

Religious Thinkers: ZALMAN SHRAGAI

by Dr. Meir Tamari

The teachings of Shmuel Chaim Landau spread rapidly both in the golah and in Eretz Yisrael where Torah V'Avoda gradually acquired the whole infrastructure of a political party, a federation of trade unions, a sick fund, agricultural settlements, kibbutzim and moshavim, industrial co-operatives and an educational network. One of the leading practical and ideological figures in all this was undoubtedly the Talmudical scholar and Chassidic thinker, Shlomo Zalman Shragai.

He was born in Poland in 1898 and grew up to be a Talmudical scholar with a fervent and profound attachment to Chassidism. Although with his small beard and piercing eyes he always looked like the scholar he was, he played a crucial role both as a party leader of religious Zionism and in the building of Israel. A passionate believer in Orthodox Judaism and religious Zionism, he left his native Poland in 1924 to work as a pioneer in the then Palestine. Like many of the other pioneers he worked for a time on building roads and other forms of infra-structure building. By his aliyah he challenged the views of the larger non-Zionist religious party Agudat Israel, and others who feared the influence of secular Zionism or thought that only the coming of the Mashiach could re-establish a Jewish state. As a Talmudic scholar, fervent believer and eloquent speaker and writer he was

able to convince many other young people to follow his challenging example.

In London after the Second World War as a representative of the Jewish Agency, the executive arm of the World Zionist Organization, Shragai, like local and Israeli Zionist leaders, was shocked by the betrayal by the Labor government of Attlee and Ernest Bevin. Feeling that Christian leaders would better understand religious Zionism, Shragai sought the aid of the churches there in the struggle for statehood. In the same way Hapoel Hamizrachi kept contact with the religious workers unions and labor parties which grew up in Europe in the post-war period.

Afterwards as head of the Aliya department of the Jewish Agency, Shragai played a crucial role in the aliyah of Jews from Eastern Europe and the Arab countries. He intensified the efforts to bring survivors of the Holocaust to Israel. He persuaded the Polish Communist leaders and Soviet officials to allow the emigration of a section of the remnant of that community. This led at first to a mere trickle but finally there was a mass exodus. When the possibility of massive immigration from Islamic countries became a reality, he made a number of dangerous clandestine trips to Arab capitals to organize the local Jewish communities. Hundreds of thousands of Jews left these countries, almost transforming overnight the young state.

He published the ideas of Torah

v'Avoda widely and consistently in writings which made these revolutionary teachings of Judaism a major influence on religious Zionism, while challenging the views of secular and religious Israelis alike. A typical example of his writings was the essay Vision and Realization and while it is impossible here to do justice to them, some brief extracts may throw light on his ideas.

"With great regret we see that galut influenced the majority of religious people to agree with secularists in separating Torah; these separate life from Torah and these separate Torah from living. Secularism sees religion as a matter for individual decision and religious say that Torah is the sole obligation of everybody. To the former it is the past glory and the others, while applying it to the present, see it only when gathered in the shul and batei medrash, only on Shabbat and chagim, only regarding food and ritual ["Only the partial Torah of galut" (Harav Tvi Yehuda).] However, our Orech Chayim is not only that single volume of the Shulchan Aruch but also Yoreh De'ah, Choshen Mishpat and Even HaEzer. Our Orech Chaim encompasses the whole of life; in town and village, trade and labor, individual and public, in the private domain and the public one, for the State and even between Israel and the Nations. Since Torah is so all encompassing, a person has to be a religious worker [soldier, doctor, driver etc or an institution] rather than one who is also religious [Shragai would therefore probably also argue that one cannot vote for those who have secular

solutions to issues.]

However, one can be a naval birshut HaTorah and therefore we strive to sanctify ourselves through that which is permissible and 'you shall do that which good and straight.' In the present society [of that time] this requires a lifestyle of creative work, even though Torah does not stipulate only physical labor. We have therefore chosen avoda, productive labor, to purify our lives and to create thereby a way through Torah to Kedusha, We have declared chalutzit'ut, personal realization, creating lives of Torah v'Avoda within a united Israel, through our vision of the all-inclusive Torah."

In 1950, Shragai was elected Mayor of Jerusalem, a city which he loved with a rare intensity. During his two-year term as the first religious mayor of the city he displayed an open-mindedness and sensitivity to the needs of its citizens, religious and secular, which was acknowledged even by his political opponents. ★