

And, Cohen wisely reminds us that so much of the program of religious Zionism in Israel is “to force Torah down throats that cannot receive it.” According to the Talmud (Shab. 88a), even God himself failed to accomplish that; the people of Israel only accepted the Torah when they were inwardly ready to love God. Those who believe in coercive religion, however, must rely on all the political, economic, even military powers of a secular state to achieve their ends. What they fail to understand is that more than they are using the secular state, the secular state is using them. Coercion in the contemporary world can use religion but does not in truth need it. Arthur A. Cohen insightfully exposes this spiritual and political danger within the crude ideology (masquerading as “theology”) of too many religious Zionists today. □

### The prophetic guide to Jewish reality

*David Singer*

For all his eloquence, Arthur Cohen fails to persuade me that Zionism is to be severed of its religious interpretation. This is not due to any particular inadequacy in Cohen’s argument. It is simply that Israel’s prophets of old—the prophets of the Bible—speak to me with still greater eloquence and truthfulness.

As a working theologian, Cohen is possessed by a rage for order: everything must fit into place; no loose ends are to be permitted. Thus, if the Israeli chief rabbinate’s characterization of the modern Jewish state as the “first flowering of the promised redemption” makes for some untidiness in the theological domain, if it in any way complicates the task of the Jewish theologian, Cohen insists that it be immediately banished from thought. The name of the theological game, as he sees it, is system-building, and from that point of view messianism is a mess.

It may indeed be that messianism—the Jewish vision of the end of days—is an untidy theological construct, but it is also, incontestably, a biblical reality. As such, it will be taken with absolute seriousness by Orthodox Jews like myself, who seek to respond in faithfulness to the living word of God. What then am I to do if in scanning the historical horizon, I see the words of the prophets playing themselves out? Shall I seek to convince myself that the miracle of 1948—Israel reborn after 2000 years of exile—did not occur? Shall I make believe that the miracle of 1967—Israel saved;

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Jerusalem reunited under Jewish rule—did not take place?

### Jewish Eyes for Jewish History

I affirm “first flowering of the promised redemption” not because someone—certainly not the Israeli chief rabbinate—has issued me marching orders on it, but because in reading the text of the Bible and the text of history with the eyes of faith, I see it plainly. The fact that large numbers of other Orthodox Jews—I refer to the non-Zionist Agudah types and anti-Zionist Satmar types—do not see it at all vexes me a great deal, but the problem, I am convinced, is attributable to poor vision on their part. In the end, they too will see.

Cohen is correct to point out that any affirmation of a “first flowering” carries with it the danger of an attempt being made to “force the end,” to coerce the historical process into yielding the full and final redemption. This, indeed, is a formula for disaster, for tragedy without limit. Still, Cohen is wrong to imply that the two necessarily go hand in hand. That is certainly not the case with regard to the members of the religious kibbutz movement, nor is it true of the intellectuals gathered around the peace movements Oz Veshalom and Netivot Shalom. Indeed, I would argue that it does not hold for most Orthodox Zionists who attribute messianic significance to the modern Jewish state.

One hears a great deal today about Rav Kook *filis* (Zvi Yehuda), the founding father of Gush Emunim, but it would be better to turn our attention to Rav Kook *pere* (Abraham Isaac), the great mystic, halakhist, and first chief rabbi of modern Palestine. He offers us a paradigm of an Orthodox thinker who exhibited remarkable openness and tolerance precisely because of his messianic reading of the Zionist enterprise. Within the context of a “first flowering,”—which he saw unfolding before him—Abraham Isaac Kook was able to set aside the old categories and the antagonisms that went with them—between secular and religious, between physical and spiritual, between modern and traditional, etc. For Rav Kook *pere*, the messianic interpretation of Zionism implied an opening up of options rather than a closing off.

I know full well that there is a world of difference between a first and a final flowering of redemption. Still, even as I await the latter, I hold fast to and glory in the former. May God indeed bless the State of Israel, the “first flowering of the promised redemption.” □

*(We invited two figures in contemporary religious Zionist affairs to add their views to the discussion of Arthur Cohen’s article.)*