

Who are you, Rabbi Davidowitz? - opinion

Davidowitz drew from the morals of the prophets, incorporated the wisdom of other nations (for example, the US Declaration of Independence) and well-seasoned it all with some Torah.

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(photo credit: Davidowitz family)

In April 1948, three weeks before Israel's establishment, David Ben-Gurion frantically searched for a lawyer to help him draft the official

document that would proclaim the establishment of a Jewish state in Israel. Such documents, he probably thought in a moment of distraction, are a matter for lawyers.

He turned to attorney Pinchas Rosen, later Israel's first justice minister. Maybe because his hands were full and perhaps because he also thought it was a purely legal matter, Rosen also did a kind of outsourcing. He assigned the task to Mordechai Beham, one of Tel Aviv's top lawyers at the time.

Beham, a graduate of both the Herzliya Gymnasium and the University of London School of Law, was a serious man and a gifted jurist. After sitting and thinking for the entire Shabbat at his home on Yarkon Street in Tel Aviv, he realized that this was too important a task to be left to lawyers alone.

Not far from his home, on Arnon Street, lived Rabbi Dr. Harry "Zvi" Solomon Davidowitz, a JTS-educated Conservative rabbi, doctor of humanities and man of literature and philosophy, who had come to Israel on a sabbatical in 1934, fell in love and decided to settle down. There was not much demand for Conservative rabbis in Tel Aviv in the 1940s but luckily for the rabbi, his father-in-law – the Jewish philanthropist Samuel Bloom from Philadelphia – was wealthy enough to set up a small factory for the idealistic Rabbi to manufacture dentures.

In this way, Bloom thought, he would be able to help the Rabbi on his Zionist adventure. The factory was established but failed because probably the only thing there was less demand for in youthful Tel Aviv at the time than Conservative Rabbis was dentures. But that's a story for another article.



KIPPOT ARE on display at the Mahaneh Yehuda market in Jerusalem. 'I and many others like me no longer feel comfortable wearing the knitted kippah, long the emblem of modern Orthodox Zionism, in public,' says the writer. (credit: SOPHIE GORDON/FLASH90)

Beham left his home, walked a few minutes from Yarkon Street to Arnon Street, knocked on Rabbi Davidowitz's door and they got to work. Beham, says Yoram Shahar, who studied the Declaration, brought to the table his expertise in the law and jurisprudence. Davidowitz drew from the morals of the prophets, incorporated the wisdom of other nations (for example, the US [Declaration of Independence](#)) and well-seasoned it all with some Torah.

Together, they composed the first draft of Israel's Declaration of Independence: the one that within 20 days (and after proofreading, editing, additions, changes and deletions), David Ben-Gurion read to declare Israel's establishment.

So who are you, Davidowitz? Why haven't we heard of you?

Davidowitz was ordained to the Rabbinate in 1913 at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). [Rabbi Prof. Solomon Schechter](#), the influential chancellor, ordained him. During World War I, Davidowitz served as a military chaplain and at the war's conclusion, held the rank of lieutenant in the United States Army (later he would also receive two decorations: the Purple Heart and the Victory Medal) and became a congregational rabbi.

At the beginning of his career, he was the rabbi of the Bnei Yeshurun congregation in Philadelphia. From 1923 to 1929, he served as the rabbi of a congregation in New Jersey. In the summer of 1929, he was appointed the rabbi of the Anshei Emet congregation in Cleveland, Ohio, which would later become better known as Park Synagogue, among the best-known Conservative communities worldwide, whose building was designed by the world-renowned architect Erich Mendelsohn.

Davidowitz was a member of the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly (RA) and even served as a permanent member of the Conservative Movement's Halacha Committee, a right reserved for the brightest of rabbis (back then, only men served on this committee). He wrote his doctoral thesis at the University of Pennsylvania.

Then, in the summer of 1934, he arrived in Israel for the first time and that was it. He and his wife Ida fell in love with the golden sands of Tel Aviv and built a life. He would only return to the US in 1946 for a Rabbinical Assembly conference in New York. There, he delivered a speech at the conference's opening session that left a strong impression on his colleagues. He spoke about Tel Aviv and Zionism with great love, talent and depth.

Davidowitz led a modest life. A Renaissance man who knew how to recite the Bible by heart but also most of Shakespeare's plays. In fact, he was the first to translate into Hebrew Shakespeare's plays. His translation of Hamlet (which came out in three editions) was used by

high school students in Israel until the 1970s, as were his translations of Macbeth, A Midsummer Night's Dream, King Lear and Othello. One cannot understate the role he played in drafting the [Declaration of Independence](#). He planted a precious seed in the first draft that shines through to this day and is also relevant – very relevant – to the debate that is today dividing Israeli society.

Davidowitz sought an elegant solution to the question that occupied the Zionist movement from its very first days as a political entity; that is, from the First Zionist Congress in Basel. That question was what to do, for God's sake, with God.

Zionism is fundamentally a secular movement. It is to a large extent a challenge to the belief that Jews must sit and wait for the days of the Messiah to return to Zion. On the other hand, Herzl knew – and so did the socialists who would later represent the hegemony of the Zionist leadership – that religious sentiment and the prayer of every generation, “Next Year in Jerusalem” was one of the necessary cornerstones for the construction of a national home.

SO HOW do you include God in Israel's founding document that is supposed to not only define the state of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state but also to unite Jews with different worldviews, both secular and religious? That is how to say God without saying God and allow everyone to sign a document together that generations to come will be proud of?

Davidowitz inserted a very precise phrase: Tzur Yisrael (Rock of Israel).

This elegant solution to God being present-not present in the Declaration of Independence could only be conceived by a biblical scholar and a man of literature but above all, a man with a heavy dose of Jewish humor.

Tzur Yisrael is one of God's names in the Bible but like any good metaphor, it is open to more than one interpretation. Tzur, in Hebrew, is a rock. In other words, Tzur Yisrael is a festive metaphor that, through nature, describes the strength of the people of Israel whether that strength is completely secular or religious.

Although Ben-Gurion would later claim that he was the one who introduced the phrase, the first draft reveals that this is how Davidowitz, with the creativity of a religious man walking among the secular, translated the phrase "Divine Providence" from the American Declaration of Independence.

Davidowitz died in December 1973, two months after the Yom Kippur War and was buried in the Holon cemetery. His name is hardly remembered. It's possible that if he wasn't a Conservative rabbi but rather one from a stream with power in today's Israeli establishment, there would already be buildings or streets named after him. One day, I hope that we will be fixed.

But more importantly, particularly this week as the World Zionist Congress gathers in Israel together with the Board of Trustees of the Jewish Agency and the General Assembly of the Jewish Federations of North America, I hope that we will be able to anchor the Declaration of Independence as the Tzur – the rock – of the state of Israel in our time.

The writer is the vice chairman of the World Zionist Organization.