Toward a More Pragmatic Redemption: The Practical Zionism of Rabbi Yitzhak Yaakov Reines

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Today, both religious Zionism as a whole and the Mizrachi movement in particular are strongly associated with the philosophy of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook and his followers. Like other early religious Zionists, R. Kook saw the cultivation and settlement of the Land of Israel as an early stage in the messianic redemption. But more than any of his contemporaries, R. Kook created a theological framework that saw the secular Zionist movement as God's holy tool for hastening the coming of the long awaited redeemer. According to R. Kook, cooperation with secular and even anti-religious Jews could be sanctioned because their awakening to Zionism stemmed from a religious spark in their souls. In fact, they were actors in a great cosmic drama that would ultimately bring about their return to traditional Judaism.[1]

But Mizrachi's beginnings were different. Mizrachi was established as a party within Theodor Herzl's Zionist Congress in 1902 by Rabbi Yitzhak Yaakov Reines (1839–1915), a man driven by a spirit unlike that of R. Kook. Whereas R. Kook was a dreamer, poet, and an idealist, R. Reines was a realist, activist, and pragmatist. It was primarily the pernicious, unrelenting nature of anti-Semitism, not messianic idealism, that brought R. Reines into the Zionist camp.

R. Reines was a brilliant Torah scholar, and he studied briefly in the famed Yeshiva of Volozhin.[2] For much of his career, he was the Chief Rabbi of Lida, a mid-sized city near Vilna. He published many works on a variety of topics, and even more of his writing sadly remains only in manuscript. Although R. Reines' prose is at times repetitive and disorganized, he was a creative and underappreciated thinker. For example, in 1880, he published *Hoteim Tokhnit*, a book that ambitiously sought to systematize halakha by uncovering the logical principles by which the Oral Torah had been derived from the Written Torah. Even though this work is incomplete and not always convincing, his attempt to create a near-scientific taxonomy of broader halakhic principles and the particulars that flowed from them remains fascinating.[3]

R. Reines was also a courageous and outspoken activist on issues concerning Eastern European Jewry aside from Zionism. In 1905, with the backing of Mizrachi, R. Reines achieved a goal he had worked at for many years: the establishment of what was essentially the first yeshiva in Eastern Europe to teach secular subjects and the Hebrew language alongside the traditional Talmud curriculum.[4] Although the yeshiva, named *Torah vaDa'at* for its merger of Torah and worldly culture, closed in 1915 upon R. Reines' death, it was a path-breaking institution. Rabbi Shlomo Polachek, the Rosh Yeshiva appointed by R. Reines, went on to teach at Yeshiva University. And the well-known American yeshiva in Brooklyn, Torah Vodaath, was founded initially by students of R. Reines and named after his yeshiva.[5]

R. Reines, however, saw himself as more of a pragmatist than an idealist. In his writings, he often speaks of the exigencies that drove him to innovate. *Hoteim Tokhnit* was in part a response to German Reform scholars who denied the divinity of the Oral Torah.[6] Similarly, he introduced limited secular studies in his yeshiva to ensure that young men could get the training they needed to support themselves financially while remaining within the traditional religious community, among other pragmatic reasons.[7] R. Reines did not ascribe to *Torah uMadda* or a similar ideology; he saw no inherent value in secular education. Rather, it was the immediate needs of the nation that drove R. Reines.

On the surface at least, R. Reines' Zionism was much the same. He came to the movement because he concluded that the Jews needed a safe haven—a homeland—where they would be free from oppression and persecution. In *Kol miTziyon*, a letter to Mizrachi constituents, he passionately painted a dire picture:

> The blood of our brothers is now being spilled more and more like water everywhere, the hatred for our nation is increasing in all the lands, pushing the Jews more and more from [a normal] life and bringing them to poverty, famine, sickness, suffering, and submission of the spirit. … Our sons and daughters are being sold to another nation. … Judaism is being pushed aside more and more for other cultures and the name of Israel is being erased from the face of the earth. [8]

A Jewish homeland in Israel, he believed, was the way to solve the problem.

Zionism was unpopular among many traditional Jewish leaders, who maintained that making a concerted effort to settle in Israel before the proper time ordained by God violated a prohibition against hastening the messianic redemption.[9] The story goes that the saintly Hafetz Hayyim himself came to visit R. Reines to plead with him not to ally himself with the Zionist cause.[10] R. Reines responded to his detractors by arguing that pure political Zionism was acceptable because it had no connection to the Messiah. In *Sha'arei Orah veSimhah* he wrote:

> And in all their [the Zionists] actions and efforts there is also no hint or mention of the final redemption. Their entire intention is only to improve Israel's [the Jews'] situation and ennoble it with dignity … so that Israel should know that it has a safe place. … It is only an effort for the improvement of the nation's physical situation. [11]

In stark contrast to the position taken by R. Kook or even the position of other religious Zionists of his time such as the *Hovevei Tziyon*, R. Reines believed that Zionist efforts had no connection to the ultimate redemption at the end of days. Rather, Zionism was a political movement necessary to save the Jewish people from danger in the here and now.

In this respect, R. Reines' ideology was similar to that of the founder of the Zionist Congress, Theodor Herzl. Disillusioned by the growing anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe despite the emancipation of the Jews, Herzl gathered the Congress in 1897 to obtain a homeland for the Jews that would guarantee their security. His political Zionist party and R. Reines' Mizrachi movement were natural allies in the Zionist Congress. R. Reines even dedicated his 1902 defense of Zionism, *Or Hadash al Tziyon*, to Herzl.[12]

R. Reines and his allies also established Mizrachi in part to oppose the Democratic Faction, a cultural Zionist party headed by Chaim Weizmann and Asher Hirsch Ginsberg, the writer known by his pen name Ahad Ha-Am. Weizmann and Ha-Am saw Zionism first and foremost as a secular Jewish renewal movement. They wanted to appeal to discontented Jewish youth by encouraging a new cadre of intellectuals to create a synthesis between Jewish culture and Western intellectualism, and revive Hebrew language, literature, art, and music. Some even called Ha-Am the "Agnostic Rabbi." R. Reines and the Mizrachi—at least at first—attempted to mitigate the Democratic Faction's influence by advocating the need to keep cultural activities out of the Zionist platform, which they believed should instead focus solely on the search for a Jewish homeland.[13] The opposite was true as well: R. Reines, ever the pragmatist, kept the finances of his Yeshiva in Lida separate from the Mizrachi treasury to avoid embroiling the school in the contentious debates over Zionism's legitimacy.[14]

One of R. Reines' strongest affirmations of political Zionism was his support of the Uganda Proposal. Although the Zionists desired a homeland in Palestine, the Ottoman Turks, under whose jurisdiction it lay, rebuffed Herzl's proposals. Therefore, in 1903, Herzl proposed an alternative based on an offer from the British: an autonomous Jewish state in the African nation of Uganda. Understandably, this famous proposal precipitated enormous controversy within the ranks of the Zionist Congress. Although the plan was eventually dropped after two years, R. Reines endorsed it. In a letter to Herzl he wrote:

> We agreed to the African proposal because we paid attention to the needs of the nation that is dearer to us than the Land [of Israel]—and the needs of the nation that is deteriorating both physically and spiritually requires a secure refuge wherever it may be. [15]

R. Reines had a deep religious attachment to the land of Israel. Nonetheless, in light of his pragmatic approach to solving the Jewish problem of his time, his support for the Uganda Proposal is unsurprising.[16]

A practical approach to Zionism is also what, in R. Reines' eyes, ameliorated the concern so many traditional Jews had about working together with the non-religious. He wrote in *Or Hadash al Tziyon*:

> There are those who claim that since they [the non-observant] are involved in the Zionist movement there is reason to be concerned that it will result in ruinous breaches in religion. … I clearly demonstrated that there is no concern at all that it will affect religion because, essentially, it is an idea whose fundamental principle is to improve our physical situation and to obtain for our brothers of the house of Israel who are oppressed and pursued without respite a place of secure refuge in our Holy Land. This has nothing to do with spiritual or religious matters. [17]

These words would have been an anathema to someone like R. Kook, for whom Zionism and religion were deeply entwined.

And yet, it's also hard to take R. Reines' words here at face value. It is likely they are somewhat polemical, designed to assuage the concerns of the traditional community. For in fact, throughout his writings, R. Reines saw the yearning for Zion expressed by the Zionist enterprise as an expression of deep religious identification. The return of secular Jews to their Jewish national roots was, for R. Reines, the kindling of a dormant spark of spirituality latent in every Jew. As he wrote elsewhere in *Or Hadash al Tziyon*, "The awakening of the non-observant to the Zionist idea is not at all because of an irreligious [nature] but because of their rejection of an irreligious [lifestyle]."[18] There are echoes of R. Kook's approach here. R. Reines even drew the title of the book, *Or Hadash al Tziyon*, from the fervently messianic close of the blessing recited before the Shema entreating God to shine a new light on Zion in which all will partake.[19]

In a letter to the poet Yehuda Leib Levin, R. Reines further explained that Zionism had a great ethical potential, particularly for the Jewish youth, as it would "turn their hearts away from the delights of the larger world to gaze upon the light of Judaism and to see the radiance of their nation and its splendor."[20] Indeed, in *Kol miTziyon*, R. Reines proclaimed with euphoric conviction Zionism's ability to unite

the Jewish people in a national renaissance:

Zionism powerfully raises the flag of Zion and rallies around it all the dispersed and unites them as one. It calls out from the heights the name of Israel, it goes out to fight bravely against the tendency towards assimilation and self-disparagement. … It calls out to the nation to stand up for itself and not to give up anything. It brings national pride to the hearts of many. [21]

Thus, despite his pragmatic refrains, R. Reines did not see Zionism as devoid of religious value. To the contrary, it was a movement of *teshuvah*, of return. R. Reines the realist knew that Mizrachi must remain a political arm of the Zionist movement. Nonetheless, he still believed that at its core, Zionism was a spiritual awakening.

This more nuanced understanding of R. Reines' Zionism suggests that R. Kook and R. Reines were not quite as far apart as some have supposed.[22] Both thinkers cast Zionism in a profoundly religious light. Both saw it as a movement of rebirth and return, a spark of holiness in an age of secularism, and as a sign of Jewish national distinctiveness and unity in a time of rampant assimilation. And with this philosophy, both built bridges to non-religious Jews, confident that the shared project of settling the Land of Israel would ultimately bring Jews together. Still, it's crucial to note that they differed on whether the Zionist enterprise was part of the messianic redemption. R. Reines was also more political than R. Kook, and worked from within the Zionist Congress.

But, within a few short years, as Mizrachi grew and its center of gravity and leadership shifted toward Austria-Hungary and points further west, R. Reines lost a great deal of influence in the movement he had founded. And although R. Reines had initially championed keeping Zionist activities aimed at creating a Jewish homeland separate from measures to enhance religious education, Mizrachi soon went in a different direction. In 1911, the Zionist Congress decided to support non-religious Jewish cultural activities and schools. Further, Mizrachi's new Western European leaders were particularly concerned about rising assimilation; perhaps they even saw religious education as more important than getting to Israel itself. In truth, Mizrachi members had been divided from the get-go about whether strengthening religious education should be part of the party's Zionist platform. For all of these reasons, Mizrachi soon abandoned pure political Zionism and dedicated itself to Jewish education and religious revival.[23]

There are many reasons why R. Reines' more pragmatic Zionism has been largely forgotten in religious circles. For one, pragmatism rarely captures the imagination as well as grand notions of religious destiny and visions of the end of days. Indeed, when the State of Israel became a reality and its miraculous existence was affirmed again and again—such as after the Six Day War and the capture of the Temple Mount—it grew harder for many religious Zionists to see anything but the stirrings of the ultimate redemption. Some, following the teaching of R. Kook's son R. Zvi Yehuda, turned to greater activism and even to extremism to make their dreams of a greater Israel a reality. For R. Zvi Yehuda, once the redemptive process had begun, there was no turning back.[24] And to be fair, even if R. Reines would never have gone so far, he himself sometimes couched Zionism in language that bordered on the messianic.

Yet there was another twentieth-century thinker who reaffirmed R. Reines' merger of pragmatism and religious meaning, finding a practical and spiritual call to action in the sheer improbability of the story of the State of Israel. In *Kol Dodi Dofek*, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik movingly argued that the fact so many displaced Holocaust survivors and other Jews had found refuge in the newly established State of Israel was one of "six knocks" of Divine Providence designed to wake up the Jewish nation to rally in support of the new country.[25] Like R. Reines, R. Soloveitchik stressed the importance of the land of Israel as a refuge for those who had nowhere else to go. Still—and again like R. Reines—R. Soloveitchik also found deep religious meaning in Israel's creation, explaining that the imperative to support the State stemmed from a "covenant of fate" that binds all Jews, religious and secular, to work together to ensure the nation's survival.[26] Speaking with passion and urgency, R. Soloveitchik unpacked the Song of Songs and its theme of missed opportunity: "Can we not hear, in our own concern for the peace and security of the land of Israel today, the knocking of the Beloved pleading

with His love that she let him enter? . . . It is eight years now that He has been knocking. Would that we not miss the moment!"[27] To R. Soloveitchik, the State of Israel's religious centrality was unquestionable and yet in no way dependent on whether its creation meant that the Messiah was stirring. That God had willed Israel into being was enough.[28]

As I reflect upon Israel today, I cannot help but wonder what R. Reines would think of the contemporary situation. Even 72 years after its founding, whether Israel represents the first flowering of our redemption remains elusively difficult to predict. Yet it is clear that the modern miracle of Jewish sovereignty in its ancestral homeland has birthed a political and spiritual renaissance. Jewish pride has increased worldwide, and exiles who were dispersed to all four corners of the globe have found respite, rejuvenation, and a new life in modern Israel. In these respects, Zionist efforts have exceeded R. Reines' most ambitious predictions.

But R. Reines also stressed the importance of national unity. He saw the Zionist movement as a way to bring all Jews, religious and secular, under the common banner of renewal and return. The political divisiveness and religious polarization in our times would disappoint this visionary. I worry too that he would not countenance the more militant messianism of some contemporary religious groups, which often further divides the country.[29] In the spirit of R. Reines, can we yet learn to minimize our differences and celebrate our shared heritage, making Israel a home of peace and prosperity for all who dwell in it?

Notes

This essay is a revised and expanded version of my "Practical Zionism: R. Yitshak Yaakov Reines and the Beginnings of Mizrachi," *Kol Hamevaser: The Jewish Thought Magazine of the Yeshiva University Student Body* 1:8 (2008), 18–19.

[1] For more on R. Kook's philosophy of Zionism, see Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, trans. Michael Swirsky & Jonathan Chipman (Chicago, 1996), 82–117.

[2] Geulah Bat-Yehudah's *Ish ha-Meorot: Rabbi Yitzhak Yaakov Reines* (Jerusalem, 1985) is the primary biography of R. Reines. It is in Hebrew, as are most of the works about him. But for a recent English appreciation, see Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, "The Rav of Lida: On the Occasion of the 100th Yahrtzeit of Rav Yitzchak Yaakov Reines, zt"l," *Jewish Action* 76:2 (2015), 64-67, https://jewishaction.com/jewish-world/people/the-rav-of-lida-on-the-occasion-of-the-100th-yahrtzeit-of-rav-yitzchak-yaakov-reines-ztl/.

[3] On *Hoteim Tokhnit*, see Yosef Lindell, "A Science Like Any Other? Classical Legal Formalism in the Halakhic Jurisprudence of Rabbis Isaac Jacob Reines and Moses Avigdor Amiel," *Journal of Law & Religion* 28:1 (2012–2013), 179–224, and Jay M. Harris, *How Do We Know This? Midrash and the Fragmentation of Modern Judaism* (Albany, N.Y., 1995), 244–249.

[4] On R. Reines' yeshiva, see Yosef Lindell, "Beacon of Renewal: the Educational Philosophy of the Lida Yeshiva in the Context of Rabbi Isaac Jacob Reines' Approach to Zionism," *Modern Judaism* 29:2 (2009), 268–294, and Yosef Salmon, "The Yeshivah of Lida: A Unique Institution of Higher Learning," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 15 (1974), 108–125. R. Reines established a yeshiva with similar goals earlier in Swenczian in 1882, but it closed after only a short time due to opposition from within the Jewish community. See Yosef Salmon, "*Reishit ha-Reformah be-Yeshivot Mizrah Eiropah*," *Molad* 4 (May-June 1971), 161–172.

[5] Philip Fishman, *A Sukkah is Burning: Remembering Williamsburg's Hasidic Transformation* (Minneapolis, 2012), 59–60.

[6] See Y. Y. Reines, *Hoteim Tokhnit* (Jerusalem, 1934), 1–2.

[7] See generally Y. Y. Reines, *Shnei haMeorot*, Part 2, *Zikaron baSefer* (Piotrkow, 1913), and in particular 6-9, 24–25, 27.

[8] This letter is printed in Yizhak Refael, ed., *Sefer Tziyonut haDatit* 2 (Jerusalem, 1977), 475.

[9] The most famous anti-Zionist argument was based on the Talmud Bavli *Ketubot* 111a, where, in the context of a discussion about returning to the land of Israel, the Talmud notes that the Jewish people

were adjured with three oaths, the first "not to ascend like a wall," and the second, "not to rebel against the nations of the world." According to many traditional Jews—and this may have been the dominant view since medieval times—the Talmud here implies that the final redemption would come on its own, and that no one should attempt to hasten it through force or by settling Israel en masse. See Ravitzky, pp. 22–25.

[10] Bat-Yehudah, p. 128.

[11] Y. Y. Reines, *Sha'arei Orah veSimhah*, Petah Tikvah (Vilna, 1899), 24–25.

[12] Channa Lockshin Bob, "Shedding New Light on Rabbi Reines," the Librarians Blog of the National Library of Israel (Jan. 5, 2020), https://blog.nli.org.il/en/rabbi-reines/.

[13] See Ehud Luz, *Parallels Meet: Religion and Nationalism in the Early Zionist Movement*, trans. Lenn J. Schramm (New York, 1988), 182–188, 227–231.

[14] Lindell, "Beacon of Renewal," pp. 276–277, and sources cited there.

[15] This letter (Central Zionist Archives folder no. Z1/30) is printed in Michael Heymann, *The Uganda Controversy* 2 (Jerusalem, 1977), 180.

[16] Eliezer Don-Yehiyeh, "*Ideologiah uMediniut baTziyonut haDatit: Haguto haTziyonut shel haRav Reines uMediniut ha'Mizrahi' beHanhagato*," *HaTziyonut* 8 (1983), 121–126.

[17] Y. Y. Reines, *Or Hadash al Tziyon* (New York, 1946), 276.

[18] *Or Hadash*, pp. 256–257.

[19] The point about the name of the book is made by Warren Zev Harvey, "Rabbi Isaac Jacob Reines: Theorist of Religious Zionism," *Jewish Action* 57:1 (1996), 37–38.

[20] From a letter to Yehuda Leib Levin printed in *Tziyonut haDatit*, p. 482.

[21] *Ibid*., *Tziyonut haDatit*, p. 476. See also *Or Hadash*, pp. 136, 138.

[22] Eliezer Schweid, "*Teologiah Leumit Tzionit beReishitah: Al Mishnato shel haRav Yitzhak Yaakov Reines*," in *Hashivah meHadash: Peritzut Derekh beMahshavah haYehudit haDatit ve-haLeumit beMeah haEsrim* (Jerusalem, 1991), 245–246. For a brief survey of the scholarship discussing whether R. Reines' conception of Zionism was pragmatic, messianic, or both, see Yosef Salmon, "*haRav Yitzhak Yaakov Reines: Profil shel Manhig Tzioni Dati*," in Dov Schwartz, ed., *Religious Zionism: History, Thought, Society* 1 (2017), 9 n. 1. See Luz, p. 235–237, who argues that R. Reines' approach to Zionism was contradictory.

[23] See Salmon, "*haRav Yitzhak Yaakov Reines*," pp. 15–32; Don-Yehiyeh, "*Ideologiah uMediniut*," pp. 136–146; and Luz, pp. 241–255.

[24] For various explanations of the reasons for the shift in religious Zionist thought, see Ravitzky, pp. 122–144; Eliezer Don-Yehiyeh, "Messianism and Politics: the Ideological Transformation of Religious Zionism," *Israel Studies* 19:2 (2014), 239–263; and Shai Held, "What Zvi Yehuda Kook Wrought: the Theopolitcal Radicalization of Religious Zionism," in Michael L. Morgan & Steven Weitzman, eds., *Rethinking the Messianic Idea in Judaism* (Indiana, 2015), 229–255.

[25] Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "*Kol Dodi Dofek*: It is the Voice of My Beloved that Knocketh," trans. Lawrence Kaplan, in Bernhard H. Rosenberg, ed., *Theological and Halakhic Reflections on the Holocaust* (Hoboken, N.J., 1992), 75–76.

[26] *Ibid*., pp. 81–89, 96–99.

[27] *Ibid*., p. 80.

[28] See the responses of Rabbis Yosef Blau and Nathaniel Helfgot to Rabbi Moshe Meiselman in "Communications," *Tradition* 33:2 (1999), 90–97, in which they contend that although R. Soloveitchik's support of Zionism was non-messianic and often justified pragmatically, *Kol Dodi Dofek* leaves no doubt as to Zionism's religious importance in his thought. Both also argue that in supporting Israel for pragmatic reasons as well as finding religious significance in its creation, R. Soloveitchik staked out a position similar to R. Reines'.

[29] See Held, pp. 240–241 and n. 85, where he writes, citing other scholarship, that "the broader anti-violent thrust in Reines' thought is clear and unequivocal."