

Renewing the Old, Sanctifying the New: The Unique Vision of Rav Kook

By Marc B. Shapiro.

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Marc Shapiro has been a leading scholar of Orthodoxy, especially Modern Orthodoxy, for over 25 years. From a groundbreaking biographical study of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, to a survey of those who dissented from some of Maimonides’s principles of faith, to a review of the way representatives of Orthodox Judaism have rewritten the past to align with their ideological agenda, Shapiro has shattered some of the most prized idols of Orthodoxy. Perhaps unusually, Shapiro has combined this scholarly work with a deep concern for Modern Orthodoxy as a way of life. Although he is based in a university and not a rabbinical seminary, he is reminiscent of the religiously engaged Jewish scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who both conducted academic research and built up Jewish religious movements and denominations. In doing so, Shapiro has always shown himself to be very well qualified, with a great breadth of reading in all the relevant Jewish and academic sources, something which he brings to bear again in this volume.

That context made Shapiro’s choice of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook as a subject unexpected, at least for me. Rav Kook, as he is widely known, is outside the Diaspora Modern Orthodox mainstream which Shapiro has made his personal and scholarly home. Rav Kook was an almost indefinable figure, ‘unique’ as Shapiro describes his vision, who has had an enormous impact on the Religious Zionist camp in the State of Israel. This includes its wing closest to the Haredi [traditionalist Orthodox] sector, a sub-group known as *Hardal*, literally ‘mustard’ and an acronym for *Haredi Dati Leumi* [Haredi National Religious]. However, Rav Kook’s impact outside Israel has been much more limited. The liberal Orthodox Diaspora has been less fertile ground for Rav Kook’s mysticism and emphasis on the Land of Israel. However, that state of affairs turns out to be at the centre of Shapiro’s motivation. He is overwhelmed by the power of Rav Kook’s thought, believes that Modern Orthodoxy has much to gain from engaging with Rav Kook, and he wants to enable that to happen.

Who was Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook? He was born in Latvia in 1865, to a *mitnagdic* [non-Hasidic] father and a mother with Hasidic roots. He entered the elite yeshivah of Volozhin in 1884 at the age of 18 and became close to its leaders, including Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv) and his future father-in-law Rabbi Eliyahu Rabinowitz-Teomim. He served as a rabbi in Lithuania and began to express his attachment to the Land of Israel in early publications. He also shared views which were unconventional for a



rabbi of his background, for example, his inclination towards vegetarianism. In 1905, he began as the rabbi of the Jewish community in Jaffa in Ottoman Palestine. There he again showed his unusual approach for a Lithuanian yeshivah product by reaching out to secular Zionists.

When the First World War broke out, Rav Kook was in Europe to attend a rabbinical conference, and found himself trapped by the start of hostilities. He found refuge in London, where he became the rabbi of the strictly Orthodox Lithuanian congregation, *Machzike Hadath*, in the East End of London. As a personal aside, I might mention that in the very early 2000s I occasionally attended *Machzike Hadath*, which by that time had moved to Golders Green, and met an elderly man who as a small child had known Rav Kook in the congregation’s East End location. In London, Rav Kook made some new relationships, for example, with the Chief Rabbi, Joseph Herman Hertz. They disagreed on certain matters, for example, on how Jewish law should respond to the exigencies of wartime. Nevertheless, Chief Rabbi Hertz’s respect for Rav Kook was profound and enduring. It was also during his time in London that Rav Kook visited the National Gallery and saw paintings by Rembrandt. He observed the way Rembrandt painted light and remarked that this was the light that God had made on the first day of creation and was subsequently stored away for the righteous. Rav Kook suggested this was the very light which Rembrandt had seen and recorded in his painting. That anecdote also indicates a breadth of sympathy and an openness uncommon in a traditional Jew of Rav Kook’s background and education.

In 1919, Rav Kook returned to what was now British Mandate Palestine, to become Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, and then in 1921 Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine. He resumed his broad spectrum of relationships and was opposed, sometimes forcefully, by more traditionalist elements in the Orthodox community of Jerusalem and the Land of Israel more generally. In 1924, Rav Kook founded his own yeshivah, *Merkaz Harav*, which became and continues to be a Religious Zionist centre, fostered by his son and successor there, Rabbi Tzvi Yehudah Kook.

Rav Kook participated in the opening of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1925 but was not uncritical of aspects of its curriculum as a secular institution without religious commitments. He was not a conventional Zionist, or even Religious Zionist, but argued that Zionism and Zionists brought positive developments. His most significant and controversial halakhic [legal] stance was to permit the sale of farms in the Land of Israel to non-Jews during the Sabbatical year, to allow crops to continue to be harvested industrially, to prevent widespread hardship. This *Heter Mekirah* [permission to make a sale] remains disputed to this day, with Religious Zionists largely supporting it, and the Haredi sector opposing it.

Rav Kook died in 1935, since which time the writings he published during his lifetime, and more that were edited—sometimes controversially—and published posthumously, have continued to be studied in Israel with great

impact, despite the fact that they are exceptionally difficult. Nevertheless, Rav Kook's standing now is much greater than it was during his lifetime and his influence much more significant. There are also ongoing debates amongst those who look to Rav Kook as an intellectual and religious inspiration. Was he more conservative and committed to maximum Jewish settlement of the Land of Israel, or can he be read in a more liberal and cosmopolitan light? Inevitably, Rav Kook evades any attempt at simple categorisation.

Shapiro argues that of all Rav Kook's efforts—organisational, halakhic, ideological—, the area that Rav Kook himself attached most importance to, and which we should understand as his most essential contribution, and the purest expression of his soul—perhaps a strange formulation for an academic text—, was as a mystic. There were other areas where he needed to work as a rabbi and leader, but his most personal activity was in the field of Kabbalah. Talmud and halakhah were important for Rav Kook, but his passion was philosophy and Kabbalah, if they can even be fully differentiated. Shapiro takes us through selected passages in Rav Kook's writings, and seeks to expound some of Rav Kook's most significant ideas, in order to examine this aspect of Rav Kook's work, especially those areas that might speak most attractively to the Modern Orthodox Diaspora.

Shapiro takes us to Rav Kook's somewhat ambivalent attitude to halakhah. While never disputing its authority, Rav Kook expressed what was most likely a reflection of his own experience that for the highly attuned spiritual personality halakhic observance or study is not always helpful or necessary. Sometimes it can even get in the way of religious growth, and is certainly not the be all and end all of Jewish intellectual or devotional life. This stands in contrast to the traditional mainstream, especially its non-Hasidic branch and above all its Lithuanian form, that taught that halakhic life and study was the highest Jewish expression; a position famously stated by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik but representing a much wider tradition.

Shapiro shows how Rav Kook advocated for a wider curriculum than the yeshivah world would generally contemplate, not least because doing so would show that Torah and the latest ideas are compatible and will therefore sustain the faith of people who might otherwise be lost. As part of this reassessment of the place of science and even history in Jewish thought, Rav Kook was willing to see the early parts of the Pentateuch as allegorical rather than literal. In his discussion of this and similar questions, Shapiro displays his characteristic tendency, produced by his very erudition, to head off into the weeds, discussing other figures with possibly comparable views, and distracting us from the main business of understanding Rav Kook's views themselves.

Shapiro describes Rav Kook's wish to limit the definition of heresy, to denying absolutely essential principles of faith only, and allowing space for doubt without condemnation. According to Rav Kook, some people who are technically heretics can have a profound if hidden connection with God. Even

atheism can have value, as it opposes false and simplistic views of God. Rav Kook stepped in to defend the natural morality of the uneducated masses, who nevertheless possess an authentic instinct, and sometimes it is the scholars who have to catch up, and when they do so will reveal the authentic will of God. This means that even some explicit Torah teachings, such as slavery, are not intended to be implemented forever, but to be set aside as the world comes to understand higher moral imperatives.

Rav Kook was a dedicated student of Kabbalah, and wanted more people to engage with it, outside a very restricted elite. Even the followers of religions other than Judaism can be seen as inspired by religious teachings that ultimately have a Divine source, at least in their ethical teachings. Even idolatry can be a step in the right direction. The final area that Shapiro examines in Rav Kook’s thought is his views of the future: the Messianic era and a redeemed world. Famously, Rav Kook argued that there would only be vegetable sacrifices in a rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem, as part of a general transition to human vegetarianism for moral reasons. In addition, for all the talk in classical Jewish sources of a King Messiah, some other form of government might be possible and more advanced and sophisticated than a monarchy, and could be implemented.

We can see from this survey both the radicalism and the attraction for moderns of many aspects of Rav Kook’s thought, even as some of his other positions, such as the rejection of women’s suffrage, would be roundly rejected. Shapiro has done us a great service by bringing the aspects, at least those, as he acknowledges, that are of most interest to him, to the wider attention of English readers. This book is a welcome and important addition to the Jewish religious conversation, especially in the Diaspora, and for that it does have to be comprehensive and exhaustive, and we can forgive its idiosyncrasies.