,* ed. Yosef Dan (Jerusalem, Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought, Vol. 20, 2006), pp. 1-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. ‘The activism of the messianic immigrant movements also demonstrates that, long before the advent of modern Zionism, Jews did not limit themselves to spiritual yearning and symbolic remembrance of the land of Israel. Inspired by messianic anticipation, many Jews regarded a return to the Promised Land as a practical goal.  […] during the sixth millennium, the land of Israel was no longer an abstract, inaccessible ideal; no longer only a subject of dreams, whose name was mentioned mainly in prayers. It was a real place, absorbing waves of Jewish immigrants from many countries, sustaining a fully fledged Jewish community that preserved its unique identity throughout the generations. […] the deep longing for their ancestral homeland and the profound faith in the possibility of national redemption, which ultimately drove the waves of Jewish immigration to Palestine in the sixth millennium, were also at the heart of the Zionist return. The widespread belief in the Jewish right to the land of Israel, the Zionist vision of the spiritual and physical redemption of the land, and the immense efforts of so many Jews to turn the dream into reality, could never have taken root without these prior beliefs. In this sense at least, one may see the period of messianic immigration to the land of Israel and the Zionist revolution as milestones on the same historical path, different chapters in an ongoing national story.’ Arie Morgenstern, ‘Dispersion and the longing for Zion, 1240–1840’ (*Azure* Vol. 12, 2002), pp. 89–90. Contrary to this view, Ysrael Bartal argues that Morgenstern attributed a powerful messianic anticipation to the Jews who immigrated before 1839, whereas, in fact, their messianic belief was the traditional one of going to Israel to die and to thus merit resurrection of the dead. See: Yisrael Bartal, *Diaspora in Israel – Settlement in the Land of Israel before Zionism* (Jerusalem, the Zionist Library, 1994), p. 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Yitzhak Conforti, *Shaping a Nation - –Cultural Origins of Zionism 1882-1948*, (Jerusalem, Yad Yitzhak Ben Zvi, 2019); Yitshak Weisz, *Theodor Herzl -– a New Reading* (French 2006; Hebrew, Yidiot Ahronot- Sifrei Hemed, 2008; English, Gefen, 2013); Assaf Malach, ‘Herzl’s Theology: a New Reading of *Altneuland*,’ *Katedra* 171, 2019, pp. 49-74; ibid., *From the Bible to the Jewish State -– the Cycles of Jewish Nationalism and the Israeli Polemic* (Yediot Sefarim, 2019) [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood -– Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*. (Jerusalem, publ. Shalem, 2008); [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Introduction by Prof. Alon Gal. See: *World Regional Zionism*, Vol. 2, ed. Alon Gal ( Zalman Shazar Center, Ben Gurion University, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Yitzhak Bezalel, *You were born Zionists - The Sephardim in Eretz Yisrael in Zionism and the Hebrew revival during the Ottoman period* (Yad Yitshak Ben Zvi, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Katz*, A Time for Inquiry, a Time for Reflection*, Zalman Shazar Center, 1998 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)