

The Old Shall be Renewed and the New shall be Made Holy

My sermon tonight is in the form of a letter to a guiding light of the Jewish people.

1 Tishrei 5782/6 September 2021

Dear Rav Avraham Yisrael haCohen Kook,

Shanah tovah, Happy new year. Our high holy day theme at Temple Beth Shalom used one of your quotes to frame our High Holy Day experiences, *hayashan yitcadash v'hehechadash yitkadesh*, the old shall be renewed and the new shall be made holy. You wrote these words in a letter to Moshe Zeidel in 1908.ⁱ

My clergy colleagues and I selected your quote because our world is in month 19 of a global pandemic and as we thought carefully about who we are, where we have been this past year, and where we want to be your words felt right. You remind us of the importance of Judaism and its depth and breadth. You also encourage us to take hold of the opportunity that the present and future offer to innovate and to make holy. With a passing glance this could almost seem to be about our Reform Judaism, you likely would not have intended it that way. However, you were a radical, and your writings and life have much to teach us.

Let me back up just a little.

You, Rav Kook were born in 1865 in Griva, Latvia.ⁱⁱ As a child you were identified as an *iluy*, a rabbinic wunderkind, who could memorize Talmudic passages with ease and impressed elders with your memory.ⁱⁱⁱ From a young age God's light shone through you. Your formal learning took place in Lithuania at the great Volozhin Yeshiva, where you were known as a prodigy. That yeshiva produced other notable alumni include Haim Nachman Bialik, the pioneer of modern Hebrew poetry, Yisrael Salanter the founder of the Mussar movement, and Chaim Soloveitchik, the great Talmudist, among many other. Volozhin was the equivalent to the Ivy

League in elite Yeshiva learning, in part because of the focus on a university-like environment for Talmud study. You were not only a student of the traditional texts of Judaism though, you also read and knew the great Western philosophers and your work included responses to their principle arguments. While always a pious traditional observant Jew, you did not live in an isolated world of study alone. You were a rabbi of the community. At 23, you had your first rabbinic appointment where you served the people, teaching, preaching, offering pastoral care, and always learning and writing. You utilized the burgeoning tradition of the creation and contribution to journals to share knowledge. However, you could only remain in a small town for so long. You ended up in Boisk, Lativa until an offer you could not refuse came your way.

In 1902, Yoel Moshe Solomon traveled to Europe find a new chief rabbi for the city of Jaffa, the ancient seaport town that was becoming the urban center of new Jewish settlements in Palestine. Upon meeting, Solomon was taken with you and you were hired for the job. The journey to Israel was long. Your family traveled from Boisk to Riga, to Dvinsk, Vilna, Odessa, Istanbul, Beirut and finally, Jaffa. When you came ashore after a long journey, you kissed the ground of the Land of Israel, just as other Jews did before you and continued to do after you. We've all seen photos of that happening and maybe have even done it ourselves.

The entourage who met you on that pier took you via carriage to your new home in Neve Tzedek. But life in Jaffa at the turn of the 20th century was not always so easy. Having nothing to do with the political environment you were thrust into, you had a lot of work. On Shabbat you spoke at the local synagogue in fluid Hebrew, not Yiddish. You made the rounds of the organizations and communities you were expected to serve, led the local beit din, answered halakhic questions, helped charities and welfare institutions, presided at civic ceremonies, and received visiting dignitaries. You quickly became known for giving away all of your own

household possessions to help those in need and co-signed pauper's loans so frequently your family had to convince the local loan society your signature was no longer valid. Whether you liked it or not, you were under the watch of what was known as the Old Yishuv, the pious primarily Lithuanian and Hungarian rabbis who ran religious institutional life in Palestine who were strict and unwelcoming to newcomers. The New Yishuv that you served was growing in the Galilee and around Jaffa. The immigrants were significantly more diverse in their political outlooks and religiosity. Though predominantly Yiddish speaking, they were eager to build a Hebrew culture. You were a bit of an outlier. Trapped between the Old Yishuv and the new. As a reformer and a pious Jew you increasingly pushed the buttons of everyone.

This year, 5782 is a good reminder of just how radical you could be. This Jewish year, a year divisible by 7, is a shemita year, a sabbatical year. As instructed in Torah, this is a year that the land is to lie fallow.^{iv} In your day in Palestine the sabbatical year posed a challenge. Previously, in 1889 the Lithuanian rabbinic authorities ruled that agricultural settlements in the Land of Israel could sell their lands to non-Jews and continue to work them for the sabbatical year. Just 14 years later the Jewish population of the Land of Israel was different, more out-and-out modernists, secularists, and socialists were part of the second Aliyah. Maintaining the sabbatical year according to previous rabbinic interpretations would mean financial ruin for the New Yishuv. In your volume, *Shabbat Ha-Aretz, Sabbath of the Land*, you upended all of Maimonides' extensive rulings for the sabbatical year. You took the laws and reinterpreted them for the dawn of the 20th century, not the 12th century of Maimonides. You completely rewrote the rules for shemita because you were living in your time and had the knowledge of what Jewish law could be. You tore apart the ancient rules in order to apply them to modernity and to building a nation. You were an innovator and creator and Jewish law was your muse. Your

argument was this. Since most Jews did not live in the biblical land of Israel any biblical prohibitions were not enforceable, the interpretation of the shemita laws were not Biblical imperatives but rabbinic, meaning they were a second-order obligation. Second-order obligations are often overruled by the precedence of the first-order biblical law, for the Jews to live in the Land of Israel. And in order for Jews to live successfully they could not adhere to the laws of shemita without incurring socioeconomic injury. You were very clear, you desired for everyone to observe the laws of the sabbatical year so your ruling did not relax everything. Your radical reform was focused on your vested interest in the Jewish future in Israel.^v You could see that future and understood the importance of Jewish law needed to it to thrive. For this decision, you were raked over the coals by other rabbis with different opinions and it crystalized your place with the New Yishuv who would become nation builders who were grateful for you and your belief in Zionism.

Rav Kook, in this way you embodied your teaching about making the new holy. You were able to authentically translate Jewish law for the time in which you found yourself without sacrificing anything from the power and force of the past. My world in 5782 in the United States is a world you could not even begin to imagine.

As Reform Jews, my congregation and I do not live with strict adherence to Jewish law like you did. We use Jewish law and tradition to inform our choices while living fully in the 21st world. And we are fortunate that our community is comprised of a diversity of people. The Pew Research Center produced their report of Jewish Americans in 2020 this year. We now know that there are approximately,^{vi} 7.5 million Jews, including children living in the United States today.^{vii} 1.7% of these Jews identify with the Jewish religion and 0.6% state they are Jews of no religion. The Reform movement that my congregation and I are members of is still the largest

movement of Judaism in America. But. Yes there is a but. The largest segment of Reform Jews are 65 and older. Only 29% of Jews 18-29 identify as Reform. Among 18-29 year olds, Orthodox Judaism is the largest denomination but the largest segment in the 18-29 year old group are the 41% of young adults who identify with no particular religion. Our Jewish community is changing and this will impact the Jewish future.

Rav Kook, I believe that our strength is in our diversity. As the old Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism slogan used to say, “there is more than one way to be Jewish.” Remember your experience with Ben Yehuda?

Yehuda Mirsky retells in his book about you:

A little less than a year after you arrived Jaffa, you took your first sally into the emerging culture wars, opening the seams that would be navigated for decades to come. The crux was a heated exchange with Eliezer Ben-Yehudah, the former yeshiva student and renegade intellectual who likely did more than anyone else to resurrect Hebrew as a spoken language. Born Eliezer Perlman in 1858, Ben-Yehudah became a radical secularist and an equally radical cultural and linguistic nationalist. He moved to Jerusalem in 1881, and by 1905 he had founded several newspapers and associations for the advancement of Hebrew, initiated a massive, multivolume historical dictionary of the Hebrew language, and antagonized the traditional religious establishment for decades.^{viii}

The debate of the day was whether the Zionist dream could be actualized in Uganda instead of the biblical Land of Israel. Ben Yehuda was accused of not caring about Jewish history because he publicly was considering support for a Jewish state outside of the Land of Israel. You Rav Kook took no position on the Uganda plan, instead stating that there were good ideas on both sides of the debate, and it seems your attempt to explain yourself in Ben Yehuda’s

newspaper drew scorn from both sides, your clerical peers and the “heretical” young. Perhaps you were actually successful as, you managed to write a treatise “celebrating both camps’ commitments to tradition and change, in terms that made obvious sense to neither.^{ix}”

Rav Kook, I do not know of a rabbi today who could claim to possess your breadth of knowledge. However, I do know that I strive to be a rabbi who uses the teachings of our tradition to invite constructive and productive discourse. Sadly, my congregation and I are living in a time of near paralysis. The “left” and the “right” on any issue are seemingly incapable of entering into a respectful exchange of ideas, instead all sides seem to scream into echo chambers. Instead of listening to someone with whom we disagree we create more noise in an attempt to drown them and their differing ideas out.

And yet, our tradition teaches us the value of an exchange of ideas. The pages of the Talmud contain not only the majority opinion but those of the minority, too. Knowledge and meaning can be derived from a multiplicity of sources. Your teaching and your life, Rav Kook, serve for us as a reminder of this tenet of our tradition. It is ancient and it is renewed in ways for the times in which we find ourselves.

Rav Kook you taught:

Every person must know and understand that deep within them a candle burns, and their candle is unlike the candle of any other. There is no person without a candle. Every person must know and understand that it is upon them to toil and reveal the light of their candle for others. They must kindle them into a great torch that will illuminate the entire world.

On this first evening of this brand new year may we take your teachings and use them to light up each precious soul and in turn brighten our world. May the wisdom of our Jewish

tradition inspire us to learning, to justice, and to peacemaking. May the new ideas, the new interpretations, and the new opportunities to build the Jewish community of our present and future be sanctified. *Hayashan yitchadesh v'hechadash yitkadesh*, the old shall be renewed and the new shall be made holy. Shanah tovah u'mtukah, Happy and sweet New Year.

ⁱ Mirsky, Y. (2014). *Rav Kook: Mystic in a time of revolution*. Yale University Press.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/abraham-isaac-kook>

ⁱⁱⁱ Mirsky, Y. (2014). *Rav Kook: Mystic in a time of revolution*. Yale University Press.

^{iv} <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/what-is-shemita-the-sabbatical-year/>

^v All of this comes from the Mirsky book cited elsewhere.

^{vi} <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/>

^{vii} Pew Research Center. *Jewish Americans in 2020*. May 11, 2021.

^{viii} Mirsky, Y. (2014). *Rav Kook: Mystic in a time of revolution*. Yale University Press.

^{ix} Ibid. p. 56.