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LEKH LEKHA

THIS MONTH'S LEHRHAUS OVER SHABBOS IS SPONSORED
BY **BRENDA AND ELIHU TURKEL**
IN LOVING MEMORY OF **MRS. LIVIA TURKEL**,
WHO DEDICATED HER LIFE TO JEWISH PRAYER AND LEARNING,
WHO WAS PROUD TO BELONG TO THE AM HA-SEFER AND WHO
INCULCATED TORAH VALUES IN HER CHILDREN, GRANDCHILDREN,
AND GREAT GRANDCHILDREN.

**ALEINU AND GENESIS: AGAINST THE TWIN
IDOLATRIES OF UNIVERSALISM &
ETHNONATIONALISM**

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Orthodox Jews have recently become more politically active and prominent, both in Israel and in the United States, and this has largely—but not exclusively—involved support for “ethnonationalist” political movements that promote the kinship bonds, language, culture, and traditions associated with peoples that first founded polities on particular lands.¹ But does the Torah endorse ethnonationalism?

In his recent book *The Virtue of Nationalism*,² and in his advocacy for “national conservatism” as the intellectual banner for a biblically-inspired nationalist politics, Yoram Hazony argues forcefully that the answer is yes. More specifically, he points to God’s call to Abraham, at the opening of Genesis 12, as the foundation stone for this brand of nationalism. As Hazony stated in his closing remarks at the 2019 National Conservatism conference:

People say (Trump’s) ‘Make America Great Again’ is just a slogan... I say, ‘Have you ever heard of Ronald Reagan?’... And it’s not Ronald Reagan who invented the idea of making America great again, of making a great nation. He was hearkening back to a tradition ... three thousand five hundred years (old), to the beginning of Genesis, to God’s speaking to Abraham.... God, creator of heaven and earth,

the first thing He has to say to Abraham, is: *I will make you a great nation.*³

The strength of Hazony’s argument hinges on the contrast between God’s call to Abraham and the previous story, that of the Tower of Babel ([Genesis 11:1-9](#)). As reviewed below, the tower-building project anticipates the totalitarian horrors of the twentieth century in the way it rejects the past for the present, God-made nature for human-made technology, and the individual and national for the collective and universal. Furthermore, God’s call to Abraham repudiates the underlying ideology of the Tower of Babel project—what Hazony calls universalist imperialism—as idolatrous self-worship.

But accepting this interpretation does not entail that the Torah embraces universalism’s counterpart, ethnonationalism. To the contrary, I suggest that our tradition is equally emphatic in rejecting ethnonationalist ideology as idolatrous. The key supporting evidence lies in a biblical exegesis that runs beneath the surface of one of the most common prayers in Jewish liturgy: *Aleinu*. *Aleinu* demonstrates the Torah’s rejection of political projects that are overly devoted to past precedent, overly focused on what seems natural, and overly committed to national distinctions.

Given *Aleinu*’s well-known condemnation of non-Jewish peoples who “bow to void and emptiness and worship gods who do not provide salvation,” it is at least somewhat ironic to regard *Aleinu* as a denial of ethnonationalism. But *Aleinu*’s highly universalistic conclusion should tip us off to the possibility that there may be more to this phrase than meets the eye. In particular, I suggest that the specific terms that *Aleinu* uses for non-Jewish peoples (“families of the earth” and “peoples of the land”) direct us to look deeply at how the covenantal promises by God to the patriarchs in Genesis 12 compare with the description of the postdiluvian rise of nation-states in Genesis 10. When we reread these chapters using the same principles that Hazony uses to analyze the contrast between the Tower of Babel

¹ See Joshua Shanes, “The Evangelicization of Orthodoxy,” *Tablet Magazine* (October 12, 2020). See also Eytan Kobre, “Unmasked: The Phenomenon of Hyper-Partisanship in the Frum Community,” *Mishpacha Magazine* (October 21, 2020).

² Basic Books, 2018.

³ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cpvd1OqHJU>.

in Genesis 11 and God's call to Abraham in Genesis 12, we discover a powerful polemic against ethnonationalism hiding in plain sight.

In short, we will see that the Torah is not so much against universalist imperialism or against ethnonationalism as it is against extremism of either variety.⁴ Instead, and as represented by the way Abraham's mission integrates elements of each, the Torah exhorts us to strive for *balance* between the two sets of competing principles.

The Idolatry of Imperialist Universalism

Various scholars have characterized the Tower of Babel story as an "anti-pagan polemic."⁵ After all, any careful reader of the biblical text should recognize the tower as a symbol of idolatry. Within the Hebrew Bible itself, this symbolic link is perhaps best illustrated by the life of Gideon, the smasher (*g-d-*) both of towers and of idols ([Judges 6-8](#)).⁶ From the standpoint of the ancient Near East, the tower represents the ziqqurat that was central to Babylonian religion: the supposed "gate to god," *Bab'el*.⁷

But the anti-pagan polemic is implicit rather than explicit. This has the effect of suggesting that idolatry is a symptom of social and political ills that are visible if we look carefully.

A close reading by Hazony and others of the Tower of Babel story suggests two problems with the project.⁸ First, the tower-builders focus on collective identity ("let us make a name for ourselves"; "one language for all" and "few words/ideas") to the exclusion of national or even individual identities (no individual names are mentioned). Second, the tower-builders seem taken with the technology they have developed (bricks that they forge from control of fire and by

developing bitumen as a substitute for mortar) vs. using what is natural (stone and mortar) as part of God's creation.⁹

A third troubling aspect of the tower-builders complements the first two problems: they are focused on the present and pay no regard for the past. The memory of God's vengeance during the Flood does not impede their plan. Accordingly, the Tower of Babel story opens with "And it was" rather than the Bible's more typical phrases used to mark a narratological transition ("And after these things"). This suggests a new story that proceeds heedless of any lessons or constraints the past may offer.

The political takeaway from the Torah seems to be that when a group of people believe that they can renounce the past and build something completely new, using tools of social control that may wipe out individual expression and established traditions, they are in fact engaged in a dangerous form of self-worship that is doomed to fail. The totalitarian projects of the twentieth century come to mind.

As Hazony correctly notes, God's call to Abram in Genesis 12 stands as a fitting retort. In contrast to the builders of the Tower of Babel, Abraham is a family man who continues his father's mission from Ur to Canaan.¹⁰ He is a tent-dwelling shepherd who refuses to integrate into society or be dependent on anyone. And he is motivated by the prospect of having a "great name" ([Genesis 12:2](#)) for himself and his progeny, achieved by yielding to a project of God's design rather than his own. The heart of this project risked social opprobrium by proclaiming God's name ([Genesis 12:8](#)) when no one wanted to hear it.¹¹

Aleinu's Universalism

To this point, we have seen how Genesis 11-12 rejects universalist imperialism and that it embraces nationalism of a sort. I will now turn to the exegesis hinted by *Aleinu* to counter Hazony's suggestion that the Torah specifically embraces ethnonationalism. Given its controversial opening that is often read as xenophobic, *Aleinu* appears an odd choice for this purpose.

To review, *Aleinu* is a gorgeous literary tapestry of biblical verses and allusions. Of unknown provenance, it was likely composed as part of the mystical *heikhalot* literature of the early first millennium CE and is perhaps as old as the Second Temple period. It entered the High Holiday liturgy sometime in the first millennium CE and became a standard feature of every prayer service sometime early in the succeeding millennium.¹² In recent generations, *Aleinu* has become one of the most familiar prayers (one of the first that children learn, with a standard melody used in liberal congregations and in modern Orthodox ones alike), one of the most ubiquitous (recited three times a day, at the conclusion of each prayer service), and also the most controversial.

To be clear, there is nothing remotely xenophobic about the second or third parts of *Aleinu*. In fact, as one proceeds through the

⁴ Hazony claims not only that the Torah embraces ethnonationalism but that it rejects imperialism. But the dichotomy of (ethno)nation vs. (universalist) empire is a false one. Consider for example the American doctrine of "manifest destiny," which is at once nationalist and imperialist doctrine. Or consider how the Persian Empire promoted ethnonationalism, as reflected in Esther's repeated equation of "province," "tongue," "script," and "law" ([1:22](#); [2:8](#); [2:12](#); cf., [8:9](#))—an equation that threatened a Jewish community that no longer abided by that equation due to exile.

⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The World of the Bible in the Light of History* (Schocken, 1966), 75.

⁶ Nathaniel Helfgot, "Unlocking the Riddle of Abraham the Iconoclast: A Study in the Intertextuality of *Peshat* and *Derash*," *Tradition* 43 (Fall 2010): 9, in his analysis of the intertextual connections between the stories of Abraham and Gideon are relevant here, and in particular his suggestion that Gideon inspired the midrash about Abraham smashing his father's idols. Cf. as well Daniel Lifshitz, "A Ripe Old Age: Abraham, Gideon and David," *Lehrhaus* (November 22, 2019).

⁷ Sarna, *op cit*, 75.

⁸ Various recent commentators have offered approaches broadly consistent with Hazony's, with their shared interpretation in turn building on that of the Netziv (R. Naphtali Zvi Hirsch Berlin) and *Pirkei d-Rabbi Eliezer* 24:6. Exemplars include Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "From Adam to Abraham: The Fall and Rise of Monotheism," in *Abraham's Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, eds. David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky, and Reuven Ziegler, (Ktav, 2008), 19-48; R. Jonathan Sacks, "Noach (5768) – A Story of Heaven and Earth," (2007); Daniel Gordis, "The Tower of Babel and the Birth of Nationhood," *Azure* (Spring 2010): 19-36; Shai Held, "People Have Names: The Torah's Take-Down of Totalitarianism," Mechon Hadar Center for Jewish Leadership and Ideas (2014); and Shalom Carmy, "Babel and Brexit," *First Things* (June 2017).

⁹ See Sarna, *op cit*, 71-72.

¹⁰ Zvi Grumet, "The Revolution of Terah and Abraham," *Conversations: The Jewish Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals* (Winter 2013/5773): 168-74.

¹¹ See Menachem Leibtag, "Sifrei Toladot: The Backbone of Sefer Breishit," <https://tanach.org/breishit/noach/noach.htm>.

¹² Ruth Langer, "The censorship of Aleinu in Ashkenaz and its aftermath" in *The Experience of Jewish Liturgy*, ed. Debra Reed Blank (Brill, 2011).

paragraphs of *Aleinu*, the themes grow in universalist orientation. The third and final section is an extended vision of a future historical process by which all of humankind will come to purge itself of idolatry and recognize God as creator of the world and to establish the world under God's dominion.¹³ Based on references to Isaiah, our eyes are treated to the image of God serving as "king of all the land" because He has won not only Israel's fealty but that of "all sons of flesh," "every tongue."

This third section flows logically from the second section, which (beginning with "As he extends the heavens and sets the foundation of the land") describes God as creator and as Israel's sole source of divine authority, and climaxes with a depiction of Israel's triumph over its own struggles to shed idolatrous practices and worship God as creator and king ([Deuteronomy 4:39](#); cf. [4:25-38](#)).

The second section in turn flows naturally from the first section, which describes "our" (i.e. Israel's) special mission (*Aleinu*="it is incumbent upon us") to "praise the master of all, to give glory to the shaper of creation... to bow (and prostrate ourselves and acknowledge) the king, king of kings, the Holy One Blessed Be He."¹⁴

Aleinu thus traces a narrative arc whereby Israel, despite its own struggles in recognizing God as creator and serving Him as rightful king, succeeds in its national mission and anticipates an historical process by which other nations also recognize God as creator and king. Ultimately, God reigns supreme and the distinctions among the nations become unimportant. Strikingly, any mention of Israel is absent in section three. Moreover, given that the turning point from section two to three is a prayerful "hope" expressed to "you, Lord God" (that his "majestic power" become visible; "that idols be removed the land;" "that the wicked of the land be turned towards you"), it is even unclear whether Israel will deserve any credit for the ultimate success of monotheism.

But if *Aleinu*'s message is highly universalistic, it is puzzling why it begins with a seemingly illiberal opening—a discomfiting focus on how our ethnoreligion is superior to that of the "families of the earth" and "peoples of the land" who worship "emptiness and void" and "gods who cannot bring salvation."

As is well known, this phrase was expunged from the liturgy in Ashkenazi communities in response to Christian authorities' allegations that it was an attack on Christianity. Indeed, some Jewish communities endorsed this interpretation (and even added more specific condemnations of Christianity to it in response to Christian

anti-Semitism), although the textual evidence doesn't support this understanding.¹⁵ ¹⁶ Nonetheless, the phrase continues to be controversial. While it has recently been reinstated by some Orthodox congregations in the last generation as a mark of religious freedom, many liberal American Jews remain highly uncomfortable with its seemingly intolerant condemnation of other peoples and their religions.¹⁷

How then do we square the seemingly illiberal opening of *Aleinu* with its universalist concluding message?

The key is to consider the highly specific language *Aleinu* uses to reference the non-Jewish peoples it is accusing of idolatry:

For He did not fashion us as he did the peoples [goyim] of the land [aretz] and did not place us as He did the families [mishpehot] of the earth [adamah].

Given how virtually every word of *Aleinu* is drawn from the Hebrew Bible, our task is to identify the biblical source for "peoples of the land" and "families of the earth."¹⁸

It turns out that these expressions are relatively rare. Only nine verses in the Hebrew Bible deploy them, and only five of them are from the Torah itself (which the later verses likely are referencing). Strikingly, all five appear in the covenantal blessings of God to Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob:¹⁹

"And Abraham will surely be a great and strong *goy* and **all the peoples [goyim] of the land [aretz]** will be blessed through him" (Blessing of Abraham; [Genesis 18:18](#)).

"And **all of the peoples [goyim] of the land [aretz]** will be blessed through your seed/descendants since you listened to my voice" (Blessing of Abraham; [Genesis 22:18](#)).

"And I will multiply your seed/descendants like the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all these lands, and **all the peoples [goyim] of the land [aretz]** will be blessed through you" (Blessing of Isaac; [Genesis 22:18](#)).

"And I will bless those who bless you I will curse those who curse you, and **all the families [mishpehot] of the earth [adamah]** will be blessed through you" (Blessing of Abraham; [Genesis 12:3](#)).

"And it will come to pass that your seed will be as the dust of the land and you will spread out westward, eastward,

¹³ The last two verses that are said by most congregations throughout the year are later additions. The first of these verses, "*The Lord (YHVH) shall reign for eternity!*" is the concluding verse of the Song of the Sea, which Hazony positions as the Israelite national song of liberation or national anthem. Accordingly, the verse also appears at the conclusion of the *Shema* service, where it punctuates a focus on God as redeemer of Israel from Egyptian bondage. But here and elsewhere (the "*Yehi Khevod*"), the words are attributed to the nations of the world, this giving it a universalist feel. This universalist feel is reinforced by the second additional verse, which was added by the Arizal (R. Isaac Luria ben Solomon Ashkenazi): "God will be king over the entire world, and on that day God will be one and His name will be one" ([Zechariah 14:9](#)). A similar pairing of verses occurs in the climax of the *pesukei d-zimrah* service.

¹⁴ The words in parentheses do not appear in the *edot ha-mizrah* version of *Aleinu*.

¹⁵ Langer, *op cit*.

¹⁶ Besides the fact that it was likely composed at a time and place where competitive tensions with Christianity were minimal and may even have been composed prior to the arrival of Christianity on the world stage, the phrase is referencing various condemnations by Isaiah of *Israel's* tendency to succumb to idolatry. See in particular Isaiah 30:7 and 40:9 for key references for "void and emptiness" and see 45:20 for "worshipping gods who provide no salvation."

¹⁷ Zev Eleff, "[The Parenthetical Problem of Aleinu](#)," *Lehrhaus* (October 10, 2016).

¹⁸ Soloveitchik, *op cit*, traces two other phrases in *Aleinu* ("sons of the flesh" and "wicked of the land") back to these chapters in the Torah.

¹⁹ The other four are [II Chronicles 32:13](#), [II Chronicles 32:17](#), [Ezekiel 20:32](#), and [Amos 3:2](#).

northward, and southward, and **all the families [mishpehot] of the earth [adamah]** will be blessed through you and through your seed” (Blessing of Jacob; [Genesis 28:14](#)).

If we want to reckon with *Aleinu’s* apparent illiberalism, we need to ponder these verses and consider their biblical context. When we do that, we see that the Torah uses these phrases when it wants to *bless other peoples*, and it sees Israel as an instrument for the delivery of these blessings. This orientation seems in keeping with *Aleinu’s* universalist message. Given that the original verses are so friendly towards non-Jewish peoples, it is doubtful that *Aleinu’s* offending line should actually be interpreted as offensive.

The Idolatry of Ethnonationalism

But we have yet to uncover why the Torah uses specifically these expressions of “families of the earth” and “peoples of the land.” To what exactly do these expressions refer? Moreover, if *Aleinu* does not set out to offend, why is *Aleinu* so keen to condemn these peoples’ religions?

Let us now go back to our earlier observation that the Torah’s discussion of the postdiluvian period may be designed to impart subtle lessons about the perils of idolatry. While the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11 condemns universalism, the prior chapter, Genesis 10, explores families [*mishpehot*], peoples [*goyim*], and land [*aretz*], and thereby imparts subtle lessons about the perils of ethnonationalism.

Genesis 10 is divided into three sections, each of which chronicles one of Noah’s three sons’ descendants, who fanned out across the ancient Near East and Mediterranean and came to be recognized as distinct ethnicities and cultures, living in well-known states. There is virtually no narrative in this chapter and so we are apparently meant to assume that this all unfolded naturally and unproblematically. Each section ends roughly the same way, and it is reinforced by the summary verse:

“From these [children of Japhet] spread the maritime **peoples in their land**, each man according to his tongue, with their **families and their peoples**” ([10:5](#)).

“These are the sons of Ham, according to their **families** and tongues, by their **lands and peoples**” ([10:20](#)).

“These are the sons of Shem according to their **families**, their tongues, in their **lands**, according to their **peoples**” ([10:31](#)).

“These are the **families** of the sons of Noah, according to their generations in their **peoples**, and from these emerged the **peoples in the land** after the flood” ([10:32](#)).

The blessings of the patriarchs in Genesis 12 and referenced by *Aleinu* are clearly hearkening back to Genesis 10,²⁰ which provides a

²⁰ Oddly, the term *adamah* (earth) does not appear in Genesis 10. However, since Noah is described as a “man of the earth” ([9:20](#)) in the story that sets the stage for this chapter and which describes the problematic transition in family leadership, “families of the earth” may essentially mean “families of Noah.”

paradigm for ethnonationalism and serves as a strong counterpoint to Genesis 11.²¹

Where Genesis 12 emphasizes collectivism and universalism (represented most clearly via a lingua franca), Genesis 11 emphasizes the particularism of patriarchy, family, culture (“tongue”), and people. This is ethnonationalism *par excellence*.

Moreover, where Genesis 11 emphasizes the present over the past, Genesis 10 is about the seemingly immutable legacy of founding fathers. Once a descendant of Noah’s arrives in a territory, that land just becomes that well-known nation-state thereafter.

And where Genesis 11 emphasizes human control of nature via technology, Genesis 10 is naturalistic. There is no narrative of conquest or settlement or of battling the elements.²² A founding father must simply arrive in a land for him and his descendants to become one with it and live in symbiosis with it.

Genesis 10 thus represents the polar opposite of Genesis 11. To the universalism, now-orientation, and technology-focus of Genesis 11, Genesis 10 offers ethnonationalism, future-orientation, and naturalism.

At the same time, Genesis 10 and 11 are alike in a very important aspect. As Sarna puts it, “the appearance of idolatry is coeval with the rise of nations.”²³ That is, just as any as any ancient Near Eastern reader would have picked up on the tower as a symbol of idolatry, she also would have recognized that something was obviously missing from Genesis 10’s equation of family=land=tongue=people: *Where are the local deities?*

In Hazony’s language, the loud subtext of Genesis 10 is each nation’s well-known distinctive culture and (civil) religion. It was common knowledge that every local tribe had its distinctive deities, which were commonly thought to be well-attuned to the specific people, its particular land, and its traditions.²⁴ But just as Genesis 11 teaches us that the real problem with idolatry is that it reflects a form of self-worship, the same is true for Genesis 10. It’s just that where Genesis

²¹ More generally, it appears that just as Genesis 1-3 present us with two creation narratives that express contrasting models of the human condition (what R. JB Soleveichik called “Adam I and Adam II” in his 1965 essay in *Tradition*, “[The Lonely Man of Faith](#).”), Genesis 10 and 11 present us with two contrasting models of socio-political organization. More detailed analysis suggests that the four models cross-cut each other in that the “rightist” model and the “leftist” model each draw upon elements from Creation 1 and Creation 2.

²² The only narrative snippet referring to a man who made his name is in a manner that leaves nature largely untouched: as a hunter. This story also provides an apparent counterpoint to Genesis 12 in various respects. It invokes the same Mesopotamian locations (Shinar, Babylon) and also hints at rebellion against God (“Nimrod”=“Let us rebel”). But rather than depict a nameless collectivity that uses technology to build tower and city (and the supporting agriculture that must have fed it), this is a story of a single man who appears to use nothing but his natural wit and strength to gain fame as a great hunter.

²³ *Op cit.*, 68.

²⁴ See II Kings 17:24-41 for an extended treatment of the fallacious logic of such religion and how syncretic attempts to integrate national gods into worship of God are faulty.

11 critiques universalist imperialism, Genesis 10 critiques ethnonationalism.

Daniel Gordis has argued that Genesis 10's "natural state of affairs" serves as a *positive* "ethnic-cultural" model for Israel.²⁵ But consider the nations whose origins are noted here. None come in for praise in the rest of the Torah. Furthermore, the nations that are discussed later--Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, Canaan, and Egypt--stand for immorality and idolatry.²⁶ It would be odd if the Torah were to describe Israel's national and political origins as following the same (ethnonationalist) models of nations it condemned as morally corrupt. And indeed it does not.

Turning back to *Aleinu*, we find a tantalizing hint to this effect in its second line. When it draws a contrast with other peoples, *Aleinu* does not state "for we are not like the families of the earth, nor are we like the peoples of the land." Rather, it states "for He [God] did not make us like the peoples of the land, and He did not place us like the families of the earth." *Aleinu* is here drawing a sharp contrast between the model of nation-formation of Genesis 10 with the process of Israel's formation that begins in Genesis 12. Genesis 10 *naturalizes* the connection between people and land. As with modern nation-states, it promotes the indigeneity myth that a piece of land naturally belongs to the "tribes" who happen to have settled it first. Israel's narrative implicitly rejects this myth. Genesis 12 highlights how Israel's formation was *unnatural* and involved divine intervention in the natural order of things.²⁷

Just as God's call to Abraham in Genesis 12 repudiates Genesis 11's universalist paradigm, it repudiates Genesis 10's ethnonationalist paradigm as well. For example, Abraham is asked to migrate from one land to another and live life as a stranger who proclaims the dominion of a God who transcends place and relates to all peoples.²⁸ In addition, neither Genesis 12 nor the rest of Genesis identifies Abraham's ethnic or linguistic heritage in any detail. *Ivri*, or Hebrew seems to be a term that *outsiders* use to refer to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 14:13), and typically (at least in Egypt) to denigrate them.²⁹ The term for our nation comes from the third generation rather than the first and it is assigned based on Jacob's achievement rather than by dint of his parentage.

Furthermore, consider that Genesis 10 makes no mention of the presence of minorities and the well-known challenges of incorporating them into an ethnonationalist framework. As in the nation-state system bequeathed to us by the nineteenth century, every piece of land is assumed in the first instance to belong to one people, one culture, one history, and one tongue. It is the model by

which the Persian Empire governs in the book of Esther.³⁰ But Genesis 12 begins the story of a man who lives as a "stranger and sojourner" among others and yet still gains a foothold in land among them. It tells the story of a nation that emerges not from having arrived at a land first and naturalized its possession by naming it for its founding father, rather a nation that begins its career as an oppressed minority in a foreign land (Genesis 15:13).

Just as the Torah rejects the idolatrous artifice of universalism, it also rejects the idolatrous naturalism of indigeneity. This rejection permeates the Torah. "The entire land belongs to me," God declares; we are always and everywhere "strangers and sojourners" (Leviticus 25:23). Deuteronomy for its part takes pains to emphasize that Israel's hold on the land is tenuous and depends on its faithful and righteous behavior. Perhaps most notably, whereas land acquires the name of its founding father in Genesis 10, Israel's land never takes on its name.³¹ The Torah could have called it "Israel" had it wanted to. It chose instead to invite us to interrogate such naturalizing claims.

Conclusion

It seems clear then that just as the Torah is skeptical of imperialist universalism, it is also skeptical of ethnonationalism. When each set of principles is adopted in their extreme forms, the resulting political projects carry the stench of idolatry. The problem with such idolatry in turn seems to be less about denial of God than about denying the essential moral principles embodied by the other side of the political spectrum.

The risks of embracing ethnonationalism lie in how it denies what is universal about human beings. Its fealty to the past can prevent needed progress, and how it can naturalize as right what is actually a product of immoral human endeavors. On the other hand, the risk of pell-mell pursuit of utopian universalism lies in how it can snuff out dissent, how it can reject ancient wisdom in the pursuit of ever-changing visions of progress, and how it can push goals that are so unrealistic in their substance or timing that such pursuit generates backlash and disorder.

Nevertheless, while the Torah seems to be rejecting extremism of either variety, it seems to endorse each set of underlying principles. The Torah *does* have an important place for nations. It does have an important place for universal projects-- for the natural as well as the technological, for rootedness in the past as well as innovative breaks with it. The challenge seems to lie in achieving effective *balance*, as reflected in Israel's mission. As suggested by the arc of *Aleinu*, that mission is particular to the Jewish people but its ultimate message is universalist.

Finally, the Torah seems to be cautioning us not to be overly confident in pursuing political projects. This is part of what is striking

²⁵ *Op cit.*

²⁶ Philistia is perhaps an exception, at least in Genesis. It fits the pattern in the rest of the Bible.

²⁷ Accordingly, the next line in *Aleinu* hints that Israel's connection to land--symbolized by the words *goral* [lot] and *helek* [portion], which evoke the allocation of land in Numbers--is radically different from that of other peoples, whose connections seem more natural.

²⁸ See also R. Meir Soloveitchik's observation (building on Michael Wyschogrod) that Israel is *sui generis* in developing its identity outside of its land. "Saving American Nationalism from the Nationalists," *Commentary* (December 24, 2018).

²⁹ See Ezra W. Zuckerman Sivan, "Where is the Justice in the Tenth Plague?" *Lehrhaus* (April 18, 2019) and Ezra W. Zuckerman Sivan, "Fellowship from Plague: Lessons from Passover," *Lehrhaus* (April 14, 2020).

³⁰ See note 4 above. Note that the book of Esther concludes by showing how the model can be broken. This is seen in how the king's final edict is sent not only to "each province according to its script and each nation according to its language" (as the prior edicts are), but to the "Jews according to their script and language" (8:9).

³¹ As I discuss elsewhere (Ezra W. Zuckerman Sivan, "The ambassador's misuse of the Torah," *Jerusalem Post* (May 21, 2018)) the term (Land of) Israel never appears in the Torah. Deuteronomy in particular makes many references to the land but never gives it a name except in one case where it is called Canaan. See also Elli Fischer, "In God's Country: The 'Zionism' of Rashi's First Comment," *Lehrhaus* (October 28, 2016).

about the ethnonationalist trend among Orthodox Jews—the confidence that the Torah has endorsed their views. In a recent *Lehrhaus* essay,³² R. Rafi Eis criticizes R. Meir Soloveichik's objections to Hazony's promotion of ethnonationalism as a redemptive force:

Soloveichik does not tell us anything about what God's plan is or how the other nations become blessed because of Israel. It seems that through fidelity to God and His commands, Israel will somehow enable the fruition of God's plan for all of humanity. However, the process is left mysterious, even magical, as though working on an unseen metaphysical plane.

This is in fact an apt description of the narrative arc traced by *Aleinu*! Somehow in the aftermath of Israel returning to God (or in parallel with it?), the rest of the world finds God as well. What is our mission in facilitating this process? It is ultimately unclear because it is God's affair, not ours. What seems quite clear though is that our mission lies not in embodying the model of "family of the earth" and "people of the land" but in critiquing and transcending this model.

A TIME TO KEEP SILENCE, AND A TIME TO SPEAK

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The United States (and beyond) has been recently convulsed by the [George Floyd protests](#), and a dam-breaking surge of outrage over agonizingly persistent racism and mistreatment of Blacks has coalesced under the umbrella of the [Black Lives Matter](#) movement. While Orthodox Jewry, [a relatively conservative group](#), has been [broadly sympathetic to the Black community](#), some Orthodox Jews have been [deeply ambivalent](#), if not downright hostile, toward the protests, due to the rioting, looting, and general lawlessness that the protests have sometimes included, as well as the anti-Semitism of some segments and leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Twentieth century Rabbinic authorities in both the United States and Israel have considered the question of public protest in a variety of different contexts. In this essay, we survey the perspectives of some prominent Rabbinic authorities on the tactic of protest, and conclude with some brief thoughts on how they might apply to the Black Lives Matter protests.

The United States

1. *Protests For Soviet Jewry*

From the 1960s through the 1980s, American Jewry engaged in protests and demonstrations (in addition to other, less public, tactics) against the spiritual and material oppression of Russian Jewry by the USSR. But as Adam Ferziger (["Outside the Shul": The American Soviet Jewry Movement and the Rise of Solidarity Orthodoxy, 1964–1986](#)) has documented, although some Orthodox Jews, such as [Jacob Birnbaum](#) and his followers in the [Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry](#), participated in these activities, prominent Orthodox Jewish leaders, particularly the older, European born and raised rabbis, such as R. Pinchas Teitz, R. Moshe Feinstein and R. Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, were deeply ambivalent toward the protests. Although they were certainly wholeheartedly supportive of their goals, they did not generally support the tactic of public demonstration against the Soviet regime and its conduct. Their qualms, however, were pragmatic rather than dogmatic: they felt that the protesters' good intentions notwithstanding, their tactics were likely to backfire and result in worsened conditions for the very people they were trying to help. (See, e.g., R. Feinstein's statement in [Hapardes Year 50 Issue 10 \(Tammuz 5736\) p. 3.](#))

Precisely this point is made by R. Yehudah Herzl Henkin ([Shut. Benei Banim 2:51](#)) in a responsum in support of [Freedom Sunday for Soviet Jews](#). This 5748 (1987) march on Washington and rally involved more than 200,000 participants in what was [reported at the time](#) to have been "the largest Jewish rally ever held in Washington." R. Henkin argues that since protests are in principle perfectly legitimate, and the rabbinic opposition toward the protests for Soviet Jewry hinged entirely on assessments of the contemporary realia and anticipation of the likely negative consequences of those protests, opposition to protests cannot be considered as absolute and immutable. A [la Emerson's critique that "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."](#) R. Henkin felt it was illogical to blindly apply positions taken in earlier decades to current questions.

2. *The Civil Rights Movement*

The historical context most analogous to the current one is, of course, the civil rights movement of the 1950s-1960s. Orthodoxy, as opposed to its more liberal sister denominations, did not generally publicly embrace the movement, although there were at least a few notable exceptions. As Ferziger notes, several days before the 1963 [March on Washington For Jobs and Freedom](#) (whose program included Martin Luther King Jr. and his iconic "I Have A Dream" speech as well as the late John Lewis), R. Pinchas Teitz delivered [a speech](#) in support of the march at the Polo Grounds in New York. In his speech, R. Teitz declared:

As we stand before the A-lmighty and this great assemblage, let it be declared without any reservations that racial discrimination of any kind, constitutes not only a social misbehavior or a civic crime, but a sin—a great sin, a sin for which, some day, we will be called upon to give an accounting to our Creator. Believing as we do that man was created in the image of G-d, it follows that he who judges his fellow man by the color of his skin debases the divine image of his own face.

Similarly, R. Ahron Soloveichik's outspoken support of the civil rights movement (along with other liberal causes, such as the opposition to the Vietnam War) is well known; I do not know whether he

³² Rafi Eis, ["Israel's Light: A Response to Rabbi Meir Soloveichik,"](#) *Lehrhaus* (December 17, 2018).

participated in demonstrations, but he was certainly forthright in the [expression of his views](#):

From the standpoint of the Torah, there can be no distinction between one human being and another on the basis of race or color. Any discrimination shown to a human being on account of the color of his or her skin constitutes loathsome barbarity. ...

A Jew should always identify with the cause of defending the aggrieved, whoever the aggrieved may be, just as the concept of *tzedek* is to be applied uniformly to all humans regardless of race or creed.

But, as noted, the strong public views of these two rabbis seem to have been the exception rather than the rule.³³

Israel

Orthodox Jewish protests in Israel have generally been in defense of religious values and halakhic concerns.

1. Protests Against the Desecration of the Sabbath

For decades, Orthodox Jews in Israel, primarily (but not exclusively) *haredim*, have [vehemently protested the desecration of the Sabbath by the non-religious](#) in both the governmental and private, commercial sectors.

One of the most notorious episodes was the “[Heichal Cinema Affair](#)” of the mid-1980s, involving weekly protests spanning months against the operation of the eponymous movie theater in Petah Tikva on the Sabbath. After thirty-three weeks of unsuccessful protests, [R. Moshe Malka](#), the city’s Sephardic chief rabbi and one of the leaders of the protests, penned [an analysis of the protests and their consequences](#) in the journal *Tehumin*, in which he expressed serious misgivings over the strategy. He confessed that he had had reservations about the protests from the beginning, and he concluded that they had failed to accomplish their goals. On the contrary, he argued, the protests increased Sabbath desecration as police were deployed to the scene of the protests, and drivers were forced to engage in additional driving due to road blockages. He therefore concluded that “we are not obligated and not permitted to continue to protest,” and he argued that the Torah’s commandment to reprove sinners does not apply in this context for a variety of reasons, including the fact that the movie patrons:

deny the Written and Oral Torah and do not believe in G-d, and the protests do not influence them at all. On the contrary, they increase their hatred of religion

³³ One other issue is worth mentioning. Despite the fact that Orthodoxy is categorically opposed to abortion on demand, and is generally opposed to abortion in most circumstances, to the best of my knowledge Orthodoxy (with a few [exceptions](#) that prove the rule) has never had much involvement with the anti-abortion movement and its protest activities (such as the annual [March for Life](#) and [Life Chain](#) and the picketing of abortion clinics). Why this is so is an intriguing question; perhaps it is concerned that the absolute prohibition of the procedure sought by the more extreme wing of the pro-life movement would prevent abortion even when allowed and even required by Halakhah (such as when necessary for the preservation of the life of the mother), and therefore it is inappropriate to support the movement.

and the religious, of Jews and Judaism, and have no effect other than to instigate them against us.

On the other hand, [R. Yosef Shalom Elyashiv](#), the highest rabbinic authority of the “Lithuanian” *haredi* sector, staunchly rejected R. Malka’s temporizing, arguing (*Kovetz Teshuvot* 4:35) that R. Malka was making a category error in analyzing the protest within the framework of the commandment of reproof. The true goal of the protests, he explained, was “to stem the epidemic of the spread of the destruction of the [sanctity of] the Sabbath”; if everyone confined himself to the technical mandate of the commandment of reproof, “the shops, transportation, and all the theaters, etc. would operate on the Sabbath as they do during the week” and nothing at all would be left of the Sabbath. (A similar point was made by *Tehumin*’s founding editor [R. Yehuda Shaviv](#) in a note to R. Malka’s article.)

Similarly, [R. Moshe Shternbuch](#), a distinguished halakhic authority and prominent leader of the hard-line [Edah Ha-Haredit](#) faction, countered the argument that it is illogical to protest the desecration of the Sabbath if the result will be increased desecration. He explained that the goal of the protests is not actually to prevent desecration but rather to impress upon ourselves and our children that “the Sabbath is not *hefker*, and the matter is so grave that we go out and protest.” (*Shut. Teshuvot Ve-Hanhaqot* 1:842)

2. Protests Against the Desecration of Graves

The desecration of graves in Israel in the course of infrastructure and commercial development, as well as archaeological investigations, has also sparked numerous demonstrations over the decades. [Atra Kadisha](#), an organization supported and led by some of the leading Israeli (*haredi*) Torah authorities of the mid-twentieth century (including the [Brisker Rav](#), the [Tshebiner Rav](#), [R. Eliezer Yehuda Finkel \(of the Mir Yeshiva\)](#), the [Steipler Gaon](#), and [R. Yehezkel Abramsky](#)), fought numerous battles to prevent what it considered the unacceptable desecration of Jewish graves, with protests as one of its primary oppositional tactics. As R. Yitzchok Breitowitz [explains](#):

Over the past thirty years, this organization, comprised almost exclusively of Chareidim, has organized protests and demonstrations at a number of archaeological and construction sites ... Some of these demonstrations have resulted in pushing, shoving, rock throwing, some arrests, and allegations of police brutality, as well as chillul HaShem. ... It must be emphasized, however, that while the Religious Zionist camp may be less vocal and public in its protests [than the *Haredim* – Y.], a number of its leading halachic authorities, such as Israeli Chief Rabbis Lau and Bakshi-Doron and Chief Rabbi Kulitz of Jerusalem, have joined the Asra Kadis[h]a (in principle, if not in tactics) by unequivocally condemning these gravesite desecrations as serious violations of halacha. Many other rabbanim have expressed their concerns privately.

This is another classic example of vehement protest in defense of important Jewish values and fidelity to Halakhah.

3. Protests Against the Drafting of Yeshiva Students to the Army

The *haredi* sector has also engaged in [massive protests](#) at various times over the past several decades against the drafting of yeshiva

students to the army.³⁴ In this case, however, the fact that participation in these protests has generally been limited to *haredim* obviously reflects fundamental differences over the underlying values at stake (military service vs. the study of Torah, participation in the national Zionist project vs. an attitude of insularity and inwardness) rather than a mere disagreement over tactics.³⁵

The George Floyd / BLM Protests

Most of the protests we have surveyed here have been in the service of parochial Jewish goals, to improve the material or spiritual condition of Jews, or in defense of Torah, *mitzvot*, and other religious values. The sole exceptions, the civil rights and anti-Vietnam war movements, indeed received the public support of only a few major Torah leaders.

I have often been troubled by the question of why our community does not seem to possess much of the same universalist sympathies that we rightly demand of others. Here's [Jonathan Rosenblum's perspective](#):

Even in a world in which the savagery of man to his fellow is hardly news, Darfur bears notice. Over 400,000 black Moslem tribesmen in Darfur province have been murdered by Arab Moslem militias known as the Janjaweed, in the last four years. ... Do we as Torah Jews have [an] obligation to care or do more than others? Can our present indifference be defended? ... I'm still left with the feeling that we must at the very least make room for Darfur, and other tragedies on such mass scale, in our hearts and minds. ... In order to be Hashem's instruments for tikkun olam, we must remain constantly aware of our responsibility for every aspect of Hashem's world and of how far the world is from its ultimate perfection.

As we have seen (e.g., in the analysis of American Orthodox rabbinic leaders leading to their rejection of the tactic of protesting the Soviet Union's oppression of Jews, and in R. Malka's explanation of his ultimate decision to withdraw his support from the Heichal Cinema protests), one of the key factors considered by rabbinic authorities in deciding whether protest is appropriate in a given context is its likely effectiveness weighed against the likelihood of unintended deleterious consequences. In the case of the BLM protests, it would seem that they are generally beneficial to the Black community and are likely to prove [instrumental in bringing about the redress](#) of various wrongs done to it, which is surely a good thing (although many of the movement's accomplishments to date have been somewhat superficial—e.g., the removal of statues and the recognition of Juneteenth—or still aspirational—promises of

significant police reform). On the other hand, it could be argued that supporting a movement that unfortunately contains deeply troubling anti-Semitic elements is against our own interests. Moreover, the movement does not have an entirely clear and concrete set of demands, and certainly not every demand of the protesters and their leaders is necessarily in the best interest of even the Black community itself, let alone the nation as a whole.

Nonetheless, beyond the narrow question of immediate effectiveness is the deeper question of whether our values demand that we protest man's inhumanity to man regardless of any concrete anticipated gain. To paraphrase R. Moshe Shternbuch's words about the desecration of the Sabbath, perhaps we should join the protest simply to demonstrate our conviction that "Black lives matter, and the matter is so grave that we go out and protest!"

As R. Ahron Soloveichik declared: "A Jew should always identify with the cause of defending the aggrieved, whoever the aggrieved may be," and as his uncle, the Brisker Rav, famously (if apocryphally) [explained](#):

Besides the halachic mandates to speak up, however, there is another obligation that flows from what is supposed to be our fundamental human nature. The midrash teaches that three people counseled Pharaoh in his decree to murder the male Israelite babies: Balaam, Jethro and Job. The first approved; the second protested and had to flee Pharaoh's wrath. Job remained silent and suffered all of his tragedies because of it. The Brisker Rav (Yitzchok Soloveitchik) questioned this. After seeing that Jethro's protest got nowhere and endangered his life, the Rav asked, what was wrong with Job's remaining silent? "Because," he famously answered, "when something hurts, we scream."

And so we need to ask ourselves: are we hurt by the experience of the Black community in the United States? If so, perhaps we cannot stand idly by.

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³⁴ In a similar vein, in 1953, the *haredim* held [a major demonstration](#) against the idea of compulsory national service for girls in lieu of army service.

³⁵ Furthermore, some conservative National-Religious rabbinic leaders, including [R. Shmuel Eliyahu](#), [R. Yaakov Shapira](#), and [R. Shlomo Aviner](#), [did endorse](#) and attend the 2014 "million man protest" / prayer rally against the drafting of yeshiva students. (Although some of them [retracted](#) their support following [a fierce attack](#) published by the *haredi* newspaper *Yated Ne'eman* against the prominent National-Religious leader [R. Haim Drukman](#), who had opposed the protest.) Other moderate National Religious rabbis [sharply criticized](#) the rally and its support by their more conservative colleagues.