

Debate Over Frum Involvement in the World Zionist Organization (WZO)

By Rabbi Yitzchok Naparstek
Fort Lauderdale, FL

Recently, there has been significant debate within the frum community regarding the upcoming elections for the World Zionist Organization (WZO). This issue has become particularly contentious for Chabad Chasidim, many of whom are unaware of the deep controversy surrounding participation in this election.

Certain *askanim* advocate for the frum community's involvement, believing it's time for Orthodox Jews to engage with the WZO. They envision a platform of influence where Orthodox communities in the Diaspora can represent their interests within official Israeli institutions. Their hope is that this involvement would allow them to address religious issues in Eretz Yisrael and influence the relationship between religion and state.

Historical Context: The Lubavitcher Rebbe's Stance

The idea of Orthodox Jews influencing the WZO is not a new one. In 1971, Shaul Shiff, a journalist for *Hatzofeh* newspaper, sought to strengthen religious representation within the WZO. He arranged a meeting with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, hoping to persuade him to encourage Chasidim to join the WZO and contribute religious votes. Shiff was accompanied by two representatives from the Jewish Agency when they visited the Rebbe in Yechidus. After listening carefully, the Rebbe politely declined, explaining that Chabad is a religious organization, not a political one, and thus it would not be appropriate for it to participate in such activities. However, the Rebbe praised Shiff's efforts and encouraged his work with the Jewish Agency, emphasizing the importance of bringing unaffiliated Jews closer to Torah. (Here's My Story, JEM, April 7, 2017).

A Distinction in Political Engagement

This story highlights a crucial distinction: The Rebbe declined to become involved in elections for organizations like the WZO on the grounds of maintaining political neutrality, yet he encouraged Chasidim to vote privately in Israeli Knesset elections. This distinction will be explained further below.

In 1982, Rabbi Eliezer Zalman Bronstein, a leader of the Mizrahi party and representative of the WZO, raised the issue of increasing religious representation within the WZO. In a letter dated 18 Sivan 5742, the Rebbe responded to Rabbi Bronstein's concerns about the growing influence of the Reform movement in Eretz Yisroel, particularly through the World Zionist Congress (WZC). While the Rebbe acknowledged Rabbi Bronstein's deep knowledge of the WZC's internal workings, he expressed the belief that adding a number of members to the WZC in the USA would not affect the leadership in Eretz Yisroel, as the Rebbe had observed firsthand the limitations of such efforts in addressing fundamental issues. Furthermore, the Rebbe noted that the influence of the WZC had significantly diminished in recent years and continued to decline.

The Rebbe emphasized that the true success in combating the influence of the Reform movement lies in increasing Torah observance and mitzvos without compromise. He encouraged Rabbi Bronstein to focus on practical actions that could influence the U.S. Jewish community, knowing that such efforts would ultimately have a positive impact on the broader Jewish world, including in Eretz Yisroel.

From the Rebbe's response, it is clear that the Rebbe did not suggest campaigning for hundreds of thousands of votes, as had already been suggested in 1971, nor did he advocate for the revival of the WZO's influence.

* * *

The Jerusalem Program: A Conflict of Ideology

To vote in the WZO elections, one must first "register." In addition to a nominal fee of \$5, there is an often-overlooked requirement: the acceptance of the "Jerusalem Program" — the platform of the Zionist movement. The Jerusalem Program defines Zionism as the national liberation movement of the Jewish people, effectively denying the Jewish people's ultimate redemption through Mashiach Tzidkeinu. It presents the establishment of the State of Israel as central to Jewish continuity, framing the State as an essential component of Jewish identity. This ideology is fundamentally incompatible with Torah values, regardless of whether the State is governed by religious individuals.

While the modern Zionist movement may have less influence today, the principles outlined in the Jerusalem Program remain at odds with Torah teachings. The belief in political consolidation and statehood as essential to Jewish identity contradicts the Torah's perspective that Jewish identity is rooted solely in Torah and mitzvos, just as prior to 1948.

Divine Providence and the State of Israel

It is essential to recognize that, by Divine providence, the State of Israel plays a significant role for the Jewish people. It functions as a technical instrument within the framework of *galus*, offering protection to the Jewish community in Eretz Yisrael and serving as a refuge for Jews worldwide. The state's practical existence — rather than its nationalist ideology — must be supported, protected, and developed. Moreover, the fact that the State is located on the soil of Eretz Yisrael, the Holy Land — "that the eyes of G-d, your L-rd, are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to year's end" (Eikev 11:12) — adds much significance and meaning.

It is these two values, *Pikuach Nefesh* (saving lives) and *Eretz Yisrael*, independently, that dictate the battle for *Shleimus Haaretz* (the integrity of the land), asserting that the Jewish government should not relinquish any part of Eretz Yisrael to non-Jews. This is entirely separate from the concept of 'Nationalism' and should by no means be perceived as fulfilling our hopes for 'liberation.' However, this topic requires further discussion elsewhere.

Opposition to Zionism: Jewish Nationalism and Torah Leaders

The vast majority of Torah leaders, including the Chabad Rebbeim, were opposed to Zionism — both secular and religious — and discouraged participation in Zionist organizations. Over the course of three

generations, under the leadership of the Rebbe Rashab, the Rebbe Rayatz, and our Rebbe, there were different strategies for confronting the Zionist movement. However, one message remained constant: whenever engagement with Zionism occurred, it was always external, never internal. To our Rebbeim, joining a Zionist organization could be seen as an implicit endorsement of its ideology, potentially exposing others to views that were incompatible with Torah teachings. In many cases, the Rebbe Rashab, the Rebbe Rayatz, and our Rebbe each sacrificed personal and financial benefits to avoid endorsing Zionist ideologies.

Authenticity and Jewish Nationalism

For a Chabad Chosid, can it truly be authentic to sign a document accepting Jewish Nationalism, especially when it directly contradicts our core beliefs? This kind of participation — agreeing to the Jerusalem Program in order to influence the WZO — could compromise Chabad's approach to kiruv. The Rebbe taught us to embrace Jews and draw them closer to Torah, but never to embrace their foreign beliefs. By joining the WZO and accepting its platform, we risk compromising our integrity by aligning ourselves with ideologies that conflict with our values.

* * *

The State vs. Organizations: A Nuanced Distinction

Supporters of engaging with the WZO often argue that, since the establishment of the State of Israel, many Gedolei Yisrael, including the Rebbe Rayatz and our Rebbe, have urged participation in Israeli institutions. This includes religious parties joining the Knesset and participating in general elections. Similarly, many Torah institutions accept financial grants from state institutions. At first glance, engaging with the WZO may seem similar to these forms of involvement. However, a closer examination reveals a significant distinction.

While the establishment of Jewish governance in Eretz Yisrael is truly admirable and miraculous, it should have been grounded in the holy Torah (see Sichas Shabbos Chaye Sarah 5749—Hisvaduyos 5749 Vol. 1 p. 355). Unfortunately, the state was founded on nationalism and secularism, and this approach is deeply problematic.

The core difference between the Zionist Organization and the State of Israel lies in their respective structures. The WZO is a voluntary organization based on membership, where individuals can choose whether or not to affiliate. In contrast, one cannot simply "leave" a state unless they physically exit its borders. The state is a concrete reality, and disengagement or complete separation from it is not practical. Moreover, since the state consists largely of Jews, mutual responsibility within the Jewish community applies—especially on the soil of Eretz Yisrael. For this reason, Torah leaders have urged the use of the right to vote in order to elect representatives who will safeguard Torah values wherever possible. These representatives can be more effective within the Knesset. Regarding government aid, the State should certainly support Torah institutions no less than it supports other communities in Eretz Yisrael, especially considering that religious taxpayers contribute to the state's revenue.

Now, let's explore the nuanced distinctions between the WZO and the State:

1. **Ambiguity vs. Explicit Ideology**

When a frum Knesset member takes their seat in the Israeli parliament, they declare, “I hereby declare allegiance to the State of Israel and its laws.” This ambiguous statement can be understood as allegiance to **Eretz Yisrael** and the laws related to the land (see the additions to *Igeres Maaneh Chacham*). This remains acceptable as long as the individual does not assume a government position, which would involve responsibility for Torah violations within the state.

In contrast, the *Jerusalem Program* explicitly refers to an ideological movement and the regime established by it in 1948. This cannot be interpreted merely as a reference to **Eretz Yisrael** as a geographical location; it specifically refers to the state and its secular, nationalist agenda it created.

2. **Natural Right vs. Active Registration**

The WZO requires active registration, which involves a conscious decision to join and support the organization and its underlying Zionist ideology, as outlined in the *Jerusalem Program*. In contrast, Israeli elections grant every Jew born in the country a natural right to vote, regardless of their stance on the state’s ideology.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe’s instruction to vote in Israeli elections was specifically for those who had already attained this natural right—those who had Israeli identification. However, those who did not have an ID card (which applied in the 1950s), maintaining complete separation from the state and its services, were not instructed to vote (*Igros Kodesh* vol. 11, p. 168).

3. **Mutual Responsibility and the Obligation to Influence**

As mentioned earlier, one is not responsible for decisions made within an organization to which they do not belong. If one can positively influence an organization from the outside, it is their duty. However, when it comes to the relationship between citizens and their government, which is automatic, failing to exercise one's natural rights in government elections and actively protect and strengthen Torah values may inadvertently empower secularism and values opposed to Judaism, which could have been prevented by exercising these rights. Therefore, those who have the right to vote are obligated to utilize it.

To conclude, we have been entrusted by the Rebbe to strengthen the presence of Torah and mitzvos wherever we have influence. By doing so, without deviating from the Rebbe’s directives and remaining true to Chabad’s views, as outlined above, we can ultimately impact not only our local community but, since all Jews are interconnected, extend this influence to the broader Jewish world, including Eretz Yisrael. This mission is especially timely in the aftermath of October 7th. May we merit, without delay, the true and complete redemption through our righteous Mashiach.