A forgotten variety of religious Zionism: the thought of Shmuel Alexandrov

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ABSTRACT Shmuel Alexandrov (1865–1941) is a fascinating yet neglected thinker. This article explores his understanding of the connection between religion and nationalism through an analysis of his vision of cultural revolution and his interpretation of Aḥad Haʿam's ideas. It illustrates Alexandrov's vision of annulling the Halakha, hermeneutical foundations of this abrogation, and the means he proposed to achieve it. This vision of cultural change rests upon several theological assumptions, mainly on an evolutionary process from the notion of a transcendental God who rewards and punishes to that of an immanent God identified with the inner authenticity of the individual and the nation. It is also based on a messianic aspiration to redeem the Torah and religious faith from mundane and anthropomorphic conceptions of divinity. To bring about this shift in religious consciousness, Alexandrov proposed to establish a national institution in Jerusalem tasked with reinterpreting Jewish tradition and thereby transforming Jewish culture.

THE INTELLECTUAL HISTORY of religious Zionism is generally chronicled through the history of its political success; that is, the pact that the Hamizraḥi party made with Herzl's political Zionist movement. Likewise, analyses of the political thought of Rav Avraham Yitzḥak Kook (1865–1935) typically ignore the fierce criticism he levelled against this pact and focus on his conception of Herzl and the founding of the sovereign Jewish state as 'Messiah son of Joseph'; that is, the necessary secular ground from which would spring the national religious state, a concept adopted by his followers to justify their involvement in Zionist politics.[1]

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1. See, for example, Dov Schwartz's discussion on religious Zionism as a practical ideology in

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This linear portrayal, emphasizing ideas that became central later in history, marginalizes other ideas that have not yet merited the same political success but that do merit increased interest for the light they cast on the meeting of the Jewish tradition with nationalism and the variety of possibilities that remain latent within that meeting. While the integration of religious ideas with Zionist socialism has attracted a certain amount of attention, another nationalist religious faction has been almost entirely forgotten – that faction that offered a religious interpretation of the cultural Zionism of Aḥad Haʿam (Asher Ginzberg, 1856–1927).

Perhaps more than any other approach, the view of Zionism as a cultural-religious renaissance movement inspired a wide variety of ideas, among them the early thought of R. Aharon Shmuel Tamares (1869–1931), Ḥayim Tchernowitz's (1871–1949) religious national historicism, and the pacifist nationalism of Avraham Ḥen (1878–1957).[2] While each of these thinkers was influenced by the view of the Zionist awakening as an opportunity for religious revival, none of them adopted that view so thoroughly as Shmuel Alexandrov (1865–1941). An original yet largely forgotten thinker, Alexandrov enthusiastically adopted Aḥad Haʿam's ideas while giving them a religious interpretation. A fervent nationalist yet a critic of Herzlian Zionism, an observant Jew yet not entirely orthodox, an advocate for annulling the Halakha but not a secularist, Alexandrov joined familiar motifs in unfamiliar ways, and his unique understanding of the connection between religion and nationalism is worthy of a thorough study. This article aims to lay the

D. Schwartz, *Faith at the Crossroads: A Theological Profile of Religious Zionism* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 131–7; Schwartz, *Religious Zionism between Logic and Messianism* (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1999), pp. 15–47. Focusing on the political success of the Hamizraḥi party, Schwartz does not see religious Hibat Zion activists as part of the intellectual history of religious Zionism, diminishing them as lacking 'a political identity'; D. Schwartz, *Religious Zionism: History and Ideology* (Boston MA: Academic Studies Press, 2009), p. 10. The present article rests on different perspectives, including that of Yosef Salmon, who argued that with regard to ideology and theology, Hamizraḥi 'added next to nothing' to the religious Zionist ideas articulated before its inception; Y. Salmon, 'Rabbi Isaac Jacob Reines: Profile of a Religious Zionist Leader', in D. Schwartz (ed.), *Religious Zionism: History, Thought, Society* (in Hebrew; Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2018), pp. 10–11. On religious Hibat Zion activism, see also D. Mahla, *Orthodox Judaism and the Politics of Religion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 25–32.

2. On Tamares's early Zionism, see E. Holzer, *A Double-Edged Sword: Military Activism in the Thought of Religious Zionism* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Keter Books, 2009), pp. 111–22. On both Tamares and Chen, see H. Rothman, *No King but God: Varieties of Jewish Religious Anarchism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021) pp. 161–81, 201–28. On other positions, such as Rabbi Binyamin's (Yehoshua Redler Feldman) pan-Semitism, see H. Harif, *For We Be Brethren: The Turn to the East in Zionist Thought* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2019), pp. 95–192.

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groundwork for that study through an analysis of Alexandrov's vision of cultural revolution and his interpretation of the ideas of Aḥad Haʿam.[3]

I will start with a short review highlighting Alexandrov's primary compositions and ideas and then explain the historical context in which Alexandrov aligned his views with those of Aḥad Haʿam. The second part of the article focuses on the complex way in which Alexandrov portrays the relationship between religion and nationalism in his first major work, *Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi* (Fiery Law and National Spirit, 1891). The study's third part further examines Alexandrov's ideas, focusing on his proposal to annul the Halakha, its theological foundations and the Ḥasidic and Maskilic sources from which Alexandrov drew inspiration in formulating this idea. The fourth part of the article highlights the hermeneutic aspect of Alexandrov's vision of cultural change and the means he proposed to achieve it. The article's conclusion considers the paradoxical nature of Alexandrov's moderate revolution, its effect on his later writings and how it is measured against other thinkers of his time.

An unconventional thinker

Alexandrov, a graduate of the Volozhin Yeshiva, was born in Borisov, White Russia, and lived most of his life in the nearby city of Bobruisk. His first composition was a pamphlet titled *Masekhet Nega'im* (Tractate on Plagues), a piece of literary criticism published in 1886. His published works from the late 1880s consisted of short literary and Talmudic critiques and essays that did not fill two columns on a newspaper page. These writings reflect the influence of Spinoza and admiration for his ability to integrate different, even opposing, ideas. In the early 1890s he became a regular contributor to the newspaper *Hamagid*, and in the spring of 1891 he published his first systematic essay, *Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi*. About a year later he was thrust into a stormy literary debate after claiming that the miracle of the oil celebrated every

3. On Alexandrov and his writings, see G. Bat-Yehudah, 'Rabbi Samuel Alexandrov', *Sinai 100* (1987), pp. 195–221 (in Hebrew); E. Luz, 'Spiritualism and Religious Anarchism in the Teaching of Shmuel Alexandrov', *Daat* 7 (1981) pp. 121–38 (in Hebrew); E. Schweid, *A History of Modern Jewish Religious Philosophy*, Volume 3: *The Crisis of Humanism* (trans. L. Levin; Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 319–26. On the difference between Bat-Yehudah's and Schweid's interpretation of Alexandorv, see I. Slater, 'Religious Cultural Zionism: Religion and Nationalism in the Thought of Shmuel Alexandrov', *Daat* 82 (2016), pp. 285–98 (in Hebrew).

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Hanukkah never happened and should be seen as a parable. He was attacked and ostracized by conservative figures, one of the factors contributing to the formation of his complex position vis-à-vis the rabbinic establishment of his day.[4] In the following decade he published articles in various literary forums, the most important of which was 'Takhlit Maʿaseh Šamayim Vaʾareṣ' (The Purpose of Creating Heaven and Earth, 1899), which outlined the universal mission of the Jews.

His major works were *Ṭal Teḥiyah* (The Reviving Dew), a complete commentary on Tractate Avot, and the three-volume *Mikhtavey Meḥqar Ûbiqoret* (Letters of Inquiry and Critique), a collection of letters drafted to a variety of recipients, among them R. Avraham Yitzḥak Kook, Aḥad Haʿam, Mikha Yosef Berdyczewski (1865–1921), R. Yehudah Leib Maimon (1875–1962) and Moše Leib Lilienblum (1843–1910). Following the Bolshevik Revolution, when connection to other world Jewish centres was cut off, Alexandrov became a spiritual mentor to rabbis and yeshiva students from across the Soviet Union. His letters reveal the hardship of religious life in the early stages of the Soviet regime. These letters, some of which have been printed and some of which remain in manuscript, reveal an original and nuanced system of thought integrating various sources, including Kabbalah and Marxism, as well as Western and Russian Orthodox philosophy, in order to address the challenges facing traditional Jews in the first half of the twentieth century.

All the same, his thought has been all but forgotten and at times misunderstood. I hope here to open a window on Alexandrov's early thought through his essays from the last decade of the nineteenth century. It was in this decade that Alexandrov articulated the fundamentals of his world-view, including his hermeneutical theories, his goal of annulling Halakha, and fierce critiques of both political Zionism and contemporary Orthodox leadership. While he continued to develop and refine his thought during the twentieth century, these fundamentals remained and he returned to them again and again. The basis of his thought system was a religious interpretation of the ideas of Aḥad Haʿam and the aspiration to cultivate a new religio-nationalist consciousness, one in which both secularization and fealty to the tradition

4. On this debate, see Bat-Yehudah, 'Rabbi Samuel Alexandrov', pp. 202–9; I. Rozenson, 'The Cruse of Oil: On Miracles and Natural Law in the Philosophy of Shmuel Alexandrov', *Badad* 30 (2015), pp. 103–16 (in Hebrew); Z. Licht, 'Hayim Zelig Slonimski and the Hanukkah Debate', *The Seforim Blog,* 26 December 2016 (in Hebrew; https://seforimblog.com/2016/12/blog-pos-7, accessed 27 May 2020).

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would play a role. As we will soon see, in his articulation of this consciousness Alexandrov relied on certain theological assumptions that provided him the freedom to reformulate the Jewish tradition and reinterpret its sources.

The literary context in which these ideas were first articulated was Alexandrov's fierce critique of both the practical Zionism of Moshe Leib Lilienblum and the political Zionism of Benjamin Ze'ev Herzl (1860–1904). His critique of Lilienblum and his passionate support of Aḥad Haʿam's position are evident in *Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi*, parts of which are analysed below. In this essay, Alexandrov refers to the debate between Lilienblum and Aḥad Haʿam over the Hibbat Zion movement at the start of the 1890s, in which Aḥad Haʿam offered an alternative form of Jewish nationalism. Rather than focusing on expanding settlement in the Land of Israel, as Lilienblum did in his role as the leader of Hibbat Zion, Aḥad Haʿam argued that not only would the new settlement project not solve the financial and social problems of the Jews but such problems were temporary and second to the more fundamental problem of the cultural image of Judaism. In his view, the movement should focus not on expanding settlement in the Land of Israel but on education, changing the Jewish way of life, and deepening the national consciousness of the Jewish people.[5]

Alexandrov passionately supported this position and attacked Lilienblum as a materialist acting out of self-interest.[6] In no more subtle terms did he attack Herzl's political Zionism, and for years running; Alexandrov saw the arguments put forth in *The Jewish State* (1896) as utilitarian and foreign to the 'spirit of Judaism'. Using arguments borrowed directly from Aḥad Haʿam's response to the First Zionist Congress, Alexandrov argued that Herzl misconstrued the true meaning of Zionism by presenting it as a movement of spiritual and cultural renewal rather than a movement of diplomatic politics.[7] Whereas other religious thinkers of his time saw Herzl as defusing the secularist potential of Zionism, and thus a possible ally, Alexandrov could not accept Herzl turning his back to the idea of cultural revival, which he

5. See S.J. Zipperstein, *Elusive Prophet: Ahad Aa'am and the Origins of Zionism* (London: Peter Halben, 1993), pp. 31–42; J. Goldstein, *Ahad Aa'am* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1992), pp. 86–104.

6. See Slater, 'Religious Cultural Zionism', p. 289.

7. S. Alexandrov, 'Hegyônôt Leyeraḥ Ha'eytanim' (Meditations for the Month of Tishrei), *Hamagid Haḥadaš* 7:37–8 (1898), p. 307; A. Ginzberg, 'Yalkût Katan XXI' (A Small Satchel), *Hašilōaḥ* 2 (1897), p. 570.

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saw as the essence of Zionism. Nevertheless, Alexandrov stayed a religious thinker, and as such he gave Aḥad Haʿam's vision of secular revival a religious interpretation. After explaining the place of this idea in the political field of the time, we can now discuss it in detail, by returning to Alexandrov's first major work, *Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi*.

The 'fire' of religion and the 'spirit' of nationalism

In *Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi* Alexandrov employs a system of dialectical images in order to portray the relationship between religion and nationalism. At the centre of that system stands the triad of fire, water and air or spirit. Fire symbolizes the religious world, divided into theological and conceptual elements ('rays of light') and emotional elements that aid Halakhic praxis ('rays of heat').[8] Water symbolizes scientific knowledge and the values of enlightenment, which prima facie seem to be opposed to the religious fire.[9] Spirit represents nationalism, itself divided into 'simple nationalism' and 'scientific nationalism'. Scientific nationalism is that of Lilienblum, which Alexandrov saw as based on the studies of Ernest Renan (1823–1892) and which he describes as 'a foreign spirit' that extinguishes the religious fire with its cold and 'artificial' intellectualism.[10] In contrast, simple nationalism is a natural and authentic feeling of solidarity that every man feels for his people. This natural emotionality allows it to join with the fire of religion and rekindle it after its being nearly extinguished.[11]

Alexandrov's point of view in describing the religious world approaches a secular one. He presents religion as possessing tremendous emotional power, especially among 'the simple folk' who respond to external motivations: fear of punishments and hope of reward, inspired not by the recognition of the autonomous powers inherent in man but rather by obedience driven by fear

8. See S. Alexandrov, 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi', *Hamagid* 35:23 (1891), p. 178. *Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi* was first published in the newspaper *Hamagid* in eight instalments (nos 19–20, 22–25, 31, 33) during the spring and summer of 1891. It was reprinted in Slater, 'Religious Cultural Zionism', pp. 299–319.

9. Alexandrov is referring to Maimonides (*The Guide for the Perplexed*, I, 34), who compared wisdom to water. But whereas Maimonides is referring to philosophical wisdom, Alexandrov is referring to scientific knowledge and the values of enlightenment; see Alexandrov, 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi', *Hamagid* 35:33, p. 262.

10. Alexandrov, 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi', *Hamagid* 35:19, p. 147. On Renan's influence on Lilienblum, see Y. Shavit, 'Intellectual Quartet: Muslims and Jews Respond to Ernest Renan', *REEH 9* (2003), pp. 113–14 (in Hebrew).

11. See Alexandrov, 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi', *Hamagid* 35:19, p. 147.

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and submission to authority. Such an attitude derives from Mt Sinai, site of a terrifying divine revelation where God forced Israel to accept the laws of religion.[12] This religious attitude, Alexandrov argues, entered the end of the nineteenth century in critical condition. Multitudes had fled religion because they did not find that it offered anything meaningful, and even those who observed the commandments did so by rote, with no religious passion or genuine faith; the assimilationists hoped 'to end Israel's life by death with a kiss'. Any who cared for the separate existence of Judaism had much reason for concern.[13]

The solution to this crisis, Alexandrov argued, must be a cultural one that addresses both aspects of the problem: the elder generation who maintained their faith out of inertia and the younger generation who scorned the religious tradition as a remnant of a bygone age that was about to pass from the world. Alexandrov's solution was the establishment of a national culture that would unite traditional religious values with the European Enlightenment. In contrast to the heteronomous nature of religion, 'simple nationalism' is an 'inner spirit', that is to say an authentic phenomenon, based on the personal freedom of the individual and his moral awareness. As for Aḥad Haʿam, for Alexandrov nationalism is not a strictly biological phenomenon but rather a combination of emotion, ethical awareness and an authentic sense of self.

As an expression of human authenticity, the nationalist spirit is preferable to religion and represents a more advanced stage in the development of Judaism. The crisis of religion, then, was not incidental but rather a preparatory stage for a cultural shift, a shift of proportions unseen since the Sinai revelation. In this transition from a religious consciousness to a nationalist one, Alexandrov assigned a critical role to the sciences (in the broadest sense) as the carriers of Enlightenment values. Like religion in Alexandrov's view, Enlightenment too is an essentially external phenomenon, based on scientific awareness, and bringing with it negative values so long as it is not internalized and integrated into the authentic individual and national consciousness. The fire of religion and the water of enlightenment only appear to be at odds and are not inherently opposed to each other. Despite its backward appearance, the religious world conceals within it enlightened values, and so too does the opposite hold true: the world of science is not necessarily secular as it

12. Alexandrov, 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi', *Hamagid* 35:20, p. 155.
13. Alexandrov, 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi', *Hamagid* 35:19, pp. 147–8.

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appears but is rather a latent source of divine inspiration. The shared divine source of both phenomena ensures their compatibility, at least *in potentia*. This potential will be realized and harmony achieved when the two forces are joined together in the spirit of nationalism.[14]

An understanding of this dialectical process, along with the symbolic triad that represents it, does much to explain Alexandrov's obscure imagery, which occurs often in his interpretations of traditional sources. Much more than hanging his claims on the peg of traditional proof texts, Alexandrov's appeal to tradition is a genuine attempt to reinterpret it in light of religious-nationalist values. So, he writes in *Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi*,

> When the all-encompassing divinity appeared on Mt Sinai to bestow the fire of religion upon the people of Israel, in that singular moment when they saw the great fire, there also appeared a thick cloud upon the mountain.[15] This very cloud entered into the great fire and sprinkled its pure waters, and His doctrine will fall as rain though the voice of God is like a flame, the voice of God is also over many waters … How wondrous is 'the fire on high that devours wet and dry alike' (*bYoma* 21a)! The Hebrew fire that descended from the heavens also irrigates, and it does not leave the Hebrew people to dry out until its Judaism crumbles like dust, and within its dry bones there may still be found the very stuff of life… 'That spirit contains both fire and water', the sages of the Kabbalah have said upon many an occasion, and how precious is the meaning of these words if we only contemplate the new spirit of the nation that has been born in this age, its inside covered with the purified fire of religion and knowledge as the water covers the sea.[16]

Divinity was revealed as 'fire', that is, a religious culture complete with a way of life and folk beliefs, but within that fire there lies scientific and rational truth, symbolized by various forms of water: cloud, rain, moisture, and so on. These forms of truth prevent religion from 'drying out' and losing its vitality, for they reflect universal and eternal truths, and so long as religion preserves its connection to these truths it will not lose its relevance. The nationalist 'spirit' swelling at the turn of the century contains within it both the fire of religion and the waters of knowledge, and it possesses the power

14. On the history of seeing nationalism as a synthesis of religion and modernization, see Y. Salmon, *Religion and Zionism: First Encounters* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Hebrew University, Magnes Press, 2002), pp. 61–9.
15. Exo. XIX: XVI.
16. Alexandrov, 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi', *Hamagid* 35:19, p. 148.

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to answer the spiritual crisis of Judaism, or, in Alexandrov's words, 'to blow the breath of life into the dead that have been scattered to the four winds'.[17]

This dialectical system, highlighting Jewish nationalism as the natural successor of religion and enlightenment, was quite common in the religious Zionist discourse of the time. Far less common were the implications Alexandrov assigned to this process – that is, redeeming the Torah from its Halakhic constraints. This idea, its sources and its theological foundations are examined below.

Redemption of the Torah and annulment of the commandments

Alexandrov's expectation of the coming synthesis of science, nationalism and religion is tied to his messianic expectation: 'Indeed, we expect that upon the scion of Jesse will rest the spirit of wisdom and understanding together with the spirit of knowledge and fear of God.'[18] The coming redemption was neither apocalyptic nor political, however; rather, Alexandrov looked to the redemption of the Torah and of religious faith. In *Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi* Alexandrov portrays the messiah as a force composed of a variety of inner potencies latent within the Jewish people and defines the messianic mission as purifying the Torah of the erroneous views that have accreted to it over the years. This messiah will rise to the level of Moses and will reveal what Moses concealed.

Moses 'laid a cover' over this messianic and spiritual Judaism, hiding 'the white fire', 'the light within the Torah', behind 'the black fire' of the Halakha.[19] The messiah will remove this cover and redeem the inner Torah and even God Himself from the images enveloping them, images that were intended to support fulfilment of the commandments but that also distort humans' vision of divinity. To this end the messiah must be a man whose critical intelligence does not dampen his faith and whose faith does not distort his critical gaze. He must be expert in the sciences and philosophy so that he can identify God within the laws of nature, as well as in the rabbinic

17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Alexandrov, 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi', *Hamagid* 35:31, p. 246.

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tradition so that he can recognize the God of abstraction who dwells beyond all the religious symbols that conceal Him.[20]

Understanding Alexandrov's view of this pure religion hidden behind the Halakha requires an understanding of his theology. Though Alexandrov rarely discusses the fundamental principles of theology, in one brief critical essay entitled 'Tehillat Hašem' (In Praise of God, 1892) he reveals some of his theological views. This essay comprises a single continuous passage in which Alexandrov seems to declare fealty to Maimonides' apophatic theology, even referring his readers to the relevant chapters in *The Guide for the Perplexed* in which Maimonides explains why no attribute can be ascribed to God beside those that indicate His role as Creator. Alexandrov, apparently following in these Maimonidean footsteps, writes,

> Whoever possesses even a little knowledge in religious philosophy knows that from the divine point of view all of God's names, attributes and praises are considered identical expressions, for the divine movement is more sublime than any human idea and can only be honoured through negative expressions, which themselves must be negated … For the praises we utter to the Creator, such as 'the great, the mighty and the awesome', are divinity in its glory, for to You, Lord, belong the greatness and the might, and if so these attributes are themselves the greatness and the might that are found in the divine creation … for the praises of the Creator are the essence of divinity and He and His praises are one (Maimonides addressed this more deeply than any other in his book *The Guide for the Perplexed*, especially chapters 51 and 52 of the first section; see there).[21]

The line that precedes the reference to *The Guide for the Perplexed*, 'He and His praises are one', does not at all align with Maimonides' opinions. Maimonides intended to negate every positive attribute in reference to God, especially every attempt to describe His essence; the primary target of his critique in chapters 51 and 52 is the attribution, as we find throughout the traditional liturgy, of descriptors or attributes to God's essence.[22]

Further review of the above passage reveals a tripartite division. The first part distances God from all human images – not only from positive statements, which Maimonides forbids, but also from negative statements, which Maimonides allows. The second part implies that, even if positive

20. Ibid.
21. S. Alexandrov, 'Tehilat Hašem' (In Praise of God), *Hasfira* 19:218 (1892), p. 937.
22. See M. Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (trans. S. Pines; Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978), vol. 1, pp. 112–19.

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attributes ascribed to God cannot apply to His essence, they can apply to the way in which He reveals Himself in the world. In this sense, it is possible to praise God's qualities, if we direct that praise at the way in which God is revealed in creation and do not attempt to identify qualities that are essential to God's being. The third part, as mentioned, seems to contradict the first part, claiming that God, His attributes and His praises are in fact one and the same. Alexandrov makes this claim on the basis of the second part: we cannot describe God's essence but only His creation – but God and creation are one, and perforce He and His attributes are one unity that, despite appearing to be divided into divinity and creation, are in fact in essence one.

This kind of reasoning cannot occur in the analytical world of Maimonides. Its source is in a different world of thought and a different semantic realm: it is the language of the Kabbalah, some of the proponents of which used Maimonides' writings to articulate quite un-Maimonidean ideas. It is fitting, then, that the essay concludes with a reference to the Kabbalah: 'For God is united as one with His attributes and His praises, as the sages of the Kabbalah have stated, that the *sefirot* are the essence of divinity.'[23]

The source of these ideas is the book *Liqutey Amarim*, colloquially referred to as the *Tanya*, by Shneur Zalman of Liady, the founder of Ḥabad Ḥasidism. In Shneur Zalman's theology God is beyond all attributes, including negative ones. God's 'glory', His attributes and the *sefirot* are nothing but expressions of His self-revelation in the world, of the indwelling of the Šekhinah or the Divine Presence, identified with the *sefirah* of Malkhut. The negation of negative attributes means that God is not entirely different from His creation. God does not transcend creation, but is rather present within as well as beyond it. At the highest ontological level there is nothing but divinity; God and the world are not separate entities; everything is a single divine unity.[24] Along with Lithuanian scholasticism, Ḥabad Ḥasidism was one of the most powerful intellectual and social forces in White Russia. Bobruisk, Alexandrov's adopted home, was a centre of Ḥabad-Kopost Ḥasidism, with the dynasty's major court and a large community of Hasidim centred there. Alexandrov's writings are bound to the *Tanya* by more than theology and

23. Alexandrov, 'Tehilat Hašem'.

24. On the different ways to interpret Shneur Zalman's theology, see D. Schwarz, *Habad's Thought from Beginning to End* (in Hebrew; Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2010), pp. 25–30.

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historical context: that work supplied him with a number of his fundamental images, including some used in *Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi*.

In this work, when Alexandrov considers the gulf between essential divinity and human conceptions of it, he uses a central metaphor from Shneur Zalman's theology based on the verse 'For the Lord God is sun and shield' (Ps. 84:11). Divinity unto itself is the sun. Since mortal minds are incapable of comprehending divinity as such, it covers itself in a 'shield', dimming its light and enabling humans to withstand it. This shield, in Alexandrov's thought as in Shneur Zalman's, is the source of those conceptions of God that anthropomorphize Him and even lead to heresy. It is referred to as a 'sheath' in reference to the words of Šim'on ben Laqiš in Tractate 'Avodah Zarah: 'In the future there will be no Gehinnom; rather, the Holy One, blessed be He, will remove the sun from its sheath, and it will blaze down upon the world; the wicked will be judged by it and the righteous healed by it.'[25] The 'sheath' appears in *Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi* wherever Alexandrov seeks to explain the gulf between 'the all-encompassing divinity' or the pure Torah and human conceptions of them.

Shneur Zalman of Liady emphasizes the crucial role of the garbing of God and the Torah in mundane commandments and laws. In his view, people can only cleave to God through obedience to the commandments and study of the Torah. Alexandrov, for his part, aspired to transcend the physical manifestation and arrive at an awareness of God that would obviate the need for commanded acts and the meticulous study of Torah that reveals the details of how to perform them. Alexandrov utilizes Shneur Zalman's theology in pointing out the gulf between the divine essence and human conceptions of it, and then abandons it for a historiosophical theory to explain the formation of this gulf.

In this he relies on a different text, Naḥman Krochmal's book *Moreh Nevokhey Hazĕman* (the *Guide for the Perplexed of the Time*, 1851), especially its seventh chapter, 'Gentiles and Their God'. In this chapter Krochmal claims that a people's images of God change according to its spiritual and ethical situation, and when its ethical situation deteriorates a people tends towards idolatry and anthropomorphism, and the gulf between their image

25. *bAZ*. 3b; Shneur Zalman of Liady, *Tanya* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Kehot Publication Society, 1999), pp. 156–8.

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of God and spiritualized divinity grows.[26] Alexandrov borrowed Krochmal's assumption that human conceptions of God are contextually contingent and given to development and improvement, but applied it differently to his analysis of his own time and place: for him, it was not only the idolatry of the nations which was based on mundane conceptions of divinity but also the Jewish religious culture.

According to Alexandrov, the difficulty laymen face in achieving a 'pure' conception of divinity led them to anthropomorphic images of God and distorted notions of divinity, which in *Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi* Alexandrov equated with the sheath of the sun, the smoke that arises from man-made fire, and the black fire that conceals the white fire.[27] In contrast to Shneur Zalman of Liady, Alexandrov claims that mankind can over time transcend these errors through ethical and conceptual development.

In such a way does Alexandrov combine Shneur Zalman's theology with Nachman Krochmal's historicism in order to undermine the hegemony of traditional Halakhic Judaism. If cultural images do not fully reflect divinity, and if they also change according to time and place, then Halakhic Judaism reflects only a partial divine revelation that was part of a larger revelatory design that has yet to reach fulfilment. So Alexandrov declares that classical Judaism is the creation of Moses. Moses fashioned the religious culture despite – or perhaps because of – his ability to see beyond the image of God as redeemer and judge. The threatening image of God revealed on Mt Sinai was merely 'for the eyes of all Israel', as the conclusion of the Pentateuch can be read. Moses, however, 'knew that the Holy One, blessed be He, will not deal severely with His creations' – that is, does not judge one's observance of Halakha.[28] Alexandrov applied the famous Midrashic statement 'The Šekhinah spoke from the throat of Moses' to the creation of Halakhic Judaism, reading it to mean that it was created by Moses with the aid of divine inspiration.[29]

26. See N. Krochmal, *Moreh Nevokhey Hazĕman* (Lemberg, 1851), pp. 21–2; J.M. Harris, *Nachman Krochmal: Guiding the Perplexed of the Modern Age* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1991), pp. 70–81.

27. See Alexandrov, 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi', *Hamagid* 35:24, pp. 185–6; 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi', *Hamagid* 35:31, p. 246.

28. Alexandrov, 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi', *Hamagid* 35:25, p. 194.

29. Ibid. In his commentary on Tractate Avot Alexandrov explains that Moses' inner feelings were the way in which God revealed his will; see S. Alexandrov, *Ṭal Tkhiya* (The Reviving Dew) (Vilnius, 1897), p. 7.

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The Šekhinah's speaking from Moses' throat reflects an elevated spiritual consciousness, one in which God reveals Himself 'in the hiddenness of the heart' of man (here, too, Alexandrov relies on the *Tanya* and its use of the same Midrashic statement to describe Moses).[30] It was out of this consciousness, continues Alexandrov, that Moses fashioned classical Judaism, which, over millennia, could lift the entire people to Moses' level of awareness. This long-awaited goal was heralded by the current nationalist awakening, especially the awakening of the youth who were 'authentically' connected to their national identity and determined to build a new national culture through redeeming 'the light in the Torah' from the religious tradition.

The redemption of this light or, in different language, 'the removal of the cover' that religious leaders had laid over pure faith requires a revival to overcome the errors of traditional faith. Alexandrov locates the source of these errors in the confusion enthralling the faithful, who mistake emotional aspects ('rays of heat'), which are meant to aid in religious practice, for theological ones ('rays of light') – that is, truth claims. For example, fear of God, necessary to induce a society to obey religious law, led to an image of God as a judge who rewards and punishes and is therefore responsive to human acts. This image, stemming from an emotion cultivated to facilitate practice, became a theological principle, bringing in its train such elements as faith in charms, incantations and supernatural miracles. This misidentification of emotional aspects with theological ones was responsible, in Alexandrov's analysis, for the apparent contradiction between the religious world and rational thought. In order to resolve this apparent contradiction between 'fire' and 'water', Alexandrov prescribed, theological concepts must be differentiated from those intended to arouse religious feeling.[31]

Such a differentiation is made through the reinterpretation of traditional sources and ideas, through the deconstruction of conceptual and normative principles and their reconstruction according to a nationalist value system. This process demands emancipation from the current religious world-view and a significant measure of interpretive freedom in re-evaluating the sources of the tradition and the principles of religion. As Alexandrov wrote in the final chapter of *Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi*:

30. See Shneur Zalman of Liady, *Tanya*, p. 85.
31. See Alexandrov, 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi', *Hamagid* 35:23, p. 178.

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> For when we serve in love and self-determination we can freely elevate and contemplate the rays of light and the rays of heat in our ancient Torah, differentiating between them, and so draw out the light of the Torah from its sheath. We are not able to do so in a religious era, however, since in such a period we act out of compulsion, for religion holds the mountain over us like a barrel and does not allow us to freely contemplate every matter. With freedom we may especially begin to understand all the forces of nature, and so we have the power to draw out the light that is in the Torah, which we are not able to do in this religious era.[32]

Freedom of thought allows not only for an evaluation of the religious world but also an acquaintance with the natural sciences and other forms of more 'rational' thought, apparently more closely connected to physical reality. Alexandrov viewed the natural sciences as promising clearer and more straightforward forms of thought, as we encounter a number of times in the essay. We have already seen his analogy of light and heat as different aspects of the 'fire' of religion. In a similar way he used the image of Fraunhofer lines (formed after the absorption of certain wavelengths of sunlight by elements in the chromosphere surrounding the sun) to illustrate the influence of the spiritual 'sheath' surrounding the 'sun' of pure religious consciousness, as well as the mitigating effect of 'the black fire' that blocks the light of 'the white fire' of the spiritual Torah.[33]

The most radical expression of the redemption of the Torah and the transition from religion to nationalism is regarding the linchpin of Halakhic Judaism: the commandments. In Alexandrov's view, the transition to an authentic national way of life necessarily includes a transition to spontaneous and autonomous action and the abandonment of the laws regulating individual and social mores; the commandments as a normative system will be annulled and replaced by the individual and national conscience. The individual Jew will act guided by the 'spirit of the people' and 'the light that is in the Torah'; that is, the national hierarchy of values that undergirds the system of commandments. Following this shift, which is the apex of the evolution of the people, there will be no further need for commandments or any system of laws.

In Alexandrov's understanding, this is not a process of secularization but rather the opposite – the purification of religious faith and the empowerment

32. Alexandrov, 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi', *Hamagid* 35:33, p. 266.
33. Alexandrov, 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi', *Hamagid* 35:31, pp. 246–7.

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of the human spiritual consciousness and conscience, themselves based on divine revelation. The transition from heteronomy to autonomy represents a change in the conception of God, from the 'outdated' view of God as enforcing divine law from without to the 'pure' and 'refined' conception that locates divine revelation within mundane phenomena such as human conscience and the laws of nature. Thus, he describes the difference between the religious era and the nationalist one as follows:

> When the divine idea is enwrapped in the fire of religion, and the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself dons phylacteries and sits to learn Torah … at this time the idea of God is a terrifying idea; He Himself chose His people Israel and He holds the smoke-filled mountain of religion as a barrel, saying, If you accept My Torah, well and good, and if not, this shall be your grave. All of this belongs only to the first era, and not in the future one, when the idea of God will be an independent and inner possession of the people. Then, and only then, will the people begin to serve its God in love, for the soul of the people is bound up with the soul of its God. And of this time it is said, 'The commandments will one day be annulled' (*bNid.* 60a), for there is no commandment without one who commands, and in that future time the master who commands will sit in our innermost heart and will not hold the mountain over us like a barrel, and if so, the commandments will be annulled.[34]

This declaration of the future annulment of the Halakha would be modulated in its practical application in the continuation of the essay, where Alexandrov notes that the acts understood today as religious commandments would continue to exist, the difference being that they would not be performed out of obedience to Halakhic law but out of the free recognition of their moral value.[35] Alexandrov explained his position in 1908 in a letter to R. Avraham Yitzḥak Kook:

> I have already stated in various places … that the rabbis' intent in saying that 'the commandments will be annulled' was that the commandment would be annulled, but not the moral act itself. The nature of the matter shall change, for with the development of the ethical feeling in those days, ethical acts will also be strengthened, though they will be performed solely out of moral necessity, which will take root then in the heart of the perfected man, and not at the command of religion, which orders him to do this or that. And so the religious commandments will be annulled, for when morality reigns, religion will be superfluous, for service performed in love, flowing from the ethical feelings of

34. Alexandrov, 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi', *Hamagid* 35:20, p. 155. On divine immanence in religious Zionist theology, see Schwarz, *Faith at the Crossroads,* pp. 46–89. On Alexandrov's later writings in that regard, see Schwarz, *Faith at the Crossroads,* p. 63.

35. See Alexandrov, 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi', *Hamagid* 35:20, p. 155.

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> the individual, does not require a commanding master, for it is content with the good deed itself.[36]

That is to say, because the commandments are of ethical value, every individual who acts out of his inner morality will choose to perform those acts that religion had previously commanded, in recognition of their ethical value. The essential difference, then, between religion and nationalism is the motivation. In the era of nationalism, the external command of religion will be annulled, and people will freely choose to behave according to the authentic values of nationalism. This in itself, however, will not redeem the spiritual Torah from 'the black fire'. For that there is a need for a new interpretation, free from previous constrains. This hermeneutic aspect of Alexandrov's vision and the means he put forward in realizing it are the subject of the next part of the article.

Interpretation, messianism and the Hebrew University

Alexandrov's expectation of the nationalist era in which the Halakha would be annulled did not stem from a secular outlook but from an expectation of a more developed awareness of divinity, in which there would be no further need to believe in 'concrete' ideas such as a transcendent God who punishes and rewards. Furthermore, specifically because religion was born out of divine inspiration, its textual legacy will not lose its central place in the national culture. The divine nature of the Torah finds expression in its ability to be reinterpreted in every generation, an ability that would be central to Alexandrov's later thought.[37] The new interpretations given it do not merely align the ancient text with the new culture; they render the gifts of that generation fit for offering. More than the result of a cultural revolution, the new interpretations are the very tools by which the revolution is brought about.

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36. S. Alexandrov, *Mikhtavey Meḥqar Uviqoret* (Letters of Inquiry and Critique), vol. 2 (Krakow, 1910), p. 8 (letter from spring 1908). See also R. Schatz, 'The Maharal's Conception of Law as an Antithesis to Natural Law', *Daat* 2–3 (1978), p. 156 (in Hebrew).

37. 'Our ancient Torah suffers all the new winds that blow in every generation; it is an old skin filled with new wine … and as the Holy One, blessed be He, suffers all, turning a blind eye, so too does our holy Torah suffer all, the old and the new'; Alexandrov, 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi', *Hamagid* 35:25, pp. 193–4.

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Nowhere in Alexandrov's early thought is this more clear than in the image of the messiah in *Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi*, where the messiah is compared to Moses, the difference being that what Moses hid the messiah will reveal. He will reveal a different scripture, an ethical and conceptual Torah. This Torah will not be expressed through a new text; rather, it dwells within the same text as the scripture of Halakha, where it was 'hidden' by Moses. These two Torahs, 'the black fire' of Halakhic Judaism and 'the white fire' of 'pure' Judaism (to use Alexandrov's terms), are borne by the same text, and only the removal of the 'cover' of the Halakhic Torah can reveal the national-spiritual Torah for which Alexandrov longed. This process will be achieved through interpretation.

This is the recurring theme of Alexandrov's thought: the text is a fixed and enduring cultural form, a form in which and by which occur all processes of cultural development and change. The location within the Torah of proof texts for modern ideas transforms these ideas into the next link in the chain of faith and the Jewish tradition, while distance from the text is tantamount to breaking this chain. An even greater danger lies in the possibility that the Torah text will be rendered meaningless to the modern Jew, who sees it as nothing more than a forsaken temple of idolaters. Such a sense of alienation from the traditional text was in Alexandrov's eyes an opening to cultural nihilism; that is, the loss of the meaning and identity that define Jewish culture and of the identities of the Jews themselves. Avoiding such a fate and maintaining a connection with the divine and the living tradition requires a reinterpretation of the traditional text, which can redeem 'the white fire' of the future Torah from the bonds of 'the black fire' of the Halakhic Torah. As Alexandrov wrote in the final chapter of *Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi*:

> Moses and his Torah lie beneath a cover of black fire, and if we remove this holy cover we will see that the skin of Moses' face was radiant because he took on the splendor of the supernal face … and so he saw the white fire in its purity… The messiah, guided by his spirit, will remove the cover and all flesh will see as one that the mouth of the LORD has spoken. We too, guided by our spirit, have here removed the cover of black fire that is spread over this statement by ben Laqiš.[38]

Alexandrov here refers to two statements by R. Šimʿon ben Laqiš, in Šeqalim 16b of the Jerusalem Talmud and Midrash Dĕvarim Rabah 3:13, in which

38. Alexandrov, 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi', *Hamagid* 35:31, p. 246.

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ben Laqiš describes the Torah as written in black fire on a background of white fire. Various Kabbalistic texts describe these expressions as allusions to a mystical Torah concealed within the 'earthly' Torah text.[39] In Alexandrov's thought, this hidden Torah is revealed through the act of interpretation, which reveals new faces of the text, as Alexandrov presumes to reveal in these same statements by ben Laqiš on which he bases his theory of redemptive interpretation.

We encounter a similar dynamic in Alexandrov's treatment of the traditional messiah. Alexandrov's messiah is an interpreter of the text who redeems the Torah from the shell of anachronistic meaning and reveals new faces befitting modern values. Over the course of the first decade of the twentieth century, Alexander described this figure as 'the perfected man' who is expert in all forms of knowledge scientific and scriptural, and who is capable of creating a new Torah.[40] In the last decade of the nineteenth century, however, Alexandrov did not elaborate on this figure, choosing instead to place his hopes for the realization of his vision on the founding of a new institution, a national interpretive one.

In order to merit the coming of the interpretive messiah, Alexandrov claimed, the Jews must unite 'all our religious and national forces' in one place, in a spiritual centre to be founded in Jerusalem.[41] This idea should not be confused with Aḥad Haʿam's concept of the spiritual centre. First, Aḥad Haʿam's idea was first made public only at the end of 1891, about half a year after the publication of *Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi*; second, these two imagined centres were quite distinct from each other. Aḥad Haʿam's spiritual centre was essentially a Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel, which would include all types of people living a 'healthy' life in the land, whose participation in the shared project would lead to a new consciousness of national unity that would later spread throughout the Diaspora.[42] Alexandrov's enterprise, on the other hand, was an institution of scholarship and hermeneutics, a combination of the academy and the traditional yeshiva, in which educated Jews from

39. See G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (trans. R. Manheim; New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 37–9, 46–50; M. Idel, 'The Concept of the Torah in Heikhalot Literature and Its Metamorphoses in Kabbalah', *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 1 (1981), pp. 43–6 (in Hebrew).

40. Alexandrov, *Mikhtavey Meḥqar Uviqoret*, vol. 2, pp. 9–12 (letter from spring 1908).

41. Alexandrov, 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi', *Hamagid* 35:33, p. 262.

42. See A. Ginzberg, 'Even Lemaṣeva', *Pardes* 1 (1892), pp. 207–17; Goldstein, *Aḥad Haʿam*, pp. 141–3.

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across the national and religious spectrum would cooperate in re-evaluating the traditional sources and forging a new national-cultural identity.

The commonality between Alexandrov's concept of the spiritual centre and Aḥad Haʿam's is in the relationship of the centre to the Jewish Diaspora. Neither thinker imagined the Land of Israel as the residence of the entire Jewish people but rather the spiritual-cultural centre of world Jewry, who would continue to reside in their home countries. Over the course of the last decade of the nineteenth century, Alexandrov repeatedly described the exile as a fundamental aspect of the Jewish identity and as an inseparable part of its universalist mission. As he writes in the essay 'Takhlit Maʿaseh Šamayim Vaʾareṣ' (1899):

> By being exiled among the nations, the Jews taste the fruit of the Tree of Secular Knowledge, which has fallen to be gathered by all the nations, as could not have been when they dwelled alone and unchanged in their land. In exile, however, they influence and are influenced, receiving the knowledge of the world from the nations among whom they dwell, and in exchange teaching them divine knowledge. They eat from the Tree of Knowledge, and give of the Tree of Life.[43]

The Jews have been given the task of teaching 'divine knowledge' – that is, knowledge of the one God – to all the nations. They cannot fulfil this task without the neighbourly relations that exist in the thriving Jewish Diaspora, and vice versa: the redemption of the Torah and the revelation of 'the white fire' requires study of philosophy and the sciences, which cannot occur in an isolated nation-state, for such study requires constant contact with the nations that excel in those fields. Thus, the spiritual centre in Jerusalem depends by design on the continuation of the Diaspora.

Alexandrov did not hide the fact that his idea of the academy-yeshiva as spiritual centre was inspired by the initiative of Zvi Hermann Schapira to found a university of the sciences in Jerusalem, an initiative that ultimately resulted in the founding of the Hebrew University.[44] The academic nature of the institution Alexandrov imagined is further clarified by the correspondence he conducted at the start of the twentieth century with R. Avraham Yitzḥak Kook as the latter planned for the founding of a new yeshiva in Jaffa. Alexandrov, who saw this yeshiva as an opportunity to realize the vision he

43. S. Alexandrov 'Takhlit Maʿaśeh Šamayim Vaʾareṣ', *Haʾeškol* 4 (1902), pp. 267–8.
44. Alexandrov, 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Leʾumi', *Hamagid* 35:33, p. 262.

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had articulated in 1891, attempted to convince Kook that such an institution should resemble an academy, resulting in a fascinating conversation between the two about what type of institution was needed for the Judaism of the twentieth century and what topics should be taught there.[45]

Alexandrov set tremendous stock in his imagined institution. In *Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi* he writes: 'In my imagination I can see, within this idea, the structure of the holy Temple in all its detail.'[46] As in his treatment of the messiah, we should not see Alexandrov's image of the Temple as mere hyperbole but as a new interpretation of the Temple and its meaning. In his view, the founding of this institution would be the realization of the vision of the prophets while also 'purifying' the Temple of the 'outdated' concrete conceptions that had accreted to it over millennia, especially regarding the sacrificial service. Again we find that, in Alexandrov's thought, the redemption is not of a civic body but the redemption of the Torah, the tradition, and divinity from incorrect conceptualizations of them. His vision of the end of days emphasizes the proper awareness of the immanent and abstract divinity, spontaneous ethical action guided by this awareness, and the transmission of these values to all the nations of the world. This vision can only be realized with the establishment of that intellectual institution, the Temple in Jerusalem.

Conclusion: a moderate revolutionism

Having reviewed the principles of Alexandrov's thought in the last decade of the nineteenth century, we may understand why Ehud Luz dubbed him a 'religious anarchist'.[47] His creative hermeneutic, his aspiration to annul the Halakha, and his hope for a cultural revolution set Alexandrov apart from his Jewish contemporaries. However, while his views are undoubtedly unique, the description of him as an anarchist is problematic and conflates historical periods. From the publication of *Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi* in 1891 until 1907, Alexandrov attempted to promote his vision of cultural change

45. Alexandrov wrote to Kook about his vision of an 'academy for Jewish studies', which would produce 'great sages to fight heresy'; S. Alexandrov, *Mikhtavei Mekhkar Uvikoret*, vol. 1 (Vilnius, 1907), pp. 17–18. For the rest of the discussion, see ibid., pp. 26–8; A.Y. Kook, *Igrot Hare'aya* (Collected Letter) (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1985), vol. 1, pp. 44–5, 51–3.

46. Alexandrov, 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi', *Hamagid* 35:33, p. 262.

47. See Luz, 'Spiritualism and Religious Anarchism', p. 133–7.

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through centralized and hierarchical national institutions. His spiritual centre was meant to serve as the authority that would formulate a unique national culture with clear and firm boundaries. Throughout this period he also implored the nationalist intelligentsia to honour the religious tradition and its representatives until there was broad agreement as to the nature of the new national culture, and he stressed that the road to cultural change must pass through Torah study, in both its conservative and its innovative forms.[48]

The combination of a far-reaching futuristic vision with a relative conservatism for the present explains a fundamental contradiction in Alexandrov's essay *Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi*. The essay opens with the following declaration: 'We may observe two eras in the life of every nation that persists for long years upon the earth: the era of religion and the era of nationalism.'[49] Alexandrov seems to be referring to two separate eras, which he will proceed to differentiate before calling for the end of the religious era and the transition to the nationalist one. The replacement of religion and its commandments with a new national culture aligns with the thought of Aḥad Haʿam, but Alexandrov quickly negates this understanding and clarifies the meaning of his opening statement:

> In saying that the era of nationalism is the last, following the era of religion, we do not intend that nationalism will inherit the full force and authority of religion, such that the people will exist only by virtue of nationalism … Nationalism is a supernal force come down to enliven the dry bones that have lost the fire of religion.[50]

This passage implies that the national revival is actually a religious renaissance, one that will restore religion to relevance and bring the entire people to see it as their exclusive culture. This aligns Alexandrov's position with those of such rabbis as Shmuel Mohilever and Yitzhak Yaakov Reines, who expected the national revival to bring the entire Jewish people back to a religious lifestyle.[51]

The latter passage seems to explain the first, but we cannot ignore the narrative backbone of the essay, which presents the two eras as separate and even contradictory in nature. Alexandrov describes the nationalist era

48. Alexandrov, 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi', *Hamagid* 35:25, pp. 185–6.
49. Alexandrov, 'Eš Dat Veruaḥ Le'umi', *Hamagid* 35:19, p. 147.
50. Ibid.
51. see Bat-Yehudah, 'Shmuel Alexandrov', pp. 200–201.

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as a development over and above the era of religion on both ethical and theological grounds. He calls for a non-Halakhic basis of Jewish culture and for the exchange of traditional interpretation of Scripture for a new and decidedly modern hermeneutic. The reservations he made were intended not to diminish the nature of the nationalist revolution but rather to moderate its secularizing impact in the present. In the messianic future, traditional religious life will indeed be done away with entirely, replaced by a complete 'national' way of life in which individuals and society as a whole will act out of ethical spontaneity grounded in their national identity. This does not mean, however, that the current religious way of life should be scorned; on multiple occasions Alexandrov expressed his opposition to externally motivated changes in Halakha, supporting only 'natural corrections that time effects by itself', an opinion he attributes to Aḥad Haʿam.[52]

It becomes clear, then, that at the turn of the twentieth century Alexandrov hoped for a cultural renewal that would arrive as the summation of a gradual process and not as a sudden, dramatic change. He believed that arousing the national consciousness would naturally lead to the annulment of the religious life and implored secular nationalists, in the meantime, to recognize the importance of religion and treat its representatives with respect. Only in 1907, after seeing that the public was not responding to his ideas, did Alexandrov begin to formulate a new vision, one of cultural revolution brought about by pioneering individuals. In this period he did develop into a religious anarchist, as Ehud Luz described him, and in the interwar period he only grew more radical, a topic I hope to address elsewhere.

This does not discount the moderate revolutionism of Alexandrov's early thought, especially in relation to the mainstream of religious nationalism. This faction, led by such rabbis as Shmuel Mohilever and Yitzḥak Yaʿakov Reines, saw the cultural aspirations of Aḥad Haʿam as contrary to their intent of establishing a religiously observant community in the Land of Israel. They argued that the religious way of life and its values were the only authentic expression of the national spirit and the distinguishing factor of the Jews.[53] Alexandrov, on the other hand, saw cultural nationalism as the herald of redemption and as one day taking the place of religion. He saw Aḥad Haʿam

52. See Alexandrov, *Mikhtavey Meḥqar Uviqoret*, vol. 2, p. 44.

53. See D. Schwarz, *Challenge and Crisis in the Circle of Rabbi Kook* (in Hebrew; Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 2001), pp. 45–56, 267–82; Schwarz, *Religious Zionism*, pp. 83–107.

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– not Herzl – as his natural partner in pursuing the Zionist goal, which he saw as bringing about a cultural-religious revolution.

Alexandrov was one of the most original thinkers of religious Zionism but he was far from being the only one to call for a religious-cultural change. He was not the only one who saw Zionism as a movement of cultural renewal that demanded a new kind of Torah; in this he was joined by the likes of R. Avraham Yitzḥak Kook, Ze'ev Yavetz (1847–1924) and Chaim Hirschensohn (1857–1935). He was not the only one who saw the renewed study of the arts and sciences as inseparable from national rebirth; this view was shared by Ḥaim Tchernowitz, Benjamin Menashe Levin (1879–1944) and Shem-Tov Gefen (1856–1927). He was not even the only one who saw exile as an essential part of the modern Jewish consciousness that must be preserved even within the nationalist project; so too did R. Aharon Shmuel Tamares, another thinker who offered religious interpretations of Aḥad Ha'am's positions.[54] Most of these philosophical positions are all but forgotten due to a reductionism that defines religious Zionist thought according to popular movements and political parties, a prevalent point of view among scholars of the field as well as contemporary political figures. I wish to suggest it is time to go beyond these narrow limits. It is time to recall the forgotten diversity of religious Zionism and return to the fundamental questions that have accompanied this movement since its inception. When we do so, the thought-provoking ideas of Shmuel Alexandrov would be a good place to start.

54. On Tamares's treatment of exile and changing attitudes towards cultural Zionism, see Holzer, *A Double-Edged Sword*, pp. 111–38. Compare to the definition of religious Zionist as categorically negating exile in Schwartz, *History and Ideology*, p. 2.

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