

# MISHIKAN

A FORUM ON THE GOSPEL AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE

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MISHKAN

P.O.Box 116, Jerusalem 91000, Israel

Phone: 972-2-6256095 or 972-2-6233926; Fax: 972-2-6251933

email: Caspari@netvinsion, net.il

# Zion in the Theology of Leon Averbuch and Shabbetai Rohold

Gershon Nerel

Eretz-Israel, the Land of Israel, increasingly attracted the interest of Jewish believers in Yeshua during the period between the two World Wars. Jewish believers in Yeshua, who we shall refer to as JBY, were at that time called Hebrew Christians. They often posed challenges to the various issues concerning the physical restoration of the Jewish people to their ancient homeland.<sup>1</sup>

In the Jewish Diaspora or Dispersion, as well as in Eretz-Israel, JBY vigorously spoke and wrote about their attitudes towards the ideas and activities of the secular Zionist movement. Some of them openly and systematically supported the national revival of the Jewish people within the feasible framework of Herzlian Zionism. At the same time, however, others disregarded or opposed political Zionism — arguing that the Zionists created a “replacement ideology” which undermined the divine plan for the spiritual salvation of the Jewish People.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, pre-eminent leaders in various assemblies of JBY expressed their “Theology of the Land” — either being in favor of “making Aliyah” (immigration)

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Gershon Nerel is the Israel Secretary for the International Messianic Jewish Alliance. He received his Ph.D. on “Messianic Jewish Self-identity in Eretz-Israel, 1917-1967” from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Levison, *Christian and Jew, The Life of Leon Levison, 1881-1936* (Edinburgh: The Pentland Press, 1989), esp. pp. 186-212. Richard Cadbury, *Nine Thousand Miles in the Track of the Jew* (London & Edinburgh: Marshall Bros., 1923), esp. pp. 8-23. “Zion — Sole Solution for Israel” *The Hebrew Christian (=HC)*, vol. viii, April 1935 - January 1936, pp. 19-21. Mark, Kagan, “Palestine and the Jew To-Day in the Light of Scripture”, in: *HC*, vol. v, 1933, pp. 177-182; Jacob Peltz, “Report on Palestine Relief”, in: *The Hebrew Christian Alliance Quarterly (=HCAQ)*, vol. xiv, 1930:22- 25.

<sup>2</sup> Abram Poljak, *The Cross in the Star of David*, translated from the German: *Das Kreuz in Davidstern*, 2nd ed. (London: The Jewish Christian Community Press, 1938), pp. 59-87. Gershon, Nerel, “Attitudes of Messianic Jews (Hebrew Christians) towards Zionism, 1866-1948”, [Hebrew] in: *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies* (1993), Division B, Vol. ii, *The World Union of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem 1994), pp. 115-122.

to the Promised Land, and even settling there in a unique colony of JBY, or by ignoring and even opposing the notion of "Aliyah." This, because in principle they saw in territorial nationalism a dangerous substitute for the cosmopolitan ideal of a spiritual pilgrimage on this earth towards a heavenly realm. Furthermore, Israel's national and territorial restoration, according to them, would come only together with the spiritual restoration of the whole world.<sup>3</sup>

In this article we shall briefly examine the above mentioned topic as reflected in the writings of two influential JBY: Leon Averbuch from Romania and Shabbetai Rohold from Mandatory Palestine. Both leaders were greatly appreciated worldwide, and can be regarded as representatives of two differing approaches towards the modern Jewish resettlement in the Land of Zion.

### Leon (Lev-Yakovitch) Averbuch (1885-1941)

For more than 20 years (1918-1940)<sup>4</sup> Leon Averbuch labored in Kishinev (Chisinau), Bessarabia, under Romanian regime, aiming successfully to renovate and develop a Messianic Jewish congregation in this town.<sup>5</sup> The original congregation of "Messianic Jews Sons of the New Covenant," which was founded in Kishinev by Joseph Rabinowitz in 1885 and disintegrated in 1899, following the death of Rabinowitz. For more than one decade (1928-1940) Averbuch was the leader of an independent congregation of JBY in Kishinev, and he became the editor of its bi-monthly organ called *Hamevaser Tov* ("The Announcer of Good Tidings").<sup>6</sup>

On both ideological and practical levels Averbuch strongly suspected that the message of Herzlian Zionism stood as a serious threat to the proclamation

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Zamir, "Litkumata shel Malchut Israel" [To the Restoration of Israel's Kingdom], (Hebrew Supplement) in: *Der Weg*, [Yiddish], Warsaw, vol. viii, no. 1, January-February 1934, pp. 9-15, and no. 2, March-April 1934, pp. 10-14; Israel Sarna, "Where?" [Yiddish], in: *Der Weg*, vol. xi, Nov.-Dec. 1937, pp. 1-3; Samuel Schor, "Growing Opposition to the Restoration to Palestine", in: *HC*, vol. iv, 1931, pp. 154-158.

<sup>4</sup> L. Averbuch., "Report — Third International Hebrew Christian Conference, held at High Leigh, 1931", in: *HC*, vol iv, 1931: 112. Kai Kjær-Hansen, *Joseph Rabinowitz and the Messianic Movement. The Herzl of Jewish Christianity* (Edinburgh/Grand Rapids: The Handsel Press/ Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1995), pp. 209-229. In an article published recently we find additional new first-hand information about Averbuch, see: Gabe, Eric, "The Messianic Work in Kishineff" in *HC*, vol. LXX, 1997: 29-30. Gabe corrects some details given by Solheim and later quoted by Kjær-Hansen.

<sup>5</sup> Magne Solheim, "Jewish Missions in Romania", in: *Mishkan*, no. 14, 1991, pp. 35-37. In this article the name 'Averbruch' needs to be corrected.

<sup>6</sup> Based on Isaiah 52:7. *Hamevaser Tov*, called "Binevestitorul" in Romanian, was published at the same time in three languages: Yiddish, Romanian and Russian. It first appeared in 1924. A special edition was published in 1934 to celebrate the regular and unceasing appearance of the three versions of the magazine for ten years.

and influence of Yeshua's message. Thus, for example, in an article called "Two Graves," published in *Hamevaser Tov* in relation to the 30th memorial date of Theodor Herzl's death (Yahr-Zeit)<sup>7</sup> Averbuch found a special opportunity to criticize Zionism. In his view, within the Jewish world Herzl was over-venerated, getting excessive respect and honor without any proportion. Against Jewry's widely accepted notion that "Herzl discovered the right diagnosis and the perfect remedy for the Jewish problem: Eretz-Israel, earthly Zion," Averbuch raised a warning as to the possible creation of a false religion and having a false messiah.<sup>8</sup>

Averbuch's criticism focused on the personality cult which emerged in Jewry around Herzl's image and the fact that the Bible, Old & New Testaments, was not central enough in Herzl's thought and practice. Therefore, he argued that Jewry spent and lost too much energy upon Herzl's humanistic Zionism — at the expense of drawing Jewry's attention to the spiritual solution provided by Yeshua's truth — first and utmost the cure of the human soul. As he criticized the idea of "trust in a human being that has no power in himself" which he found in Herzlian Zionism, Averbuch pointed out that any national hope for Israel was primarily in the Messianic "Corner Stone": Yeshua.

It is clearly observed that with such an approach Averbuch repeatedly expressed the basic attitude of Joseph Rabinowitz towards secular Zionism. Namely, both Rabinowitz and Averbuch disregarded Herzl's ideas and declared that Zionism, proclaiming immigration to Eretz-Israel, became a stumbling block on the track leading to the real solution for the Jewish problem. In Kishinev it was still well remembered what Rabinowitz said about this issue: "In the hands of Yeshua is found the key to the Holy Land."<sup>9</sup> Averbuch in his lifetime pronounced the same statement.

Thus, for example, just before the elections to the 19th Zionist Congress, planned to be held in August-September 1935 in Luzern, Switzerland, Averbuch published in *Hamevaser Tov* a one-page public notice where he wrote:

Jewish brothers! We give you an advice: ...we, Messianic Jews, want to say as once Joshua the son of Nun had said: 'as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord' (Joshua 24:15)... The key of Eretz-Israel and of the happiness of all peoples is in the hand of Yeshua Hamashiah.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> On the 20th of the Jewish month of Tammuz. The other tomb which Averbuch referred to was that of the Hebrew national poet Hayim Nachman Bialik. Averbuch's approach in this article to this second grave, however, will not be discussed here.

<sup>8</sup> Lev Averbuch, "Zwei Kevarim" (Two Graves), Yiddish, in: *Hamevaser Tov*, vol. xi, no. 7-8, 1934, pp. 7-8.

<sup>9</sup> Kjær-Hansen, p. 117 and especially pp. 122-126.

<sup>10</sup> "Zu di Wahlen zum 19 Zionistschen Kangress un zum Welt Kangress", Yiddish, ("To the Elections of the 19th Zionist Congress and to the World Congress"), in: *Hamevaser Tov*, vol. xii, no. 7-8, 1935, p. 11.

Averbuch directly and sharply contrasted the secular ideology of Herzl with his political solution for the Jewish people on the one hand, with the hope and leadership of Yeshua — the real and true "Shepherd of Israel" and the "Light of the Nations" on the other. Thus, according to Averbuch, only in Yeshua is found the real cure and medicine for the maladies and pessimistic situation of the Jews. In his mind, Herzl misled the Jewish people from remaining under the "Wings of the Shekhinah," the Divine Presence,<sup>11</sup> and therefore directed Israel to other ideas than those found in the Word of God.

Against this background it is clearly understood why Averbuch, in his many articles which appeared in *Hamevaser Tov*, nowhere did he recommend to the members of his Kishinev congregation to leave the Diaspora and prepare themselves to make "Aliyah." For Averbuch, Herzl and Zionism no doubt became a serious and growing menace to the work of witnessing to the Jews about Yeshua — and focusing on faith in the kingdom of Heaven. Thus, for example, Averbuch stated that the ultimate goal for Judaism is to get out from the "Diaspora of sin" and repent.<sup>12</sup> For him, as the belief in secular Zionism so quickly spread within Jewry, it became a form of a new "religious faith" which pushed away spiritual faith in the Bible and destroyed the soul-strength of the nation.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore Jewry, according to Averbuch, should not search for new roads of salvation within Zionism and its human wisdom, but rather should discover the old way to God which leads to eternity.<sup>14</sup> Then, when all Israel will repent and find God and His prophets, and acknowledge the Messiah who appeared in the Second Temple period, it will become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Only then will Israel become a blessing among the nations (goyim) and be instrumental in bringing all the "Goyim" under the wings of the Shekhinah<sup>15</sup>. From this it is crystal-clear that Averbuch held the view that basically JBY need

<sup>11</sup> "Zwei Kevarim", loc. cit., p. 8. Cf. David Baron, "Hamagid Mereshit Achrit", Hebrew, (A Divine Forecast of Jewish History), Hebrew Christian Testimony to Israel, London 1927, pp. 13-19.

<sup>12</sup> Lev Averbuch, "Vuhin Geht das Yidentum?", Yiddish, ("Where is Judaism Going?"), in: *Hamevaser Tov*, Kishinev, vol. xi, no. 7-8, 1934, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Lev Averbuch, "Vuhin Geht das Yidentum?", (a).

<sup>14</sup> Averbuch based this on Jeremiah 6:16: "Thus says the Lord, 'Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; And you shall find rest for your souls'. But they said, 'We will not walk in it'. NASB, "Vuhin Geht das Yidentum", (b).

<sup>15</sup> Lev Averbuch, "Vuhin Geht das Yidentum?". Similar views were also expressed in Warsaw, Poland, in the Messianic Jewish Congregation established there by Joseph Emmanuel Landsman. Cf. Jacob Jocz, "Mi Natan Limshisa Ya'akov?". Yiddish, ("Who gave Jacob up for spoil?"), in: *Der Weg*, vol. xi, no. 6, November-December 1937, pp. 4-6; Jacob Jocz, "Vuhin?", Yiddish, (Where to?), *Der Weg*, vol. xiii, no. 4, July-August 1939, pp. 1-3.

to remain in the Diaspora in order to become highly useful in the world's salvation.<sup>16</sup> Zion, therefore, within a designated territorial context had no practical meaning for Averbuch. Consequently he opposed a key concept in Herzlian Zionism: the annihilation of the Diaspora and the solution of the Jewish problem by massive immigration to Eretz-Israel.<sup>17</sup>

Averbuch's focus on the centrality of the heavenly and spiritual Jerusalem is also found in his booklet "Zion's-Lieder" ("Songs of Zion"). In this hymnal which includes 29 hymns, most of them written by Leon and some by his wife Miriam,<sup>18</sup> we could expect to find reference also to earthly Zion. However, Zion, in the sense of Eretz-Israel being the Jewish Homeland, is absolutely absent. As the title of the hymnal immediately indicates, Zion is placed as the focus of attention, but obviously this is the heavenly and allegorical Zion and not the earthly one.

Furthermore, in order to avoid any possible misunderstanding, on the first page of "Zion's Lieder" Averbuch wrote three quotations from Scripture to clarify exactly which "Zion" he was referring to: "Zion where God dwells" (Ps 9:11); "The everlasting joy of the redeemed in Zion" (Isa. 51:10-11); and "The city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb. 12:22). In Averbuch's theology secular Zionism had to be systematically bypassed as a major solution to the Jewish problem. In his eyes Zionism became a power too magnetic for the Jewish masses. It actually presented a competitive force which hindered and endangered the progress of Yeshua's spiritual message as found in the Bible.

In historical retrospect we realize that Averbuch was de-facto an anti-Zionist who found in the ideas and activities of Herzlian Zionism a 'casus belli' which justified public opposition. In his writings Averbuch constantly confronted Herzlian Zionism — for the sake of protecting and advancing the cause and survival of Yeshua's message. Averbuch was wholeheartedly convinced that he had to counter-attract the Jews to Yeshua. No wonder that nowhere in his writings do we find the slightest recommendation to make Aliyah to Eretz-Israel.

### Shabbetai Benjamin Rohold (1876-1931)

Shabbetai Rohold was born in Ottoman Jerusalem into a rabbinical family, and

<sup>16</sup> This Averbuch based on Psalm 96:3: "Tell of His glory among the nation, His wonderful deeds among all the peoples", NASB. "Vuhin Geht das Yidentum?", in: *Hamevaser Tov*, vol. xi, no. 7-8, 1934, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Almost in every issue of the magazine *Hamevaser Tov*, Averbuch continued to advertise for his readers a small booklet called "Zionism without Zion" (in Yiddish), written by Prof. Martzinkovsky, where political Zionism was criticized. Concerning the close relations between Averbuch and Martzinkovsky see: Eric Gabe, "The Hebrew Christian Movement in Kishineff", in: *HC*, vol. LXII, no. 2, 1989, pp. 47-48.

<sup>18</sup> Lev Yakovitch Averbuch, *Zion's Lieder*, (Yiddish), Chishinau, 2nd ed. 1931.

embraced faith in Yeshua when he was around the age of 20. Following the breaking of family ties, Rohold moved to Scotland where he became a missionary to the Jews. In 1908 Rohold was invited to Canada where he was ordained as a Presbyterian minister. In June 1913 he opened a "Hebrew Christian Synagogue" in Toronto.<sup>19</sup>

In 1914, together with Elias Newman he started to labor to found the "Hebrew Christian Alliance of America," and in 1915 was unanimously elected President. Later he became the first editor of the American Alliance magazine, "The Hebrew Christian Alliance Quarterly." However, his heart and mind remained in his homeland and he looked for opportunities to return there. On September 24, 1920, Shabbetai and his wife Belle-Petrie left for Eretz-Israel to take up missionary work in Haifa under the auspices of the "British Jews Society."<sup>20</sup> In Haifa Rohold advanced and developed "The Mount Carmel Bible School," where lectures were given in Hebrew, English and German, and the teaching was extended also to Safed.<sup>21</sup>

From Haifa Rohold travelled extensively throughout the country. He was particularly excited to meet the new immigrants and speak to them. Rohold was most enthusiastic about the activities of Zionist settlers in the Land and the spreading of their colonies. Thus, for example, in one of his letters to England Rohold wrote:

On our way we passed Benjaminah. The changes in this new colony were most wonderful. This is going to be also a garden city on a smaller scale than Tel-Aviv, but it is in more fertile and lovelier surroundings. Then we came to Atlit and we saw hundreds of the Zionist-Hallutzim (Pioneers), draining the land, and building a large plant for making salt, etc. etc. All along the line we saw new settlements, bright young men and women working hard to build up Zion.<sup>22</sup>

These prosperous Jewish settlers and their colonies meant for Rohold the visible revival of the "Dry Bones" (Ezekiel 37). In most places where he visited and spoke, he envisaged the fulfillment of Ezekiel's vision of 'The Valley of the Dry Bones' becoming alive in their ancient Land according to prophecy. It was obvious to him that the 'dry bones' came together under the direction of secular

<sup>19</sup> Jacob Gartenhaus, *Famous Hebrew Christians*, IBJM (Tennessee: Baker Book, Chattanooga, 1979), pp. 153-158; Robert Winer, *The Calling . The History of the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America, 1915-1990*. (Wynnewood, Pennsylvania, 1990), pp. 7-19, 85-93.

<sup>20</sup> Elias Newman, "There is a Prince and a Great Man Fallen This Day in Israel", in: *HCAQ*, VOL. XVI, April-June 1931, pp. 4-8.

<sup>21</sup> William Christie, "The Mount Carmel Bible School and the International Hebrew Christian Alliance", in: *HC*, vol. iii, 1930, pp. 21-23.

<sup>22</sup> S.B. Rohold, "News from Palestine", in: *The Friend of Israel and Time of the End*, vol. xdi, no. 92, November 1922, p. 8.



Zionism, paving the way for the Holy Spirit to enter their hearts and change their minds.

Wherever Rohold saw the white tent camps of the Zionist-Halutzim they reminded him of the "Israelitish camps" in the wilderness, "But oh, what a different spirit, all of them full of hope, zeal and hard work."<sup>23</sup> Rohold realized that active Herzlian Zionism had become an essential phase, a preliminary stage in God's divine plan to gather the Jews into the Promised Land, reunite the "dry bones," and then, the second great happening would be their spiritual redemption through Yeshua.

At the first International Hebrew Christian Conference, held in London in 1925, Rohold represented Palestine and its JBY, and at an open session he read a most enthusiastic and impressive paper. He spoke of a "new epoch" in Eretz-Israel, where the new immigrants, the Zionist Halutzim, adopted Hebrew as their national language and urged Jewry to awaken from its long and deep sleep. He viewed these Zionist forerunners of Israel's spiritual awakening as "the returning remnant."

Furthermore, the Zionist Hebrew University of Jerusalem, solemnly inaugurated in the same year, was the highlight of Rohold's speech. Rohold was personally invited by Zionist leaders to participate in the official opening of the University on Mount Scopus, where Lord Balfour was the guest speaker. Shabbetai Benjamin confessed in the London Conference that he was affected and carried away by the Zionist enthusiasm that prevailed on that occasion. For him, the Zionist Halutzim were "no mere crowd of sightseers — these were people possessed of a definite purpose and stirred by a high ideal!"<sup>24</sup> However, at the same conference Rohold also stated that: "I protest against anybody thinking I would advocate going to Zionism without holding the bloodstained banner of the Cross."<sup>25</sup> In other words, also for him Zionism was just a tool in the hands of the Almighty to further His prophetic plans with Israel. As in the times of Cyrus the Persian, God used extraneous forces to accomplish His will.

Therefore Rohold found no theological reasons to ignore or attack secular Zionism. With no hesitation he identified with the Jewish immigration to the Land and encouraged and supported the "Aliyah" process. Herzlian Zionism was in his understanding an inevitable Prelude, the "key to the front-gate," used by the hands of the firstnewcomers to the Land. Later the second "key" shall be

<sup>23</sup> S.B. Rohold. For further information see also my dissertation (Hebrew): "Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917-1967) — Trends and Changes in Shaping Self Identity", unpublished, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, October 1996, pp. 79-80.

<sup>24</sup> S.B. Rohold, "The Jews in Palestine", in: *Report of the First International Hebrew Christian Conference*, held at Islington, London, 5th-12th September 1925, The International Hebrew Christian Alliance (London & Edinburgh: Marshall bros., 1925), pp. 11-28.

used, the "key to the house itself," Yeshua who will generate the national spiritual revival towards building a spiritual Zion.<sup>26</sup>

### One, Two or More "Keys" to Eretz-Israel?

Leon Averbuch, following Joseph Rabinowitz, believed that the Jews, scattered throughout the world, would solve their problems in their Promised Land only after their national acceptance of Yeshua. For Averbuch, only one "key" existed to solving the difficulties of the "Golah," the Diaspora, and Zionism was not a part of this.

Shabbetai Rohold, however, expressed the view that a system of "two keys" had to operate towards the national and spiritual redemption of Israel: first the secular "key," via the Zionist movement, and then the second "key," the work of the Spirit.

Yet it is interesting to mention that beyond these two approaches we also hear of those who believe that there exist other "keys" to the Holy Land. One of these ideas is the concept that the Shoah, the Holocaust and the persecution of the Jews under the Nazi regime, was another "key" which eventually drove the Jews to their Land. Namely, that "the Shoah was the Golgotha of the Jews" — and it actually "forced" the national restoration of the Jews in Eretz-Israel.<sup>27</sup>

These questions are still bothering us today, towards the end of the both present century and the present millennium. What shall we learn from history?

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<sup>25</sup> S.B. Rohold, "The Jews in Palestine", p. 126.

<sup>26</sup> S.B. Rohold, "The Holy Land: Its People and Present Conditions," in: *HC*, vol. 1, no. 3, October 1928, pp. 150-152.

<sup>27</sup> Nechama Tec, *In the Lion's Den, The Life of Oswald Rufetsen*, (New York & Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1990), pp. 169-171.