

*Excerpts of an Address by*

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*at the*

**Annual Dinner of the  
Religious Zionists of America**

*in Honor of Rabbi Israel Friedman*



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My remarks this evening will revolve around three items: Morale, Mafdal, and Morals

The first theme is that of **Morale**—a not unimportant ingredient in the success or failure of any organization or institution. We of the RZA (Religious Zionists of America)—as well as other notable organizations of kindred ideology, such as the Orthodox Union, the Rabbinical Council of America, the various alumni groups of Yeshiva University, and all those individuals who are generally committed to the platform of Modern or Centrist Orthodoxy—are beset by a depressing sense of isolation and defeat.

It is true that the Mafdal, which is so tightly bound up with Mizrahi and hence with the RZA, has lost a significant number of Knesset seats, and that all Modern Orthodox and Torah Umadda-related institutions are under pressure from within and from without. We feel intuitively that we are losing on the demographic front, and we face constant aggressiveness on the part of both a rather broad coalition of left leaning liberal groups and a triumphalist right wing.

But we must not give in to such a debilitating pessimism. I fear that such a dour view of our future can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

But even if there are problems of various sorts that beset us, fear and pessimism unto despair are misplaced. We should not judge the power of an idea by the number of votes in a political body—and Mizrahi embodies a great and even sublime idea

Permit me to share with you something I mentioned last night, at the Annual Hanukkah Dinner of Yeshiva University.

Do not be impressed by numbers, and do not be depressed by minority status. At the very beginning of our history, inscribed in the birth certificate of Israel, the Almighty told us clearly: **לֹא מִרְבָּכֶם מָכַל הָעַמִּים חֶשֶׁק ה' בָּכֶם וַיִּבְחַר בָּכֶם כִּי אֶתֶם הָעָמָּה מְכַל הָעַמִּים**—

“Not because you are the most numerous of the nations did the Lord desire you and choose you, because you are the fewest among the nations.” And in the Prophetic period, amongst Jews, Jewish pagans far outnumbered those loyal to One God.

That is why, in our Hanukkah prayers, we thank God who **מָסַר גִּיבּוֹרִים בְּיַד חַלְשִׁים וְרַבִּים בְּיַד מַעֲטִים**...The strong were delivered into the hands of the weak, and the many in the hands of the few. In the Maccabean revolution which Hanukkah commemorates, our ancestors were a decided minority and they were militarily weaker than their oppressors. Yet, they prevailed over the far stronger majority.

So it is with Religious Zionism. We Jews are a minority in this country, and certainly in the world; we fully traditional Jews are a minority amongst Jews; and Religious Zionists and Modern Orthodox Jews in general are apparently not a majority amongst them. But—so what? Our durability and our strength and our influence far exceed mere numbers. We shall succeed and return to our former eminence whether our numbers be many or few—as long as the vision is grand and large.

Consider this marvelous historic fact, which was brought to my attention by an article by the late Dr. Israel Eldad a number of years ago: For almost all nations, spiritual development followed material power. The more powerful they were in a worldly sense, the more their culture and influence dominated the world. Once their physical and political situation weakened, so did spiritual influence. That was true of Egypt, ancient Babylon, Greece, Rome, etc. The one great exception was the Jews. Our Biblical heights were attained at Sinai, *before* we had even sliver of land to call our own. All evolutionary theories, all predictions of dialectical materialism, fail to explain this marvelous phenomenon. Our spiritual strength proved independent of our material power or lack thereof. This is perhaps the real meaning miracle of Hanukkah. When the Maccabees liberated the Temple in Jerusalem from the Greek-Syrians, they found only one small cruse of undefiled olive oil with which to light the Menorah, and a miracle occurred and it lasted 8 days. The meaning of this miracle is clear: we do not have to have eight jars oil for eight days of light—one will do quite well, thank you—because we are the people of Israel, and for us the flame of the spirit does not reflect the material basis of our existence. *A little oil, a lot of light...*



But do not interpret my words as being pollyannaish; for the few to be victorious, they require **השתדלות, מס"נ**—self-sacrifice and utter devotion. We can prevail despite our few numbers provided we become proactive in disseminating our ideals and practices.

The destiny of Mizrachi fully depends upon us: on whether continue to tread on our old road, offering yesterday's solutions for today's problems; or in the determination to face up to a new world, to *re-invent selves*. If we can do that—we have no reason to fear the future.

Which leads me to my next point: the relationship of **Mizrachi and Mafdal**, and the nature of Mizrachi as we enter a new century.

A personal biographical note that may or may not be pertinent: In the first part of the last century, my grandfather, Rabbi Yehoshua Baumol זצ"ל—who had been the Vice President of **אגודת הרבנים** as well as of Agudath Israel—pleaded for a union between Agudah and Mizrachi. His was a lone voice in the wilderness. If only his advice had been heeded! Unfortunately, any such sentiment expressed today would lead to ridicule, even more than neglect. It simply is too late for that now. But what of all those good Orthodox Jews who remain outside the orbit outside of Agudath Israel, and yet are not identified with Mizrachi? Shall we dismiss them, or shall we make an effort to embrace them?

I mentioned the importance of our not losing heart, and of continuing and redoubling our efforts even in the face of declining numbers. Yet I ought to mention an opinion I heard earlier this evening in a casual discussion with Gershon Jacobson of the *Algemeiner Journal*. He maintained that 90% of Orthodox Jews in America effectively identify with the principles of Mizrachi; they are the silent majority of American Orthodox Jews. Granted that there is exaggeration in his numbers, but there is much to ponder in his remarks. Maybe not 90%, maybe not 80%, but probably a far larger number than we imagine, and certainly a far larger number than those enrolled officially in our ranks. And the question of questions is: Will we be wise enough, vigorous enough, dedicated and optimistic enough, to undertake the massive effort of embracing all these Jews as part of Mizrachi, and thereby giving voice to them—and to us?

I believe that most of you are aware of my point-of-view regarding the depoliticization of the RZA. In a word, I have great respect for the Mafdal as an Israeli political party, I acknowledge with gratitude their historic achievements especially in the realm of religious education in Israel and even here in the United States, and I feel for them in the battles they wage on our behalf in the Knesset. *Kol ha-kavod!* But I also firmly believe that the political interests of the Mafdal are confined to Israel, and that here, and in Israel as well, there must be a disconnect between Mafdal the *party* and Mizrachi the *movement*. We must separate the **תנועה** from the **מפלגה** in order to expand our base and enhance our mission. The party has its function all cut out for it, but its policies should not hamper the efforts of the movement to include all Jews who are loyal to Torah (especially Torah Umadda) and to the State of Israel, without demanding of them any assent to the political positions of the party. Whether doves or hawks, right or left, for or against settlements, Mizrachi must be above those issues and unite those who, as I said, are committed to Torah and to Israel. It matters not if one is a member of Likkud or Labor or any of the other political parties—if they are pro-Torah and pro-Israel, they have a place of respect in Mizrachi.

Mizrachi as a movement should include such eminent Jews who are not and will not rally to the banner of Mafdal, but may well feel comfortable in the non-political framework of Mizrachi. I have in mind such worthy individuals as President Katzav or Ambassador Lancre or Rabbi Melchior or any of the many religious individuals who aspire to a Jewish Israel, to a Jewish state rather than merely to a State of Jews. We must be the spokesmen for all religious, Israel-oriented Jews, Sephardi or Ashkenazi, rightists or leftists—including, of course, members of Mafdal, but not excluding others.

With such a successful effort to establish a broad based **תנועה**, we can realize dream of **אז נדברו יראי ה' איש את אלו**—note: **נדברו** in the passive, transitive, *nifal* sense, which implies that we not only speak to or at others, we not only proclaim, but also involve ourselves in genuine dialogue—speaking but also hearing—and thus maturing and growing. We who are now involved in a tense and fateful struggle with “post-Zionism,” **בני תורה** and all who are Orthodox who love Israel and, as well, the State of Israel, must take the lead, ignore vicious criticism, and move on and ahead. But we must first learn the lesson of **נדברו**, listening to each other, taking counsel together, without becoming cynical and unforgiving.



This leads me to my last point—the **moral** issue. With your leave, I wish to exploit this opportunity to air some of my frustrations which do not apply to specifically to Mizrachi, indeed, probably not at all, certainly not more than to others in the Jewish community.

One of my greatest regrets in the over 50 years of my service to the Jewish community concerns the lack of charity and the excess of churlishness towards each other by active members of the various organizations that constitute the American-Jewish community generally. More specifically, I deplore the growing gap and distrust between leaders and followers. We are fragmentized from and envious of each other, quick to delegitimize all others, especially leaders other groups. The all-pervasive cynicism is in direct contradiction to the teaching of the Sages, who demanded of us *לכף זכות*, *הוזה דן את כל האדם לכף זכות*, to judge others charitably. We have allowed ourselves (and this holds true for *all parties*) to reduce all issues to personalities, and have become intolerant of the petty foibles of good people who are less than perfect—as if the critics have a monopoly on virtue, especially moral perfection. People involved in leadership positions in Jewish life give their time and energy and resources to Jewish causes they believe in, and too often are rewarded with *הרע ורכילות* that is most unbecoming. And these same people, victims of undeserved captiousness, in turn become so emotionally tied up with their particular organizations or causes that they automatically and unthinkingly derogate others with equal passion. The mutual backbiting can often be as damaging—and immoral—as the frontal attacks in which the media, of course, revel.

I can offer biographical proof of the equal-opportunity complainers and assorted malcontents and occasional cranks who make communal service so unappealing except to the most dedicated. On my Left, one acerbic critic maintained (in writing!) that Lamm should resign as President of Yeshiva University because Modern Orthodoxy has fewer devotees than he thinks we ought to have. And from my Right, as is now fairly well known, I am publicly branded as an “enemy of God” for reasons I still cannot discern.. Just this past summer, one of my grandsons who was spending several weeks in Israel, studying and touring with other Bar Mitzvah aged boys from various *yeshivot*, called to ask me how to respond to another 14-year old who insisted that “your grandfather is an enemy of God.” One wonders about the kind of education in calumny given to such innocent youngsters.

Such was not the way of *גדולי ישראל*. The spiritual giants of Judaism preferred to be victims rather than perpetrators of such petty vilification. Take, for example, three giants of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Rav Kook, Rav Herzog, and “the Rav,” R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik. Each of these eminent personalities suffered indignities inflicted upon them by small-minded critics, gossips, and quidnuncs. These petty antagonists failed to arouse these *גדולים* to respond in kind, no matter how vicious, untrue, and outrageous were the charges against or the rumors about them. Neither Rav Kook nor R. Chaim Sonnenfeld nor the Chofetz Chayyim, each of whom represented a different strand within the Torah camp, ever acted with enmity or pettiness against each other. Their disagreements were conducted on the highest level, without personal agendas. And the same can be said of the more contemporary giants, such as the Rav, R. Ahron Kotler, and R. Moshe Feinstein, *זכר צדיקים לברכה*. I am almost tempted to say that to be a *gadol*, you first have to be a gentleman. They—the giants I mentioned—should be our real role models.

In this respect, our guest of honor, my very good friend Rabbi Yisrael Friedman has played an important role. Let me tell you why.

At age 14, he made *Aliyah* from France, and in Israel (then Palestine) he studied under R. Elyashiv, acted as secretary of the Vaad Hatzala, and became the private secretary of R. Meir Berlin. Since 1968 he has been the Executive Vice President of the RZA. His life has been heavily influenced by these extraordinary spiritual and intellectual giants of our times. He was, indeed, the confidant of Rav Eliashiv, of R. Meir Berlin, and a variety of *Admorim*—Hasidic masters. Reb Yisrael thus reminds me, in his person, of the majesty, the holiness, and the vitality of the three great Torah traditions they represented: the Lithuanian Haredi, the Religious Zionist, and the Hasidic. I have been pressuring him, so far unsuccessfully, to write his memoirs, not only to preserve for posterity his personal recollections of this major part of the history of Mizrachi, but also so that these eminent *gedolim* become alive for us and remain types worthy of emulation. I hope this public plea to our guest of honor will spur him on to undertake this project.

Rabbi Friedman is thus no stranger to any group. He is friendly to all, he learns from all, and he forges bonds with all, including those outside our Torah world. His capacity to bring all of them closer together is thus a boon for the

entirety of the Jewish community. And all this while, for all these years, he has been our indomitable, utterly loyal, hard-working leader and advocate of RZA.

In thinking of his role vis-a-vis these great leaders, it occurred to me that he embodies the function of the Biblical Eliezer, the עבד אברהם—the servant of Abraham—as the Torah calls him. Eliezer was characterized by the Torah as דמשק אליעזר, and the Sages explain this sobriquet as a word play: שדולה ומשקה מתורתו של רבו לאחרים, he draws from the well of his master's wisdom and quenches the thirst of all who come for instruction from his master. (Of course, this analogy is limited: a Midrashic passage maintains that Eliezer was identical with the Biblical giant Og, king of Bashan, whose dimensions were awe-inspiring... And Yisrael Friedman is—at least physically—less than 10 feet tall...)

So has Yisrael Friedman quenched our thirst for the wisdom of the various masters of Torah by dipping his pail into the well of their teachings—and we are the fortunate and grateful beneficiaries of this modern Eliezer. He has taught us from first-hand knowledge of his Abrahams that there are indeed giants, and even more ordinary people, who act out of pure love and genuine commitment, with no admixture of ego; that their אהבת התורה ואהבת ישראל is what motivates them even if they disagree with each other, even if we disagree with them.

In this sense, Yisrael Friedman has been a peace-maker in our times, one who protects the dignity and reputation of those who *are* pure of motivation—even while championing our cause. He has shown that one can be utterly Mizrachi without downing others. *Would that others learned from his example.*

In the years I have been privileged to know him, I have been impressed by the genuineness of his piety—the constancy of his תפילה בציבור and the regularity of his use of the Mikvah—and I have always been inspired by his chanting of the סליחות. In general, he is a first rate בעל תפילה whose נוסח and כוונה are truly uplifting. His Hasidic background has stood him in good stead.

These added elements of personal faith, warmth, and confidence have been a major part of his legacy to Mizrachi, and through Mizrachi to all of world Jewry.

So, as he leaves his duties officially, we say to him as Abraham did to Eliezer, ה' אלקי השמים אשר לקחני מבית אבי, וימאנץ מולדתי—May the Almighty who guarded and watched over you from the time you left your ancestral home until this very day, send His angel to guide you into the future, and may He bless you with many many years of strength and vigor, and grant your beloved wife a שלימה. And may you and she derive endless “nachas” from your gifted children and grandchildren for years and years to come.