

Special K: Rav Kook's Vision of Am Yisrael B'Eretz Yisrael



Aims

- 📖 **Learn** about Rav Kook's approach towards Secular Zionists.
- 📖 **Discover** Rav Kook's vision for Medinat Yisrael.
- 📖 **Explore** the centrality of Torah to Rav Kook's ideal state/society.

Rav Kook's Yahrzeit is 3 Elul.

It is therefore fitting for us to dedicate a Kvtza/Tochnit to this revolutionary thinker on this day.

Rav Cook?

Rav Avraham Yitzchak haKohen Kook was the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of what was then called Palestine. He was a profound thinker, teacher and writer, and had an immeasurable influence on the religious Zionist world. In truth, although religious Zionism claims him as their own, Rav Kook towered above ideological differences and political bickering and concerned himself with all groups of the Jewish community.



Rav Kook was aware of the need to inject the ancient doctrines and concepts of Judaism with fresh life and relevance to the problems of the day. To achieve this goal, however, he never compromised a single principle of Orthodoxy. What was needed was not the trimming down of Jewish theory or practice, he believed, but rather an emotional revitalisation and intellectual reinterpretation. Rav Kook's works are often considered the conceptual foundation stone for religious Zionism because his teachings place Jewish nationalism and *binyan ha'aretz* (the building up of Eretz Yisrael) at the centre of the Divine plan for the Jewish people.

Putting the Rav into Rav Kook

Rav Kook was born in 1865 in the little shtetl of Grieve in north-west Russia. His family was uniquely a mix of the two major schools of Orthodox thought at the time: his mother, Zlata Perl, came from a devout Chassidic family; whereas his father, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman, was a student of Volozhin Yeshiva, the archetypical 'Litvak' yeshiva whose founders were staunchly opposed to Chassidut.

He was plunged into the sea of Talmud at a very early age and by the age of 9 he had already earned himself the name of "illui" (child prodigy). He followed in his father's footsteps joining the yeshiva in Volozhin at the age of 18 (#theoriginalTorani) and became close to the Rosh Yeshiva, the Netziv, despite only staying at the yeshiva for only a year and a half.

Quick Quote

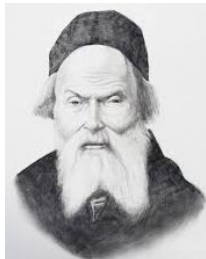
"If the Volozhin yeshiva had been founded just to educate Rav Kook, it would have been worthwhile."

- Netziv.

However, Rav Kook wasn't the typical Volozhin-er. He spoke to his friends in Hebrew rather than Yiddish and he became more interested in Zionism, and after he got married, he began to venture outside the sphere of solely Gemara and read the literature of the Haskalah (enlightenment) movement, Kant and other

philosophers in German. This was at odds with the standard Orthodox position of the time, which vehemently opposed any interaction whatsoever, with the radical Haskalah movement, and secular literature as a whole.

He is unique among the other hashkafic (ideological) minds of the time, in that he drew elements of western philosophy and culture to enrich and deepen his religious beliefs. Rav Kook also became highly prolific in his studies of kabbalah, and the Leshem (his teacher) testified that he grasped all kabbalistic doctrines and approaches.



The Chafetz Chaim (pictured) urged Rav Kook to enter the rabbinate and take up the position of rabbi in Zaumel. This was to be his entry into the rabbinate and at the age of 30, Rav Kook became the rabbi of the city of Boisk where his brilliant sermons and essays on current problems brought him national recognition and fame.

During this time, Rav Kook published a number of articles about Zionism and the necessity of returning to Eretz Yisrael. At the same time, he worked tirelessly to obtain the cooperation of the Orthodox masses towards the **practical** tasks involved in building up Eretz Yisrael. Based on these ideals, he made aliyah in 1904 and became the Rabbi of Yafo.

'In for a penny, in for a pound'

As well as being the Rabbi of Yafo, Rav Kook also took an interest in the moshavot in the surrounding area, and in 1913 (and again in 1923 and 1927), Rav Kook went on 'tour' (Israel Machane?) of the kibbutzim and moshavot in the Galil with Rav Chaim Sonnenfeld and other rabbis to meet and inspire their residents. He took a particular interest in ensuring the youth in these areas received a solid Jewish education, and sought to assist the chalutzim (pioneers) in observing the Mitzvot Taluyot b'Aretz (mitzvot that are specific to the land of Israel) such as pe'ah and leket.



In addition to helping in these practical matters, he deliberately sought to build positive relationships with the secular settlers, countering the common view that all Orthodox rabbis lived in an insulated bubble without concern for the problems of the day.

POINT TO PONDER

- 📖 *What is the spiritual value for religious Jews interacting with non-religious Jews regarding things that have nothing to do with religion?*

You can take the boy out of Israel...

In 1914, there was a conference of many prominent European Rabbis held in Germany. Rav Kook was invited, however he was reluctant to attend, since that would mean leaving Eretz Yisrael. However, he ultimately attended when he was required to leave Israel anyway for a medical procedure in Switzerland. World War I broke out during his visit, so he was unable to return to Eretz Yisrael for the duration of the war. During this time, he lived in St Gallen, Switzerland and London. Whilst in London, he served as Rabbi of the Machzikei Hadat Synagogue in the East End. During his time Chutz l'Aretz he campaigned for a Jewish State, particularly in the run-up to the Balfour Declaration in 1917. He focused on addressing the sentiment among religious Jews that Jewish nationalism contradicted Torah values and beliefs.

"Guess who's back, back again"

Following his return to Eretz Yisrael, in 1919 Rav Kook accepted an invitation from the Jewish community of Jerusalem to become its Chief Rabbi and in 1921 he became the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Mandate Palestine.

As Chief Rabbi, Rav Kook's first achievement was the organisation of the rabbinate of Eretz Yisrael, which allowed the religious character of the rapidly growing Jewish community to be maintained. Despite his attempts to harmonise the factions within the Jews in Palestine, the splintering of the community continued. Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, leader of the Edah Chareidis movement, did not recognise Rav Kook's authority and often challenged his seemingly more lenient halachic rulings towards issues such as Shemittah, as well as Rav Kook's warm attitude towards the secular Zionists. It's important to note, however, that there was never a personal disagreement between the two Rabbis, only machloket l'shem Shamayim, although some of Rav Sonnenfeld's followers made personal attacks against Rav Kook.

POINT TO PONDER

- 📖 *Is the claim of leniency still the main cause of the disagreements between Religious Zionists and Chareidim/Chassidim?*

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One of Rav Kook's greatest educational achievements was the founding of Yeshivat Merkaz, commonly known as Mercaz haRav. He hoped that this yeshiva would serve as the 'centre' of Torah learning, in line with the passuk: *"Ki m'Tzion teitzei Torah, u'dvar Hashem m'Yerushalayim – For from Zion the Torah shall come forth, and the word of Hashem from Yerushalayim."* (Yishaya 2:3; Michah 4:2)



His dream was that great minds, in approaching Torah with fresh genius, would enrich Judaism. One of his much-quoted expressions, fervently uttered on the occasion of a visit from a non-religious scientist, was, "May the day come when the great of the Jews will also be Jewishly great."

To the last day of his life, Rav Kook tirelessly worked to strengthen and unify the Jewish community b'Aretz, remarking with the last ounce of his strength, "there is nothing that justifies and permits division in Israel".

POINT TO PONDER

- 🗨️ *What do you think Rav Kook intended with his statement "there is nothing that justifies and permits division in **Israel**"?*
- 🗨️ *Am Yisrael? Eretz Yisrael? Both? Neither? RON?*



On the last Friday evening before his death, he urged participation in the nineteenth World Zionist Congress, observing "How can one not be a Zionist seeing that the L-rd G-d has chosen Zion?"

Rav Kook zt'l passed away in Jerusalem in 1935.

Rav Kook and Secular Zionists

In a pseudo-prophetic manner, Rav Kook even recognised "that a spiritual rebellion [would] come to pass in Eretz Yisrael amongst the people of Israel, in the beginnings of the nation's revival" (Orot HaTehiya).



With the pioneers of "Avodat Yisrael," during the Teshuvah Campaign

Rav Kook predicted that the early Zionists would rebel against the Torah, but saw it as a mere 'birth-pain' of redemption: *"The planting of G-d develops and blooms; and the light of Salvation and Redemption spreads out slowly like the dawn which stretches over the mountains"* (Orot HaTeshuva).

The question is: Why would Hashem bring about the beginning of the redemption of Israel through those who are not loyal to Him and have rejected his Torah? Surely one imagines the Geula to be spearheaded by faithful Jews who shine with Kedusha?

To this, Rav Kook answers:

"In all paths of life it is the secular which awakens first, and then the holy is compelled to awaken, to complete the renewal of the secular, to beautify it and to redeem it."

(Ma'amarei Ha-Reiya pf.403)

This is indicative of Rav Kook's highly complex philosophy. He believed that there is no black and white in the world, in terms of *kodesh v'chol* (holy and mundane), but rather he viewed the world in a myriad of colours.



forces which, to the unseeing eye, seemed to be thoroughly chol but to anyone wearing *the spectacles of Rav Kook* contained sparks of kedusha. Rav Kook felt that secular Zionists thinkers and pioneers were, in fact, doing the work of Hashem even if it was being done unwittingly, or even unwillingly.

When challenged by other Orthodox leaders as to why G-d would allow atheists to build the path towards redemption, he would answer that: In the Temple the Holy of Holies was of such a degree of holiness that even the high priest was only

allowed to enter it once a year on Yom Kippur. Yet, when the temple needed to be rebuilt, **ordinary workmen in working clothes** entered to do their jobs. The present time, he declared, was one of building which would lead one day to the establishment of the Holy of Holies. Secular workmen therefore precede priests. In other words, the tree grows before the fruit. May the tree blossom and the fruit ripen speedily in our days!

POINTS TO PONDER

- 📖 *Was Rav Kook right? Were the Secular Zionists the builders of something holy?*
- 📖 *Would it have been even better if these "workmen" were religious?*

Rav Kook and (the State of) Israel:

As a child, Rav Kook was famous for his special love and passion for Eretz Israel. It is told that he would play with his mates a game about Aliyah to Israel (sounds like Sviva/Machane...!).

His magnum opus, Orot begins with the following statement:

"Eretz Yisrael is not a peripheral matter, an external acquisition of the nation; it is not merely a means toward the goal of the general coalescing of the nation, nor of strengthening its material existence, nor even its spiritual existence. Eretz Yisrael is an independent unit, bound with a living attachment with the nation, bound with inner Segulot (uniqueness) with the nation's existence."

ארץ ישראל איננה דבר חיצוני, קנין
חיצוני לאומה רק בתור אמצעי
למטרה של ההתאגדות הכללית
והחזקת קיומה החמרי או אפילו
הרוחני. ארץ ישראל היא חטיבה
עצמותית קשורה בקשר חיים עם
פנימיות עם האומה, חבוקה בסגולות
מציאותה.

For Rav Kook, Eretz Yisrael was a fundamental foundation for the Jewish people, and it was the vehicle by which Am Yisrael's "inner Segulot" could manifest and illuminate the world, and serve as an "Or le'Goyim."

POINT TO PONDER

- 📖 *Is 'or le'goyim' best achieved when we are spread in the diaspora and able to influence them directly, or best achieved by being a 'model' nation in Israel?*

For Rav Kook, the answer was blindingly obvious. It was impossible for him to fathom a fully-functioning, utopian experience of Judaism outside the Land of Israel, and it was only when the Jewish experience was complete that it could begin to illuminate other nations of the world.

The Centrality of Torah in Rav Kook's vision:

He writes in Orot, *"It is impossible for a Jew to be faithful to his thoughts and visions outside of the Land in the same way that he is faithful in the Land of Israel. Manifestations of holiness, of whatever level, tend to be pure in the Land, and outside the Land, mixed with dross. However, in relation to the longing and the attachment of a person to the Land of Israel, his thoughts become purified by virtue of the 'air of Eretz Yisrael'."* It is only with this perfect faith, belief and practice that true Judaism can be realised.



Indeed, Rav Kook takes it even further, suggesting that the fundamental basis for the complete Torah to be existing in this world is through a fully functioning Jewish state, Only, when Torah exists in this world, the light of it's glory and splendour can illuminate the world.

"It is needed for Eretz Yisrael to be built and for all of [Am] Yisrael living in it, with every organization in order and running smoothly: Mikdash and Kingship, Priesthood and Prophecy, [Halachic] Judges and Police. Then the Oral [experiential] Torah lives in all its splendour and glory." (Orot haTorah 1:3)

וּצְרִיכָה אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהִיּוֹת בְּנוּיָה וְכָל
יִשְׂרָאֵל יוֹשְׁבִים עָלֶיהָ מְסֻדָּרִים בְּכָל
סֻדְרֵיהֶם, מְקַדְּשׁ וּמְלַכּוֹת, כְּהֵנָּה וּנְבוּאָה,
שׁוֹפְטִים וְשׁוֹטְרִים וְכָל תְּכֻסִּיסֵיהֶם, אֲזִ
חַיָּה הִיא תּוֹרָה שֶׁבַעַל פֶּה בְּכָל זֵיו
תְּפֹאֲרֶתָהּ

(אורות התורה א:ג)

**AM YISRAEL,
B'ERETZ YISRAEL,
AL PI TORAT YISRAEL**

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Summary

- ☛ Rav Kook believed that there is no black and white in the world, in terms of *kodesh v'chol* (holy and mundane), but rather a myriad of colours.
- ☛ Rav Kook felt that secular Zionists thinkers and pioneers were, in fact, doing the work of Hashem.
- ☛ He envisioned Am Yisrael B'Eretz Yisrael forming a Jewish state which would serve as a model state that illuminated the world.
- ☛ In Rav Kook's ideology Torah has a two-fold purpose: it is the basis upon which everything must be built; and also by building up the Land **properly** we can bring Torah into the world in its entirety.