

Reflections on *Yom ha-'Atsma'ut*

By Bezalel Naor

The fifth of Iyyar commemorates the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. When it came to the State of Israel, the Orthodox community adopted three different stances. At one extreme was Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook who viewed the rebirth of Israel in its ancestral land as an event, an event of major, even Messianic proportions.¹ At the opposite extreme was Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, the Rebbe of Satu Mare, who saw in the Zionist entity an anti-event, once again of mythic proportions, evoking images of the antichrist or anti-Messiah, Shabbetai Tsevi.² The middle ground was the position adopted by Rabbi Abraham Isaiah Karelitz ("*Hazon Ish*") and Rabbi Isaac Ze'ev Halevi Soloveitchik ("Brisker Rav"), which was basically to treat the establishment of the State as a non-event.³

Let us leave aside for the moment the rhetoric of redemption and think in less romantic, more pragmatic terms of transvaluation. What is undeniable by all camps is that the State represents a transvaluation, an introduction of new values to Jewish life. What are these values, what is their import, and how are they to be contextualized within the ongoing history of the Jewish People?

It is to Rav Kook's credit that in several important essays he undertook the herculean task of identifying these elements that surfaced with twentieth-century Zionism and grappled with their larger significance. To the table he brought prodigious erudition in both the exoteric and esoteric traditions of Judaism, coupled with a talent for engaging in historiosophy.⁴ Three major essays were devoted to this task:

- *The Lamentation in Jerusalem* (1904)
- *The Way of Renascence* (1906)

¹ Though Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook died in 1935, thirteen years before the proclamation of the State, he could clearly see the "handwriting on the wall," and in his writings (perhaps prophetically) enunciated the name "*Medinat Yisrael*." His legacy and viewpoint were continued by his biological and/or spiritual heirs, Rabbi Tsevi Yehudah Hakohen Kook and Rabbi Jacob Moses Harlap, who lived to see the establishment of the State.

² Shabbetai Tsevi (1626-1676), Turkish pseudo-Messiah.

³ Rabbi Dr. Zevi Yehudah, a student of the "*Hazon Ish*," shared with this writer that the "*Hazon Ish*" would poke fun at the term "*at-halta di'ge'ulah*" ("beginning of redemption") popular in Religious Zionist circles. He would say that with each day gone by, we inch ever closer to the redemption, but who is to determine whether we are in the beginning, the middle or the end?

Rabbi Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, nephew of the Brisker Rav, in his eulogy for his uncle, "*Mah Dodekh mi-Dod*," observed stoically that from his uncle's perspective, the *Medinah* (State) had no halakhic relevance because it did not occur in Maimonides' code *Mishneh Torah*. Thus the eulogist explained the fact that unlike the "*Hazon Ish*" who received Prime Minister David Ben Gurion in his home in B'nei Berak, the Brisker Rav refused to countenance Ben Gurion.

⁴ A brilliant student of Rav Kook, Rabbi Shim'on Starelitz referred to his mentor's work as a "*historiosophia di-mehemnuta*" ("historiosophy of faith").

- *To the Process of Ideas in Israel* (1912)⁵

Different elements and emphases come to the fore in each essay.

In *The Lamentation in Jerusalem*, Rav Kook examines the rabbinic and kabbalistic notion that there are two Messiahs, Messiah Son of Joseph and Messiah Son of David. In Rav Kook's analysis, Messiah Son of Joseph symbolizes the physical as well as universal aspect of the Jewish People, while Messiah Son of David represents the spiritual as well as particularist or Torahitic aspect of the nation. Rav Kook boldly situated political Zionism, brainchild of Herzl, within the tradition of Messiah Son of Joseph.⁶ Recalling the prophecy of Ezekiel 37, Rav Kook appealed for a unity of the "Tree of Joseph" and the "Tree of Judah," expressing at the same time the fervent hope that the secular leaders of the Jewish People would recognize the authority of the great Torah sages.

In *The Way of Renascence*, Rav Kook views Jewish history as a pendulum swinging back and forth between the two poles of "charisma" (Rav Kook actually employs this term), raw, unmediated experience, and book-learning with all of the discipline and rigor that it demands. Rav Kook recognizes in the Zionist romance of return to the Land yet another outburst in a series of spiritual eruptions (some noble, some ignoble): early Nazarene Christianity, Sabbatianism, Frankism, Beshtian Hasidism. These are instances of the spirit bursting the envelope of Torah learning. Whereas Rav Kook views Rabbi Akiva with his emphasis on Torah study as the corrective to the wild, unbridled charisma of Jesus; and the Gaon of Vilna with his call for devotion to Torah learning as the foil to the Hasidism of the Ba'al Shem Tov—in the case of the People's meeting up once again with its land, Rav Kook feels a different kind of solution is called for. The People are in need, not of rabbis who will dispense a dry, legalistic teaching, but exactly charismatic leaders who will be capable of channeling revelatory experience through the inwardness of Torah!

In any case, Rav Kook has identified in the new Israel the element of charisma, of untutored, direct apperception of God.⁷ Coming from his background in the Volozhin Yeshivah,⁸ which continued the tradition of the Vilna Gaon, whereby Torah learning is the bedrock of Jewish existence, there is a remarkable openness here to alternative models. (One might counter that Rav Kook's view was never as monastic as that of the true Volozhiner, for in his youth Abraham Isaac was exposed by his maternal grandfather Rabbi Raphael to Habad Hasidism.)

⁵ All three essays were translated by this writer and included in his collection *When God Becomes History: Historical Essays of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook* (Spring Valley, NY: Orot, 2003).

⁶ Perhaps in the recesses of Rav Kook's mind was the saying of the *Midrash Tanhuma, Vayyigash* (10): "Whatever happened to Joseph, happened to Zion." The commentators elucidate that "Zion" has the same numerical value as "Joseph." By an extension, Zionism becomes Josephism.

⁷ Compare the opening salvo of *Resh Millin* (London, 1917), Rav Kook's mystical meditation on the letters of the Hebrew alphabet:

"יודעת היא הנשמה שכל הבא בלימוד—איננו מקורי."

"The soul knows that whatever comes through learning—is not of the Source."

⁸ Himself a product of the Volozhin Yeshivah, Rav Kook prided himself that his paternal ancestor Rabbi Dov Baer Jaffe of Turetz and Utian had been one of Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner's original ten students.

In *To The Process of Ideas in Israel*, Rav Kook embarks upon exploration of the three “Houses” or Temples (or Commonwealths) of Israel—*Bayit Rishon* (the First Temple Period), *Bayit Sheni* (the Second Temple Period), and *Bayit Shelishi* (the Third Temple Period) —the last period (our own) to be, according to Rav Kook, a synthesis of the more salient features of the first and second.

This is a lengthy essay which deserves much study, but in a rough and ready way one might sum up by saying that the “idea” (Rav Kook employs this exact term, Greek in origin, in the Hebrew essay) of the First Temple was nation; the idea of the Second Temple was religion. Conveniently, by the insertion of a hyphen, this yields in the Third Temple the national-religious idea. Rav Kook is acknowledging that whereas in Exile, Judaism was restricted to a strictly religious phenomenon, in the modern era of the Return to Zion, Judaism once again (as in the First Temple Period) assumes the role of a nation. And whereas Second Temple religion focuses on personal salvation and afterlife, the earlier edition of Judaism—brought back to life by Zionism—trains its sights on the eternity of the People.

Yet this is an extremely superficial reading of the essay. If one reads with proper concentration, one discovers that Rav Kook is saying that in the Third Temple period—our very own era—we shall discover the higher idea which subsumes and unites these two ideas of nation and religion, and that is: “*ha-idea ha-Elohit*” (the divine idea, or the idea of God).⁹

CONCLUSION

During his tenure as Rabbi of Jaffa (1904-1914), considered by many his most fruitful years in terms of Jewish Thought, Rav Kook penned three essays designed to place the modern Return to Zion in historic perspective. Taken together as a unit, they identify in the Zionist enterprise the following elements:

⁹ While at a glance one might think that MK Ruth Calderon in her recent address before the Knesset, or Israeli Parliament, in so many words captured Rav Kook’s picture of the Third Temple, with a little probing we see that this is not so.

Calderon recounted that she grew up in a house imbued with Zionism, for which the study of *Tanakh* (Bible) was of paramount importance. Pronouncing a personal and collective *mea culpa* on behalf of secular Israelis for jettisoning the study of Talmud, Calderon held up for all to see, a tome of Talmud which in her words “transformed her life.” She then proceeded to teach a homily from the Talmud, Tractate *Ketubot* 62b, concerning Rav Rehumai, whose extreme devotion to his study of Torah was at the expense of his conjugal duties to his poor wife, for which Rav Rehumai was punished by accidentally falling to his death when the roof of the study house collapsed.

Calderon’s point was that it is inhumane and unconscionable for Torah students not to fulfill their responsibility toward their partners in society, in this case the military service incumbent upon Israeli citizens.

With all due respects to MK Calderon (and I genuinely respect her), I believe that her presentation is flawed for two reasons. First, it fails to grasp that just as the study of Bible is not neutral but carries with it responsibility (in her words, “*mi-Tanakh le-Palmah*,” from Bible to military service), so the study of Talmud cannot be reduced to an academic exercise, to an appreciation of the humor and linguistic subtleties of the Talmud as she has demonstrated, but rather carries with it the “*ol mitsvot*” (“yoke of commandments”) and “*shi'buda de-‘oraita*” (“obligation of the Torah”).

But beyond that criticism, even if we should arrive at a hyphenation of the two Judaisms, Biblical Judaism and Rabbinic Judaism, `a la *dati-le’umi* (national-religious), or more recently *hardal* (acronym of *haredi-le’umi* or national-Orthodox), we would come up short, for we would not have realized the unifying principle, the supernal root of these two ideas, nation and religion, and that is the God idea, or as Judah Halevi termed it in Arabic, *al-‘amr al-ilahi* (translated by Ibn Tibbon into Hebrew as “*ha-‘inyan ha-elohi*”).

- Physicality and universalism, as opposed to disembodied spirituality and particularism rooted in Torah perspective
- Charismatic or experiential spirituality, as opposed to didactic book-learning
- National, collective consciousness, as opposed to personal, religious consciousness