

"Dr. Polonsky has written an insightful and thought-provoking book on the teachings of Rav Kook, one of the twentieth century's most influential Jewish religious thinkers. This book will open readers' minds to new ways of understanding some of Judaism's most central ideas."

*Rabbi Marc D. Angel,
Founder and Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals;
Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Shearith Israel, New York City.*

"Dr. Pinchas Polonsky's book, *Religious Zionism of Rav Kook* (abridged from a larger Russian language book) is an important contribution to Orthodox thought and to all who seek to embrace the tradition while living it fully inside the modern world. The book is full of fine insights into understanding Rav Kook's thought – I would cite especially his concept of continuous revelation and of monotheism as the dialogue of God and individual, of God and national group. At the same time Polonsky applies these ideas to such challenging contemporary situations as conflicts of ethics and Halacha, the role of doubt in developing faith, how to learn from alternate approaches such as Reform Judaism, atheism even if one disagrees etc. Here he brings his own ideas to illuminate or extend Rav Kook's wisdom. This book deserves a wide readership and deep reflection. If Dr. Polonsky's approach is followed, it can lead to a revival of religious life in Israel and make Judaism more relevant to all Jews who want a positive religious influence in their lives. This book is a wonderful fruit of the rediscovery of Judaism in the process of the rebirth of Russian Jewry."

*Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg,
Founding President, CLAL: National Jewish Center for Learning
and Leadership, 1974-1997;
Founding President, Jewish Life Network, 1997-2007*



Pinchas Polonsky

RELIGIOUS ZIONISM OF RAV KOOK



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SECOND EDITION



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OF RAV KOOK**

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Translated from the Russian by Lise Brody

Edited by Galina Zolotusky

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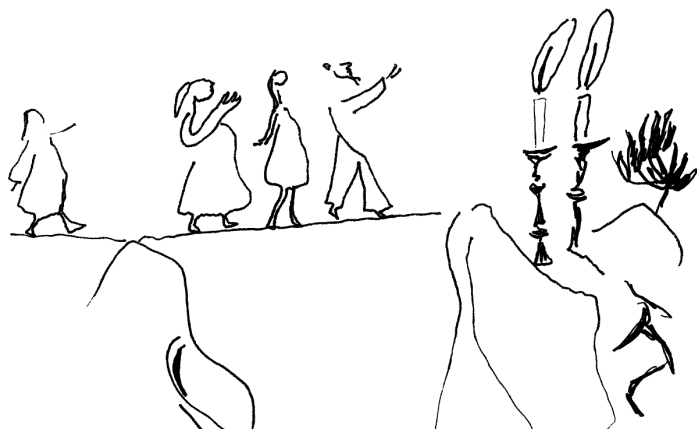
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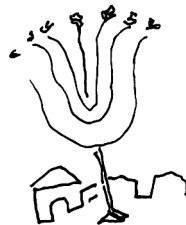
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PREFACE

Rabbi Abraham-Yitzhak ha-Cohen Kook (1865-1935) is, without doubt, one of the most celebrated rabbis of the twentieth century. He is known to most people simply as Rav Kook, the founder of Religious Zionism. We frequently overlook the fact that the foundations of his teachings reflect a deep modernization of the Jewish faith itself and of its approach to an array of contemporary problems.

Rav Kook was born in Griva, Latvia, the oldest of eight children. At the time, Latvia consisted of the provinces of Livonia (Livland) and Courland. The Latvian Jews were a special group within Russian Jewry. They were influenced from three sides: by the culture of the neighboring Lithuanian Jewry, by the Chassidism of Chabad disseminated in neighboring Byelorussia (now Belarus), and by German culture, which mostly prevailed in this region. Courland Jews identified with German Jewish culture and the majority spoke German, not Yiddish. *Haskala*, the Jewish Enlightenment, penetrated the Livonia and Courland communities early, but assimilation did not make the same headway there as in Western Europe.

Both Rav Kook's parents descended from generations of Torah scholars, of both the Lithuanian and Chassidic schools. His father, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman haCohen Kook, was from the Litvaks, and studied in the famous Volozhin Yeshiva; his mother, Pearl Zlata, was from a Chabad Chassidic family. Some of their relatives were also devotees of the *Haskala*. Rav Kook synthesized these three approaches in his life and teachings.

Rav Kook studied at the famous Volozhin Yeshiva (1884-1887), and in 1904, after working as a rabbi in several places in Lithuania and Latvia, moved to Eretz Yisrael to assume the rabbinical post in Yaffa and agricultural settlements nearby. In 1921 he was appointed the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, and soon after that he became the

first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine. In 1924 Rav Kook founded the Zionist “world-wide Yeshiva” that became known as Yeshiva *Merkaz haRav* in honor of its founder. After his death his students, and especially his son, Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook, brought up a new generation of rabbis and religious activists. Today, the yeshiva has about 500 students, including 200 students in the kollel (post-graduate division).

A kabbalist who united in his teachings the ideas of the Vilna Gaon and the legacy of Chassidism, Rav Kook created the philosophy of Religious Zionism, a movement virtually unheard of in the Diaspora, yet which plays an enormous role in Israeli life today. It now claims as its adherents more than half of Israel’s Orthodox Jews, and is symbolized by the knitted kippa. Rav Kook’s teachings have attracted great attention from the entire Jewish intellectual world, and his approach is widely seen as a turning point in the development of Judaism. But not everybody, even among Rav Kook’s supporters and followers, understands the true essence and philosophical underpinnings of his religious revolution.

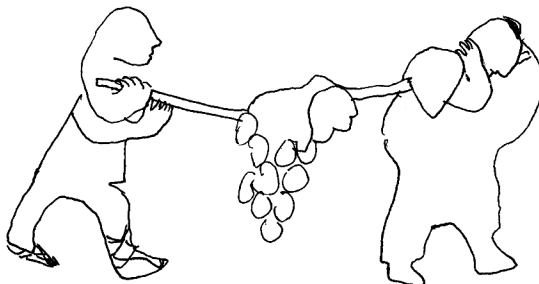
In discussing the religious approach to assessing the role of the Jewish people and the State of Israel in today’s world, we must turn to the ideas of Rav Kook, who was able to see Zionism in a religious light. At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, Zionism was not seen as an aspect of Judaism. In fact, it contradicted Judaism in many ways, occasionally even coming into sharp conflict with it. Despite this, Rav Kook not only “supported” Zionism, as did many rabbis, he also formulated a religious conception of it. Furthermore, he demonstrated Zionism’s importance for the development and deepening of Judaism. This is the aspect that we will examine first and foremost.

The central idea of monotheism is that God created humankind in His likeness. The individual is the image of God, and all of our life is a dialogue with Him. All that we do is the words we speak to God, and everything that happens to us is His answer to us. Rav Kook’s main philosophical concept is that the Jewish understanding of life as a dialogue with God has not one but two central themes. The first one is the dialogue at the individual level. The second is at the national

level: a dialogue between God and the Nation. The main religious significance of the State of Israel is that its very creation compels the Jewish people to act as a whole. Zionism and the creation of the State of Israel bring the Jewish people back into a full dialogue with God.

Rav Kook's uniqueness lay in his ability to deal with different groups of Jews, including the nonreligious, and to build bridges between them. This ability was symbolized by two portraits that hung in his study: one of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (the Alter Rebbe), founder of the Chabad-Lubavitch trend within the Chassidic Movement, and one of the Vilna Gaon, who strongly opposed Chassidism. This is what made him such a controversial person and at the same time such a great man.

Rav Kook was a poet by nature. This makes a systematic study of his philosophy difficult. We will attempt to outline Rav Kook's philosophy in more simple and concrete terms.



PART 1

RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING OF MODERN HISTORY



CHAPTER 1

Rav Kook's Religious Revolution

1. Religious Zionism and the Global Renaissance of Judaism

Rav Kook's religious revolution is distinguished by the fact that it exists entirely within the framework of Orthodox Judaism, presenting itself as "Modern Orthodoxy." But what exactly does that mean? Is it not a contradiction in terms? Can one preserve intact all of the religion's content, laws, and commandments and at the same time modernize?

In order to see how this could possibly be done, we will introduce an analogy from an apparently different sphere altogether. Imagine that we have a painting hanging on the wall, which we gaze at and study for a long time. We study it for a day, a year, ten, a hundred, nearly two thousand years. We have learned the painting by heart, we know its every line and detail, and we believe that we understand its meaning. Then, suddenly, the entire wall is lit up, and we realize it is all one great picture, and that our original painting is merely a fragment of the whole. In that moment, although the painting remains unchanged, all of its meaning changes. We had thought that a person in the painting was sitting alone, but when the wall is illuminated, we see that someone sits opposite him; they converse. This is Modern Orthodoxy: all of the details remain, but the meaning changes – or, rather, becomes clear.

To turn from the analogy back to Judaism: for millennia we thought that Judaism occupied only the "religious sphere," that science, literature, art, government, and other such "worldly" concerns were

not an essential aspect of religion. Rav Kook showed us that the whole wall – the universe, all of culture and civilization – is a unified whole to be interpreted in a religious context. He broadened Judaism to the dimensions of civilization – not only “Jewish civilization” (the Jewish life that had taken shape in the Diaspora over the last millennium), but also all of human civilization.

We will examine the ways in which he did this below.

2. The National Dialogue with God

The Meaning of Monotheism

What are the principal characteristics of monotheistic religion? Why did the transition to monotheism bring about such striking advances for humankind? The essence of monotheism, and its difference from idolatry, lies not only in its assertion that there is a single God.

In any system of idolatry there is a single higher power, but it is always represented as an impersonal force: for the ancient Greeks, it was Fate; for the Buddhists, it is the law of Karma; for the Chinese, the law of Heaven. Zeus was not the highest deity in Greek mythology; he was far from omnipotent. The highest power was Fate, who reigned over all. Why did the Greeks pray to Zeus rather than to Fate? Because Fate has no character. It does not converse with us, does not respond when called upon; it is a soulless law of nature. Therefore, it is pointless to pray to Fate or to try to engage with it, and one must turn to Zeus who, though he stands lower than Fate, enters into dialogue with human beings. A similar logic exists in every pagan system, from ancient Babylon to Siberian Shamanism. But if the Highest Power is an impersonal and indifferent law of nature, then there is no unified meaning in the world, and there never can be.

The central idea of monotheism is that God – a Highest Power, who created the world and its laws and who is omnipotent – created humankind in His likeness. The individual is the image of God, and all of our life is a dialogue with Him. All that we do and believe, all

of our decisions and actions, are the words we speak to God, and everything that happens to us is His answer to us.

And as God created us, He loves us, and therefore the central commandments, to love God and to love our neighbor, are two sides of the same idea. It could even be said that a person's love for God is measured by his love for his neighbor, and that the spiritual level of a society can be measured by the degree to which that society treats the individual as the image of God, respecting his worth and freedom.

And as God created people in His image, He regards them as His children, so that each of us is the child of God, and He strives for our advancement. This means that there is and will always be progress toward the good. Thus, God's love for humankind gives meaning to the world, making monotheism a fundamentally optimistic belief system.

All of these ideas lay at the foundation of Western civilization, and they continue to spread today. The idea of monotheism brought extraordinary progress to humankind, as the concept of man as the image of God endowed every individual with the status of person and creator, laying on him responsibility before God for his own actions, making it his task to strive for the world's progress towards good, and offering the certainty of Divine support in this endeavor.

Rav Kook's conception of the dialogue with God at the individual, national, and human levels

Rav Kook explains that the Jewish understanding of life as a dialogue with God has two central themes. The first, presented above, is the dialogue at the individual level. The second is at the national level: a dialogue between God and the nation. In other words, the nation as a unified whole, including all of its generations, is also a person, with freedom of choice and the ability to act – and its decisions and actions are the words the nation wishes to say to God. What happens to the nation is God's answer to the nation. And if, in the case of the individual, the dialogue unfolds within the framework of the person's life story, in this case, it develops over the course of many centuries of national history.

And as we speak to God above all not with our words and prayers, but with our actions, in order for a people to enter fully into dialogue, it must be able to act as a unified whole. For this it needs a national organism, a body, some form of government.

The main religious significance of the State of Israel is not that people there observe Shabbat and kashrut, important as that is, but that its very creation compels the Jewish people to make decisions and act as a whole. National actions create national responsibility; this not only advances and educates the nation, it allows it to realize monotheism at the national level and to bequeath it to all humanity.

Rav Kook explains that the balance between the ideas of the national and individual dialogues with God has changed over the course of the four-thousand-year history of the Jewish people. Both of these ideas were instilled at the beginning, at the time of our ancestors and the revelation of the Torah; during the time of TaNaKh (until the fifth century BCE) both aspects played a role and flourished. However, humankind as a whole was not able to assimilate both of these levels of dialogue at once: it was not yet ready for them. Therefore, during the time of the Second Temple, the awareness of the individual dialogue was preserved in Jewish culture, while the sense of a national dialogue was gradually wiped out, so that by the end of the period it had nearly disappeared entirely, as a result of which the Jewish state fell as well. It was at that moment that Christianity arose from Judaism, an occurrence which brought monotheism to humankind at the level of the individual dialogue with God and began to disseminate Jewish ideas. The Jewish people, in exile and dispersed, almost completely lost the idea of the national dialogue, and concentrated on improving themselves at the individual level.

In our time, according to Rav Kook, these processes have reached their conclusion. In other words, humanity has gradually digested the idea of the individual dialogue with God, while the Jewish people have improved themselves at the individual level. The time has come, he says, to begin to pass on to humanity the second portion of Divine light. To make this possible, Zionism has appeared, the State of Israel is built, and the Jewish people once again enter into national dialogue

with God. And although the Zionists never planned it, the people must begin to carry on and gradually recognize this dialogue in order to offer it later to all humankind. It is in this that the role of the Jews as the chosen people will be revealed. Their task, as the prophet Isaiah puts it, is “to be a Light unto the Nations,” (*Isaiah* 42:6, 49:6, 60:3) to advance humankind. The concepts of “bechira” (chosen) and “segula” (treasured) need to be distinguished: The idea of a “chosen nation” reflects the mission of the Jewish people towards the outside world – how it influences the other nations. In contrast, “a treasured nation” refers to the internal characteristics of the Jewish people.

In addition to the dialogue at the national level, Rav Kook presents the idea of God’s dialogue with all of humankind. This does not replace His dialogues with the nations of the world; it supplements them, and can only be built on their foundations.

The direct implications of the concept of the national dialogue with God

Thus, the idea of the national dialogue with God – which is only the first part of Rav Kook’s religious revolution – gives us an entirely different perspective on Judaism.

This approach throws an entirely new light on many contemporary Jewish religious problems. For instance, almost all of the Halakha in the Talmud and Shulchan Aruch was formulated after the loss of the Jewish state, at a time when there was no national dialogue. Therefore, all of the individual commandments have been examined in extreme detail, while the national commandments have barely received attention. Accordingly, there is almost no Halakha on the national commandments, and we must develop it now in the State of Israel. The idea of the existence of national commandments significantly changes our perspective on many aspects of Jewish life.

But what is even more essential is that this approach overturns our understanding of the meaning of Judaism and of Jewish history. Instead of a religion focused on the detailed observance of its commandments, Judaism becomes again a universal world religion,

which lit the way for humankind in the past, and which now guides it into the future.

3. The Concept of Continuing Revelation and the Changed Religious Paradigm

We will now examine the second of Rav Kook's central concepts: the idea of the continuing revelation, which is in some ways more radical, as it changes the very framework of our understanding of religion.

The concept of continuing revelation as an implication of the national dialogue

If God carries on a dialogue with the people as a whole, and what's more with all of humanity, then there is one long dialogue over the whole course of history. As the Mishna states, "*Everyday a Heavenly Voice emanates from Mount Horeb.*" (*Pirkey Avot*, 6:2) And if this is truly a living dialogue, then God must continue to speak words that are new to the entire people, and that have not been revealed earlier.

In other words, the idea of the continuing revelation follows naturally from the idea of the national dialogue as part of the historical process. This revelation needs no prophets or miracles – God speaks with us through history, through the development of civilizations, through all that occurs in the life of the people and of humankind.

And if we examine the course of history and the development of culture and civilization as God's continuing revelation, then we have not one source of revelation, as in many religions, but two. The first is the original Divine revelation, which took place at the birth of the religion, at the time of the forefathers and of Sinai, and which we receive through the Tradition. But in addition to this spring, there is the flowing stream. God has not stepped outside of history. He continues to speak with the Jewish people and with the world, and this revelation manifests itself in the development of culture, science, ethics, society and state. Thus, development not only has a spiritual

value, it contains within itself the revelation. Therefore, we must always strive to understand what God is telling us.

At the same time, of course, we cannot discard anything from the original revelation, which is the word of God, and so cannot be changed. But neither can we turn away from the continuing revelation given to us in the course of history.

Therefore, we must preserve entirely all aspects of religion (this is Orthodoxy) and at the same time assimilate the new spiritual information that is revealed in the world (Modernism) in an attempt to integrate the original revelation with the ongoing one (Modern Orthodoxy).

Changes in the religious paradigm and the central role of creation

The concept of the continuing revelation and the need to integrate the original revelation with it is an entirely new and revolutionary one, which we do not find in any other religious context. Rav Kook bases his idea on the ideas of the classical Kabbalah, and we find elements of it in the works of Jewish authors of the past centuries and even in the Midrashim of the time of the Talmud. But until Rav Kook came along, nobody had formulated it so clearly. Before Kook, there was no full realization that the course of history – the development of civilization, science, culture – is God’s dialogue with humankind, continually bringing us new religious insight and demanding religious renewal.

This concept changes the very paradigm of religion, the ways that we interact with it. To be specific, we are accustomed to seeing religion as something given, our relation to which can range from “studying” to “accepting.” It does not enter our head that we have the ability, while remaining Orthodox, to continue this religion and develop it.

Thus changing the paradigm, the concept of the ongoing revelation opens the way to those who are suffocated by the static nature of traditional religion. This concept, by placing creation at the very heart of religion, answers to our intuitive sense of the Divine nature of creation.

CHAPTER 2

Religious Significance of the State of Israel

1. The Vilna Gaon's Concept of the Death and Resurrection of the Jewish People

Rabbi Eliahu ben Shlomo Zalman, known as the Gaon of Vilna for his exceptional knowledge of Jewish tradition and religion, lived in the city of Vilna in the eighteenth century, towards the end of the second era in Jewish history. He was the spiritual leader of the Lithuanian Jewry, the most educated Jewish population of its time and a community particularly focused on the study of Torah and Talmud. To this day, he is considered the central pillar of the “Lithuanian” stream in Judaism. His ideas are relevant to our topic.

Let us examine one of the ideas of the Gaon, which he expressed in his commentary to *Safra Detzniuta* (Appendix 9):

*Since destruction of the Temple our spirit (crown of our heads) left us and here we are body without soul. **And the departure to exile is the grave.***

And deterioration consumes us, but we are powerless to save ourselves, and the idol-worshippers devour our flesh.

Nevertheless, the remained communities of study created great yeshivot even as the flesh decayed and the bones were scattered over and over. And yet the bones continued to exist, they are the Torah scholars of Israel, the supporters of the body, until even the bones decayed, and nothing left and the remains became dust.

Our souls look from above to the dust and we hope for resurrection. “Shake yourself off the dust and arise etc., and may the Spirit pour down from above upon us.”

According to the Vilna Gaon, when the Jews were exiled from the Land of Israel after the destruction of the second Temple and the defeat of the uprising against Rome, the Jewish nation died. Its corpse lay in the grave throughout the periods of the Babylonian Talmud (third to sixth centuries) and the Gaonim (seventh to tenth centuries.)¹ In time, he says, during the period of the Rishonim in the late Middle Ages, the corpse began to fall apart, and eventually its pieces decomposed so that by his time, the end of the eighteenth century, the body had almost entirely decayed. However, like a seed thrown into the earth, which appears to disintegrate and rot but in fact germinates, so it is with the Jewish people. Its body, said the Gaon, appeared to have decomposed, but was, in fact, about to rise from the dead.

Let us try to interpret the Gaon's words. First, what does he mean by "death"? The soul lives always; therefore, "death" must refer to the severance of body from spirit. In other words, a soul is "alive" while it has a body; it is "dead" in the bodiless afterlife. When the body is taken from the soul, we say that a person has died, even though his soul continues to exist.

This interpretation clarifies the Gaon's meaning. When the Jews were exiled from the land of Israel, the Jewish people lost its body. That is, it lost its national/political structure. This was the death of the nation.

The Vilna Gaon goes on to say that during the period of the Babylonian Talmud and Gaonim, the "corpse" of the Jewish people "lay in the grave." A corpse resembles a person, but is not a person. Likewise, during this period, when the center of Jewish life was transferred to Babylon, the Jews had cultural and political autonomy. They had a social structure that resembled, but was not, a government.

¹ Although the Mishna and the Jerusalem Talmud were written in the Land of Israel, they are considered to be works of the Diaspora because they were composed at a period when the Land of Israel was not under national Jewish control. Some of the Tana'im lived at the end of the period of independence, but the final version of their ideas was formulated by Rabbi Yehuda haNasi, after the end of the independence period. Therefore, they do not refer to issues of a state but only to the lives of individuals and communities.

By the time of the Rishonim, there was no single center of Jewish life; the Ashkenazim and Sephardim had split – the corpse was falling apart. And finally, after the exile from Spain and the resettlement from Germany to Eastern Europe, the fragments themselves begin to decompose: the Jews gradually cease to be a single entity, even within the Ashkenazi and Sephardic groupings. Now every community lives independently of the others, and eventually the individual becomes independent of the community. No national organism remains at all—the corpse has entirely decomposed.

The resurrection from the dead

The Vilna Gaon concludes with the assertion that the Jewish people are about to rise from the dead. If we examine the two and a half centuries that separate us from his time, we see that his prediction has come true. A national body has arisen, known as the State of Israel. From this point of view, the Zionist movement and the State of Israel are not transient political-economic events; they are a pure and typical resurrection, a soul re-embodied.

Over the many centuries of exile, the disembodied soul of the Jewish people continued to exist, but now it is reincarnated. Israeli government, of course, is far from perfect; however, this is not determined by the body, but by the character of the soul that inhabits it. Zionism did not create the soul of Judaism – that lived always – it created a body for it. The formation of the State of Israel is a cardinal phenomenon in Jewish life, and an event unique in world history. The life of the Jews in the Diaspora was the life of the disembodied soul, and everything created by Jews in Galut is the work of the spirit beyond the grave.

Jewish life in exile as existence beyond the grave

If one were to ask of what Jewish life consists, or consisted, in any city in the Diaspora, the answer would be an enumeration of yeshivas, synagogues, theaters, and clubs. We equate Jewish life with Jewish culture. Over two thousand years of exile, the important figures in Jewish life have been those who wrote great literature, usually religious. No other people would view itself this way. If we were to ask

someone to describe French life in any particular century, in addition to culture and literature we would be told about the physical aspects of life, the actions of the government: what it built and destroyed, what laws it passed and how it enforced them, with whom it made war and peace, what it seized and what it relinquished. Culture is only one aspect of the national life of a people.

Only in the Jewish exile do we see national life equated with national culture. Jewish life in Israel is another matter. It includes not only culture, but also social and political life, relations between Jews and other peoples, wars and truces, law and government, territories and boundaries. Culture, including literature, is merely one aspect of this life.

For Jews in exile, Jewish life is reduced to culture alone. Like a disembodied spirit, lacking life and breath, it is taken up entirely by its own ideas and humors. It is a life that cannot be called real.

The distinction between life and culture is like the gulf between the person who lives and solves real problems, and the person who reads a novel in which problems are solved in theory. The reading of a novel may be a fully absorbing occupation, but it cannot be compared with life in its entirety. Zionism and the creation of the State of Israel returned to the Jewish people the possibility and necessity of a real national life; it has placed us in a situation where we must decide real problems, not simply compose and read novels about them. This is a resurrection from the dead.

We then conclude with posing the following question: during which of these two periods – the time of the Land of Israel or the time of the Diaspora – did the Jewish people make a greater contribution to world culture and civilization? Many would answer with barely a moment's thought that it was during the time of Diaspora. But as soon as we ask what specifically the Jewish contribution consisted of from the third to the nineteenth centuries, we find ourselves stumped. Can we name even ten great Jews from that period who made an essential contribution to world culture and civilization? Well, say we name Maimonides and Spinoza. With some difficulty (concerning whether their contribution can be considered essential), we add the Kabbalah, Chassidism, Mendelssohn, Heine, perhaps

Rothchild, and, let us say, Karl Marx. That completes the list, and it turns out to be much shorter than we had anticipated. Not much for a “chosen people.”

We could, of course, lengthen the list by widening our time span: if we include the twentieth century, we can add Freud, Einstein, Wiener and, a rung below, some Nobel Laureates. But here problems arise: first, it is difficult to assess just how great these names will be in five hundred or a thousand years. When we speak today of the greats of the fifth or tenth century, we realize that these must indeed be truly outstanding individuals for their names to be known a millennium later; it is not clear whether today’s Nobel Laureates will appear quite so impressive fifteen hundred years hence. Furthermore, it is a bit odd that all of our claims to importance over the entire period of the Diaspora should be concentrated in the last hundred years. What were we doing for fifteen hundred years before, why did we not make a fitting contribution to the development of civilization? Despite the fact that the first era is separated from us by two millennia, any educated western person can easily name dozens of great Jews of that time, from Moses to David, King Solomon, the prophet Isaiah, and so on. This is the period when the world received the Bible, an unprecedented contribution to world culture, through the Jews.

The Bible is the foundation of Western and, hence, world culture, the basis of the entire Western worldview. The idea that man is made in God’s image (on which Western civilization is founded), the Western view of man’s place in the universe, of his freedoms and rights, of morality and ethical values, all spring from the Bible. It would be difficult to overrate the Bible’s influence on world culture.

2. Rav Kook’s Analysis of the Potential for *Chochma* and *Bina* in the Diaspora and in the State of Israel

A new approach to Kabbalah

Rav Kook’s entire approach is based on Kabbalah interpreted at a new level. Rav Kook’s Kabbalah is a Kabbalah of God’s dialogue with the Jewish people. He examines the Jewish people as a single

organism, applying the conceptual model of Kabbalah to interpret the dynamics of social processes within it, thus generating a sociological projection of Kabbalah. In addition, Rav Kook interprets us not as empty vessels, containing nothing but the light that we have received from above; he emphasizes the personal nature and unique quality of every individual – the “I” of the person and of the nation. Realizing its individual creative potential, the person and the nation find meaning in life. This realization is the essence of religion.

Chochma and Bina

The concepts of *chochma* and *bina* are familiar. They long ago migrated from the Kabbalah and Chassidism into mainstream Jewish and European thought. However, their true meanings and application are not widely understood.

Both of these terms belong to the realm of understanding and intellectual attainment. It would be incorrect, however, simply to translate *chochma* as wisdom and *bina* as understanding, as these meanings are specific to the Kabbalah. In a European context, it would be more accurate to define *chochma* as illumination, and *bina* as the analysis of that illumination. *Chochma* is the first stage of enlightenment, the blinding flash. *Bina* develops and structures the ideas grasped (the word *bina* comes from the root bone, meaning to build), putting them into a logical system. It is worth noting that as the Divine light descends from the uppermost spheres to the world below, *chochma* is a higher stage than *bina*.

The potential for attaining Chochma and Bina in exile and in the State of Israel

We will turn now to Rav Kook’s own ideas. Speaking of the creative potential of the Jewish people, he states that in exile, they can rise no higher than the level of *bina*; only in Israel can they attain *chochma*. Therefore, no authentic Jewish creativity is possible outside the land of Israel (*Orot haKodesh* ch. 1, p. 133.) Only in Israel can the Jewish people receive truly new revelations; in Galut, they can do no more than analyze, systematize, and explore old ones.

The TaNaKh and Talmud as Chochma and Bina

In order to understand Rav Kook's claim, we will examine the following example. The primary Jewish book created in Israel is the TaNaKh; those created in Galut are the Talmud, codes and commentaries.

What is the character of the TaNaKh in terms of *chochma* and *bina*? In every book of the TaNaKh we encounter new revelations. It is clearly a book of *chochma*. On the other hand, the Talmud, codes and commentaries – in fact, all of the culture of Galut – are directed towards what has already been said. The purpose of these works is to analyze, systematize, and develop prior revelations. Jewish culture in exile, with its constant mandate to cite its sources, is directed solely at preserving tradition, whereas the nature of Jewish culture in Israel is to advance, to make new discoveries. The TaNaKh, created in Israel, reflects *chochma*; this is why it, and not the Talmud, had such a cardinal influence on all humankind. Christian European specialists read the commentaries of Rashi – they were even translated into Latin at one point – but Rashi's influence on this small group cannot be compared with that of the Bible, which remains the most important book in European civilization.

The TaNaKh is a book meant for every person on Earth. The Talmud is for Jews and specialists; it is not addressed to humanity as a whole.

The lack of study of the TaNaKh in yeshivas in Galut in recent centuries

It is a remarkable and little known fact that over the last one or two hundred years, the TaNaKh was not taught at all in yeshivas; the Talmud was studied almost exclusively, along with the Halakha, the fundamentals of Chassidism, or ethical tracts, depending on the yeshiva. Everyone knew the Torah of course, especially as it was read on the Shabbat, as were the haftarot; people knew the psalms and the Five Scrolls; but as for the rest of the TaNaKh, even those who studied it in yeshivas did so for the most part unsystematically. They were familiar with it as fragmented excerpts mentioned in

the Talmud, presented almost always in illustration of some logical argument or foregone conclusion, rather than in their original sense and significance. Yeshiva students had no substantive knowledge or understanding of the TaNaKh.

At first glance, this is shocking. How can it be that the Bible itself, the most important book given to the world by Jews, was not studied in the yeshivas? But the explanation is clear. Jews throughout the centuries have approached their sacred texts very seriously, seeking in them guidance for their actions and understanding of the world around them. What could the TaNaKh, and especially its histories, offer in Galut? Of course, the Torah has much to offer: it contains the commandments and laws that guide our behavior in life. But what can Jews in the Diaspora draw from its history of the Jewish people – the kings, the wars, the relations between kings and prophets, the conquest and division of the nation, the spiritual-political history of the Jewish kingdoms – what could they feel for all this? Almost nothing. Those books were distant from the world they lived in; they dealt with problems alien to them; they were simply uninteresting. General interest in the the TaNaKh was revived only with Zionism. The new Zionist Jewish population of the State of Israel found it both interesting and essential. We will discuss the reasons for this in detail below.

3. The Connections between the Approaches of the Vilna Gaon and Rav Kook

The existence of the body demands action; choice creates the potential for chochma

We now compare two periods in the history of the Jewish people: the era of the Land of Israel from the fourteenth century BCE to the second century CE, and the era of exile from the third to nineteenth centuries.

As we have seen, the Vilna Gaon holds that during the first era, the Jewish nation had a physical body and was, therefore, alive, while during the second era, disembodied, it was dead. Rav Kook adds

another perspective to this analysis: during the first era we had the potential to attain *chochma*; during the second, we were limited to *bina*.

What is the connection between these two ideas? Why should a people's ability to attain *chochma* be dependent on the existence of a government? After all, understanding is gained through reason, and the Jewish people never lost its power of thought. The landowner and the keeper of livestock lost their occupations, but the thinker and poet took their minds with them. Why cannot the mind in exile attain *chochma*? We see that it is capable of functioning at the level of *bina* – it can acquire and analyze information, draw logical conclusions. Why are new revelations beyond its reach?

Let us approach this question at the individual level by examining our own personal experience. We do not gain new insights when we sit in our armchair reading a book and scratching our head. Illumination, true understanding, arrives only when a person collides with reality in his own life – this is when sparks fly. These sparks contain the seeds of *chochma*. They need only be seized and examined.

To express it less picturesquely, the collision with reality is an existential crisis, the crisis of choice. We make many decisions in life: we rise in the morning, eat breakfast, leave the house, ride the bus, etc. Of course, each action involves an element of choice, but these are standard choices, within the norm. An existential crisis is a situation in which our decision-making apparatus ceases to function, and we face a complicated dilemma with no clear solution and serious consequences. Only in making such choices as these, and taking responsibility for their outcomes, does the soul mature and attain *chochma*.

Most important in overcoming an existential crisis is the exercise of the will, and will is, in fact, the higher part of the soul. However, the presence of the body is necessary in order for the crisis to exist and thus to demand action, or the realization of the will. For there to be a problem of choice, there must be the possibility for real action to be materially undertaken. If the question demands no physical action, we can discuss it ad infinitum, weigh its pros and cons forever, and never reach a decision. But the moment of choice is the existential

breakthrough and the foundation for the attainment of *chochma*, and it is the body that creates the necessity for the soul to exercise choice. A person gains new insight when he is forced to act and to answer for his action with his life.

The will is the essence of the person.

The will matures through responsible decision making

For an additional illustration of this idea, we ask: what is the definition of a mature human being? The word *mature* is generally applied to a person who has had the experience of making conscious choices and taking responsibility for them. This, not accumulated knowledge, is the essence of adulthood. One may have read many books and yet remain infantile if one has never made a responsible decision. It is in the moment of decision that the soul is realized, as the essence of the soul is the will. The reality of the decision is what causes the spiritual breakthrough; necessity forces the soul to take action, and necessity depends on the existence of the body.

One can say that a person is defined by the decisions he makes. The true essence of an individual is not his knowledge, abilities, or even wisdom; it is his will, which is revealed in his actions.

Keter (will) as the highest level in the system of Sephirot; the disagreement between the rationalists and the mystics over whether the world is governed by wisdom or by will

It must be added here that in the system of the *Sephirot*, the Kabbalistic representation of the structure of the world and of the soul, the highest sephirah is *keter*, or will and not wisdom. Wisdom, *chochma*, is depicted as an outcome of *keter*. The Kabbalah thus asserts that the world is constructed and ruled not by wisdom, but above all by will.²

² It might also be noted here that this connection between will and material reality – the dependence of spiritual progress on the presence of the body – is presented in the Kabbalah through the peculiar relationship between the sephirah of *keter* (will) and the sephirah of *malchut* (realization).

This question of whether the creation and course of the world are determined by Divine wisdom or Divine will is at the root of the principal difference in views between two religious-philosophical ideas. Applied to humankind, the question becomes whether one's life and actions are governed by one's wisdom or one's will. Which of these is the essence of the individual? Classical rationalists lean towards the primacy of wisdom, those who adhere to the mystical school, including Rav Kook, towards the primacy of will.³ For this reason, rationalists tend to expect people, nations, and humankind as a whole to behave rationally, whereas mystics note that in critical situations people and nations act in accordance with the higher call of the soul, often paradoxically, illogically, and irrationally.

As regards the parallel question of whether the world was created by Divine wisdom or Divine will, rationalists lean toward the former (this can lead to determinism, as wisdom acts according to truth, which is absolute); mystics emphasize Divine will and, accordingly, the spontaneity, open-endedness, and uncertainty of the universe.

This, however, is a large, specialized, and complicated subject, and we cannot here examine it in more depth.

A national body makes necessary the realization of the national will; this creates the potential for Chochma

The link between the existence of the body and the illumination of the understanding, or *chochma*, exists not only for the individual, but for the national organism as well. When there is a government, its existence forces the people to make complex and responsible decisions; this gives the people as a whole the opportunity for spiritual development. In the Diaspora, Jewish life is so ordered that only the individual has to make choices, face existential crises, and advance through acts of will. Thus, progress occurs at the individual level, but not at the national. The community serves to fill cultural needs; it does not make existential decisions for its members. The Jewish people

³ Rav Kook emphasizes the particular importance of the parameters of Divine freedom as related to will, pointing out that the highest sephirah, *keter*, Divine free will, is the metaphysical source of man's freedom of choice.

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may suffer as a group, but they do not make decisions as a unified entity, as no actions can be taken without a body or mechanism to carry them out – or to make decision necessary. Without national action, there is no national spiritual progress, and therefore in Galut, the Jewish people as a whole is without access to new realizations or discoveries. As a result, Jewish culture in the Diaspora is focused on *bina*, the analysis of existing ideas; it is not able to contribute new insights to humankind.



CHAPTER 3

Advancing our Understanding of Jewish Life through the Concept of a National Dialogue with God

In this chapter, we will “test-drive” the idea above with a few examples in which the concept of a national dialogue helps us understand world events. We will then examine paths to the development of the individual, society, and religion that are opened by this concept.

1. The Establishment of Religious Holidays to Commemorate Key Events in National History

The concept of history as a national dialogue with God allows us to view many familiar things in an entirely new light. The simplest but most vivid example of this is the peculiar Jewish phenomenon of transforming key historic events into religious holidays. We see this in no other national-religious system. Of course, events involved in the origin of a religion itself always become holidays. In Judaism we have Pesach and Shavuot. In Christianity there are Christmas, Easter, and Trinity (or Pentecost). Islam commemorates Mohammed’s escape from Mecca to Medina. However, only in Judaism have events that took place over the course of several centuries following its founding been made into new religious celebrations: Purim, Chanukkah, Ninth of Av. Today, Israeli Independence Day approaches the same stature.

We see a similar lack of attention to centuries of national history in almost all Western peoples. In general, there is sufficient

national memory to celebrate only the most recent victorious war for independence (to be replaced by the next war of similar scale) and the establishment of the current form of government. Old victories and forms of government are forgotten. Only the Jewish people continues to celebrate key events in its long-term history, and to imbue them with religious meaning. This unique phenomenon has no apparent explanation other than a self-perception of the Jewish people as a single national organism in all its generations. This is what allows a group to see landmarks in its history not merely as links in a chain of political and economic events, but as a national dialogue with God (monotheism at the national level), and to perceive key historic events as Divine revelation.

The transformation of national historical events into religious holidays is striking evidence of the difference in world-view between Jews and other peoples. It has no apparent explanation other than Rav Kook's concept of the national dialogue with God.

***Bringing the first fruits of the harvest to the Temple;
the difference between the Jewish and Christian
approaches to history***

We will examine one more instance. The Torah includes a commandment to landowners to bring the *bikurim*, the first fruits of the new harvest, to the Temple, place them at the altar, and speak the following words:

“A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down into Egypt, and sojourned there, few in number; and he became there a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians dealt ill with us, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. And we cried unto the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, and our toil, and our oppression. And the Lord brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness, and with signs, and with wonders. And He hath brought us into this place, and hath given us this land, a

land flowing with milk and honey. And now, behold, I have brought the first of the fruit of the land, which Thou, O Lord, hast given me.” (Deut. 26: 6-10)

Every Jewish landowner, in fulfilling this commandment, yearly teaches himself to see his farming not only as a source of sustenance, but also as an integral part of Jewish history. It is not by chance that this passage later became the basis for the Passover Haggadah.

Now picture an American farmer bringing the first crop to Washington DC, setting it opposite the Capitol and declaring: "There was a British Colony and it did not let us farm freely and taxed us heavily. But the patriots went to war and liberated the land, and gave me a plot to farm. Now I am bringing the crop and asking for God's Blessing."

Why does this sound inconceivable? Not because Washington DC is too far to travel: it is equally impossible to imagine of those who live near. It is because history has never become a source of religious meaning or popular instruction for the Church. What has a peasant been taught in the church? He has been taught the concept of God; he has been taught not to kill, not to steal, to honor elders, etc. He is taught faith and morals (which are important), but in the church, he has not been taught history. If anything, he has learned Jewish history: in Christian culture the term "sacred history" refers to the ancient history of the Jews. This startling phenomenon – that sacred history for all European peoples is not their own but that of the Jews – came to be, apparently, because Jews alone declared their history to be sacred (and included it in the Holy Scriptures). European religious thought attached great importance to the life of the individual and to the individual's relationship with God, but it almost never examined national histories in a religious light. Because Christianity proceeded from Judaism at a time when the Jews' dialogue with God remained real only at the individual level, it did not retain the idea of a national dialogue. For this reason, the Christian people's religious criteria adhere only to the individual.

Jesus's admonition to "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's"⁴ was interpreted by the Christians to mean that spirituality was not to be found in political or national history. Christianity divides life into the spiritual and worldly spheres; the former pertain only to the individual, the latter to national and political matters. For this reason, classical Christianity never subjected the history of the Christian peoples to religious scrutiny (only at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries did this begin to happen). Individual biographies were examined; national biographies were not. The individual can serve as an example for emulation – this is why Christianity has saints who, through their actions, pave the way for others to follow. The emphasis is on the person, not on the historical process. For this reason, the Christian peoples have made no place for their national histories in the spiritual realm.

2. The Implications for Freedom of Choice

Here it must be emphasized that neither the concept of the national dialogue with God nor its corollary view of history as sacred precludes freedom of choice, either for the individual or for the nation as a whole. If we see life as a dialogue with God, freedom of choice – real freedom, not imaginary – is inevitable, as without freedom to speak, there can be no dialogue.

In the same way, the transition from the individual dialogue with God to the national makes national freedom of choice equally inevitable. Such an approach renders it impossible to attribute the actions of the national organism to material and physical circumstances, difficulties, etc.

Thus, this worldview is the one that presupposes free will and, accordingly, great responsibility, for both, the individual and the nation. And the greater the responsibility, the greater the spiritual and cultural (and along with these, material) progress of the society.

⁴ Jesus was asked whether it was right for Jews to pay taxes with Roman money, which bore the portrait of the Roman emperor and so represented idolatry.

3. The Dialogue with God at the Jewish National Level and at the Level of Humankind as a Whole

One may ask: Is it worthwhile to focus on the dialogue with God at the level of a single nation, or should we rather look at humankind as a unified organism and, accordingly, at our individual participation in the larger dialogue carried on by human history?

The answer is that, indeed, there exists a dialogue with God at the level of all humanity, when all humanity acts as one, and in this sense human history should be considered as such. However, the national dialogue with God exists in addition to the individual; it does not replace it. Further, until we fully and deeply understand the essence of the dialogue at the individual level, we cannot adequately carry it on at the national. Just so, the human dialogue does not replace the national, but complements and is founded upon it.

Human history cannot be examined without the history of nations. This is evident in regard to material and political history, in which the players are peoples and governments. It is equally true for spiritual history, be it literature, art, philosophy or religion. Every accomplishment of human culture is fully revealed in the context of its own national culture. For this reason, to omit the national level and skip directly from the individual to the human impoverishes rather than enriches. Love for humankind is important, but it must complement love for one's people, not oppose it.

In connection with this, Rav Kook notes that the next era in spiritual history will be the recognition of humankind's dialogue with God (*Yisrael Vetchiyato*, ch. 12; also *Shemonah Kevatzim*, 5:180). However, this step can only follow the national dialogue.⁵

⁵ An exception to this might be scientific discoveries (and, to a lesser degree, technical progress), which are also, of course, manifestations of the dialogue with God, and which today occur at the international, rather than national level.

4. The Historical Books of the Hebrew Bible: an Example of the View of History as Divine Revelation

The next example of Jewish history made sacred is the presence in the Bible of the historical books: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. These books primarily recount and analyze Jewish history. Why did they become part of the Holy Scriptures? What Divine revelation occurs in the telling of history? And why are they included under “Prophets”? The Christian view would have no trouble with the placement of Isaiah or Jeremiah in this section, as they contain prophecy; but it is unclear why Samuel or Kings should be here.

Let us imagine, for comparison, that someone suggests including a history of the first thousand years of the Christian Church in the New Testament. Such a suggestion would be seen almost as sacrilege. The Christian consciousness makes a sharp distinction between the New Testament, which contains the Divine Revelation, and the centuries-long process that followed in which humans received, disseminated, and realized that revelation at both the sacred and secular levels. Because of this distinction, a thousand years of history of the Christian Church has no place at all in the New Testament. In Judaism, this is not so. The Torah contains the original revelation and first stage in the life of the Jewish people, but these are followed with books dedicated to describing and analyzing nearly a thousand years of Jewish history. It is all part of the Holy Scriptures, that is to say, of the Revelation. This is a very important manifestation of the principle of history as sacred.⁶

Here we may make an observation on the structure of the Hebrew Bible as distinct from the Christian Old Testament. As we know, the Hebrew Holy Scriptures are divided into three parts: Five Books of

⁶ Today in Israel it is quite possible to hear the assertion that we are writing new chapters in the Torah with our lives; and though some may agree with this and others disagree, nobody would think to call it sacrilege. It is seen as a legitimate, if not indisputable, claim.

Moses, or Torah; Prophets, or Nevi'im; and Writings, or Ketuvim. The first Christians, who were Jews, were fully aware of this division, and it is referred to in the New Testament; however, in the Christian Bible, the Old Testament is not divided into these three sections. Why not?

It is possible that one of the reasons for this lies in the difference between the Jewish and Christian understanding of the word *prophet*. In the Christian mind, a prophet is a seer of the future, one who foretells in the name of God. Thus, the primary use made by Christians of the texts in Prophets has been the seeking and interpreting of prophecies which, according to them, were fulfilled in Jesus Christ, as well as prophecies of the apocalypse. There is little else of interest to Christians in the books of this section. As they see it, Isaiah and Jeremiah are prophets, and Judges and Kings have nothing to do with the topic. Because the section referred to as Prophets is not associated, for them, with prophecy, they did not retain the Hebrew division of the book. (Instead, the Christian Old Testament is divided thematically into Pentateuch, Historical Books, Poetic Books, and Prophetic Books.)

However, according to Judaism, a prophet is something far different. A prophet is one who brings the word of God to the people, in particular through the understanding of the historical process as a dialogue with God. In a certain sense, a prophet is a religious history teacher or, more accurately, one who exhorts the people to see religious meaning in historic events.

The division of Prophets into Former and Latter was not made chronologically. (Part of Kings tells of events that occurred after the lifetimes of some of the "latter prophets.") The books of the Former Prophets describe events that took place in the course of national history, and so they are written in epic form, whereas the books of the Latter Prophets deal principally with an understanding of future Jewish and world events, and so for the most part consist of the words of the prophets.

Thus, from the point of view of Judaism, the main function of the prophet is not to tell the future, but to teach people to see God's will revealed in the course of history and, through this, to perceive

the Divine Revelation. As Christianity does not view history as revelation, this concept does not make sense to it. For this reason, the very meaning of the word *prophet* has shifted, and it has become unclear what is prophetic about the books of the Former Prophets. In consequence of this, the division of the Hebrew Bible was not retained in the Christian Old Testament.

5. Even Today Jewish History is Seen by Humankind as Sacred

The idea of sacred history originated when Jews included their own in the Holy Scriptures. Other peoples, adopting the Bible, agreed with this view to some extent. And here we might propose that this acknowledgement of the religious significance of Jewish history, though it originally applied to ancient times, is, apparently, the deepest reason for the close attention paid by the world to Israel today. This phenomenon, though it has an obviously negative aspect (overly strong interference in Israeli life by the rest of the world), also has a positive side. The whole world follows anxiously all that takes place within the State of Israel. And if we compare the amount of coverage by the world's media with the actual number of events, particularly in light of the size of the population, we see that, proportionately speaking, Israel receives a hundred times more attention than all other countries.

The reason usually suggested for this – that it is an area of war and of conflicting interests – cannot fully explain it. The world contains many conflict zones, many clashes of interests and faiths. The only explanation for this heightened attention is that the peoples of the world subconsciously know that Jewish history in the Holy Land is of the utmost importance; is, in fact, sacred; and that through it spirituality is revealed. It is for this reason that our life is observed with such close attention, both positive and negative. The world senses the truth of the lines from Isaiah: “For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” This is an essential aspect of the world's view of us, and one of which, unfortunately, we are not always deeply enough aware ourselves.

The immanent and transcendent revelation of God, and the awareness of this in Judaism today

When we view history as sacred, we assert that God reveals Himself immanently in the course of history. Rav Tzvi Yehuda Kook spoke a lot about the importance of studying history as a way to understanding the Will of God in the world. As it says, “Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations; ask thy father, and he will declare unto thee, thine elders, and they will tell thee.” (*Deut.* 32:7) This is natural revelation, as opposed to the transcendental, or miraculous revelation that occurred at the birth of the religion. Taking place in the course of the historical process, God’s continuing revelation⁷ is a key teleological factor in understanding religion as a dynamic and growing system. The recognition of history as a dialogue with God is a subtle and complicated idea that is not adequately grasped by the Jewish religious community as a whole. The entire approach laid out above is tied to Rav Kook’s ideas, but it is far from being adopted by all streams in Orthodox Judaism.

Rav Kook’s ideas were revolutionary nearly 100 years ago, and though today approximately half of all Orthodox Jews (the Religious Zionists in Israel and the Modern Orthodox in America) embrace them, others still do not.

After all, in a certain sense, history stopped for us during the time of Galut: it could not be made sacred then. For this reason, the revival now in Judaism of a powerful sense of this sacredness is not a simple process.

6. Interpreting Jewish History in Light of the Idea of the National Dialogue with God

If you feel that you fully grasp the concept of the national dialogue with God, you may deepen your understanding by undertaking the following.

⁷ For more on this, see Part 2, Chapter 6, section 8. Also, see T. Ross and Y. Gelman, *The Influence of Feminism on Orthodox Jewish Theology*, part 5: *The Theology of the Continuing Revelation and its Antecedents in Jewish Philosophy, the Aggadah, the Kabbalah, and the works of Rav Kook.*

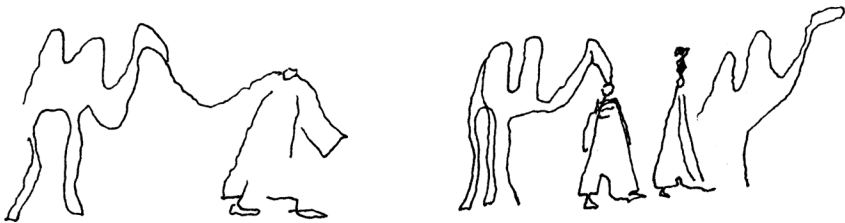
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Recall the principal events of the last, say, 200 years of Jewish history, and try to analyze them from the perspective of a dialogue with God. Systematically state what you believe the Jewish people has said to God, and what God has answered. Which of God's words over these years do you understand, which are incomprehensible to you? If you do this, Jewish history over the last two centuries will take on an entirely new aspect.

Then you might try to analyze, from the same point of view, contemporary Jewish life and the actions of the Jewish people and the State of Israel. Where are we right in our dialogue with God, where not? Where have we acted honorably, where not?

From these observations, reflect on the ethical principles that should guide national behavior (which emerge when we examine the people as a unified whole), and consider which of these principles should apply to the individual, and which should differ.

Reflection on these matters is, I believe, of the utmost importance for the advancement of our understanding of national life and its challenges.



CHAPTER 4

Applying the Concept of the National Dialogue with God to Current Problems Facing Judaism

We begin our discussion with an analysis of one of the most well known legends from the Talmud, the tale of “The Four Who Entered Paradise”; we will then look at contemporary problems in Jewish life in the context of Rav Kook’s analysis.

1. The Story of Elisha ben-Abuya

The Aggadah, as it appears in Kiddushin 39B and similar sources, relates the following:

Four men, the rabbis Akiva, Ben-Zoma, Ben-Azai, and Elisha ben-Abuya, entered Paradise. Rabbi Akiva entered and left in peace. Rabbi Ben Zoma lost his wits, and Rabbi Ben Azai died. But Elisha ben-Abuya entered the garden and began to cut down the plantings.

Four men entered Paradise: Paradise, or *pardes*, which means garden, represents the attainment of all levels of understanding of the Torah, from the simplest to the deepest and most complex mystery.

Rabbi Akiva entered and left in peace. He was the only one able to leave unscathed. The others could not endure the complexities and strain raised by knowledge of the higher world.

Elisha ben-Abuya entered the garden and began to cut down the plantings. He entered the garden of understanding of the Torah, but acted against it: he ceased to observe Jewish law, left the religion,

joined the Romans (this was at the time of the Bar Kokhba revolt), and fought with them against the Jews. For this reason, ben-Abuya is referred to in the Talmud as “Acher” or “the other.”

The Talmud attempts to explain how one who had reached the very heights of enlightenment could defect to the Romans and fight against the Judaism. It continues with the following story:

It happened that one day Elisha was sitting by a tree when a father said to his son, “Climb up this tree and get us some chicks from the birds’ nest.” The son, doing as he was bid, climbed the tree. He pushed the bird out of the nest, as it is forbidden to take a bird with its fledglings, and took the chicks. Climbing down, he fell to his death.

Elisha ben-Abuya, seeing all this, said, “There are two commandments for which the Torah promises long life. One is “Honor your father and your mother, in order that your days be lengthened on the land that the Lord, your God, is giving you.” (*Exodus 20:12*); the other is, “If a bird’s nest chances before you on the road, on any tree, or on the ground, and it contains fledglings or eggs, if the mother is sitting upon the fledglings or upon the eggs, you shall not take the mother upon the young. You shall send away the mother, and then you may take the young for yourself, in order that it should be good for you, and you should lengthen your days.” (*Deut. 22:6*) This young man has fulfilled precisely these two commandments. But instead of receiving longevity, he has fallen to his death.”

From this, Elisha drew the conclusion that the whole Torah was untrue. If, he reasoned, its promises are not fulfilled, there is no point in observing its commandments. He abandoned Judaism and took up with the Romans.

Later in the Talmud, another sage, the Rabbi Jacob, whom some believe to have been the nephew of Elisha ben-Abuya, explains that Elisha did not know how to interpret the Torah, and so fell into heresy. According to Rabbi Jacob, there are no rewards for fulfilling the commandments in this life; the rewards come only in the afterlife. The long days referred to in the Torah are eternity.

***The problems of understanding this Aggadah
and all Aggadahs in the Diaspora***

That is all the Talmud has to say about this tale. However, the more we ponder it, the less we understand. What is the internal contradiction here? The most obvious one is that, on the one hand, Elisha ben-Abuya entered Paradise – that is, he attained the highest level of understanding of the Torah – and on the other hand, his nephew, who was not distinguished among sages, claims that Elisha was unable to interpret Torah and he himself is. How could this be?

I do not know what answer was arrived at by those who pondered this tale in past centuries: the classical commentators give none.

I will note here parenthetically that in the yeshivas, Aggadah was not deeply studied. When I was just becoming acquainted with the Talmud, in Moscow at the end of the 1970s, I studied with Rabbi Avrom Miller, a wonderful teacher to all religious Jewish youth, who never ceased to obey the commandments despite all of the obstacles of life under the Soviet regime, including time in Stalin's camps. As a young man, Rabbi Avrom had studied at the celebrated yeshiva Chofetz Chaim, known as the best "Lithuanian" yeshiva of the early twentieth century. When he taught us Talmud, he told us to study the Halakhic texts minutely and come to understand them fully, but to read the Aggadic sections without deep investigation. They needn't be analyzed, he said, as we cannot understand them anyway. In other words, they are good reading for the simple folk, and, of course, they contain deep meaning, but their message is unattainable to us, so there's no point delving into them. Thus, serious study of Aggadah was not developed in the classical yeshivas, and few of the great rabbis wrote commentary on it. This may be one reason why we find no answer there to our question.

It might also be noted here that though we find many Aggadic texts in the Babylonian Talmud, almost all of them originated in the Land of Israel, and they have an *Eretz Yisrael* feel to them. Almost the whole body of Aggadic texts is centered around the Land of Israel, a factor which contributed to the difficulty of understanding

them in the Diaspora. At one point, the Talmud even states that the Babylonian Jews don't study Aggadah because they are vulgar and would not be able to understand it. It implies that the Jews of the Galut are better suited for the rigid, technical, logical teachings of Halakha, while Aggadah is too subtle for them.

It is therefore significant that with the return of the Jewish people to Israel, Aggadah has played an ever larger role as we look to the Torah for guidance.

Interpreting the Aggadah of Elisha ben-Abuya with the help of Rav Kook's ideas

How can the tale of "The Four Who Entered Paradise" be interpreted according to Rav Kook's ideas? The core of this new approach is that when the Torah refers to "thou," it addresses itself less to the individual Jew than to the Jewish people as a unified whole.

The Torah is above all a dialogue between God and the Jewish people, and to them it is primarily directed. In places, of course, it speaks also to the individual, as in Genesis, where Adam is both all humankind and every man. We see an example of "thou" as directed to the people as a whole in "Hear, o Israel: thou art to pass over the Jordan this day..." (*Deut.* 9:1). Here it is clear that the words are addressed to the people as a group. This understanding must inform our interpretation of other commandments as well. Thus, when the Torah promises long life as a reward, the promise is not to the individual fulfilling the given commandment, but to the Jewish nation. If the nation respects its elders, it will enjoy longevity; if it spares mother birds, it will dwell longer in its land.

This interpretation, in fact, makes clear why the commandment not to take the bird is associated with long life. There's no magic here. It does not imply that "if you spare the bird God will spare you," as we might incorrectly suppose if we look at it from the individual point of view. This is an ecological commandment⁸: preserve nature

⁸ We note that there are many such environmental commandments in the Torah. Some examples: "When you besiege a city for many days ... you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them, for you

and you will live long on the land. Take the eggs or chicks for food, but leave the bird so that her species may continue to thrive.

The Talmud commands that one who prays, “Thy mercy extendeth to young birds” (*Berachoth* V.3, 33b) should be silenced, as, clearly, the reason for this commandment is not mercy for the bird. However, what the meaning of the commandment is, the Talmud, written at a time when only the individual’s dialogue with God was real, does not explain.

Thus, these commandments promise long life in the context of a national, not an individual dialogue with God. The Torah emphasizes this in many places: national righteousness and sinfulness, national reward and punishment. As an example of this viewpoint, let us examine that most important and well-known excerpt, the Shema (*Deut.* 6 and 11). The Torah instructs us to repeat this familiar prayer twice daily, but we do not always pay attention to what we are saying:

If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the Lord your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil. I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle and thus you shall eat your fill. Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. For the Lord’s

may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down... Only a tree you know is not a food tree, you may destroy and cut down...” (*Deut.* 20:19) It is therefore not out of place to view the commandment about the bird in this way. Ecology and the recognition of the value of living nature occupy an enormous place in the Torah: even the original principles with which Adam was to settle in the garden have an environmental character: God placed Adam in the garden “to dress it and to keep it” (*Gen.* 2:15). From whom, however, was Adam to “keep,” or protect it? Not from the snake, certainly, which could do nothing on its own, but from himself, Adam, who alone was capable of destroying the garden. Ecology is our defense of nature against the destructive actions of humans. At the same time, Judaism does not condone “radical environmentalism,” rejection of civilization, etc. The Torah commands us to “dress” (cultivate) the garden – to build civilization – even as we “keep” it.

anger will flare up against you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the Lord is assigning to you.

Therefore impress these My words upon your very heart: bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead, and teach them to your children reciting them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up; and inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates to the end that you and your children may endure, in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers to assign to them, as long as there is a heaven over the earth. (Deut. 11:13-21)

If we observe the commandments, God promises us rain for the earth and long life on the land which he has given us. If we do not observe them, the skies will close up, there will be no rain, and we will be forced from the land. It is clear that these rewards and punishments do not come in the afterlife. It is also clear that God is speaking to the people as a whole: rain is sent to all, and exile is likewise shared. Although there is, of course, a parallel dialogue between God and each individual, the collective focus prevails, as the Torah seeks not only the righteousness of the individual but of the national-social life of the people.

Thus, the commandments to honor the parents and spare the bird are concerned with the longevity not of the person observing them, but of the nation, which must respect its elders and preserve nature.

2. A Turning Point in Jewish History

Here we must note yet again that all four of those distinguished Jewish sages who entered heaven, three of whom were unable to return in the same condition, lived during a time of transition, on the borderline between the first and second eras in Jewish history. (One might surmise that at other times there lived sages who entered Paradise without a crisis.)

At the end of the second century, after the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt, when the Jewish national organism was in its death throes, history turned a corner, and the national dialogue with God disintegrated, leaving only that of the individual. Simple people, like slow-moving cars, maneuvered the bend smoothly, perhaps not even noticing it. Although from a historical point of view, it was a tremendously sharp turn, they did not feel its abruptness, as it occurred over the course of a century. But distinguished sages, weighed down by knowledge and Tradition, were like powerful, heavy trucks, careening with trailers in tow, that easily flew off at the bend. Burdened with a generations-long tradition of study, they were unable to change direction so sharply. Of the four who entered paradise, Rabbi Akiva was the only one who managed the curve and was able to hold the road. This is why the entire Mishna would afterwards be based on his teachings and the teachings of his students.

Every person (including the sage who feels himself to be a link in the chain of Tradition) interprets the Torah in the context of his own experience and attitudes, factors which exist always in the present, which are tied to the epoch and its problems. Elisha ben-Abuya lived at a turning point. He was unable to interpret the Torah's words on longevity in the national sense, as he had already broken psychologically from that earlier world-view. The national dialogue had been lost, and he had no sense of it. In the context of his time, he interpreted the Torah's verses as pertaining to the individual. But he could not reinterpret them so dramatically as to see them in terms of the afterlife. He understood that the Torah speaks of this life, yet this understanding could not be reconciled with the first – that the Torah speaks to the individual. Over the preceding centuries, the Torah and its commandments had been viewed in the national sense, and so rewards and punishments could take place in this life. In the following century, his nephew would have no difficulty interpreting the Torah in the individual sense and applying its words to the afterlife. But at this turning point, his two views could not be reconciled, and he ran off the road.

In other words, Elisha ben-Abuya was at a much higher level than his nephew. Nor was it a matter of his being ignorant of some

commentary to the Torah regarding the afterlife. Of course, like all sages of the oral tradition, he believed in the afterlife. However, he could not in this case have embraced such a commentary, because he knew that these verses refer to longevity in this world. But this was incompatible with an era in which the dialogue with God, and, consequently, righteousness, were understood only at the individual level. The national dialogue had already collapsed and could no longer be the basis for understanding, but he was not yet able to assert that the Torah referred to the afterlife.

It is worth noting that just at this time, during the era of the destruction of the Second Temple, the question of the afterlife and its rewards received a great deal of discussion. This issue barely shows up in the Torah, although the Jews, fleeing Egypt, where everything turned to the idea of the afterlife, could not have lacked a conception of it. It simply wasn't important to the Torah. However, by the end of the period of the Second Temple, when the national dialogue had collapsed, the individual's afterlife took center stage. And for Christianity, which emerged from Judaism at that very point, the question of rewards and punishments after death is at the center of the theology. The Christians view the salvation of the soul as applying only to its fate in the afterlife. From this comes the vital role played in Christianity of heaven and hell and, accordingly, the loss of the national aspect of the dialogue with God.

This is how the story of Elisha ben-Abuya can be understood in the context of Rav Kook's ideas. And now, I hope, you can guess where the logic of this discussion leads next. (I once heard a wonderful suggestion from Professor S. Rosenberg. He suggested that, in order to confirm that you fully understand what you are reading, you should cover the next paragraph and try to figure out what it should say. If you are able to do so, you have mastered the text. Try applying this test right here.)



CHAPTER 5

Contemporary Problems in Judaism

1. Running off the Road in our Century: the Religious Inadequacy of the Judaism of Galut for Life in Israel

We will now turn our analysis to a second turning point in Jewish history: the present day. Let us examine the problems of the past hundred years.

The twentieth century saw a sharp turn in the reverse direction from that of the second century. Thanks to the Zionist movement and the creation of the State of Israel, the Jewish national dialogue with God has been revived. As a result of this, just as before, many “big, heavy trucks” veered off the road. Only a very few of the great rabbis of the beginning of the twentieth century supported the Zionist movement, and almost none understood its essence. There were, of course, some who supported it and who even initiated the idea of a return to Israel (Rabbis Zvi Hirsch Kalischer, Yehudah Ben Shlomo Chai Alkalai, and Samuel Mohliver). There were also those who opposed it. But for the most part, the religious establishment at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries was in confusion and did not know how to react to this unprecedented phenomenon. Rav Kook and, to some extent, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik were among the few who were able to grasp not only the practical, but the spiritual meaning of Zionism, and they laid the foundation for what is now known as Modern Orthodoxy. In this sense, they were able to round the bend, while many other great scholars of the Torah were not. Within Orthodox

Judaism, there was a division between the Haredim, who recognize no change of direction, and who believe Judaism should continue to follow the course it took in Galut, and the Religious Zionists.

(To be more precise, it may be noted that today many strands of Haredim in Israel, often in opposition to the Haredi establishment, are gradually turning towards Zionism. However, this is a long, complicated social and religious process, which demands a separate discussion.)

The fact that the main body of Haredim does not recognize this dramatic change in the world, in Jewish life, and in the Jewish dialogue with God is the root of the major problem faced by them in Israel: their religion is inadequate to address the surrounding reality. (We note that the first impression a nonreligious person has upon seeing the Haredim is that they are not adapted to the modern world. However, we are examining this lack of adaptation not in the everyday, but in the religious sense.)

Before continuing this analysis, I would like to emphasize that it would be entirely incorrect to mistake any of my critical observations for a rejection of the value system of this religious group. On the contrary, the Haredim have a great many virtues, and, to some extent, I believe that the religious Zionists have much to learn from them. Therefore, the critique which follows addresses specifically the problem of the inadequacy of their religion in those situations where it must address not classical problems, which have existed unchanged for two or four hundred years, but contemporary ones. These are problems of reconciling religion with science, with the values of today's culture and civilization and, above all, with the entire national, social and spiritual complex of problems pertaining to the State of Israel and the gradual rebirth over the last 100 years of independent Jewish life in the Holy Land.

As an example of this inadequacy, let us examine the position taken by several of the major religious leaders of the Haredim in the 1970s and 1980s regarding the Halakhic approach to the question of the territories of Judea, and Samaria.

As we know, after the Six Day War, Judea, Samaria, and Gaza, which the Israeli media preferred to lump together under the impersonal

term “the territories,” were under Israeli control. The media suggested that by holding the territories, we were exposing our soldiers to danger. As the situation was presented, we were faced with a choice between possession of the territories and a threat to lives. Therefore, it was suggested, we had best return the territories and avoid the risk. The value of life was to be weighed against the value of the territories. This dichotomy took hold in the general consciousness. Those on the left advocated giving away the territories to protect lives; those on the right, advocated holding onto them at the risk of lives. (In reality, of course, there was no such dichotomy, and at the end of the 1990s it was clearly demonstrated that it was not keeping the territories, but attempting to give up them that would result in terrorism, creating far more danger to many more lives. However, in the 1970s, this had not yet been shown in practice.) The majority of rabbis took the right-wing position, saying that the territories were the most important historic and religious part of the Land of Israel, that through them we were linked with our Jewish history and with God, and that they must not be sacrificed. Almost all those who advocated giving them away were antireligious.

In this situation, the religious leaders of the Haredim argued that according to the Talmud, there are only three commandments that take precedence over life (in other words, that must not be broken even under threat of death): the prohibitions against killing, idol worship, and incest and adultery. In all other cases, preserving life is more important than adhering to the commandment. The commandment to dwell in the Land of Israel, important as it is, is not among these three. Therefore, they said, life is of greater value than the territories, and if holding them poses a risk, they must be given away.

At first the leftists seized upon this declaration, rejoicing. They pointed out that here were rabbis calling for peace, for the return of the territories. But they quickly realized that while they used the word “territories” in the political sense, referring to the lands occupied by Israel since 1967, according to the religious ideas of the Haredim it must be extended to all “territory” in the State of Israel. If the principle were true under Halakha, then it must be applied not only to Judea

and Samaria, but to Jerusalem, Haifa, and Tel-Aviv. In fact, if we proclaim life more precious than territory, then we cannot retain any piece of the Land of Israel, as doing so would always entail a risk to soldiers' lives. The only thing to do would be to give away the entire country as fast as possible and leave. In other words, we could not keep even the part of the country that the majority of leftists would not wish to cede. The leftists quickly silenced their enthusiasm for this Halakhic ruling.

But let us put aside the political implications of this principle, and return to its essence. If there are in fact only three commandments for which life can be risked, then we cannot have our state at all: under any circumstances it would have to be protected at the risk of soldiers' lives.

(Later, several of these rabbis changed their views and stated that, as we have observed that ceding territories leads to terrorism, we must not give them away, again in light of the danger to lives. But this shift was brought about by political circumstances; there was no essential change in the Halakhic principle.)

Those rabbis who adhered to religious Zionism immediately pointed out that this Halakhic analysis was inadequate, as the Talmud, identifying three commandments that take precedence over life, refers only to commandments addressed toward individuals. In individual life, there are indeed only three such laws; but the commandment to keep the Land of Israel is not an individual, but a national one, and the risk to soldiers' lives is inherent in it.⁹ It is not included among the three discussed in the Talmud because the Talmud, as a rule, is concerned with the individual aspects of Judaism.

To this, the Haredi rabbis respond: "We studied at the very best yeshivas, our teachers studied with the very best teachers, and their

⁹ Here it should be mentioned that the position of the religious Zionists does not automatically entail a right-wing political stance. Although the majority of religious Zionists do hold rightist views, there are those who take moderate left-wing positions. Our analysis here is not a discussion of who is correct – right or left – but a demonstration of the inadequacy of attempts to solve modern national problems with classical methods of Talmudic analysis.

teachers with the wisest men of the last generation, and nobody ever said such a thing.” And they are right. Only Rav Kook noted the distinction between individual and national commandments. For many centuries before him, no such analysis was carried out. Although “dwell in the Land of Israel” was numbered among the commandments, it was not studied in detail. And although it is obvious that if such a commandment exists, it will be necessary to fight and risk life to fulfill it, in all the centuries of exile, this question was never discussed at the formal Halakhic level.

In other words, we see that the Halakhic analysis of this question was carried out according to all of the formal rules, yet it is inadequate to the actual situation. Arising from the norms of Judaism in Galut, it fails to take into account the real political life of the Jewish State of Israel today. This is at the root of the religious inadequacy of the main body of Haredi thought.

Of course, the majority of traditionalist (particularly Sephardic) Jews, recognizing the authority of the Haredi rabbis, still serve in the Israeli army, risking their lives for the country. And if they were to be asked whether, in light of Halakha, they must really risk their lives thus, they would answer: “Of course! Who else will defend Israel?” They do not ponder the fact that the Talmud names only three commandments worth risking one’s life to fulfill because, to use our earlier analogy, they are small, light cars, not overburdened with knowledge and the certainty of their ability to make a decision based on thorough knowledge of Halakha.

The “average” religious person is focused not on a book but on real life, and has a natural (and usually correct) intuitive reaction to the problems surrounding him. And because he does not believe he knows everything, he does not draw conclusions based on a book he has read or a phrase from the Talmud that contradicts what he sees in the life around him. Only an overeducated person, who believes himself to know all, can draw from the Talmud conclusions so far-fetched that he runs himself off the road.

This is a typical illustration of the fact that what occurred in the second century is repeating itself today, at an analogous turning point in Jewish life.

2. The Problem of Applying Halakha to National Questions

Note that the problem discussed above is, unfortunately, not a private one. It is not simply a matter of the inadequacies of Haredi Judaism, but a much broader issue.

If we take note of the dates of Halakhic literature (that is, literature that breaks down the law in detail) we see that it was nearly all written during the second era in Jewish history, in the time of Galut. A possible exception is the Mishna, which was begun during the period of the Second Temple, but which took its final form during the period of transition between the first and second eras. Therefore, almost all Halakhic literature, like nearly everything created by Jews in Galut, pertains only to the individual commandments. For this reason, we know a great deal about the details of Halakha regarding the individual commandments, but very little regarding the nationally oriented ones.

Let us examine the following illustration. What does the Jewish tradition say about the prohibition against mixing milk with meat? The Torah contains only one verse on the subject, repeated three times: “Thou shalt not seethe a kid in its mother’s milk.” The oral tradition explains that the repetition of the commandment represents three separate prohibitions: against cooking, eating, and use. The sages added to this the separation of dishes. That is the entire history of the matter. How, then, does Halakhic literature end up with countless volumes on the problem of the separation of milk from meat? What do they all say? They discuss such cases as what to do if a milk spoon falls into a meat pot – can it be made kosher, and how? In other words, the greater part of Halakha is devoted to post-factum problem solving – responding to situations that fall short of the ideal. The ideal separation of milk and meat is described in four principles: do not cook, use, or eat meat and milk together, and keep separate dishes. It is the non-ideal situation that is the subject of volumes.

However, such detailed analysis was undertaken by the Jewish tradition only for the individual commandments, as only they were being carried out and observed during the period of exile, so questions

arose regarding them. As for the national commandments, the Jewish tradition at best described only their ideal observance; there was no discussion of how to approach them in a less than perfect situation.

Let us assume (although this is far from evident) that we know what the ideal Israeli government should be: fully observant of the commandments, with a king, a Temple, etc. What, then, is to be done about the fact that we do not have such a government today? Our government does not fulfill the ideal, nor is it in opposition to it. It is not religious, but neither is it antireligious. How should we regard it? Is it kosher or not? If the government were like a meat spoon that had fallen into a milk pot, we would ask if its volume were less or more than 1/60 of the contents of the pot. Or do some other principles of kashrut work here? Should we participate in elections for the Knesset of this government, serve in the army, take part in its life? All the countless Halakhic studies of all the centuries of Galut speak not a word on this question. We have no developed tradition to guide us in the contemporary political and social realm. There is almost no Halakhic discussion of the national commandments. This is one of the reasons why rabbis cannot run the government: not a single yeshiva has taught them how. (I refer not to individual rabbis voting democratically in the Knesset, but to the rabbinate as a social institution.) Sadly, we have seen in practice that it is false to assume that spiritual leaders are prepared to take on political leadership. They have studied individual, not national Halakha. Therefore, we cannot assume that rabbis know the correct solutions to contemporary national problems. In fact, they themselves are only just learning, along with the rest of the Jewish people.

In a certain sense, the Jewish people is only now beginning to bring the national commandments to life and, in the process, we have taken the first steps toward the creation of a corresponding Halakha. In realizing Jewish national life in the context of the State of Israel, we participate together in working out principles for Halakhic solutions to national questions. This is an element of the turn in Judaism's road.

The processes that have been taking place in the Jewish religion since the middle of the last century signify a transition toward the

realization of the concept of the national dialogue with God. As with the individual dialogue, we dare to hope that we may someday pass on this understanding to the entire world.¹⁰ This is the role of the Jews as the chosen people today.

Such a transition is not painless. In essence, many of those who consider themselves nonreligious left the faith because life, and they with it, had already rounded the curve, while Judaism had not. They find a gap between the demands of life and what is offered by classical Judaism. Because life is always stronger than theory, they reject religion.

In this sense, too, I would note that our primary religious task is to take Judaism around the bend in its road. Only that can bring back those who have left.

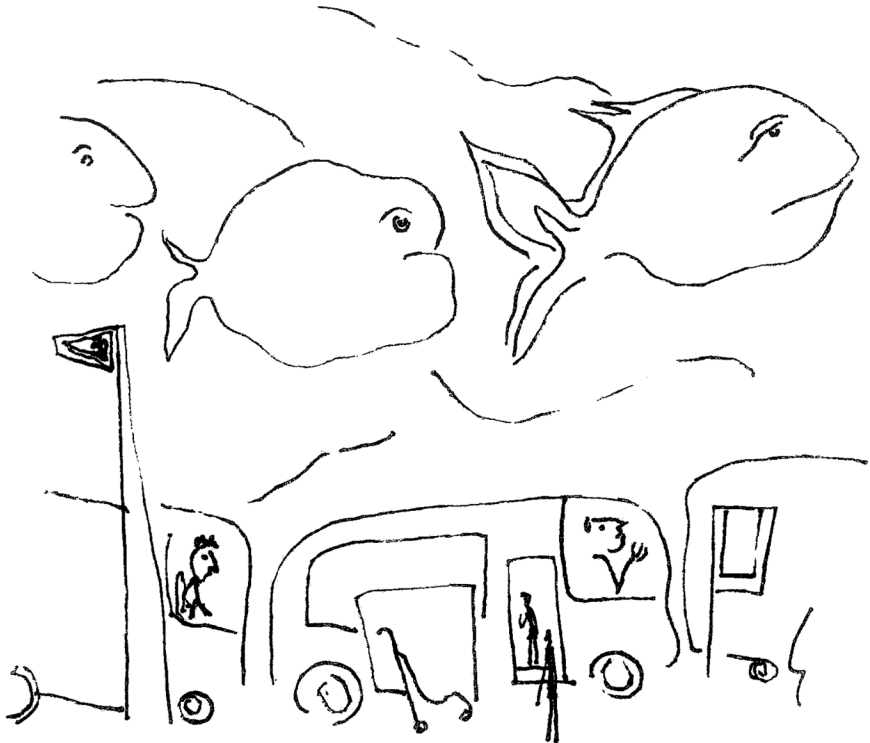
3. The Four-Millennia Scope of this Historical/Philosophical Concept, and the Historical Process Today

Rav Kook's model is a unique historical/philosophical conception that embraces four millennia, analyzing the spiritual development of humanity over that period and offering an understanding of the current point of historical development. Beginning its examination with the forefathers and the giving of the Torah, it identifies the relationship between the national and individual dialogues with God during the biblical period; the loss of one of these during the period of the Second Temple; the transmission of the other to humanity and its gradual adoption by Western civilization; and the future rebirth in Jewish life of the national dialogue with God, leading to the eventual transmission of this higher level of monotheism to all humankind. The scope of this examination and the historical meaning it reveals is astounding. It serves as our guide as we participate in the current stage of development of Judaism.

¹⁰ The question of the need for this concept in today's global world (which in many ways opposes it) is a subject for a separate analysis.

PART 2

RAV KOOK AND THE MODERNIZATION OF JUDAISM



CHAPTER 6

Rav Kook's Vision of the Modernization of Judaism¹¹

1. A Step in the Development of Judaism

Rav Kook was a poet by nature, not a university professor. Thus, he believed that mysteries are explained only by other mysteries. This approach makes a systematic study of Rav Kook's philosophy difficult. In the following chapter, we will attempt to outline Rav Kook's philosophy in more concrete terms.

According to Rav Kook, one vital step in the evolution of Judaism is the revival of those sparks of Divine light that have hitherto been lost, or that were insufficiently realized in the process of historical development. It must be noted that the outline presented below represents a simplification of Rav Kook's views. It is described in more detail in Rav Kook's article, "The War of Ideas and Faiths" (*Orot*, p. 129; see also *Shemonah Kevatzim* 1:16).

The central problem Rav Kook faced was the wave of Jewish souls leaving Judaism for various ideological movements alien to it. This

¹¹ This chapter was initially published as an article in *Conversations*, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, in May 2009 issue; and later its revised version appeared in January 2015, <https://www.jewishideas.org/articles/rav-kook-and-his-view-modernization-judaism>

The pieces about the spiritual-religious value of Science and Technology, and also of Art, were added to the later publication.

wave was particularly strong in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when many deserted yeshivas closed their doors and Jewish youth turned en masse to secular Zionism, socialism, or other “ism.” According to the mainstream Orthodox view, these departing youth were “lost and mistaken;” the problem was thought to lie in them – they were not taught correctly, they did not fully understand their traditions, and so forth. Thus, the task of religious leadership was to influence these souls through explanation and teaching so that they would return to Judaism.

It was at this moment that Rav Kook proposed an entirely different approach to the problem. According to him, the reason Jews were rejecting the Torah lay not only in the error of their ways, but also in the flaws of the modern religious world – in Judaism as it existed at the time. In order to bring about the return to Judaism of those who had fled, it was necessary not to drag them back to the Judaism that they had rejected, but to correct the defects within Judaism itself. Then those Jewish souls would gradually return of their own accord to the renewed Judaism of tomorrow. In other words, Rav Kook regarded the exodus of Jews from Judaism as an indicator of the presence of flaws in Judaism; furthermore, he saw it as a sign that the time was ripe for correcting these defects and believed that social/historical circumstances required that we do so without delay.

Basing his approach on Kabbalah, Rav Kook maintained that if a large number of Jews rushed to a particular ideology under the banner of morality and virtue, this meant that despite its apparent distance from Judaism, or even hostility to it, that ideology must contain a spark of Divine light. The anti-religious appearance of this alien ideology would merely be its shell, which fed off the energy of the spark inside. It is that spark, not the shell, that attracts the souls of those who turn away from Judaism, as Jewish souls, on the whole, are drawn to good and reach for it innately. Furthermore, the “breach” – the spontaneous, morally grounded mass movement of the Jewish people – is itself an indicator of the ripeness of the spark, a sign that it is time for its activation.

2. The Teaching of Rav Kook as Torat haKelal, Teaching for the Entire Nation

Of course, Rav Kook did not believe that every Jew is an entirely upright person, who strives for good in every deed. We know perfectly well that among Jews there are plenty of fools and criminals. However, when a large group of Jews leave their tradition for another ideology, we see not the rejection of the Torah by an individual Jew, but a socially significant movement. Such a movement is always accompanied by a sense of moral righteousness declared and subjectively felt by its participants. Without this sense, a social movement cannot develop.

Rav Kook believed that a human sense of morality, which is the manifestation of God in the individual, is the world's driving force. Therefore, he viewed a spontaneous, morally grounded social movement by the Jewish people as a definitive manifestation of the role of the Jews as the chosen people – even though the form that this manifestation takes might directly contradict the directives of the Torah – and held that we must, in the end, view the situation as “*hitgalut Elokim*,” the revelation of the Divine.

Thus, Rav Kook's teaching is a *Torat haKelal*, a teaching of national unity, viewing the Jewish people as an integral whole, capable only as a single entity of bringing the Torah to the world, and seeing disparate groups within the Jewish people as essential parts of the whole.

3. Flaws in Judaism and the Process of their Correction

Continuing our analysis of the outline for Judaism's development, it is important to note that the ideas presented so far – that inside every shell are concealed sparks of holiness and Divine light, that the shell feeds off the energy of this spark, and that Jewish souls carry within themselves – the role of the chosen and the attraction to good – do not constitute the unique and truly revolutionary teaching of Rav Kook, as all of these ideas have been stated and discussed many times in Kabbalah and in Chassidism.

The true revolution in thinking put forth by Rav Kook lies in the proposition that this situation arises due not only to the attraction of the sparks, but, above all, to a defect in Judaism as it exists, evidenced in the lack or insufficient activity of a given spark within it.

The process of activating the spark involves several stages. The first step is to extract the sparks from the shell (see *Shemonah Kevatzim* 1:71, also p. 63, passage 9). Guided by our Divine moral intuition, we must explore and determine the precise nature of the Divine spark that is drawing masses of Jewish souls to a particular ideology. To do this, it is necessary not only to approach the views of those who have joined the new ideology or movement with extreme respect and deep attention, but also to demonstrate genuine sympathy for the “ism” itself.

In the language of Kabbalah, we must feel the Divine spark locked within the foreign ideology. Clearly, in order to extract the spark from any specific “ism,” it is necessary, while staying within the framework of Judaism, to show sympathy toward the “ism,” as sympathy and empathy are the first steps toward understanding. But any individual religious person may not sympathize with every ideology. Some may simply be too deeply repulsive to him or her. This merely shows that this person is not equipped to extract the spark of Divine light from those particular “isms.” Rather, that person must work with those ideologies that he finds himself naturally in accord with, as only in them he or she will be able to find the spark of Divine light. It is impossible for any one person to sense the sparks in all “isms,” and it is wrong to attempt to spread oneself so thin. Every person must focus on what is genuinely close to his or her Divine soul.

At this stage, those who, in the course of their lives, have spent time near to or even within the foreign ideology being examined may play an especially important role. In particular, when Western values are integrated into Judaism – or, to put it more precisely and formally, when those sparks of Divine light that nourish the values of contemporary Western culture are revived within Judaism – an important role must be played both by Jews from Western countries and by Jews from Russia, who have been educated in the crucible of totalitarianism and communism.

The process of identifying the Divine sparks in secular ideologies is only the beginning of our work since, as stated above, we cannot integrate that spark into Judaism directly. Such a heavy-handed transplant would lead to a rejection of the tissue, which could even result in the death of the entire organism. Therefore, unlike Reform Judaism, which swallows the spark whole from the other teachings and so takes in with it elements of shell that radically contradict the Jewish approach and tradition, the Modern Orthodoxy of Rav Kook strives before all else to find this spark's native, authentic manifestation in Judaism. Orthodoxy must seek out the spark and its true Jewish form in the fundamental tenets of Judaism – that is, in the complete and ideal Judaism, encompassing all the ideas contained in all of its texts and oral traditions. To do this work, one must not only be an expert in Torah, Halakha, and Aggadah, but one must also have the particular wisdom to sense behind the traditionally expressed formulations the deep contemporary content that accurately reflects their Divine light while resonating in today's world.

Next, the given spark must be cultivated within a renewed Judaism. The process of the cultivation of sparks is carried out in our model through modern Judaism, as it does not alter the existing, historically formed Judaism, but supplements and corrects it. (See for example, *Midot haRe'aya, Emuna (Faith)* 28.) The concept presented here is not Reformism, which is associated with the abolition of ritual commandments, but Modern Orthodoxy, in which a process of development is continually taking place alongside the preservation of tradition. Judaism loses nothing, but only increases.

Rav Yochanan Fried, who studied at Mercaz haRav in the seventies, gives an example of this complementary kind of learning. He once received a letter which related how two Mercaz haRav students, Yochanan Fried and Hanan Porat, were invited by Rav Tzvi Yehuda Kook to the Ein Harod Kibbutz to participate in a discussion on "What does the youth do in its free time". When their turn came to speak their mind, they said, "Yeshiva students don't have free time. Therefore, we don't have this kind of problem. Yeshiva students are above all this – we study Torah continuously and don't have time for recreation." As a result of their words, an hour-and-a-half long

discussion evolved, at the end of which a woman sitting at the end of the hall stood up and asked, "If you are so great, what can you learn from us?" When Rav Tzvi Yehuda later heard about the question, he asked the students, "What did you answer her?" When they responded that they didn't answer anything, he criticized them. "Be ashamed of yourselves! You traveled all the way to Ein Harod and didn't learn anything about love of the land and about hard work? You didn't learn anything from the wonderful relationships that exist between members of Ein Harod?" This encounter gave rise to a correspondence between Rav Tzvi Yehuda and Hanan Porat, who published his letters in his book *Et Ahai Anohi Mevakesh* (first published as *Et Anat Anohi Mevakesh*).

As a result of the activation of the spark, the defect in Judaism is corrected, and Judaism takes a new developmental step. In place of the existing Judaism of today comes the Judaism of tomorrow. Furthermore, because the spark whose light had been attracting the souls who left in process is now restored and active within Judaism, these souls begin to return to Judaism (see *Shemonah Kevatzim* 8:51).

Of course, we do not in any way mean to say that those who will return to Judaism are the very same people who earlier left it. The step in development described here occurs over the course of several decades, and those who have left have left. At the individual level, a return to Judaism is possible at any moment; but the return of a whole generation is impossible without the restoration of that spark that gives life to the new ideology and that triggered the exodus from Judaism in the first place – a process that must ripen over many decades. Finally, people with "kindred souls" to those who left earlier now return, as they are the souls attracted to this particular spark – but this takes place two to four generations. In other words, it is their spiritual grandchildren and great grandchildren.

4. Example 1: The Integration of Sparks from Zionism

We will now use examples to illustrate how this model functions in practice.

For the first example, we will examine a fairly simple “ism,” with regard to which the above model has been fully carried out from beginning to end: secular Zionism.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, “Judaism” and “Zionism” were not only contradictory, but in many ways hostile to one another. The first heralds of Zionism were religious (Rav Tzvi Hirsch Kalischer, Rav Yehuda Ben Shlomo Chai Alkalai, and others) but they did not succeed in creating a mass movement. The Zionist mass movement sprang up in the twentieth century and was mostly secular. At that time, the slogan of secular Zionism was “we will become a nation like all others.” This entailed, in particular, the abandonment of religious principles as a basis for Jewish self-identification in favor of a civil-national identity. Because of this, many rabbis condemned secular Zionism as an attempt to destroy the Torah and traditional Judaism.

Under these circumstances, Rav Kook took an entirely different position. He maintained that we should not berate secular Zionism for being outwardly wrong, that is, for straying from the Jewish heritage, the Torah, and God. His method was not to focus on the outward defects of Zionism, but to seek out its inner truth, to find its Divine spark and then, to correct the existing Judaism accordingly by integrating into it the spark that had attracted Jewish souls to secular Zionism. As Rav Kook writes,

The nefesh [that is, the lower part of the soul in kabbalistic tradition] of sinners of Israel in the “footsteps of Messiah” – those who join lovingly the causes of the Jewish people, Land of Israel and the national revival – is more corrected than the nefesh of the perfect believers of Israel who lack the advantage of the essential feeling for the good of the people and the building of the nation and land. But the ruah [that is, the higher part of the soul] is much more corrected in the God-fearing and Torah observant... The tikkun [correction] will come about through the “Light of Messiah”... Israel should bond together, and the nefesh of the observant will be corrected by the perfection of nefesh of the better transgressors, in regard to communal affairs, and material and spiritual ideals attained to human understanding and perception. Whereas the ruah of these

transgressors will be corrected by the influence of the God-fearing, observant and great of faith. And thereby both groups will receive Great Light... The higher tsaddikim, masters of neshama [the third and highest part of soul] will be the uniting conduits, through which the light of the nefesh will flow from left to right, and the light of the ruah from right to left... This will be accomplished through the light of Messiah, who is David himself, who erected the yoke of teshuvah. For the sake of David, Your servant, do not rebuff Your Messiah.” (Arfilei Tohar, § 21, published also in Orot, Orot haTehiyah 51)

The situation was somewhat simplified by the fact that this spark consisted of the desire to resurrect a full and authentic Jewish national life in the land of Israel. Not only does this ideology *not* contradict Judaism, as many mistakenly believed at the beginning of the twentieth century, but, on the contrary, it is an essential condition for Judaism's further existence and development. Therefore, Rav Kook focused on the study of those sources in Judaism that address the religious significance of Jews coming back to their Land [See, for example, *Orot haTehiyah* 8]. In his articles and books, he conducted a thorough and deep analysis of these sources, and he made this analysis the central component of his educational program at the Zionist “world-wide Yeshiva” (*Merkaz haRav*) that he founded. After his death, Rav Kook's students, and especially his son, Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook, brought up a new generation of rabbis and religious activists at that yeshiva, for whom Zionism – the claiming of the Land of Israel and active participation in its government – was an integral part of the living Judaism that they studied, taught, and abided by. Graduates of the yeshiva *Merkaz haRav* transmitted the same active contemporary Zionist spirit to their students and to the religious circles they influenced.

Since this teaching was in keeping with the times, it began to spread far and wide. All of this took place as an undercurrent over the course of nearly half a century, from the 1920s to the 1970s. And when, after the Six Day War (1967) and especially after the Yom Kippur War (1973), the question of creating Jewish settlements in the territories of Judea, Samaria, and Gaza came up, the tens of thousands of students

of Rav Kook's school, united in the movement Gush Emunim, were the driving force behind the new wave of Zionism.

In other words, in the 1970s and 1980s, the religious Zionists – that is, the adherents of Modern Orthodoxy, Rav Kook's school – became the leading Zionist group in the country. The perceptions of society were transformed: People's ideas of "Zionism" and "Judaism" ceased to contradict one another and drew closer. The struggle for the settlement of the Land of Israel by Jews took on a religious character far different from the anti-religious character it had had at the beginning of the twentieth century. As a result, those who had a Zionist soul, who cared about Jewish settlement in Israel, began to draw closer to Judaism, rather than to distance themselves from it. One could say that in the late twentieth century, Zionism "returned" to Judaism the souls that it had "borrowed" at the beginning of the century.

As a result of all of these processes, the right wing of Israeli society (that is, people who seek to settle and claim all of the territory of the Land of Israel) is today significantly closer to religious values than the left wing. This distinction is so strong that the expression "religious right" has become a stock phrase in the Israeli political lexicon. In the 1920s, it was the opposite – those concerned with the settlement of Israel were significantly farther from religion than those who were indifferent to the issue. In this way Judaism has completed a step in its development, having extracted a spark from secular Zionism. A side-effect of drawing "Zionist souls" to religion was, in particular, that hardly any such souls remained on the atheist side; this has led to the fact that today secularism is most often associated with a rejection of Zionism, or "post-Zionism."

5. Example 2: The Integration of Sparks from Atheism

We will now examine a different example, one that may appear shocking at first, but that nevertheless fits within Rav Kook's overall model for approaching secular ideologies (see, for example, *Orot haKodesh* 3, *Musar haKodesh*, pp. 125-127, 129.) Specifically, we will apply the system described above to atheism. We will attempt

to carry out the process of extracting a spark of Divine light and furthering the development of Judaism by means of atheism.

Rav Kook writes,

Atheism displays the power of life. Therefore, the real spiritual heroes extract sparks of great kindness from their atheism and turn its bitterness into sweetness. (Arfilei Tohar, § 120)

The destructive wind of disbelief will purify all the filth that gathered in the lower realm of the spirit of faith... all will grow in purity and strength, in supernal holiness, from the firm, pure exalted kernel, which no negativity can affect. Its light will shine as a new light upon Zion with a wondrous greatness. (Shemonah Kevatzim 1:476, Orot haTehiyah, ch. 51, p. 199)

Atheism, according to our model, fully qualifies as an outside “ism.” It stands in opposition to Judaism, it displays the banner of rejection of religion, yet Jews join its ranks in significant numbers, proclaiming its morality and worth.

Because in Rav Kook's time atheism was actively growing and attracting supporters, Rav Kook devoted a significant amount of attention to its analysis in his works. For example, *Midot haRe'aya, Emuna (Faith)*, pages 27-28; *Orot haEmuna, Kfira (Heresy)*, p. 84. As always in his approach to a foreign ideology, Rav Kook did not focus on a critique of atheism's mistakes, its rejection of God and tradition, and so forth. This would have been trivial, and it was attended to at the time by much of the religious establishment. Rather, he attempted to understand where the deep attraction of atheism lay, what was in it that drew Jewish souls, and how Judaism needed to evolve so that, instead of leaving, souls of this type would find their rightful place in it.

What is the “spiritual core” of atheism, its Divine spark? In order to find this, we can ask the following question: From where do members of this group derive pride? For pride reveals the correlation between our achievements and our Divine spirit. We take pride in those achievements that gladden our Divine spirit, seeing them as truly worthy. In other words, the point of pride of any ideology signals what must be culled from it, as it is the root of the attraction of the

Divine soul. This, therefore, is where we must seek out the concealed spark.

In what, then, do atheists take pride, specifically as atheists? Of course, I am not speaking here of those atheists who have never given either religion or atheism a serious thought, and who were simply taught to be atheists. Any movement has fools in plenty; we must not focus on these, but on those who think for themselves. We speak here of real atheists – intelligent, thinking, and active. In what do they take pride *as atheists*? Based on my own acquaintance with atheists and their books, I believe that the atheist prides himself on being a doubting, critically thinking person. The atheist says: “You, the religious, merely believe. But I doubt. I cannot unquestioningly accept all of this. I am a skeptic.” It is not for nothing that a conversion to atheism in Israel is called *hazarah beShe’ela*, literally, a “return to the question” (as opposed to coming to religion, which is traditionally known as *hazarah beTeshuva*, or “return to the return,” which can also be read as “return to the answer.”) With this formulation, atheists establish themselves in opposition: “You, the religious, have the answer (*teshuva*) – but we have the question (*she’ela*). This is their source of pride, that they “have the question.” We are not discussing simple questions, of course, such as what is or is not kosher, but the fundamental and eternal questions of existence. The atheist stresses: “You are attracted to answers, we to questions.”

Thus, the true atheist has skepticism as his or her core conviction and declares him or herself to be a critical thinker who has unanswered questions to which no one can have ready answers. Is this core of atheism attractive? Picture two teachers, one who says, “Come to me. I have answers for everything,” and one who says, “Come to me. I have questions and doubts for every problem.” Which of them seems more spiritually advanced? Whose lectures would you wish to attend? The skeptic’s, of course. We know that there are no ready answers to the truly complicated questions. We also know that answers are very often superficial and questions much deeper. Therefore, if one says that he has answers, and the other that he has questions, we will, of course, go to the one who has questions.

By means of this analysis, with the help of our own religious intuition, we have found the spark of Divine light in atheism. Our intuition clearly confirms that questions and doubts are a great thing, and that in them there lies the source of atheism's spiritual attraction.

Does this component – unanswerable questions – exist within Judaism? Clearly, in Judaism as it existed 100 to 200 years ago, the emphasis was primarily on the “answers.” Today, unfortunately, within the popular, rather primitive Judaism with which certain demagogues try to “capture” the masses, the stress is also frequently placed on the answers. But if we are deeply convinced of the religious importance of unanswerable questions, then let us look to ideal Judaism and try to find out where within it the central questions and doubts lie.

The first thing that comes to mind is the book of Job. Job is a righteous and good man, yet he is showered with misfortunes: the destruction of his possessions, the death of his loved ones. And so, three of his friends come to him, and after the period of silent mourning, they begin to ask: Where is justice in the world? Why does the righteous man suffer? Job's friends offer highly reasonable explanations, but Job rejects them all, telling his friends that they are wrong, that they understand nothing. The discussion continues for the length of the book, about 40 chapters. At the end of the book a voice rings out from the heavens, saying to the three men, “Ye have not spoken of Me the thing that is right, as My servant Job hath.” (*Job 42:7*)

In other words, the Book of Job concludes by telling us that there is in principle no answer to these essential questions. The question of justice remains open. It is necessary to seek an answer, but one must never assume one has found it.

Thus, we have an example from a book from TaNaKh that clearly states that there can be no answer to this and, apparently, to many other fundamental questions. Another such book is Ecclesiastes (*Kohelet*). And although this book ends with the words “fear God... for this is the whole man (*Ecclesiastes 12:13*) which can be seen as an “answer,” the entire book in essence tells us that answers to real

existential questions do not exist. This is one more typical instance in Judaism of the “unanswerable question.” One must admit that had the books of Job and Ecclesiastes consisted of a collection of answers about the meaning of life, the TaNaKh would have been greatly impoverished.

However, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this aspect of doubt was not a developed area within existing Judaism. Its spiritual leaders considered doubt to be a flaw and discouraged their followers from discussing questions that sowed it. They were to stay inside and never venture out. The leaders feared that one of their flocks might leave – yet many did flee Judaism because those spiritual leaders were unable to reveal its inner potential to address adequately the problems of the times. The leaders discouraged the reading of certain books, but people read them and turned away from Judaism and its lack of tolerance for doubt.

We have found the Divine spark in atheism, and we determined that that spark was not realized in existing Judaism, which feared doubt to the point that the thirst for it became a force for the spread of atheism. Our next steps are to develop within Judaism the spark of doubt that we have discovered in its roots, so strongly that it will shine more brightly there than it does in atheism.

The following conception formulated by Rav Kook provides us with a roadmap for revealing the spark of doubt in Judaism. He tells us that any faith that lacks doubt is not an ideal faith. On the contrary, belief without doubt is primitive and simplistic [See for example, *Shemonah Kevatzim* 1, 36; *Orot, Zir'onim* 5]: Doubts are an integral part of true faith. As the Divine is by its very essence eternal, and all things human are, by their essence, temporal and finite, including all of our thoughts, ideas, and reasoning about God, our understanding of God cannot, in principle, be correct.

But what are we to do, if we are finite and temporal? How can we at least draw closer to the eternal Divine, come to understand even partially? At the very least, we must doubt everything we think about the Divine, for when the finite being feels his limitations and doubts himself, he becomes “less finite,” some potential of the infinite appears within him. If we are sure of ourselves and do not doubt,

then our finite and temporal conceptions of the Divine become “even more finite,” moving further from the eternal Divine. If what is finite wishes to become less finite and to move closer to the infinite, it must be dynamic. That is, we cannot become actually infinite, but we must at least be potentially infinite, if only through doubting the certainty of our understanding and wishing to move forward. Therefore, doubts are an integral, necessary part of true faith, aiding, not impeding, its progress.

When students in a yeshiva or school are taught this concept of faith, an entirely new generation of religious people rises up, whose views can be characterized as “religious post-atheism,” which uses the religious achievements of atheism in the development of Judaism. Unless it activates within it the aspect of doubt, religion will be primitive. Doubt is necessary for its existence. Because the aspect of doubt was not adequately developed in religion over the last centuries, atheism came along, smashed everything, and advanced among people the concept of the value of doubt – and for this, religion owes it a debt of gratitude.

Atheism comes, says Rav Kook, to ridicule the primitive form of religion and destroy it, clearing the ground for the construction of a more exalted religious system. From the point of view of the development of religion, atheism was a historical necessity, as we ourselves – even the religious community and leaders who recognize the importance modernization – would never have decided to destroy that primitive aspect of religion. We simply would not have had the strength and nerve. Therefore, atheism enters and does all of that work for us.

The observant religious person who has grasped the ideas of post-atheism holds a different sort of religious consciousness. He combines Orthodox religiosity with a willingness to doubt his own religious tenets. Such a person emanates this new type of faith, changing the ideas of those around him, opening the way to religion for doubting people. These doubting souls begin to approach Judaism, seeing that post-atheist Judaism contains the spark of doubt, and that the spiritual necessity of doubt is even more developed here than it was in atheism.

The difference between the post-atheist religious consciousness and the classical one is easy to see. The Israeli essayist and philosopher Dr. Daniel Shalit says that one needs to converse with a religious person for no more than ten minutes to determine whether he or she is post-atheist or pre-atheist. Approached this way, atheism is not an enemy of religion. It is an enemy of primitive religion, but an ally in the creation of a more advanced one. If we can make the ideas of atheism the general property of the religious world, we will move religion forward and make it possible for those whose souls instinctively and absolutely correctly thirst for skepticism and doubt to approach this religion.

What Is to Be Doubted?

Thus, according to Modern Orthodoxy and post-atheism, doubt is critical for the growth of faith; without it a person cannot believe truly. If people, limited by nature, do not doubt their own limited religious ideas, they will remain much farther from God in their understanding than those who, though limited, at least doubt.

When we frame the problem this way, we frequently encounter the following question: “Should one doubt everything? There must be something, from the religious perspective, that is absolutely beyond question. God’s existence is certain – how can that be doubted?” The answer, from the point of view of religious post-atheism, is that everything can and must be doubted. To doubt is not to deny, but to subject to criticism and analysis. This applies even to the tenet that God exists. What is to be doubted is not the words themselves, but our interpretation and understanding of them. Since doubt is not denial but analysis and clarification, it is necessary for our religious understanding. It would be incorrect to see doubt in the existence of God as a choice between the statements “God exists” and “God does not exist.” This is a different kind of doubt entirely. What we must doubt is the meaning that we give to the word “existence” as it relates to God.

Rav Kook proposes a completely radical approach to this problem. He explains that there is a faith that is not faith. And there is a lack of

faith, or atheism, that is, in its essence, faith (see *Shemonah Kevatzim* 1, 633). What does he mean by faith that is not faith? He refers to the person who believes in God, but whose belief is so primitive that his image of God is closer to a caricature than to what God is. And what is lack of faith that is faith? This is the situation when a person says that he does not believe in God, but he says that because religious groups have pictured God in such a primitive form that he is unable to believe in such a God. This unbelief reflects not a lack of faith, but a high level of religious feeling.

The words "I believe in God" or "I do not believe in God" do not reflect true faith or lack of faith. We must hone the meaning of these words during our whole lives – not just our individual lives, but over the course of all human life. We can and must doubt these meanings in every way, for doubt is not denial; doubt is dissatisfaction with simple answers and a thirst for more precise understanding.

6. The Concept of Continuing Revelation

The religious concept of the continuing Revelation of God asserts that the Divine Revelation did not stop at Mount Sinai, but continued throughout time and continues still, manifested not in miracles, but in the course of human history, above all of Jewish history. Therefore, this Revelation can and must be listened to, and to do this we must see history as a dialogue with God.

There is no doubt that the very idea of monotheism as a religion of dialogue implies a continuing interaction between humans and God throughout all of human history. What is more, Jewish monotheism, as Rav Kook's concept emphasizes, is characterized by the idea that not only does every individual carry on a dialogue with God, but the nation as a whole, and all of humankind do the same. It would be natural to suppose that through this dialogue, God continues to speak. Of course, God does not say anything to contradict God's earlier words; God's word cannot be revoked. The earlier Revelation is never rescinded, but it must be continually developed and added to. Thus, the idea of a national dialogue with God leads to the principle of

continuing (or ongoing) Revelation, and that, in its turn, to Modern Orthodoxy.

The view of history as a dialogue between humans and God means that God is continually speaking to us, and all innovations that bring forth progress in culture, society, and religion are not simply human invention, but also Divine Revelation. Therefore, they must be integrated into our religious ideas and not discarded. In other words, the need for progress and modernization, even in the area of religion, is not merely a human trait; it is a manifestation of our Divine nature. Religion, therefore, must develop – not in order to make it easier and more convenient for us humans, but because without development religion will not adequately reflect God (see *Shemonah Kevatzim* 8:43, as well as many other sources.)

It stands to reason that not everything that has occurred in the course of history is Divine. Many developments can and should be criticized, changed, repaired. However, it would be categorically wrong to cast away historical development as a whole, as we would be discarding with it essential elements of the Revelation. According to this conception, we do not have the right to reject historical change – not because we must protect human creative activity from primordial religious dogma, but on the contrary, because we adhere to a religious viewpoint.

7. The Spiritual-Religious Value of Science and Technology

Science and technology play a big role in society, but do they have a spiritual-religious value in and of themselves? The general opinion is that they don't. However, already in the first chapter of Genesis, immediately following the creation of Adam and Chava, God commands them, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it" (*Genesis* 1:28). This verse contains a commandment to conquer the earth, which means to build a civilization. This building is impossible without the development of science and technology. Conquering the earth means gaining control over nature. It means using power and knowledge to improve the conditions of human

existence despite nature's limitations: being able to turn on the light when it is dark outside, to heat your house when it is raining and cold, to move at great speed, to transmit sound over long distances. All this is included in the concept of "conquering," and technological development needs to be seen as the fulfillment of this commandment. Why then is the "commandment of conquering," i.e., constructing of civilization, not enumerated among the 613 commandments? The reason is that it pertains to humanity as a whole and does not address any individual or even any nation – and commandments that are intended for the human race are not counted among the commandments. There are those who interpret this verse as a blessing and not as a commandment; however, the grammar of the verse suggests the formulation of a commandment. Additionally, "be fruitful and multiply" is understood as a commandment. Therefore, if the first half of the verse is a commandment, it stands to reason that the second half is also a commandment. See also *Orot haKodesh* 2, *haMegama haElyona* 33, page 563; *Orot haTehiyah*, sections 16 11 and 30. According to Rav Soloveitchik as well (in *The Lonely Man of Faith*), the ambition to develop technology is engrained in humans, who are created in God's image, and therefore, it is clearly a spiritual value. It follows, then, that science has religious worth. We must see those who advance science and technology as performing a commandment and feel national and religious pride towards Israelis who receive the Nobel Prize. Moreover, in order to return those souls who are attracted to "Americanism" as expressed in the desire to conquer and develop nature, we must create a positive religious image of scientific and technological development; to do so we need the explicit support of our religious leaders. Many of them are focused on finding halachic solutions to the halachic problems that arise from technology. But unfortunately, very few of them see the religious significance of science and connect it with Torah.

8. The Spiritual-Religious Value of Art

In ancient times, the sole purpose of art was decoration and beauty. In both secular and religious life, decoration and beauty were used to

convey a divine message to the people. Judaism did not have a problem assimilating this view of beauty: there are numerous Jewish sources that emphasize its importance. For example, *Ten measures of beauty came down to this world - nine of them were received by Jerusalem and the rest by the entire world* (*Kidushin* 49b) and, “whoever did not see the Beit-haMikdash that Herod built, never saw a beautiful building in his life” (*Bava Batra* 4a).

In the Renaissance period, the perception of art underwent a metamorphosis: art became an expression of the innermost world of the artist, and was no longer a means of transmitting a religious message. In the modern age, a new phenomenon that facilitates this newly gained purpose appeared: all of society began promoting and encouraging creativity.

During the course of history, art lost its association with religion, and became a secular, universal phenomenon. Religion did not comprehend this new kind of art, which exists in and of itself and expresses the inner world of the artist; religion surely did not see any religious value in it and therefore limited its interaction with art by using strictly halachic terminology, defining what is permitted and what is forbidden. The tension between religion and art intensified until they reached a point where each one saw the other as hostile and dangerous.

Rav Kook changed religion's perception of art. He taught that there is religious value in the expression of a person's inner world. (See introduction to *Shir haShirim* (*Song of Songs*) in *Olat haRa'ayah*; Rav Kook's letter to the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design; Rav Tzvi Yehuda Kook, Mizmor 19 (*Eretz haTzvi* in *Ma'amarey haRav Tzvi Yehuda*.)

A person is created in the image of God, and the more a person comes closer to Him, the more he realizes himself as a human being and makes himself complete. The Torah opens with a description of the creation of the world – God creates the world and humans. Creation is the first act; thus, a person's ability to create brings him closer to God. [In *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Rav Soloveitchik speaks a lot about how a man resembles God through creative action.] Therefore, art, which gives expression to human creativity

and teaches society about creativity, opens before mankind a new way to draw nearer to God.

It should be emphasized that art's religious significance becomes clearer when we contemplate art's role in history rather than the lives of individual artists.

9. The Embedded Implication that Judaism Must Lag Behind Culture in Its Development

Looking at this model for the development of Judaism by means of sparks from "isms," we are obliged to make note of one critical feature, which from a religious point of view might well be seen as an embedded "flaw." Namely, the model presupposes that Judaism lags behind culture in its development. The "ism" appears first, arising in relation to progress in the larger society. As a result of this, people become dissatisfied with flaws in Judaism that earlier generations accepted (see *Arfilei Tohar*, 2 and 68); they leave and build a new ideology; and only two or three generations later does a segment of the religion adopt, develop, and realize the essence of these new ideas to create.

But if it is always thus, how will religion ever be able to lead? How will it accomplish what it is called upon to do?

The answer to this problem comes in two complementary parts.

The first is the fact that, indeed, within the structure of assimilating sparks from various ideologies and movements, Judaism will never be in a position to overtake those "isms." However, Rav Kook explains that Judaism has "in reserve" another most important concept, namely, that of God's dialogue not only with the individual, but also with the nation as a whole. Christianity or Western society never adopted this idea, inherent to Judaism from the start; humankind has only today begun to explore it. Therefore, Judaism will be able to lead civilization by means of this idea, rather than through its assimilation of sparks, which, as important as it is, merely serves to correct accumulated flaws that occur in the process of transition from Judaism of Diaspora to a Judaism of the Nation of Israel. Until we have adequately corrected these flaws, we will continue to fall behind

and so will be unable to make ourselves heard by the world. We must continue to correct them, while at the same time developing that concept of national dialogue with God that is uniquely ours. We would later bequeath this concept to humankind, thereby making an essential contribution to the development of civilization.

This is the first part of the answer. However, the problem has another aspect. The second part of the explanation as to why Judaism lags behind culture in its development is that, as Kabbalah explains, our entire world is “*tikkun olam*” – “a world of correction.” Godliness is infinite and therefore human perception cannot fully grasp it. Similarly, no traditional movement can reflect Divine perception in its entirety because it is limited by time and wording. (*Orot haEmuna*, p. 64) In kabalistic terms, God’s light cannot appear in our world immediately in its true form. At the beginning of Creation and again in every new stage of development, there is *shevirat kelim*, the breaking of the vessels, and the sparks of Divine light become enveloped by shells. Judaism’s “lag” is grounded in the very foundations of existence. Every idea first appears in a wrong form, in the context of the “ism.” And only afterward, as a result of our efforts to improve the world, it appears in a purer and more correct form.

This arrangement of things is, of course, not accidental. It is related to God’s desire to allow us to become God’s “companions,” God’s co-creators in the universe.



CHAPTER 7

The Conflict between Halakha and the Ethical Instinct

The goal of this chapter is to analyze the approach of Modern Orthodoxy to situations in which there is a conflict between the directives of Halakha and our intuitive sense of what is right, worthy, or just.

Rav Kook's approach to such problems differed significantly from the general response of the religious authorities. We call his approach "Modern Orthodoxy" although the Rabbi himself never used such a phrase. Rav Kook's writings are a sort of philosophical poetry of extraordinary depth and imagery, written without Western academic terminology, systemization, and formal structure. This makes it extremely difficult to present his basic views in a way that is accessible to the new reader. This chapter attempts to offer a simplified introduction to his approach to these problems.

During Rav Kook's time, the conflict between Halakha and people's intuitive ethical sense arose, for the most part, over the attitudes of the religious towards the secular pioneers of the Zionist movement and the associated issues of atheism, secular Zionism, socialism, and other ideologies. Today, more than eight decades later, the situation has changed significantly. Conflicts that were pressing at the time are now long past. They no longer evoke strong feelings, and I fear they will not be deeply felt by the contemporary reader. Therefore, I illustrate my discussion of Rav Kook's Modern Orthodoxy with examples that are burning issues of our own time. Thus, my analysis of specific problems is in no way a presentation of Rav Kook's writings (he never touched upon these problems, as they did not exist then),

but my own treatment, based, to the best of my understanding, on Rav Kook's ideas.

I would also like to note that this chapter is to some degree a continuation of the previous one, "Rav Kook's Vision of the Modernization of Judaism." Or perhaps it is, rather, a look at the same ideas from a different perspective.

1. General Principles and Examples of the Conflict between Halakha and the Ethical Feeling

The orthodox religious world view in Judaism is defined by the recognition of the obligation to observe Halakha, the religious law that has been passed to us through the Tradition. But how should the religious person act in situations where Halakha, as far as we know, contradicts our internal moral instincts? What should be our position, as religious people, when Halakha seems to be instructing us to do something which our conscience tells us would be wrong? On one hand, the religion cannot exist without belief in the Divine nature of the Tradition; on the other hand, the same religion proclaims itself the source of our innate ethics and morality. What, then, are we to do when these two Divine elements, Halakha and ethical feeling, seem to contradict one another?

Let us examine a very simple example. It is customary in Orthodox synagogues for women to sit in the balcony, where they cannot always hear and see as well as in the sanctuary below. In some cases, the women's area is at the far end of the sanctuary and separated by a barrier so thick that they cannot see the services at all and may have no sense of even being in attendance at them. Halakha would seem to say that all is well here – that is, all laws are observed. But what is to be done if a religious, observant person feels that this is discriminatory to women – when his own conscience and sense of morality tell him that all is not well, that the arrangement is demeaning to women and unacceptable? And what is to be done if the women themselves (religious, observant, orthodox) begin to feel that they don't want to be shut out from services in the synagogue? What if they themselves object? How should we approach this situation?

Or in another, more radical instance, when a repatriate from Russia now in Israel says, “I am a Jew by my father. In Russia I was always considered a Jew, yet here in Israel, I am not. Where is the justice in this? There I suffered from anti-Semitism, and here I am refused recognition as a Jew and viewed as an alien. Meanwhile, someone who is Jewish by a maternal grandmother, who was never taken for a Jew either by name or appearance in Russia, and never suffered from anti-Semitism, is considered Jewish here.”

Naturally, this person (along with many Jews close to him) draws the conclusion that Halakha and Judaism as a whole are entirely amoral. What answer can be made to this? Truly, Halakha seems to dictate that this person is not a Jew and there is no more to be said; but our conscience is left uneasy.¹²

2. Opposing Approaches to the Conflict between Halakha and Ethics

Thus, we face a conflict between Halakha and our ethical sense. There are two “classical” approaches in the case of such a conflict.

The first is the conservative approach, widespread, for instance, among the Haredim. First of all, say the adherents of this approach, Halakha is Divine. It was given by God on Sinai and has come to us through the Tradition. Therefore, it is God’s law. The ethical sense, or conscience, has been formed under the influence of historical development, surrounding cultures, contemporary society, the mass media, etc. It is shaped by human and historical forces. What is human must yield to what is Divine; therefore, the ethical feeling must defer to Halakha.

¹² Conscience is, by definition, our intuitive protest against injustice, demanding that we act honestly and righteously ourselves, and that we speak out or feel shame when another acts dishonestly or unjustly. Is the conscience solely a product of upbringing and therefore an entirely relative matter, or does it contain (aside from its development, honing and refinement, which must be nurtured) an inner kernel which is the Divine Voice inside every person? Various approaches to this question will be discussed later.

The opposite approach can be referred to as the Reformist position.¹³ This approach emphasizes that we must recognize above all that morality, the ethical sense, is the Divine within us. We are created in His image, and He inhabits each of us in the form of conscience, the “unconscious God.”¹⁴ Therefore, if our conscience speaks to us, it is not merely important, it is sacred. Halakha, according to adherents of this position, is a human/historical phenomenon; it was created over the course of many historical and cultural periods, under the influence of various societies. And as the human must defer to the Divine, in the case of a conflict between them, the ethical sense must prevail and Halakha yield.

In other words, these two points of view are mirror images.

3. Rav Kook’s Approach: Synthesis, Rather than Compromise

Which position does Rav Kook take on this question? What is the approach of Modern Orthodoxy to such problems?

The guiding principle behind Rav Kook’s approach to conflicts of ideology within Judaism is that our task is not to effect a compromise between two opposing sides, but to find their synthesis. Of course, in practical life one often has to settle on compromise, but in the realm of ideology and ideas, compromise is unproductive; only synthesis is vital and creative.

(Note again that I speak here not of conflict with an external enemy, but of a clash of ideologies within Jewish society, where a basic sense of unity ultimately outweighs ideological differences.

¹³ This position is sometimes called “Reform.” However, representatives of Reform Judaism are rarely willing to proclaim conscience Divine. Furthermore, in the actual conflicts that Rav Kook addressed in formulating his approach, the opponents of orthodoxy were not Reform Jews, but the Zionist pioneers of the Second and Third Aliyah, who called for the “Revival of Judaism.”

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion of this theme, see *The Unconscious God: Psychotherapy and Theology* by Victor Frankl, one of the preeminent psychologists of the twentieth century.

In general, Rav Kook's approach is entirely based on the belief that every ideological group among the Jewish people carries within itself its own "Jewishness," a necessary element of the overall picture, and that even should the "shell," the proclaimed ideology that enfolds this group's views, be in opposition to all the tenets of Judaism, nonetheless, enclosed within it is a kernel of truth, a Divine spark, an element of higher truth, which must be apprehended and integrated for the completion of the picture.)

What is the difference between compromise and synthesis? In a compromise, two clashing points of view, attempting to defeat one another, eventually reach a point of equilibrium and agree to cease struggling for the time being. The accepted compromise brings about a truce which allows each side to expend less energy fighting; in the process, however, each side's ideas become twisted and deformed.

Compromise is a balance of distortions. It creates no real unity, and each side remains frustrated. The truce is usually temporary, as each side husbands its strength for the next round of battle and inevitable future clashes. In practice, compromise is often essential for the resolution of life's ongoing problems. But in matters of ideology, compromise is unproductive, leading to nothing new or vital. In these cases, what is needed is synthesis.

To arrive at a synthesis, we extract the kernel, or Divine essence, from each point of view. We separate this spark from its superficial, inessential details, from its external shell and, instead of taking the two initial points of view whole, we build an entirely new construction on the foundation of their two seeds.

With this synthesis, the central ideas of each point of view are realized in full. Nothing is lost from either; neither is twisted or distorted to avoid conflict. They can be realized both fully and harmoniously because a new structure is created to house them both, founded on the ideals of each. It is not the original positions that are united, but their core ideas. And because it is these ideas, and not their shells, that are the life force behind these positions, the synthesis brings about a vital, growing, unified community that attains true peace, not temporary truce, and that has the potential

for further advancement. (It is easy to see that new biological life is formed in the very same way).

4. Modern Orthodoxy as a Synthesis of the Two Opposing Approaches

Let us examine how this approach works in practice. We have described above two opposing positions frequently held by the Haredim, on one side, and the secular Jews on the other. It stands to reason that these two points of view should clash on many concrete issues. And although in practical situations they may reach a compromise, or, in the case of common interests or danger from a common enemy, settle on some arrangement, when it comes to ideology, they will never reach a common understanding. Compromise, therefore, leads to no real progress, and creates only a temporary truce. Rav Kook's Modern Orthodoxy is not a compromise; it is a synthesis of these two positions. It extracts the Divine idea from each, and builds a new construction from these.

Here is how it is done. First we identify the essential core of the conservative/Haredi viewpoint. Clearly this is the conviction that Halakha is of Divine origin. This conviction is unquestionably correct and of a positive nature. (As an orthodox religious ideology, Rav Kook's Modern Orthodoxy emphasizes, of course, the need for total observance of Halakha.) So we must incorporate the idea that Halakha is Divine into our newly forming Modern Orthodoxy. And what is the Divine essence of the Reformist point of view? Clearly, it is the conviction that ethical feeling is of Divine origin. There is no doubt that this idea, too, is true; therefore, it must also be realized in Modern Orthodoxy. Modern Orthodoxy must be built on a recognition of the Divine origin of both, Halakha and ethical feeling.

From the point of view of Modern Orthodoxy, both, Halakha and ethical feeling, come to us from God. However, their Divine natures are not the same. Halakha originates in the transcendent Divine, which entered this world with the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. Its source, therefore, is external; it transcends our world.

It comes to us indirectly, by means of the tradition. Ethical feeling originates in the immanent Divine, which is revealed through our own lives, through our intuitive morality, through the image of God in man.

Inasmuch as both are Divine, explains Rav Kook, neither has the right to defer to the other. We are obligated to adhere fully to both Halakha and our ethical sense. But what are we to do when they conflict?

Because they share the same Divine source, Halakha and ethical feeling should agree. But what if, in real contemporary life, they do not? The answer is that the reason for their divergence lies not in a true contradiction between Halakha and conscience, but in either our incorrect understanding of Halakha or our incorrect understanding of our own ethical instinct – or, most likely, in both at once. The problem is not in Halakha itself, but in our mistakes of interpretation. Likewise, our ethical feeling is not wrong, but we have been deceived by superficialities and have not reflected deeply enough on the essence of the matter. Therefore, our task is to sharpen our focus, to sort out and analyze both foundations of our existence – Halakha and conscience, to clear away the coverings and reveal their true contents until, finally, they do agree and work together.

As in any situation, creating a synthesis is not easy. There is nothing mechanical about the process. It is necessary to “love” both viewpoints, to feel them deeply. Below, we examine ways to undertake this task in some concrete instances.

Neither of the opposing groups can create a synthesis, nor could they do it together as each is fighting against an alien point of view. For them it is an external conflict. Synthesis can be brought about only through the integration of the central ideas of both streams of thought, and this can be done only through internal conflict.

5. Example 1: The Conversion of non-Jews Marrying Jews: a Revision of Halakha

Let us examine an example in which a Halakhic decree has been changed: the issue of conversion.

If we study the Halakha concerning *giyur*, we soon observe that many circumstances have ceased to exist since the writing of the classical codes. In general, of course, the sixteenth century Shulchan Aruch, the most recent of the generally accepted classical codes, still holds. But “in general” indicates that there might well be exceptions. That something is written in the Shulchan Aruch does not always mean that it stands today. Circumstances may be entirely different, and it may be possible to adhere faithfully to all of the very same Halakhic principles and yet reach a different conclusion.

Here is an example. The Shulchan Aruch states that if a Jewish man has had (or is suspected to have had) intimate relations with a non-Jewish (unmarried) woman, or vice versa, and the non-Jew has since converted, they are not allowed to marry, as this would raise suspicion that the conversion was made only for the sake of the marriage.

Let us look, however, at the Halakhic ruling of the Hungarian rabbis of the mid-nineteenth century (whom, by the way, it would be hard to accuse of Modernism). The decision examined the following situation: a young man left Judaism, married a gentile, and had two children. He requests that his wife and children be allowed to convert and his family be accepted as Jewish. According to the Shulchan Aruch, *giyur* is prohibited in this situation. But the rabbis ruled otherwise. They first took into consideration that the ruling in the Shulchan Aruch was not a law written in the Torah or decreed by the sages, but an accepted norm for practical life. Until the sixteenth century, this rule had protected Jews from forming intimate ties with gentiles. In the nineteenth century, however, they faced a different situation. They could not prevent such ties. Furthermore, if this woman were not to convert, her husband would not divorce her and, thus, would remain married to a gentile, which is a serious breach of the Law. His children would be gentiles, further obstructing his path to a normal Jewish life. If she were allowed to convert, he would live with a Jew and have a Jewish family, which would be preferable both for him and for the Jewish people as a whole. For these reasons, they decided to permit the conversion, even though the ruling seemed to contradict the Shulchan Aruch. This was the action, not of twentieth century

Modernists, but of rabbis of a very conservative bent in nineteenth century in Hungary.

The Shulchan Aruch was based on the idea that allowing such conversions would create a “breach in the wall,” that people would enter into intimate relations with gentiles, assuming that they could simply convert and marry them. In the sixteenth century, apparently, this prohibition was an effective deterrent against undesirable connections.

However, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an entirely different approach is necessary. The Shulchan Aruch’s ruling against conversion has long ceased to restrain those who are not observant of the commandments. What’s more, we may see the opposite situation: it is frequently the non-Jewish partner who wishes to convert, observe Jewish tradition, and make the family fully Jewish, while the Jewish partner may be fairly indifferent. If we were to conform to the ruling of the Shulchan Aruch, the non-Jew would be unable to bring the Jewish partner closer to the Torah. Again, it is critical that what we have here is not a Law from the Torah, or even a decree from the sages, but a practice that has become the rule; furthermore, Halakha allows the *Beit-Din*, or religious court, to adopt those criteria for conversion that it sees as best for the Jewish people in a given situation. Therefore, the concrete Halakhic ruling in this case must be different, even as the essence of the Halakha, its principles and underlying rules, remain unchanged. Due to changed circumstances, we reach a different conclusion. Today, no *Beit-Din* would prevent a non-Jewish spouse from converting in such a case.

6. Example 2: The Status of “Jewish by Father” in Jewish Society

I will now try to present some possible paths to a solution of a very complicated problem, a burning issue today in Israel: what is the status of those who are Jewish only on their father’s side, but who consider themselves, and wish, to belong to the Jewish people. I will note yet again that, as in all previous discussions of concrete instances, the one that follows is not a direct exposition of Rav Kook’s

point of view. The issues of his time were different, as these problems had not yet arisen; therefore, we cannot learn his views on them. The following discussion is my own attempt to seek out a solution based on his principles.

The situation is as follows: A repatriate from Russia says, "I have a Jewish father and a Jewish last name. All my life I have considered myself a Jew; everyone in Russia saw me as a Jew. I suffered from anti-Semitism, but did not change my name. Yet here, in Israel, I am not recognized as a Jew. This is unjust."

What is the correct religious approach to such a situation? According to Halakha, this person is not a Jew, yet our ethical sense tells us that he has a valid claim. We can make an effort to suppress our feeling, tell ourselves it's foolishness, that Halakha is Halakha. But this would be wrong. After all, the ethical feeling is the most important element of our dialogue with God: it must not be suppressed, but developed and deepened. We must think about it: which position is, in fact, right? Is Halakha really all that clear? If we begin to explore this question seriously, we will find that it is not as simple as we thought.

Of course, in popular literature we frequently encounter such assertions as, "a person is either Jewish or not; there is no in-between. If a non-Jew happens to be the son of a Jew, he is no different from any other non-Jew; the fact that his father is a Jew means nothing at all from the point of view of Judaism." However, a more attentive analysis reveals that such assertions are not accurate. Halakha actually takes a very different approach. I learned of one aspect of this myself in Moscow in the early 1980s, when Rabbi Avrom Miller (a man who had studied at the *Chafetz Chaim Yeshiva* at the beginning of the twentieth century, had managed to carry Judaism through World War II and Stalin's camps, and who still taught in the Synagogue and was the universal mentor of Moscow's religious youth in the 1970s and 1980s) explained to me that, although it is not written anywhere, if a person who has a Jewish father wishes to convert, we must not dissuade him, but help him. The laws of *giyur*, which state that we must try to dissuade a non-Jew from converting and agree to it only if he insists and is prepared to observe the commandments, only apply to a gentile with no ties to Judaism. When I asked which book of

Halakha this was in, Rabbi Avrom again stressed that it is written nowhere: we must understand it ourselves.

Here it must be said that today (partly due to the fact that “mixed” aliyah has raised this problem in Israel society) far more detailed literature exists on the issues of *giyur*, so one can now find written sources on the question above. There are even Halakhic sources that state that in the case of a Jewish man married to a non-Jewish woman, it is a commandment that he converts the children. The next question raised is whether, in so doing, he is also fulfilling the commandment to be fruitful and multiply. However, it is important to note in principle that there is much in Judaism that one must simply “understand oneself,” even when one is unable to cite a Halakhic text.

Thus, we see that if someone’s father is Jewish, he is not “just” a non-Jew. The correct term for this person’s status is *zera Yisrael*: descendent of Jews, and Judaism views him entirely differently from a gentile.

Likewise, the attitude towards people in this group who came to Israel in the last wave of *aliyah* (if, of course, they wish to be part of the Jewish people) must not be the same as toward gentiles. They must be seen as partial or potential Jews, and we must help them to undertake *giyur*.

Of course, it would be incorrect to consider them Jewish without conversion; the law of the Torah clearly forbids this. But it is quite possible that we must try to facilitate their *giyur* by determining which demands are really required by Halakha, and which are norms that have come to be accepted for the sake of keeping it “tough” to convert and that are not, in fact, required. A central aspect of *giyur* is that the convert, in becoming part of the Jewish people, shares its fate and life, and in that respect, the very fact that the person has immigrated to Israel may have religious, and even Halakhic, significance. Residence in Israel and participation in the life of the nation could certainly be seen as very real confirmation of a desire to be part of the Jewish people. Of course, the desire alone is insufficient; one must still tread a long path. But it is very possible that if we, the religious Jewry, clearly state that aliyah in such cases has Halakhic and religious significance

and that such people are not “simply” gentiles, this change in our position itself will alter the attitude of these and other people towards Judaism, and transform the situation in the land from conflict to positive collaboration.

In summing up, it can be said that in acknowledging the special status of children of Jewish fathers, we in a sense acknowledge that their complaint has itself a positive Divine truth. If we integrate this element of truth on one side, and clarify the relevant Halakha on the other, we are able to discover not a compromise, but a synthesis.

Of course, in every real religious-social problem, it is extremely difficult to attain such a synthesis – but this must be the direction of our search.

