**Chapter Forty**

**Half Dust; Half Heaven**

Jewish history spans millennia, stretching from antiquity to our present day. In the biblical period, the nation’s national and religious character was shaped in the Land of Israel; later, the Jewish people began to be dispersed throughout the world – first in the Near East, then throughout Christian and Islamic lands, and eventually across the entire globe. In regions where the Jews had close contact with diverse linguistic and cultural influences, their lack of political sovereignty exposed them to persecution and oppression. Nevertheless, and despite their dispersion and the many influences and pressures exerted upon them, the Jewish people continued to endure as a religious and national entity.

The national survival of the Jewish people is manifest in their enduring recognition of their ancient origins and their shared historical destiny. Their unbroken preservation of the Hebrew language, their shared memory of the Land of Israel, and their common dreams of a messianic redemption were the cornerstones underpinning the continuity of the Jewish national experience. Throughout history, national cooperation facilitated ties between the Jewish communities and fostered mutual recognition and influence – despite their diverse social, cultural, and traditional structures.

This was true in the Second Temple Era, when different Jewish diasporas maintained contact with each other and at the turn of the first millennium, when the Jews in the Land of Israel, Babylon, and Europe kept close ties. It was evident later, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in the correspondence between the Tosafists and the Torah centers of Germany, France, and Spain and after that, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in the extensive trade relations between the various Jewish communities lying between Turkey and England. This sense of national connectedness also fueled acts of mutual assistance: the aid provided by the Jews of Rome for the Jews of the Land of Israel in their time of crisis; the intricate charity systems developed in Mediterranean Jewish society during the Middle Ages; the absorption of the Spanish exiles by the Jewish diasporas in the Ottoman Empire; the activity of Dona Gracia Nasi on behalf of Jews in crisis; the sense of obligation felt by the communities to redeem their brethren imprisoned during the Khmelnitsky pogroms (a sense of obligation that derived from a long, multi-generation history of redeeming Jewish captives); the willingness of court Jews to intercede on behalf of their brethren, and, in the modern period, the international relief efforts organized on behalf of the Jews of Damascus following the blood libel of 1840; the creation of organizations dedicated to providing aid for Jews worldwide; and finally, American Jewry’s support of the fledgling State of Israel as well as its fervent struggle on behalf of Soviet Jewry trapped behind the Iron Curtain. There were always walls and tensions that separated different Jewish communities from each other. However, the basic sense of national cooperation was never undermined

The religious survival of the Jewish people is manifest in its enduring loyalty to the Torah, the source of its faith and the foundation of its life – a system that offers its own internal frame-of-time (the Jewish calendar year) and its own behavioral framework comprised of commandments, customs, traditions, and various holy objects. As a source of faith, the Jewish Torah served as the foundation for the rich and impressively sophisticated cultural accomplishments of the Jewish people. Over the centuries, they fostered prophets and priests, Sadducees, pharisees and zealots; ascetics and hermits, Jews impacted by the culture of Hellenism and Jews who lived on the boundaries between a nascent Christianity and the Jewish faith of old. There were teachers of halakhah and writers of liturgical poetry. Geonim and theologians, kabbalists, rabbis, and conversos; hasidim, misnagdim, and maskilim, philosophers and writers and modern poets as well. All of them gave expression to the many facets of Jewish culture, a culture more often than not witness to internal contradictions, disputes, divisions and, of course, an enduring gap between idealistic aspirations and human reality. And despite all of this diversity, the religious life of the Jews embodied components that created a framework for continuity and endurance. These elements included the view of Scripture as the starting point for Jewish faith and life; the deep connection to the world of Halakhah which shaped the contours of individual, family, communal, and national life; the existence of stable religious institutions – such as the synagogue and the study hall – and an enduring commitment to Torah study.

These two aspects of the Jewish experience, religious and national, were closely entwined with each other with no differentiation. The national dimensions of the nation’s life (the basic sense of fraternity between the members of *Klal Yisrael*, the Jewish collective, the shared language, the attitude towards the Land of Israel, and the hope of redemption) were given expression in religion. Conversely, the religion required a specific people to perpetuate and preserve it. This combination molded the Jews into a single people, a people with its own life and creativity, all hanging from an unbroken historical chain.

In the modern era, this sense of cooperation was questioned. It even became the bone of bitter contention between different Jewish sects. We cannot in this context discuss the varying approaches of all the denominations and ideologies that emerged in the modern period to the question of the relationship between the Jewish nation and the Jewish religion. Therefore, we will have to make do with mentioning the views of the three trends that emerged in the nineteenth century and which continue to encompass the vast majority of world Jewry today (unlike, for example, now defunct movements such as the autonomists and the large Jewish labor movements).

Jews who sought to integrate into the modern, liberal nation states in which they resided, were already claiming in the nineteenth century that Judaism is only a religion, and perhaps only a culture or a folklore. As far as their national identities were concerned, they sought to join the ranks of the nation-states in which they lived.

Conversely, some of the secular leaders of the Zionist movement – headed by Theodor Herzl, a Jew who was very far from traditional Jewish culture and from the Hebrew language – maintained that Jewish identity is national, not religious. Some of these secularists believed that the only way for the Jews to survive the modern period was through the establishment of a free Jewish nation-state.

Haredi Judaism did not deny the national component of Jewish existence. However, many of its members objected to the establishment of a Jewish nation-state. They based this objection on two arguments: 1) the state would be secular and would aspire to secularize those who were still religious; 2) the Jewish People cannot take redemption into their own hands.

These different views seem to be radically at odds with each other. However, already at the beginning of the twentieth century, and certainly after the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel, Jews began to understand that divorcing the national and religious facets of Judaism from each other was not desirable – and perhaps not even possible.

Liberal and Reform Jews in the Diaspora admitted already in the early 19th century that Jewish life has a national component. We have already seen how, after the foundation of Israel, some Reform Jews drew closer to Zionism and the Jewish state.

In the first half of the twentieth century, there was certainly opposition to Zionism in Haredi circles – a phenomenon that continues in one form or another until today. Nevertheless, and as mentioned above, sweeping generalizations about Haredi stances tend to miss their mark. Ever since the first days of Zionism, from the Balfour Declaration until the eve of the Holocaust, there were rabbis and hasidic leaders who supported immigration to the Land of Israel and who cooperated in different ways with the Zionist project. In the first years after Israel’s establishment, it was not unheard of to find Haredi Jews – from heads of yeshivas to laypeople – who saw no contradiction between their Haredism and their proud Zionism. Regardless, Haredism in Israel was rebuilt after the Holocaust and cooperation and shared destiny between Haredim and Zionists is part of the reality of Israel today.

As for religious non-Haredi Jews: we have already seen how the religious Jews in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean Basin were quick to forge a strong connection with the Western-secular notion of nationalism. Herzl was admired by many religious Jews (even if his approach to them showed that he did not always understand them). Throughout Zionist history, religious organizations actively participated in building the Yishuv and the State of Israel.

Furthermore, the Zionist movement could count among its ranks figures who were hardly disconnected from their Jewish heritage: Ahad Haam, Hayim Nahman Bialik, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, Martin Buber, A.D. Gordon, Berl Katznelson, Gershom Scholem, Yehezkel Kaufman. These figures – and many others – all tried in their own way (sometimes coupled with a criticism of Herzl’s secularism) to offer a modern nationalistic interpretation of their biblical heritage and Jewish culture, to formulate a Jewish humanism and to furnish Jewish-Zionist nationalism with a new religious significance. Their heritage is still alive and well in the modern State of Israel.[[1]](#footnote-1)

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The Jewish need to contend with the relationship between its religious and national components in the modern era raises another question: How should we describe the relationship between the Zionist dream and its fulfillment (the State of Israel) and a long Jewish history and a hope for redemption?

The answer to this question is far from simple. On the one hand, Zionism was certainly a spectacular turning point in the history of Diaspora Jewry. It represented an opposition, and even a repudiation, of traditional Jewish hopes of redemption. It is not surprising that from its beginnings, and throughout the twentieth century, large segments of Haredi Jewry viewed it as the antithesis of the belief in the coming of the Messiah. Without a doubt, in order to overcome exile, in order to wean the people off of patient yearnings for the Land of Israel and waiting for the Messiah, in order to revive the life and spirit of the Jewish people, Zionism had no choice but to alienate itself from at least some of the most basic elements of Jewish religious life.

On the other hand, this renewal drew heavily from the old. The land to which the Zionists cast their gaze was a familiar one – the Land of Israel. The Zionist aspiration to precipitate an ingathering of exiles and to achieve political freedom was an inseparable part of the messianic dream. The language they revived was the people’s ancient tongue, and the book that served as their manifesto was the nation’s first – the Bible.

Describing the Zionist affinity to the long history of Judaism, Yaakov Talmon wrote the following:

If we wish to […] contrast Judaism as a spiritual-historical phenomenon with the doctrines of the right and the left, we find that Judaism naturally gravitates towards the right. The special mission given by God to the Chosen People; […] tradition as an absolute value, preservation of national existence, constant and persistent struggles against intermarriage, the so heavily stressed assumption that a Jew’s Judaism is an inescapable fact, sealing the fate of every individual; and the loyalty required of every Jewish individual toward the national-religious collective. […] Obviously, Zionism had a revolutionary element to it – the decision to shape our future with our own hands instead of remaining chess pieces in the hands of destiny and hostile forces. But the other element far outweighs it: the moving experience of a unified Jewish existence throughout history and upon every continent; the unbreakable connection with the nation’s place of origins – as if our exile took place not two thousand years ago, but just yesterday. Neither Jewish misfortune, nor the idealism of the Kibbutz movement, nor our achievements in rebuilding the land, nor the military prowess of the IDF would have been enough of an impetus, enough of a birthright the eyes of the world, had they not been predicated upon the foundations of continuity and the identity of Jewish uniqueness.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Zionism was revolutionary in that it sought to fashion Jewish destiny – to create a new world with its own hands. And while it was a secular movement, and while some of its members certainly subscribed to secular universalistic values, at the same time it always contained something that was extraordinarily conservative.

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Modern Zionism draws its power from the past. This is what allowed its greatest leaders to look with hope towards the future:

Herzl wrote:

I once called Zionism an infinite ideal, and I truly believe that even after attaining our country, the Land of Israel, it will not cease to be an ideal. Because Zionism, as I see it, entails not only the aspiration for that piece of land lawfully promised to our unfortunate people, but also the aspiration for moral and spiritual perfection.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Likewise, David Ben Gurion wrote:

The Jewish people – who, after thousands of years of wandering and experiencing hardship throughout the world, arrived at the beginning of its political revival in its homeland – will never relinquish its historical vision and its great spiritual heritage: combining its national redemption with the redemption of all the nations of the world; it will never divest its spiritual independence of universal human elements. […] After our long 4,000 year journey on the stage of world history, through every country on the face of the earth, we have returned to our place of origin and established – for the third time – the Kingdom of Israel. […] We will not cloister ourselves in our own shell. Rather we will open windows to every corner of world-culture; we will acquire for ourselves all the spiritual and intellectual achievements of our time.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Zeev Jabotinsky wrote:

Even the Jewish state is not an ultimate goal: The Jewish state is nothing but a first step in realizing Noble Zionism. It will be followed by a second step: The return of the people to Zion, the liquidation of exile, a solution to the Jewish quest. And the true final goal of Noble Zionism will not appear until the third step – what actually great nations exist for: The creation of a national culture to share its glory with the world, as written: “From Zion goes forth Torah.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

How will life in Israel – standing betwixt affinities to the past, action in the present, and sights to the future – look like? The answer depends on those who participate in it. I will conclude with the words of Hebrew poet, Nathan Alterman:

Not for naught were books composed

Before a city arose upon the sand

Not in vain did admired teachers speak

Words of law and words of faith

In their essence, Zionism and the State of Israel are a blend of old and new: between “books,” teachers, faith, and law all bequeathed to us by a long Jewish history, and a beautiful city that has been established upon secular foundations. Alterman also offered his prediction of their relationship:

In this destined place

The two will be together bound

Until one body they do become

Half dust; half heaven[[6]](#footnote-6)

1. Eliezer Schweid, “Am yisra’el: Petiha,“ Ha-entsiqlopedia ha-‚ivrit, vol. 26, 888–891; idem, *Ha-tsiyonut she-aharei ha-tsiyonut* (Jerusalem, 1996). See also Elia Samuele Artom, *Hayei Yisra’el hadashim* (Tel-Aviv, 1966); André Neher, *Zehutenu ha-yehudit* (Jerusalem, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Yaakov Talmon, “Yehudim bein Yamin le-smo’l,” *Ahdut ve-Yihud*, 251–252. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Theodor Herzl, “Tikvateinu: Birkhat ha-derekh le-yarhon noar (March 1904), *Bifnei ‘am ve-‚olam* (Jerusalem 1961), vol. 2, 285. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. David Ben Gurion, “Yihud ve-yi‘ud,” Yihud ve-yi‘ud: Dvarim ‘al bitahon yisra’el (Jerusalem, 1971), 122–123. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Noble Zionism,” Excerpt from Jabotinsky's speech at the founding of the New Zionist Organization (Vienna, 1935). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Nathan Alterman, “Shuq ha-peirot,“ *Hagigat Qayits: Sidrat shirim* (1987), 68–70; Eli Alon and Yariv ben Aharon (eds.) *Simhat ‘aniyim: Masekhet* (Tel-Aviv, 2002), 165–167. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)