BABYLONIAN LINEAGE SERIES

THE COVENANT AND THE EXILE

Traditional Jewish Opposition to Zionism

This article examines the documented theological opposition to Zionism that has existed within traditional Judaism since Zionism's inception as a political movement. The primary sources engaged — Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 111a, the 1897 rabbinic declarations, and Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum's VaYoel Moshe (1961) — are scholarly documents of the Orthodox Jewish tradition. The article presents these positions as the internal theological witness they are, neither endorsing nor dismissing the larger political questions they address. It does not conflate theological anti-Zionism with hostility toward Jewish persons or communities.

Preamble: A Witness From Within

A central assumption in public discourse about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is that Zionism is the political expression of Judaism — that the modern state of Israel represents the fulfillment of Jewish religious aspiration. This assumption is challenged, comprehensively and from within the tradition itself, by a substantial current of Orthodox Jewish scholarship that has maintained, from Herzl's First Zionist Congress in 1897 to the present, that Zionism is not merely independent of Jewish religious law but directly contrary to it.

This is not an antisemitic claim. It is a claim advanced by the most learned halakhic authorities of the 20th century, grounded in Talmudic primary sources, and sustained today by organized communities in Jerusalem, Brooklyn, London, and Antwerp. Its primary sources are the Babylonian Talmud, the medieval responsa literature, and the halakhic codes. Its contemporary voices include the Satmar Hasidic community — one of the largest Jewish communities in the world — and Neturei Karta, the Aramaic-named Jerusalem movement that has maintained continuous opposition to Israeli statehood since 1938.

What follows is an account of this witness, built from primary sources to the methodological standard of this series: no claim is made that the primary sources do not support, and the theological claims are distinguished from the historical and political questions they may be used to address.

§ I — The Three Oaths — Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 111a

The foundational Talmudic text for the halakhic case against Zionism is Tractate Ketubot, page 111a, in the Babylonian Talmud. The passage expounds Song of Songs 2:7 — "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and by the hinds of the field, that you neither stir up nor awaken the love until it pleases" — which the rabbis read as encoding three oath-conditions governing the Jewish exile:

PRIMARY SOURCE · BABYLONIAN TALMUD, TRACTATE KETUBOT 111A · THREE OATHS (SHALOSH SHEVUOT)

The First Oath: That the people of Israel shall not ascend "as a wall" (b'chomah) — shall not emigrate collectively and by force to the Land of Israel during the period of exile.

The Second Oath: That the people of Israel shall not rebel against the nations among whom they dwell.

The Third Oath: That the nations of the world shall not oppress Israel excessively (be'chazakah).

Source: Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ketubot 111a (Vilna edition). The passage derives the three oaths from the triple repetition of the adjuration formula in Song of Songs 2:7, 3:5, and 8:4.

Some midrashic versions (Song of Songs Rabbah, Midrash Tanchuma) add a fourth oath: that Israel shall not force or calculate the end of days.

Rashi, the preeminent 11th-century commentator whose glosses are foundational for all subsequent Talmudic scholarship, explains *"ascending as a wall"* as ascending *"forcefully"* or *"as one unified body."* The oath targets collective political action to end the exile — not individual immigration, which has always been permitted and even encouraged, but organized mass migration designed to establish Jewish sovereignty.

Maimonides *(Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, 1135–1204)* cited the three oaths in his Epistle to Yemen *(c. 1173)*, written to discourage the Yemenite Jewish community from following a messianic pretender. His invocation of the oaths demonstrates their functional status in the tradition: they operate as a brake on political messianism, a reason not to force the end of the exile through human action. That Maimonides used this passage for this purpose eight centuries before Herzl confirms the oaths's deep roots in pre-modern Jewish theology.

The Maharal of Prague *(Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, c. 1520–1609)* understood the three oaths as heavenly decrees — not merely legal restrictions but the metaphysical structure through which God governs the exile. The exile is unnatural *(a people without a land)*; the oaths are the mechanism that sustains it. Violating them is not merely a legal transgression but a disruption of divinely ordered history.

"Aggadic passages that introduce new legal material are normally codified as binding halakhah — the absence of the oaths from the codes reflects their self-evident force, not their non-binding character."

The central halakhic debate about the Three Oaths runs directly through the Zionist question: are they binding law (halakhah) or merely narrative exposition (aggadah)?

CONTESTED INTERPRETATION · ARE THE THREE OATHS BINDING LAW OR AGGADIC NARRATIVE?

RELIGIOUS ZIONIST POSITION (Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and successors): The oaths are aggadic — homiletic narrative, not legal code. Their absence from Maimonides' Mishneh Torah and the Shulchan Aruch means they are not actionable halakhah. Furthermore, the nations violated their oath through centuries of persecution, releasing Israel from its obligations. The Balfour Declaration (1917) and the UN Partition Resolution

(1947) represent the nations granting permission — satisfying the normative exile framework.

SATMAR POSITION (Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, VaYoel Moshe, 1961): The oaths are binding. Aggadic passages that introduce new legal obligations are typically codified as halakhah; their non-codification here reflects their self-evident and continuous force. Maimonides' citation in the Epistle to Yemen treats them as binding — "metaphorical" refers to the Song of Songs vehicle, not the oaths themselves. Individual persecutions do not release the collective obligation; a divine decree cannot be voided by human political arrangements.

NACHMANIDEAN OBJECTION: Nachmanides (Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, 1194–1270) held that settling the Land of Israel is a positive Torah commandment in every generation, including exile. This creates a direct tension with the prohibition on mass immigration. Subsequent authorities debated whether the positive commandment applies to individuals, to the collective, or only in specific historical circumstances.

Neither side in this debate disputes the existence or authenticity of the Talmudic text. The disagreement is over its legal weight, its scope, and whether subsequent historical events modified its application. This is a genuine halakhic dispute, conducted through the traditional methods of responsa literature and Talmudic argumentation.

§ II — Exile as Theology — Galut and the Divine Decree

The Hebrew word galut designates more than the historical fact of Jewish dispersal. In classical rabbinic theology, the exile is a divinely ordained condition with a specific architecture: it begins in sin, is sustained by God's will, and ends only through divine initiative — not through human political organization.

The foundational biblical text is Deuteronomy 28–30. Chapter 28 describes the consequences of disobedience — dispersion among all the nations (28:64), a "trembling heart, failing eyes, and fainting soul" (28:65), "life held in doubt" (28:66). **Chapter 30 is the promise of return, given in explicit conditional form:**

PRIMARY SOURCE · DEUTERONOMY 30:1–4 · CONDITIONS FOR RETURN

"And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you shall call them to mind among all the nations whither the Lord your God has driven you, and shall return to the Lord your God, and shall obey His voice according to all that I command you this day, you and your children, with all your heart, and with all your soul: That then the Lord your God will turn your captivity, and have compassion upon you, and will return and gather you from all the nations, where the Lord your God has scattered you."

Source: Deuteronomy 30:1–4 (King James Version). Hebrew: כִּי תָשׁוּב אֶל-ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ (ki tashuv el-Adonai Elohecha) — *"when you return to the Lord your God."*

The logic of this passage is consistently read by traditional commentators as requiring teshuva — moral and spiritual return — as the condition for physical return to the Land. **The return is the consequence of an internal transformation, not of demographic migration or military achievement.** Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (Frankfurt, 1808–1888), the founder of neo-Orthodox Judaism in Germany and one of the

most important traditional voices of the 19th century, developed this reading into a **comprehensive theology of exile:**

For Hirsch, the Jewish exile was not a misfortune to be corrected but a commission to be fulfilled. Dispersed among the nations, Israel was to demonstrate the possibility of a life ordered by Torah — a witness to the existence and binding authority of divine law within human history. Any attempt to resolve the exile through political means was, in his framework, a denial of this mission. The exile was a divine assignment, and its premature termination — however humanly understandable — represented a rejection of the assignment.

This is important to establish: Hirsch died in 1888, a decade before Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress. His theology of exile was not anti-Zionist in the reactive sense — it preceded Zionism as a political movement. The understanding of galut as divine mission rather than political problem was mainstream Orthodoxy before Herzl. Zionism was the novelty; the exile theology was the tradition.

§ III — Before Herzl — The Pre-Zionist Orthodox Consensus

Before 1897, organized opposition to a political Zionist movement was impossible for the simple reason that no such movement existed. But the theological consensus that would animate anti-Zionist opposition was firmly in place. The near-universal position of traditional rabbinic authorities across the 18th and 19th centuries was that the Jewish exile would end by divine initiative — through the coming of the Messiah — and that any attempt to force that end through human political action was theologically impermissible.

This consensus rested on several foundations. First, the Three Oaths reading of Ketubot 111a, which had been continuously cited since the Talmudic period. Second, the Deuteronomic theology of return as conditional on teshuva. Third, the Maimonidean formulation of the messianic era: the Messiah would restore the Davidic kingdom, rebuild the Temple, and gather the dispersed — but these conditions required specific accomplishments (full Torah observance, rebuilding the Temple) that no secular political movement could fulfill. Fourth, the concept of atchalta d'geulah ("beginning of redemption") did not exist as a recognized theological category before the 20th century — it was coined by Zionist Religious Zionists to describe what they believed was happening.

Rabbi Yitzchak of Berditchev (1740–1809), one of the foundational figures of Hasidic theology, taught that the exile was an expression of God's love — a period in which Israel's spiritual work was of particular cosmic importance. Rabbi Chaim Vital (1542–1620), the principal disciple of the Arizal (Rabbi Isaac Luria), wrote that the exile was the matrix of the greatest spiritual elevation. These are not minority positions; they represent the mainstream mystical theology of the pre-modern Jewish world.

The Chatam Sofer (Rabbi Moses Schreiber, Pressburg, 1762–1839) established the foundational principle of Haredi Orthodox separatism: chadash asur min ha-Torah ("the new is forbidden by the Torah"), applied not only to ritual but to political life. His consistent opposition to any theological innovation that accommodated itself to modernity laid the groundwork for the comprehensive Orthodox rejection of both the Reform movement and, later, the Zionist political program.

§ IV — The Response to Herzl — 1897 to 1917

Theodor Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, on August 29–31, 1897. The initial venue was Munich; it was moved to Basel after local rabbis — both Reform and Orthodox — objected. Before the Congress convened, a declaration was published by the Executive Committee of the Union of Rabbis in Germany:

> **HISTORICAL DOCUMENT · UNION OF RABBIS IN GERMANY · JULY 1897 · DECLARATION AGAINST ZIONISM**
>
> **Signatories:** Dr. S. Maybaum (Berlin), Dr. Horovitz (Frankfurt), Dr. Guttmann (Breslau), Dr. Auerbach (Halberstadt), Dr. Werner (Munich).
>
> **Core claim:** Zionist efforts to create a Jewish national state in Palestine are "antagonistic to the messianic promises of Judaism" as grounded in Scripture and subsequent religious sources.
>
> **Political argument:** Jews are citizens of their countries of residence. The declaration argues that Jewish nationhood was settled approximately 1,800 years prior — with the destruction of the Temple — and that Jews constitute a separate community "solely with respect to religion."
>
> **Source:** Union of Rabbis in Germany, Declaration, July 1897. Published in The Jewish Chronicle (London), translated July 9, 1897. Cited in Posenlibrary.com (primary-source repository).

A critical distinction must be preserved: the 1897 German rabbinical protest was led primarily by Reform and Liberal rabbis who opposed Zionism on civic-integration grounds — Jews are Germans of the Mosaic faith, not a separate nation. This is a fundamentally different argument from the Orthodox halakhic case, which is grounded not in civic integration but in Torah law and exile theology.

> **METHODOLOGICAL NOTE · TWO DISTINCT ANTI-ZIONIST ARGUMENTS**
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> **REFORM/LIBERAL ARGUMENT (1897):** Zionism is incompatible with Jewish civic loyalty. Jews are nationals of their countries of residence. A Jewish national state in Palestine would compromise the civic status of Jews everywhere. This argument does not appeal to Torah law; it appeals to Enlightenment civic universalism.
>
> **ORTHODOX HALAKHIC ARGUMENT (continuous from Talmud, intensified 1897–present):** Zionism violates the Three Oaths (Ketubot 111a), the exile theology (Deuteronomy 30), and the messianic conditions (Maimonides, Laws of Kings). It is not an argument from civic loyalty but from divine law.
>
> These two arguments are different in premise, scope, and implication. Conflating them obscures the specific force of the halakhic case. The Orthodox argument remains valid even if the civic-integration argument is abandoned or reversed. The internal witness of this article is the Orthodox halakhic one.

On the Orthodox front, the institutional response to Zionism took organizational form with the founding of Agudath Israel in Katowice in 1912 — an Orthodox political movement that opposed both the secular Zionist program and the religious reform of the Zionist-aligned Mizrachi movement. Agudath Israel held that Torah observance was the organizing principle of Jewish communal life and that secular nationalism was an impermissible departure from it.

Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk (1853–1918) — the founder of the "Brisker method" of Talmudic analysis, one of the most analytically rigorous halakhic traditions of the 20th century, and arguably the most important rabbinic figure in Lithuania at the turn of the century — viewed Zionism as a direct threat to traditional Judaism. His opposition was transmitted to his son, Rabbi Yitzchok Zev Soloveitchik (the Brisker Rav, 1886–1959), who worked actively to prevent the UN partition vote and the 1948 declaration of statehood.

The Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917, issued by the British Foreign Secretary to Lord Rothschild, promised "a national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine. Edwin Montagu, the only Jewish member of the British cabinet at the time and Secretary of State for India, submitted a memorandum of opposition arguing that the Zionist project was "anti-Semitic in its result" — in that it implied Jews could not be loyal citizens of their respective countries. His objection belongs to the civic-integration tradition. But its existence confirms that at the moment of the Balfour Declaration, significant and senior Jewish opinion opposed Zionism — not only from the margins but from within the British establishment.

§ V — VaYoel Moshe — The Halakhic Indictment (1961)

The most comprehensive halakhic statement of the anti-Zionist position in the 20th century is VaYoel Moshe, published in 1961 by Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum (1887–1979), the Satmar Rebbe. The title — from Exodus 2:21, "and Moses agreed (vayoel Moshe)" — contains a deliberate pun: Yoel is the author's name, and the Mosaic parallel positions the work within the prophetic tradition of speaking difficult truths to a wayward community.

Teitelbaum was born in Sighet (then Hungary, now Sighetu Marmației, Romania), the son of a distinguished rabbinic dynasty. He survived the Holocaust — controversially, on the Kasztner transport that evacuated 1,684 Jews to Switzerland in 1944, an episode that was itself a subject of intense legal and political controversy in Israel in the 1950s. He rebuilt the Satmar Hasidic dynasty in Brooklyn, New York, and eventually established Kiryas Joel (now Palm Tree), a closed Satmar community in Orange County, New York, which today has a population of approximately 35,000.

VaYoel Moshe comprises three treatises:

PUBLISHED WORK · VAYOEL MOSHE (1961) · RABBI YOEL TEITELBAUM

MAAMAR SHALOSH SHEVUOT — "The Three Oaths": A comprehensive halakhic argument that the Three Oaths in Ketubot 111a are binding law; that Zionism violated all three *(mass organized immigration violated the first; the militant posture toward the British Mandate and Arab neighbors violated the second; international political appeals violated the normative structure of exile)*; and that this constituted an extraordinary and continuing transgression.

MAAMAR LASHON HAKODESH — "The Holy Tongue": An argument against the Zionist secularization of Hebrew, which traditional Judaism regards as the sacred language of Torah and prayer. Turning lashon hakodesh into a national vernacular was, for Teitelbaum, a desecration of its sacred character.

MAAMAR YISHUV ERETZ YISRAEL — "The Settlement of the Land": An argument that the Torah

obligation to settle the Land of Israel cannot be fulfilled through an illegitimate secular state that violates the conditions of exile. The obligation applies; but its fulfillment requires legitimate halakhic conditions that Zionism does not meet.

Source: Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, VaYoel Moshe (Brooklyn: Dvar Yerushalayim, 1961). Three volumes. Widely cited in subsequent halakhic literature.

The most theologically distinctive — and most debated — element of VaYoel Moshe is its reading of the Holocaust. Teitelbaum argued that the entire Jewish community bore collective responsibility for permitting Zionism to develop without adequate communal rebuke. The violation of the Three Oaths was communal, not merely individual; the community's failure to resist the violation implicated it collectively in the transgression. This led to a theological reading of the Holocaust as divine consequence — not the punishment of individual sinners, but the working-out of divine judgment on a community that had failed to honor the oath-structure governing its exile.

This must be understood precisely as what it is: a theological claim, made within the framework of traditional Jewish theology, about divine providence and communal responsibility. It is not, and does not claim to be, a historical-causal argument of the kind that would require external evidentiary support. Teitelbaum was applying categories of collective covenantal responsibility from within the tradition — the same framework through which the prophets read the destruction of the First Temple as divine consequence of Israel's sins. Whether one accepts that framework is a question of theology, not historiography.

CONTESTED INTERPRETATION · THE INTERNAL ORTHODOX RESPONSE TO VAYOEL MOSHE

Rabbi Menachem Kasher, Ha-Tekufah Ha-Gedolah ("The Great Era," Jerusalem 1968): Argued that the Holocaust itself constituted the nations' violation of their oath — releasing Israel from its obligations under the Three Oaths. The State of Israel was therefore not a violation but the legitimate beginning of redemption. This became a foundational text for Religious Zionist halakhic arguments.

Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook (son of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook): Held that the Zionist project was atchalta d'geulah — the beginning of divine redemption — and that the State of Israel carried religious significance independent of its secular founding ideology. His position influenced the Religious Zionist settler movement from the 1967 war forward.

Scope of the debate: The disagreement is not about whether Talmudic texts exist and say what they say. It is about their halakhic weight, their applicability to contemporary events, and whether specific historical events *(the Balfour Declaration, the Holocaust, the 1947 UN vote)* modified the obligations they encode. This is a live debate within Orthodox Judaism.

What is not disputed within this debate: the text of Ketubot 111a; the fact that the Three Oaths have been cited as authoritative by major halakhic figures across centuries; the fact that Teitelbaum's argument constitutes a sustained and technically serious halakhic presentation; and the fact that VaYoel Moshe remains the central anti-Zionist halakhic text of the 20th century.

§ VI — The Living Witness — Neturei Karta and Satmar

The theological positions articulated in Ketubot 111a and VaYoel Moshe are not academic positions. They are held by large, organized, and continuously existing communities whose institutional life is organized around the theological rejection of Zionism.

NETUREI KARTA

Neturei Karta *("Guardians of the City," Aramaic)* was founded in Jerusalem in 1938 by Rabbi Amram Blau and Rabbi Aha*a*ron Katzenelbogen. The name comes from a passage in the Jerusalem Talmud *(Hagigah 1:7)* in which students of Torah are identified as the true "*guardians of the city.*" The founding involved a split from the mainstream Agudath Israel organization, which Blau and Katzenelbogen believed was moving toward an accommodating position with Zionism.

> **DOCUMENTED POSITION · NETUREI KARTA · OFFICIAL THEOLOGICAL STATEMENT**
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> ***"We wish to make it clear that we are not anti-Jewish. On the contrary, it is because of our love for the Jewish people and Torah that we cannot accept the State of Israel and Zionism which is contrary to the Torah. We follow the opinion of our rabbis who ruled that the establishment of a Zionist state is against the Torah."***
>
> **On the Three Oaths:** *"The Jewish people are forbidden by the Torah to establish their own state prior to the coming of the Messiah. We are in exile as a Divine decree and we are forbidden to return en masse prior to the coming of the Messiah."*
>
> **Spokesman:** Rabbi Yisroel Dovid Weiss, documented public statements (multiple sources, 2000s–2020s).
>
> **Current population:** estimated "thousands," primarily in Jerusalem, Brooklyn, London, Antwerp, and Montreal. No official membership roster is maintained. (Wikipedia, March 2024.)

SATMAR

The Satmar Hasidic dynasty, originating in Satu Mare *(Szatmár)*, Hungary, represents the largest organized institutional presence of the anti-Zionist Orthodox position. Founded by Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum after the Holocaust, Satmar today is one of the largest Hasidic communities in the world, with its largest concentrations in Williamsburg, Brooklyn and Kiryas Joel/Palm Tree, New York. Estimates of global adherents range into the hundreds of thousands.

Satmar maintains the anti-Zionist position institutionally: operating separate educational systems *(yeshivot)* that refuse Israeli government funding, maintaining communities that do not recognize Israeli state authority, and producing continuing halakhic literature on the Zionist question. The community is not a marginal protest movement; it is a functioning self-governing society whose theology is an organizing principle of daily life.

A NECESSARY DISTINCTION · THEOLOGICAL OPPOSITION VS. POLITICAL ALIGNMENT

In December 2006, several Neturei Karta members attended the Tehran International Conference to Review the Global Vision of the Holocaust, hosted by the Iranian government under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This attendance drew condemnation from almost all segments of the Jewish community — including, critically, from the Satmar leadership itself.

The Satmar successors to Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum issued public condemnations of the Tehran conference attendance. This condemnation demonstrates an important structural point: theological anti-Zionism from within the Jewish tradition does not imply political alliance with Israel's adversaries, and the majority of those who hold the theological position explicitly reject such political alignment.

The legitimate internal Jewish theological witness — grounded in Ketubot 111a, exile theology, and the messianic conditions — stands independently of its political instrumentalization. Using this witness as a license for hostility toward Jewish persons or communities represents a category error that the witness itself rejects.

§ VII — The Prophetic Tradition — Scriptural Conditions for Return

The halakhic case against Zionism is grounded not only in the Three Oaths passage but in a broader constellation of prophetic texts that traditional scholarship reads as specifying the conditions under which the exile ends and the people return to the Land.

Song of Songs 2:7 — the primary text of Ketubot 111a — repeats its adjuration three times (2:7, 3:5, 8:4): *"I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and by the hinds of the field, that you neither stir up nor awaken the love until it pleases."* The Talmudic passage reads these three adjurations as encoding the three oath-conditions. The phrase *"until it pleases" (ad she-techpatz)* is read as "until the time pleases God" — until divine initiative brings the exile to its end.

Isaiah 11:11 describes *"a second time" (shenit) when "the Lord will set His hand again to recover the remnant of His people."* The traditional reading emphasizes the singularity of this event — *"a second time,"* not a gradual process — and its miraculous character: *"He will set up an ensign for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth" (11:12)*. The ingathering is total, universal, and orchestrated by divine initiative.

PRIMARY SOURCE · EZEKIEL 36:24–28 · CONDITIONS FOR THE RETURN

"For I will take you from among the nations, and gather you out of all the countries, and will bring you into your own land. Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you shall keep my judgments, and do them. And you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God."

Source: Ezekiel 36:24–28 (King James Version). Note the sequence: gathering (v.24), spiritual purification (v.25), new heart (v.26), divine spirit (v.27), then dwelling in the land (v.28). Traditional commentary reads the spiritual transformation as preceding and enabling the return — not as the result of residence but as its prerequisite.

Maimonides, in his Laws of Kings and Their Wars *(Hilchot Melachim, chapters 11–12)*, sets out the conditions by which a claimant to messianic status is authenticated. The Messiah must accomplish three specific acts: compel all of Israel to walk in the ways of the Torah, wage the wars of God, and rebuild the Temple. A figure who appears to accomplish these things but is then killed or fails is not the Messiah. Until these conditions are met — not partially, not inaugurally, but completely — no return to the Land can be identified as the messianic ingathering.

The implications for the Zionist project are clear from within this framework: a secular movement whose founders explicitly rejected Torah observance, whose political program was borrowed from 19th-century European nationalism, and whose institutional structures were designed around a modern liberal democratic state could not, on these terms, constitute the fulfillment of the prophetic conditions for return. => ***This is not because the individuals were unworthy — it is because the conditions themselves were defined in terms that secular nationalism cannot meet.***

§ VIII — Situating the Witness — What Judaism Is Not

The theological witness assembled in the preceding sections establishes several things that carry significance for the broader historical and political questions this series addresses.

First: Zionism was not Judaism's political self-expression

Zionism was a modernist secular nationalist movement founded largely by Jews who understood it explicitly as a departure from, not an expression of, traditional Jewish religious life. Theodor Herzl was non-observant; his diaries record no engagement with halakhic sources. He wrote that religion in the new state, if unavoidable, would be kept "behind the walls of the synagogue." Max Nordau, his closest associate, was an explicit secularist. Ber Borochov, the founder of Labor Zionism, was a Marxist. David Ben-Gurion, the founding Prime Minister of Israel, was an atheist who participated in Shabbat desecration as a matter of political principle.

The founders of Zionism knew they were departing from the tradition. The tradition's response, documented above, confirms that this was not a failure of recognition on the part of the Orthodox authorities. The opposition was real, immediate, and grounded in primary sources.

Second: The most observant sectors of Jewish life were predominantly anti-Zionist

From the First Zionist Congress in 1897 through the founding of the State in 1948, the majority of traditionally observant Jews — those most continuously and deeply engaged with the primary sources of the tradition — opposed the Zionist program. This was the position of the Agudath Israel movement, the Satmar dynasty, the Brisker tradition, and the dominant authorities of Lithuanian Orthodoxy. The Religious Zionist tradition of Rabbi Kook and his successors was a significant minority within Orthodoxy that became more prominent after 1948, and still more so after 1967 — but it was not the consensus position of pre-state Orthodoxy.

Third: The argument is from love of the covenant, not hatred of Jews

The anti-Zionist Orthodox position is not, in its own self-understanding, a negative judgment about Jews or Jewish dignity. It is an argument about what Torah requires of Jews — a more demanding position, in its own terms, than the Zionist one. It holds that the exile is sacred, that patience within it is required by divine law, and that the temptation to resolve it through human political action must be resisted for the sake of the covenant itself. The condemnation is of Zionism as a political program, not of Jewish persons.

Fourth: This witness does not resolve the political questions

The theological case against Zionism addresses the mode and conditions of return, not the management of a state that already exists. The existence of several million Jewish residents of Israel, of established institutions and communities, of Palestinian residents whose situation the founding of the state directly affected — these are realities that the Three Oaths argument does not address. It is a prior question: was the founding theologically authorized? Its answer to that question — no — does not by itself prescribe what should now be done with the consequences.

The political questions remain political. What this witness establishes is more limited but not less significant: that presenting Zionism as the authentic expression of Jewish religious aspiration requires suppressing a substantial, learned, and primary-source-grounded tradition of dissent from within Judaism itself. Any account of the conflict that presents *"Israel's right to exist"* as self-evidently identical to *"Jewish religious tradition's requirements"* must contend with the Satmar Rebbe, Ketubot 111a, and the communities that have lived by them.

"The exile is a divine decree, not a political misfortune. Only the decree's author can legitimately end it — and the conditions He specified for its ending are not those of secular nationalism."

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