Philistines and the Future of Zionism

The redemptive scenario of Rabbi Zvi Tau

That the Bible has played a central role in the history of Zionism is an indisputable fact. But how does it influence Israel’s current political reality? Is it a source of inspiration? Is it an historical testimony? Or could it be that Scripture is also scripting our very present?

By YOSEF ACHITUV
The Orthodox nationalism of Rabbi Zvi Tau, an important figure in contemporary religious Zionist circles, blends all three of these ideas. Born in 1936, Tau was a disciple of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, the predominant religious ideologue of the Greater Land of Israel movement after the Six-Day War. In 1997, Rabbi Tau led a walkout of rabbis and students from the famous Merkaz Harav Yeshiva to found a competing institute, Yeshivat Har Hamor. The rift followed bitter disagreements regarding adherence to the teachings of the yeshiva’s founder, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (“Rav Kook,” father of Zvi Yehuda). Tau also accused Merkaz Harav of straying from the “proper” educational ethos, which in his eyes should consist purely of religious studies, and not include any secular studies or professional training. As rosh yeshiva of Har Hamor, Tau wields considerable influence in the right-wing religious nationalist camp. He teaches that the State of Israel is itself sacred to a degree, and must be loyally served and protected. And his unusual and creative analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has generated great interest among some Israelis - and concern among others.

Over the years, various public figures in Israel, religious and secular alike, have voiced the notion that there is no such thing as a Palestinian people. According to this seductive line of thinking, Palestinian nationalism is a modern invention with no real historical basis, expediently constructed in opposition to Zionism. But Rabbi Tau, perhaps surprisingly, disagrees. Just as the People of Israel have preserved and enhanced their unique identity for millennia, he contends, so have the Palestinians - for they are none other than the biblical Philistines. Such acknowledgement of Palestinian antiquity, however, is not intended as a compliment. The Palestinians are resident in the Land as the eternal warmongers in God’s historical plan, and must be dealt with accordingly. Tau’s argument is all the more fascinating because of the Jewish sources that underlie it. He relies on a very specific reading of biblical commentaries by Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna (known as “the GRA”), the towering 18th-century sage famed for his fierce opposition to Hasidism. Tau interprets the Vilna Gaon within the spiritual framework of Rav Kook, who taught that the renewal of Jewish sovereignty in the Holy Land constitutes one of the final stages in the attainment of Redemption.

Tau’s unusual and creative analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has generated great interest among some Israelis - and concern among others.

Rabbi Tau’s reliance on the Vilna Gaon is part of a growing trend in certain quarters of religious Zionism. Intensive efforts are invested in careful study of the Vilna Gaon’s writings - and the studies themselves are viewed as being divinely ordained, providing the means to speed the coming of the Messiah in an age of atchalta dege’ula (the beginning of redemption). Unearthing clues and prophecies on contemporary historical events, the Vilna Gaon’s interpreters seek to confirm his status as the true harbinger of Zionism.

Because of his status, Rabbi Tau’s views are more than mere biblical interpretation: they are received by disciples and congregants as concrete political instruction that is justified by a comprehensive, theological worldview. This view maintains that reality is permeated by a divine presence that determines the history of the People of Israel. What’s more, the fate
and purpose of the People of Israel bear on the future of humanity at large. All current events must therefore be interpreted against the backdrop of the redemptive processes of the People of Israel. Daily headlines have a metaphysical and cosmic significance of which people need to be made aware, and advancing this awareness is an integral factor in the progress toward redemption. Tau speaks of a “chosen few” - of whom he is one - who serve as agents of heavenly providence via their rare ability to decipher for the rest of us the unfolding of the divine plan.

The Bad Boys of History

Tau developed his unique conception of the Palestinian nation in a 2001 pamphlet entitled “Nihalta BeOzcha,” a phrase from the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15, which means “You guided [the Israelites] with Your strength.” The Torah makes explicit reference to the Philistines as early as Genesis 10. They are listed among the families of Noah’s sons that later formed the Seventy Nations of the world. Rabbi Tau takes this reference as the point of departure for the Philistines’ divine role in the course of human history.

Tau’s argument is based on the Vilna Gaon’s elaborate exegesis of two verses of the Song of the Sea: “The people hear, they tremble; agony grips the dwellers in Philistia. Now are the clans of Edom dismayed; the tribes of Moab, trembling grips them” (Exodus 15:14-15). These three nations represent three different threats to Israel: “Moab is the father of the sinfulness with which Israel had been marred, and Edom is the father of the most destructive woes inflicted on Israel, and the Philistines besieged Israel heavily, preventing them from having any regime and government.” In Rabbi Tau’s hands, the Vilna Gaon’s interpretation leads to a far-reaching conclusion: the Song of the Sea is proof of the Philistines’ permanently disruptive role in history. “The role played by the Philistines,” writes Tau, “during Israel’s settlement in its land and the establishment of its kingdom, is the same role played by the Palestinians today, the neo-Philistines, the Philistines of today.”

Rabbi Tau’s metaphysical interpretations of scripture coupled with his reading of the political map have led him - and others of a similar persuasion - to conclude that Israel’s wars are not mere historical events, but cosmic necessities.

The special nature of the Philistines is made evident for Tau by the genealogy listed in Genesis 10. In verses 13 and 14, the Hebrew text sets the Philistines apart: “And Mizraim begat Ludim, and Anamim, and Lehabim, and Naphtuhim, and Pathrusim, and Caphtorim, out of whom came Pelishtim, and Caphtorim.” “Out of whom came” is a unique parenthetical wording within the long litany of nations, and clearly indicates, according to Tau, that the Pelishtim - the Philistines - were not intended to be “a legal member” in the family of nations. Indeed, he declares, they “were not meant to be, there is no place for them from the outset.” He buttresses his view with an ancient midrash, cited by Rashi, claiming that the Philistine nation was born out of illegitimate wife-swapping between the Pathrusim and Casluhim.

The Philistine deviation from the “normal order” of nations is a necessary component of Tau’s dialectical scenario. “This also has a program,” he argues. “We have here a reality
Just as the People of Israel have preserved and enhanced their unique identity for millennia, Rabbi Tau contends, so have the Palestinians - for they are none other than the biblical Philistines.

of a people that is preoccupied only with abandoning order, so that when they are vanquished, this same order is reaffirmed all the more forcefully.” The divine plan that pulls the strings of world history thus gives the Philistines a paradoxical role. Their rebellion against Jewish sovereignty over the Land of Israel intensifies the metaphysical power inherent within the Jewish People, thus enabling Israel to preserve the very sovereignty against which the Philistines are rebelling.

Explains Tau: “One must understand this divine technique for the creation of history - how the Lord of the Universe arranges the powers and establishes the precise point of opposition and pressure, which in the end will give rise to the Kingdom of Israel in the most successful and effective manner.” Rabbi Tau emphasizes that “Philistine nationhood has no self-contained moral, historical or ideal content in and by itself.” Apart from their supporting role in the
The founding of a new Kingdom of Israel, “they do not have ideals, nor a purpose, nor a foundation.” That this is true of the Palestinians in our own time is crystal-clear to Tau, who finds convenient analogies between their behavior and that of their Philistine forebears. In the Bible, the Philistines gloated over the plight of the blinded Samson, betrayed by Delilah: “As their spirits rose, they said, ‘Call Samson here and let him dance for us.’ Samson was fetched from the prison, and he danced for them” (Judges 16:25). So too, says Tau, when an enemy rocket lands on Israel, the Palestinians “mount the rooftops and rejoice, since this is the inner essence of their whole national organization.” Later in the Bible, when “David’s kingdom reaches Jerusalem, the Philistines are at the height of their military success and the height of their strength,” and indeed today, when “the People of Israel return to their land, [and] the State of Israel has been founded at the end of Days, there are Philistines too.” “Baruch hashem sheyeshnam,” he writes; God be praised that they exist, for if they are here “it is a sign that the divine mechanism of history is working perfectly, and that God has not abandoned us.” To which he adds, with no apparent irony: “Personally, I have nothing against them.” Tau’s reasoning leads to the inevitable conclusion that the Philistine-Palestinians have no future, since they, unlike Jews, do not have an inherent positive essence. Once their purpose runs its full course, he predicts, they will disintegrate. “The
rebirth of Israel constitutes liberation, a complete victory over this national non-entity, as opposed to the true and eternal national entity of God’s Holy People.”

**War is Good**

Rabbi Tau’s understanding of Palestinian nationhood may be objectionable to Jews of a more liberal temperament, but he cannot be accused of timidity. He goes so far as to claim that the recent discovery of mystical writings by the Vilna Gaon – namely, the texts that support Tau’s eschatological argument - is in itself another act of divine intervention. Further proof of Tau’s boldness as a thinker is his harnessing of the Vilna Gaon’s exegeses to the ultimate religious-nationalist authority, Rav Kook himself.

‘The role played by the Philistines,’ writes Tau, ‘during Israel’s settlement in its land and the establishment of its kingdom, is the same role played by the Palestinians today, the neo-Philistines, the Philistines of today.’

Kook believed that the essence of the universe is dynamic. All of creation, human history included, yearns to ascend from its material existence and merge with its divine source. This ascent may be achieved by actualizing the divine potential inherent in the material world. Dialectical historical processes reflect the “natural order” God has impressed into the world. One of the laws governing this divine order is that potential divinity can only be actualized by the activation of a contrary force. This analysis leads to the rather problematic notion that wars play a positive and productive role in history. As part of the “natural” regulation of the universe, wars are also “natural.” When two nations are at war, each side refines and asserts its national uniqueness in contrast to the identity of its enemy, thus achieving the full potential of its national essence.

In elaborating the divinely ordained processes of human progress, Rabbi Kook avoided questions about the morality of war and the human suffering it entails. In his philosophy of history, wars are instruments for the hastening of redemption. The terrible War of Gog and Magog described in the Book of Ezekiel is expected before the arrival of the Messiah for a reason:

Wars enhance the unique value of every nation, until its form emerges and is actualized fully, down to its innermost, most profound details. Israel is the general aspaktarya [mirror] to the entire world ... hence each time kingdoms challenge one another, plans for the full actualization of the nations go into effect, are drawn up, and naturally Knesset Yisrael is instilled with the power of actualization as she expects to hear the footsteps of Mashiach who will arrive and appear soon in our days.

Written amidst the horrors of World War I, this passage could not yet have referred to a concrete struggle for Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel. Still, Kook considered all military conflicts to be linked to the Jews’ progress towards redemption. In his eyes, wars between other nations facilitate Knesset Yisrael, which is the spiritual perfection of the People of Israel.

For Kook, redemption arises out of the unique metaphysical essence of the Jewish People. In Kabbalistic literature, Knesset Yisrael is commonly linked to Shekhinah, a feminine sefira or aspect of divinity, which absorbs spirituality from higher spheres. Kook believed that Knesset Yisrael is embodied in the concrete People of Israel,
a belief enhanced by another image he uses to describe Israel, “ha’askpaklarya haklalit shel ha’olam,” “the general mirror of the entire world.” The mirror analogy stands for Knesset Yisrael’s capacity to passively absorb also the effects produced by events that are not directly related to Jews.

The mystical role of war as imagined by Rav Kook fits neatly into Rabbi Tau’s interpretation of the all-too-real Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Now that the People of Israel can and do wage their own wars, Israel’s redemptive progress benefits from these wars in exactly the same way as from wars between other nations. What’s more, in fighting against the Philistine-Palestinians, Israel’s potential courage is fully actualized. In this way, the bloody conflict brings nearer the rule of the Kingdom of Israel over the entire Land of Israel.

Rabbi Tau’s metaphysical interpretations of scripture coupled with his reading of the political map have led him - and others of a similar persuasion - to conclude that Israel’s wars are not mere historical events, but cosmic necessities. Peace will come about not through any diplomatic pacts with the Palestinians, but only when all nations - except for the Palestinians - “shall see how [the Jews] live under the light of the divine idea and the light of the content of Torah, prophecy, and Shekhina, and how these serve to shape the kingdom.”

Tau has no doubt that Israel’s military battles are “wars for the establishment of our kingdom, for establishing our might and national courage.” At the same time, they should not be interpreted as an attempt to convert others to Judaism: “We are not mounting a Jihad war to impose the faith of Israel on the world.”

**The Practice of Theory**

The historical validity of Palestinian nationhood has long been problematic for Israelis. This is famously exemplified in a 1969 comment by Rabbi Ya’akov Herzog, a former ambassador to Canada and the-then director general of the Prime Minister’s Office, to the extent that the Palestinians “have never been a people, and this is one of the miracles of the Land of Israel.” As Palestinian demands for international recognition of their national identity were increasingly acknowledged, historical arguments seeking to dispel their national aspirations waned in mainstream Israeli discourse. Among many religious nationalists, however, particularly those fiercely devoted to the vision of the Greater Land of Israel, the Palestinians continue to be grasped as lacking any genuine historical roots.

As our reading of Rabbi Tau has shown, his thoughts on the subject are complex and paradoxical. For Tau maintains that the Palestinians do indeed have very deep “historical” roots, as they were born along with the Seventy Nations of the world. However, in contradistinction from all other nations, the Philistine-Palestinians do not possess any positive essence of their own. In Rabbi Tau’s view, the Palestinians are merely a fake nationhood, a mock-people, donning all the available garments of national symbols, but lacking the essence, the internality, the self-generated contents of nationhood. The Philistines have no value, function or positive talent required to complete the human form of humanity by adding force, character and value. Certainly, they do not have a grip on eternity in the same way the people of Israel do.

In today’s political world, such thinking may seem absurd, but it cannot be dismissed as irrelevant. Rabbi Tau’s scenario of redemption is shared by a substantial number of Jews, in Israel and elsewhere, who reject not only the ethical claims of liberal Judaism but also the efforts of Modern Orthodoxy to embrace the rest of humanity. Considering the devotion of his followers, one can only speculate what impact Tau’s teachings will have beyond the walls of the yeshiva.