

**Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohein Kook:
The First Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of The Land of Israel
Parashat Pedukey
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Temple Aliyah, Needham**

I don't usually have much good to say about the Chief Rabbi of Israel. Actually, there are two of them: one Sephardic and one Ashkenazic. I don't usually have much good to say about either of them. It's a sad story. Today, the chief rabbis of Israel are functionaries. They are bureaucrats. They're not known for being scholars or pastors or creative thinkers. Corruption is endemic. Several recent Chief Rabbis have been investigated by the police and in some cases indicted. In short, the Chief Rabbinate does not have the respect of vast number of Israelis.

It wasn't always this way.

Today, I'd like to speak to you about the very first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of the Land of Israel, a truly extraordinary person about whom we should all know: a traditionalist Jew who nonetheless won over secular and even anti-religious people. This Chief Rabbi wasn't free from controversy and by no means did he have everyone's support, but he was universally appreciated as an exceptional human being and rabbi.

I'm speaking of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Kohein Kook, or Rav Kook, for short. Born in Russia in 1865, he died in Jerusalem in 1935.

Rav Kook was an *ilui*, a child prodigy. Almost from infancy he was educated into the classics of the Jewish world, becoming prodigiously learned in Talmud and Jewish law. He studied at the famous Volozhin Yeshiva.

But even in his youth it was clear that there was something different about him. Though he remained deeply immersed in traditional learning and living, he also reached beyond the edges of the Talmud's pages, so to speak, to pursue secular learning. He reached out to the *maskilim*, the enlightened, secular Jews of his day – something not done by traditionalist Jews, much less rabbis.



In other ways as well he crossed boundaries—from the left side of his brain to the right. From an early age, he was a poet and a mystic. Finally, he also was captivated by the holiness of the Land of Israel. Though he never became a card-carrying member of the Zionist movement, he was deeply sympathetic to it and supportive of it.

Today we think of Zionism as one thing: the political movement that led to the creation of the State of Israel. But that doesn't capture the range of sensibilities, the range of reasons why Jews, both secular and religious, were drawn to Zionism in the latter part of the nineteenth century. As Yehuda Mersky, the author of a recent biography of Kook (*Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution*), puts it,

Rav Kook stands in the pantheon of figures, all born in the mid-nineteenth century, who laid the foundations of Zionism. **Theodor Herzl** projected Zionism as rescue. **Ahad Ha-Am** preached Zionism as renewal. **Micah Joseph Berdichevsky** proclaimed Zionism as revolution. **Eliezer Ben-Yehuda** taught Zionism as resurrection, and **Chaim Nachman Bialik** showed how a resurrected tongue could be brave and beautiful. **Rav Kook taught Zionism as redemption.**

Indeed, Rav Kook felt that through the Zionist project, through returning to the Land of Israel, we Jews could be restored, and Judaism could be restored.

One can only imagine how challenging, how stressful it must have been to be a traditionalist Orthodox Jew (and rabbi), on the one hand, and yet also drawn to support the return to the Land of Israel—at a time when it was so, so unpopular in the traditionalist world, on the other.

There always was a group of pious Jews living in the Land of Israel. Called “the Old Yishuv,” the “Old Jewish Community of Palestine,” this group was strenuously opposed to Zionism. They believed in the special nature of the Land of Israel, but they were staunchly opposed to Jews taking any steps to turn that small community of indigent pious people into a national home, much less a state. On paper, Rav Kook had a lot in common with the leaders of the Old Yishuv. He, like they, had studied at the finest Yeshivot; he, like they, were pious, observant, and pursued a holy life. But *unlike* they, he saw meaning and value in what the mostly secular, revolutionary Zionists were doing.

I want to share a few highlights of Rav Kook's life. I want to give you a sense of what made him so special, and so influential even today. To make it easy for us

(and since Passover is coming), let's look at four specific dates, each of which has a 4 in it: 1904, 1914, 1924 and 1934.

First, 1904: that was the year Rav Kook left Russia and came to the Land of Israel to become the Rabbi of Jaffa. Not the rabbi of Jerusalem, whose rabbinic establishment was traditionalist, opposed to Zionism, hardly receptive to the new pioneers, but Jaffa, which was the bustling urban center of the New Yishuv, the growing community of secular pioneers who were creating kibbutzim and moshavim; speaking Hebrew, not Yiddish; talking about and agitating about creating a Jewish homeland, a Jewish state.

Rav Kook's first challenge came two months into his tenure: On July 3rd, 1904, came word that Theodor Herzl, the great leader of political Zionism, had died suddenly at the age of 44 of a heart attack. This death startled and deeply upset the secular Jewish newcomers. Think about it: the first Zionist Congress had taken place in 1897, only seven years before! Now, the energetic, charismatic, passionate champion of the Jewish return to the Land of Israel was dead. What would become of the Zionist movement? Would it die on the vine?

On the other hand, the ultra-religious Jews, of whom Rav Kook was one, and whom he represented, *couldn't care less about Herzl*. No, it's stronger than that: they *despised* Herzl. In Jerusalem, the Old Yishuv rabbis chose to ignore Herzl's death—and they wanted Rav Kook to do the same.

What was he to do? To pay tribute to this freethinker, this “non-Jewish Jew” (from the perspective of the Old Yishuv) would be an affront to the religious community. It would strain his relationships with his colleagues in Jerusalem. And yet, to ignore Herzl and his contributions would be a terrible slap in the face of the pioneers. Moreover, it would deny something fundamental within Rav Kook himself.

Rav Kook was invited to speak at a memorial service for Herzl to be held in Jaffa, ... and he decided to accept. He delivered an incredible eulogy, in which *he never mentioned Herzl by name*. Instead, he spoke about Jewish Messianism. Most people then and now are aware that there is a Jewish notion that, at the end of days, a Messiah will come to redeem the Jewish people. That Messiah is called Mashiach ben David, the Messiah who is the son of David; that is, descended from King David. But there's also an obscure figure in Jewish eschatological thinking called Mashiach ben Yosef, the Messiah who is the son of Yosef. This Messiah, the son of Joseph, is understood to have the job of laying the earthly, material

foundation for the other Messiah's coming. Unlike Mashiach ben David, this Messiah is understood to be a "man of this world," and someone who dies young.

The "*nimshal*", the interpretation of this eulogy, wasn't lost on anyone. It was a *tour de force*: a brilliant way of situating Herzl into the Jewish religious imagination, turning him into a Jewishly significant cultural figure and not just a secular Jewish journalist seeking to solve the problem of anti-Semitism.

[Soon thereafter, Rav Kook travelled to the new agricultural settlements. He was irrepressible. His love for what the pioneers were doing was hard to contain. Passing through the fields, he pointed and said, "Look! A Jewish cow!" Once, on his way to Rishon- Le-Zion, he told a companion, I could kiss every stone in this land – and even the mules on the road."

Once, a physician refused to travel to a patient on the Sabbath, out of fear of reprisals from the more stringent Orthodox. So Rav Kook walked alongside the physician's carriage the whole way. This unconventional mix of piety and responsiveness won him many admirers and hearts. (p. 51)]

Rav Kook's efforts to reach out to the secular pioneers met with much opposition from the rabbis in Jerusalem. He was constantly being criticized and condemned. He remained in Jaffa until 1914, when he travelled with his wife to Frankfurt, Germany, to attend a conference of the Agudat Yisrael organization. There he was stranded when, on August 1st (Tisha B'Av), World War I broke out. There was no way to return to Palestine yet, as a Russian national, he could not remain in Germany. He escaped to Switzerland, and then eventually made it to London. For almost four years he lived in London, where he studied English, and eventually learned enough to read some of Charles Dickens and other English classics. He visited the city's cultural sites, including the National Gallery. Listen to what he writes about that:

My favorite pictures were those of Rembrandt. I really think that Rembrandt was a tzaddik. Do you know that when I first saw Rembrandt's works, they reminded me of the legend about the creation of light? We are told that when God created light, it was so strong and pellucid that one could see from one end of the world to the other but God was afraid that the wicked might abuse it. What did He do? He reserved that light for the righteous men when the Messiah should come. But now and then there are great men who are blessed and privileged to see it. I think that Rembrandt was one of

them, and the light in his pictures is the very light that was originally created by God Almighty.

This isn't the way Rav Kook's fellow traditionalist rabbis were wont to talk about gentile visual artists.

Rav Kook was in London on November 2, 1917 when the Balfour Declaration was issued. It hit him "like a thunderbolt." This reinforced his belief that the Jewish return to the Land of Israel was divinely ordained. Some sought to get him involved politically, but this was not his arena. As he later wrote, "I am not a politician and relish not at all divergences of opinion. I see only the good side of phenomena." (p. 152)

Nonetheless, his conciliatory nature made him irresistible during a time of great internal Jewish conflict. When he returned to a transformed Palestine after the war, no longer ruled by the Turks; instead now under the rule of the British, he was invited to become the chief rabbi of Jerusalem (with the understanding that the Old Yishuv rabbis could continue to hold sway), and then, a year later, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of the Land of Israel.

Soon thereafter, he created a yeshiva of his own dedicated to creating a new kind of rabbi, "one as committed to national rebirth as to tradition;" (p. 178) "versed not only in the Talmud but also trained in rhetoric and composition, and engaged with modern society." And thus, **Mercuz HaRav, Rav Kook's Yeshiva**, was founded.

Rav Kook continued with his writing, his thinking, his leadership of the yeshiva, but he also had his duties as Chief Rabbi to contend with. And this brings us to **1924**, when he travelled to the United States on a fund-raising trip for the Central Relief Committee, a body created to help Jewish communities devastated in the war. They went to New York's city hall for a reception with Mayor John Hylan, who was surprised when Rav Kook spoke in English. "Rav Kook was the outstanding member of the group, his charisma felt even by hotel clerks."

"On April 15th, he met at the White House with President Calvin Coolidge, to whom he presented a hymn he had written for the occasion, in Hebrew." (p. 185) [The picture on your study sheet was taken that day.]

"Coolidge politely expressed his support for a Jewish national home, effectively the only time in his presidency that he endorsed the Balfour Declaration."

Kook didn't speak much of his trip to America but he did recall with great respect one particular person whom he met. Five years later, Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson, the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe, passed through Palestine en route to the U.S. He met with Rav Kook and asked for suggestions of people who might aid his efforts to save Russian Jewry from the Soviets. Kook named Louis Brandeis. He said, "I spoke with him [Brandeis] at length, in German. I saw he's a very great man who can't bear injustice being done to anyone, anywhere ... His soul is hewn of the purest marble."

Rav Kook became increasingly unpopular among the ultra-Orthodox. They skewered him in print. (p. 203 ff.) On the eve of Purim in 1932, a group of ultra-Orthodox youth staged a mock trial in which he was tried for heresy. Next, they mutilated him in effigy as the youngsters danced around and sang.

He continued to try to build bridges. In 1933, he sent a letter of greeting to the Maccabi sports association, wishing them luck and kindly asking them not to play on Shabbat. This enraged the ultra-Orthodox, who condemned, "That man, that heretic, hypocritical, flattering, like a pig rummaging in trash and raising a stink." The ultra-Orthodox struck out at him unceasingly. **"Yet he never responded in kind."**

He was lonely and often morose because of the abuse to which he was subjected. One night a disciple of his came upon him while taking a walk. The student reminded Rav Kook that it says in the Talmud that a *talmid chakham*, a scholar, ought not to walk about alone at night, lest he be set upon by demons. Rav Kook responded, I have nothing to worry about: in this city the demons don't think I'm a *talmid chakham*." (p. 204)

In 1934, he was ill with cancer. His gentle, mystical visions kept coming. "The root of everything," he wrote, "is directing oneself toward simple wholeheartedness. As it says, "Be whole with the Lord your God (Deuteronomy 18:13). Let your constant effort be founded not on the great innovations, but on perfect simplicity, which bestows health and life to body and soul." (p. 214)

Rav Kook died on September 1st, 1935, the third day of Elul, sixteen years after he had arrived in Jerusalem. His funeral, depicted in the picture on the second side of your study sheet, was attended by one quarter of the Jewish population of Palestine.

Why speak about Rav Kook today? Well, the *sefer torah* from which we read today was commissioned by Ori's great-great-grandmother (Rebbitzin Rachel Michal) in memory of her husband, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kushilevitz. It was written by a Yemenite scribe in Jerusalem, in 1934, the last full year of Rav Kook's life. Ori's grandfather grew up in Palestine, and remembers the *sefer torah* being written. This Torah was presented, shortly before Rav Kook's death, to Rav Kook himself, who accepted it as a gift to Rav Kook's Yeshiva, Mercaz Ha-Rav.

There it remained for many years until eventually, the family decided to look into the matter. They discovered that the *sefer torah* had become *pasul*; that is, it had become worn out. But it had not been buried. It had been placed in a *geniza*, from which they were able eventually to recover the *sefer torah* and restore it. It now resides in a yeshiva in Lakewood, New Jersey. They brought it up here in honor of Ori's bar mitzvah.

This *sefer torah*, which was presented, according to Ori's grandfather, to Rav Kook himself, has served as a reminder of the singularly inspiring personality and the enormous contributions of one of the great rabbis of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And for that we can be grateful.

Shabbat shalom.

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“The truly righteous do not complain about evil, but rather add justice; they do not complain about heresy, but rather add faith; they do not complain about ignorance, but rather add wisdom.”

“There are free people who have spirits of slaves, and slaves whose spirits are full of freedom. One who is true to his inner self is a free person, while one whose entire life is merely a stage for what is good and beautiful in the eyes of others, is a slave.”

“We [Israel] are great, and our foibles are great, and therefore our troubles are great—but our consolations will also be great.”

“The desire to be good to all with no restrictions - neither in the quantity of those to whom we are good nor in the quality of the good that we perform—that is the inner nucleus of the essence of the soul of Israel.”