Embracing Tradition and Modernity: Rabbi Benzion Meir Hai Uziel

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Introduction

One of the great rabbinic lights of the twentieth century was Rabbi Benzion Meir Hai Uziel (1880–1953). Born in Jerusalem, he served as Chief Rabbi of Tel-Aviv from 1911 to 1921, and then was Chief Rabbi of Salonika for two years. In 1923, he returned to Israel and assumed the post of Chief Rabbi of Tel-Aviv. From 1939 until his death in 1953, he was the Sephardic Chief Rabbi, the Rishon le-Tzion, of Israel. He served as Chief Rabbi during the founding of the State of Israel and wrote extensively on the halakhic ramifications of the State and the staggering changes in Jewish life it would bring.

Rabbi Uziel believed that the purpose of the State of Israel on the world scene is to serve as a model nation, characterized by moral excellence. Just as individuals are religiously required to participate in the life of society, the Jewish people as a nation must participate in the life of the community of nations.

Tanakh and rabbinic Judaism have a universalistic grand vision that sees Judaism as a great world religion. Unfortunately, too many religious Jews overemphasize the particularistic aspects of Judaism, and lose sight of the universalistic mission of the Torah. We cannot be a light unto the nations unless nations see that light through Jewish involvement.[1]

Rabbi Uziel stressed the need for Jews to remain committed to Torah and the commandments. If Jews abandon their commitment to Torah, then they no longer are united under their national charter. Any vision not solidly rooted in the Torah and halakhah is untrue to Jewish experience. People who speak about “Jewish values” without commitment to Torah and halakhah misrepresent the Torah.[2]

Simultaneously, Rabbi Uziel was absolutely committed to Jewish unity. In 1948–1949, he joined many other rabbis to protest against Shabbat desecration in Israel. At a large rally, Rabbi Uziel gave an impassioned speech urging Shabbat observance. After the rally, he hailed a taxi to take him

home. In those days there was a fuel shortage in Israel, so Israeli taxi drivers were allowed to drive only six days a week. On one's windshield, a sticker would indicate which day the person would not drive. The particular taxi that Rabbi Uziel hailed did not have a *shin* (for Shabbat), meaning that this driver drove on Shabbat. Some of Rabbi Uziel's followers were shocked that he would ride with this Shabbat-desecrating driver, especially only minutes after he spoke so passionately in favor of Shabbat at the rally. Without flinching, Rabbi Uziel got into the taxi and said, "I do not excommunicate any Jew personally, even if he is a Shabbat desecrator."[3]

Rabbi Uziel craved peace with Israel's Arab neighbors. In 1921, a group of Arabs were attacking Jews. Rabbi Uziel appeared, dressed in his rabbinic garb, and told the Jews to hold their fire. He then walked out and spoke to the Arabs in Arabic. He reminded them that the land had been desolate and disease-ridden for centuries, and now Jews were dramatically improving conditions as they rebuilt their homeland. These were all signs of God's providence, and the improved conditions would benefit everyone.

Rabbi Uziel then addressed the Arab attackers: "Our cousins! Our mutual ancestor, Abraham, father of Isaac and Ishmael, when he saw that his nephew Lot felt constricted and complained that they could no longer live together… said to him: Let there be no feud between me and you nor between my shepherds and your shepherds, for we are brothers. So, too, do we say to you: The land will carry us all, will sustain us all. Let us stop the feuds between us. We are brothers." For that moment, Rabbi Uziel won the day, and the Arabs stopped their attack.[4]

In 1939, when Rabbi Uziel was appointed as Chief Rabbi, he gave a radio address calling for peace and unity in the nation. He then addressed the Arab population:

We reach our hands out to you in peace, pure and trustworthy. We say: The land is stretched out before us, and with joined hands we will work it; we will uncover its treasures; and we will live on it as brothers who dwell together. Know and trust that the word of our God will rise forever. Make peace with us and we will make peace with you. Together all of us will benefit from the blessing of God on His land; with quiet and peace, with love and fellowship, with goodwill and pure heart we will find the way of peace.[5]

Rabbi Uziel was an ardent religious Zionist who believed that rabbis had to apply halakhah in ways that would allow the fledgling State of Israel to thrive. When there were halakhic debates, he relied on lenient opinions when they would build industry and serve society. For example, he permitted grafted etrogim (citrons) grown in Israel since he wanted all Jews to use Israeli etrogim on Sukkot. He similarly relied on a minority halakhic opinion to permit milk from cows who receive inoculations to prevent stomach disease. If he did not rely on those permissive opinions, the cows would be considered *terefah*, non-kosher, and there would not be a dairy industry in Israel.

Of course, Rabbi Uziel found halakhic precedents for his permissive rulings, and relied on those positions in order to protect Israeli agriculture. He was not always lenient in his halakhic rulings, but in the case of building the State of Israel, Rabbi Uziel had a clear value system that guided his decision-making to the extent that he could improve life in Israel within the parameters of halakhah.[6]

Rabbi Uziel and Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook[7]

It is instructive to contrast the rulings of Rabbi Uziel with another exceptional rabbinic leader of the early twentieth century, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel.

Rambam espoused a non-essentialist understanding of a Jew. There is nothing inherent in a Jewish soul that distinguishes it from a non-Jewish soul. Jews are a covenantal nation with a unique set of laws from God in the Torah, and also are part of the community of nations. There is no room for racism, since all humans are created in God's Image, and all people are part of one family.[8] In contrast, some Jewish mystical teachings espouse an essentialist position, maintaining that Jewish souls are fundamentally different from (and superior to) non-Jewish souls.[9]

Aside from the possibility of negative attitudes toward non-Jews that the essentialist position often promotes, it also has practical halakhic ramifications. For example, someone asked Rabbi Kook in 1931 whether Jews can perform autopsies in medical school since this process will help them save lives when they become doctors. Halakhah generally prohibits the desecration of a human body, but perhaps this concern should be waived on account of the future saving of lives. Rabbi Kook ruled that medical schools should obtain bodies of non-Jews. He argued that even though everyone is created in God's Image, this Image is particularly manifest in Jews because of the holiness of the Torah. Jewish attachment to the Torah not only characterizes the Jewish soul but also infuses a Jew's body with additional sanctity.

Rabbi Uziel vehemently disagreed with Rabbi Kook's ruling. Autopsies for medical school are not a desecration of human bodies if the cadavers are treated with care and the purpose is to help save lives. When asked whether it was preferable to use non-Jewish bodies, Rabbi Uziel retorted, "Certainly this should not even be said and more certainly should not be written, since the prohibition of desecration stems from the humiliation caused to all humans. That is to say, it is a humiliation to desecrate the body of a human being—created in the image of God."

Rabbi Uziel thereby advanced two arguments: An essentialist position is fundamentally wrong, and an essentialist position is shameful to publicize in any forum.

In another discussion over the interface between Torah and democracy, rabbis debated whether women were halakhically permitted to vote or hold public office. Rabbi Kook ruled in the negative, insisting that this behavior was immodest and would threaten Jewish family values and morality. Offering a broader context for Rabbi Kook's ruling, Dov Schwartz explains that Rabbi Kook opposed women's voting and holding office since the British government recognized the right for a Jewish homeland based on the authority of Tanakh. Rabbi Kook insisted that Jews had to behave according to Torah values—not only because that is God's will, but also because it was essential for continued British recognition of Israel. If Jews are not behaving modestly in accordance with Torah values, opponents of Israel would argue that Jews do not deserve their homeland.[10]

In contrast, Rabbi Uziel maintained that women may vote and hold office. We allow interactions between men and women in so many public areas, so there is no valid halakhic argument for the absolute separation of the sexes specifically in the realm of voting. Additionally, women should be allowed to vote for the people who will make the laws that they must obey. In terms of women holding office, classical sources indicate that halakhic objections to women holding positions of authority (*serarah*) apply only when the community objects to women holding office. However, if women are democratically elected, that means that the public accepts them.[11]

Conclusion

Before he died, Rabbi Uziel composed a spiritual testament, describing his ultimate life goals:

To spread Torah among students, to love the Torah and its mitzvot, to love the land of Israel and its holiness, to love absolutely every Jewish man and woman and the people of Israel in its entirety; to love God, the Lord of Israel; to bring peace among all Jews physically and spiritually, in their words and actions, in their thoughts and in the ruminations of their hearts, in all their steps and deeds, at home and in the street, in the village and in the city; to bring true peace in the house of Israel, to the entire congregation of Israel in all its subdivisions and groupings; and between Israel and their Father in heaven. These goals are actually only one, since they stem from one source, namely the Torah of the living God and the King of the universe, Who is the King of Israel and its Holy One Who gave the true Torah to His people, a Torah all of whose ways are pleasantness and all of whose paths are peace.[12]

[1] R. Marc D. Angel, *Loving Truth and Peace: The Grand Religious Worldview of Rabbi Benzion Uziel* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1999), pp. 7, 46–47.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 11–13.
[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.
[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 59–60.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 64.
[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 102–105, 213–239. See also R. Marc D. Angel's translation of R. Haim David Halevi, *Asei Lekha Rav* 8:97 into English, "The Love of Israel as a Factor in Halakhic Decision-Making in the Works of Rabbi Benzion Uziel," *Tradition* 24:3 (Spring 1989), pp. 1–20.
[7] See R. Marc D. Angel, "A Discussion of the Nature of Jewishness in the Teachings of Rabbi Kook and Rabbi Uziel," in *Seeking Good, Speaking Peace: Collected Essays of Rabbi Marc D. Angel*, ed. Hayyim Angel (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1994), pp. 112–123.
[8] See also Mishnah Sanhedrin 37a.
[9] See Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* (Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006); and Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991).
[10] Dov Schwartz, *Religious-Zionism: History and Ideology* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009), p. 36.
[11] See further in *Loving Truth and Peace*, pp. 204–209; Zvi Zohar, "Traditional Flexibility and Modern Strictness: A Comparative Analysis of the Halakhic Positions of Rabbi Kook and Rabbi Uziel on Women's Suffrage," in *Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries: History and Culture*, ed. Harvey E. Goldberg (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 119–133.
[12] *Loving Truth and Peace*, p. 244.