

MORASHA

A JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS ZIONISM

"TOWARDS THE RENEWAL OF MIZRACHI"

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I

Religious Zionism is in disarray. Underneath the thin veneer or "normalcy" lies a reservoir of sadness, tension, worry, and foreboding apprehension. There is *angst* and melancholy in the air generally in Israel because of events that do not require repetition by me. For Mizrachi, there is the awareness that it is today at a critical point in its history. Politically it has lost half of its parliamentary seats—at least, as of this writing; the next Knesset may deplete even that. Organizationally, it is in decline throughout the world. Some of us have begun to feel like vestiges of the past instead of harbingers of the future.

Some may think I am overstating the case, yet others that I am understating it. Whatever, the situation is an unhappy one. And yet, our historic challenge and duty is to resist being gripped and paralyzed by a psychology of defeatism. As Hasidism taught us, despair is the greatest sin. Greatness is achieved only in confrontation with great challenges.

This means that our generation can no longer look upon itself as a *dor ha-hemshekh*, as those who continue the past, but as those who must rescue that past by reconstituting and reformulating it in the face of adversity. We have an unparalleled opportunity to leave our mark upon history. This is the time neither to ignore the difficulties nor to despair of them and lose heart, but to rise to the occasion with a clear mind, a firm spine, and a fierce visceral determination to change the course of events and prevail.

Indeed, this challenge is greater than that faced by our predecessors over 80 years ago. They founded Mizrachi in the growth phase of the Zionist movement. Zionism was new, the ideal of the Return to Zion had a certain freshness about it, and thus was born Mizrachi, the *Merkaz Ruchani*, the "Spiritual Center." It is far more difficult, more painful, and more arduous to rebuild than to build. As the Talmud taught us: *Kasheh attika me-chaddeta*, the old is far more impervious to the creative gesture than the new. But for the same reason it is more admirable and praiseworthy.

I have often wondered at the fact that we do not celebrate Rosh Chodesh Nisan as the day that the *Mishkan* was erected. Similarly, we have no observance to commemorate the building of the first or second *Bet ha-Mikdash*. The only holiday we do not celebrate with regard to the *Bet ha-Mikdash* is Chanukkah—which commemorates not the *building* but the *rebuilding* of the Temple. Why so? Because, as I mentioned, rebuilding is more taxing, less glorious, more demanding, and less personally satisfying than building—and therefore more creative and more laudable.

It is time to resurrect Mizrachi, to breathe into it new life and energy and passion and thus bring blessing not only to religious Jews, but to all Israel—people and State. "Every generation in which the Temple was not (re)built, it is considered as if [members of that generation] destroyed it" (J.T., *Yoma* 1:1).

The organizational renewal of Mizrachi must be based upon a clear distinction between *Tenuah* and *Miflagah*, between Movement and Party—for the ultimate good of both. This is something a number of elder statesmen of Mizrachi have been advocating for some time now. For the very health and security of Mafdal, the Party, we must ensure Mizrachi, the Movement, will not be its handmaiden. Indeed, it is Mizrachi which must be the sanctuary of the values and ideals of our cause, and to do so it must have an independent existence and identity. Only thus can the two, *Tenuah* and *Miflagah*, fructify each other creatively.

Only Mafdal may endorse political candidates or engage in partisan negotiations. The *Tenuah* must never do so. Its responsibilities must be much broader: the welfare, both spiritual and organizational, of Jews and Judaism throughout the world. Indeed, members of other political parties should be encouraged to affiliate with the Mizrachi if it is their natural spiritual and ideological home.

The *Miflagah* must remind us that the State is crucial, pivotal, and central to Jewish concerns. The *Tenuah* must teach us that it is not absolute.

The Movement *embodies* an idea; a Party is only a *means* to achieve and enhance it in the political forum. If there is to be only Mafdal without a Mizrachi, or with a Mizrachi so weak and ineffectual that it is devoid of significance, then one may question whether in the long run such a party serves the higher purpose to which we are dedicated, and one must undertake a cost-benefit analysis to determine whether its existence is justified. No such calculus is relevant to a national religious movement. Indeed, the *Tenuah* alone can vindicate the *Miflagah*.

Political parties must respond to the flux of events, the vicissitudes of government policy and public opinion and political trends. Its fortunes are linked to external events rather than to internal processes. The Movement must transcend such concerns. As the expression of overarching spiritual and ideological commitments, it has the power to abide all such conditions and endure all such changes, because it is focused on ideas and ideals rather than on persons and structures.

Thus, it is conceivable that a two-party system will emerge in Israel and that Mafdal will attach itself to one of them. I am by no means advocating that. But as an illustration, even if that should occur, Mizrachi as a Movement will and must survive, its integrity uncompromised and its mission undiminished.

Similarly, if the opposite should occur, and the *Miflagah* will divide, amoeba-like, into two or three or four political parties, the natural spiritual and ideological home of all of them remains Mizrachi.

To effectuate the *chanukat ha-Mizrachi*, let it seek out a leadership that is preferably uninvolved in the daily rough and tumble of partisan political activity. Its leaders should be the finest and the best of its spiritual and intellectual elite throughout the world—the most able of the Yeshiva world (provided that they not only attend or teach in Hesder Yeshivot, but truly represent and are committed to its

ideas); the most appealing of the religious academic world; businessmen and professionals whose lives and activities are reflections of the Mizrachi ideology concerning Torah, Eretz Yisrael, Kelal Yisrael, and the modern world. Above all, Mizrachi must shun mediocrity.

There is a place for party functionaries—in the Party. There is a need for politics—in Mafdal. The Party must confront and deal with the jagged edges of a stubborn and unmalleable reality. The Movement must stand a bit apart, beyond, and hold aloft the ideals for which the men of the Party work and struggle.

There need not, perhaps ought not, be unanimity of opinion between the two. But the dialogue will be constructive and creative and benefit all Israel.

II

This leads me to the second renewal—that of fraternity, a reassertion of our friendship, our mutual trust, our cohesiveness. Most regretfully, Mafdal politics has been too rough, too truculent, too *ad hominem* for too long. It is true that Mafdal is blessed with highly competent leaders, men of competence, personal integrity, and probity. But God knows how many people were lost to the cause because of the unseemly infighting, the slurs, the disrespect, and the lack of self-restraint we have allowed to go unchecked.

I am not naive—I know that politics is politics is politics. Indeed, the involvement with personalities rather than issues is more characteristic of a Party than a Movement, and a good argument for the revival of Mizrachi as a Tenuah. But certainly a religious party—and most certainly a religious Zionist party—should be more elegant, more civilized and tolerant and forgiving, less jugular and brutal in its politics—and always aware of the fact that politics must serve the cause, for otherwise it is bankrupt.

There has been too little *shalom bayit* in our ranks. If in America we were for a while too tolerant, even of those unworthy of our trust, in Israel we have been too critical, even of those deserving of leadership roles.

I recall the story of a Jewish professor in Western Europe who spent 15 years researching humor in the Talmud, and could come up with only one joke in all of the Talmud: "*Talmidei chakhamim* increase peace in the world."

As a relative outsider to inside politics in Mafdal, I can only plead with its leadership—all of whom I admire and for whom I bear personal affection and esteem—to heal the breaches of the past, both because of enlightened self-interest and a desire to avoid the desecration of the divine Name. The times call for statesmanship rather than politics.

Former Secretary of HEW of the USA, Dr. Gardner, once said that one must be neither an uncritical lover nor an unloving critic. Of course we must be critical but also loving.

This advice is useful not only for Mafdal, but equally—indeed, much more so—for the other political parties in Israel. The ferocious partisanship, especially in the course of the Lebanon campaign, has left American Jews embarrassed, deflated, and angry. One recalls the words of Pogo, a famous American comic-strip character: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

Divided opinion in a country is good for its soul. It ensures vigorous debate of great issues that enhance the democratic character of a nation. But when the polemics are so ferocious that they go beyond politics to fratricide, then the controversies are convulsions of a feverish and sick people.

When extremist fringe groups like the Neturei Karta publish ads in the American press excoriating Israel, we are indignant at this instance of religious fanaticism. But what excuse is there for a leftist politician to commit the same unpatriotic act? Here there is not even the fig leaf of a venerable religious tradition of quietism, though grievously misread. There is only the nakedness of unrestrained ambition and the self-pity of political powerlessness. With such "leaders," who needs enemies?!

Irresponsible political rhetoric, even if it is only by one individual and meant not literally but only as an expression of frustration, is not only politically counter-productive, but is a threat to the security of the State and the Nation.

So renewal of what Rav Kook used to call *ahavat chinam* is the second element in the *chanukkat ha-Mizrachi*, important for our group and important for the whole State and all the people of Israel.

III

The spiritual renewal of Religious Zionism will take place only when we appreciate the real need there is for us—whether or not it is yet perceived.

Wise leaders of Israel, men of vision, even if they are not of our camp, recognize this. Towards the end of his last trip to America, the late President Shazar asked me to see him just prior to his leaving for the airport. I shall never forget his brief but moving request. He said, while holding my hand:

You know, Rabbi Lamm, that I have been a Laborite and not a Mizrachist all my life. Yet I must plead with you and your colleagues to make a special, heroic effort to save Bnei Akiva from its state of deterioration in America. Bnei Akiva is a precious national treasure and we are morally forbidden to stand aside and see the movement go down the tube and do nothing about it.

A man of Labor, President Shazar appreciated the value of Bnei Akiva—and what is this youth-group if not the spawning grounds of the future of the Movement?

Indeed, without Mizrachi, all Torah would be identified as anti-Zionist and anti-State, isolated and inward-looking. Without Mizrachi, how long would Israel remain a *Jewish* State, instead of just a State of Jews, an independent Birobizhan in the Middle East?

The same need for Mizrachi that led it to its historic contribution in the past remains relevant and potent today. And the less others realize this, the more cogent is the need!

Hence a source for spiritual renaissance lies in the awareness that we are needed and have a purpose, a mission, a role to play. In this we are more fortunate than a number of other groups which, while they may be more viable financially, more active organizationally, and more numerous electorally, have lost their *raison d'être* and have begun to rot within.

In Lithuania it used to be the custom of the *chevra kadisha* that during or before the *taharah*, the Gabbai would address the corpse of the deceased and say, "So-and-so son of so-and-so, know that you are dead!"

There are unhappily, a number of organizations to whom that applies: They are dead and do not know it. Fortunately, that cannot be said of Mizrachi. Even if many of the twigs are brittle and dry and its branches bent, the trunk is healthy and the roots vital. Such an organism is capable of regeneration and rebirth.

In that case, the pessimistic note with which I began has to be reevaluated. Maybe our potential is far greater than our sorry present reality would indicate. Maybe the substance is quite different from the perception.

There is a need for Mizrachi—a need to speak to the State and its citizens today and to call them back to their roots, to assist the State to fulfill its true stature.

Mizrachi must teach that if Israel will strive to be America or England or France, it will be neither America nor England nor France—nor Israel. If Israel will try to be Israel, then it will be Israel, and not need to be America or England or France.

There is no one else who can say that quite as clearly, with as much conviction, and with as much spiritual authority as Mizrachi.

Mizrachi must affirm for the rest of Jewry that our people are peaceful but not pacifist, that the State must be powerful and must defend its borders and vital interests with all the means at its disposal. But arms are a means, not an end. An army is a necessity, not a desideratum. We have already proven that a Jew can fight to defend himself, and there is no longer any reason to posture and to stage military parades on *Yom Haatzmaut*—even to think of it. We can use weapons and even produce them and make them technologically better than many a Western country. We are proud that a young Israeli can use a gun if necessary, but our emblem is not the Uzzi but rather *Ha-shem uzzi u-ma'uzzi*—a faith in and commitment to a transcendent vision and higher Being who summons us to peace and construction and human felicity and spiritual excellence.

Israel is now going through an agonizing period because of what happened in Lebanon and its aftermath. It constitutes a small demon in our recent past, an aberration, totally out of character with what we are, what we purport to be, what we strive to be. At great pain and with much chagrin, we are exorcising it. At the same time, there is a giant, ugly demon in Arab circles that no one really seems to care about. There are other, equally ugly demons in the chancelleries of Western capitals, in the editorial rooms of great newspapers and in television news studios—demons of overstatement and gleeful rhetorical mugging of Israel—and no one talks of exorcising them.

So be it. "The House of Israel is not like unto other nations." In our very chagrin and dilemma we have much to be proud of. If we have a guilty conscience, at least we have a conscience. That is a mark of the Jewishness of the Jewish State. I am proud of the leadership of Mafdal for having insisted upon the trial that aired all this and brought this catharsis about. I am confident that Mizrachi leadership will be equally forthcoming in meeting other such challenges as they may arise, and that it will be equally vigilante in self-criticism as in the criticism of others.

What Mizrachi has to tell Israel, a message that makes it vital for us to survive and thrive and speak out, is perhaps best exemplified by a nightmare in "*Temol Shilshom*" by Israel's Nobel Laureate Sh. Y. Agnon.

Yitzchak, the young *Oleh* who is the hero of the story, has a bad dream. He is at the seashore at Jaffa and forgets his shoes. The wind blows off his hat. So he remains barefoot and bareheaded. He hears the sound of prayer in a *shul* on a second floor that can be reached only by a ladder. He climbs up and enters, when the door slams shut, his head is within the synagogue and his body outside it.

Shoes represent the satisfaction of physical needs, material comforts. The head-covering symbolizes spiritual felicity, religious authenticity. Our fate, if we are not extremely careful and thoughtful, may yet be that we remain without shoes *or* hat, material *or* spiritual well being—and, *davka*, with our uncovered heads in the *shul* and unshod feet outside it. That is the nightmare Israel must avoid—a country poor in natural *and* spiritual resources, a population that cannot find its *kipah* in its sanctuaries and its shoes where it ought to tread proudly.

Mizrachi—with its teaching of Torah *and* Zion, of a productive and prosperous state *and* a vital flowering of Torah—can avoid this nightmare and return to the State both its *kipah* *and* its shoes, its material well being *and* its spiritual dignity.

I propose that in its ideological stock-taking as it prepares for renewal, Mizrachi affirm its essential moderation, long a hallmark of the Movement.

By moderation I do not mean an ideological evasiveness that leads to compromise. That is what is today called a "cop-out." I refer rather to what I recently termed "radical moderation," a moderation that is achieved through clear thinking and which has the power to summon up the passion of commitment even though it is not extremist.

Mizrachi has long battled against extremism in Jewish life, and it must be wary as well of extremism in its own ranks. While the Movement must have place for all who profess allegiance to its fundamental ideals, I would not want to see it wedded to any extremist position. It may seem attractive to tap the sources of passion by opting for an extreme political course. But that will turn away more people than it will attract. The Mizrachi must be a nesting-place for both hawks and doves, but never for terrorism. We must always bear in mind the warning of the Sages that one must not respect even a *Rav* when *chillul ha-Shem* is involved. There is no such thing as acceptable terrorism for the sake of Torah or for the sake of Israel.

But the spiritual renewal cannot be achieved, either by intellectuals or by *hoi polloi*, unless Mizrachi as a Movement returns to what was and should always have remained its priority: education.

By "education" I mean primarily *talmud torah*.

There was a time when Mizrachi was the prime mover for Torah education in the Diaspora. In America it founded a number of important institutions, and its leaders were all educationally oriented.

It is imperative that every Mizrachi, wherever he or she is, be active in Jewish education. Mizrachi as a Movement must use its power and influence to persuade the World Zionist Congress and The Jewish Agency to place more emphasis on education.

In the long run, education is more important for the future of the State than Aliyah. Aliyah will not necessarily produce educated Jews. But education will improve and enhance Aliyah. Consider the Yeshiva University experience: despite (or maybe because of . . .) no formal Aliyah propaganda or *shelichim* for Aliyah, we have some 10% of our alumni living in Israel—some 1500 families, may they increase!

In Israel, Mizrachi must continue to improve and expand its primary and secondary schools—and encourage its Hesder graduates to make careers in teaching in these schools.

Mizrachi has done magnificently in creating the Yeshivot Hesder. It must now, as part of its spiritual renewal, undertake:

- 1) to strengthen them and increase their number.
- 2) to tap them for leadership in the Movement.
- 3) to reorient them to the basic ideals of Mizrachi.
- 4) to give them the prominence and prestige in our circles that will not make them seek approbation and authentication from other Yeshivot who claim for themselves and for another movement exclusive hegemony over Torah.
- 5) to make it possible for the best and most talented of Hesder students and graduates to receive an advanced secular education as well.

But in educating and striving for the realization of the ideals of religious Zionism, Mizrachi must consider problems of broader scope and impact, beyond that of Israel. And that is, the whole question of how the Jewish tradition relates to the contemporary world. Of course, the educational expression of that concern by Mizrachi is Bar Ilan University.

This is an issue with which we in America are vitally concerned. Yeshiva University stands for a certain interpretation of that relationship. It expresses a *Weltanschauung* of which religious Zionism is only one aspect, albeit an important one.

While Mizrachi must be primarily involved with Israel, it most certainly should see itself as part of, or related to, that movement which maintains that Torah must neither retreat from nor capitulate to the secular Western world.

What I am saying is that the fortunes of Centrist Orthodoxy in the U.S. and elsewhere in the Golah and those of Mizrachi are linked to each other—not organizationally, but fraternally. While our constituencies are not and need not be identical in all respects, it is clear that we are closely related, and that relationship should be encouraged, elaborated, and developed.

With self-confidence in our cause we can turn to the historic task of self-renewal, the *chanukat ha-Mizrachi*.