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Exile and Zionism in the Writings of Rav Shagar

Shlomo Abramovich

WHO WAS RAV SHAGAR?

The term “Zionism” can be understood in many ways. However, for the most part, it refers to the connection to Zion and Israel. Whether this notion leads to an actual attempt to move to Israel or stays as an amorphous ideology, the place and the land have significant roles in Zionism. As we will see, many Zionist thinkers also added to it a negative attitude toward the exile and diaspora. Some negate the actual living outside of Israel, and others also refer to the exile as philosophical and existential, which contradicts the essence of Zionism.

Therefore, finding a Zionist thinker with a positive approach to the exile is exceptional. In this essay, I present Rav Shagar’s ideas on such an approach and examine his unique position on Zionism.

Rav Shagar should definitely be described as an exceptional thinker; his writings challenge the conventional religious perceptions in religious Zionism. He was born in 1949 to Holocaust survivor parents and grew up in the Religious Zionist educational system: high school yeshiva in Jerusalem and Hesder yeshiva [combining Talmud study with military service] in Yavne. He fought in the Yom Kippur War in 1973, where he lost many of his friends and was badly injured. This tragic experience deeply affected him and brought him to ask existential and philosophical questions leading him to develop his concepts. He took part in the creation of several unusual yeshivot and religious educational institutions, and in 1997 he established his own yeshiva, Yeshivat Siach Yitzhak, where he taught and developed his unique ideas. In 2007 he passed away from cancer.

Most of Rav Shagar’s writings were published posthumously by his followers, who are still working on publishing his varied writings. This causes methodological difficulties in the attempt to examine and summarize his ideas. Among his books, different ideas and approaches can be found that were written in separate times and connotations. Also, the fact that his writings are still being published requires a certain amount of carefulness in claiming definite arguments about his ideas. Therefore, in this essay I focus only on the ideas presented in the sources discussed, and any general determination about Rav Shagar’s attitudes will refer only to the way it is expressed in the sources.
The books published until now are varied in style and context. Homilies to the Jewish holidays, interpretation to the Talmud, and discourses about Chasidism are only part of Rav Shagar’s prolific works. However, Rav Shagar is mostly known for his philosophical writings and especially his unique approach to postmodernism. In the past years, his writings are being discussed in academia especially since the publishing of his first book in English, which also focuses on his approach to postmodernism.

I will not attempt to summarize Rav Shagar’s whole complex approach. However, as an introduction to further discussion, I will present some of his main concepts in this field. I focus on ideas that contribute to the main discussion about the positive meaning of the exile.

A POSTMODERNIST RABBI

In his writings, Rav Shagar describes the loss of faith in grand narratives under postmodernism: “People lost faith in the idea of a cohesive world, with a single, comprehensive meaning, a world governed by a clear and consistent set of principles.” The postmodern deconstruction, which describes the entire reality as a human construct, aims to shatter the basic ideologies and concepts. These ideas are usually described as a critical threat to the religious world, which is based on strict principles and ideologies. However, Rav Shagar shows that these notions not only have deep sources in the Jewish thought but also create an opportunity for spiritual renewal.

Rav Shagar finds the roots for his ideas in the Kabbalistic theory about the shattering of the vessels. This theory describes the creation of the world as a process of destruction due to the divine influence that meets the physical world, that is, the vessels. They could not stand it and therefore shattered. However, this deconstruction is not the final level and allows man to reconstruct the world differently. This Kabbalistic notion refers to the creation of the world but also gives man the ability and obligation to become a creator, using the shards of the world to create a new one. The purpose of this process is to “purify the vessels” and to create a new world that can hold a higher level of the divine influence.

This description provided Rav Shagar with the ideological basis to accept the postmodern mode of life. The loss of faith in the grand narratives and the postmodern deconstruction are another step in the process of the shattering of the vessels, which frees them from their limitations and opens them to divine and infinite influences. As mentioned, this will create new opportunities for
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a deeper and higher way of living and understanding the world. Rav Shagar points to the connection between postmodernism and the New Age movement and shows how it leads to mysticism. This is an example of opening new options after the destruction of old concepts, among them modern rationality. In his writings he even predicts the next step in this process and describes a mental revolution, when mysticism will lead to the developing of new spiritual abilities and to the revival of prophecy.

Postmodernism is also identified with relativism and skepticism, as Rav Shagar shows from writings of different thinkers. If everything is only a social construction, then everything is also subjective and should not be accepted as absolute truth. These ideas, instead of being a threat to religion and faith, which is usually based on total acceptance of clear religious principles, are the basis for Rav Shagar in creating a unique view about faith in the postmodern world.

In a personal and intimate essay titled “My Faith,” Rav Shagar described the new phase of faith that should be adopted in this era:

“It is a path of choice, of creativity. Its point of departure is not identity but freedom. . . . It stems from a postmodern consciousness that denies the self and authenticity posited by the existentialists. Here faith is a choice in the full sense of the word: establishing, rather than abiding by, the rules of the game.”

This is a different view of faith than the common rational one. Instead of proving faith, a person should choose it; instead of seeking for certainty, a person should learn to live with the unknown, as in of Rav Shagar’s essay titled “Living with the Nothingness.” These ideas require a deeper and longer discussion, but we can see how the postmodern terminology and ideas were used by Rav Shagar to describe the religious experience. Skepticism is turned into a faith that is based on choice, and the deconstruction is a process of purifying and elevating our understanding of the world beyond its previous limitations.

Rav Shagar compared his attempt to deal with postmodernism to Rav Kook’s approach to modern ideologies. Rav Kook searched for the religious roots of ideas such as nationalism and secularism and described the opportunities they opened to religious life and thought. Rav Shagar sees it as the mission of rabbis and thinkers of our time that they should not avoid or be afraid to deal with.

The ways Rav Shagar chose to deal with postmodernism have been described by different scholars. Hoanoch Ben Pazi, for instance, presented two approaches that can be found in Rav Shagar’s writings. The first is as an
attempt to help and guide the confused religious intellectual who faces postmodernism and is feeling confused and threatened. Rav Shagar then provides guidelines on how to cope with the dangers of postmodernism to religious thought and what postmodernism might contribute to religious thought. At the same time, Ben Pazi shows how sometimes Rav Shagar is not an outside adviser who is dealing with postmodernism but instead a postmodernist rabbi who is creating a new way of thinking, living postmodernism from within and giving it a religious connotation.¹⁰

As said above, this brief introduction to Rav Shagar’s attitude to postmodernism does not attempt to present a whole picture of his unique ideas but instead is intended to give a short glimpse of it that will be the basis for the main discussion about his perspective on exile and Zionism. Before I get to it, I will discuss the idea of negating the diaspora, which was common among many Zionist thinkers, in order to emphasize the uniqueness of his ideas.

**SHLILAT HA-GOLAH: THE NEGATION OF THE DIASPORA IN ZIONIST THOUGHT**

In order to evaluate the uniqueness of Rav Shagar’s positive attitude toward the exile, I will present the role of the idea about the negation of the diaspora in Zionist thought and the criticism of it in recent years.

David Ben-Gurion was a proud supporter of the idea of negating the diaspora. Of course, he was not the first to present the idea, but his important role in shaping Israel made him a powerful promoter of this ideology, which was rooted in the nature of the country. In 1957 at the National Zionist Congress, he described the exile as a “poor and miserable experience that we should not be proud of.”¹¹ In many ways, the Proclamation of Independence of Israel, which Ben-Gurion had a significant influence on, also presents these ideas in its opening words:

> The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious, and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.¹²

The next paragraph describes the forcible exile and the striving to go back to the Jewish homeland and then skips to aliyah and Zionism. Thousands of years of life in the diaspora, with all its cultural and social achievements, do
not appear in the core text of the modern State of Israel. This is a clear example for negating the diaspora and even erasing it from Jewish history.

This view was part of the Zionist perspective of many leaders and thinkers. Ahad Ha’am, also known as Asher Zvi Hirsch Ginsberg, for example, wrote about it and described in depth his theories about the exile. Yosef Gorani pointed at other figures as well, such as Ze’ev Jabotinsky, Yosef Haim Brenner, and Abba Kovner, who in their writings about creating a new model of a proud Zionist Jew also displayed a negative view of the exile.\(^{13}\)

There are different aspects in the idea of negating the diaspora. Its basic understanding refers to the actual demand to leave the land of exile and move to Israel. However, this view became weaker as the Jewish communities outside of Israel became stronger. Even radical supporters of this ideology, such as Ben-Gurion, realized that even after the establishment of Israel, the diaspora was not going to disappear in the near future; therefore, actual negating of it would not be practical and productive. Ahad Ha’am also rejected the idea that the diaspora was not appropriate to the Jews and that therefore they must physically move to Israel as soon as possible, a notion that he defined as the “objective negation.” He claimed that this idea was harmful and could cause hopelessness and lead to assimilation.

More common is the ideological negation of the exile. In this view, the exile is described as a negative way of living with harmful effects on the nature of the Jewish people. The focus is not on actually living outside Israel but instead is on the values coming along with it. Ben-Gurion, for example, in his speech in 1957 mentioned above, used Shylock, in *The Merchant of Venice*, as an example of a negative result of the exile, as the Jews became identified with nonproductive occupations. He was very careful not to blame the people who were living in the diaspora, including Shylock, for their way of life. However, Ben-Gurion was very clear and used harsh words in his criticism of the negative moral and ideological results of the exile, which created characters such as Shylock.\(^{14}\)

Hence, Rav Shagar’s ideas about positive ideological influences of the exile were exceptional. As a proud Israeli Zionist, his focus was not the actual exile and living outside of Israel but rather its philosophy that, he found, contributed important additions to Zionism.

The ideology of negating the diaspora was much criticized in recent generations and in many ways is considered not politically correct. One of the reasons for that change is the effect it has on the relationship between Israel and the Jewish communities outside of the country. Negating the diaspora
might create a feeling of superiority of Israelis over Jews in the diaspora, and as the Jewish communities in other countries became stronger and more confident in themselves, especially in the United States, this kind of relationship could not last.

Criticism of this ideology came from American Zionist thinkers who described in different ways how being a Zionist did not contradict being strongly identified with American society. Jonathan Sarna shows a few examples of this perspective and quotes writers such as Louis Brandeis and Israel Friedlaender. Sarna also explains why historically due to their different experiences in gaining emancipation and equal rights, an ideology of negating the diaspora could not develop in American Zionism compared to the struggle of the Jewish communities in Europe.15

The rejection of the idea of negating the diaspora demands a new definition of the role of Israel. Even among Zionist writers who do not accept the idea of negating the diaspora, a difference can be found between Israeli and American writers. An example of this can be found in the argument between Gorani and Sarna. Gorani, in his view of the current relationship between Israel and the Jews in the United States, emphasizes the role of Israel as the center of the Jewish nation due to its uniqueness as a Jewish state.16 Sarna disagrees and describes an equal relationship between Israel and the Jews in the United States. He calls for a free market and a friendly competition between all the Jewish communities around the world so that each place will seek to create a better environment for Jews and Judaism for the benefit of all people.17

Criticism of the idea of negating the diaspora from a different angle comes from postmodernists and post-Zionists. The criticism of this idea became a symbol for criticism of Zionism. The adoption of the ideology of negating the diaspora by Ben-Gurion and the other founders of Israel was blamed by post-Zionists for causing various moral and social injustices in Israel, particularly the discrimination against Mizrachi Jews and Palestinians. Arrogance and aggressiveness are part of the characteristics of the Zionists as portrayed by post-Zionists, who claim that negating the diaspora caused a negating of any sector that did not fit into the new Israeli model that was created.18

The criticism of the negation of the diaspora came with a positive, romantic perception of the exile. In contrast to the Zionists mentioned above, who describe the negative ideological and moral effects of the exile, the post-Zionists describe the important contributions of the exile to Judaism, as it creates a better society with equal rights and social justice for minorities.19 Some post-Zionists even describe the exile as the original nature of the Jews and as
“the most important contribution that Judaism has to make to the world,” even more than monotheism.\textsuperscript{20}

The historical and ideological discussion about the ideology of negating the diaspora is part of the argument about the nature of Israel, as some of the critics call for defining Israel as a multicultural country. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is part of this discussion because it is part of the results of these arguments. The exile is a model of life without a country, a nation without a place and with no need for one—the opposite of the modern notion of nation-state. If the exile is the desirable and natural way of life for the Jewish people, then the conclusion is that Israel should be defined not as a Jewish state, since Jews do not need a country of their own, but instead as a state defined by its own citizens, with equal rights for the Palestinians.

In some cases, the basis for the post-Zionist criticism is postmodernist ideas, as some of the writers who describe the positivity of the exile use clear postmodernist terminology.\textsuperscript{21} This leads us back to Rav Shagar, whom I titled earlier as a “postmodernist rabbi.” As we will see, he adopted some of the terms and ideas used by the post-Zionist critics in regard to negating the diaspora as part of his postmodernism in general. His view should also be defined as criticism of this ideology but from a different angle. Rav Shagar is not post-Zionist but has a unique definition of Zionism, as I will show in the end of this essay. He is also not motivated by the developments and changes in the Jewish communities in the diaspora and their relations with Israel, like the American Zionists. Rav Shagar was a proud Zionist, was rooted in Israel, and believed in the importance of adding the exile to Israeli Zionism.

**MIRACULOUS NATIONALISM**

In his discussions about the exile, Rav Shagar used postmodern terminology and quotes and based his views on current thinkers. As mentioned, it was part of his ideology, as he saw the integration of postmodernism into religious thought as part of the challenges demanded from thinkers and rabbis at this time. Therefore, the easiest way to define his view about the exile is to relate it to the ideas mentioned above of the postmodern criticism of negating the exile. However, I claim that despite the similar terminology and his usage of postmodern ideas, he is coming to this topic from a totally different angle.

The postmodern sympathy of the exile is part of a larger view about modern nationalism. The basis for the postmodern sympathy emerges from ideas about nationality as a human construct and nations as “imagined
The rejection of nationality leads to the rejection of the nation-state, and the result might be to admire the exile as a preferred way of living. According to this view, the Jews should not seek an ancient homeland but instead should live among the other nations, because keeping their own separated nationality is insignificant. These ideas might not be accepted by all types of postmodern thinkers, but they are the common explanation for the appreciation of the exile among many of these writers.

Rav Shagar had a similar conclusion; he described the exile as “the ideal Jewish condition.” However, this is not because of the insignificance of nationality and nation-state but instead is due to the uniqueness of the Jewish people as a nation: “its place is beyond geography, and its identity transcended the constricted boundaries of nationhood.” The Jews are in the exile, spreading among other nations, because of their divine nationality. They do not allow themselves to be limited to the structure of a specific place and country. Rav Shagar compared the uniqueness of the Jews to the unity of God, as in both cases it cannot be limited to a confined space, but “the whole earth is full of His glory.”

In Rav Shagar’s view, nationalism is not rejected as a whole but exists in other nations. He was not denying the distinctions between nations and does not refer to nationalism as a human imagination. To the contrary, his view was based on the essential difference between the Jews and the other nations. Nationality is real, and the nation-state is the natural way of life to all the nations except for the Jews, who are beyond these limitations and definitions. The exile fits the Jews due to their unique spiritual identity. The people who gave the world the Book of Books cannot be limited to a single land and country.

In describing the unique existence of the Jews, Rav Shagar used the writings of Franz Rosenzweig and Slavoj Žižek. Žižek writes about “the part that is no part,’ not simply a nation among the nations, but a remainder, that which has no proper place in the ‘order of nations’”; Rosenzweig describes the Jews as a nation that “was seized by the river of the world and driven off . . . remains standing on the shore.” He portrayed the Jewish existence as having “the universe entirely in itself.” Rav Shagar gives to these philosophical ideas a Jewish religious connotation and describes the Torah as the “heterotopic space in which the Jew resides.” The devotion to the Torah, the divine law, is what alienates the Jews from the natural order of the world and from the other nations. Rav Shagar is using the writings of traditional Jewish thinkers to base his ideas, particularly the Maharal of Prague.

It should be noted that there is a difference between the presenting of these ideas by the Maharal and by Rav Shagar. When the Maharal, who lived in
Prague in the sixteenth century, was talking positively about the exile, it might sound apologetic: as a way to comfort himself and his followers. He explained that the Jews were in the exile only because of their greatness and because they were beyond the need of an actual land. But when Rav Shagar was saying the same ideas at the end of the twentieth century while living in a sovereign Jewish state, it had a different meaning. In spite of the modern state he was living in and of which he was a proud citizen who even fought as a soldier to protect the country in the 1973 war, he found the exile to be the desirable way of life for the Jews. His unique view about the State of Israel is based on the difference between theory and reality and on an unusual definition of miracle and nature.

In Rav Shagar’s view, the settlement of the Jews in an actual country was a miracle. The Land of Israel represents the physical world, the human natural order, which is unnatural for the Jews. They were forced to have a country of their own, to get involved into politics, to have a government, a flag, and all other characteristics of a modern country. This was not a matter of necessity but rather a divine requirement, a miracle performed by God: the rootless nation has its own place in the world.27

This is a unique definition of Israel, different from the common Zionist narrative as presented in the Proclamation of Independence of Israel. The proclamation explained that the establishment of the state is “the natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign State.”28 According to Rav Shagar, having a country of their own is not natural to the Jews, and they are not like the other nations. Having the State of Israel is a demand from God, and its existence is a miracle because it contradicts the nature of the Jewish people.

According to this view, living in Israel is an unusual existential experience. The Jews are expected to be citizens in a modern country but should know that deep inside of them, it is not their natural way of life. Jews should not feel too comfortable in their life as members of a modern state29 but instead should participate in it, without fully belonging, due to their divine nature. Life according to this split existence has various implications in actual life in Israel, as Rav Shagar describes, and I will present a few aspects of them in politics and Israeli society.

BEYOND THE RIGHT-LEFT DICHOTOMY

Rav Shagar was a Religious Zionist, right-wing in his political affiliation, and he established his yeshiva in the West Bank. He opposed the Oslo Accords,
criticized the way the peace process with the Palestinians was negotiated, and was against the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. However, he also resisted the dichotomy of the Right and Left and presented a unique political vision, which was partly based on his view about the exile discussed in this essay.

Although he wrote about political issues and referred to current events in his writings, Rav Shagar was not a political figure, and his main interest was the philosophy behind the politics, as Shaul Magid wrote: “The Realpolitik does not concern him, what concerns him is the soul of the people.”30 The basis for Rav Shagar’s political ideology and his attitude toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was his religious and philosophical concepts. In this essay, his political statements will serve as actual implications of the ideological ideas presented above.

In his writings, Rav Shagar criticized his own political sector and described the danger of rigid ideology and strict nationalism that existed on the Right. He was afraid of aggressiveness and lack of sensitivity to the other that often accompanied this type of ideology. He claimed that Religious Zionists’ absolute confidence in the natural right to inherit the Land of Israel and the strong feeling of connection to the place and the nation might cause disregard for the suffering of the Palestinians.

Rav Shagar also pointed to the experience of the Jews in exile as a possible basis for these reactions: “The exiled nation . . . becomes sovereign over a defined territory. . . . Must its collective historical memory of Diaspora and defeat compel it to treat the other residents of the land with contempt and hostility?”31 Rav Shagar’s response to his rhetorical question is clearly negative. In his view, the exile should have a positive effect on the nature of the Jews and should bring them to ethical behavior toward the other nations.

Rav Shagar claimed that the memory of the exile should make the Jews more sensitive to others. The Torah commands the Jews to remember not only the Exodus and the heroic victory over the Egyptians but also their suffering and poverty in Egypt to “foster sensitivity and awareness of the other’s tenuous plight, and to prevent condescension toward him,”32 as Rav Shagar explained.

Nonetheless, the effect of the exile goes beyond that. It is not only the memory of the past, which teaches how not to behave in the present. In Rav Shagar’s vision, the exile is also part of the Jewish existence even after inheriting their land and establishing a Jewish state: “The insecurity of the Diaspora must deeply inform our confidence as the inheritors of the land. Otherwise, confidence will degenerate into hubris, into the sense that all is due to “my power and might of my hand.”33
As I described above, in Rav Shagar’s vision, the exile represents the divine and unlimited existence of the Jews. The Land of Israel is a Jewish heritage due to a command from God, and the Jews are called to live in this duel being as the inheritors of the land and as a nation beyond the limitations of place. This complex existence creates a modest nationality, a sense of belonging to the place with the notion that the Jews do not have a natural homeland. This should prevent feelings of arrogance and rigidity, which often accompany the notion of “this land belongs to us.” The biblical promise of Israel to the Jews was described by Rav Shagar as requiring the Jews to have a sense of modesty in their nationality and in the building of the country, as the land was not their natural or legal right. This modesty should affect their attitude to other nations, including the Palestinians.

Rav Shagar does not offer any actual solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and does not express a clear position regarding current practical questions. However, he calls for a change of the Right and Left dichotomy and challenges the Right, his sector, to adopt some of the values traditionally identified with the Left. Compassion and sensitivity toward the Palestinians and the unceasing desire for peace, said Rav Shagar, should not contradict the strong nationalism of the Right.34

Magid compares Rav Shagar’s view of Zionism to Rav Menachem Froman’s and presents it as the ideological basis for the new generation of settlers he describes in his article.35 Rav Froman was an exceptional figure, an Orthodox rabbi of a settlement in the West Bank who constantly tried to promote an alternative path for peace and met many times with Palestinian leaders, including Yasser Arafat. Rav Froman also tried to create a dialogue between religious leaders, both Jewish and Muslims, as a basis for future peace between the nations.36

Rav Shagar was not involved in similar political actions but believed that peace can and should come from the national Right. His view of soft nationalism, affected by the exile as a source of ethical values, can be a basis for real cooperation between the nations. A true peace, wrote Rav Shagar, will rise not by neglecting the connection to the land and weakening national identity but instead by adding the humility and boundlessness of the exile.37

CONFLICTS AND EDUCATION
The positive attitude to the exile in Rav Shagar’s thought is the basis for other issues he discussed about the Israeli society, and I will present two of them.
The first will be the conflicts and tensions between different sectors in Israel. In an essay he wrote for the Yom Ha’atzmaut [Independence Day] celebration in 1986, Rav Shagar described the feeling among many people that Israeli society was falling to pieces due to the hatred between the different groups. He described how those feelings might lead to the conclusion that the idea of a state for the Jews cannot last, and maybe the right place for the cosmopolitan Wandering Jew is in the exile, spreading among the nations.38

Rav Shagar’s response to this conclusion was complex. He agreed that the unique nature of the Jews is the reason for the separation into different sectors and for the clashes between them, and he also ascribed this nature to the identification of the Jews with the exile. As mentioned above, in his view, the exile is natural to the Jews because of their divine and infinite nature, which is beyond any limited place. The infinite nature of the Jewish people is being expressed in the many ideologies and sectors comprising it. The holy Jewish identity cannot be limited to a single way of expression but instead has to have multiple faces. This is another example of the comparison that Rav Shagar made between the nature of the Jews and divinity, which also has endless ways of expressions due to its infinite nature.

In addition, the divine nature of the Jews gives each sector the feeling that its ideology is extremely important, and therefore it should not compromise with the other groups but should fight for its beliefs. Rav Shagar did not criticize the reality of the divided Israeli society; instead, he gave it a religious justification. According to his view, the Jews are fighting with each other and do not get along together because of their greatness and their divine nature.

However, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Rav Shagar’s conclusion is not that the Jews should go into exile but instead should bring the exile into their life in Israel. He said, similar to what we saw above about the Jewish nationality, that Jewish unity and solidarity is a miracle. Naturally, they cannot live in one place and cannot get along with each other, but they are forced to do so, and the way to do it is by understanding their miraculous existence.

In order to explain the miraculous existence of the Jews, we should go back to his view of Jewish nationalism. Rav Shagar said that the Jews should have a universal nationalism, based on the postmodern universalism rather than the modern type. He explained that from a modern point of view, universalism is based on the idea of the equality of all human beings. If everyone is equal, there should not be any difference between the nations. However, according to the postmodern view, universalism is based on the otherness of all human beings, which creates a different type of cooperation: when each individual or
nation is essentially different, there should not be any tensions or conflicts, since they are not competing with each other. That can create a unity between the nations, even though each nation is keeping its own unique identity.

Rav Shagar finds the roots for these ideas in Jewish thought. He explains that in addition to the uniqueness of the Jews as the chosen people, there is another view of all the nations as God’s creations when each nation has its own role in the divine plan. According to this view, all nations are equal, including the Jews, despite their separate identities, as they are all doing their role. This is the universal nationality of the Jews: they should keep their own identity, should practice their own religion, and should not involve themselves with the other nations, but at the same time they should have a wider perspective and see themselves as part of all humanity, fulfilling their role just like all the other nations. He even quotes Rav Kook, who explains that this level of existence, where the Jews are equal to the other nations, is a higher level of existence, as part of God’s creation, above the unique nature of the Jews.

Similarly, Rav Shagar explains how the different sectors among the Jewish people can coexist together. He calls on them to accept the differences between the sectors and to appreciate the other sectors, as they are also sparks of the divine nation. This means that each sector should fight for its own beliefs and must keep its own identity but also should realize that in a wider perspective the other sectors also have their own justification. This is more than just a pluralism of “live and let live”; it is based on the idea that human limited understanding cannot hold the whole infinite Jewish identity, and therefore one sector cannot represent all the Jewish nation. From a divine perspective, all sectors have a role and should be respected, but at the same time each sector should keep and express its own view.

We can easily find in these ideas Rav Shagar’s religious postmodernism. The idea of faith based on choice, which he describes as a result of postmodern deconstruction and the opening of new spiritual options, is one of these structures. The Jews and every sector should keep their own identity from a place of choice, despite the idea that all nations and all sectors also represent divinity and have their own role in the world.

The faith in the divine infinite, as expressed in the kabalistic notion of ayin, or nothingness, should lead to openness to the other and to true tolerance to opposite ideologies. Magid describes Rav Shagar’s view in this way: “The celebration of nothingness holds the potential for truth to come from every corner, the Arab and the Jew, the homeland and the Diaspora, Israel and the world.” Particularism and choice in one’s own way should not lead to the
negation of the other. The idea of an infinite divinity, when expressed in different ways, is the basis for this concept. Thus, each part should keep its own identity, as it is a spark from divinity, but at the same time should give space to the other, as it is also an alternative spark out of the infinite. These ideas lead to the last implication of Rav Shagar’s positive attitude to the exile in his writings about the proper education for religious Zionists.

In his writings, Rav Shagar criticized the common religious Zionist educational system in Israel, which he finds irrelevant to the postmodern era, and he claimed that it cannot last anymore. He said that the typical religious Zionist belongs to multiple cultures and is exposed to different values and therefore needs to learn how to live a coherent life in this reality. Rav Shagar claimed that the existing system failed to do this and does not prepare its members for the current world. He suggests alternative methods. I will not present all his suggestions but will focus on one idea, which is based on his theories about the exile and the ideas discussed in this essay.

Rav Shagar calls for the shaping of an educational environment that combines domesticity and exile. On the one hand, the system must educate based on its own core values, to present its beliefs to the students and give them a feeling of belonging to a deep and rich tradition. On the other hand, the idea of the exile, as unlimited divine existence, will give students a sense of skepticism and curiosity and present them with a space to choose. There should not be any negation of the other; instead, there should be an open space where different and opposite ideologies can coexist without competing with each other. This kind of atmosphere will enable students to develop a rooted identity with confidence; in this way, they can choose from the options that exist in this world. Students will also create a diverse identity, with different worlds that coexist separately and without competition and fake harmonization of the differences.

We can see how Rav Shagar was using the same structure and teaching that different approaches and ideologies should not contradict each other, as each is representing a spark of the divine infinite. Even religious education, which traditionally is not open to the competition of other ideologies, should let the students have the space to choose. This means that religious education should educate the students according to its own values, but it should not do so through negating other ideologies, as they also have a role in the divine infinite universe.

The idea of the exile adds a sense of complexity and diversity to Rav Shagar’s philosophy. The rootlessness, as an expression of the infinite divinity,
enables the openness to the other and the accepting of different ideologies. Rav Shagar was describing a duel existence, when the idea of the exile is added to a strong nationalism and to identification of each sector with its own beliefs.

WAS RAV SHAGAR A POST-ZIONIST?

Post-Zionism is being discussed recently in Israel both in the public and the academy. Usually, the attitude toward this term is dependent on the social affiliation of the writer, with some groups badly criticizing it, while others adopt it or at least will discuss its relevance to their ideology. Therefore, it is surprising to find that Rav Shagar, as a right-wing Orthodox rabbi, writes very positively about post-Zionism, which he views as an important development of Israeli society. The question becomes whether Rav Shagar should be defined as post-Zionist, especially according to his ideas about the exile as presented in this essay.

Obviously, it is a matter of definition, as post-Zionism was defined in so many ways and was used to identify different types of ideologies. Uri Ram presents a broad overview of different definitions of this term. One definition he presents is that critics of the idea about negating the diaspora are post-Zionists. According to another definition, processes of Jewish revival are connected to post-Zionism, as it emphasizes a different center to Jewish identity other than the traditional national Zionism. According to these views, Rav Shagar should be defined as post-Zionist, based on his writings presented in this essay. Ram also writes about the tension between post-Zionism and neo-Zionism; he identifies neo-Zionism as an emphasis of the Jewish aspect of Israel over its democratic-civilian one. According to this view, Rav Shagar should be defined as neo-Zionist.

As mentioned before, when dealing with Rav Shagar’s ideas, it is important to separate theory and reality. When Rav Shagar writes positively about the exile and calls it the desirable way of life for the Jews, he does not call for Jews to emigrate from Israel but instead talks about the values that the exile carries as an idea. In this sense, Rav Shagar is definitely Zionist and a proud Israeli. His Zionism is deeply religious when he identifies the land and the state with terms such as “holiness” and “redemption.” However, at this point, his religious Zionism is taking him away from traditional Zionism. His post-modern religiosity, as presented at the beginning of this essay, leads him to see the positive in post-Zionism.

Rav Shagar believed that the emergence of post-Zionism is the beginning of a new era, which he identified with the messianic era and the end of days.
Post-Zionism in his eyes is part of the process of shattering the vessels, which will open new opportunities and lead the Jewish nation to its next step beyond the limitations of the place and nation. Here again I should point out the difference between theory and reality: Rav Shagar did not talk about the post-Zionists as actual people and movements that will probably disagree with the way he defines them. He talks about their ideologies and the meaning he finds in their appearance in the course of Jewish history.

These ideas do not move Rav Shagar from his identification with Zionism. Just as he calls to add the exile into the life in Israel, as seen above, he also calls to add the ideas of post-Zionism and the new options it is opening to the Zionist ideology. In his view, the postmodern deconstruction is leading men to reconstruct the world differently, and the purpose of shattering the vessels is to purify them. This is the basis for Rav Shagar’s complex thought, whereby opposites such as Zionism and post-Zionism or exile and Israel can coexist together.

NOTES

1. Rav Shagar publicly presented his thoughts about the war, maybe for the first time, in a meeting of yeshiva student soldiers who fought in the Yom Kippur War ten years after the war. Warriors of Yeshiva, “Discourses of Warriors, a Decade after the Yom Kippur War” [Hebrew], Daat—Jewish and Spiritual Studies, 1986, http://www.daat.ac.il/he-il/tsava-imilhama/maamarim/sih-lohamim.htm.


5. Ibid., 173–75; Rosenberg, Faith Shattered and Restored, 118–29. The importance of this change is described in other places when he defines his religiosity as based on mysticism. Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, Tablets and Broken Tablets: Jewish Thought in the Age of Postmodernism [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Miskal, 2007), 437.

6. Shagar, Tablets and Broken Tablets, 177–79.

7. Shagar, Faith Shattered and Restored, 34

8. Ibid., 85

9. Shagar, Tablets and Broken Tablets, 430


14. Ibid.


24. Ibid., 181.

25. Ibid., 189.


29. Magid finds in these ideas a basis for new types of settlers, who rejected the philosophy of Rav Kook and replaced it with Rav Nachman’s. Saul Magid, “The Settler Nakba and the Rise of Post-Modern Post-Zionist Religious Ideology on the West Bank,” Tablet,
30. Ibid.


32. Ibid., 185.

33. Ibid.

34. Shagar, Tablets and Broken Tablets, 144–45; Shagar, Bayom HaHu, 132–33, 328–29.

35. Magid, “The Settler Nakba.”


38. Ibid., 193.

39. Shagar, Tablets and Broken Tablets, 130–32.

40. Ibid., 128–29.


42. Shagar, Tablets and Broken Tablets, 152–57.

43. Magid, “The Settler Nakba.”

44. Rav Shagar has many other comments about religious Zionist education. For example, he claims that it is “too ideological” and creates insincerity among its members, but these arguments are beyond the interest of this essay.

45. For example, he calls to create a deeper connection between the schools and the community. Shagar, Tablets and Broken Tablets, 193–95.

46. Ibid., 202–7, 222.


48. Ibid., 819.

49. However, Rav Shagar does not fit with the ethnic neo-Zionism that Ram mentioned earlier in his article (Ram, “Post-Zionism,” 805), as seen in his ideas about universalism.
