

Tzion ("A New Light on Zion"), taken from the messianic conclusion of the *Yotzer Or* blessing. What is true is that Rabbi Reines' messianism, unlike some varieties of messianism common today, was sober, non-theurgical, and non-Hegelian.

His view about the spiritual and messianic implications of Zionism is clear. Zionism is in itself a purely political movement, and must be run in accordance with purely political wisdom. Nonetheless, it has supreme spiritual importance! It

makes possible the fulfillment of the commandment to dwell in the Land of Israel. Moreover, by renewing physical Jewish life in the Land, it makes possible the renewal of spiritual Jewish life in it. Rabbi Reines believed that by settling the Land in accordance with pragmatic political wisdom, we are fulfilling the *halachah*, and affirming our hope that the Creator of Lights will shine a new light on Zion, *ve-nizkeh kullanu meherah le-oro*, and may we all soon be worthy of His light! §

GREAT MINDS OF THE



TWENTIETH CENTURY



1894-1947

A Personal God and the Rebbe Who Taught of Him Rabbi Aharon Roth (Reb Arele)

BY RABBI MAYER SCHILLER

In prayer, throughout *Tehillim*, and in song, Jews speak of man's yearning for God. We are challenged time and again to "seek Hashem," "cleave to Him," "rejoice in His presence" and "love and fear Him." The optimum state for a man (as the *Shulchan Aruch* states) is constantly to think of Him — to set Hashem before oneself always.

Yet, the hurly-burly pragmatism of our times makes this an ideal which is often forgotten. As Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto writes in the Introduction to *Mesilas Yesharim*, it is precisely the most basic elements of our faith which, due to their familiarity, frequently fail to strike us with the appropriate emotional impact.

The elaborate communal structures that all segments of Orthodoxy have erected in the post-Holocaust era are testimony to the Jewish People's innate loyalty to God. What these structures sometimes lack is a conscious awareness of the ultimate purpose for their existence. They are meaningful because they are the fulfillment of the Creator's Will.

How are we to go about achieving the requisite God awareness? There are many well-known sources which offer inspiration. However, there are others which lie somewhat off the beaten path of one's cultural context, but may prove relevant to contemporary needs. Our task, therefore, when examining other Torah traditions is to separate the eternal from the particularistic. By so doing, we will be able to derive spiritual sustenance from the leader of a Chassidic movement which, due to his rejection of the forms and essences of modernism, seems frightfully foreboding to those attached to either. In the case of Rabbi Aharon Roth (1894-1947), affectionately known as Reb Arele (who founded the movement that came to be known as "*Toldos Aharon*"), it will

be an endeavor well worth the effort, for he sought, as have few in the history of our people, to bring every individual Jew into a heartfelt relationship with God.

By the twentieth century, leadership in the Chassidic movement had, for better or worse, become completely hereditary. Unlike the generations immediately following the Baal Shem Tov, *rebbeim* were no longer succeeded by disciples, but invariably by sons or sons-in-law. Reb Arele was an astonishing exception to this rule. Without rabbinical lineage of any sort he became the first grass-roots *rebbe* in nearly a century. Reb Arele lived the hard life of an obscure Hungarian yeshivah student. Yet, by the time he passed away in Jerusalem in 1947 (without organizational props of any sort) he had amassed a devoted following on two continents. Indeed, it was a following which, similar to earlier *Chassidim*, was pledged to their *derech* (path) despite the initial opposition of the Hungarian rabbinic hierarchy, many of whom were, ironically, Chassidic *rebbeim*!

It is not surprising that Reb Arele raised the wrath of the establishment, for he was not averse to criticizing their institutionalization of religious fervor. In a letter written years later to a disciple, he explained his rationale for assuming the role of *rebbe*:

My goal in accepting upon my shoulders [to become a rebbe] was not to acquire disciples. Today, due to our many sins, the essence of Chassidism is to attach oneself [to a rebbe] and nothing more is required... When I spent time among contemporary Chassidim I saw the state of Chassidism. Even my own rebbeim were seen by their followers as too holy to emulate and no alternate paths [to serve God] were pursued. People came [to rebbeim on pilgrimages] and left them without any personal changes taking place... When I, the lowly, saw this, jealousy for the Lord

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burned within me and I said, "Shall we, God forbid, desert the holy path of the Baal Shem Tov?" ... So I said in my heart, "I will gather together a few broken souls and we will accept upon ourselves the yoke of God's service."

As a young man, Reb Arele attended an assortment of Hungarian yeshivos where he made a reputation for himself as an extraordinary *masmid* (one who studies day and night) and fiery servant of God. It was in Veitzin, though, at age 17, that his desire to found a *chevrah* (group) which would devote itself to passionate Divine service began. Those initial efforts were devoted to raising his followers' devotion to *tefillah*. As he wrote years later:

It was striking that in Veitzin where the rav would spend many hours a day in devout prayer, the students of the yeshivah did not realize that passionate prayer was an obligation that rested upon them as well. Indeed, this error was found everywhere. Many think that devotion in prayer belongs to the rav or rosh yeshivah or the exceptionally pious and consider it a sign of haughtiness when practiced by the average person ... If God is not to be served devotedly in prayer, one's entire Yiddishkeit will go down.

To this day, one of the most striking aspects of *Toldos Aharon Chassidim* is the time and effort they invest in *avodat ha'tefillah* (prayer). The main *minyán* in Jerusalem (attended largely by working people) spends two hours daily on morning prayers — on non-Torah reading days! Obviously, not all are up to this standard today and the most wondrous forms of devotion can fall prey to what Max Weber termed the "routinization of charisma," but the fire lit by Reb Arele in Veitzen ("my soul was sent to this world to repair weekday *davenen*") still burns brightly 80 years later.

From his teenage years and onward, Reb Arele would always lead a *chevrah*. A prolific writer, his teachings were spread throughout Eastern Europe via books as well as the example of his own life. Eventually, his great love of *Eretz Yisrael* ("where you can be worthy to feel the light of the *Shechinah*") and especially Jerusalem would lead him to settle there.

Fortunately, the details of Reb Arele's life have been described at length in several biographies.¹ They provide insight and inspiration to those interested in the details of his righteousness and how his visionary dreams for the *chevrah* were implemented. His written works are also readily available and can uplift us today with the same potency that they did the Jews of pre-war Hungary.²

There are several areas of emphasis in Reb Arele's thought which speak with particular power to the contemporary Jew. Foremost among them are his exhortations to faith and trust in a God who is, as the Rebbe often refers to Him, "our sweet, dear, loving father in Heaven." Throughout Reb Arele's works, there are an abundance of personal prayers, poems and songs ("there is nothing as powerful as a *nigun* [melody] to awaken a Jew to joyous love of God") which are geared to produce the vivid realizations that we all stand constantly before a Father who loves us, and that the sweetest thing on earth is to perform some *mitzvah* for Him. At a time of extreme poverty and suffering in his life Reb Arele wrote, "We have before us every second so many holy and sweet *mitzvos* to fulfill. What do we lack? Nothing! As long as we have the dear Creator and His *mitzvos*. Praise and thanks we give to the holy Creator forever! As the Baal Shem Tov said, 'An angel would give away all his holy spirituality for just one *mitzvah*.'" L
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Reb Arele's prayers are original compositions in

which one asks that God grant him perfect faith and trust. They deal with everything from *bitachon* (faith) that our livelihood is solely dependent on Him to requests that we be granted success in controlling lustful and haughty thoughts.

This was, indeed, a revival of the Baal Shem's teachings with the force and passion of those earlier generations. To Reb Arele, the Chassidic belief that the whole earth is full of His glory led him to regard every aspect of *avodas Hashem* (serving God) as profoundly significant. He authored *Shulchan Hatahor*, a lengthy volume devoted to how to approach eating "for the sake of Heaven," and *Taharas Hakodesh*, dealing with the repentance process in general and evil lusts in particular. He wrote shorter works on charity, visiting the sick, welcoming guests and how working for a living should be imbued with a God-consciousness. The constant summons is to fervent prayer and song, total humility and absolute, joyous faith in God's merciful providence.

Reb Arele was particularly devoted to restoring the original Chassidic commitment to *ahavas Yisrael*. He saw the "love of every Jew as the most significant aspect of Chassidism which remains for us today." According to the Rebbe, this was the meaning of the Messiah's statement to the Baal Shem Tov that the final Redemption would depend on the "spread of his teachings."

To the degree that a person is attached to ahavas Yisrael, so is he linked to the Highest Holiness ... Anyone who causes enmity in Klal Yisrael his entire Chassidus will go to the 'other side' (sitra achra). It was certainly not the will of the Baal Shem Tov to bring a derech into the world which would cause any separation among Jews, for he was the true lover of all Jews the likes of which was not heard of for generations.

Reb Arele's writing style is unique in several ways. He brings to his task a wide-ranging familiarity with the revealed and esoteric Torah which he weaves together in a thematic approach to topics. This is in contrast to almost all Chassidic works which present their thoughts via homiletic expositions of the weekly *parshah*. Even more striking is the personal language — the reader is generally addressed as an intimate friend and the Rebbe often discusses his own struggles (successes and failures!) in *avodas Hashem*. An intimate style combined with the frequent use of Yiddish and the texts of voluntary prayers, yields a sense of soaring spiritual calling, a life-long yearning for God.

A mere noting of the chapter topics in Reb Arele's most well-known work, *Shomer Emunim*, will give us a sense of the broad spectrum he deals with as well as the potential for inspiration inherent. The chapters address faith, Divine Governance, trust in God, spiritual strength, seeking faith, reward and punishment, Redemption, the final "comfort" of Jerusalem and Israel, passion in God's service and finally rejoicing in God. *Shomer Emunim* was written and published in a three-month period in 1942 so that "in this time of darkness" the "holy nation will not falter in its faith in God and His Torah." Appended to the book are prayers and songs which the Rebbe wrote concerning the topics discussed.

Reb Arele's approach to faith is most profound as it sees belief as primarily dependent on the state of a Jew's soul. To the degree that we purify ourselves via Torah and *mitzvos* and cleave to humility and trust in God, while uncompromisingly adhering to Torah standards of purity, we will be granted the ability to believe. It is not a matter, in the final analysis, of intellectual assent, but of the soul's ability to link itself

to its Creator in love and joy. We may avail ourselves of rational argument, but faith is ultimately a spiritual virtue.

Some years ago, a student of mine wrote from Israel with a glowing description of a Shabbos he spent in Bnei Brak with the Viznitzer Rebbe and his *Chassidim*. The combination of their unique approach to prayer, the long Friday night *tisch* and the small groups devoted to study of *Or HaChaim* on the *parshah* led him to exclaim that he had never before experienced such a Shabbos. My response was that he was granted this experience not merely to luxuriate in it as a tourist, but to bring it back (translated to different cultural forms) into his own life.

A study of Reb Arele's works or recitation of his prayers does not mean that we must settle in Meah Shearim (although a weekday *shacharis* at the Toldos Aharon *shul* there from time to time would prove instructive). It means that we bring his teachings, minus the external trappings, into our homes and schools. For a generation of non-affiliated Jews, starved for a sense of the Divine, as well as those of us already aware of the Torah's truths (and even for *Chassidim*

whose movement's original ardor has dimmed somewhat over the centuries), the humble and pure joy that a consciousness of our "sweet Creator" will bring may be found in the writings of Reb Arele Roth.

NOTES

1. Mordekai Blum, *Toldos Aharon*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 1989); Eliahu ha-Kohen Steinberger, *Uvda d'Aharon*, 1st ed. (Jerusalem, 1946) 2nd ed. (Jerusalem, 1986); Pinhas David Weberman, *Parah Mateh Aharon* (Jerusalem, 1985); Yizhak Izak Zelikovitsh, *Zichron Tzaddik* (Jerusalem, 1987). The Blum and Steinberger works are systematic biographies while the latter volumes are collections of stories and teachings.

2. Aharon Roth, *Iggeros Shomrei Emunim*, *Noam Halevavos*, *Shomer Emunim*, *Shulchan Hatahor* and *Taharas Hakodesh* are all readily available in many editions. The *Sefer Hazavah* (Jerusalem, 1942) and *Takanos V'hadrachos D'chevras Shomrei Emunim* (Jerusalem, 1952) are unfortunately and strangely out of print. The *Iggeros Shomrei Emunim* has been issued with its Yiddish sections translated into Hebrew (Jerusalem, 1988). There are also many shorter works of Reb Arele which the diligent seeker may be able to locate.

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TWENTIETH CENTURY



1903-1993

The Traveler's Route Home: Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik and the Unending Dialectic

BY DR. DAVID SHATZ

One of Rav Soloveitchik *zt"l*'s richest images may be applied to capture some key points concerning his philosophy and its significance.

Rashi gives two interpretations of the verse, "And Hashem *Elokim* created man from dust of the earth" (*Genesis* 2:7). The first maintains that "He gathered the dust from the entire earth — from its four corners" (*tzavar afaro mi-kol ha-adamah, me-arba ruchot*). The other states that God took the dust from the future site of the altar.

Rashi's two interpretations, says the Rav, are both, symbolically speaking, true; they reflect two aspects of the human being. On the one hand, the human being is cosmic. He wants to know everything, aspires to be everywhere, and easily detaches himself from native surroundings to explore new horizons. *Tzavar afaro me-arba ruchot*. And yet — as Rashi's second interpretation suggests — no matter how far one journeys intellectually, emotionally, and aesthetically,

"the traveler, out to conquer infinity, will surely return home... each man is created from and attached to a single spot, the origin, from which he cannot escape."¹

The dynamics of the Rav's thought can be described in much these same terms. In his philosophical writings and discourses, the Rav roams far and wide, reflecting a "cosmic" intellectual mastery and a large fund of cultural experience. His vocabulary, reference frame, and style often are heavily philosophical and scientific; his discussions at times overflow with allusions to philosophers, scientists, and literary figures; the categories he uses to diagnose our contemporary religious predicament, such as alienation and autonomy, are drawn in significant measure from the modern philosopher's analysis. Yet, no matter how far that journey takes him, the Rav's *hashkafah* (outlook) always circles back to the site of the altar — to concepts like *emunah*, *halachah*, *Talmud Torah*, *avodat Hashem*, *tzelem Elokim*, and *brit*.

Besides providing a vivid metaphor for Rav Soloveitchik's own thought, the traveler image, modified again from its original use, highlights the role that the Rav plays for many a modern Jew. To trace the way home from the modern world is a colossal challenge; after all, *how* does a Jew live cosmically while remaining rooted? For obvious

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