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SEMINAR

"THE IDEOLOGY OF THE NETUREI KARTA"

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Thank you for giving me this assignment. Until now, I've opposed Neturei Karta (=NK) without ever having studied its major theoretician and analyzed its arguments. Now I have been forced to do so - and I remain unconvinced and as firmly opposed. If anything, I am even more opposed - but also more respectful.

B. Had genesis in 1935 when a few hundred members of Agudat Israel considered Agudah too lenient to Zionist groups, generally too moderate, and under Amram Blau seceded and formed NK. They number today several hundred families in Israel, and followers and adherents in Brooklyn and several other centers throughout Diaspora.

C. "NK" means "Guardians of the City." Term appears in J.T. (Hag. 1:7) that 3 Sages, under instruction from R. Judah the Prince, traveled through land to make sure every town had teachers - of Bible and Mishnah. Came upon one town that had none, and said to townsfolk: Show us your NK, i.e., guardians of the city. Thereupon they produced police. Rabbis: No - they are destroyers of city. Who then are NK? Answer: teachers and scribes - for without them a city is fated to destruction.

NK, therefore, are teachers of Torah by virtue of whom the rest of the population survives.

D. NK comes to our attention usually through acts of dramatic protest or minor violence, rarely serious. Its publication restricted largely to shrill posters, polemic pamphlets, strident banners. Only serious works of any real consequence are by aging Satmarer Rebbe, R. Yoel Moshe Teitelbaum, a Rumanian Hasidic leader in U.S.A. since end of World War II, in three volumes published in the last ten years: *דבר נא בלתי* (V.M.) (Vol. I-1959; II-1961) and *קונטרס על גאון חסידות סאטמאר* (G.T.) (1967). It is, in essence, the continuation of the strongly held views of the Hasidic dynasty of Muncacz and their Hungarian-Rumanian followers.

E. These views, by any standards - extreme. Most Orthodox Jews - even non-Zionists or even anti-Zionists - reject them, find them often reprehensible. Yet they represent a consistent ideology of Jewish life, and it is good to give them a hearing.

F. I shall try to be as objective as possible, not allowing my bias to enter unless I label it as such. If time permits, I will conclude with a critique of their major premises.

G. In general, we are presented with a theoretical, ideological presentation based, according to the author, on classical sources of Jewish tradition: Bible, Talmud, medieval scholars, etc. -

and the author does not hesitate to offer a program of action which includes extremely radical suggestions. It is a major achievement, although I am convinced that the arguments are often contrived, one-sided, and decidedly extravagant.

II. CONTEXT OF JEWISH TRADITION.

- A. All Jewish Tradition - Covenant ... (This obviates Nation-Religion question; Covenant binds one to other irrevocably.)
- B. This Covenant is clue and key to drama of Jewish history which revolves around two poles of galut and geulah.
- C. We now in major exile which will result in final Redemption - ushered in by Messiah (descendant David, the Messiah).
- D. Messiah: vast variety interpretations, and one most fertile ideas in Judaism. Mainly: divine instrument Redemption Jewish people leading their independence, restoration of Land of Israel, and rebuilding of Third Temple; and through renaissance of Israel, to redemption of all mankind and ushering in of era of universal peace, justice. Messianism is corruptible - whole history of pseudo-Messiahs from Jesus through Sabbatai-Zevi. But bespeaks an optimistic view of life, and imperishable hope for a happy ending to history. At bottom - is based on faith in divine promise of redemption for His exiled people.
- E. Within this rubric, large gaps. Tremendous history Messianic speculation, some more authoritative than other. How we treat this literature, how "normative" we consider it -- will determine, to large extent, our view of current events.

III. MAJOR PREMISES NK IDEOLOGY - four major premises.

A - Divine Redemption and Human Passivity.

1. God alone will redeem Israel in a supernatural, miraculous manner (VM - 126,7), making His power manifest, whole Israel will remain passive as history comes to end without human intervention. All Israel must do is submit to the yoke of exile while it waits faithfully and lives in accordance with divine will, i.e., Torah (ib.10). NK does not accept view that Messiah will have primarily political function - ensuring Israel's restoration and independence - and insists upon seeing his advent as occasion for cosmic changes and indisputable miraculous events. Man's contribution is purely spiritual; his "waiting" is utterly passive from political views. Author seizes upon one strand in complex Jewish tradition, that of religious quietism, and transforms it into the very fountainhead of Judaism: quietistic apoliticism is the fundamental expression of Jewish faith. (The author acknowledges that in other areas, such as earning a livelihood and health, divine governance of human affairs does not contradict human initiative; but he asserts, without even attempt at adequate distinction, that this does not apply to redemption of Israel -- here only God can act, not man. VM, 137). Hence, the very idea of an independent Jewish State before or without Messiah is heretical. Political initiative is a gesture of defiance of the divine Redeemer (VM, 7); it is an act of arrogance and is "cynical" or dog-like (VM, 113).

2. Sources. (a Jewish religious doctrine must be validated from Jewish sources.)

a) Talmud (Ket. 111a) discusses halakhic problem as to whether husband and wife can legally compel one the other to change residence from Land of Israel to Babylon and vice-versa. Appended to this - a lengthy discourse, based on Scriptural verses, in which tradition is recorded that at destruction of Temple and beginning of exile, God administered a number of oaths; four of them are especially relevant. God made Israel swear *לֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים* (will not use force in mass return to "א"); *לֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים* (loyal to countries of dispersion); *לֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים* (not use initiative in hastening advent of Messiah prematurely). Also, He adjured gentile nations *לֹא תִכְרֹס בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל* (not oppress Israel in exile more than necessary or bearable). Now, everyone agrees that other nations violated oath... But some Talmudists (as: *אֵלֶּיךָ הָיָה*) maintain that the oaths are all one package-deal; and since gentiles violated their oath, other oaths binding Israel are null and void. Satmarer, however, considers this both heresy and nonsense (VM, 135).

b) Now, key here is that in Talmud we have Halakhah (law) and Agadah (non-legal portions - legend, philosophy, general wisdom, etc.) Halakhah is normative, decisive, and follows systematic form. Agadah, though possessing mines of Jewish

wisdom, is non-legal, hence, not require decision between competing points of view, and given to hyperbole - hence non-normative. Satmarer, however, insists that this passage is not Agadah, but Halakhah (VM 12) and proceeds to apply to it whole, complex, systematic halakhic methodology of analysis and decision. ^{The results are often grotesque.} (This involves him in a number of immediate difficulties - such as Maimonides' omission of whole passage of "oaths" from his legal code when he discusses Messiah. The author's response is fanciful, circuitous and devious gymnastics: the "oaths" are not technically oaths but - far more than oaths! They are fundamentals of Judaism, the essence of the faith! (VM 67). He is reduced to similar extravagant dialectics to overcome Maimonides' rational, non-miraculous interpretation of Messianism [ib. 71ff, 146].)

c) There are other issues which Satmarer dismisses - quite unconvincingly. Thus, Balfour Declaration and UN vote on establishing State of Israel ought to cancel out argument that Zionism violates oaths of לֹא יִהְיֶה לָנוּ מֶלֶךְ וְלֹא יִהְיֶה לָנוּ מֶלֶךְ and לֹא יִהְיֶה לָנוּ מֶלֶךְ וְלֹא יִהְיֶה לָנוּ מֶלֶךְ yet author gives this short shrift, despite important authority (לֹא יִהְיֶה לָנוּ מֶלֶךְ) to the contrary (VM 149).

d) His most important post-Talmudic source is a remarkable statement by the MaHaRaL of Prague that forbids transgression of oaths if nations force Jews physically to return to Israel, even under

pain of torture and death! (A critic of the Satmarer, R. Menachem M. Kasher, in his " *דבר אמת* ", has pointed out that the MaHaRaL has been misread and misinterpreted by Satmarer. Further, the statement is patently absurd, for to resist efforts by gentiles to force us to return to because of oaths would entail violating oath of *לשון הרע* !)) This becomes a locus classicus for Satmarer, and source for him to elevate the precipitate return to *י"ד* to rank of most solemn sin - that of *אכילת ערס* ... equal in severity to idolatry, unchastity, and murder.

e) Hence, Satmarer concludes that *זוהר* , human initiative in precipitating redemption is vilest sin available to Jews today, and Zionism thus is arch-heresy of our times. -- and, of course, Herzl is the heresiarch of modern Jewish history. For only God can redeem, and any endeavor by man to hasten process is a breach of faith and an intolerable and perfidious act of arrogance.

B - 2nd: Sequence of Redemption. Torah and Jewish tradition speak of End of Days as including both national restoration and spiritual renaissance - geulah and teshuvah, Redemption and Repentance. NK hold that there can be no geulah without prior teshuvah, and that this sequence is crucial to belief in redemption. Even if Messiah were to come before mass repentance of Jewish people, the redemption would be delayed until such collective return to God took place (VM 81-83).

One who denies this necessary sequence is equal to one who denies belief in Messiah (ib. 84). But Zionism is source of denial, atheism, and heresy (VM 14). Whole movement of Jewish nationalism is but an imitation of the gentiles (VM 124). Obviously then, attrition of religion caused by Zionism vitiates any claim by Zionism to be precursor or agent of redemption.

C. 3rd: Agents of Redemption can only be the Pious. It is inconceivable and absurd that God should bring on redemption by means of those who deny and hate Him. Hence, Zionists and the State of Israel are in effect obstacles to the true redemption (VM 9, 216; GT 6) because they are source of irreligion.


D. 4th: Messianic State = Complete Theocracy. Satmarer holds that democracy is valid for non-Jewish political communities. For Jews, however, democracy is utterly unacceptable. Only the laws of the Torah, as interpreted by its authorized expositors, are applicable to Jews (VM 164). The Zionist state, a majority of which is non-religious, and of which even the religious Zionist faction accept democracy, is untenable and reprehensible.

E. Summary. Four major ideas: Only divine, no human political initiative; spiritual return must precede political redemption; agents of redemption must be the pious, those committed to God and Torah; and the Jewish State must be a thorough theocracy, not a democracy.

Hence, any cooperation with the Zionists or the State of Israel is a major sin (VM 14); this would be true even if the whole government were saints and sages (ib. 139). One should rather submit to martyrdom than become a member of the Knesset (ib. 152). Those who cooperate with the government - such as the Agudath Israel - do so because of unworthy motives: they are bribed by power, and other principles are compromised (ib. 220). The evil king of Biblical times, Ahab, had status of king; but Zionist government, because its very inception is in defiance of Torah, cannot be accorded status of even de facto legitimate government (ib. 208).

IV. NK INTERPRETATION OF CONTEMPORARY JEWISH HISTORY

A. The ideology so far delineated serves as criterion by which to judge and evaluate climactic events of current Jewish history. That such an evaluation is necessary, is evident from the triumph of just those forces condemned by this ideology. Zionism, execrated as heresy, has the allegiance of the majority of the Jewish people. Its political aspirations have been realized in the establishment of the State of Israel. The very groups so deplored by NK have scored phenomenal military successes. The great majority of religious Jews identify with the Government and the State and with those organizations that believe in full cooperation -- while the NK dwindles into more and more precarious marginality, and must resort to futile gestures of violence in order to make its presence felt. Under such conditions, a rather extreme philosophy of history is called for.

B. The Rabbi of Satmar, as the chief theoretician of NK, does indeed offer such a philosophy of history. He sees the events of modern Jewish history, from Herzl to the Six-Day War, not as secular history, certainly not as sacred history - rather, as an elaborate, diabolical scheme to ensnare Israel by dangling before it the wicked temptation of Zionism. In a word, the NK's reading of this history is: demonological. The State of Israel is a satanic kingdom that has unloosed dark powers upon the Jewish people. The Satmarer even names the demon in charge of this unholy intervention in human affairs: Samael. Unknown in Bible or Talmud, Samael is frequently mentioned in the Zohar and Kabbalistic literature. The Satmarer does not even consider a symbolic interpretation of demons in the Kabbalah. Samael, general of the profane legions, is charged by God with ensuring the success of Zionism and the State of Israel (VM 10). God permits this because Zionism is a , a trial or test for Jews: will they succumb to evil illusion of their own autonomous initiative in effecting redemption, or will they faithfully refrain from interfering in the course of the divinely preordained destiny of Israel? (VM 8). Such demonic intrusions into Jewish history occurred before, in form of pseudo-Messianic movements. Zionism is just the latest such manifestation; its precursors are the Messianic pretenders, such as Tartozeba, those of medieval Yemen, and, of course, Sabbatai-Zevi (VM 13). It has happened that Samuel triumphed, and majority of Jewish people was misled: our people succumbed to paganism in First Commonwealth. Or, in days of Gideon, only 300 people were left who did not kneel to the idol (VM 8, 89). We who dissent, the NK assert,

are the ones who will save the entire people from the Satanic ensnarement of Zionism. The picture is two-tone: black and white. The Zionists are *פילנט, פאלד*; we are *פ'י'ס*. It is as simple as all that.

C. Holocaust. This demonology of history focuses, of course, on the most demonically apocalyptic event in all/^{human}history: Holocaust. Politically, this was response to incitement by Zionists when they challenged Hitler, declared war on Germany, and this aroused fury of the tyrant (GT 11). Spiritually, the Holocaust is divine punishment for transgressing the three oaths and yielding to Samael (VM 5,182). It was only the prayer of the righteous (i.e., NK) which effected rescue of the remnants of Jewry (GT 18).

But the question arises: did not the Zionists attempt to save pitiful few survivors of the Holocaust? Did not the State of Israel become the haven and refuge for the Displaced Persons? The Satmarer refuses to give them any moral credit: since they were responsible for the original massacre, they are not to be lauded for opening their home to the straggling survivors. In a parable, he refers to the Zionists as criminal arsonists who stay for the fire and then enthusiastically help to save a few survivors (VM 185,6).

D. The Israeli War of Independence. The Zionists are responsible not only for the Holocaust, but for the three wars form 1948-1967. (GT 171) Were it not for their political ambitions, England would have permitted

an unlimited number of refugees to Palestine (VM 184). Their policies are to be blamed as well for causing the expulsion of the Jews from the Arab countries (VM 183).

E. The Sinai War. The Sinai invasion of 1956 was morally unjust. The use of the Suez Canal was not worth jeopardizing human lives in battle and the difficulties that ensued for Egyptian Jewry (GT 88). Any war carried out not in accordance with opinion of Torah authorities is not a war but simple murder (VM 112). This military action of 1956 led to the war of 1967. The Arab threats of genocide against Israel were the direct result of Israeli intransigence (GT 11). The Zionists were the aggressors, for aggression is in character with their over-reaching in forcing the redemption (GT 10, 89).

F. Six-Day War. The Satmarer is of two minds as to why Israel won this war. At one point he attributes it to the prayers of the righteous (i.e., NK), for which he feels he must apologize, since both Arabs and Zionists are Pr 12 (GT 12,13,88). Elsewhere he reverts to his demonological theory: Samael was at work again (GT 7).

But was not the dramatic Israeli victory a true miracle, as religious Zionists and even non-Zionists - indeed, even some secularists, declared? First, answers the Satmarer in an almost rationalistic vein, a true believer is unimpressed with miracles; his faith cannot be shaken even by supernatural attacks against it (GT 7). Second, as we have said, if there were miracles, they were part of Samael's satanic designs further to ensnare unsuspecting Jews (ib) Third, it was just extra-

ordinary success, but no miracle at all (GT 8). All of what occurred was perfectly natural, and largely the end product of Arab technological backwardness and military inferiority (GT 36). Reports that the war brought in its wake a renewal of religious feeling are discounted by the Satmarer, who compares it to the religious enthusiasm in the hey-day of Sabbatai-Zevi, and thus must be considered illusory at best, satanic at worst (GT 100). Donning the mantle of prophecy, the Satmarer expects more apparently miraculous victories for Israel. But this does not gladden his heart, for it will be the work of Samael and will thus further delay the true redemption (GT 137).

V. NK POLICY. As result of this approach to contemporary history:

A. The policy must, in accord with the divine will is that the State now be dissolved. It should be emphasized that this does not by any means imply the advocacy of a permanent exile in Diaspora. Paradoxically, NK favors giving up Statehood now so that, by this gesture of renunciation of human initiative and overreaching, the Messiah may come and usher in the complete redemption and restore Israel to its ancient eminence. Meanwhile, the UN will see to it that the Jewish population is protected (GT 10).

B. Until such time that the State is dismantled (and the Messiah will have to undo the entire State and rebuild it on sacred rather than demonic foundations - GT 133), the Stmarer strongly disapproves visiting the Western Wall, and other shrines and holy places. The possession of the Wall by the evil, corrupt, and unclean Zionists

is an unmitigated disaster (GT 153). They have desecrated the shrines by assembling at them frivolously and immodestly (GT 142). To visit them, even with the right motives, implies support of the Zionist State (GT 139, 142). Since the UN is opposed to Israeli rule over the Old City of Jerusalem, therefore residing there is a violation of the oath אמרת לך אמרת, and is to be discouraged unless one is a true saint (GT 160). At times his logic is piquant: if God had wanted Jews to return to the Old City, He would have arranged for them to return to it בתיאור, under proper aegis, and not in violation of the oath (GT 162). He uses similar reasoning - perhaps even more astonishing - in counseling against visiting the המכנס הנצחי (GT 165).

C. Consistent to the end, the Satmarer declares that the commandment of "אלוהים" is applicable only to העיר זמן and not in force today (VM 37f). And the ingathering of the exiles is therefore contrary to Judaism (VM 55).

D. Finally, the NK are not disturbed, at least ideologically, by the successes of their Zionist adversaries. He does not subscribe to triumphalism, the idea that political triumph validates the ideology of the victors (GT 92) -- an idea that used to be part of Catholicism's self-justification. Numbers are no guarantee of truth. Why does the Talmudic formula read יחיד ורבין הלכה כרבין; would not the more economic expression הלכה כרבין be a sufficient legal maxim? The Satmarer answers: we are to follow the majority only

when אֱלֹהֵינוּ , when the One - the One God, the אֱלֹהֵינוּ - is with the אֱלֹהֵינוּ (VM 239). Indeed, he tells us in a psychologically revealing aside, the NK are the only real Jews left. All the others possess the souls of the אֲנֵינוּ , the multitude of non-Jews, the riff-raff or rabble that accompanied the Israelites out of Egypt in the days of Moses (VM 229).

VI. CRITIQUE

A. Clearly, we are dealing here with a fringe group that, in its extremism, its hyperbolic language, and its extravagance and simplicism, reveals a psychological pattern of defensiveness. Yet its fierce independence of thought, its refusal to be outvoted on matters of principle, the courage of its convictions, and its coherency of ideology, cannot but elicit our admiration. Courage, especially idealistic courage, expressed at great personal sacrifice, is so rare that even if we disagree with its thesis, deserves our respect.

B. However, the NK's uncompromising ideological integrity is not matched by an equal intellectual honesty. R. Menachem M. Kasher and others have pointed out the careless manner in which the sources are treated so as to yield a predetermined conclusion. The Talmudic passage of the oaths, for instance, can be easily disputed. Most objectionable is his misapplication of legal, halakhic methodology to non-legal, agadic texts. Classical talmudists often did this, but

only as a kind of academic playfulness, never imagining it to be a bona fide avenue for determining practical issues or ambiguously. There are many other instances where the Satmarer tries to fit a square pig in a circle; his intellectual deviousness is a tribute to mental agility, not to scholarly objectivity. The Jewish tradition certainly does possess, here and there, a quietistic element. But it certainly does not predominate. Similarly, his simplistic, demonological interpretation of Jewish history would be amusing were it not frightening.

C. The NK are incapable of appreciating that the Jewish tradition often embraces divergent views, and that it is neither necessary nor desirable to reconcile them. They emerge with an awesomely consistent ideology. But its very coherence and consistency is itself an indication of its vulnerability. One need not return to Marx's philosophic criticism of ideology to feel that the ideology here discussed ignores much of Jewish tradition and literature -- which, reflecting life itself, possesses ambiguities, ambivalences, paradoxes. Thus, his simplistic views of Messiah, while it may long have been popular, ignores the element of absurdity that must of necessity participate in the Messianic process. Of course it is absurd to view one who denies Messiah as his very agent of redemption. But then, the survival of Israel, its restoration, indeed the very notion of an eventual vindication of the divine promise to Abraham -- these too

are by nature absurd. No wonder that Maimonides counseled against any extravagant speculations about Messianic days. But such ideas are anathema to super-consistent ideologues for whom intellection is subtly transformed to mystification.

D. Finally, with all our aversion to its outrageously anti-Israel stance, two things ought to be remembered by us. First, while the NK, theoretically and practically, are totally opposed to the State of Israel, they are not opposed to Israel as a people. On the contrary, they oppose the State because they favor the people. We may deplore them - as I certainly do - but we must ^{not} indiscriminatingly condemn them (as has been done) as religious anti-Semites.

Second, the existence of this group, scandalous as it sometimes may seem, can prove a much needed corrective. There are times when Israel seems threatened by an inflated view of its own power and prowess. Its triumphs may, if it is not careful, go to its head, and militarism may begin to raise its ugly head. An ancient Pharaoh once boasted that "my power and my might have wrought all this." Modern Israel must scrupulously avoid this fallacy. The NK are constant reminders that activism can lead to the illusion of self-sufficiency, and self-sufficiency to arrogance, and arrogance to presumptuousness. Even if the medicine of the NK is too strong for the illness it seeks to prevent, it is a medicine nonetheless.