

"The Beauty of Yefet in the Tents of Shem"

Gentiles and Jews in the Thought of Rav Kook



In matters of daily life, the State of Israel has largely fulfilled the famous biblical depiction of the Jews as "a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations" (Numbers 23:29). The world of many Israeli Jews is largely devoid of significant contact with non-Jews. Other than as workers at construction sites or in the kitchens of restaurants, non-Jews are mainly glimpsed through the prism of the local media. This is particularly true of the Palestinian population, which, despite its geographical proximity, remains behind a barrier of violence, fear and political deadlock. The problem is compounded in the case of religious Zionism, whose authoritative texts are rife with negative perceptions of non-Jews.

{ By **DAVID DISHON**

The foremost spiritual figure of religious Zionism is undoubtedly Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaCohen Kook (1865–1935), the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Palestine, and one of the most prolific, profound and influential Jewish thinkers of the 20th century. His legacy enjoys particular popularity among the youth and educators of the national-religious public. Although Rabbi Kook developed a rich, complex and original body of thought on a wide variety of spiritual issues, many of his followers have chosen to focus on his messianic Zionism and his mystical doctrines of Jewish uniqueness. Rabbi Kook, however, expressed love for all human beings. His teachings regarding non-Jews combine a kabbalistic worldview with a modern, humanistic sensibility. When properly understood, these teachings can become an important source for educating Jews to appreciate their own uniqueness while interacting positively with the non-Jewish world.

The Iron Furnace of Egypt

Contemporary scholars customarily identify two basic conceptions of non-Jews in the halachic tradition. The first views the non-Jew as possessing a spiritual essence that is different from, and inferior to, that of the Jew. Jewish spiritual superiority arises from the Jews' unique bond with God, as described in the Bible, which marks Israel's distinctiveness as "a people that dwells apart" not only religiously and as a community, but by virtue of their spiritual essence. Non-Jews who convert to Judaism are considered lost Jewish souls that have undergone a miraculous transformation and have returned to the fold; or else as individuals possessing limited spiritual potential. This "essentialist" approach characterizes the thought of the medieval sage Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, as well as the major streams of Jewish mysticism and Hasidism, all of which remain highly influential in most Orthodox circles today.

The second conception sees no essential difference between Jews and non-Jews. All men and women share the same human qualities and frailties. The Jews are unique by virtue of having been chosen by God to receive the Torah and are thus required to become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). Uniquely Jewish traits are perceived as arising from Torah learning and Jewish education. This "nonessentialist" approach has appealed to rationalist sages such as Sa'adia Gaon and Maimonides, and became popular in modern Orthodox circles from the 19th century onward.

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For many modern Jewish liberal and humanist thinkers, Orthodox Jews included, the essentialist approach is a source of embarrassment and concern. After centuries of combating demonic portrayals of the Jew based on racial theories, it is appalling to see one's own tradition portraying the Other as representative of the *Sitra Ahra* (literally, the other side): the ritually impure aspect of the universe containing the forces of evil and destruction. This image of the non-Jew is deeply ingrained in Jewish mysticism and is dominant in the thought of many a great Jewish sage.

With the founding of the State of Israel, this embarrassment evolved in the eyes of many into a serious concern. For the first time in 2,000 years, Jews are sovereign over

non-Jews and are able to wage war against non-Jewish enemies. Within this new reality, it is feared that religious ideologies holding non-Jews to be inferior by their very essence could be invoked to condone abuses of human rights, both in armed conflicts and within civic society. Since Israel has become in many ways the “public face” of Judaism worldwide, the attitudes of Israelis towards non-Jews are of acute interest and concern for Diaspora Jews who identify with the Jewish state.

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The teachings of Rabbi Kook, a key spiritual authority of the religious Zionist movement, are of particular importance in this context. His essentialist perspective has guided the thought of his followers, most important, his son Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook (1891–1982), who served as head of Jerusalem’s Merkaz HaRav Yeshiva (named after his father) and as an early leader of the settler movement. In many quarters of religious Zionism, youths are growing up in an educational environment that takes for granted the spiritual inferiority of non-Jews. There is a danger that this could justify, in their eyes, a lack of concern for non-Jewish lives, property and dignity. If the non-Jewish world is perceived as “impure,” offering nothing of spiritual value, intellectual quests into other human cultures and their histories could then be dismissed as irrelevant to Jews.

Many Jews are alarmed by this simplistic interpretation of Rabbi Kook’s ideology.

Through a close reading of his works, we may reconstruct a fuller and more nuanced picture of Rabbi Kook’s views on the relations that Jews should maintain with non-Jews.

Rabbi Kook makes his essentialist understanding of Israel crystal clear. He claims that Israel’s uniqueness does not derive from the mitzvot but that the mitzvot were given to Israel and not to the other nations in recognition of Israel’s unique “soul essence” (*etzem nishmati*). Rabbi Kook maintains that at the dawn of human history, the whole of humanity shared an identical essence. When God decided to set apart a unique, chosen nation – the Jews – He supplemented the human essence of its people with a “majestic spirit.” But with the onset of moral depravity, the secular, universal humanity could no longer serve as a basis for the sacred essence of the Jews but rather corrupted it. Israelite receptivity to divine holiness was then made possible only through the experience of exile and slavery in Egypt, which functioned as an “iron furnace,” reforging a totally new creation of a unique spiritual entity, separate in its essence “from head to heel”:

The difference between the Israelite *neshama* [supernal soul], its essence, internal longings, aspiration, character and position – and the *neshama* of all the nations, in their various grades, is greater and deeper than the difference between the *nefesh* [lower, biological part of the soul] of man and the *nefesh* of animals. For between the latter there is only a quantitative difference, while between the former there exists a qualitative, essential difference. (*Orot Yisrael* 5:10)

The Humane Impulse

Yet Rabbi Kook’s belief in an inherent Jewish spiritual superiority did not prevent him from preaching deep love and respect for every human being. “For only in a soul rich with the love of creatures and the love of man,”

he taught, "can love of the nation soar to the height of its nobility and its spiritual and practical greatness" (*Musar Avicha*, p.58).

This love of mankind is central to Israel's spiritual role among the nations. For Rabbi Kook, a superficial reading of sacred Jewish texts could lead to hostility or apathy towards the non-Jew. He condemns such spiritual "miserliness" (*tzarut ayin*) that holds all foreign elements to be categorically negative. Largesse of spirit must be accompanied by careful navigation through the traditions of halacha and Torah study:

[The love of all creatures] must withstand very demanding trials, to overcome many contradictions strewn like obstructing boulders in [the form of] isolated statements, the superficial meaning of certain *halachot*, and a vast many doctrines derived from the *tzimtzum* [brevity] of the literal meaning of the Torah and national morality. (*Orot Hakodesh*, vol. 3, p. 318)

Rabbi Kook certainly practiced what he preached. In the aftermath of the 1929 riots in which more than a hundred Jews were massacred by Arab mobs, Rav Kook dismissed Arab allegations that the violence was triggered by Jewish provocations. But instead of resorting to counter-accusations, he sounded an empathetic note in an article published in the Hebrew newspaper *Ha'Olam*:

Ultimately, I know full well that that the Arab people in general, and also the greater part of the Arabs of the Land of Israel, are filled with sorrow and shame for the despicable acts performed by a small minority in their midst as the result of incitement. And we hope that the same tradition of ways of peace and mutual support, of building together with all of the inhabitants of the Land of Israel, the beloved and forsaken country... will triumph over all conspiracies of lies and deceit, of defilement and malice.

The following year, addressing a meeting of the Jewish National Fund, Rabbi Kook reminded the Jews that they must be, even in the face of violence, "a righteous nation keeping faithfulness," in the words of the prophet Isaiah. Such righteousness, he emphasized, must express itself by acting justly toward every nation and individual. He praised the JNF for acquiring land only through purchase, as a fulfillment of the mitzvah to love one's neighbor, which refers not only to Jews, but to foreign nations as well.* As he taught:

The love of Israel requires the love of all mankind, and when it instills hatred for any part of mankind, this is a sign that the neshama has not yet been purified from its filth, and thus cannot be united with the Eden of the highest love. (*Orot Yisrael* 4:5)

Indeed Rabbi Kook believed that the ultimate purpose of Jewish spiritual activity is to perfect the role of the Jewish nation as the carrier of divine goodness to mankind. This process, he wrote, will culminate with the redemption of the whole world – the attainment of a human society of perfect justice and truth. This redemptive scheme is anchored in an important concept of Jewish mysticism: *Knesset Yisrael* (literally, the Assembly of Israel) – the metaphysical entity of the Jewish nation, expressed in the concrete People of Israel.

Knesset Yisrael is the microcosm of Being as a whole, and in this world, this microcosm is embodied in the concrete Israelite nation, in its corporeality and spirituality, in its history and faith... there is no movement in the world, in any of the nations, for which you cannot find an example in Israel. (*Orot Yisrael* 1:1)

* This address, along with many of Rabbi Kook's articles and speeches, may be found in their original Hebrew in *Ma'amarei Hara'ayah* (Mecaz HaRav Kook, Jerusalem, 1984.)



Dignitaries on donkeys,
Palestine, ca.1915

Though not apparent on the surface, the historical interaction of the Jews with other nations is the vehicle of universal redemption:

The essential desire to be “good to all” with no limitations whatsoever, not in the number of the beneficiaries and not in the quality of the goodness, is the inner core of the essence of the *neshama of Kneset Yisrael* . . . At the depths of its desire *Kneset Yisrael* is not at all separated from the divinity; it “wears” the divinity that is revealed in the world and desires in its Being the divine desire of “The Lord is good to

all, and his mercies are over all his works” (Psalm 145). This goodness is the secret of redemption, which must inevitably come. (*Orot Yisrael* 1:4)

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This commitment to universal goodness, however, comes at a price, as it places a heavy moral duty on every Jewish individual:

Knesset Yisrael is founded entirely on the basis of the highest divine morality. Therefore any moral elevation found in any of its individual members adds to her strength. And vice versa: a moral failure, and any malice [on the part of an individual], according to its inherent degree of ugliness and evil, diminish her strength and weaken the relation its individuals maintain with the collective. (*Orot Yisrael* 2:1)

Rav Kook's category of "highest divine morality" does not imply that human morality is separated from God's. On the contrary, the morality of the Torah enhances the universal moral intuitions that come naturally to all people:

The fear of heaven must never quash the natural morality of man, because it then ceases to be a pure fear of heaven. . . . A sign of pure fear of heaven is when natural morality, implanted in man's upright nature, ascends higher than where it would stand without it [the morality of the Torah]. (*Orot HaKodesh*, vol.3, p.27)

Moreover, Rav Kook warned in *Orot HaTorah* against violations, in the name of Torah, of "the spirit of natural morality" and "the gates of light of natural understanding." Torah that is "torn from all the light of life spread throughout the world," he wrote, is Torah misunderstood."

The story of the Binding of Isaac (the *Akedah*) serves Rabbi Kook as a case in point. God commands Abraham to "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love. . . and of-

fer him there for a burnt offering" (Genesis. 22:2). Many exegetes, especially in the modern era, have seen Abraham's willingness to comply as proof that divine command must trump all human moral intuitions. But Rabbi Kook maintains that God complements Abraham's complete surrender to the divine command by stopping the sacrifice, thereby establishing the imperative that God's command must never contradict human feelings of love and justice. The latter, in fact, are also a revelation of divine will: "[T]he mercy of a father and his love with a pure soul is itself a flame of holy fire, emanating directly from the pure love of God, 'whose mercies are over all his works' " (*Olat HaRa'ayah*, p. 93).

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Pathways of the Intellect

Rabbi Kook understands world history as a continuous process of striving for perfection (*hishtalmut*). This process involves the unification of different human elements that possess special qualities, each making their unique contribution to the overall mosaic.

The Holy One acted kindly towards his world by not putting all the talents in one place – not in one person, nor in one people, nor in one country, nor in one generation, nor in one world. Rather the talents are spread around. . . . A rich eternal spiritual quality [*segulat olamim*] is ensconced

"*Orot HaTorah*, along with *Orot HaKodesh* and other volumes, is a compendium of Rav Kook's writings assembled after his death by his principal disciple Rabbi David Cohen, known as the Nazir, and other followers.



Palestinian schoolgirls,
Gaza, 1969
/// Photograph by Rick/
Israelsun

in Israel. But in order to be united with the world in a general sense as well, aspects of unique faculties must be lacking in Israel, for the world and all “the great of the peoples” (Psalm 47) to supplement. (*Orot Yisrael* 5:2)

Israel has been entrusted with the task of leading the process of *hishtalmut* and must be assisted by other nations as well. Yet Rabbi Kook is careful here to distinguish between Jewish openness to “external” non-Jewish contributions (in aesthetics, science, technology) and Israel’s complete self-reliance when it comes to “internals” (the spiritual realm of faith and morality). In his words: “[T]he internality of life is perfect in Israel without needing help from any foreign power.”

There is a delicate and difficult balance to be maintained between self-confidence which empowers oneself and self-righteousness which abuses others, between healthy self-criticism and corruptive cynicism.

This receptivity to “externals” undoubtedly reflects Rabbi Kook’s own intellectual voracity, which extended well beyond the confines of Jewish law and lore. However, in contrast to his distinction between “externals” and “internals” in the spiritual life, Rabbi Kook in fact freely and elaborately cited non-Jewish thinkers in his writings and celebrated the challenge to reach new understandings of Torah through the confrontation with modern science and ideas. After the religious

Zionist historian Ze’ev Yavetz (1847–1924), author of the monumental *History of Israel*, criticized Maimonides for relying on Greek philosophical concepts in the *Guide for the Perplexed*, Rabbi Kook responded as follows, in an essay appended to the 12th (and posthumous) volume of Yavetz’s opus:

These [concepts] are nothing but rational explanations that reach as far as human capacity to delve into eternal mysteries goes, and these can be uttered in any language. And I cannot fathom such excessive zealotry: are indeed all the pathways of the human intellect forbidden unto Israel? Where is then “the beauty of Yefet in the tents of Shem?”

Maimonides, the first sage to offer a comprehensive halachic codification, is traditionally hailed as the foremost Jewish thinker throughout the generations. His *Guide* is a theological tour de force that is informed by sensitivity to rational consistency, which derives from the philosophical legacy of Aristotle. Therefore, for Rabbi Kook, it is hard to see how Maimonides’ philosophical discussions in the treatise would lack spiritual significance, even if they are inspired to a degree by a Greek thinker. The Talmudic reference to “the beauty of Yefet” (BT Megillah 9b) serves Rabbi Kook to expand the notion of beauty to pertain to all forms of truth and wisdom. Yefet, one of Noah’s three sons, whose offspring were the forefathers of great ancient kingdoms, may nonetheless bring offerings of beauty (in Rabbi Kook’s expanded sense) to the tents of his brother Shem, forefather of Abraham:

And where is the collective sharing in the universal image of God that the Holy One Blessed Be He had given? For that is why we respect any wise and righteous among the whole of humanity, and we accept the truth from all those who speak words of wisdom . . .



Like Maimonides before him, Rabbi Kook sees nothing wrong with the use of “external” philosophical concepts for the elucidation of spiritual questions, including the study of Scripture, since the purity of Jewish spiritual essence cannot be tarnished by their incorporation, but may indeed gain substantially.

Still, Rabbi Kook identifies a hierarchy among the different national cultures. He distinguishes “higher” from “lower” nations, although this distinction is fluid and may change in the course of time. Within this hierarchical scheme, Israel is commanded to search out the positive contribution that inheres in each and every nation, and to absorb it and use it in the formation of a superstructure of the True and the Good. In Rabbi Kook’s view, even the archenemies of Israel have a positive side, as hinted in the rabbinic saying: “The grandsons of Haman taught Torah in Bnei Brak. . .” (BT Gittin 57b).

One should not, of course, interpret Rabbi Kook’s openness to other cultures as a license to intermingle with them. He walks a very fine line between multicultural awareness and the fundamental commitment of Jews to social and spiritual isolation. In an article published in the journal *Tachkemoni* in 1910, Rabbi Kook explicates his unique reading of the phrase “a nation that dwells apart.” Rabbi Kook understands Jewish insularity as the expression of its being “a distilled nation” (*am tamtztit*) that absorbs, purifies and then disseminates the best of all human cultures. Over time, the necessity of remaining detached from other nations slowly dwindles, as history progresses toward the redemptive moment:

The seal of the separation of Israel from the [other] nations in the early days of Israel’s emergence is rooted in the memory of the Exodus and the rebirth of the nation [Israel] that is oriented to the future turns with all its resources in an opposite movement, away from the Exodus. Israel is approaching organic unification with

the whole of humanity. The moral, liberated streams gradually come into being during the period of isolation to prepare life for organic connection.” (Emphasis in the original).

Note that Rabbi Kook does not call for the abandonment of Jewish separatism, since the path toward greater integration is long and gradual. In fact, separation is a necessary preparation for integration, and Rabbi Kook constantly warns against moving too fast before the adequate conditions have been created. Clearly, however, he sees that the times are changing and a shift in emphasis is in order. Israel’s national renaissance, which will usher in a new era in relations between Israel and non-Jewish cultures, is imminent.

Belief and Blemishes

Lofty as Rabbi Kook’s thought may seem, for him it extended seamlessly to real life. His deep involvement in the public sphere, as both a religious leader and a representative of the Jewish *yishuv* before the British Mandate, was fully entwined with his theology. Therefore, the notion of *Knesset Yisrael* constitutes a moral compass that enables the betterment of the Jewish people. At a time when secular Jewish intellectuals leveled harsh criticisms against the spiritual, moral and physical state of the Jews, Rabbi Kook insisted that one must never lose sight of the ideal entity expressed by *Knesset Yisrael*, while acknowledging the enormous gap between the ideal and the real:

When ideals reach the stage of practical implementation (*ma’aseh*) they gradually assume limitations, and many portions of the “upper brilliance” are lost immediately. . . When it comes to practice, humanity is clad in filthy clothing, its many lights fall into the harsh shells (*klipot*) with which it is wrapped, and he who loves humanity as it is cannot soar. He becomes

inclined to absorb all the filth it [concrete humanity] has accumulated, much more than the sparks of holiness hidden in its secret places . . . And the same applies to the status of individual nationality, where we find these same trends manifested also within our nation. (*Orot*, p. 130)

Rabbi Kook contrasts the ideal nationhood of Israel with its historical experience of corruption and destruction. Alongside the optimism that Israel's national renaissance will lead to universal redemption, he warns of the dangers of secular nationalism and "national wickedness." To illustrate, Rabbi Kook turns to the events that led to the destruction of the Second Temple. As he wrote in the journal *HaNeer* in 1905:

[At that time] nationalistic sects emerged that adopted the superficial manifestations of nationalism. The hatred unique to the evil inclination which wreaks destruction in the name of nationalism intensified. Although this hatred is purportedly directed only towards a foreign nation [Rome] and does not concern the nation [of Israel] itself, over time it transforms into an internal curse and brotherly hatred intensifies, destroying any national goodness.

Acutely sensitive to the danger inherent in the double-edged sword of hatred for the Other, Rabbi Kook opposed Jewish nationalism that sought to base itself on xenophobia instead of "love for all creatures." Spiritual superiority also entails grave moral responsibility; the eager anticipation of the nearing redemption should never desensitize Jews to the faults and dangers of concrete reality. Rabbi Kook warns repeatedly against the precipitous inclination to act as though Israel's immense potential were already fully realized, a tendency that he identified as Christianity's greatest mistake. At the same time, Rav Kook insisted

that Israel must never lose sight of its fundamental greatness. The human sense of inadequacy, the feeling that the individual or Jewish nation is unworthy of divine love and revelation, is what prevents spiritual and moral perfection from developing. "The upright person," we read in *Orot HaTorah*, "must believe in his own life".

There is a delicate and difficult balance to be maintained between self-confidence which empowers oneself and self-righteousness which abuses others, between healthy self-criticism and enervating guilt or corruptive cynicism. In *Orot Yisrael* we find Rav Kook's conclusion that human beings, and Israel even more so, must believe in their own greatness "without blinding our eyes so as not to criticize all her blemishes."

Fiery messianic visions tend to overshadow calls for caution and discretion. Rabbi Kook's rich legacy contains much of both, but quite understandably its appeal has derived more from its redemptive promise than from its accompanying warnings. His writings lack systematization and, as he himself confessed, were composed in creative outbursts. This is why a reconstruction of this broad array of materials into a cohesive position is a formidable challenge.

Our reading of a small selection of his writings has attempted to show that Rabbi Kook's synthesis of historical reality and the grand metaphysical mission of the Jewish people is multilayered and sophisticated. Throughout, we are inspired by his message that patience and tolerance are preconditions for drinking deeply from the fountain of Torah learning, and for exercising the potential of the human spirit to soar to the heights of divine goodness.

Amid the turbulent currents of the Middle East in the 21st century, the words of Rabbi Kook resound more urgently than ever: "The love of Israel requires the love of the whole of mankind." It remains for a new generation of idealistic and highly committed religious Jews to nurture this legacy.



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