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PACIFISM, THE JEWISH MISSION, AND RELIGIOUS ANTI-ZIONISM: RABBI AARON SAMUEL TAMARES IN CONTEXT¹ David Wolkenfeld

Introduction

During the Russian-Ottoman War (1877-1878), Aaron Samuel, a young Jewish boy in the Lithuanian *shtetl* of Maltsh, witnessed his neighbors receive news of their son's death. Many decades later, Rabbi Aaron Samuel Tamares (1869-1931), a writer, philosopher, and community rabbi for the Lithuanian village of Milejczyce,² described his memory of that day in his autobiography:

During the Russian-Turkish War the terrible news came to [R. Tamares]'s gentile neighbor that his son had fallen in the war. The mother of the soldier cried out bitterly and the little Jewish boy cried along with her. From that time onward, the boy was obsessed by thoughts regarding the terror of war.³

This experience infused in R. Tamares a deep hatred of warfare and violence that would lead him to espouse a fierce pacifism that shaped his reactions to social movements, such as revolutionary socialism, and informed his imagination as a *darshan*. R. Tamares's pacifism was also connected to an idealistic vision of Jewish destiny. Pacifism, to R. Tamares, was not just a spiritual ideal, but an inherent part of the mission and purpose of the Jewish people.

R. Tamares's support for Jewish spiritual renewal and skepticism towards the separatist orientation of the Eastern European rabbinate, together led R. Tamares to support Zionism. However, he was quickly disillusioned with the

¹ This article was originally written for a course on Zionism taught by Professor David Fishman at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University.

² R. Tamares inherited the rabbinic post in Milejczyce from his father and held it until his death. In addition to the interests discussed here, R. Tamares is known for his unique fulminating against the fossilization of halakha.

³ Aaron Samuel Tamares, "Biography of *Ahad ha-Rabbanim ha-Margishim*," in *Pacifism and Torah* (Hebrew), ed. Ehud Luz (Jerusalem: Dinur Center, 1992), 3. All translations of R. Tamares are my own. R. Tamares's autobiography is written in third person.

movement and became a vocal opponent of Zionism. To R. Tamares, the Zionist focus on developing Jewish nationalism and the creation of a territorial nation-state based on the model of contemporary European nationalism amounted to a betrayal of the vital Jewish mission in world history: to be a non-political, and even “anti-political,” nation. R. Tamares recanted the essays he had written supporting Zionism, forbade them from being reprinted, and penned new essays and books explaining his pacifist vision of Judaism and ideological opposition to Zionism.

Of course, R. Tamares was not the only East-European rabbi to write essays or books characterizing Zionism as a betrayal of essential elements of the Jewish faith. However, whereas some Hasidic rabbis, R. Shalom Dov Baer of Lubavitch among them, attacked Zionism as a betrayal of the Jewish dream of redemption, R. Tamares argued that Zionism was a betrayal, not of the vision of a perfect and miraculous redemption, rather of the spiritual mission, pacifist message, and necessarily non-political methods of Judaism.

The outbreak of World War I confirmed R. Tamares’s negative assessment of European civilization. He witnessed the carnage brought by nationalism and political activism. He saw the noble ideals of democracy and socialism tainted by a quest for power. His belief that only a pure, non-political Judaism could offer humanity hope for a different future was reinforced. In the first decades of the twentieth century, R. Tamares looked with scorn on a discredited European civilization, with alarm at Jewish attempts, through Zionism and assimilation, to mirror what he perceived to be the worst attributes of that civilization, and continued adamantly to advance a message of Jewish pacifism.

R. Tamares’s idiosyncratic vision of pacifist Orthodoxy is more than just a “road not taken” in Jewish intellectual history. For those who have thrown in their lot with Zionism and the State of Israel today, his writings are worth revisiting. Post-Zionist Jews and others searching for a new purpose to Jewish national life and a peaceful existence in the modern Middle East may find value in both R. Tamares’s vision of the Jewish nation as well as his pacifist ideals.

Pacifism and Anti-Nationalism

As his early encounter with his gentile neighbors demonstrates, R. Aaron Samuel Tamares recoiled in horror in reaction to warfare and violence. As the young Aaron Samuel cried together with his neighbors, he wondered to himself how those same neighbors could decorate their home with a patriotic picture of a Russian army engaging the enemy:

The boy would stand there for hours unable to break his gaze from the picture. He was dumbfounded by people. How could they find it in their hearts to commit the acts of violence depicted in the picture [...]? And together with those questions he was perplexed by this mother, stricken by fate, how could she

tolerate the presence of this picture in her home? And what was it that compelled her to look, without any break, at that same cursed vision, that had caused agony to so many mothers?⁴

At the age of nineteen, Aaron Samuel Tamares went to learn at the *mussar*-movement affiliated *Kolel Perushim*. While studying there, he attracted a circle of like-minded *batlanim* [idlers], so called for their lack of interest in discussing rabbinic placements and careers. When not immersed in study, they would gather to hear the young R. Tamares expound upon the “evil oppression that exists” in the world.⁵ The worst form of oppression, young Tamares would exclaim, was war: “taking people from their homes, against their will, and setting them in front of the firing cannons [...] this is the pinnacle of dread against which a special struggle must be initiated.”⁶

Warfare, for R. Tamares, was the worst form of injustice, not only in degree, but in quality as well.⁷ The recognition of justifiable violence, such as exists when violence is yielded by a state, allows violent urges to corrupt the intellect with lies. Justified violence was therefore qualitatively more harmful and pernicious than violence with no claimed justification. In a *derashah* for Passover, which will be discussed in greater detail below, R. Aaron Samuel Tamares expounded upon the types of wickedness that can be found among people:

The evil that is intellectual, the evil that is lying, the evil that is political—that is to say, evil that brings alongside itself an excuse, is the greatest source of destruction in the world. It is the source of all of the disasters and destruction since the time when humanity began, in a small way, to perfect its intellectual capabilities, such as they are. For from that time, private murder, the natural murder of an individual falling upon another, has decreased. But, in place of that decrease, the lying form of murder has increased. And what is that lie? The formation of nations, which are “clubs” organized together for the sake of pursuing and afflicting other nations weaker than they are.⁸

Here, R. Tamares links the artificial groupings of people into nations, and the ensuing national sentiments coupled with “intellectual violence,” corrupt minds that justify murder.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷ Aaron Samuel Tamares, “Freedom,” in *Pacifism and Torah* (Hebrew), ed. Ehud Luz (Jerusalem: Dinur Center 1992), 125.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

Aversion to Violent Revolution and Marxism

R. Tamares's commitment to nonviolence led him to reject the violent tactics of revolutionaries. Although he recognized the same oppression and injustice as the most ardent bomb-throwing anarchist, he could not countenance the use of terror, even in the most noble of goals. While still in the *Kolel Perushim*, R. Tamares told the other *batlanim* that their hatred of oppression and injustice must not lead them to violence:

When he told them of the need to struggle against oppression, his intention was not terror, i.e. placing a bomb under the carriage of some minister. First of all, because such behavior was against the spirit of the *gemara*, second, because that very act is itself an act of war. The proper way to struggle against oppression is to educate the masses and to give them the ability to distinguish between good and evil.¹

R. Tamares's pacifism pulled him towards and also away from socialism. Initially, the socialist disdain for war earned R. Tamares's strong support.² However, when the various European socialist parties supported their governments during the First World War, R. Tamares's pacifism led him to turn against them:

He [R. Tamares] was silenced when he found out that the socialists from all the different lands, and the Russian socialists included, who only a moment before the war had agitated each one against his own government, once those same governments declared war and invited the socialists to participate in the fight, the socialists were instantly appeased and began to shout patriotic cheers. Each one handed authority to his own government to play with them in the comedy of "national liberation."³

But even deeper than a political disillusionment with the socialist parties over their support for the various war efforts of their own nations, R. Tamares, already before the First World War, had found the entire Marxist way of thinking unsatisfying. "Marxism was a food that was too dry, he desired a socialism of the heart, not a socialism of numbers."⁴ R. Tamares was greatly moved by socialist literature that aimed at arousing sympathy for the struggling workers and contempt for wealthy capitalists. But he could not bring himself to endorse a political program that sought to replace one ruling class for another. A "socialism of numbers," he felt, would only replace one type of oppression with another. Marxist materialism would guarantee that a rising

¹ Tamares, "Biography," 4.

² *Ibid.*, 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

proletariat would seek to gain only material benefits for itself, and never seek to reform the human heart.⁵

Even still, R. Tamares was sensitized to the oppression and injustice that socialists were struggling against. Yet because R. Tamares considered violence to be the worst form of injustice and oppression, he could not support any movement that would attempt to use those tools in the service of even the highest ends. Ultimately, R. Tamares believed that the most pressing problems facing humanity were not political problems, nor did they have political solutions; rather, R. Tamares believed they were spiritual problems, and he felt that oppression, injustice, and violence, could only be confronted through spiritual resistance and spiritual renewal, first on an individual level, and then on a broader scale.⁶

Passover and Spiritual Resistance

R. Tamares's *derashah* [sermon] for *Shabbat ha-Gadol* in 1906 is a particularly eloquent explication of his vision of spiritual renewal, opposition to oppression, and commitment to pacifist methods. The *derashah*, given the title "*Herut*," is collected in a volume called *Musar ha-Torah ve-ha-Yahadut*, published in Vilna in 1921. This collection of *derashot* that R. Tamares gave on *Shabbat Shuvah*, *Shabbat ha-Gadol*, and other occasions, demonstrates the facility with which he utilized the *derashah* genre to develop his thinking in a creative fashion and to organize his challenging thoughts around simple and familiar homiletic units. Additionally, the *derashah* format allowed him to inject his lofty idealistic vision of Jewish pacifism into the annual celebrations and religious observances of his community.

"*Herut*" begins with praises of freedom: Passover is a holiday devoted to that value, and it is indeed a worthy ideal to not only yearn for, but to actively strive to achieve. In "*Herut*," R. Tamares presents the experience of the Seder night and the memory of the Exodus from Egypt as two cornerstones of a distinctly Jewish strategy for achieving freedom that is different from the freedom as sought after and practiced by Western revolutionaries:

We can see a little bit of difference between the methods of "taking one's freedom" of the European political parties, and our way of achieving freedom. They took freedom, for example, during the French Revolution, by "barricades" or by throwing bombs upon some despot or another. And we try to achieve freedom by making a seder, eating *matzah*, singing *hallel*...that is to say, by means of repeating well on our lips the memory of the freedom of the Exodus, the Godly flame will be fanned within our souls and we will remember His kindness and His

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

actions.⁷

Not surprisingly, R. Tamares found the Jewish method of achieving freedom superior to the political struggles of non-Jews:

Their strategy of making those revolutions, to respond with evil to the evil of the wicked, can possibly succeed, but it is also possible that they will make matters worse. And in any case, they are nothing more than a temporary cure that is effective for only a short period of time. Just as we have seen take place in all of the lands where freedom was won through a violent revolution, again a short time later, the affliction of despotism returns to the body politic as before. The true cure against despotism, burning out the evil to its roots, is to be found precisely in the Jewish “revolution” of making a Seder if only Israel understand well the idea that is contained in the Seder [...] and the true meaning of *zeman heruteinu*.⁸

R. Tamares then sets out to explain the specific understanding of freedom and slavery that Passover is designed to impart. First, he articulates the philosophical distinctions between two types of wickedness:

There are two types of evil actions that occur among human beings. That is to say, they emerge from one of two distinct sources. There is evil that comes from physical and bodily sources, and there is wickedness that comes from the intellectual side [...] The bodily destruction falls under the framework of “good and bad” and the intellectual component is under the framework of “truth and falsehood.”⁹

Physical and material evil is the cause of “simple, natural murder,”¹⁰ as well as other acts motivated by anger alone. Theft and other actions that are motivated by greed, envy, or lust are likewise the outcomes of this physical wickedness. Intellectual evil on the other hand, causes murderous actions that are “accompanied by justifications and excuses.”¹¹ There is a lie or falsehood at the root of intellectual evil since an unjust act gets disguised as a justifiable one. According to R. Aaron Samuel Tamares, this justified wickedness is the greatest evil, both because it is caused by the corruption of man’s higher mental faculties, and because it is responsible for large scale massacres and oppression, even as civilization has slowly stamped out simple physical wickedness and “natural

⁷ Tamares, “Freedom,” 127.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

murder.”¹²

R. Tamares next explains that the enslavement of one people by another is a manifestation of the second, more pernicious, form of wickedness. Only a corrupt intellect justifies the malicious rule of one person over another.¹³ The spiritual message, therefore, of the Exodus is that God’s opposition to falsehood, and in particular the intellectual corruption that can justify slavery, is so severe that he intervened in history to rescue the Israelites and make clear that opposition. Furthermore, Egyptian slavery and Exodus was a necessary precursor to revelation to ensure that the Torah itself would not become a tool in the arsenal of the wicked. We are meant to learn from the Torah’s laws an elevated ethical sensitivity, not use them to attack other Jews for their minor transgressions.¹⁴

Thus far, R. Tamares has provided a richer understanding of Passover as a holiday of freedom, but he has not yet explained how freedom can be achieved in the absence of divine intervention and why pacifist methods are the superior method of achieving freedom. To answer those questions, R. Tamares explains that the superiority of pacifist methods is the result of the intellectual nature of the Egyptian slavery, and other large-scale oppressions. The slave can only be kept in bondage if he himself acknowledges the legitimacy of the arrangement.¹⁵ The path to freedom, and the ability to maintain that freedom, depends upon internalizing the message of the Exodus, namely, that God defends the weak, represents truth, and is opposed to the falsehood and intellectual corruption that is expressed in oppression.¹⁶ If the victim of oppression denies the legitimacy of that oppression, and asserts that God, too, is opposed to oppression, then the victim is already better off; the slave is already partially free. This is the purpose of the rituals of Passover. They remind us what God’s values are, and that freedom from oppression is our birthright as people.

In contrast to utilizing peaceful Passover rituals, R. Tamares believed that the use of violence to achieve freedom or justice is doomed to failure for two reasons. First, R. Tamares was concerned that an individual who used violent means in self-defense, would ultimately come to use those same means aggressively.¹⁷ Second, he believed that any use of violence would in the long-run only strengthen the rule of force and weaken the forces of justice:

A whole nation, just as an individual, must arrange its way of life on the foundation of the aphorism mentioned by Tosafot (*Bava Kama* 23), “one must be more concerned about harming others than in being harmed by others.” Indeed, for when a

¹² *Ibid.*, 130.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

person strives to guard his own fists from causing harm to others he causes, through this, the reign of the God of truth and justice over the world, and he gives strength to the kingdom of righteousness. This strengthening of righteousness will in turn guard him against being harmed by others. This is not the case if he prioritizes his own self-defense and keeps his fists ready to defend against the attacks of others. Behold, by this very way of thinking he weakens the power of justice and arouses the characteristics of wickedness.

As the text of the Passover Haggadah states, “And I shall pass [through Egypt] on this night—I and not an emissary.” The Holy Blessed One could have given Israel the ability to exact revenge on the Egyptians themselves. However the Holy Blessed One did not want to show them how to use their own fists. Even though at that moment it would be to protect themselves from the wicked, it would end up causing the spread of the use of the fist throughout the world, and the defenders would eventually become pursuers [...]

We can now explain the *beraita* that discusses the verse, “and you shall not leave, not any one, from the door of his home until the morning.” Rav Yosef taught, “once permission was given to the destroyer, he will not differentiate between wicked and righteous.” At first glance, this *beraita* is a deep contradiction to the statement in the Haggadah of “I and not an emissary.” How can the *beraita* say, “once permission was given to the destroyer!” But according to our ways the two statements match. For the *beraita* is coming to explain why the Holy Blessed One sought to exact vengeance Himself and did not allow the Israelites even to look. The answer is that God acted in this way so as not to arouse the destroyer that is within the Israelites themselves. For once permission is given, he will not distinguish between wicked and righteous and the defender will in the end become a pursuer.¹⁸

These passages recognize that violence in self-defense can be just, yet R. Tamares argued that resorting to violence was always self-defeating when confronting wickedness of the intellectual variety. This type of wickedness emerges out of a distorted mind. Such a mind wrongly believes that the strong are allowed to abuse those weaker than they. By responding to this unjustified violence with yet more violence, the victim is agreeing with his oppressor that

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

force should be the prime determinant in human relations. In R. Tamares's wording, he "strengthens the power of the fist." R. Tamares does not discuss the use of violence in personal self-defense. Since such "natural and physical" wickedness is not accompanied by a corrupted intellect, on the contrary it is accompanied by a guilty conscience,¹⁹ there is no risk that responding violently in individual self-defense will strengthen a false belief about force.

The pacifist orientation of "*Herut*" is focused on the use of nonviolence in the quest for freedom. Although the message is universally applicable, "*Herut*" addresses the Jewish people and their own quest for freedom. Yet, in R. Tamares's other writings, pacifism is given a more important place: the very purpose of Jewish existence is to spread a pacifist morality throughout the world.

The Pacifist Mission of the Jewish People

R. Tamares wrote of a universal mission of the Jewish people. The basic idea is this: Jews exist as a people to spread the moral precepts of the Torah, including a pacifist aversion to bloodshed, to the rest of humanity. Since an aversion to bloodshed is part and parcel of the moral message of the Torah, the Jewish mission to humanity must be accomplished without the use of force. The suffering of the Jews in exile and attempts to alleviate that suffering, must therefore be evaluated in light of the Jews' purpose for existing as a people.

In "*Te'udat Yisrael: Kivush ha-Tevel u-Kivush ha-Yetzer*," another *derashah* published in the collection *Musar ha-Torah ve-ha-Yahadut*, R. Tamares develops a dialectical conception of progress. Material and spiritual progress follow one from the other and lift humanity from barbarism to moral civilization. Progress, in both of its aspects, is the selection of the good from the bad. Material progress is the refinement of what is useful from what is not useful. Spiritual progress is the refinement of good moral character from bad moral character. "Enlightenment" is R. Tamares's term for the effort to increase good over bad in the physical realm; "Torah" is the term for God's method to increase the good over the bad in the spiritual realm.²⁰

R. Tamares argued that both aspects of progress were valuable and necessary. Indeed, "*derekh eretz kadmah la-Torah*," that is, it is first necessary for civilization to establish a beachhead through material progress.²¹ However, technological civilization alone without concomitant moral development will result in great evil. The Pharaoh who enslaved the Jewish people, in R. Tamares's conception, was attempting physical technological development without moral development.²² The form of enlightenment that yields mastery over nature is the common destiny of humanity. Israel, however, was entrusted with the Torah to

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

²⁰ Aaron Samuel Tamares, "The Destiny of Israel: Conquest of the Earth or Conquest of the Heart," in *The Morality of the Torah and Judaism* (Hebrew) (Vilna: 1912), 80.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

²² *Ibid.*, 84.

promote morality among all people.²³ In a 1913 essay “*Le-She’eilat ha-Yahadut*,” R. Tamares reiterated this point, “Judaism, throughout its long existence, has but one destiny—to uplift the spirit of humanity in the image of the people of Israel, chosen by the Higher Intelligence to receive its Word.”²⁴

Once R. Tamares has claimed that the “Higher Intelligence” has imparted a moral model for all humankind upon the People of Israel, R. Tamares must flesh-out the salient content of that moral message. The pinnacle of Judaism’s moral message is an aversion to bloodshed, and the “extreme revulsion of the Jew towards murder and bloodshed,” was for R. Tamares, a source of confidence in the moral success of Judaism:

For what is there that is more precious and more holy to a living person than the blood that flows in his heart? Therefore, there can be no test more exacting, to make known the moral perfection of a person, than his attitude towards the blood of his fellow. “For the soul is in the blood,” the Torah says with the intention of increasing the value of the soul of one who has blood. But this verse will not lie if we interpret it also as reflecting on the soul of the other side. That is to say, the way in which a person treats the blood of his fellow is the prime test of the character of his soul.²⁵

We have already seen how R. Tamares, writing in his autobiography, reflected upon his childhood commiseration with his gentile neighbors over the loss of their son during the Russian-Ottoman War. That event did not merely sear into the consciousness of the future rabbi the grim reality of war. For R. Tamares, the co-mingled tears of the stricken parents and the Jewish boy symbolized the role of the Jewish people:

That action from long ago, the little Jewish boy crying alongside a gentile woman over the death of her son, a sacrifice of war, served [years later] as a symbol for the Jewish mission in the midst of the other nations, to arouse among all peoples the appropriate feeling of hatred for warfare. For it is only the free and refined Jewish spirit, that is composed of a combination of Torah and *galut* [exile], that is capable of feeling with exceeding poignancy the disgrace that it is to drag a human-being to be a “bull in the arena,” the horror that is bloodshed.²⁶

For R. Tamares, all people could come to appreciate the horror and injustice

²³ *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁴ Aaron Samuel Tamares, “On the Jewish Question,” in *Pacifism and Torah* (Hebrew) ed. Ehud Luz (Jerusalem: Dinur Center 1992), 149.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

²⁶ Tamares, “Biography,” 16.

of war. For many, such as the young Tamares's gentile neighbors, that realization only came when a son died in battle, and even then not completely. Nationalism clouded the vision of most people. The Jews, however, their moral consciousness refined by the experiences of the *galut*, were capable of a keen moral awareness and therefore had a crucial role to play in history.

A Reevaluation of *Galut*

As we have seen, R. Tamares believed that *galut* was responsible for purifying the moral sensitivity and moral judgment of the Jewish people. Several of his writings discuss *galut* and evaluate its hardships in light of the spiritual gains that can accrue to a nationless people. The arch evils afflicting the world, nationalism, warfare, and violent revolutionary struggle, were all evils that exilic existence had spared the Jews. The viability of the Jews' educational mission to humanity, and therefore the betterment of all humanity, was dependent upon the continued exilic existence of the Jews.

Furthermore, the powerlessness of exilic existence and the frequent victimization of the Jews in *galut* reinforced the moral teachings of the Torah. A victim of injustice understands the importance of justice; a victim of violence appreciates the horror of violence:

This destiny [of the renewal of the world through moral transformation] cannot be undertaken by any new political party or sect as effectively as that ancient people, whose yearning for freedom and justice are its ancient heritage from days gone by, that is to say the Nation of Israel in *galut*.²⁷

The long education of the Jew on the knees of the noble spirit of the Torah, on the one hand, and the low spirit of the burden of exile, on the other, removed from our midst all base egoism which is the filth of the primordial serpent.²⁸

As an individual too, R. Tamares grappled with the question of *galut*. He weathered his entire career serving as a rabbi in a small community, rejecting offers for a teaching career in Odessa.²⁹ Reflecting upon this self-imposed exile, R. Tamares concluded that a positive impact upon the world could be effected even in relative isolation and obscurity:

He [R. Tamares] involved himself, principally, in improving his own spiritual status [...] However, his inward concentration and focus did not mean that he despaired of repairing the world and considered that task to be lost from the outset. On the contrary, he believed that the redemption of the world, its

²⁷ Tamares, "Jewish Question," 155.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁹ Tamares, "Biography," 12.

renewal, and its improvement were sure to come. However, he was convinced that the renewal of the world would not come by means of shrewd politics nor through artificial organizations of society, rather only through sharpening the moral-esthetic sense—sharpening the ability to distinguish between good and evil. And, since according to this “war plan,” an individual went to battle first and foremost with his own self, it followed that there was no need for a freedom fighter to be in a central urban area, among the multitudes who can be organized into demonstrations in the street. Rather, it is possible to sit in a small village, and even in the forest, and be involved with liberating the world.³⁰

If an individual could liberate the world sitting in a small village or in the midst of a forest, a nation could also play a role in world history, even without a territory under its control. On the contrary, R. Tamares argued, exile could be advantageous for the truly crucial task of moral refinement:

Contemporary youths, members of the new movements, do not understand at all that Israel has a special destiny in the world [...] Because of this, they present the *galut* as a simple and secular phenomenon that does not contain within itself any advantage [...] Recently, they have decided amongst themselves “*beli neder*” to remove the *galut* with all the means at their disposal, whether to find some new land or to change the organization of the lands where they already reside. But all of their struggles are for naught.³¹

Exile, and accompanying antisemitism, are not, God forbid, some sort of incitement or pogrom from the Holy Blessed One when we fall behind in offering up to him “taxes” in the form of *mitzvot*. Rather, exile is a necessary result of our destiny and our role.³²

The exile scattered the Jews among the nations of the world and gave Jews the potential to serve as a pacifist and non-nationalist element within their host countries—freed by their statelessness from the morally corrupting effects of nationalism—bearing witness to the true outrage and horror of violence. Jewish patriotism during the First World War was therefore particularly upsetting to R. Tamares. Instead of serving as a moral example, offering sympathy to all victims of the war and condemnation to all combatants, Jewish communi-

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

³¹ Aaron Samuel Tamares, “The Destiny of the Prophets,” in *The Morality of the Torah and Judaism* (Hebrew) (Vilna: 1912), 132.

³² *Ibid.*, 133.

ties offered blind support for their homelands and an opportunity for moral excellence was lost.³³

Zionism: From Early Support to Intense Rejection

Given his positive evaluation of exilic Jewish existence, it is not surprising that R. Tamares was an opponent of the Zionist attempt to end the exile. Considering his disdainful attitude towards political activism, it is also not surprising that R. Tamares doubted that any meaningful gains could result from Zionist activities. Moreover, given R. Tamares's wholly spiritual and pacifist conception that he feels makes up the true Jewish identity, it is not so surprising that the Zionist dream of normalizing the Jewish condition—including a return to national life—was seen by R. Tamares as a betrayal of the Jewish mission.

What is somewhat surprising, however, is that R. Tamares was present in 1900 at the Fourth Zionist Congress in London—not as a protester or observer, but as a delegate!³⁴ R. Aaron Samuel Tamares's presence at the Fourth Zionist Congress was the culmination of a decade of vocal support for Zionism that began in his days as a yeshiva student and included offering the talents of his caustic pen in service of the new movement. The London Congress marked the pinnacle of R. Tamares's involvement with Zionism. As the character of the Zionist movement, its goals, and its means became clear to R. Tamares, and as his own thinking matured, R. Tamares retreated from his earlier support, recanted his pro-Zionist essays, and emerged as a passionate voice of religious anti-Zionism.

R. Tamares first identified as a Zionist during the years that he was a student at the yeshiva of Vollozhon, beginning in 1890. R. Tamares was a member of *Netzah Yisrael*, a student Zionist organization allied with *Hovevei Tziyon*.³⁵ This identification continued after Herzl's first Zionist Congress in 1897. R. Tamares was particularly attracted by Ahad Ha-Am's call to create a spiritual center for the Jewish people. R. Tamares understood Zionism to be an idealistic movement that would spark positive spiritual renewal among the Jews.³⁶ In "*Shilumim le-Riv Tziyon*," published in *Ha-Melitz* in 1899, R. Tamares predicted that Zionism and Jewish independence would enhance the spiritual heritage of the Jewish tradition.³⁷

Years later though, writing in his autobiography, R. Tamares described, with some sarcasm, his early attraction to Zionism:

Sometime later, starting in 1897, the Zionist Movement appeared: Herzl, the Congresses, the speech of Max Nordau from

³³ Tamares, "Biography," 17.

³⁴ Ehud Luz, introduction to *Pacifism and Torah* (Hebrew), by Aaron Samuel Tamares (Jerusalem: Dinur Center 1992), x.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, viii.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, ix.

³⁷ *Ibid.*,

the podium at the Congress, rebuking the nations and their governments for pursuing the Jews, his demand to the nations that they repair this injustice by handing *Eretz Yisrael* to the Jews (why an injustice which they had committed should be fixed with what is in the hands of others—i.e. the Turks—nobody had yet thought to ask that question). The rabbi [R. Tamares] supported this movement with all of his might and soul on account of his thinking that Zionism was a movement of freedom and justice, fighting against evil and oppression. He was dragged into this error by the above mentioned speech by Nordau; this rabbi was still lacking, (asking his forgiveness for saying so), the correct discernment to evaluate that type of “justice” which is found on the lips of those who fight—not for the redemption of man, but for territory [...] At that time no person had yet occasion to witness freedom fighters, of noble spirit, after they have achieved their goals, afflict and choke others with the same pain that had been done to them, all in the name of freedom.³⁸

R. Tamares had been particularly drawn to the cultural Zionism of *Ahad Ha'am*.³⁹ Although the cultural activities that the cultural Zionists advocated were a direct challenge to European Orthodoxy, which was quite happy to see the regnant European Jewish culture continue unabated, the cultural Zionist emphasis on a broader Jewish revival, that would encompass culture in all its forms, appealed to religious Jews whose conception of Judaism was more spiritual and idealistic than national or territorial. “The best of Orthodoxy,” in R. Tamares’s words, were drawn to Zionism by the cultural Zionist appropriation of the most “lofty verses of the Bible,” and the “brightest statements of *Hazal*.” Writing in his autobiography, R. Tamares responded to the appeal of cultural Zionism with a brief sarcastic remark, “How noble the spirit, how wonderful the Judaism, that depends upon ownership of a ‘private yard.’”⁴⁰ R. Tamares looked askance at a form of Judaism that primarily depended upon a piece of territory. He came to view the cultural Zionist linkage of Jewish renewal with Zionist political goals as a negation of the possibility for any spiritual potential of cultural Zionism.

Putting aside R. Tamares’s sarcastic remarks in his autobiography, written many years after his disillusionment with Zionism, the proximate causes of that disillusionment came precisely during the time that R. Tamares was most connected to the Zionist movement and its formal leadership. As a known rabbinic supporter of Zionism, following the publication of his 1899 article in

³⁸ Tamares, “Biography,” 6.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Ha-Melitz, R. Tamares participated in a regional meeting in Vilna of the Zionist movement. R. Tamares was distressed by the assimilated youth who dominated the meeting, leaving the rabbis present to sit and watch in silence:

The rabbis sat before them with guarded breath, as if afraid, God forbid, to disturb the great intelligences there, speakers of Russian, who used lofty words, completely new to the rabbis—such as “agitation,” “propaganda,” and “party discipline.” Not one word of “Jewish” was spoken from the mouths of those youths during the entire gathering, and certainly there was no remembrance of the “lofty and great Jewish ideal.” For two days these children sat and prattled above the heads of the rabbis—some of whom’s hair had already fallen from their beards—in Russian, a language that most of the rabbis could not even understand.

He [R. Tamares] left that gathering with a great cooling of his prior fervor. About one month later, in the summer of 5660 (1900), “*Ahad ha-Rabanim ha-Margishim*” [R. Tamares] was chosen by the Zionists of Brisk to attend the Fourth Zionist Congress, that was to take place in London, and he traveled there. All of those same flaws of emptiness, bureaucracy, and formality that were revealed at the meeting in Vilna, returned in greater force at the London Congress, and were the entirety of the Congress, except for the addition of a verbal announcement, which was met with applause deafening to the ears, when it was heard by the delegates who had gathered from all parts of the world: Dr. Herzl had been invited to eat lunch with the Turkish sultan!

The fantasies he had previously held regarding raising the Jewish spirit and struggling against oppression, that he had first thought to find within Zionism, melted away completely. Immediately, while still in London, he sent word to the Kovno Zionists forbidding them to print his [pro-Zionist] article in a booklet. He returned home with his spirit broken by disappointment.⁴¹

The practical and political orientation of official Zionism, together with its fixation on what to R. Tamares were trivialities—such as Herzl’s meetings with world leaders—lead R. Tamares to realize that the attraction he had felt towards Zionism was due to elements of the movement that were marginalized within the circles that counted. R. Tamares could not entertain an allegiance to an idealistic Zionism, devoted to confronting oppression and raising the Jewish spirit high, after sitting through regional Zionist meetings and international Zionist congresses where nobody with any influence within the movement was remotely interested in R. Tamares’s concerns. It was not the irreligiosity per-se

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

of the youths in Vilna, or the delegates in London, that was off-putting to R. Tamares. Indeed, the *haredi* intolerance for religious lapses among Zionists had originally pushed R. Tamares into the arms of Zionism.⁴² What R. Tamares found so offensive was the lack of Jewish spirit among the Zionist leadership, as R. Tamares defined it, a failing that was deeper than a simple binary of allegiance to, or non-observance of, the rituals of Judaism. R. Tamares saw an assimilationist spirit of the worst kind leading the Zionists in Vilna to conduct their meeting in sophisticated Russian. No Jew devoted to a true spiritual revival of Judaism could be seduced by the superficial nationalism of the Congress and visions of Herzl dining with princes and sultans.

As his own thought matured, R. Tamares's opposition to Zionism became far more categorical and absolute. It became more than a rejection of a particular movement with particular flaws. As R. Tamares's pacifist philosophy developed, and with it his positive evaluation of exilic Jewish existence, the very goals and material methods of Zionism became anathema to him. In his later, mature writings, Zionism became nothing less than a betrayal of a prime element of the Jewish mission in history: to impart ethical living and pacifist values to humanity while in exile.

The earliest manifestations of religious anti-Zionism were motivated by opposition to the irreligious lifestyle of many Zionists, the secular orientation of Zionist leaders from Leon Pinkser to Theodor Herzl, and the implicit challenge of Jewish nationalism to the traditional rabbinic leadership of Jewish communal life. Even Zionist sympathizers and supporters such as R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin came into conflict with the leadership of *Hovevei Tziyon* over the emerging irreligious character of the early *Hovevei Tziyon* settlement of Gadera and the Zionist movement's response to the *shemitah* of 1887. The denunciations of rabbis less favorably disposed to Zionism, such as Rabbi Hayim Soloveitchik of Brisk, were even more strident.⁴³ A common denominator between the equivocal support of Zionism by R. Berlin and the harsh denunciation of R. Soloveitchik was their characterization of the elements of Zionism that they each condemned as rebellious departures from proper and appropriate Jewish lifestyle.

Hasidic opposition to Zionism however, had been more intrinsic. As Aviezer Ravitzky observes in his *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, Hasidic anti-Zionism, specifically of the Munkacz and Satmar schools of thought, has always viewed Zionism and the State of Israel through an entirely theological lens, rather than through a pragmatic analysis of the movement and the state. They have claimed that Zionism is an inherently demonic force and deterministically doomed to failure, irrespective of the level of religious observance of the Zionists or the religious character or policies of the State of

⁴² *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴³ Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, trans. Michael Swirsky and Jonathan Chipman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996 (orig. Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1993)), 13.

Israel.⁴⁴

Ravitzky highlights how Zionism was attacked by Hasidic thinkers, specifically as a betrayal of the true redemption. Rabbi Shalom Dov Baer Schneersohn of Lubavitch, writing in 1899, attacked Zionist activities for undermining the perfect redemption of the future. The long awaited redemption of Israel, R. Schneersohn wrote, would be complete and entirely miraculous, beyond any event in Israel's history:

The redemption that took place through Moses and Aaron was also not a full one, for the Jewish people were once again enslaved; and even less so was the redemption at the hands of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah [...] In the present exile we must expect redemption and salvation only at the hands of the Holy One, Blessed be He, Himself, not by flesh and blood, and thus will our redemption be complete.⁴⁵

By characterizing the biblical redemption of Israel's history as incomplete in comparison to the future redemption, R. Schneersohn denied Zionists the ability to use those events as historic precedents or inspirations for their own planned liberations. "Let my people go," may have been a Zionist slogan, linking modern political liberation with the Exodus, but R. Schneersohn could respond that the authentic liberation and redemption of the future would transcend even the paradigm of the Egyptian Exodus.

The Bialer Rebbe, Rabbi Yitzhak Yaakov Rabinowitz, also attacked Zionism in his book, *Divrei Binah* (1913), for betraying the authentic faith in a miraculous Redemption:

Zionism represents the struggle of the Evil Urge and its assistants, who wish to bring us down, heaven forbid, by false and harmful opinions, claiming that, if Israel will not perform some concrete action to settle in the Holy Land and to actually work the land, then they will be unable to leave this bitter exile [...] In fact, Israel have no greater foe and enemy, who wish to deprive them of their pure faith, that our salvation and redemption transcends the way of nature and human intelligence.⁴⁶

In this passage, any attempt to improve the Jewish condition is a dangerous force eroding the sustaining faith in a perfect, complete, and entirely divine redemption.

Ravitzky portrays R. Schneersohn as the originator of religious anti-Zionism

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴⁵ S.Z. Landau and Joseph Rabinowitz, *Or la-Yesharim* (Warsaw: 1900), 58. Quoted and translated in Ravitzky, 17.

⁴⁶ Yitzhak Yaakov Rabinowitz, *Divrei Binah* (Lublin, 1913), 27a. Quoted and translated in Ravitzky, 18.

based in large part on his messianic argument. Only R. Schneersohn had developed this line of thinking among the contributors to the anti-Zionist booklet *Or la-Yesharim*, published in 1900. The other contributors focused their attacks on the irreligiosity of many Zionists.⁴⁷ By 1903, however, *Da'at ha-Rabanim*, a second booklet of anti-Zionist essays, contained numerous essays based upon the messianic argument first developed by R. Schneersohn.⁴⁸

This growing trend within religious anti-Zionism, that would reach its apotheosis in the anti-Zionism of Munkacz and Satmar, shares certain aspects with the anti-Zionism of R. Tamares's mature thought, but also departs from it in significant ways. Both varieties of religious anti-Zionism have surpassed a simplistic reaction against Zionist irreligiosity, but rather are responding to the essential nature of Zionism. A broadly tolerant outlook, such as what lead R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin to support Zionism despite his misgivings, would not have provided an answer to the religious anti-Zionism of either Rabbis Schneersohn or Tamares. Indeed, R. Tamares displayed great tolerance towards less observant Jews in his writings, yet he was a staunch opponent of Zionism. Observance of Jewish ritual would not have mollified R. Tamares, because for R. Tamares, the Zionist movement was intrinsically a movement that betrayed an essential (if not *the* essential) component of Judaism.

If R. Tamares shared the broader religious anti-Zionist perception of Zionism as an inherent betrayal of an essential characteristic of Judaism, he differed in his analysis of the nature of that betrayal. It was not a betrayal of the faith in redemption, *per se*, but rather a betrayal of an essential Jewish attribute of pacifism and anti-nationalism. As we saw above, R. Tamares rejected the assertion of both Zionists and Hasidic anti-Zionists that exile was entirely a punishment for Jewish sin. Exile, for R. Tamares, was intrinsic to the Jewish spiritual mission. It was the spiritual mission of Judaism itself that was threatened by Zionism. Jews were faced with a choice between becoming a nation operating on the political plane or remaining faithful to a religious tradition that demanded pacifism and rejection of the political.

Ironically, R. Tamares's understanding of the idealistic nature of Jewish peoplehood was mirrored by one of the strongest proponents of religious Zionism: Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaCohen Kook. Writing in the aftermath of "the war to end all wars," R. Kook discussed the timing of the return to Jewish national life:

We left the political arena under duress but also with a certain inner willingness, until that happy time when a polity could be governed without wickedness or barbarism. The delay has been necessary. We have been disgusted with the terrible iniquities of ruling during the evil age. Now the time has come, is very

⁴⁷ Ravitzky, 19.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

near, when the world will be refined and we shall be able to prepare ourselves [...] It is not for Jacob to engage in government as long as it entails bloodshed, as long as it requires a knack for wickedness.⁴⁹

As Ravitzky explains, based upon the messianic orientation of R. Kook's Zionism, R. Kook implicitly accepted the *haredi* critique of pre-messianic Jewish statehood. It seems from the above quote that R. Kook also implicitly accepted R. Tamares's critique of Jewish warfare and political activity. R. Kook's messianic Zionism was dependent upon a messianic framework through which R. Kook understood both Zionist colonization and the broader post-World War I international scene. R. Tamares saw the First World War as the nail in the coffin of European civilization and final proof of the horrors of war. Any remaining sympathy he felt towards Zionism was lost when the Zionist movement involved itself in the Allied war effort. In his words, "during the global bacchanalia, Zionism was revealed to be a twin sister to all the monsters of the world."⁵⁰ R. Kook was taken by the lofty rhetoric surrounding the war and believed that it was indeed the final war of an old global political paradigm and the dawn of a newer, "refined" world.

The First World War marked the dying of an old civilization and the end of a global political paradigm as both R. Tamares and R. Kook understood it. However, the Second World War and the Holocaust, which occurred only a few years after the deaths of R. Tamares in 1931, and R. Kook in 1935, might very well have shaken the attitudes of each towards Judaism and Zionism. R. Kook's messianism and belief in historical progress would have been challenged by humanity's sinking to new depths of brutality and violence and a State of Israel gaining and maintaining its independence through warfare in an as-of-yet-unredeemed world. Perhaps R. Tamares as well, so perceptive in his awareness of the costs of power, would have recognized in the destruction of the Holocaust, the costs of powerlessness.

⁴⁹ Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot* (Jerusalem: 1963), 14. Quoted and translated in Ravitzky 120.

⁵⁰ Tamares, "Biography," 19.