

Worlds Destroyed, Worlds Rebuilt: The Religious Thought of Rabbi Yehudah Amital

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Abstract: This essay presents an overview of the thought of Rav Yehudah Amital. Topics covered include his approach to ethics, spirituality, and history. The article points out Rav Amital's conception of natural ethics, natural piety, and natural sovereignty. It also highlights two tensions in his thought, that between the individual and the collective, and that between taking responsibility toward the past and embracing the future.

Biography: Rabbi Dr. Alan Brill teaches Jewish Philosophy at Yeshiva University. He is the Founder and Director of Kavvanah: Center for Jewish Thought, and the author of *Thinking God: The Mysticism of R. Zadok of Lublin* and has a forthcoming volume on Judaism and other religions. His previous contributions to *The Edah Journal* include the review essay, “An Ideal Rosh Yeshiva: *By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God and Leaves of Faith* by Rav Aharon Lichtenstein” and “Judaism in Culture: Beyond Bifurcation of Torah and Mada.”



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Rabbi Amital is a profound visionary driven by his memory of the past with a unique natural sense of Judaism.¹ Yehudah Klein (later changed to Amital) was born in 1925 in Transylvania. As a boy he studied in *heder* and yeshiva and had only four years of elementary secular education; his teacher in Hungary was the Lithuanian R. Hayyim Yehudah Halevi, a student of R. Hayyim Ozer and of Reb Barukh Baer Leibowitz. R. Amital recounts a story of his youth in which he imagined a ball of fire in the sky. His vivid and active imagination took it as a messianic sign, and he persuaded his classmates to dance around a tree in celebration. R. Amital didn't himself experience this envisioned messianic redemption, for in 1943 the Nazis deported him to a labor camp, and the rest of his family perished in Auschwitz. Upon his release, he came to Israel in December of 1944 and resumed his yeshiva studies, receiving ordination from R. Isser Zalman Meltzer and then married the latter's granddaughter. R. Amital joined the *Haganah* and fought in the battles of Latrun and the Western Galilee. After the war, R. Amital became a rabbinic secretary in the Rabbinical Court in Rehovot, and two years later, he started giving a Talmud *shiur* in *Yeshivat Ha-Darom* together with his colleague Rabbi Elazar Mann Shakh.²

While at *Yeshivat Ha-Darom*, R. Amital formulated the idea of the *yeshivat besder*, which combines

yeshiva study and military service. The exemption from army service granted to yeshiva students

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increased the friction between the religious and secular communities, so R. Amital created the *yeshivat besder* to unite these two communities, as well as to illustrate the religious significance of the accomplishments of the new state. This decisive move shifted R. Amital from his *haredi* background to a religious Zionist affiliation and distinguished his teachings from those of his colleague Rav Shakh, who came to lead the anti-Zionist yeshiva ideology at the Ponovitch Yeshiva in Benei Beraq.³ For R. Amital, there was no turning back: the secular state was a reality. The *besder* form of Religious Zionism became a distinct variety of Modern Orthodoxy, one that consisted of helping to build the state under labor Zionism, and combining Torah study with army service. (One should note the difference between this form of religious Zionism and Hirsch's diaspora keeping of *mitsvot*, Hildesheimer's academic study of Talmud, or American suburbanization).⁴

Propelled by Holocaust memories, R. Amital became a force in the building of the modern state

¹ I wish to thank Rabbis Ari Kahn, Jason Leib, and Yehudah Mirsky and my friend David Landes for reading earlier drafts of this essay. This essay is part of a larger project of presenting the varieties of Modern Orthodoxy; hence, no advocacy of a given variety over other varieties is intended. The order of their appearance and the venue of publication is incidental. Lastly I thank *The Edah Journal* for its notable efficiency and consistency in publication.

² Biography taken from *Yeshivat Har Etsion* website at <http://www.vbm-torah.org/rya.htm>.

³ In R. Amital's eulogy for R. Shach, he states, "There is a paradox: there is no one who brought the ultra-Orthodox world closer to the state and its institutions than Rav Shach" *Alon Shvut Graduates' Journal* Nissan (5762). It is interesting to note that R. Mordechai Breuer was also their colleague at *Yeshivat Ha-Darom*. Already from the War of Independence, there are essays written by Rav Amital in the Israeli army journal about bringing the world of Torah into the mainstream of Israeli life.

⁴ As noted above, this essay is part of a larger project of differentiating the varieties of Modern Orthodoxy; in the interim, see my web course on Modern Orthodoxy at tinyurl.com/4brqh.

of Israel, and, after the liberation of the Gush Etzion in the Six-Day War of 1967, Rabbi Amital founded the *yeshiva* in Kefar Etzion. (In 1971, R. Amital invited R. Aharon Lichtenstein to join him as *Rosh Yeshiva*.) R. Amital later led the politically liberal religious party Meimad and served as a cabinet minister. He publicly displayed his pain over the 1973 and 1982 wars, especially the loss of some of his earliest students, and raised three generations of primarily Israeli students, teaching them to think independently, sensitively and subtly about the complex issues of morality, piety and politics that the modern Israeli faces. His combination of simple interpersonal directness and complex inner theology makes him, to quote a recent *Ha'aretz* article, “a simple Jew... a rare breed” and one from whom American Jews can learn much.⁵

Three recent volumes have appeared that present R. Amital’s vision: a volume on ethics with the inappropriate English title, *Jewish Values in a Changing World* (the Hebrew has the more appropriate title, *But the Earth he has Given to Man*⁶); a volume critical of the new spirituality within Israeli religious Zionist circles called *Between Religious Experience and Religious Commitment*; and a book on the Holocaust and Zionism called *A World Built, Destroyed And Rebuilt: Rabbi Yehudah Amital's Confrontation with the Memory of the Holocaust*, written by Moshe Maya. Each volume appears to be distinct, but taken together they present a unified personal and autobiographical theology.⁷

The three volumes complement the prior publication of *Ha-Ma`alot mi-Ma`amaqim*.⁸ He also recently published the first volume of his talmudic novellae, *Resisei Tal*, reflective of the creativity that originally made him a great and energetic *Rosh Yeshiva*.⁹

He works from R. Kook’s premises that are foreign to American Jews, such as the importance of imagination, natural emotions, collective action, evolutionary history and mystical vision.

R. Amital’s basic canon of texts includes the writings of Maharal of Prague, Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto (Ramhal), and the Vilna Ga’on; the literature of Polish *haisidut*; and the writings of R. Kook, to which he is devoted. Most of these texts are not staples of the American Modern Orthodox canon, and there has been only limited reception of R. Kook’s writings in America. R. Amital does not perform a formal exegesis of R. Kook’s writings; rather he works from many of R. Kook’s premises that are foreign to American Jews, such as the importance of imagination, natural emotions, collective action, evolutionary history and mystical vision. Since the little knowledge of R. Kook available has come from universalist presentations based on the philosophic work *Orot ha-Qodesh*, American readers are not aware of the full R. Kook corpus—the tensions in his writings, the contradictory interpretations of his students, the

⁵ Yair Sheleg, “A rare breed, this ‘simple Jew’” *Ha'aretz* (10/06/2005).

⁶ The Hebrew title implies the divine in the natural order, while the English title implies the imposition of ideal values against the backdrop of the change. Also the translation was inconsistent between translators, did not always convey the Hebrew, and was not documented or indexed well. The transcription is more than awkward at times and sometimes one has to strain to hear R. Amital behind the text.

⁷ These essays are edited versions of actual lectures that R. Amital gave to his students. In each, a homiletical question precedes a citation from R. Abraham Isaac Kook, or another textual building block of R. Amital’s thought, to serve as a frame for the discussion. Then R. Amital introduces the topical issue at hand and presents the complexities of the issue. Finally, he returns to the original homily and connects it to the issue at hand and offers a new vision.

⁸ Yehudah Amital, *Ha-Ma`alot mi-Ma`amaqim: Devarim be-Sugyot ha-Dor al ha-Teshu`ot ve-al ha-Milhamot* (Jerusalem : Agudat Yeshivat Har Etzion, 1974); *Jewish Values in a Changing World* edited by Amnon Bazak, (Alon Shevut-Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Pub. House, 2005); Moshe Maya, Mosheh. *A World Built, Destroyed, and Rebuilt: Rabbi Yehudah Amital's Confrontation with the Memory of the Holocaust* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2004); *Between Religious Experience and Religious Commitment - Five Addresses on Youth in Crisis* (Alon Shevut: 2003); *Resisei Tal* (Alon Shevut: Yeshivat Har-Etzion, 2005).

⁹ The *shi`urim* are in the finest tradition of creating new understandings of the Talmud, in the broad tradition of the *Sha`agat Aryeh*, R. Akiva Eiger, and Rogochover, and with much reference to the immediately prior generation, such as Hazon Ish, and R. Aharon Kotler. It is interesting to note that his categories, in many cases, come from conceptual or philosophic sources such as Rambam, Maharal, or Sa`adyah.

recent scholarship, and his diarist recordings of the mystical rapture. This essay will examine the role that individuality, naturalism, and vision play in R. Amital's theories of ethics, piety, and sovereignty.

Ethics

But the Earth He Has Given to Man contains the story of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi who, when studying Torah, heard the crying of his infant grandson. The elder *rebbe* rose from his studying and soothed the baby to sleep. Meanwhile, his son, the boy's father, was too involved in his study to hear the baby cry. When R. Zalman noticed his son's lack of involvement, he proclaimed, "If someone is studying Torah and fails to hear the cry of a Jewish baby, there is something very wrong with his learning." From this story R. Amital draws the principle that "in every society...there are those who feel the burden...rest upon their shoulders, and as a result they will initiate and organize activities on behalf of the community"(pp. 157-8). Piety, therefore, cannot be detached from moral empathy and social responsibility.

R. Amital writes that recognition of our innate image of God leads to moral sensitivity and conscience. Fundamental for R. Amital, following his reading of the thought of the *Ge'onim*, Maimonides, and Musar writers, is the idea that man can naturally tell right from wrong, independently of the *halakhab*. R. Amital cites the Ga'on Rabbenu Nissim, (eleventh century) who, like most *ge'onim*, affirmed the *kalam* doctrine of a natural intuition (*lutf*) given to all people as a gift of God that allows humans to know the correct course of moral action even without revelation (p. 21).¹⁰ He also cites Maimonides, who criticizes those who say that the law does not have any *telos* or purpose. R. Amital expands Maimonides into a statement criticizing those who think natural morality conflicts with Torah. According to Maimonides' *Eight Chapters*, we perform the good

because we have internalized that the good is its own virtue and the decision should not require a struggle. R. Kook suggests the same relationship between morality and divinity when he states, "When the passionate desire to be good to all prevails, then man knows that a heavenly illumination has come to him" (*Orot ha-Qodesh*, III, p. 316).

With a sweeping sense of the widespread sources for natural morality, R. Amital cites the various ethical statements of the Netziv (R. Naftali Zevi Yehudah Berlin), *Mesbekeh Hokhmah* (R. Me'ir Simcha of Dvinsk) and others who assert for the need for humans to be morally upright and explains how these statements apply to everyone as a form of natural law. These statements may certainly be read as other forms of ethical theory, but for R. Amital, natural morality was expressed by Nahmanides' need to "do the good and the right," Maimonides on the need to do justice and R. Moses Cordovero's *Tomer Devorah* kabbalistic need for humanism. For R. Amital all of these ideas add up to R. Kook's conclusion that one's piety cannot override natural morality and, in fact, must support one's natural morality:

It is forbidden for fear of Heaven to push aside one's natural morality, for then it would no longer be pure fear of Heaven. The sign [by which one can recognize] pure fear of Heaven is when the natural morality which is rooted in man's honest nature ascends by means of [the fear of Heaven] to higher levels than it would have attained without it.

But if there should be a fear of Heaven, such that without its influence, life would tend to function better, and would actualize things beneficial to the individual and society, whereas with its influence that actualizing power would diminish—such a fear of Heaven is invalid.¹¹

¹⁰ It is interesting that R. Amital did not directly quote Sa'adyah Ga'on, who has a concept of a natural consciousness of the good available to all (*lutf*). According to the *ge'onic* doctrine of inner revelation, man's intellect is capable of distinguishing what things are good and what are repugnant. That is, irrespective of what the law resolves man can tell good from bad.

¹¹ *Orot ha-Qodesh*, Vol. III, p. 27, cited at *But the Earth*, p. 30. Compare "Morality in its natural state, with all its profound splendor and might, must be fixed in the soul, so that it may serve as a substratum for the great effects emanating from the strength of Torah." (*Orot ha-Torah*, 12 2-3).

From this natural morality, R. Amital also approvingly cites R. Samson Raphael Hirsch's universalism to show that Judaism by definition consists of morality, "humanity and justice and all the spiritual and moral assets of man received their eternal confirmation through this divine echo in the hearts of man."¹²

If morality is natural, one may rightly ask: what of those moments when the Bible and rabbinic literature seem not to be moral? R. Amital refreshingly addresses the problem openly and without the usual apologetic strategy of claiming the halakhic suspension of the ethical or the need to stoically accept the injustice as part of our submission to the law. He gives two answers to the problem of troubling texts. The first answer requires us to use the ethical interpretations of the biblical law found in later rabbinic literature. We are to find the interpretation in the oral law that makes it moral; we find an explanation without worrying about internal consistency of sources. He trusts that Judaism consists of one single unit, and we need to pick the ethical approach from the available options. The second answer suggests that we should follow the law as stated, but we should not let the *halakhab* affect our natural morality. Natural morality can withstand obedience to a formal law. The second approach places the gravitational center of our Jewishness in our morality, not our obedience to *halakhab*.

R. Amital's approach to Judaism provides us with two parallel and separate imperatives: that of the soul and that of the halakhab.

R. Amital must not be misconstrued. He does not have biblical values that transcend Rabbinic Judaism; in fact, for him the *halakhab* can be used, in many cases, to teach an approach more ethical than the Bible's. R. Amital's approach to Judaism provides us with two parallel, and most of the time separate, imperatives: that of the soul and that of

the *halakhab*. We are simultaneously to follow natural ethics and *halakhab*, for one helps us to reach decisions through intuition and the other through formal reasoning. Neither one alone can exhaust our obligations before God.

There are two stories of moral challenges told in *Yeshivat Har Etzion* circles that contrast R. Amital with his co-Rosh Yeshiva R. Lichtenstein. In the first story, this question is asked: would one save the life of a gentile on the Sabbath if one were on a desert island? According to standard *halakhab*, one saves a gentile on the Sabbath only to promote "the ways of peace," or to avoid hatred on the part of gentile observers that would be caused by not saving the gentile. These considerations, of course, do not apply on a desert island, where there are no observers. As the story goes, R. Lichtenstein answered that he would save the gentile as a universal moral imperative and then need to repent for violating the Sabbath, while R. Amital would save the gentile and not feel any need to repent because he was doing God's will. For R. Lichtenstein, the *halakhab* remains the ideal embodiment of God's will even though we also have to fulfill universal moral requirements. In contrast, R. Amital's answer suggests we know God's will through our natural moral sense, which is usually expressed through the *halakhab*. R. Amital does not give us criteria to use when we have to submit to the *halakhab* despite our moral sensitivity; rather, he believes it should be a natural given that we do not have to repent over saving a human life.¹³

The second story concerns the scenario where one is in an extreme situation and has this choice: whether to either eat human flesh or pork. The standard *halakhab* designates pork as a biblical prohibition and human flesh as only a rabbinic prohibition (assuming the flesh is already dead and there is no question of murder); hence one should eat the human flesh. R. Lichtenstein is wont to go further and consistently point out that the punishment for the consumption of pork is only

¹² Hirsch, Genesis 18 cited on *But the Earth* p 34. Compare a similar approach in Walter Wurzburger, "Samson Raphael Hirsch's Doctrine of Inner Revelation" *Fox* IV (1989) 3-11.

¹³ There are several versions of the same moral dilemma presented to R. Professor Saul Lieberman—in each case he answers that we tell the gentile now, on dry land, that we would save his life because of "ways of peace." We do not tell the gentile that actually we would not need to act that way on the island.

lashes while eating fruits from the priestly portion that has not been taken is excision (*keret*). In contrast, R. Amital almost shouts out from his soul that human flesh should be repulsive to everyone's natural sense of morality so that one should eat the pork, and the reason that the prohibition was not stated in the Torah was because this revulsion is a natural intuition not needing to be stated. R. Amital also adds a more halakhic reason that the calculation of choosing to violate a rabbinic prohibition over a biblical one is itself only rabbinic.

He further cites as a paradigm for his thought the famous statement of Rabbi Moses Samuel Glasner (1856-1924) in his *Introduction to Hullin*, where he states that just because something is not forbidden does not mean that it is permitted, e.g., the case of choosing to eat human flesh over pork. R. Amital guards himself in the halakhic realm by noting that some say R. Glazer went too far—and may not be correct as *halakhab*. However, for R. Amital, R. Glazer's approach can still serve as our paradigm of ethics and as a rejection of legal formalism by affirming mandates outside of texts (page 40). Once again we are left without criteria about when to rely on this moral sense; rather, R. Amital asks the important questions of the moral dilemmas of collateral damage, triage, and wartime ethics, but he does not give answers. R. Amital's consistent reliance on moral sense exemplifies his commitment to the idea that we should be trained to think for ourselves and figure out the needed and correct response in these difficult situations.

This ethical intuition builds on the talmudic statement of Rabbi Simlai that there are 613 commandments, which becomes reformulated as natural morality—how one should “walk humbly with God,” how one should “shut...one's eyes from seeing evil” and how “the righteous should live by his faith,” ideas that are not even included in the list of *mitsvot*. For R. Amital, the categories of good and bad are in the soul and not in the text; one's virtues and *middot* are generated from the

calling of the soul, not from the 613 commandments. Virtues lead to *mitsvot*, but the reverse is not true. We need to have a sense of gratitude and dignity in our souls; Nahmanides' open-ended directives of “do the good and the right” and “not to be a scoundrel with the Torah's permission” typify a broad approach to the many moral intuitions that are part of Torah. For R. Amital, natural morality is not an ideal that one aspires to fulfill, not a virtue ethic, or a system that provides answers in life, or even a prescription to change. It is, rather, a natural capacity of our souls. (p. 8).

The morality of the Torah cannot be less than the morality of the gentiles.

R. Kook wrote, “It is our desire to observe the command to ‘love thy neighbor as thyself,’ not only with regard to individuals but also with regard to the nations.”¹⁴ Following R. Kook, R. Amital asserts that the morality of the Torah cannot be less than the morality of the gentiles, despite the halakhic opinions that seem to imply otherwise. For R. Amital, the universalism of the verse “these are the generations of man” implies a universal ethical mandate to all of humanity that should be taken with greater *gravitas* than the *mitsvah* that only applies to Jews of “love your fellow.”

R. Amital's two-tiered approach of *halakhab* and ethics allows universal morality and particular *halakhab* to operate on separate tracks, the narrow halakhic “Love your neighbor” and the broad natural morality of “these are the generations of Man.” In contrast, many modern rabbis such as Samuel David Luzzatto, Ernst Simon, or Shimson Rosenthal, who formulate Judaism as a one-tiered ethical system, were forced to reread *halakhot* such as “love your fellow” in a universal way. R. Amital offers a unique solution that avoids upsetting the halakhic system or being forced to reject rabbinic statements.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Ma'amarei Re'AYaH*, p.25

¹⁵ “Rabbi Akiva said: The verse, ‘Love your fellow as yourself’ (Leviticus 19:18) is a great principle of the Torah. Ben Azzai said: The verse, ‘This is the book of the history of mankind’ (Genesis 5:1) is a greater principle still.” *Bereishit Rabbah*, Theodor-Albeck edition, Jerusalem 1965, page 237. Rabbi Luzzatto taught at the Padua Seminary in the middle of the nineteenth century, and Rabbis Simon and Rosenthal were associated with the *Kibbutz Ha-Dati* movement.

If the virtues of the soul are more important than the regular commandments, one might ask, “Why are they not commanded?” In answering this question R. Amital reveals the core of his theory that we must act from internal motivation. We need to cultivate the self toward moral perfection, which the *mitsvot* do not accomplish. He formulates this end in several ways. First, we must emulate the actions of the patriarchs through being individually inspired by their exemplary, true moral behavior. Second, we should go beyond their actions and personally act out of natural morality based on internal motivation, as did the patriarchs. Third, we need to understand that to be voluntarily ethical is greater than being commanded to be ethical. Therefore, in contrast to the halakhic hierarchy where those who are commanded receive greater reward than those who are not commanded, the ethical realm provides rewards for volunteerism.

The contrast between the required and the voluntary is like the contrast between the open air and a building: the open air is itself important architecturally as a contrast to the building. R. Kook teaches:

That aspect of morality, which must rise out of charity and the love of kindness, must always be the greater part of general positive morality, just as the open air is in comparison with the buildings and cultural activities in them; it is impossible that they should not leave it a very broad expanse. (*Iggerot Re'AYaH*, I, p. 97) (105)

Based on R. Kook’s perspective, Judaism contains love and kindness, not just law. In R. Amital’s formulation, he leaves space for moral identification through individual growth (of the sort discussed by Kohlberg and Piaget) and speaks honestly about the limits of the law. He presents a

morality of two tracks—law and ethics—that allows greater room for personal moral development.¹⁶ For R. Amital, those who are looking for moral development through the *halakhab* may be trying to square a circle; there is an independent need for *musar*, moral perfection, altruism, and the acquisition of a true fear of God shown by responding in the moment. Moreover, the performance of ethical acts should be natural and habitual, not paradoxical and tension-filled.

A voluntary morality of law and ethics allows greater room for personal moral development.

For his intuitive theory of natural morality, R. Kook drew from various elements of late nineteenth century ideas including Herbert Spenser’s and T. H. Huxley’s views that evolution produces a natural altruism, the romantic view of Rousseau in which society interferes with natural man and Nietzsche’s vitalism—even though Nietzsche was an explicit critic of natural morality. R. Kook identified this Romantic and Victorian biological morality as the natural element of the soul in Maimonides’ *Eight Chapters*.¹⁷

Already in 1904, however, R. Reines wrote about the need for this morality to be cultivated with *aggadah* and Jewish history, and in 1913 R. Tzvi Yehudah Kook stressed that the cultivation is achieved through reading works of Jewish thought creating an autonomous realm of faith (cf. R. Lichtenstein, in whose view morality can be cultivated through reading English literature). In contrast, R. Amital maintains that a person cultivates natural morality by following the footsteps, rather than the words, of the Vilna Ga’on, Maharal of Prague, Moshe Hayyim Luzzato (Ramhal), Polish *Hasidut*, and R. Kook. He stresses

¹⁶ In a recent exchange in Lookjed Digest (listserv of the The Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein Center for Jewish Education in the Diaspora, The School of Education, Bar Ilan University), educators discussed their efforts to read Kohlberg’s ideas into *halakhab*, through the tacit assumption that *halakhab* must lead to moral development. Kohlberg himself initially saw *halakhab* and moral development as complete separate, but he later modified his views. For an approach different from R. Amital’s that seeks to find ethics in *halakhab*, see Steve Bailey, “Educating for *Menschlichkeit*: A Kohlbergian Model for Jewish Day Schools” in Saks and Handelman, eds., *Wisdom from All My Teachers* (ATID/Urim, 2003) 137-58. For a nuanced approach closer to R. Amital, that keeps them separate, see Barry Kislowitz “Appropriating Kohlberg for Traditional Jewish High Schools” (unpublished PhD dissertation, Columbia Teachers College, 2003)

¹⁷ In the twentieth century, this naturalism would usually lead to a biological metaphor for ethics as found in numerous works from John Dewey to Frans DeWaal’s study of *Bonobo: The Forgotten Ape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

not the specifics of the books, but the path of the intellectual and the individualistic piety the works generate.

Perhaps it is fortunate that R. Amital did not have a college education, for he would have been taught in an “Introduction to Ethics” course that according to G. E. Moore the good could not be translated into any natural (i.e. non-moral) category and that there was no natural morality. Hence he might have followed the *zeitgeist* and accepted one of the regnant philosophic views: that halakhic ethics are based on duty, or that *halakhab* is scientifically objective or that halakhic ethics contain a teleological suspension of the ethical. Were he living in North America, he would also likely be fighting against the intuitionism of liberal Judaism by denying its very existence in traditional texts.

R. Amital states that we have a natural *menschlichkeit* because *derekh erets* [civility] comes before Torah. However, R. Amital’s use of the very word and concept of ‘*menschlichkeit*’ for a basic ethic and non-ideological morality is of a relatively recent and markedly secular vintage. The secular Yiddishist Chaim Zhitlovsky (1865–1943), coined the modern usage of the word to mean the universal ethos of Jewish civilization and its ethical foundation.¹⁸ “*Menschlichkeit*” became a popular word in twentieth-century Jewry because the term transcended the various religious and political ideologies of the twentieth century; no matter which group one was affiliated with—whether socialist, communist, Zionist, Orthodox, Reform, or assimilationist—a *mensch* takes care of his family, serves the community, goes to synagogue on the High Holy Days, and cares about his fellow Jew. (We will see below how R. Amital’s political thought bears similar non-ideological overtones)

In sum, R. Amital’s natural ethics bears some resemblance to that of Rabbis Walter Wurzburger

and Abraham Joshua Heschel. Wurzburger similarly stressed the role of individuality in navigating multiple values in moral reasoning, and he also cited R. Hirsch as teaching an inner revelation illuminating our response to the pressing needs of the moment. Yet until the influence of R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Wurzburger constrained himself, considering these imperatives as *metahalakhab*, based on the interplay of philosophy and explicit rabbinic statements. He taught that the covenantal imperatives are individualist imperatives based on an existential inner voice or as agent morality of virtue and responsibility.¹⁹ In contrast, R. Amital situates morals in natural ethics in the soul, outside halakhic, or philosophic formulation.

The relationship of the moral to halakhab is not entirely worked out.

Rabbi Heschel’s call of the moment and empathy for the Divine perspective was based on a canon similar to R. Amital’s. Yet the former’s approach was clearly on the hasidic side, stressing that experiential knowledge of God and a situational ethics demands us to hear God’s call in the moment and that piety takes precedence over Torah study or halakhic norms. R. Heschel had the enthusiasm of the Ba`al Shem Tov, but R. Amital has the discipline of Ramhal and the collectivism of R. Kook. For R. Amital, piety and ethics are grounded in our natural sense, not in prophetic calls from God. While both use the *Kotzker Rebbe* [R. Menachem Mendel] on the need for a sophisticated religion, R. Heschel finds the Kotzker in resonance with existential individualism and disestablishmentarianism; R. Amital treats the Kotzker as rooted in *mitnagdut* and the individualism of the Torah scholar.²⁰

Yet R. Amital’s thought is unlike in that of Wurzburger and Heschel in that the relationship of

¹⁸ Marc Kaminsky, “Discourse and Self-Formation: The Concept of Mentsh in Modern Yiddish Culture” *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*; Dec. 94, Vol. 54 Issue 40, 293-316; see also M. Hoffman, “From Pintele Yid to Racenjude: Chaim Zhitlovsky and Racial Conceptions of Jewishness” *Jewish History*; Mar. 2005, Vol. 19 Issue 1, 65-78.

¹⁹ On the approach of Rabbi Walter Wurzburger, see Alan Brill, “A Tiny but Articulate Minority: The Thought of Rabbi Walter Wurzburger” (forthcoming).

²⁰ For a similar appraisal of Polish *hasidut* as based on Torah study, see Alan Brill, *Thinking God: The Mysticism of R. Zadok of Lublin* (Hoboken: Y.U. Press, 2002), introduction, Chapter 7.

the moral to *halakhab* is not entirely worked out. Nor are the important *Kalam* questions answered, i.e., why is there a need for revelation if ethics is naturally known? And, naturally, R. Amital's approach would not withstand the critiques of academic anthropology that moral intuitions are subjective and culturally bound; long ago William Graham Sumner showed in his work *Folkways* that naturalistic moral decisions are not universal.²¹

Individual Piety and the Fear of God

As in the case of his ethical thinking, R. Amital claims that we have a Maimonidean natural sense of reaching the infinite (*Earth is the Lord's*, chapter 10), a natural joy when we recognize God's presence and our connection to God. One should strive for naturalness in piety based on truthfulness, wholeness, simplicity and the human qualities of our lives. R. Amital stresses the idea that even the definition of "fear of God" (*yir'at shamayim*) needs to be appropriate for our age. Believing that Maimonides' and the Kelm school of Musar's emphasis on fear of divine retribution will not work for our age, Rav Amital argues that the contemporary version of fear of God should emphasize God's exaltedness as described by Maimonides in the beginning of his *Mishneh Torah*, the mystical writings of R. Kook and the liturgical poem *Adon Olam*.²²

R. Amital has long taught the Vilna Ga'on's *Commentary on Proverbs* as the source of his individualism in personal worship, a *mitnaged* spirituality of effort, combined with diligence, fear of God, responsibility, and elevation of the self. Drawing further ideas from the *Sefat Emet* and the writings of R. Kook, R. Amital found he wanted his students to develop sophisticated concepts in faith and Jewish thought. He insists that if one does not encourage religious maturity, the results are deleterious. As R. Kook had already taught, "Generations whose general conceptions have matured and developed while they have not dealt

at all with the realm of divine concepts will be left in a lowly and pathetic condition, with religious breaches constantly multiplying."²³

One shows individuality by one's fear of God, and R. Amital develops a dichotomy between "fear of God" and *frumkeit*. The former applies to one's sense of doing the will of God at any given moment, while the latter describes one overly scrupulous performance of *mitsvot*. *Frumkeit* is not always a good thing, as his grandmother taught him, "*frum*" is an anagram for "*fiel risbus un venig mizvos*"—"much wickedness and little action." Rather than taking an approach of *frumkeit* as habituation, external obedience and scrupulousness, a person should seek fear of God to reach one's personal sense of divine command.

*His grandmother taught him, "frum" is an anagram for "fiel risbus un venig mizvos"—
"much wickedness and little action".*

R. Amital credits this individuality to the approach of the *musar* (ethics) of the Slobodka school and the *hasidut* of the Kotzk school, which he defines as striving for sincerity, performance of the basic *mitsvot* with intentionality, and favoring internal piety over an external show. For R. Amital, these two schools typify the toil, questing and diligence that R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto demanded as necessary elements in one's religious life. The alternative is only a foolish piety of external acts. R. Amital also cites R. Kook who considered the individualized fear of God as the only way to incorporate the multiplicity of this world through jettisoning the narrow confines of *frumkeit* and seeking the limitlessness of God's will.

R. Amital notes that the confusion between *yir'at shamayim* and *frumkeit* is especially problematic because *frumkeit* does not require intellect but *yir'at shamayim* does. Following the leads of Ramhal, the

²¹ Graham Sumner, *Folkways* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1906).

²² *Earth is the Lord's*, pp. 8-12, Chapter 17. He offers an alternative contemporary model for fear of God might be our natural fear of our parents, a relationship based on loyalty, justice and morality. Similar to our relationship to our parents, our relationship to God should not be one of command but of natural familial respect and fear.

²³ *Iqvei Ha-Tson, Ma'amar Avodat Elokim*. (The editions of R. Kook used in editing R. Amital were not standardized, so I cite the texts from R. Amital's works.)

Kotzker, and R. Nosson Tzvi Finkel of Slobodka. he teaches that one must cultivate one's intellect as part of religion though a firm basis in yeshiva study. R. Amital's models are the products of the Kotzk *Beit Midrash*, such as Rabbi Isaac Meir of Gur, the author of the *Hidushei ba-Rim*. They are the elite learners who find their individuality in *Beit Midrash*.²⁴ For R. Amital, proper awe of God's exaltedness leads to strength, spiritual growth, and vitality, while *frumkeit* leads to weakness, passivity, and a lack of the mandated struggle.

R. Amital remains consistent on the importance of his students being able to make informed personal choices. From a perspective of true fear of God, one must distinguish between the significance of *mitsvot* because not every line in the *Shulkhan Arukh* has the same value. When values within *mitsvot* clash—and they inevitably do—choosing the wrong priorities leads to superficiality. Therefore, Jews need to cultivate an ability to ascertain the significance of the *mitsvot*. Note the irony: “This simple Jew” requires a sophisticated cultivation of choice between *mitsvot*, unlike complex analytic Jews who do not make distinctions based on values. A politically charged example of this hierarchy of choice includes R. Amital's statement that the Jewish people are a greater value than the land of Israel.²⁵ But even on the mundane level, R. Amital considers many stringencies to be only for people of a high level of piety. Indeed, the *Mishneh Berurah* was renowned for its advocacy of stringencies and writes in many places that a God-fearing person should keep a stringency. But R. Amital claims that the converse is not true: Stringency does not lead to fear of God or to sincerity, intentionality, and growth. The lesson one learns from R. Amital is not be the drive toward leniency, but that we must develop a more subtle understanding of the fabric of intellectual piety in the forms of individuality, sincerity, intention and hearing God's will. These are the virtues that should be praised as true *yir`at shamayim*.

There is a Kotzker aphorism that declares, “I do not want a God that any average person can

believe in.” I have heard people assert this repeatedly without realizing that it might apply to their own concept of God. In contrast, R. Amital states this, but makes his readers realize that they require a more sophisticated view of God, similar to those of Bahya, Maimonides, Ramhal, and R. Kook, who each taught of the need for a sophisticated understanding of God. It would be unfair to compare R. Amital's inscrutable God, Who demands ethical behavior, to the sophisticated debates on these same topics between *Kalam* and Sufis, or Levinas and Marion or even to situate R. Amital's views within that discourse. Yet one can see the same contours in R. Amital's ideas.

We need to cultivate an ability to ascertain the significance of the mitsvot.

R. Amital advocates that we watch a person at prayer to see his human elements of piety (121). One can almost sense R. Amital gazing into human souls as he looks at his students praying, and one can imagine the mixed moment of his peering into their souls, analyzing their motives, and using them to project his own religious thoughts. The Nazir (R. David Cohen) and R. Yaakov Moshe Charlop made their decisions to follow R. Kook after hearing him pray, not because they were going to learn to pray from him, but because they judged his prayer as a sign of his individuality. Based on the model of R. Kook's students, R. Amital states that we should pick a yeshiva today the same way, yet he certainly knows that students do not choose to go to *Yeshivat Har Etzion* to learn to pray. One might well ask, “Is he pointing out the need to choose something deeper and more individual?”

Prayer requires an openness to the self. We say in the *amidah*, “God open my lips” to show that we want our own souls to be open. But for R. Amital, the openness of prayer is not equated with poetry or journal writing, for prayer requires a sense of opening so that one may become aware of the distance from the divine and the space to be filled

²⁴ *Religious Experience*, 44. Compare the writings of Arthur Green, who uses these very texts to advocate a path of the individual seeking God in his or her own heart.

²⁵ *Earth is the Lord's*, 59.

by God. He follows the paths of R. Zadok of Lublin and of R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib of Gur, of sensing our distance and seeking to let the Divine fill us. This is in distinct contrast to the enthusiasm of early *Hasidut*, the purity of mind of *mitnagdut*, or Maharal's sacrifice of the soul.

One hears the living human being when he discusses the role of spiritual dryness, distance and crisis.

Whatever the choice of text, one hears R. Amital the living human being when he discusses the role of spiritual dryness, distance and crisis, calling them states of *gotnut* (spiritual smallness). The problem of distracting thoughts (*mahshavot zarot*) discussed in the traditional literature applies only when one tries to reach too high or displays external artifice. When a person engages in direct prayer based on openness to his or her own distance, then there are no distracting thoughts. One needs to turn foreign thoughts into prayer so that prayer serves as faith and dependence on God, and one needs to know that in God's power nothing is impossible.

Despite the importance of individualism, a person should not stand out in his or her piety; one should dwell among the people and understand the need for emotional health. Again following R. Kook, R. Amital writes that the masses are better at natural morality and emotional health, while the elite can give counsel and resourcefulness.²⁶ However, in R. Amital's reading of R. Kook, emotions alone solve few riddles of the universe—trusting them with the Classic texts present piety as communion with God (*devequt*), but we now have a more distant yet individual loyalty to God that suggests, as the Psalms state, “even if you afflict me I will still trust in you.” After the recent travails of history, we should not look to God for guarantees. We offer our God-given soul before the Divine in the parity of gesture of you to you.²⁷ God is infallible and inscrutable. Yet even if God is hidden, we still need to act kindly towards others. In short, human loyalty to God should produce ethical behavior.

²⁶ *Earth is the Lord's*, 146-7.

²⁷ *Religious Experience*, 30-31.

Based on classic *midrashim*, R. Amital insists that Torah study and *halakhab* strengthen the bond between man and God. (His *mitnaged* approach stands out if we compare it to the *Shulhan Arukh Ha-Rav* of Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi, for whom *Kabbalah*, *Hasidut* and contemplation of divinity are the required texts of study.) Nevertheless it is interesting in that in a homily for Chag ha-Shavu'ot, R. Amital develops a non-*mitnaged* theme for his students, that there is no natural sense for Torah. Torah requires self-scrutiny—we need to be worthy to appreciate study. However, when his students told him “that they feel no connection to Talmud study, that they are not the Vilna Ga'on who can learn all day,” Rav Amital responded by telling them to be patient during the dry period, for learning will soon again be meaningful. His approach reflects more *mitnagdut* than *hasidut*, even though he cites the Ba'al Shem Tov in his discussion.

R. Amital presents the miracle of Hanukkah as the ability of the Hasmoneans to bring people together in community. He does not emphasize the Sefat Emet's concept of renewal, or *Qedushat Lev's* lighting of the heart. Instead, his piety seeks to provide the collective answer of common goals. R. Amital's writings contain an implicit replaying of R. Kook's unresolved tension between the acceptance of Rousseau's position where the natural self serves as a source of values and the collectivist demands of the community.

Seekers

Currently, many among the new religious Zionists are seeking new paths to God because they sense that the old paths no longer speak to them. Abandoning the single focus on halakhic study and obedience, these seekers, particularly those following the ideology of “HaBaKuk” (an anagram for *Habad*, *Breslov*, *Kook* and *Carlebach*) are studying *Habad*, *Breslov* and the mystical writings of R. Kook in place of Talmud. They journey to India, practicing meditation and *Kabbalah* with an Eastern religions influence, or take up their pen in creative writing. These seekers study the recently published *Shemonah Kevutzim* of R. Kook, which

points to a more mystical and personal approach towards Judaism, and they reject the collectivist years of building the state through labor and reason.

Excessive individualism leads to pride, weakness, laziness and loss of interest in society.

R. Amital tries to be sensitive to the pain many contemporary seekers experience from a lack of feeling and a surfeit of dryness in institutional religion. Yet he quickly reminds the reader that seeking new paths based on subjectivity cannot be the solution. R. Amital warns against excessive individualism because it leads to pride, weakness, laziness and loss of interest in society. While acknowledging that *niggun* (song) is important, he disapproves of Carlebach services for their pseudo-ecstasy, enthusiasm, and lack of aspiration.

If R. Amital teaches individualism, why does R. Amital not like the individualism of today's youth? He offers three reasons: They are too experiential and emotional; they are impatient with results; and they are turning to magic and wonder-working. On some level R. Amital's critique of the spirituality of new Religious Zionists contains a classic *mitnaged-basidic* divide (Luzzatto and the Polish *hasidism* are claimed to be part of the *mitnaged* side). Yet surprisingly R. Amital does not distinguish between different levels of experience—or parts of the path. For example, R. Dov Baer of Liady's *Tract on Ecstasy* distinguishes the various stages on the spiritual path between being “turned on” or hearing from afar where one moves from the early stages of enthusiasm and song toward the later more committed contemplative levels.²⁸ *Tract* presents a spectrum from the sham ecstasy of enthusiasm to that of spiritual virtuosity. Once we start judging levels of piety, it is important to articulate a clear hierarchy and present criteria for evaluating one's experience. But R. Amital's writings lack a R. Pinhas ben Ya'ir spiritual ladder from Moshe Hayim Luzzatto's *Mesilat Yesharim*, or the archetypal differences of personality found in the writings of Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izbica.

When noting that students are attracted to the writings from the school of *Pryzsucha*, such as Mordechai Yosef Leiner's *Mei ha-Shiloah*, R. Amital immediately points out that the author was implicitly addressing different people, at a higher level, both intellectually and religiously.²⁹ For R. Amital, Kotzker serves as a model for individuality only after years in the collective enterprise and in the community. Religious experience, fear of God, and individuality can only be based on intellect and learning, as R. Avraham Borenstein presents in his introduction to the *Eglei Tal*. And since Judaism expects one to work for the collective as part of one's public responsibilities, it relegates religious experience to an occasional activity. We also have to acknowledge that religious experience is short lived. Finally, we must acknowledge that many times people's religious experiences are external and artificial.

R. Amital sees irony in common dress of these new individualists, without noting that Kotzker *hasidim* themselves originally rejected the clothes of the wealthy *erliche yidden* [noble Jews] in their early days in Tomshov (1827-1830). These *hasidim* wore rags and cabbage leaves as a costume—it is a common phenomenon for seekers to wear counter-cultural costumes for temporary periods in their lives. Nor does he mention the individualism of Izbica, where special souls follow the path of Yehudah, rather than Yosef, or R. Kook's allowing for souls from the realm of chaos (*tohu va-vohu*) to act outside the system. R. Amital remains committed to the collective project of state building and does not have a category of psychological individualism as a means of change or asserting one's identity before re-entering the collective. Additionally, he thinks that the tranquility of Eastern meditation merely provides an answer to the stress of the West or else reflects a lack of ambition, and he does not consider that it is part of a path of commitment. R. Amital's critique is stronger yet, as he quotes R. Zadok on fighting laziness to object to meditation.

R. Amital solidifies his position by introducing a distinction between commitment and connection: The former requires effort and working within the

²⁸ See A. Brill, *Thinking God: The Mysticism of R. Zadok*, Chapter 6.

²⁹ *Religious Experience*, 36.

collective, while the latter does not.³⁰ He favors of cultivating the individual, but he also stresses that the person needs to work within the collective and not abandon the community. In the current decade, the balance between the poles of the individual and the collective is in peril. For R. Amital connection is not sufficient, and he therefore introduces the term “loyalty,” an obligation of self, suggesting that it be used for those wishing to avoid the word “commitment” (*ḥiyyun*).

Kotzék serves as a model for individuality only after years in the collective enterprise and in the community.

In his 1985 best-selling *Habits of the Heart*, the noted sociologist Robert Bellah condemned the narcissistic individualism he perceived in contemporary religion. R. Amital similarly condemns all individual seekers for being narcissistic, self-absorbed, and solipsistic. His views of contemporary Israel are similar to the contemporary Israeli literary critic Gadi Taub’s analysis of the anti-collectivism of the new generation, particularly when Taub presents the nihilism of Etgar Keret’s stories, which portray the lack any values after the collapse of Zionist collectivism.³¹ But one does not actually see the extreme of an Etgar Keret story in the new generation of yeshiva students, or the New Religious Zionists, for they possess a new spirit of building and teaching in that they have already created new *besder yeshivot*, written books, formulated philosophies, published journals, and now serve as teachers to others.

Despite his individualism, R. Amital unexpectedly portrays either/or choices on religious identity issues: one either accepts working for the collective

or accepts a life as a self-centered individual. He does not have the shades of gray of contemporary thinkers such as the sociologist Robert Wuthnow or communitarian philosopher Charles Taylor.³² Wuthnow points out in *Sharing the Journey* that we now collect in small groups in our religious lives rather than in the sprawling collectivism of the nineteen fifties. He also points out the important shift in religious language between the prior collective language of loyalty and self-obligation to the group, to the recent individual language of trust and fellowship. The changes are not a rejection of religion, rather a shift in emphasis. Similarly, Charles Taylor can still see the traditional value of authenticity, and even future communitarian resources, behind seemingly narcissistic individualism. Taylor makes a point to teach the reader to look for the positive core value behind the individualism, and not to dismiss it entirely. R. Amital, unfortunately, treats the new spirituality as centaurs at the gate

Sovereignty: Guardian of Israel as Millennium Approaches

R. Amital’s other natural senses—in addition to those of morals and piety—are those of political freedom and self-determination. Nationalism is intrinsically good, even in its secular and political aspects; e.g. we should be proud when the President of Israel visits Poland. For R. Amital, sovereignty is not a paragraph in the *Shulḥan Arukh*, nor is it based on the *mitsvah* to live in Israel. Even if there were not any *mitsvah* to live in the land of Israel, every Jew should have a natural sense of the need for political sovereignty in the land and should not take the State of Israel for granted.³³ R. Amital believes there is a natural connection between the soul and the land, and considers sovereignty a natural desire for self-determination.

³⁰ *Religious Experience*, 36.

³¹ Gadi Taub, *A Dispirited Rebellion: Essays on Contemporary Israeli Culture* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, *Hakibbutz Hameuchad*, 1997); Etgar Keret, *The Bus Driver Who Wanted to be God and Other Stories* (New York, St. Martin’s Press, 2001); *Cherries in the Icebox: Contemporary Hebrew Short Stories*, edited by Haya Hoffman and Marion Baraitser (London: Loki, 2002).

³² Robert Bellah, et al. *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985); Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press 1998); *idem, Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America’s New Quest for Community* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*. (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2004)

³³ “Guardian of Israel - Watch over the State of Israel” (*Yom Ha-Atzma’ut*, 1993), 4. On the creation of this idea, see Eliezer Schweid, *The Land of Israel: National Home or Land of Destiny*, (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, Inc. 2002) and Dov

According to R. Amital, nationalism for other nations consists of a connection of the land and the people based *post facto* on language, blood, territory, and historical experience. In contrast to these externals, Abraham was the start of the Jewish nation based on monotheism. For R. Kook, Israel as a state should display the superior morality of the patriarchs; yet for R. Amital, this superiority awaits its messianic fulfillment. It is therefore the Hasmonean kingdom that should serve as the model of the current State of Israel. The Hasmoneans were not perfectly moral, yet they are still celebrated as an embodiment of Jewish sovereignty.

*Sovereignty is not a paragraph in the
Shulhan Arukh*

R. Kook wrote that national Torah decisions are more difficult than individual ones and that political parties often overstep justice.³⁴ There is a tension between sovereignty and morality because states cannot exist without bloodshed and evil doing. Yet, according to R. Amital natural sovereignty is a category beyond the letter of the law. We have the *halakhab* and the ethical, but if we only have the law, it would lead to a destruction of the land. This conundrum creates a need for natural national feeling. These conflicting tenets of state, law and *halakhab* are most problematic when applied to Israel's treatment of its minorities. In the current climate of interpreting R. Kook through the nationalistic lens of his son R. Zvi Yehudah, R. Amital is almost a lone voice in thinking that R. Kook would not want to apply his son's vision today. My concerns in this essay remain theological and so I will not directly address their political ramifications.

According to R. Amital, R. Kook teaches that the current state cannot be considered the realization of the messianic era. In these pre-messianic times, there is a distinction between the current state of Israel and the messianic Zion. *Yom ha-Atsma`ut* should be a celebration of sovereignty and of

respect after the Holocaust, not a day of picnics and nature. However, the celebration should exclude the messianic function of the state—*reshit tsemihat ge'ulateinu* (the beginning of the dawn of our redemption)—until the actual messianic age. The messianic ideal should not play a role in our pragmatic decisions of sovereignty, or in our halakhic decisions.

One of R. Amital's most original points is his view that even though the state is the beginning of the redemption, it does not come with guarantees of success. R. Amital believes that the sovereignty of the State of Israel should not be considered the trumpet-blast proclaiming messianic kingship. It should rather confirm the biblical guarantee that God is the Guardian of Israel. The divine hand is ever obscured by reality, mandating responsibility and moral demands. We are pilgrims in a promised land, a revolution of the saints. Yet we must not act as individual pilgrims, but a collective community.

In his famous essay "On the Significance of the Yom Kippur War," published in *Ha-Ma'alot mi-Ma`amaqim* (1974), R. Amital states his messianic position that

It is forbidden to view this war in the manner we viewed misfortunes in the days of exile. We should recognize the greatness of the moment in its biblical dimension, and it can only be seen within its messianic perspective...only through a messianic light.

Even though we are living in a messianic age, this time includes loss, retreats, and regressions. R. Amital's thought reflects "a mystical realism," wherein even rationality and pragmatism have super-sensory elements. But what can be the point of the afflictions and why do the wars continue if the Messiah has already come and the Kingdom of Israel has already been established? There can only be one reason: the war initiates the process of purification, of refinement, of "the purifying and cleansing of the congregation of Israel." We thus

Schwartz, *Faith at the Crossroads* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

³⁴ "Guardian of Israel"

learn the only explanation of the wars, namely that the Lord performed an act of grace in giving us wars, because they refine and purify the soul. And as impurity is removed, the soul of Israel—by virtue of the war—will then be refined. We have already conquered the lands, and all that now remains is to conquer impurity.

The messianic ideal should play no role in our decisions of sovereignty or our halakhic decisions.

For many, this essay served as a messianic beacon lighting up the state in its redemptive meaning despite the casualties and setbacks. A return to biblical providence was to be attributed to the process of building the land. Yet, some now ask why R. Amital attributed messianic meaning to the state in 1973 if he preaches daily that the messianism does not apply to contemporary political decisions? R. Amital himself maintains that there has been no substantive change in his attitude, and emphasizes:

Even when I wrote *Ma'alot mi-Ma'amaqim*, I did not think that the doctrine of redemption is a recipe for everyday policy. But when I saw that many were interpreting redemption in that way, I started to make clear my objections to that publicly.

Many of his students, however, continue to use this essay to attribute messianic meaning to the state, while most other students think that R. Amital did indeed sharply change his attitude, and that he retreated after painfully feeling the loss of some of his dearest disciples. For the latter group of students, war has brought brutality and a lower moral standard, not a vanquishing of impurity. While the German-Jewish literary critic and theorist Walter Benjamin was certainly not an influence on R. Amital, one is reminded here of Benjamin's view of history and messianism. For

Benjamin, meaning only appears in hindsight and we are thrust willy-nilly into a future in which destruction leads to renewal and the building of utopia. He envisions an angel of history caught in the storm of destruction powerless to effect change in the present. R. Amital rejects the prevalent progressive Hegelian views of the State of Israel, replacing it with our sense of being caught in a whirlwind of catastrophe. The metaphysic destiny of Judaism can only be found in the State of Israel, where the prosaic daily activities of the labor Zionists reflect the utopia. Yet, for R. Amital, unlike for Benjamin, there is a hand of God and a *telos*, even if obscured. The unique mix of divine providence, obscured path of redemption, and liberal ethics leads to multiple political interpretations, whether or not R. Amital's personal position has changed over the years.

The Ball of Fire

In 1985, on the fortieth anniversary of R. Amital's moving to Israel, he stated "there were worlds built and worlds destroyed."³⁵ R. Amital is one the last of the modernists who lived in the old world of the Eastern European hamlet and was thrust into modernity with the full force of the Holocaust, the War of Independence, and the building of a new state. R. Amital offers a similar vision to that of Shmuel Yosef Agnon, of worlds destroyed and rebuilt without any immediate sense of redemption—only messianic hope in the secular Zionist project. In Agnon's writings, Zionism functions as a vision of redemption from the destruction of Europe, even as the hope commingles with nightmares and nostalgia. Zionism must work with greater urgency because Eastern Europe Jewish life has crumbled.

The young Yehuda Klein carried a copy of a pamphlet about R. Kook with him in the work camp during the Holocaust and found his faith sustained by R. Kook's vision of an ideal ethical return to the land of Zion.³⁶ R. Amital's vision of a

³⁵ "Forty Years Later: A Personal Recollection"

³⁶ According to Yehudah Mirsky, who discussed R. Amital's early years with him, the pamphlet was R. Moshe Zvei Neriah, *Ha-Rav: Li-Me'ot Shalosh Shanim le-Hilakach Ge'on Yisrael u-Qedosho Avraham Yitsch'haq ba-kohen Kuk*; *Toldotav, mi-Devarav, me-Silotav* (Jerusalem: *Irgun Benei-Akiva*, 1938). According to the same oral communication, Rav Amital discovered the writings of Rav Kook through reading Rav Hirschensohn in his native Grosvardein, a town of competing *Mizrabi*, Neologist, assimilationist, and sectarian ideologies.

ball of fire underlies a very tangible connection between the Holocaust and building of the State of Israel.

In his book about R. Amital, Moshe Maza sees his individualism, natural ethics, and peaceful vision grow out of the Holocaust experience. Maza's approach parallels Ehud Luz's description of the rise of the post-Holocaust ideology in Israel needing to accept our moral obligation. To reduce this obligation to its most simplistic formulation, R. Amital argues that there are only two choices: to be a murderer or to be murdered, and in the building of the state, he does not want to be on the side of the murderers. The only response to the Holocaust is a return to an inner ethos of morality because there are only two roles. Even in Israel we need to take the second role of preserving our humanity.

The only response to the Holocaust is a return to an inner ethos of morality.

R. Amital does not see any explanation for his surviving the Holocaust: Was it chance? Providence? We cannot answer these questions about past, but they lead us forward. This is a paradox: The Holocaust is so deep, so abnormal, so lacking in any logic, that it must be metaphysical, for it took away human presence and logic and left only the Divine Presence and the inexplicable. R. Amital insists that the message of the Holocaust cannot be heroism, only the humanism of acting compassionately.³⁷ He will not allow moral wallowing in theodicy. Answers lie in the action, moral obligation and self-perfection. R. Amital declares that Israel was our savior after the Holocaust in that it gathered the exiles, and though

it did not redeem them wholly, it started the process³⁸

Surprisingly, R. Amital does not have a narrative sense of the subtle changes of pre-Israel state, the building of the state in the nineteen-fifties, the building of *yeshivot* in the sixties, the euphoria of the post-Six-Day-War period. Instead, his writings start with the pessimism of the post-Yom-Kippur-War era. I would love to have records of his reactions to the minor events of the 1950's and 1960's—his relationship to Rav Shakh in *Yeshivat ha-Negev* and his relationship to the post-Holocaust vision of many in Israel, that the state must survive since now, after the Holocaust we are without choice (*eyn berarah*). On the other hand, they may not show much because R. Amital's vision of natural sovereignty allows him to avoid making the ideological choices between Israel Eldad's Likud vision of an ideal greater Israel or Yehoshafat Harkabi's vision of political realism.³⁹ R. Amital accepts a messianic ideal vision, yet he precludes relying on it until the messianic age. As much as his talks start from R. Kook's theological perspective, R. Amital evokes a Jewish pan-nationalism. Like Zhitlovsky's *menschlichkeit*, they transcend ideological division between religious and secular, ideal and reality, or Labor and Likud. R. Amital appears to argue that absolute values allow for a greater working for the common good and sense of society, yet they can only be implemented through pragmatic and realistic means.

According to Luz, the late 1950's and early 1960's were an era of no turning back to the diaspora, when the ends of power, military might, and nationalism became inevitable. These generations chose to name their children Arik, Ehud, and Alon rather than Avraham,⁴⁰ and those children became

³⁷ Compare the similar approach to the Holocaust in Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996).

³⁸ R. Amital, "Burst Forth and Sing Together, Ruins of Jerusalem" (*Yom Yerushalayim* 5757), *idem*, "If I Forget You, O Jerusalem, Let My Right Hand Forget Its Cunning" (*Asarah be-Tevet* 5761). Compare Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1993).

³⁹ Yehoshafat Harkabi, Hazon, lo Fantazyah: Likhe Mered Bar-Kokhva ve-Realizm bi-Medinyut be-Yamenu (Jerusalem: Hotsa'at Sefarim Domino, 1982) and Israel Eldad, Pulmus ha-Hurban u-lekahav (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute of Jerusalem, 1982); *idem*, *The Jewish Revolution; Jewish Statehood* (New York: Shengold Publishers, 1971).

⁴⁰ On this generation in general, see Ehud Luz, *Wrestling with an Angel*. On the broader turn from Jewish to Israeli of those years, see James S. Diamond, *The Canaanite Critique of Israel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1986).

R. Amital's students. Their parents knew there was no going back to Europe, and they had no choice but to recognize their new lives in the modern secular State of Israel with the concurrent needs to build the land, serve in the army, and act for the good of the collective. Even when faithful to Orthodoxy, they would not condone their children studying in a *yeshiva* that did not recognize the new state. There was a non-ideological need to rebuild. Thus beyond his ideals and messianism, R. Amital's thinking accepted classical liberal Zionism calling for individual freedom and human rights. Yet as a seeker of unity, R. Amital's Zionism cannot ground Jewish identity on a secular national basis alone, totally distinct from its religious one: Religion and state must work together as a unity.

For R. Amital the post-Holocaust era was a shift from gratitude to trust, from certainty to commitment, and from cognition to natural ethics, natural sovereignty, natural piety and *menschlichkeit*.⁴¹ After the Holocaust we do not offer God gratitude, but we offer God trust—though we do not see where we are going. Even his call by Mr. Moshe Moskovic, a survivor of the 1948 battle for Gush Etzion, to found a *yeshivat besder* in Gush Etzion where there were terrible losses in War of Independence, is one of memory that paradoxically looks backwards towards the rebuilt future.⁴²

The ardent Zionist, Isaiah Leibowitz, believed that the State of Israel of our day has no religious significance and that we have no insight into the designs of Providence.⁴³ In contrast, R. Amital proclaims a design of Providence that leads us forward into the uncertain future. From the opposite perspective, R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik

heard the providential voice of God in the proclamation of the state in 1948, but he did so without a sense of history of the various difficulties of the fledgling state, e.g., the fifth *aliyah*, the battle of Latrun, the era of austerity, the difficulty of draining swamps, or that of creating a modern army and a democratic state.⁴⁴ For R. Amital the providential ways are unknown and mysterious, yet he retains historic meaning in the building of the state. R. Amital's views of sovereignty deserve further development for he provides a religious vision of the State of Israel dependent more the mysterious cunning of history than on a discussion of the *mitsvah* to live in *Eretz Israel*.

Providential ways are mysterious, yet there is historic meaning in the building of the state.

The millenarian right wing interpretations of R. Kook make possible the current trend of creating a messianic settlement movement in which the settlers know better than the government of Israel. R. Amital strongly condemns this approach, and insists that one can change government but not reject it. Redemption will only come through the secular democracy. R. Amital's firmness on this point has led some figures on the Israeli left to turn to R. Amital to provide a moral, universal, and individualistic approach to the significance of the land. This move is interesting because many of these same people used to turn to Isaiah Leibowitz to break free of the cult of the state and advocate liberal politics and ethic. Paradoxically they now seek an ethically charged meaning in the state.⁴⁵ As a result of R. Amital's thought and work, we have a

⁴¹ "Confronting the Holocaust as a Religious and a Historical Phenomenon." Compare this understanding of the human changes of the twentieth century as a shift in approach without a break with the past to the more Hegelian Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, for whom we are now living in a post-holocaust age that transcends the old and requires a new covenant based on autonomy.

⁴² David Ohana, "Kfar Etzion: The Community of Memory and the Myth of Return," *Israel Studies*, Volume 7, Number 2, Summer 2002, 145-174.

⁴³ Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "Redemption and the Dawn of Redemption" (1971), trans. in *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State* (Cambridge: Harvard U., 1992) 123.

⁴⁴ He does write "this mitzvah is fulfilled not only by building up the country...but also by our sovereignty there," but does not address the actual issues of army, democracy, or labor Zionism; sovereignty is treated as *balakhab* not political science. See. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Rav Speaks: Five Addresses on Israel, History and the Jewish People* (New York: The Judaica Press Inc., 2002) 137.

⁴⁵ In 1993, R. Amital founded "Meimad, the Movement for Religious Zionist Renewal... to find the required synthesis between Judaism and democracy" and served as Minister without Portfolio from November 1995 until July 1996. He favors territorial concessions to the Palestinians, opposes the injection of Jewish law into politics, and wants the state to be

large repository of pragmatic responsa balancing Religious Zionism with building the state, army service, participation in the broader Israeli state, and national security decisions.⁴⁶

Paradoxically, R. Amital's trust in God enables him to believe that by giving cities to the Palestinians, he is not relinquishing the claim of a dawn of the messianic age: "Sixty years after the Holocaust, how is it possible to make promises like that? His personal lesson from the Holocaust is "the feeling that I have to act also in the name of those who did not survive. That is what gives me strength." At *Yeshivat Har Etsion* just a month ago, he stated: "A Palestinian state is the light at the end of the tunnel of what we have undergone in the past few years, because only a Palestinian state will save us from losing the Jewish State." He criticizes the certainty of others who state that "in relation to the disengagement plan or any other subject—that 'God will not let it happen'." Israel has meaning, but without certainty and without an ability to see the future.

Conclusion

How does one become a simple Jew? There is a Kotzker story of one *hasid* declaring that he is a simple Jew and another replying that he is also a simple Jew. Later an ordinary person arrives on the scene and proclaims that he too is a simple Jew, at which point the first two Hasidim say: "Who does he think he is to call himself a simple Jew?" R. Amital may have a simple natural message, but understanding it requires an elite training, for in his presentation, the *Kotzker Rebbe* addressed sixty elite individuals and was teaching them how to lead a collective, not to seek experiential individualism.

R. Amital seeks to raise students who think independently and thereby can make independent decisions to better confront on their own the complex situations of modern life. R. Amital is fond of telling the story of R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the *Alter Rebbe* of Chabad, who taught that in

most cases his followers have no need for counsel from the *rebbe*, for a *rebbe* should create students who stand on their own feet. Like R. Shneur Zalman, R. Amital believes that in order to make decisions, a person needs a strong character. He knows that it is rabbis' responsibility to make their students competent to decide matters for themselves.

He was looking for a rabbi that would not be an angel and would not be holy—a rabbi who would be a human being.

R. Amital explains how individuality comes from the cultivation of a person's own vision, intuition, basic feelings, and common sense. Rabbis should encourage students to think for themselves and to respect those with whom they differ. One of R. Amital's successors at *Yeshivat Har Etsion*, Rabbi Ya'akov Medan, explained to Yair Sheleg in a *Ha'aretz* interview that he studied under R. Amital because he "was looking for a rabbi that would not be an angel and would not be holy. A rabbi who would be a human being." Sheleg comments on R. Medan's choice, pointing out that "There are quite a few rabbis, especially yeshiva heads, who would not be proud of such a 'human' description; Amital views it as a great compliment."⁴⁷

No other Modern Orthodox theologian in our age has written with the emotion, imagination, and depth of character that R. Amital has. His writings are a complex body of ingrained reactions, memories, hopes, and visions. He has had less influence in the United States than in Israel, primarily because his Modern Orthodoxy consists of state building, army service, the creation of a liberal democracy, and the writings of R. Kook combined with Torah study. It also does not tackle the American concerns of secular studies, particularism, ritualism, suburbanization, and professionalism. R. Amital's thought is particularly

concerned with ethical values.

⁴⁶ They have yet to be collected in a unified volume, but will deserve to be compared to those of Rabbis Herzog, Goren, and Unterman. On the earlier period, see Asher Kohen, *ha-Talit ve-ha-Degel: ha-Tsiyoniut ha-Datit ve-ha-Litvayit Medinat ha-Torah bi-Yomenu Reshit ha-Medinah* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitschak Ben-Zevi, 1998).

⁴⁷ Yair Sheleg, "A Rare Breed, This 'Simple Jew'" *Ha'aretz* (10/06/2005).

valuable in our world of education, textuality, and programmatic ideologies, for it allows us to return to a natural sense of morals, piety, and sovereignty.

In the Spring of 2005, R. Amital was terribly distraught that the settlers would think to reject the State of Israel over the disengagement from Gaza, validating his prior fears that Israel has more to fear from acute messianism than from *Haredi* rejection of the state. The world may never return to a simple belief in the State of Israel and its natural sovereignty. It may now take the complex decision making of his students on both sides of the political spectrum, including Knesset member

R. Yehuda Gilad, Prof. Benjamin Ish Shalom, R. Ya'akov Medan, and Bentzi Lieberman, to apply the thought of their teacher to these new conditions.

Worlds destroyed, world rebuilt—R. Amital's students will need to respond to historic changes in their individual paths. Armed with the teachings of R. Kook and their training by R. Amital, these students will confront the need to cultivate their natural souls that have been thrust into an unknown future while bearing the responsibility of a tragic past.