

Can't Live With Him, Can't Live Without Him:

The Approach of Ze'ev Ya'avetz to the Writings of Josephus

The approach of Ze'ev Yaavetz (1847-1924) a Zionist Orthodox historian, author of the 14-volume history, *Toldot Yisrael*, rests on three pillars: nationalism, Orthodoxy, and historical inquiry.

I would like to briefly discuss each of these pillars, the most significant of which, in my view, is his nationalism. Yaavetz's approach to Josephus will serve as a test case for his general historiographical conception.

Yaavetz's complex thinking reflects the varied mosaic of his sources of inspiration, as well as his experience living in the land of Israel itself. He was born in 1847 in northeastern Poland in the town of Kolno. In 1860 the family moved to Lomzha and in 1865 to Warsaw. His father was a wealthy merchant who was opposed to Chassidism and made sure his son would enjoy a broad religious education, encompassing Scripture, Gemara, and Hebrew, as well as knowledge of languages (French, Polish and German). In his youth, Yaavetz read many historical and geographical works. He was also inspired by his brother-in-law from his second marriage, Yechiel Michel Pines.

In 1887 he immigrated to the land of Israel and settled in Yehud. In 1889 he was appointed rabbi and teacher in Zikhron Ya'akov. In that period the effects of the denuding of the land of Israel of its ancient forests were palpable, and in 1890, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Shevat, a date associated in Jewish tradition with attention to trees, he took his pupils out to plant trees. This initiative is remembered in modern Israeli culture as the genesis of the contemporary Israeli arbor day, marked to this very day as a staple of the Israeli calendar.<sup>1</sup> In that same year, a conflict with the Baron's clerks cost him his

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<sup>1</sup> Planting trees on Tu BiShevat was documented at Yesud HaMa'alah in 1884, but it did not create a resonance of continuity as did Ya'avetz's initiative.

position in Zikhron Ya'akov. He moved to Jerusalem, where he lived for seven years, until his emigration from the land of Israel in 1897.

In Jerusalem he began to publish his major historiographical work, the History of the People of Israel. The first volume was published in 1895 and the second in 1897. He emigrated to Vilna, to seek his livelihood, where he stayed until 1905. In Vilna three additional volumes of the series were published (volume 3, 1898, volume 4, 1900, and volume 5, 1902). Also in Vilna he joined the Zionist Federation and was one of the founders of Mizrachi, and the editor of its organ, "HaMizrach".

In 1905 he moved from Vilna to Homburg, where he came into contact with the rabbinical seminary in Berlin headed by Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman and Rabbi Yitzhak Isaac Halevi, author of *Dorot Harishonim*. In Germany he published three additional volumes: volume 6 – 1907, volume 7 – 1909 and volume 8 – 1912. In 1910 he published a book on the development of Jewish prayer entitled *Mekor Habrakhot*.

Upon the passing of his wife in 1912, Yaavetz moved to Antwerp to be near his children. Following the outbreak of World War I he moved with his children to England, living alternately in Leeds and London, until his passing in 1924. In England he published an additional volume: volume 9 – 1922. His friend, Binyamin Menashe Levine, published the remainder of the volumes of the History of the People of Israel posthumously in 1940.

Yaavetz saw himself as an Orthodox Jew, committed to *halakhah* and the Rabbis. He sets out the purpose of his writing in his introduction to volume 6, which deals with the period following the destruction of the second Temple, as follows:

The purpose of this project will be satisfied if we will succeed in clearly demonstrating the power and value of the *halakhah* and its role in the history of the people of Israel. Our ambition is to prove that all the acts of our Sages, from the days of the Men of the Great Assembly through Rav Hai Gaon, were inspired by the spirit of the Torah and of the prophets, formed in its likeness

and image. They have been its most faithful interpreters and strongest advocates, explaining in clear language, with sound reasoning and pleasant demeanor, the exalted words of the Torah and the vision of the prophets. They have stood in the breach to defend the purest and most refined of God's teachings from the hostile misdirection's of their adversaries, who arose from within to spread apostasy, to sully and distort God's Torah (History of the People of Israel, Part 6, pp. vii-ix).

Thus Yaavetz extols the Sages, from antiquity through the middle ages and the early moderns, the bearers of tradition and the molders of the halakhic world. In parallel he harshly condemns disloyalty to rabbinic *halakha* over the generations. So, for example, in volume 13 he expresses harsh reservations with regard to the Berlin enlightenment and the Reform movement, who compromised their loyalty to the tradition of their ancestors in his view.

Throughout his works Yaavetz demonstrates his halakhic commitment in numerous ways. Yet, significantly, in many cases his halakhic commitment takes second place to his nationalist commitment. Yaavetz affirmed a traditional kabbalistic paradigm, which views the people of Israel as a single organic body, qualitatively distinct from other nations:

For this [the power of the nation to survive following the destruction – ES], is what patently demonstrates the character and very nature of our nation, which makes of it a single unit literally. The advantage which was revealed within our people at that time [following the destruction – ES] over all the nations of the world is the advantage of the animate over the vegetative, for Israel did not wilt even having been exiled from their land, where other nations who suffered that fate withered overnight. In the place of the soil of our motherland, which was swept away from under its feet, this nation created out of its spirit, which was placed upon it by its prophets, a complete world, a haven strong enough to hold out against the attacks of their persecutors over

two thousand years, , an oasis of peace which all of the troubles and travails which its cruel foes have brought upon it were unable to pollute with a spirit of despondency, a house of study of the divine wisdom and the moral lessons, whose truth is everlasting.

In his view, the ethnicistic<sup>2</sup> commonality amongst Jews is stronger and more significant than the differences amongst them:

Because in our view we are neither Poles nor Germans but we are all Jews, Hebrew Jews amongst whom international frontiers do not divide (13 p. 233).

The importance of this ethnicistic bond is a motif in all of his historical writings. He praises historical figures that, in his judgment, acted in accordance with the spirit of the nation and on behalf of its people, and denounces those who, in his view, damaged the nation and did not act in accordance with its values. Up until the destruction of the second Temple, sovereign independence in the land of Israel and the Temple cult were the foundation of the unique spirit of the nation. Following the destruction, rabbinic exegesis became the focus of the spirit of the nation. From Yaavetz's viewpoint, rabbinic exegesis reflects the uniqueness of the Jewish nation, and therefore, in most cases, they are in harmony. Yet the spirit of the nation holds primacy in his view, and therefore where there is a contradiction between rabbinic exegesis and ethnic pride, Yaavetz gives primacy to ethnicity. Thus, for example he praises the mass suicide of the defenders of Gamla and Masada and, and sees in these a source of national pride, while completely ignoring the halakhic prohibition on suicide.<sup>3</sup>

At this juncture I would like to note the paradox in the combination of an Orthodox approach with an ethnicistic-nationalistic approach to historical events. Ethnicism and

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<sup>2</sup> Following Anthony Smith, I distinguish between ethnicism and nationalism. By the term ethnicism I mean the willingness to act on behalf of other members of the ethnic group from the sense of fraternity based on a common cultural heritage. The term nationalism indicates the desire for sovereignty and independence of the ethnic group.

<sup>3</sup> Unlike the Ashkenazic tradition which lionizes those who took their own lives in the massacres of 1096 in order to avoid forced conversion, the mass suicides at Gamla and Masada were motivated by national honor.

nationalism are, by their natures, a modern phenomenon, while Orthodoxy, which is itself a modern phenomenon as well, seeks to preserve what it conceives of as traditional values. Occasionally, as in the instance of the suicides for the sake of national honor and freedom from foreign enslavement, the discrepancy between the modern and the traditional conceptions becomes significant. Modern European ethnicism views the sacrifice of one's life for the sake of ethnic fraternity and national liberty a supreme value. Jewish tradition, on the other hand, and Christian as well views suicide as a severe religious transgression. The combination between an ethnicist-nationalist approach and an Orthodox approach raises a head-on collision of values. Yaavetz's decision to give primacy to nationalist-ethnicist values at the expense of Orthodox values reflects how central a place nationalism holds in his world view.

In addition to the Orthodox and nationalist elements, there is a third and important element in Yaavetz's worldview, his professionalism as a historian. Yaavetz, like the proponents of *wissenschaft des judentums*, sees himself as committed to the principles of historiography of the school of Ranke:

In my opinion chronicles should be counted amongst the sciences of which the essence of what is discussed in them is external, or, as the Ibn Tibons would have said, outside the "objective" mind; in other words, experience which stands on its own, and the intellect has nothing to add to it or subtract from it of its own, and the clear direction of historical study proceeds from the specific to the general, i.e. "analytical" (*Bikkoret Mevukeret* pp. 203-204, Yaavetz 1939, pp. 280-281).

In Yaavetz's view, the Orthodox-nationalist approach is completely supportive of professional historical writing because it is more appropriate than other approaches to the objective historical reality. As described above, in his view, the nation of Israel is characterized by unique characteristics as compared with any other ethnic group, and therefore writing the history of this group must be done "from within", in other words,

on the basis of its unique sources. The proponents of *wissenschaft* were unfaithful to historical research in that they sought for themselves a viewpoint “from outside”, i.e. writing the history of the people of Israel in terms that the Jewish nation shares with other ethnic groups.<sup>4</sup>

At this point it is worth noting that Yaavetz is “guilty” of the same transgression which he accuses the proponents of *wissenschaft*: assessing events in the history of the people of Israel on the basis of criteria of non-Jewish European society. His assessment of the people of Masada is based on the conventions of early twentieth-century Europe and not on traditional Jewish criteria. In other words, despite his awareness of the *modus operandi* of the *wissenschaft* school, and his pretention to establish an alternative to it, he does not succeed in “liberating” himself from the *zeitgeist*. Both Yaavetz and the *wissenschaft* school aspire to present the historical reality as it is, using the accepted scientific method. Whereas the *wissenschaft* school reflects the spirit of enlightenment, Yaavetz reflects the spirit of romanticism, but neither they nor he reflect the tradition. Moreover, unlike his peer, Rabbi Yitzhak Isaac Halevi, the Orthodox historian who authored the series *Dorot Rishonim*, Yaavetz is not willing to sacrifice values for the sake of historical accuracy. Halevi, as distinct from Yaavetz, while giving primacy to Orthodox values, was prepared to criticize central figures in rabbinic tradition, at points where, in his opinion, they were not punctilious in historical terms. Yaavetz, on the other hand, cannot be found in any instance to critique those whom he perceived to be heroes of the nation.<sup>5</sup> In other words, HaLevi’s professional commitment was greater than Yaavetz’s, so it is not

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4 We noted above that Ya’avetz was “guilty” of the same transgression of which he accuses the proponents of *wissenschaft*: assessing events in the history of Israel on the basis of criteria set by the non-Jewish European society. He also assesses the people at Masada on the basis of the accepted conventions of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe, rather than on the basis of traditional Jewish criteria. In other words, despite his awareness of the ways of *wissenschaft* and his pretension to present an alternative to it, he does not manage to “liberate” himself from the *zeitgeist*. Whereas the proponents of *wissenschaft* reflect the spirit of enlightenment, he reflects the spirit of romanticism, but neither reflects tradition.

5 I would point out that while in the case of HaLevi, my inquiry included a comprehensive and close examination of his overall oeuvre, my examination of the works of Ya’avetz was not comprehensive, and further examination may reveal additional aspects. Below I will note the one instance in which Yaavetz criticizes historical inaccuracy for the sake of national honor.

surprising that he criticizes, amongst other things, the biographies of the sages that Yaavetz weaves into his writings, intended to glorify the objects of his inquiry, as insufficiently based from a professional standpoint. In HaLevi's opinion, Yaavetz falls into the same error as the wissenshaft school, sacrificing accuracy on the altar of an ideological agenda:

In this manner, writing whatever comes to mind on the basis of some evidence that is in no wise relevant is what has led to the destruction of Jewish wisdom; for even if this is done for a desirable effect, those who are of treacherous mind may also do thus with their enchantments, making shady arguments to mislead the readers. Only by establishing as the fundamental foundation of Jewish wisdom a thorough enquiry, whose proofs must be clear and well-founded, can the Torah of God be rescued from the hands of its defamers.<sup>6</sup>

Halevi, the Orthodox historian, defies the stereotype amongst historians that Orthodox historiography is "hagiography with footnotes," criticizing his colleague Yaavetz for basing his historiographical struggle against wissenshaft upon a foundation of unprofessionalism stemming from ideological bias.

Up to this point we have dealt with Yaavetz's general approach. At this point I wish to focus on his attitude towards Josephus. Josephus's works are a central source for Yaavetz. In volume 6 of *Toldot Yisrael*, which deals with the post destruction period, Yaavetz presents his readers with a general survey of the writings of Josephus, although volume 5, which deals with the period from Herod to the destruction of the second Temple, contains hundreds of references to the works of Josephus in its two hundred pages. A photocopy of Yaavetz's summation of his approach to Josephus, in Hebrew, along with an English translation, is appended to this file.

It may be seen that in Yaavetz's view, the central criterion for his assessment of Josephus is his contribution or damage to the honor of the nation. The first of

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<sup>6</sup> Letter from Rabbi HaLevi to Ze'ev Yaavetz, September 3, 1907. National Library Archive, Yaavetz Archive.

Josephus's works surveyed by Yaavetz was *Wars*. Yaavetz's attitude towards the work is ambivalent. On the one hand Josephus's tendency to openly express "the tumult of his overly agitated heart when speaking of the calamity which befell his nation" is praiseworthy. On the other hand there are three tendencies with which he finds fault:

1. Josephus's sharp criticisms of "the heroes of Israel devoted wholeheartedly to their homeland" whom he represents as "men of bloodthirsty temperament".
2. Josephus's tendency to self-aggrandizement: "the extensive, insipid and tasteless eulogizing of his own righteousness and faithfulness", when compared with the historical reality of his "treason against his people".
3. His sycophantic depiction of Vespasian and Titus as "compassionate sons of compassionate fathers, pure in thought and deed"

Yaavetz also exhibits an ambivalent approach toward *Antiquities*, although in this case the scale clearly tips to the favorable side. Yaavetz appreciates Josephus's tendency, in *Antiquities*:

1. "to remove the darkness covering from people the great deeds of our ancestors amongst their people and all the peoples of the world, to exalt the honor of the Torah and Israel's way of life."
2. To expose the negative attitude of the local Israel-hating officialdom against the nation of Israel, which did not correspond to the generally positive and sympathetic attitude of the kings of Greece and Rome towards Israel.

Yet, as in the case of *Wars*, Yaavetz criticizes Josephus for his tendency to self-aggrandizement. He also has complaints about Josephus's use of the Greek style, which places grandiose speeches in the mouths of the heroes of history. It is noteworthy that in Yaavetz's view Josephus used the Greek translation and not the Hebrew source of the Bible, although he cites no support for this conclusion.

Contrary to his ambivalence towards *Wars* and *Antiquities*, Yaavetz is unequivocal in his attitudes to Josephus's two remaining works, *The Life of Josephus* and *Against Apion*. He heaps fire and brimstone upon *Life of Josephus* because in it Josephus exalts himself at the expense of his people: "The abominable traitor who betrayed his people", and the manipulations he perpetrated to sell out his homeland for the ..."

Yaavetz is astonished at the complexity of Josephus's attitude towards his people, considering it a deviation that defies psychological or psychiatric explanation: "..."

In *Against Apion*, on the other hand, Yaavetz sees all of Josephus's greatness. He notes several highlights of *Against Apion*:

1. glorifying the nation of Israel – Josephus "argues the case of his beleaguered nation... he speaks clearly and properly of the value of Israel and the Torah... the righteousness of his people coming out like the light of the dawn."
2. exposing the foibles of the haters and critics of Israel – Josephus uses his literary talent against the persecutors of Israel: "With a heart brimming with courage he unmasked all of the villainy and haughtiness of these slanderers... trapping them with the words of their mouths, revealing their lies to the light of the sun."
3. distinguishing between the superior Hebrew culture and the inferior alien culture:
  - 3.1. as opposed to the gentile religious which is "only a law of justice "the religion of Israel "its entire essence is the deep knowledge of God and His ways"
  - 3.2. the form of the gentile religions gods reflect human weaknesses "which placed all of the misdeeds and abominations of man as a mirror of the ways of their gods, to the point where any wicked evil person could find a model amongst these gods for his evil and wicked ways..." in contrast, the religion of Israel presents God as "the source of justice, sanctity and purity, and whoever wishes to become pure should lift their souls unto God, to walk in the ways of His Torah and observe its laws ..."

3.3. the Torah of Israel is more profound and accurate than “the spirit of the gentile sages”.

3.4. The Greek sages were afraid of the results of the public declaration of their views and therefore chose to hide them, whereas the prophets of Israel “knew no fear and declared the truth in clarion call...”

In addition to specific references to each of Josephus’s four works, Yaavetz notes that Josephus’s works were not known in the Jewish diaspora. In his view there were two main reasons for this:

1. He was perceived in the collective memory as a traitor to his people: “the record of his treason against his heritage discouraged the dissemination of his works amongst his own people ...”
2. His works were written in Greek, a language which was not popular amongst the Jews.

It is notable that despite the popularity of the book of Josippon in the medieval and early modern period, Yaavetz completely ignored it. Yaavetz mentions that the study of Josephus’s works began at the start of the modern period with the works of Azariah dei Rossi. In his view, the lack of study of the works of Josephus brought negative results “and much confusion has arisen, due to the absence of this book, in the accuracy of chronologies ...” He is certain that the modern use of Josephus’s works will bring great utility, as “a setting for the history of our ancestors ...” At the same time he is faithful to the principles of the profession of history he warns the modern reader that “the stones embedded in that setting require individual examination ...” on the basis of these principles:

1. To distinguish between the words of Josephus himself and those of copyists who “introduced into it things that are inconsistent with the spirit of Israel and Josephus’s style ...” I.e., a professional principle subject to a national-ethnicistic conception.

2. In keeping with this principle, Yaavetz warns the readers of Josephus of cases where he distorted the historical depiction from personal motivations “in order to shame his rivals or to place a mantle of glory on his own exploits...”
3. In contrast to the aforementioned, in the framework of principles governing close readings of the works of Josephus, Yaavetz also alerts to the fact that in places Josephus changed his depiction in order to aggrandize his nation: “For some of these records he gave new facades to, in order to exalt the honor of his people in the eyes of the Greeks ...” This is the only case where Yaavetz gives priority to the historian’s professionalism at the expense of the honor of the nation. Yaavetz’s willingness to pay such a price in the matter of the honor of the nation, which stands at the center of his conception, shows us that his aspiration to historical professionalism is not mere lip service but an important operating principle.