The Grand Religious Worldview of Rabbi Benzion Uziel

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Rabbi Benzion Uziel delivered the opening address at a gathering in Jerusalem of the rabbis of the land of Israel (spring 1919). In describing the rebirth of the Jewish nation in Israel, he pointed out the many challenges facing the emerging Jewish communities and settlements. He urged the rabbis to be active participants in this historic process. It would be unacceptable and dangerous if religious Jews were to say: "Let us stand in a corner as though looking at the events from a distance. Let us say to ourselves: we and our families will serve the Lord." He felt that this isolationist attitude was contrary to the vision upon which our religion is based. Rabbi Uziel exhorted his colleagues to go among the people, to work with the people, to participate in every aspect of the nation-building process. In this way, they could bring the eternal teachings of Torah into the real world. [1]

This theme was to dominate much of the thought and work of Rabbi Uziel, who proclaimed that Judaism is not a narrow, confined doctrine limited only to a select few individuals; rather, the Torah is the guide for the ideal way of life for the entire Jewish people, and also carries a message for humanity at large. Jewish religious expression must not be confined to a parochial, sectarian mold. Rather, it must thrive with a grand vision, always looking outward.

Rabbi Uziel's philosophy of Judaism flowed from various sources. Born in Jerusalem to an illustrious Sephardic rabbinical family, his father was the *Av Bet Din* of the Sephardic community of Jerusalem and president of the community council. His mother was part of the Hazan rabbinical family, which had produced fist-rate rabbinic leaders for generations. As a youth, Rabbi Uziel studied with the Sephardic sages of Jerusalem, but also with Ashkenazic rabbis. He became one of those unique individuals who was well steeped in the halakhic methods and literature of both the Sephardim and Ashkenazim.

In 1911, Rabbi Uziel was appointed Chief Rabbi of Yafo and its district, where he worked with Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the Ashkenazic spiritual leader of Yafo. Although Rabbi Kook was older, Rabbi Uziel was appointed Chief Rabbi (*Haham Bashi*) by the authority of the Turkish Government. Officially, the office of Chief Rabbi was open only to individuals born in the Ottoman Empire, whose families

had been living there for several generations, and who knew the language of the land, as well as French and Arabic. Rabbi Uziel had all these qualifications, while Rabbi Kook did not. Rabbis Uziel and Kook developed a good working relationship and held each other in high esteem. In 1921, Rabbi Uziel became the Chief Rabbi of the famous Sephardic community of Salonika, returning to be Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv in 1923. In 1939, he was elected Chief Rabbi of Israel, *Rishon le-Zion*.

Rabbi Uziel was a leading *posek*, thinker, teacher, communal leader and political activist, one of the unique figures of 20th century Jewish life. Rabbi Uziel saw God's hand in the development of Jewish life in *Erets Yisrael*. He felt that he was participating in the early stages of the final redemption of Israel. His writings are characterized by the calm wisdom of a genuine scholar and at the same time by an overwhelming sense of urgency. Depending on the quality of religious leadership, he said, everything could be won or lost.[2]

Rabbi Uziel believed that the Jewish people, especially those living in a revitalized *Erets Yisrael*, could be living models of the excellence inspired by the Torah. Through their moral and ethical accomplishments, the Jews would succeed in making the rest of the world aware of the great standards set by the Torah for all of humanity. [3]

He felt strongly that Jews must be aware of their own national charter. Through this self knowledge, they would be able to conduct their lives according to the ideals set forth in the Torah tradition. This would lead to their own happiness, as well as to a positive influence on the world in general. Rabbi Uziel criticized those false ideologies which distracted the Jewish people from their authentic national charter. He rejected the assimilationists, since their strategy would ultimately undermine the true message of Judaism. He also chastised those who would restrict Judaism to the narrow confines of their homes, synagogues and study halls. This strategy would bury Judaism in a small inner world, cutting off its impact on society as a whole. It was necessary to steer a middle course between assimilationist tendencies on the left and isolationist tendencies on the right. Rabbi Uziel cited the verse in *Mishlei* (4:25) as a guide: "Let your eyes look right on and let your eyelids look straight before you. Make plain the path of your foot and let all your ways be established. Turn not to the right nor to the left. Remove your foot from evil."

Only by focusing on the specific charter of the Jewish people--to create a righteous nation based on the laws of Torah tradition--could the Jewish people fulfill its mission. Through our creating a model Torah society, we would be seen by the entire world to be the representatives of God. Our Torah teaches us to live life in its fullness. It teaches us how to apply the highest moral and ethical standards to all human

situations. Judaism is not a cult, but a world religion with a world message. "Our holiness will not be complete if we separate ourselves from human life, from human phenomena, pleasures and charms, but (only if we are) nourished by all the new developments in the world, by all the wondrous discoveries, by all the philosophical and scientific ideas which flourish and multiply in our world. We are enriched and nourished by sharing in the knowledge of the world; at the same time, though, this knowledge does not change our essence, which is composed of holiness and appreciation of God's exaltedness." The national charter of the Jewish people is "to live, to work, to build and to be built, to improve our world and our life, to raise ourselves and to raise others to the highest summit of human perfection and accomplishment. (This is accom-plished by following) the path of peace and love, and being sanctified with the holiness of God in thought and deed."[4]

In his address accepting the appointment as Chief Rabbi of Yafo (6 Heshvan 5672), Rabbi Uziel stated that a leader must have two seemingly opposite qualities: strength of character and humility (*gevura nafshit and anava*). In truth, these two qualities are not in opposition but must go together. True humility cannot be found except in one who has spiritual strength. Indeed, humility without such strength is not humility at all: it is weakness stemming from fear and doubt.[5]

In his address to the rabbis of *Erets Yisrael* in 1919, he reminded

his colleagues that while humility in itself is praiseworthy, it becomes repulsive if it leads to shying away from the needs of the hour. Rabbis who hide in the mantle of humility abdicate their responsibility to the community. Leadership requires strength of character. [6]

Rabbi Uziel saw the rabbis' influence deriving from the force of their own righteousness, devotion and erudition. Since the hallmark of Torah is peace, coercion and threats are not the proper ways to gain adherence to Torah. Rather, rabbis (and religious people in general) must win the hearts of their fellow Jews through deeds of love and kindness. [7] One cannot demand respect; one must earn it.

Rabbi Uziel was among those who believed that the time had arrived for the reestablishment of a Sanhedrin. Through such a structure, rabbinic authority would once again be centralized. The public would know where to turn for Torah guidance. A properly constituted Sanhedrin would have profound influence on Jewish communities throughout the world and would be a harbinger of the ultimate redemption. [8]

Rabbi Uziel was troubled by a schism among the Jews in Israel. One group stressed the study of Torah to the exclusion of building the land and organizing the people, while the other group emphasized action while negating the need to study Torah. Both groups were wrong. "Action without study--even action is lacking, since it is a

branch without roots. And study without action is a root without a branch." [9]

According to the Torah, work is obligatory. It is forbidden for a person to be supported by the labor of others without providing his own productive labor. A parent is obligated to teach his child Torah and an occupation. A child who does not learn how to support himself through his own labor is compared to a thief who steals the labor of others without exerting any effort of his own. Each individual must be engaged in productive labor to support himself, to share in the building of the world and the advancement of humanity. Labor is not only an obligatory commandment, but also gives the individual a sense of honor and dignity. The laws of the Torah go hand in hand with productive forms of labor and business. By working, one learns not only the knowledge of one's profession, but also compassion, love and responsibility for others.[10] These spiritual and moral qualities are learned by engaging in productive labor, not merely by abstract study.

During the War of Independence in 1948, a number of yeshiva students came to Rabbi Uziel to obtain exemptions from military service. He rejected their requests and said that if he were not already an old man himself, he would be holding a gun and hand grenade, fighting to defend the Old City of Jerusalem where he was born and raised. This was a battle of life and death for the people of Israel. How could

anyone want to be exempted from fighting this great battle? On the contrary, each person should rise to the occasion and give strength to his fellow soldiers. He told the yeshiva students that it was a mitsvah for them to join in the defense of their people, to risk their lives alongside their brothers, to defend the Jewish people and the Jewish land. [11]

In Rabbi Uziel's view, religious leadership entailed a total commitment to participate in all aspects of the life of the nation. Religious people were not to live on hand-outs or to seek exemptions. Only by a thoroughgoing involvement in all aspects of national life could the religious community bring its values and ideals to all the people of Israel.
To retreat into self-enclosed religious enclaves was to surrender Torah leadership. It was to reduce Judaism to a small, self-contained cult. This position was absolutely untenable to Rabbi Uziel, who viewed Judaism as a grand way of life which must shape the entire society, serving as a model for the world.

Rabbi Uziel believed that Torah study and observance should make the religious Jew into a model human being.[12] But exactly what are we to study and do in order to attain the highest standards of Torah ideals? Obviously, we must study and observe Torah in as thorough and profound a way as possible. In Rabbi Uziel’s view, the Torah is not simply a book of laws and commandments; it encompasses all knowledge.
"It is impossible to understand it--certainly to plumb its depths--without

a profound and broad knowledge of all worldly wisdoms and sciences" which are hidden in the depths of creation. [13] The Torah itself is interested in cosmology, philosophy, theology, human history. To be well-versed in Torah involves knowledge of astronomy and mathematics in order to set the calendar. Torah law includes comprehensive knowledge of weights and measures. It entails agronomical and zoological knowledge in order to observe properly the laws of mixed species (*kilayim*). Likewise, the laws of *terefòt* demand a thorough knowledge of animal anatomy. Jewish law requires a knowledge of human psychology, so that the judge can determine whether or not a witness is attempting to deceive him. Halakha includes political and economic principles, as well as laws governing the relationships between different peoples. In short, Torah--being a total way of life--necessitates understanding life in its fullness.[14]

The Torah tradition teaches Jews to be engaged in the development of society (*yishuvo shel olam*) in the broadest sense of the term. This entails not only populating and settling the world, but studying the ways of nature (science) in order to advance human civilization. *Yishuvo shel olam* involves knowledge of how to establish a system of justice and how to develop a harmonious and ethical society. Involvement in *yishuvo shel olam* is a necessary condition to fulfilling our specific Jewish way of life. The settlement and building of society increases knowledge, widens our intellectual and scientific horizons. This very

process awakens within us a more profound appreciation of the wonders of God, His creative powers and His providence. [15]

Rabbi Uziel did not see Torah and *mada* as conflicting. He believed, rather, that in order to be a Torah personality with full Torah knowledge, one must study worldly wisdom. But when one studies such subjects as philosophy, science, psychology, history and literature, one does not do so for the sake of academic knowledge, but rather as a means through which one gains a deeper understanding of God's ways. "Talmud Torah" is a general term referring to the attainment of wisdom; it includes Torah study as well as all the studies and sciences which deepen our understanding. [16] It is Talmud Torah in this broad sense which raises a person from ignorance to wisdom. Secular knowledge by itself provides knowledge, but only within the context of Talmud Torah does secular knowledge have ultimate meaning, leading the student closer to God.

In his address upon assuming the position of Chief Rabbi of Salonika (9 Adar, 5681), Rabbi Uziel stated: "It is true that scientific knowledge (*mada*) raises a person, gives him wings to soar to great heights, enlightens his eyes to discover the secrets of nature and to uti-1ize its powers, to make life more pleasant and to increase longevity; general knowledge also endows a person with spiritual powers. But all the acquisitions of general knowledge are vessels which help one to

live--and are not life itself. . . . The goal (of life) is . . . to know the God of the universe, to walk in His ways and to cling to Him. [I7]

Rabbi Uziel saw Maimonides as the classic example of the Jewish ideal. In the *Mishne Torah*, Maimonides presents the spiritual inheritance of the people of Israel from Moses to his own time. In addition, he draws on the best of worldly knowledge. Rabbi Uziel believed that Jewish sages were well aware of the philosophical, scientific and theological insights propounded by non-Jewish sages. Indeed, Jewish sages had to have knowledge of the world in order to fully understand the Torah itself. After all, the Torah, Talmud and rabbinic literature include references to all branches of human knowledge. Maimonides advocated the principle: receive the truth from whoever states it. Maimonides studied philosophy and science, gathering the best of what he found; in this way he enriched his own thoughts in depth and breadth. [18]

In his book on the laws of guardianship (*apotropos*), Rabbi Uziel noted that our sages were fully cognizant of the legal thought and practice of the non-Jewish nations with whom they had contact. Our rabbis of all generations "did not limit themselves to their four cubits and to the walls of the study hall. Rather, they learned and knew al which transpired in the world of science and justice." They did not hesitate to admit the truth of the words of non-Jewish sages when the truth was with them. [19]

In a letter he wrote to the leadership of the Alliance Israelite Universelle, Rabbi Uziel recognized the importance of Jewish students learning both religious subjects and general studies. He stressed the need to learn Hebrew and said that Jewish students in the diaspora should learn the language of the land in which they lived as well as at least one European language. But the goal of Jewish education should be clear: to raise children faithful to their people and to their Torah, people who would be useful to their families, their people, and society. Rabbi Uziel insisted that general subjects be taught by religious teachers. Otherwise, a spirit of secularism would enter the children's hearts, leading them away from the very goals for which Jewish schools stood. In every generation, he said, the Jewish people have produced learned doctors, authors, and business people. We have not lacked giants in science and worldly wisdom. And we have been able to attain this while retaining total loyalty to the Torah tradition. If modern-day Jews think that their children can achieve success only by receiving an exclusively secular education, they are in fact sacrificing their children's spiritual lives. There is no necessity to do so, since one can attain worldly success while remaining deeply steeped in Torah tradition. The ideal can be attained only when general studies are taught within the context of the Jewish religious tradition. [20]

Jews throughout history have not allowed themselves to be cut off from the intellectual currents of the world. Rather, they have been at

the forefront in all areas of human knowledge and scientific advancement. In spite of the attempts by anti-Semites to confine Jews to ghettos and to limit their educational opportunities, Jews have made remarkable contributions to human knowledge. As active and knowledgeable participants in world civilization, our goal is to lead humanity in the paths of proper ethics and social harmony.[21]

Rabbi Uziel saw Abraham, our forefather, as his model for outreach to general society. Abraham's teachings brought people closer to a proper understanding of God; indeed, he was successful in converting many to his beliefs. By lovingly guiding people in the ways of God, he set a pattern for his descendants to emulate. A basic responsibility of the Jewish people is to teach monotheism and ethical behavior to the peoples of the world. [22]

Unlike some other religions, Judaism does not claim a monopoly on the world to come. All people--Jewish or not--have access to God, and will be rewarded for a life of righteousness. [23]

Judaism teaches responsibility towards each human being and every nation. The ultimate redemption of Israel is not the success of one people, but rather the redemption of all humanity. The entire world will become free of war, rid of false beliefs and ideologies; it will be free of political, military and religious coercion.[24] A cornerstone of

Jewish religiosity is the recognition of the "image of God" found in all human beings. This insight leads to the love of individuals and to the love of humanity. [25]

Since all human beings are created in the "image of God," all are entitled to loving concern and respect. Rabbi Uziel’s commitment to this principle is evident in a halakhic controversy which erupted concerning autopsies. Already in the early 1930's in *Erets Yisrael*, the issue of autopsies arose in connection with training Jewish doctors in emerging Jewish medical schools. Medical training necessitated performing autopsies, but how could this take place under halakhically correct conditions? Rabbi Kook ruled in 1931 that it was not permissible to perform autopsies on Jewish bodies for the sake of medical education. He recommended that non-Jewish bodies be purchased for the sake of scientific research. In sharp contrast, Rabbi Uziel theorized (*le-halakha ve-lo lema'ase*) that autopsies could be permitted according to Jewish law if conducted with proper respect. "In a situation of great benefit to everyone, where there is an issue of saving lives, we have not found any reason to prohibit (autopsies), and on the contrary, there are proofs to permit them." In considering whether it would be preferable to obtain non-Jewish bodies for autopsies, Rabbi Uziel’s response was unequivocal: "Certainly this should not even be said, and more certainly should not be written, since the prohibition of *nivul* stems from the humiliation caused to all humans. That is to say, it is a humiliation to cause the body

of a human being--created in the image of God and graced with knowledge and understanding to master and rule over all creation--to be left disgraced and rotting in public." According to Rabbi Uziel, if one were to prohibit autopsies, then no autopsies could be performed on anyone, Jewish or non-Jewish. The result of this policy would be that no doctors could be trained. [26]

Rabbi Uziel's appreciation of the "image of God" in everyone was manifested in his abhorrence of discrimination based on religion or race. In the early days of British rule over *Erets Yisrael*, Rabbi Uziel was already imagining how halakha would be implemented in a new Jewish state. He posed the theoretical question: may the testimony of non-Jews be accepted in Jewish courts according to the rules of the Torah? "It is impossible to answer this question negatively, because it would not be civil justice to disqualify as witnesses those who live among us and deal with us honestly and fairly. Weren't we ourselves embittered when the lands of our exile invalidated us as witnesses? If in the entire enlightened world the law has been accepted to receive the testimony of every person without consideration of religion or race, how then may we make such a separation?" He then went on to write a comprehensive responsum in which he demonstrated the propriety of establishing a regulation allowing testimony from non-Jews. [27] This responsum demonstrates Rabbi Uziel's concern for creating ajust Jewish society which respected the rights and needs of the non-Jewish population.

In his speech to the rabbis of *Erets Yisrael* (1919), he stated that the Jewish nation was a people of peace, never wanting to advance itself by causing destruction to others. Non-Jews should not feel threatened by the emergence of a Jewish state, since a Jewish government would be a source of peace and blessing.[28] In his address at his installation as Chief Rabbi of Israel (1939), Rabbi Uziel stressed the need to forge links of peace and fellowship among all segments of society in *Erets Yisrael*. [29] In his radio address in honor of his installation as Chief Rabbi, he made a special appeal to the non-Jewish population in the land of Israel: "We stretch out to you a hand of peace, true and trustworthy. We say to you: The land is spread out before us and we will work it with joined hands. We will uncover its treasures and will live in it as brothers together." [30]

Rabbi Uziel, who spoke Arabic fluently, felt it was vital for Jews to establish good relations with their Arab neighbors. He strenuously criticized those individuals who, in the name of Judaism, fomented anti-Arab attitudes. This was a perversion of Judaism. "The Torah of Israel, all of whose paths are ways of peace, calls for the peace and love of its people and all who are created in the image ofGod."[31] It was up to rabbis to decry negative attitudes towards the Arabs. In 1927, Rabbi Uziel visited Baghdad and spoke to the Jewish community there, inspiring them with his message from Zion. In his speech, which he delivered both in Hebrew and Arabic, he called on the Jews of Baghdad to share

in the religious Zionist ideals, to settle in Israel, to maintain their religious traditions in the land of Israel. The Arabic newspapers of Baghdad praised Rabbi Uziel's speech, and lauded his call for peace and friendship between the two great nations (Jews and Arabs), both peoples being descendants of our forefather Abraham.[32]

In 1921, a battle erupted between Jews and Arabs in the outskirts of Tel Aviv. When Rabbi Uziel learned that both sides were shooting at each other, he went out to the battleground in his rabbinical garb. Fearlessly, he walked between the two camps. The gunfire stopped. Rabbi Uziel spoke to the Arabs with emotion. He reminded them that Jews and Arabs are cousins, descendants of Abraham. "We say to you that the land can bear all of us, can sustain all of us. Let us stop the battles among ourselves, for we are brothers."

Rabbi Uziel fully believed that peace and harmony were achievable if goodwill could prevail. He was faithful to this vision throughout his life, even though it was rejected by political and religious leadership on both sides.

When Rabbi Uziel died in 1953, hundreds of thousands of people mourned his passing. All the people of Israel, Sephardim and Ashkenazim, Jews and non-Jews, had lost a religious leader of the highest stature. The motto of his life had been the words of the prophet Zekharya:

"Love truth and peace." The grandeur of his life and his religious vision were an inspiration to his generation, and will stand as a lasting monument for generations to come.

NOTES

[1] R. Benzion Uziel, *Mikhmanei Uziel*, Tel Aviv, 5699, p.328.

[2] For more on the life and career and Rabbi Uziel, see Shabbetai Don Yahye, *HaRav Benzion Meir Hai Uziel: Hayav uMishnato*, Jerusalem, 5715. See also Yaacov Hadani, "*HaRav Benzion Uziel keManhig Medini*," *Hamidrashia*, Vol.. 20-21, 1987, pp. 239-266. [See also Marc D. Angel, *Loving Truth and Peace: The Grand Religious Worldview of Rabbi Benzion Uziel*, Jason Aronson, Northvale, 1999.]

[3] R. Benzion Uziel, *Hegyonei Uziel*, VoL. 1, Jerusalem, 5713, p. 99; and *Hegyonei Uziel*, Vol. 2, Jerusalem) 5714, p. 120.

[4] *Hegyonei Uziel*, VoL. 2, pp. 121-125. See also, *Mikhmanei Uziel*, p.460.

[5] *Mikhmanei Uziel*, p.324.

[6] *Mikhmanei Uziel*, p.331.

[7] *Mikhmanei Uziel*, pp. 364-365.

[8] *Mikhmanei Uziel*, p.391; *Mishpetei Uziel*, *Yore De'a* 3, Vol. 2 Addendum No.3; *Sha'arei Uziel*, Jerusalem, 5751, p.l0. See also Marc D. Angel, *Rhythms of Jewish Living*, New York, 1986, pp. 70-72; and Marc D. Angel, *Voices in Exile*, Hoboken, 1991, pp. 194-196.

[9] *Mikhmanei Uziel*, p. 557.

[10] *Mikhmanei Uziel*, pp. 456 and 458.

[11] Quoted in Shabbetai Don Yahye, pp. 227-228.

[12] *Hegyonei Uziel*, Vol. 2, pp. 96-97.

[13] *Mikhmanei Uziel*, p. 405.

[14] *Mikhmanei Uziel*, pp. 406-407.

[15] *Hegyonei Uziel*, Vol. 2, p. 98.

[16] *Mikhmanei Uziel*, pp. 552-553.

[17] *Mikhmanei Uziel*, p. 345.

[18] *Mikhmanei Uziel*, pp. 382-383; 393.

[19] *Sha'arei Uziel*, introduction, pp. 35 and 37.

[20] *Mikhmanei Uziel*, pp. 516-517.

[21] *Mikhmanei Uziel*, p. 120.

[22] *Hegyonei Uziel*, Vol. 1, pp. 98-99.

[23] *Hegyonei Uziel*, Vol. 1, p. 176.

[24] *Hegyonei Uziel*, Vol. 2, pp. 146-147.

[25] *Mikhmanei Uziel*, p. 344.

[26] For Rabbi Kook's opinion, see *Da'at Cohen*, Jerusalem, 5745, No. 199.

Rabbi Uziel's opinion is found in *Piskei Uziel*, Jerusalem, 5737, No. 32, especially

pp. 178-179. See also my article, "A Discussion of the Nature of

Jewishness in the Teachings of Rabbi Kook and Rabbi Uziel," in *Seeking Good, Speaking Peace,*

edited by Hayyim J. Angel, Hoboken, 1994, pp.112-123.

[27] For a discussion of Rabbi Uziel's position, see Rabbi Haim David Halevy,

"The Love of Israel as a Factor in Halakhic Decision Making in the Works

of Rabbi Benzion Uziel," *Tradition*, Vol. 24, Spring 1989, pp. 17-19.

[28] *Mikhmanei Uziel*, p. 330.

[29] *Mikhmanei Uziel*, p. 424.

[30] *Mikhmanei Uziel*, p. 429.

[31] *Mikhmanei Uziel*, p. 523.

[32] Shabbetai Don Yahye, pp. 107-108.

[33] Shabbetai Don Yahye, p. 77.