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Redemption, settlement and agriculture in the religious teachings of Hovevei Zion

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Hovevei Zion is a collective name for several societies established in Eastern Europe in the 19th century, advocating immigration to the land of Israel, settlement of the land and agricultural work. This article examines the religious approach of several prominent thinkers from among Hovevei Zion and the First Aliya, who shared the perception of farming and settling the land as having religious and even messianic meaning. It was clear to them that the Torah is the foundation of the Jewish people's existence, however, to this they added another value – work. These thinkers strived to change the identity of the exilic Jew, who was occupied only with spiritual religious life and to reinstate the identity of the biblical Jew, who combined a spiritual and a material religious life. The article examines the approach of Hovevei Zion in light of the general rabbinic approach to redemption, settlement and agriculture and the social changes in 19th century Europe.

Contribution: This article contributes to the journal's multidisciplinary theological perspective, particularly the notion 'historical thought', which covers the textual and oral history and hermeneutical studies, narratives and philosophies behind the Abrahamic religions as expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Rabbinic literature.

Keywords: Hovevei Zion; work; Halakha; Rabbi Samuel Mohilever; redemption; Torah; First Aliya; Moses Hess.

Background

Hovevei Zion, or Hibbat Zion, is a collective name for several societies established in Eastern Europe in the late 19th century, advocating immigration to the land of Israel, settlement of the land and agricultural work (Goldstein 2016). Several factors generated this national revival: national revival trends among European nations; pogroms in the southwestern regions of the Russian Empire ('Sufot Banegev'), which made it clear to the Jews that they must take their fate into their own hands (Goldstein 2016:38–63), the Emancipation, Jewish migration to America, the sense of affinity with the land of Israel and redemption (Goldstein 2016:13–37). Taken together, these factors caused members of Hibbat Zion to set themselves a goal of purchasing land in the land of Israel and tilling this land (Goldstein 2016:64–87). The movement was not as successful as expected, among other things because of conflicts between observant and non-observant Jews and deliberations concerning whether to focus on religious practice or agricultural work.

The movement's leaders were of the opinion that it is necessary to create for Jews sources of subsistence based on agriculture. For instance, Moshe Leib Lilienblum (1843–1910) saw the solution in the form of economic and social change. He sought to establish agricultural towns for Jews in Russia; however, the Sufot Banegev riots caused him to change his approach and he redirected his efforts at settling the land of Israel. When the Society for the Support of Jewish Farmers and Artisans in Syria and the Land of Israel was founded, he served as its secretary until the day he died. He wrote the book: *On the Revival of Israel on the Land of Our Fathers* (Odessa 1884), which ends with the words: 'Come and work, house of Israel!'

The approach of Yehuda Leib Pinsker (1821–1891) also changed after the riots (Netanyahu 2003:11–77). He wrote one of the most fundamental compositions in the history of Zionism, *Autoemancipation!* (Berlin 1882). Pinsker described anti-Semitism and its roots and consequently called for the founding of a Jewish state. In order to realise his ideas, he joined Hovevei Zion. At the Katowice Conference in 1884, he gave the opening and closing speeches in which he discussed the need for Jews to return to agriculture and settlement of the land of Israel and proposed that a General Histadrut be funded to encourage agricultural work, named 'Mazkeret Moshe' for Moses Montefiore (Yoeli 1939:27).

The theorists of Hovevei Zion were preceded by the theorists of the Enlightenment movement, such as Yitzhak Ber Levinson (1788–1860), who preached the return of Jews to agricultural productive work and even made efforts to realise their ideas in practice (Zahari 2002). Their slogan was 'Those who work their land will have abundant food' (Pr 12:11). During the 19th century, attempts were made to settle Jews in parts of Russia and Poland, where they would become productive farmers. This endeavour failed because of the ravages of nature, the attitude of the government and bureaucracy, but took root in the hearts of Hovevei Zion, who strived to realise it in the land of Israel (Levin 1975:187–256).

The Enlightenment movement's ideologues, who advocated work and productivisation, were preceded by the founding fathers of the socialist idea, Karl Marx and Moses Hess. Moses Hess (1812–1875) was among the heralds of Zionism. In his book *Rome and Jerusalem* (Jerusalem 1983; Leipzig 1862), he presented his Zionist doctrine and called for the settlement of Jews in the land of Israel (Jerusalem 1983:178–208; Leipzig 1862) and their return to a life of labour, as in biblical times (Jerusalem 1983:85–108; Leipzig 1862). He claimed that in order for the 'national spirit' that had characterised the ancient Jewish state to persevere, it is necessary to establish Jewish life in the land of Israel and to found agricultural-oriented settlements and industrial enterprises.

Moses Hess' friend, Karl Marx, also influenced the concept of labour among 19th century Jews (Holt 2015; Poston 1993; Sovell 1985). Marx argued that humans are by nature creative (*homo faber*). By working, humanity establishes ties with nature and with the world beyond itself, thus shaping them. Doing this allows human beings to bring to the fore the abilities they have been granted. At the same time, humans are shaped by the work in which they engage, thus developing the special abilities with which they have been blessed. However, work conditions in the capitalist world prevent people from realising these abilities, causing them to become alienated from their work and from the results of their productivity, as well as from themselves and from nature. The worker is thus reduced to the condition of merchandise. Henceforth, society is divided into two classes: those who possess property and the workers who possess no property. Based on this, Marx assumes the view that work has a liberating capacity: it liberates from poverty and from lack, from the struggle for existence and from wearying toil. As per Marx's view, work liberates only when it liberates us from the very subjection that enslaves us to work (Avineri 1965:79–197).

These conceptions generated the productivisation principle that had a considerable effect on Hibbat Zion (Goldstein 2016:13–37). The idea, initiated in the 18th century European Enlightenment movement, had a strong impact on 19th-century general and Jewish philosophy (Levin 1975:170–256). This included criticism of the '*Haluka* funds', philanthropic funds utilised in the land of Israel to support members of the Old Yishuv, as well as support for productive manual labour, particularly agricultural. Productivisation was seen as a response to the gentiles who accused the Jews of laziness, unproductiveness and a parasitic way of life. Productivisation was expected to provide a response for weaker population groups and to improve their financial situation. It was also a window of opportunity, as Emancipation granted the Jews the opportunity to engage in a variety of fields that were previously inaccessible.

These principles led to national revival and were the theoretical basis for the First Aliya, in which towns were established and sources of subsistence generated (Ettinger & Bartal 1981:1–24). The First Aliya was a combination of secular and religious ideologies. On the one hand, modern national aspirations and awareness, as formulated by Moss Hess, and on the other hand, the concept of natural redemption, stemming from the ideology of Alkalai (1843:308–356) and Kalisher (Kalisher 2002; Katz 1979:285–307). Namely, side by side waiting for Divine redemption, one must act in the current world in order to bring about a general redemption, by settling the land and performing manual work in the land of Israel. The current article examines the approach of Hovevei Zion in light of the general rabbinic approach towards redemption, settlement and agriculture and the social changes in 19th century Europe.

The attitude to work in Jewish religious literature

The Bible has an ambivalent attitude to work (Asaf 1985; Neuwirth 2015:4–-28). On one hand, 'The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it', (Gn 2:15) namely Adam's job was also to work, and work bears the religious meaning of carrying out a Divine commandment. Then again, once Adam sinned he was punished, 'Cursed is the ground because of you… by the sweat of your brow you will eat your food', (Gn 3:17–19), that is, work is a punishment. In rabbinical literature as well, the attitude to work is ambivalent. Some ascribe religious value to work, for instance: 'Great is labor, as just as Israel were commanded to keep the Sabbath, thus they were commanded to perform labor' (Avot de Rabbi Nathan, Version B, 21). Therefore, just as it is a religious precept to cease from work on the Sabbath, it is also a religious precept to work on weekdays. Then again, some claim that work is only an existential need, for instance, the father's obligation to teach his son a profession, stating that: 'Anyone who does not teach his son a trade teaches him banditry', as 'if he [the son] shall have no trade and he shall lack for bread, he will go to the crossroads and rob people' (Bavli, Qiddushin 29b and Rashi on site). Namely, work is a means of subsistence and of preventing misconduct but has no religious meaning per se. Notably, it was obvious to all that the Jewish scale of ethics is headed by the study of Torah, 'But the study of Torah is equal to them all' (Mishna, Peah 1:1).

Over the years, the concept of work as a necessity attained dominance. R. Joseph Karo too, the greatest of all halakhic adjudicators, ruled that one should indeed work, but the explanation he gives is that: '[otherwise] poverty would

undermine his faith in God' (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Haim, 156:1). Notably, work is a means of living a proper life but has no independent religious value.

With regard to corporeal work, the innovation offered by the Hassidic movement and the principle of *avoda begashmiyut* ('earthly activities') is notable (Kauffman 2009). Buber claimed that according to the Hassidic outlook there is a constant Divine presence in the world (Buber 1945:12–14) and therefore, 'God desires that everything should be sanctified' (Buber 1945:37–38, 40–41, 56, 89–90, 2005:13–15, para. 2). The sanctification of reality will result from contact with the actual existence and from the intention of acting 'for the sake of Heaven'. According to Buber (1945 & 2005), Hassidism revived pan-sacramentalism. The entire world is a 'conduit of benevolence' between God and man. Therefore, the world with all its contents, both material and spiritual, can serve as a point of encounter between them (Elior 1992:13–35). However, this does not grant work religious value, rather only means that work is another way of encountering God.

Agriculture and settling the land in the teachings of First Aliya rabbis

Those who came to the land of Israel in the First Aliya included several prominent rabbis, who shared the perception of farming and settling the land as having religious and even messianic meaning.

The rabbis of the First Aliya were the successive and to a great degree the realising link of the theological revolution effected by the heralds of Zionism. The heralds of Zionism were Orthodox rabbis, theological revolutionaries, who initiated their actions in the first half of the 19th century. Most of the rabbis and of the nation at that time believed that the redemption would occur miraculously, would appear from Heaven inexplicably with no active human intervention. The theological revolutionary actions of the heralds of Zionism renewed the activist tendencies. The redemption shall be natural rather than miraculous, and it includes immigration to the land of Israel, purchasing its lands and tilling them.

For instance, Alkalai, one of the heralds of Zionism, argued that the redemption will be natural and slow and not as many think:

> And do not imagine that the end [*of days*] and the redemption… and the arrival of our Messiah… will all occur at once and in one day… Because it will begin slowly and inadvertently… and those who say that the redemption will be initiated by the Messiah ben David as hoped by the poorest of the ignorant… these are null and void thoughts… and in my opinion one who conceals this surreptitiously desecrates God's name. (ed. Raphael 2004:I; 254–255, based on the Jerusalem Talmud, Berachot 1:1)

And how will the redemption come about in his opinion? By immigrating to the land of Israel and tilling its land. 'Our exile began with clay and bricks and work in the field, and our redemption will begin with clay and bricks and work in the field' (Raphael 2004:II; 689). No longer passively waiting for the Messiah, as previously, but rather corporeal work and activism.

Part of this active theological revolution entailed changing Jewish identity. Let us clarify this. Observing Jewish identity beginning from ancient times, we can identify two types: biblical-Jewish identity and rabbinical-Jewish identity. Biblical identity as described to us in the Bible comprised several features, such as nationalism. This is allegedly a modern concept; however, Hastings argued that the Bible was the first national charter (Hastings 1997:chap.1). Constructing a nation involves several components: literature, an ethnic group that shares a cultural identity and language, self-consciousness, geographic territory, a state, a shared religion and a threat to the national identity. Hence, the Bible constituted Jewish nationalism. Judaism is a nation-religion. Hastings followed Kohn (1944:chap.2), who posited three measures of Jewish nationalism: the alliance between the nation and its God, shared national memory and the concept of national Messianism. According to Hastings, the people of Israel are 'the first true nation' (Hastings 1997:chap.8).

Beyond nationalism, there are other features of the biblical Jew, such as activism, that are manifested in work and military service. The biblical Jew tilled the land of Israel and fought on it and for it and therefore had an offensive ethos. After the failure of the Great Revolt (66–73), the Kitos War (115–117) and the Bar Kochba Revolt (132–135) (Mashiach 2012), which led to the destruction of Judea and of the temple, the sages assumed leadership and reached a strategic decision that in order to survive the exile it is necessary to change the Jewish identity and ethos from offensive to defensive (Mashiach 2020). In contrast to the biblical Jew, the rabbinical Jew no longer worked (as a value) or fought; Torah study was the only supreme value. Their ethos was defensive, and part of this defensive ethos was their passivity (Boyarin 1997).

Where the Bible describes many wars that involved the people of Israel, in rabbinical literature this was interpreted differently, preaching a defensive ethos. For example, Jacob told his sons before he died: 'Which I wrested from the Amorites with my sword and bow' (Gn 48:22), and the sages interpreted this as prayers and pleas rather than war in its simple meaning. The spiritual came to occupy a central place in Judaism, while the material was marginalised. The sages preached subservience and a bent stature. No longer a Jew who insists on his dignity, rather one who bends his head. 'The sages said: If wicked people come upon a person, he should bend his head before them' (Bavli Yevamot 121a). And another piece of advice: 'A person should always be soft like a reed, and he should not be stiff like a cedar' (Bavli, Taanit 20a). The message is the same: the Jew must bend his head and relinquish his honour like a reed. In sum, the rabbinical Jew has a defensive and passive ethos.

In addition, they preached passivity and subservience by giving interpretive content to various basic terms such as

liberty, bravery and war. Let us explain in short. The term liberty, as customary in pre-rabbinical times, meant legal liberty. Namely, a free person was one who has no master, ruler, or king above him. Legal liberty was the main cause of Jewish incitement and uprisings in the various empires. The sages gave the concept of liberty different meaning. From now on its meaning was on the religious-conscious dimension, 'For there is no free man but one that occupies himself with the study of the Torah' (Mishna, Avot 6:2). There is no longer any need to rebel and remove the subjugation of the enslaver, from now on the Jew who studies Torah anywhere whatsoever becomes free by virtue of this. Heroism too was interpreted differently by the sages. The concept of bravery normally relates to physical prowess, manifested on the battlefield. However, for the sages physical-militarist bravery became cognitive-psychological bravery: 'Who is mighty? He who subdues his [evil] inclination' (Mishna, Avot 4:1). No longer bravery through the valiant sword, physical bravery versus the enemy, rather the bravery of one who battles with himself, with his inclinations, which are his enemies. In direct continuation of the different content given to the concept of bravery, we encounter the conversion of the concept of war. Where in the Bible the concept of war bears the simple meaning of a nation that fights another on the battlefield, from now on in rabbinical literature the concept of war also receives the content of 'the war of Torah' (Bavli, Megillah 15b; Bavli, Hagiga 14a), that is, fighting in the *beit midrash* (place of Torah study) in the context of *halakha*, conjectures or offering prayer.

The rabbinical identity became an exilic-Jewish identity. It was not only a product of the lengthy exile, rather an intentional course that shaped exilic identity in order to survive the long exile. Therefore, when the heralds of Zionism and rabbis of the First Aliya came with their ideas of creating a national state, immigrating to the land of Israel, building an army, tilling the land, being active in order to bring the redemption, using natural means, the theological revolution they preached also meant reinstating biblical Jewish identity.

The heralds of Zionism formulated this theological revolution, and the rabbis of the First Aliya implemented it in practice. We shall now turn to several ideologues-rabbis of the First Aliya who realised these ideas.

R. Ze'ev Yavetz (1847–1924), author, educator and historian, was one of the prominent rabbis of the First Aliya. Based on Jewish history, he understood that work is one of the Jewish people's designations (Yavetz 1905:vol. 1):

> Because not only in wisdom and morals did our forefathers obtain their reputation… In time they acquired all the practical skills of Egypt in those days. And by the end of Joseph's life the sons of Judah encompassed metal workers and artisans… so much so that Pharaoh appointed them in charge of his work… and the Israelites did not neglect the artisanship on their travels in the desert when leaving Egypt, because after settling the land they implanted it within them. (chap. 11)

Therefore, he called for a return to the original Jewish nature and became a role model of a man of Torah and work.

R. Yehiel Michel Pines (1843–1913) was a significant figure in the renewed Yishuv. He espoused a combination of Torah and work and consequently called for linking farming with educating residents of the land of Israel to engage in beneficial professions, particularly agriculture and manual labor (Pines 1875:35).

Pines (1938) was a visionary:

> Similar to all those of a political outlook, my heart yearns to see Jerusalem in its beauty as one of Europe's extolled daughters… to be a gay town, a city bustling with general trade and a seat of wisdom and practical labor. (pp. 273–302)

As he sees it, 'The revival of the nation and the revival of the land are intertwined' and therefore, he says of himself, 'My soul craves a vision of the holy land's graciousness, when it shall once again flourish as the Garden of Eden… for its sons'. He envisions a romantic vision of 'reviving the national glory', which will be realised when 'Israel will bloom in its beauty and valor and existence', at such time when the Jewish people shall return to their land and farm it. 'From the corners of the land they will flow to it to visit, work, and protect it' (Pines 1938:273–302; Salmon 2004:291–302). These concepts aroused a conflict between himself and members of the Old Yishuv who claimed that Jews in general and, in the land of Israel in particular, should only engage in spiritual matters (Verbin 1984).

Another significant rabbinical figure from the First Aliya was R. Mordechai Gimpel Yaffe (1820–1891), rabbi of Ruzhany in White Russia. He immigrated to the land of Israel, lived in Ekron and Yahud and managed a farm. His opinions and rulings were highly considered and therefore many observed the year of Shmita, did not till their land in this year and did not accept the *heter mechira* in 1889. *Heter mechira* is a halakhic solution that allows agricultural work during the year of Shmita, by selling the land to a non-Jew (Achiezer 1986; Sternberg 1986). His opinion was that there is a religious obligation to return to the land of Israel, live there and till the land (Slutzky 1891:II):

> To redeem the land… Return house of Israel, return to your land to work it and guard it… anyone to whom He of blessed name granted the privilege of sowing and planting – for it has great value, happy is he who manages to achieve this privilege. (pp. 14–16)

In the context of the First Aliya, the views of Yemenite rabbis who immigrated in 1882, in an aliya called 'E'eleh betamar', are also of relevance (Druyan 1982:207–224). The motivation for the immigration of Yemenite Jews was messianic (Klorman 1982), side by side with perceiving work in the land of Israel as having obligatory religious value. For instance R. Avraham Alnadaf, a leader of Yemenite Jewry and a prominent rabbinical figure (Razhabi 1977). He describes

the immigration and settlement in the land with the support of Baron Rothschild (Alnadaf 1911):

> And several societies and holy corporations and they are all occupied with settling the land and gathering its sons within it… and they were given permission to purchase land… and to settle it well and truly and they did so and succeeded… to settle in the moshavot, to build and plant and all work in the field, with the help of the officials from the house of Rothschild. (pp. 22–23)

Further on, he interprets this reality as meaning redemption: 'And since we have been privileged to be granted all this in our days it is the "beginning of redemption"'. Therefore, it is obvious to him that all the Jewish people should immigrate to the land of Israel and till its land (Alnadaf 1911):

> Who is it among the Israelites in all the diasporas who is not enthusiastic about coming to their help or at least sheltering under the wings of the Divine spirit, settling the holy land, tilling and protecting it, so much as he is capable, even if this entails suffering. (pp. 22–23)

Alnadaf (1911) called for a combination of Torah and work. He concludes his words and promises:

> He who is determined to settle in the land of Israel, namely who bought land and built a house… and tills his land… by plowing and sowing… without leaving his occupation with the Torah… will receive tidings of being entitled to enter the next world, i.e., the days of the Messiah… this depends on our deeds. (pp. 22–23)

R. Shmuel Mohilever (1824–1789) was the most significant rabbinical figure in Hovevei Zion and the First Aliya. He was considered one of the most prominent rabbis of his generation, served as the rabbi of Bialystok in Russia and was among the founders of Hibbat Zion and one of the founding fathers of religious Zionism (Salmon 1991; Shayovitz 1987; Yarden 1982). He was the unofficial rabbi of the First Aliya and the person who enlisted Baron Rothschild in support of settling the land of Israel (Fishman 1923:22–26). For this reason, we shall focus at length on his enterprise and ideology.

As one who called for a life combining Torah and work, R. Mohilever did as he preached. He worked for a living even as a student at the Volozhin Yeshiva and later, as a married man, as a flax merchant. R. Mohilever was a man of means, unlike most Lithuanian rabbis, and was not dependent on his position as rabbi for purposes of subsistence. He owned a share in an estate and managed a farm. His life experience and knowledge served him well, in time, for the purpose of his activities in Hibbat Zion (Fishman 1923:6; Prawer 1970:vol. 22, 402).

R. Mohilever was critical of the traditional Jewish educational system in the diaspora. As he saw it, education must be combined with productivisation in order to prevent religious deterioration, which was already evident among the traditional Jewish society of Eastern Europe, not to mention Western Europe (Mohilever 1872). In this way, Jews would be able to support themselves, which in his opinion is a religious obligation. 'One is obliged to work to supply the needs of his household, even if in this way he will necessarily refrain from the study of Torah'. This was further emphasised in a letter from 1884 in which he wrote (Fishman 1923):

> In the matter of a house for the study of Torah there is nothing at all to worry about at the moment… because… there will be no lack of Torah scholars in Jerusalem… We must only worry about settling the land, namely that they should not lack animals and tools necessary for working the land. (p. 28)

These declarations were very unusual for an Eastern European rabbi of his time. Torah study was considered the supreme Jewish value, while here R. Mohilever claims that corporeal work in the land of Israel is no less important. Years later he said once again, in words written for the opening of the Zionist Congress in Basle in 1996 (Fishman 1923):

> All 'sons of Zion' must also be fully cognizant and have complete faith that 'settling the land', namely buying land and building houses, planting orchards and sowing fields, is one of the major precepts of our Torah, and some of our ancients say that it is the equivalent of the entire Torah… as it is the foundation of our nation's existence. (p. 68)

It was clear to R. Mohilever that the Torah is the foundation of the Jewish people's existence; however, he added to this another value – work, so much so that he argued that it is 'the foundation of our nation's existence'.

R. Mohilever strived to change the identity of the exilic Jew, who is occupied only with spiritual religious life, and to reinstate the identity of the biblical Jew, who combined spiritual and material religious life, studied the Torah and observed its precepts, side by side with work in the corporeal world, as described in the Bible (Mashiach 2014). This is evident in a letter he sent to Solomon Reinak, head of the JCA (A Jewish settlement company established in 1891 at the initiative of Baron Hirsch, who saw settlement in Argentina as the solution to the Jews' suffering). The latter refused to divert funds to the Jewish settlement in the land of Israel and protested, we wish to produce 20th century Jews, and in your Palestine you will produce 12th century Jews.' R. Mohilever responded (Fishman 1923):

> You are mistaken! In our land of Israel we wish to create neither 20th century Jews nor 12th century Jews, rather Jews of a completely different type, Jews who on one hand will belong to the third millennium and on the other will be from ancient periods, Jews from the time of the prophets and of the Hasmoneans. (p. 66)

R. Mohilever imagined a new-old Jew, one who does not resemble the exilic Jew common in his time but rather combines modern times with pre-exilic behaviour patterns, when a Jewish state existed in the land of Israel and the Jews functioned on a multidimensional level, both spiritual and material.

For this purpose, R. Mohilever preached a return to work and to corporeal labour, concurrently with spiritual occupations. He defined the integrated path as 'good education'. As he sees it,

'temporary happiness' is the corporeal occupation and 'eternal happiness' the spiritual occupation. From the biblical story of Jacob's ladder, 'resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven' he understood that the proper order consists of the material – 'resting on the earth', and the spiritual – 'reaching to heaven', rather than only the spiritual. And he who focuses only on the spiritual will not succeed (Mohilever 1874):

> The Torah instructs us, in the vision seen by Jacob our forefather: 'And he had a dream in which he saw a ladder resting on the earth and its top reaching to heaven…' (Genesis 28). Here Jacob envisioned the ladder of happiness resting on the earth, its beginning is here on the ground, to make a trustworthy foundation for his temporary happiness, and then he shall build on it a tall and lofty house, 'with its top reaching to heaven', which is the house of his eternal happiness. One who takes this course, and follows this order, will succeed and be elevated. Indeed, one whose deeds are foreign, and who ascends to the heights to build himself a home of eternal happiness and then utilizes this in order to obtain temporary happiness, will decline and will achieve neither. (n.p.)

He further concludes and asks:

> From all these words of truth it is clear that practical work has a considerable advantage over the wisdom of the heart, and why have our people rejected all manual work? Our forefathers were farmers and shepherds… and this did not detract from their shining virtues… and only we are embarrassed to teach our sons a craft… although the rabbis said 'One who enjoys the work of his hands is greater than one who fears God'. (n.p.)

R. Mohilever visited the land of Israel in 1890. He published an article in which he enumerated three reasons for the religious precept of settling the land (Slutzky 1900:7–18): First of all, the establishment of the moshavot and their success shows that building the land is the wish of God. Secondly, the rabbis determined that the precept of settling the land of Israel is the equivalent of all the precepts. Therefore, he declared (Mohilever 1900)

> The Holy one blessed be He desires that his sons shall live in His land, even if they do not observe the Torah as they should, more than that they should live in other countries and observe it well. (n.p.)

It is better to be non-observant in the land of Israel than to be observant in other countries. Third, it enables one to maintain one's Jewish identity and religious character, including the possibility of repentance.

R. Mohilever claimed that the precept of settling the land is not fully observed if a Jew lives in the country but does not work there. In this, he was strongly at odds with the Old Yishuv, the members of which indeed lived in the country but engaged only in studying the Torah and observing the precepts, with no corporeal work:

> The major virtue of living in the land is when it leads to settlement of the land… as merely living in the land, if not occupied with its settlement, is not considered such a major precept. (n.p.)

By 'settlement' he means work, 'namely buying land in the land of Israel and settling it through planting, vineyards, and fieldwork, and living in it' (Slutzky 1900:7–18).

This outlook was further stressed in a letter he wrote to R. Simha Byk, the rabbi of Mohyliv (today in Belarus) in 1886, where he distinguished between their manners of affection for Zion (Fishman 1923):

> The esteemed rabbi craves only the high needs and the spiritual part of living in the holy land… but if the esteemed rabbi had considered the material part of the Holy Land as well (since in my humble opinion, the material aspect of the Holy Land is also very spiritual and lofty, a ladder resting on the earth with its top reaching to heaven)… because the major part of settling is planting trees. (p. 31)

R. Byk sees only spirituality, while R. Mohilever sees the material aspects too as having religious and spiritual value. He emphasises the idea mentioned above about the combination of Torah and work, by utilising Jacob's ladder, 'it is resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven'.

Summary and discussion

The philosophical and social climate of 19th century Europe intensified the concepts of nationalism and work. The rabbis of Hovevei Zion and of the First Aliya, headed by R. Mohilever, endeavoured to provide a Torah-oriented social response to these issues.

The rabbis of the First Aliya followed the path of Rabbis Kalisher and Alkalai, who espoused the idea of natural redemption, that is, active actions in natural ways, in order to advance the redemption. Therefore, they immigrated to the land of Israel, tilled the land and helped facilitate the arrival of the redeemer in this way. This, in contradiction to the common opinions among ultra-Orthodox rabbis, whereby the redemption will be miraculous and Divine (R. Mohilever in Fishman 1923):

> It is known that with regard to the future redemption most of the great rabbis and most people are of the opinion that it will happen in miraculous ways… There are indeed also many great sages who think that the redemption, or at least the beginning of the redemption, will be in a natural way… and my humble opinion is also of that view. (pp. 153–154)

In these acts, R. Mohilever saw the revival of the biblical Jewish identity. Where the exilic Jew was passive with regard to redemption, engaged in the study of Torah and in observing its precepts, and even when he worked for his subsistence, he saw this as an existential need and not as a religious value, the biblical Jew was completely different. The Jew portrayed in the Bible took an active part in his life. He worked, fought and his faith was monotheistic. At once: the biblical Jew occupied himself both with spirit and with matter. This was the identity that R. Mohilever sought to reinstate (Fishman 1923):

> Jews who on one hand will be from the third millennium and on the other will be from ancient periods, Jews from the time of the prophets and of the Hasmoneans. (p. 66)

R. Mohilever saw his era as the time of redemption or at least its beginning. 'We know from experience in the past century

that the days of our redemption are drawing near… only one or two more steps and our redemption will undoubtedly emerge' (Fishman 1923:155). This is contingent, in his opinion, on the Jewish people immigrating to the land of Israel and tilling the land. The combination of engaging in spirituality side by side with material aspects is the way to redemption and that is what he called for.

He based his words on those of the prophet: 'But you, mountains of Israel, will produce branches and fruit for my people Israel, for they will soon come home' (Ezekiel 36:8). The sages claimed that this is the most explicit proof, the 'impending redemption' (*ketz meguleh*), of the redemption. 'When the land of Israel will produce its fruit abundantly then the redemption will be close, and there is no more impending redemption' (Bavli, Sanhedrin 98a, and Rashi on site).

R. Mohilever (in Fishman 1923) added:

> And who has seen the land of Israel bear its fruit for the people of Israel? Not our fathers and their fathers for some two millennia, rather we and our sons. And the more our land continues to bear its fruit, thus the impending redemption draws near. And therefore in my opinion, any Jewish person who believes in the ultimate fate of our people is obliged to give whatever he can, of his strength and of his money, to take part in 'settling the land of Israel', and to make every effort to multiply the moshavot in our holy land and the workers on the mountains of Israel. (pp. 175–176)

R. Mohilever was indeed the most conspicuous of the First Aliya's rabbis and was considered one of the most prominent rabbis in the world in his era, but he did not enjoy the cooperation of his rabbinical peers. Nearly all of them objected to the renewal of the Jewish settlement in the land of Israel. They constituted a direct continuation of the views held by rabbinical Jews with their defensive and passive ethos and waited for redemption from Heaven (Mashiach 2014). They sanctified passivity and objected to the activism preached by R. Mohilever. R. Mohilever did not manage to recruit even R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, who was himself a revolutionary and is called 'the father of modern Orthodoxy', in favour of his struggle in this matter.

Hirsch too espoused the classical passive outlook and objected to activism. In a letter he wrote to R. Kalischer, one of the heralds of Zionism, who tried to mobilise him in favour of renewing the Jewish settlement in the land of Israel and to have him meet with wealthy people, R. Hirsch responded: 'And we have never taken upon ourselves the path of redemption through enhancement and rectification of holy land, rather through enhancement and rectification of our hearts' (Hirsch 1951:letter 12). The redemption will come through observing the Torah and the religious precepts and not through immigrating to the land of Israel and active work there. He refused to support the Jewish settlement in the land of Israel and wrote: 'Because that which they consider a major good deed [*mitsva*], I perceive as a considerable offense [*avera*]' (Hildesheimer 1986:199). You, R. Kalischer, see immigration to the land of Israel as a religious precept, while I, R. Hirsch, see it as a transgression. R. Hirsch learned from the failure of the Bar Kochba revolt, 'Not to try once again by their own power to establish national independence, rather this national future should be left to the discretion of God's leadership alone' (Hirsch 1992:148). Activism is a transgression. It is necessary to wait for the Messiah, passively.

In order to clarify to what degree R. Mohilever's demand for action was daring and innovative, we shall bring the words of R. S.B. Schneersohn, the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, who headed those who advocated the passive approach. As he saw it, any active endeavour to advance the redemption is doomed to fail. And even if it shall succeed, the redemption shall be partial and temporary, not complete. And this was true even when the leaders were Moses and Aaron:

> Because even the redemption brought by Moses and Aaron was not a complete redemption, and they returned (Israel, who became subjugated once again to Babylon], and all the more so the redemption brought by Hananya, Mishael, and Azarya (This refers to *Shivat Zion* (the Return to Zion) and the building of the Second Temple following the Edict of Cyrus.) [as they became subjugated once again to Greece], even when they followed the advice of Jeremiah and of the last prophets who were with them. And in the current exile we must anticipate only our redemption and salvation by the Holy one blessed be He himself, and not by a human being, and then our redemption will be a complete redemption. (eds. Landa & Rabinowitz 1982:1, siman 122)

And if this is true with regard to the redemption from Egypt by Moses and Aaron, who would dare attempt a natural and active redemption? In his opinion, it is necessary to wait for 'the Holy one blessed be He himself' with no human intervention, and then 'our redemption will be a complete redemption'. Active endeavours of any type are not only not beneficial but rather negative and harmful. R. Schneersohn did not settle for rejecting any practical active endeavours; he also prohibited spiritual activism, that is, praying strongly for the Messiah to come, as such prayers are considered 'forcing the end' (*dehikat haketz*), and in his words: 'It is not permissible to force the end even by pleading for this, all the more so by using corporeal forces and schemes' (eds. Landa & Rabinowitz 1900:57; Rashi, Bavli, Ketubot 111a, s.v. *shelo yerahaku et haketz*).

R. Mohilever responded and said that the prohibition against praying does not rule out active actions (Shemesh 1974):

> We vowed only to refrain from pleas to force the end, but in actions not only is there no prohibition against them rather it is imperative upon us to act with all our force to settle the land of Israel. (p. 26)

R. Mohilever's conceptions had halakhic meaning as well. He was one of the prominent advocates of the *heter mechira* during the *shmita* year. Some of his arguments stemmed from his support of productivisation. As he saw it, refraining from work for a year negates the idea of productive settlement of the land. In addition, refraining from labour for a year would be harmful to the process of redemption (Mohilever 1980,

Yoreh Deah, siman 22). The attitude to work and to the redemption merged within the religious teachings of Hovevei Zion, in theory and in practice.

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