

# Religious Zionism in the Diaspora

Excerpts from an address by Rabbi Norman Lamm at a Zionist conference in Jerusalem

by Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm

President and Rosh Hayeshiva of Rabbi Elchanan Seminary, Yeshiva University

It is unfortunate that Minister Yaakov Neeman had to lecture earlier and was not able to appear on this panel. It would have been a pleasure for me to be associated with Dr. Yaakov Neeman. My surname Lamm, which means sheep, requires a shepherd, and I need a faithful shepherd (in Hebrew "faithful" = "neeman"), and he - Yaakov Neeman - is both a faithful shepherd (רועה) and a visionary (רואה).

The topic assigned to me is "Mizrachi's Role in the Diaspora." I am no expert on the Diaspora as such. I am somewhat acquainted with the United States scene, and I therefore will speak on that. I must admit, however, that when I talk about America, it is to an extent as a synonym for the rest of the Diaspora.

One more prefatory remark: I would not dare speak about the Israeli situation since you are at the front, in the midst of all that is happening. We Jews of the Diaspora, even though our heart is in the East (i.e., Israel), at the end of the day we stay in the Far West (i.e., overseas, in the United States), in peaceful and prosperous lands.

For a number of years in the United States, there is a feeling of frustration and failure regarding Mizrachi. Partly it is the result of organizational and institutional reasons: Israel. In addition, there are also psychological and existential elements: confusion; embarrassment; ambivalence. We are in the midst of a major, disturbing identity crisis. As we go to sleep at night we ask ourselves: Who are the Mizrachi? What is Religious Zionism? Where is it leading? The answers are not easy.

Permit me to make three points. First, we must know that we are not alone in our confusion. The political changes, the weak organization, the psychological and existential dilemma, are all illnesses of the developed Western World and maybe, as well, parts of the Third World, in these final years of the 20th century. Such doubts are common to all moderate opinions, to anyone who follows the middle path proposed by Maimonides. All this is not new, especially to the Mizrachi movement. About a 100 years ago, Rabbi Yitzchak Nissanbaum, one of the great founders of Mizrachi, said that we the Religious Zionists find ourselves between the hammer and the nail. We cannot and do not want to abandon a single letter of our Torah and a single paragraph of Zionism. Rabbi Meir Berlin complained: We, the Mizrachi group, are in an infelicitous spot - fighting on two fronts. So the illness is an old one, and we cannot allow such feelings to intimidate us.

Secondly, there is an interesting paradox, almost an absurd one. The feeling of defeat is growing in World Mizrachi, while in Israel, Religious Zionism penetrates into layers of Israeli society that were once "closed" to us - the towns, the army, the academic world, the settlements, business, etc.

It is possible that to an extent this is a sign of the success of the exalted idea of Religious Zionism. The weakness of organizational framework sometimes is a result of ideological success. In the Diaspora, Mizrachi is usually helpless as an organization, but its basic priorities were accepted quietly, sometimes without recognizing the source of these ideas. However, the ideas did not become the majority opinion of the Jewish world. The ideology of "Torah and worldly culture" (Torah Umadda), which is the motto of Yeshiva University in America, does not suit any other movement



Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm

except for Mizrachi. Our rate of *aliya* to Israel is a sign of a healthy Religious Zionism in America. I am proud that we at Yeshiva University annually send more than 500 boys and girls, who learn in all the yeshivas, other institutions, Hesder Yeshivot, and Torah institutions for women. This year we have almost 550-560, who came for a year or two. Some return for a second period when they learn for *semichah*. Accepting *Eretz Yisrael* as a central idea in circles of Modern Orthodoxy has become self-evident, and this is consonant with our movement's approach.

Thirdly, and most importantly, we cannot permit this internal struggle, which is the source of despair in our camp, to prevail. We can correct the mistakes, and we not only can but we must avoid such intimations of hopelessness. Permit me to illustrate my point from a *halachic* source.

The Rambam says that Chanukah candles should be placed outside, by the entrance to one's house, a handbreadth on the left-hand side entering the house, so that the mezuzah will be on the right-hand side and the Chanukah candles on the left side. It is difficult to understand from where Rambam - and the Gemara - derived this *halacha*. Why the entrance to the house? If the main thing is that the one who lights be surrounded with *mitzvot*, aside from publicizing the miracle, why could he not light the candles near the window while he is covered with a *Tallit*? In any case, he is surrounded by *mitzvot* and the miracle is publicized.

I submit that the entrance to the house is a symbol of instability, the lack of self-confidence, a result of standing on the threshold, on the borderline between the inside and outside, when one cannot decide whether he is going in or staying out.

A similar situation of that nature is found as well in Parshat Miketz, which will be read, please G-d, this coming Shabbat. The brothers saw that they were brought to Yosef's home, so they approached the director of Yosef's residence and spoke to him. Where? At the entrance to the house! They were doubtful whether they should challenge this man and try to explain to him, or whether they should remain quiet. Here again, the entrance is symbolic of self-doubt, hesitancy, diffidence.

The same is true regarding Chanukah, concerning which the Rambam writes: "It is known what happened to the Israelites under the wicked Greek kingdom, as a result of difficult decrees, among them that a man should not close the entrance to his house, so that he should not secretly perform any *mitzvah*." This way we understand the link between history and the laws of Chanukah. The mezuzah faces the inner part of the house in order to defend the home and all that is inside from external dangers and baneful influences. Therefore the mezuzah is placed on the right-hand side of the one who is entering the house. The Chanukah candle speaks from the point of view of the insider; it is the purpose of the Chanukah candle to spread light from inside to outside, to publicize the miracle. This conflict between the tendency to open the door or to close it is what creates the tension and the doubt. But when man has a mezuzah and Chanukah candles, he can decide in a moderate and unpressured manner how and when to open the doors of his heart/his house to anything which is true and appropriate in his surroundings and when to close them as a result of danger from anything that is false and harmful in his area and beyond. A person has the ability to know when to close the doors and when to come out boldly, because the mezuzah and Chanukah candles show him the way without incurring possibly embarrassing situations.

Let us put aside for now the psychological problem and focus on the question of Mizrachi's functioning in the Diaspora. What should be the main emphasis of our movement? In my humble opinion, the Mizrachi should broaden its interests without losing or forgetting the purpose it has stood for in the course of its existence. The centrality of Israel should be an unchallenged foundation of Mizrachi. But the situation in our world is different from what it was when the movement was founded. Today in the Diaspora we lack a large group of Jews who have a solid Jewish background and who are familiar with Judaism first-hand. Our streets and homes are not characterized by Jewish tradition and Jewish lifestyle, as was true in the past.

In those days it was not so necessary to combine the notion of Judaism with Zionism. Today, we live in an era that is very different in many respects - and you know the frightening statistics as well as I do - a period that to a large extent is one of decline, and all the while extremism and polarization grow within the camp of Torah observant Jews. We must send a double message today - to teach Torah in a maximally acceptable way, and to emphasize the State of Israel in a way that is well received.

Just as we should emphasize the Israeli symbols of flag, language, *aliya*, and Yom Haatzmaut, so must we also be the movement which emphasizes Torah study and observance of *mitzvot* by our community in all areas, giving our first priority to this religious message, in order to carry out the Zionist vision through it. It is preferable that these two messages appear as one, i.e., that the Zionist element grow organically out of a religious commitment.

What I want to say is that just as Modern Orthodoxy, which combines Torah and secular knowledge - what was known in Germany as "Torah Im Derech Eretz" - must include the love for *Eretz Yisrael* as a basic principle, likewise Religious Zionism must include a message that Torah Judaism does not disregard science and decent culture, it does not ignore the non-Orthodox community, it does not dismiss anything just because it isn't ours. We should care about the needs of the entire community, operating out of moral responsibility together with any Jew and with any faithful person in the world. I do not say that we must abandon highly regarded and cherished ideas such as *Torah V'Avodah*. But the economic, social, and religious conditions today are different from what they once were. It is now more important to emphasize Torah and *Mitzvot* and "Torah Umadda" as the basis of Religious Zionist education.

So I offer three suggestions: One, for the Mizrachi itself. Mizrachi in the Diaspora must act and be known as a movement, not a party. Movements and partisan parties are separate issues. The meaning of a movement is that it must open its gates to anyone who is committed to the Torah, Nation, and Land as one organic unity, irrespective if he or she is from the Mafdal, Labor, Likud or from any other party. In *Chutz L'Eretz*, especially, we have no right to get involved in Israeli politics. If one still desires to do so, whether or not it is positive or negative to assist in forming a party, he should do what he wants as a private individual, not in the name of the movement. This idea did not originate with me. I remember the late Zalman Shragai being involved in this subject; he wrote a few cogent articles on the topic. Likewise, Yoske

Shapira - G-d grant him long life - has repeatedly articulated similar notions.

Parshat Miketz tells a fascinating story, one that in some ways is even a bit humorous: The brothers came to Yosef, and the Egyptians prepared three tables - one for Yosef alone, one for the Egyptians alone, and one for the brothers alone. The Torah goes on to explain that the Egyptians could not break bread with the Jews, as it would be a disgrace for them, and Yosef, as a royal personage, could not eat with his brothers, who were both aliens and commoners. So: One for Yosef, one for the brothers, one for the Egyptians. Three Tables.

The distinction between Jew and pagan is often one of mutual repugnance. We are a disgrace for them; they are a disgrace for us. Similarly, there is too often separation, hatred, and jealousy among fellow Jews - between Yosef and his brothers, between the Jew living in Canaan and the one living in Egypt, between the observant Jew and the one who defies Torah.

Even various types of Orthodoxy create separate tables - not eating together at one table, one does not trust the *hekscher* of the other ... The two tables that divide us Jews are not confined to food; they include verbal violence against the other one, as happens too often, sowing dissension and disunity among our people. The time has come for us to mend what was torn, to reunite those who were dispersed, to bring closer those who have been separated. It may be within the ability of Diaspora Mizrachi, or at least it is their obligation as a move-

## Modern Orthodoxy must include the love for Eretz Yisrael as a basic principle

ment, to proclaim a message of peace and unity within the House of Israel. That is not an easy task; we know that chances are that we will not succeed, at least initially. Still, we have to make every effort to bring an end to the "three tables." It is sufficient that the differentiation between Jews and Gentiles creates two tables. Two is more than enough.

Let us not worry what the others will say. I heard that the late Shai Agnon visited Ben-Gurion for the first time - and maybe the only time - at Sdei Boker. On the way back, Ben-Gurion's young aide, Shimon Peres, asked Agnon: "What did you talk about? What is your impression?" Agnon remained silent and then said, "This Ben-Gurion does not fear Gentiles - and not even the Jews." We also have to learn this. During 50 years of independence we have learned not to fear the Gentiles. The time has come not to fear the Jews. We must accept this task upon ourselves. We need to see how much peace and unity we can bring into our camp. We don't always have to fear the extremists and the noise makers.

Thirdly and finally, education. We must face the current reality in the Diaspora. I don't know how relevant it is in Israel, but I think it is a universal phenomenon. There is a new spirit in American cities. It is interesting that those who totally dismissed any religion, who assumed that they are realistic that there is no need for a G-d or for any transcendental being - they, together with their children and grandchildren, aspire for "spirituality." They are searching for something beyond the human race, beyond entertainment, beyond the realm of sensory experience.

If they don't find an answer to their questions in Judaism they will, G-d forbid, drink of the poisonous waters of the Eastern religions. Heaven has left Mizrachi a goal to achieve. It is true, indeed, that for many of the spirituality seekers, this entire concept is a fad. Clearly, there is no future for such a view of a spurious spirituality. You know that *ruach* has two meanings: spirit and wind. This includes those people in the United States of America who delve into Kabbalah without knowing a *pasuk* from the Chumash with Rashi or without even knowing what the Hebrew letters look like and yet pretend to be kabbalists. Wind, not spirit.

Generally, I am upset at the fact that Mizrachi in the United States of America, which in the past was privileged to develop and support different educational institutions - including one of the schools at Yeshiva University, a teachers' seminary - has now abandoned educational issues and has allowed others to take the initiative and assume leadership within the field of education. In this critical time, Mizrachi in the United States of America and in other places abroad, has to plow and sow in the educational field, to plant and to reap, to water and then in the end, with Hashem's help, to harvest and see the wonderful fruit that can flourish and live by the exalted vision of Mizrachi - a new generation loyal to Torah and dedicated to Zion that won't be a stranger to every great idea in the world and will be far from extremism and jealousy.

In the blessing of "Shehecheyanu" we distinguish three different concepts: 1) "shehecheyanu" 2) "ve'kiymanu" and 3) "ve'higiyanu lazman hazeh." I understand "shehecheyanu," that we are alive, and "higiyanu," that we have arrived at this great day; but what of "ve'kiymanu"?

What does it add? I heard from my uncle that it is a *halachic* term for a man who brings a document to the Beit Din on which witnesses have signed but the Beit Din is not sure if it is their handwriting. There is a *halacha* regarding the certification or notarization of documents - witnesses come and acknowledge: "We recognize these signatures," and thus the document is accepted. We at Mizrachi have to bless not only "shehecheyanu" and "ve'higiyanu," that we have grown and multiplied, but "ve'kiymanu," that our ideology and values have been sustained and confirmed by reality. This reality will be achieved only if we are dedicated to it with all our hearts and with our entire beings.

If we do this, I know that, please G-d, it will bring upon us a new era - not an era of retreat and failure, but one of success in every meaning of the word!