

OUR SERIES ON LEADERS WHO HAVE SHAPED RELIGIOUS ZIONISM OVER THE LAST 150 YEARS

## Rabbi Meir Bar-Ilan

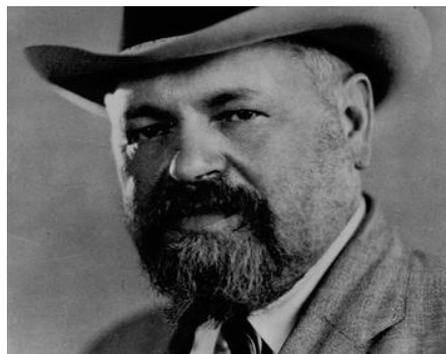
**M**eir Bar-Ilan (Berlin) was born in Volozhin, Russia, son of the Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zevi Yehuda Berlin). Undoubtedly, the young Meir was influenced by his father's deep commitment to the settlement of *Eretz Yisrael*. When the Netziv died in 1894, Meir began to travel from yeshiva to yeshiva; first to Telz, then Brisk and finally to Novardok, where he learned with his grandfather, the renowned Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein.

In 1905, Rabbi Bar-Ilan participated as a delegate to the Zionist Congress for the first time. Unlike many of his other colleagues within Mizrahi, he voted against the Uganda Plan, convinced that *Eretz Yisrael* was the only possible homeland for the Jewish people. From this point on, Bar-Ilan began to devote his entire life and activities to the development of the Mizrahi party in the Diaspora and in *Eretz Yisrael*.

To further his studies, Bar-Ilan moved to Germany, where he was deeply influenced by the religious community and its ideology of *Torah im Derech Eretz* – a synthesis of traditional Jewish law and study with contemporary culture. There, Rabbi Bar-Ilan was involved in the daily affairs of the Zionist community and within Mizrahi in particular. In 1911, he founded "*Halvri*," the first Hebrew weekly newspaper. It became recognized as an open forum, enabling leading Zionists to express the questions and challenges that faced the Zionist Movement as well as serving as an outlet for literary articles on Zionism. Although he held no official position within Mizrahi, Rabbi Bar-Ilan became its traveling spokesman,

helping to establish Mizrahi groups in other countries in Western Europe.

Prior to World War I, Bar-Ilan visited the United States for the first time and laid the groundwork for the American Mizrahi party, becoming the central figure in the Mizrahi Convention held there in 1914. He returned to Europe after a stay of many months, but when World War I engulfed Europe in 1915, he traveled back to the United States, where he resided for the next 10 years. He became the recognized head of the Mizrahi party and established an American equivalent to *Halvri*.



In 1920, at the First Mizrahi Congress, he served in the capacity of President and from that time on was recognized as the world leader of Mizrahi. In 1926, he made *aliyah*, one of the first Zionist spokesmen from the United States to realize the dream of living in *Eretz Yisrael*. In Israel, Bar-Ilan carried a strong voice within the Mizrahi leadership and served in the Jewish Agency and the Jewish National Fund. In 1937, at the 20th Zionist Congress, he was among the few who fought against the plan to partition *Eretz Yisrael*.

Bar-Ilan left an indelible impression upon Mizrahi in *Eretz Yisrael* and

the Diaspora, being the first to coin the phrase *Am Yisrael BeEretz Yisrael al pi Torat Yisrael* – The Nation of Israel in the Land of Israel according to the Torah of Israel. In regard to this statement, he wrote: "The direction of the Mizrahi Movement is not to remain hidden within Judaism, nor to seek out a hidden corner even if that is where the Torah can be found, but to capture the Jewish way of life, to spread the spirit of Torah in the thoroughfare, on the street, upon the masses and within the State." He understood that the spiritual composition of the Jewish State must be decided not through ideas and advice, nor through promises or decisions made from afar, but rather through the participation of the religious community in building the Land itself. He also understood very clearly that future generations would base their dedication to the State and the values of Judaism upon the participation and contribution of the religious community towards the re-establishment of the State and the national reawakening.

In 1927, Rabbi Bar-Ilan said that Mizrahi would see the fruits of its labor not when most Jews were living in *Eretz Yisrael*, but when Judaism would be visible in most places in *Eretz Yisrael*.

Before his death, Rabbi Bar-Ilan saw the realization of his dream – the establishment of a Jewish State in the Land of Israel. In the last year of his life, the first of the new State, he fought hard to have Jerusalem declared the capital of *Eretz Yisrael*. His name has been memorialized in various places in Israel, such as Bar-Ilan University in Ramat Gan, and Moshav Beit Meir, in the Jerusalem Hills. ■