

# Reb Chaim, the Malach and Zionism

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## Introduction

Below is a story about Rav Chaim Soloveichik, Rav Chaim Dov Ber Hakohen Levine, who is commonly referred to as the Malach, and the Malach's son, Rabbi Rifoel Zalman. There are those who will probably find the story shocking, but I assure you that it is true. After relating the story, we will attempt to add some perspective. However, first we present some biographical information about the participants.

**Rav Chaim Soloveichik** (1853- 1918) is often referred to as Reb Chaim Brisker. He introduced the famous Brisker *derech* (approach) to Talmudic study.

Reb Chaim was born in Volozhin where his father Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (1820 – 1892), popularly known as the *Bais HaLevi*, was a Rosh Yeshiva in the Volozhiner Yeshiva. Reb Chaim was recognized as a child prodigy. He eventually accepted a position as Rav of Brest (*Brisk* in Yiddish), which was then located in Imperial Russia and is now in Belarus.

**Rav Chaim Avraham Dov Ber Levine Hakohen** (1859/1860 - 1938) was born in the town of Ilya in Russia. His father, who was a Rov in Krisleva, was a follower of the *Mitteler* Rebbe of Lubavitch, Rabbi Dov Ber and subsequently of his son the *Tzemach Tzedek*. Although a follower of Chabad, the Malach distanced himself from the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneesohn, due to personal differences. He was also close to a number of Litvishe gedolim, something most unusual at this time. The Malach was recognized as an outstanding Talmud Chocham, and Rav Yitzchok Elchonon Spector (1817 – 1896) gave him Semicha at a young age. In addition to being famous for his Torah brilliance, he was also known for his ascetic tendencies.

In 1923 when his son, Reb Rifoel Zalman (see below), emigrated to America, the Malach went with him, becoming the Rov of a small shul in the Bronx. Reb Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz of Torah Vodaath fame encouraged his students to visit the Malach. Some were so inspired by him that they became his followers. Rav Levine encouraged his followers to dress in Chassidic garb, grow beards and long peyos, and wear their Tzitzis over their shirts, things that went against the “blend in trend” then popular in American Orthodox circles. In 1936 these *bochrin* left Torah Vodaath and formed yeshiva *Nesivos Olam*.

**Rav Rifoel Zalman Levine (1900 - 1992)**, the only son of the Malach, was a prized student of Rav Boruch Ber Leibowitz, having studied with him from 1919 to 1923. He

was awarded semicha by the Slabodka Rosh Yeshiva Rav Moshe Mordechai Epstein (1866 – 1934), among others. Rav Zalman Levine insisted on being called Reb Zalman and discouraged people from calling him Rav. As mentioned above, he immigrated to America in 1923, but only after he received a bracha from the Chofetz Chaim who warned him about the materialism prevalent in America.

In 1929 Reb Zalman married the daughter of the Rov of Albany, NY. Since his wife wanted to remain close to her family, Reb Zalman lived in Albany for the rest of his life. Throughout his life Reb Zalman maintained a rigorous schedule of Torah learning which began at 4:45 AM. He worked for the State of New York and oversaw the disbursement of checks issued to state workers. He did not retire until he was 84.

### **The Story**

Reb Zalman related an incident that had occurred in Minsk. One morning when he left shul after davening, he saw a man standing on a corner collecting money for Karen Kayemes L'Yisroel (the Jewish National Fund). Reb Zalman put a couple of small coins in the *pushke* the man was holding, and the man attached a pin to his jacket. Reb Zalman then proceeded to his father's house. When he entered the house, he found his father in the middle of davening. Seeing the pin, the Malach interrupted his davening (something which he had never done before), and told his son to remove the pin immediately. Reb Zalman replied that he saw nothing wrong with wearing such a pin and that there were many rabbonim who permitted wearing such a pin. However, his father would not listen and insisted that he remove the pin, which he did.

That afternoon Reb Zalman was walking in the street when he saw his father coming towards him with another man whom he did not recognize. "Say 'hello' to the world renowned Brisker Rav," the Malach said. Reb Zalman was filled with trepidation when he realized before whom he was standing.

The Malach then turned to Reb Chaim and said, "This is my son, and he has a question to ask you." Reb Chaim replied, "Why doesn't he ask you?" The Malach said, "He will not accept an answer from me. This is a question related to Emunah." "Emunah," Reb Chaim said, and stopping, he turned to Reb Zalman and asked, "What is your question?" Reb Zalman related to Reb Chaim the incident that had occurred that morning.

At this point they happened to be standing not far from a big church. Pointing to the church, Reb Chaim said, "If you have money to throw away, then it is better for you to give it to this church than to the Zionists. Giving to Zionists is worse than giving to a church!"

### **Reb Chaim's Statement about Zionism**

To put it mildly, many people will find Reb Chaim's assertion that "Giving to Zionists is worse than giving to a church!" incomprehensible, offensive or worse. "How could he say such a thing?" they will ask. This author most certainly is not in a position to defend

or condemn anything that Rav Chaim Soloveichik, ZT”L, ever wrote or said. However, even if one disagrees with Reb Chaim’s view of Zionism, it is important for every observant Jew to understand the basis for his view.

On November 10, 1975 the United Nations General Assembly, by a vote of 72 to 35 (with 32 abstentions), adopted Resolution 3379 which stated that “Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination.” (On December 16, 1991 this resolution was revoked. It is noteworthy that this is the only UN resolution that has ever been revoked.)

Rav Shimon Schwab (1908 – 1995) in his 1976 essay **Zion or Zionism** (reprinted in **Selected Writings**, pages 147 – 158, CIS Publications, Lakewood, NJ, 1988) writes,

“The United Nations, which today is but a caricature of what its brave name implies, has resolved by majority vote to equate Zionism with Racism. It is obvious that this is a blatant lie. It is equally obvious that this political slur is in itself intended as an expression of Racism, read: Antisemitism, of the ugliest and most heinous kind.

“All over the world Jews have reacted by indignant protests and vigorous public declarations: “We are all Zionists,” “Judaism is Zionism” and so on. This Jewish response is most unfortunate. A vicious lie is being answered with a simplistic untruth, which is as naive as it is self-defeating. Let us state at the outset that we have no sympathy with certain irresponsible anonymous advertisers in the N.Y. Times who claim to speak in the name of the Torah, but in reality speak in the name of nobody.

“On the other hand, truth compels us to state unequivocally that most certainly Zionism is not at all identical with Judaism, that in fact it is diametrically opposed to it. Zionism is a political philosophy which considers the divine Nation of the Torah a nation like all others, albeit with certain religious traditions which you are free to accept or to reject as an individual, and which may or may not become part of the law of the Jewish land, subject to a majority vote of a democratic parliament. Zionism has transformed the holy land, the holy tongue, the holy nation into secular entities, according atheists and anti-religionist Jews at best equal status with firm believers.

“Zionism has created a sovereign state which is governed like all other states by its own man -made laws and not by the G-d given laws of the Torah. All these are dry facts which cannot be disputed.”

Rav Schwab concludes his essay with quotes from an article written by Rabbi Emanuel Feldman formerly of Atlanta, Georgia entitled **Israel, Torah and I: Musings of a Temporary Resident** that appeared in **Tradition**, Vol. 15, No. 3, 1975. Rabbi Feldman wrote

“I live here and I must confess that, as much as I love the city [of Jerusalem] and the Land and the people, occasionally I despair at what I see. For twenty-five years Israel’s dominant leadership - political, social, educational, military – has followed a fundamental irreligious way. Israel’s Declaration of Independence contains no direct mention of

Israel's G-d, and in 1975 the New Year message of Israel's president also omits any reference to Him. This leadership has opted for the strange gods of secularism. They wanted a new generation unfettered and unencumbered by the albatrosses of G-d, Torah, mitzvot, observances, which were after all - it is by now a discredited cliché - only designed for the Galuth Jew to keep him conscious of his Jewishness, but were no longer necessary in an independent Jewish State, and so they made the dominant school system a secular one. And now, twenty-five years later, having exposed an entire generation to the Bible as a book of literature and poetry and history but not as the Book of G-d, they now have a youth whose personal commitment to the State can no longer be taken for granted, and which occasionally actually questions Israel's own right to live in the Land.

“Illusions are punctured daily in Israel. They wanted a land *kechol hagoyim*, like all the Nations, but having become like all the ‘Goyim,’ they now find that the ‘Goyim’ despise them as before. They wanted a State of their own in order to put an end to anti-Semitism, but having created the State, they find that the endemic anti-Semitism of the world is now directed against the State of the Jews. Little by little, the dreams and illusions of the secularist founders disappear like a mist.

“They have raised a generation of socialists who are hard-eyed materialists: a young generation of ‘cultured’ secular Jews who, according to a newly issued government report, know little even of the secular culture of the land - not the history, not the geography, not the literature. They wanted to be like the Nations and much of its youth lives for the now and has little commitment to anything beyond its immediate needs - just like the youth of the Nations. They sought desperately to be accepted into world society, wanted to be normal like any other country - but so fearful were they that their own traditions would make them less acceptable and that their own uniqueness would make them less normal that they threw the wheat with the chaff to the winds, and now they possess neither the tradition, nor the normalcy, nor the love, nor the respect of mankind. Instead they have become the most lonely and most isolated and most forlorn among the nations, in ironic fulfillment of that very Bible which to them is not G-dly: ‘It is a people which dwelleth alone and is not reckoned among the nations.’ (Numbers 23:9).”

I am sure that Reb Chaim and the Malach understood and foresaw all that Rav Schwab and Rav Feldman wrote above, and that this was at least to some extent the basis for their negative view of Zionism.

Some will argue that today this situation in Eretz Yisroel is very different from what it was in 1975 and 1976 when Rabbis Schwab and Feldman wrote their articles. This may indeed be the case. However, one thing is for sure, namely, that we must wholeheartedly support the Jews who reside in Eretz Yisroel. Yet, it is also incumbent upon us to keep in mind what the goals of the secular Zionists were and why gedolim like Rav Chaim Soloveichik and the Malach were opposed to secular Zionism.