

RABBI YEHUDAH ALKALAI 1798-1878

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YEHUDAH ALKALAI was born in 1798 in Sarajevo to Rabbi Shlomo Alkalai, the spiritual leader of the local Jewish community. We know very little about his early years, but it is established that he spent his boyhood in Jerusalem. There Alkalai came under the influence of the cabbalists, who were then a significant element in the spiritual life of its Jewish community. In 1825 he was called to serve as rabbi in Semlin, the capital of Serbia. Not far away the Greeks had recently won their national war of independence, and the other nationalities of the Balkans, including the Serbs among whom he lived, were each beginning their efforts to rise against their Turkish overlord. Hence ideas of national freedom and restoration came easily to Alkalai's mind from the atmosphere of his time and place.

The notion of commencing a serious effort to effect a Jewish Redemption appears in his writing as early as 1834, in a booklet entitled *Shema Yisrael* (*Hear, O Israel*). He proposed the creation of Jewish colonies in the Holy Land, by man's own effort, as the necessary preamble to the Redemption. This idea was, of course, at variance with the usual pious notion that the Messiah would come by miraculous acts of divine grace. Alkalai argued, both here and later, that self-redemption was justified by "proof texts" from the tradition. As cabbalist, he invoked an ancient Jewish myth, which had been much embroidered by the mystics, that the days of the Messiah were to be ushered in by a forerunner of the true miraculous Redeemer. This first Messiah, the son of Joseph, would lead the Jews in the wars of Gog and Magog; under him, they would conquer the Holy Land by the might of their sword.

The real turning point in Alkalai's life was the year 1840. The Jews of Damascus were confronted in that year by the Blood Accusation, the charge that had often been repeated throughout the Middle Ages that they annually slaughtered a gentile and used his blood in the preparation of their unleavened bread for Passover. This affair quickly

became a *cause célèbre* throughout the Jewish and, indeed, the European world. It convinced Alkalai (as it half-convinced his younger contemporary, Moses Hess) that for security and freedom the Jewish people must look to a life of its own, within its ancestral home. After 1840 a succession of books and pamphlets poured from Alkalai's pen in explanation of his program of self-redemption. Much of his pleading was addressed to the Jewish notables of the Western world, men like the English financier Moses Montefiore and the French politician Adolph Crémieux, for he knew that his schemes could not succeed without the support of their money and political influence. Alkalai imagined that it would be possible to buy the Holy Land from the Turks, as in biblical times Abraham had bought the field of Machpelah from Ephron, the Hittite. The schemes which Alkalai conceived for carrying out this great work included the convocation of a "Great Assembly," the creation of a national fund for the purchase of land and another fund to receive tithes, and the floating of a national loan. Such ideas were to reappear later in Herzl and actually to be realized through the Zionist movement.

Alkalai was not merely a writer and propagandist; he journeyed frequently to the capitals of Europe to attempt to inspire practical efforts for the redemption of the Holy Land. He succeeded in organizing a few small circles, including one even in London, to support his ideas, but their careers were brief. However, Simon Loeb Herzl, Theodor Herzl's grandfather, was a disciple and admirer—one of the very few—of Alkalai. One of Alkalai's granddaughters was among the delegates to the First Zionist Congress. In a memoir that appeared in 1922, in honor of the twenty-fifth anniversary of that event, she wrote: "I thought about my grandfather, Rabbi Yehudah Hai Alkalai, who spent his life preaching the return to the Land of Israel and I remembered my grandmother—his wife—who, in joyous dedication, had sold her jewels to enable my grandfather to publish his books in which he broadcast his idea of the return to the Land of Israel."

Alkalai ended his days in the city of his visions, in Jerusalem, in 1878. Regarded among the pietists and the modernists alike as a strange being, he was half forgotten. Recent scholarship has rediscovered his writings, and in 1945 a literary epitaph in the form of a major novel in Hebrew, Judah Burla's *Kissufim* (*Longings*), helped delay justice to an intriguing personality.

The excerpts below are largely from one of his early works, and his first in Hebrew, *Minhat Yehudah* (*The Offering of Yehudah*), which was published in 1845.

THE THIRD REDEMPTION (1843)

IT IS WRITTEN in the Bible: "Return, O Lord, unto the tens and thousands of the families of Israel."¹ On this verse the rabbis commented in the Talmud² as follows: it proves that the Divine Presence can be felt only if there are at least two thousands and two tens of thousands of Israelites together. Yet we pray every day: "Let our eyes behold Thy return in mercy unto Zion."³ Upon whom should the Divine Presence rest? On sticks and stones? Therefore, as the first step in the redemption of our souls, we must cause at least twenty-two thousand to return to the Holy Land. This is the necessary preparation for a descent of the Divine Presence among us; afterward, He will grant us and all Israel further signs of His favor.

"And Jacob came in peace to the city of Shechem . . . and he bought the parcel of ground where he had spread his tent."⁴ We must ask: Why did Jacob buy this land, since, being on his way to his father, Isaac, he had no intention of living there? Obviously, he performed this act to teach his descendants that the soil of the Holy Land must be purchased from its non-Jewish owners.

We, as a people, are properly called Israel only in the land of Israel.

In the first conquest, under Joshua, the Almighty brought the children of Israel into a land that was prepared: its houses were then full of useful things, its wells were giving water, and its vineyards and olive groves were laden with fruit. This new Redemption will—alas, because of our sins—be different: our land is waste and desolate, and we shall have to build houses, dig wells, and plant vines and olive trees. We are, therefore, commanded not to attempt to go at once and all together to the Holy Land. In the first place, it is necessary for many Jews to remain for a time in the lands of dispersion, so that they can help the first settlers in Palestine, who will undoubtedly come from among the poor. Secondly, the Lord desires that we be redeemed in dignity; we cannot, therefore, migrate in a mass, for we should then have to live like Bedouins, scattered in tents all over the fields of the Holy Land. Redemption must come slowly. The land must, by degrees, be built up and prepared.

There are two kinds of return: individual and collective. Individual return means that each man should turn away from his evil personal ways and repent; the way of such repentance has been prescribed in the devotional books of our religious tradition. This kind of repentance is called individual, because it is relative to the particular needs of each man. Collective return means that all Israel should return to the land which is the inheritance of our fathers, to receive the Divine command and to accept the yoke of Heaven. This collective return was foretold by all the prophets; even though we are unworthy, Heaven will help us, for the sake of our holy ancestors.

Undoubtedly our greatest wish is to gather our exiles from the four corners of the earth to become one bond. We are, alas, so scattered and divided today, because each Jewish community speaks a different language and has different customs. These divisions are an obstacle to the Redemption.

I wish to attest to the pain I have always felt at the error of our ancestors, that they allowed our Holy Tongue to be so forgotten. Because of this our people was divided into seventy peoples; our one language was replaced by the seventy languages of the lands of exile.

If the Almighty should indeed show us His miraculous favor and gather us into our land, we would not be able to speak to each other and such a divided community could not succeed. Let no one "solve" this problem by saying that, at the time of Redemption, God will send an angel to teach us all the seventy languages of mankind, for such a notion is false. This sort of thing is not accomplished by a miracle, and it is almost impossible to imagine a true revival of our Hebrew tongue by natural means. But we must have faith that it will come, for Joel prophesied: "I will pour out My spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy."⁶ If the prophet foretold that the sons and daughters of the era of the Redemption will prophesy in a common language which they would know and be able to use, we must not despair. We must redouble our efforts to maintain Hebrew and to strengthen its position. It must be the basis of our educational work.

The Redemption will begin with efforts by the Jews themselves; they must organize and unite, choose leaders, and leave the lands of exile. Since no community can exist without a governing body, the very first new ordinance must be the appointment of the elders of each district, men of piety and wisdom, to oversee all the affairs of the community. I humbly suggest that this chosen assembly—the assembly of

the elders—is what is meant by the promise to us of the Messiah, the son of Joseph.

These elders should be chosen by our greatest magnates, upon whose influence we all depend. The organization of an international Jewish body is in itself the first step to the Redemption, for out of this organization there will come a fully authorized assembly of elders, and from the elders, the Messiah, son of Joseph, will appear. It is fundamental to the success both of an international Jewish organization and of an assemblage of elders that the elders be men of high caliber, who will command respect and obedience, so that the people of the Lord cease being like sheep without a shepherd. Redemption depends on this.

We have certain bad habits among us and there are forces which are weakening our religion. Our faith will not regain its strength until these elders are appointed. Even before we re-enter the Holy Land, as, with God's help, we assuredly will, we must first name elders to arrange for the observance of those commandments which apply, in particular, in the Holy Land, like the law of letting the soil be fallow on the seventh year, for the blessings to come to us from the land depend on the faithfulness with which we will adhere to these laws.

It is not impossible for us to carry out the commandment to return to the Holy Land. The Sultan will not object, for His Majesty knows that the Jews are his loyal subjects. Difference of religion should not be an obstacle, for each nation will worship its own god and we will forever obey the Lord, our God.

I ask of our brethren that they organize a company, on the mode of the fire insurance companies and of the railroad companies. Let this company appeal to the Sultan to give us back the land of our ancestors in return for an annual rent. Once the name of Israel is again applied to our land, all Jews will be inspired to help this company with all the means at their disposal. Though this venture will begin modestly, its future will be very great.