

## What's the Truth about ... Rav Kook's Hebrew University Invocation



**MISCONCEPTION:**<sup>1</sup> In 1925, in Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook's invocation for the inauguration of the Hebrew University, he applied the Biblical verse "*Ki miTzion tetzei Torah, u'devar Hashem meYerushalayim*, For out of Zion shall go forth Torah, and the word of God from Jerusalem" (Isaiah 2:3; Michah 4:2).<sup>2</sup> This is an oft-used criticism cited by denigrators of Rav Kook who claim that by quoting the verse, he proved that he viewed the scholarship that was to come from the Hebrew University as the fulfillment of the Prophet Isaiah's vision of Torah "going forth from Zion."

**FACT:** The invocation by Rav Kook, the first Ashkenazic chief rabbi of Eretz Yisrael, was a brave exposition of Biblical verses and Jewish history designed to sound a cautionary note regarding potential dangers inherent in the founding of a Jewish university. His paraphrase of the verse about Torah emanating from Jerusalem did not refer to the Hebrew University but rather was part of his concluding prayer in which he pined for the Messianic era.

**BACKGROUND:** Despite the fact that Rav Kook's true intention in citing the verse is quite clear, this misconception is still perpetuated, sometimes maliciously and sometimes naively. Unfortunately, most people are not familiar with the actual content of Rav Kook's brilliant invocation.

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The facts are clear. The foundation stone of the Hebrew University was laid in 1918, and the university was formally inaugurated on April 1, 1925 (7 Nissan 5685) at a ceremony held in a large open-air theater on Mount Scopus. Future Israeli President Dr. Chaim Weizmann presided over the service, which was attended by representatives of numerous foreign governments, distinguished scholars and Jewish dignitaries. These included the Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth Dr. Joseph Herman Hertz; the British Foreign Secretary Lord Arthur James Balfour; the first High Commissioner of Palestine Sir Herbert Louis Samuel; the British commander who defeated the Turks in Palestine in 1918 Lord Edmund Henry Hynman Alenby; and Professor William Foxwell Albright of Johns Hopkins University. In total, between six and seven thousand people attended the ceremony—a huge number considering the population of Jerusalem at the time was less than sixty thousand. As the chief rabbi, Rav Kook was invited to deliver the invocation.

Rav Kook's mere attendance was a courageous act because many of his colleagues viewed it as treason.<sup>3</sup> Professor Shnayer Z. Leiman has noted that:

*Even more courageous was his message. In front of a theater full of enthusiastic supporters of this new endeavor, he minced no words in expressing his true feelings regarding the Hebrew University and its place in the life of a revitalized Jewish yishuv in the land of Israel ("Rabbi Abraham Isaac Ha-Kohen*

*Kook: Invocation at the Inauguration of the Hebrew University," Tradition 29, no. 1 [fall 1994]: 87-92).*

Rav Kook's speech is rich with Biblical and rabbinic allusions and is worthy of study by anyone, but especially by those who perpetuate this myth.

The claim that Rav Kook applied the verse to the university first appeared in the journal *Beis Va'ad Lechachamim* in Satmar, Romania (Kislev 5688 [1928]).<sup>4</sup> Shortly afterwards, Rav Kook defended himself in a letter (dated 13 Adar 5688) to Rabbi Yosef Messas, a rabbinic leader in Algeria at the time who later became the chief rabbi of Haifa.<sup>5</sup> In the letter, Rav Kook acknowledges that slanderers are not uncommon, but expressed shock at how one could even suspect him of stating the verse in reference to a secular university. Nevertheless, the allegation continued to spread. More recently, in 1986, it appeared in an Israeli *Chareidi* newspaper. Rabbi Moshe M. Alharar, today rabbi of Shlomi and then living in Kedumim, spent more than six months attempting to get a retraction from the newspaper; his efforts were rewarded by the newspaper restating the claim a year later. Finally, in 1988, Rabbi Alharar wrote a comprehensive response to the baseless accusations against Rav Kook, tracing the use and spread of the lie and presenting the true story. It was published in a pamphlet called "*Lichvodah shel Torah.*"

Rav Kook's invocation was an eloquent and courageous speech delivered with foresight. In his remarks,<sup>6</sup> Rav Kook noted two historical intellectual

trends in Judaism. One trend is more insular, focusing on the sacred only. This approach was advocated by *yeshivot* throughout the centuries. The second is a more porous approach that accepts the notion of importing and exporting foreign ideas. Proponents of the latter approach are willing to share Torah with the outside world, serving as a “light unto the nations,” and absorbing external ideas into the Jewish nation. By means of the second approach, Rav Kook said, the Hebrew University could serve a useful and exalted function. But, he lamented, this approach also engenders trepidation because in hindsight it is clear that from those who drew upon it in the past, unhesitatingly embracing foreign ideas, very few Jewish descendants remain since they long ago assimilated among the nations. On the other hand, he countered, most of those participating in the building of the Jewish Land are descended from Jews who embraced the first approach. In his speech, Rav Kook then warned that the Hebrew University can play only a small part in the Jewish community’s

educational needs, and it must be regarded with apprehension and fear. The main source of education will—and must—come from traditional *yeshivot*, he said. Furthermore, he charged the Hebrew University to maintain certain standards so that it would help bring about a *kiddush Hashem* (sanctification of God’s name) and not, God forbid, a *chillul Hashem* (desecration of God’s name).

Though it is true that Rav Kook paraphrased the verse “*ki miTzion*” in his invocation, he did not apply it to the Hebrew University. At the conclusion of his warning about the potential dangers of the university, he recited the following prayer: “May we witness the joy of our nation, the rebuilding of our Temple and our glory, to which the nations shall stream in order to receive the Torah from Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem, Amen.” His prayer was that the ultimate Redemption should come speedily and that, at that time, Torah will truly come forth from Zion and the word of God from Jerusalem. Rav Kook was simply concluding his speech with a standard *be-*

*rachah*, blessing, for the coming of *Mashiach* and was clearly applying the verse to the Torah that will issue forth from the Temple in Jerusalem.

Although Rav Kook had reservations about the specific role of the university, he viewed the general events of his day as the fulfillment of prophetic words. He based his remarks on the vision of the prophet of consolation, Isaiah, who proclaimed:

*Lift up your eyes and look around, they are all gathered together and come to you. Your sons come from afar and your daughters are on your side. Then you will see and be radiant, and you shall have “pachad” and a large [joyous] heart, because the abundance of the sea [trade] will be towards you, and the wealth of the nations will come to you (Isaiah 60: 4-5).*

This passage, one of the seven *haftarahs* of consolation read each summer, describes the wealth and glory of the redeemed Jerusalem. Rav Kook indeed viewed the establishment of the Hebrew University as a partial fulfillment of Isaiah’s words. He saw the presence of such a large and distin-

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gushed gathering in Jerusalem after centuries of desolation as the start of the ingathering of the exiles and the opening of the gates of Redemption. In his speech, he noted Isaiah's puzzling use of the word "*pachad*," generally understood as fear. Why should the glorious future Isaiah predicted generate fear? asked Rav Kook. He then offered his exposition of the two historical approaches and observed that the prophet's use of the term "*pachad*" was, in fact, warranted because of the fears and concerns caused by the opening of the university. He assured his audience, however, that the antidote to the fear was at hand—the Jewish people had to ensure the primacy of *yeshivot* and Torah institutions.

The Hebrew University, according to Rav Kook, is a means to an end—a vocational school of sorts—but the true goal is the study of Torah. Rav Kook reiterated his position regarding the university in a letter to Rabbi Yechiel Michel Kossovsky of Lithuania (dated 11 February 1927 [9 Adar I 5687]).<sup>7</sup> In the letter, he mentions that his speech from the inauguration had been published in its original Hebrew in the official inaugural volume (5686, pp. 15-18), along with an English translation. He then restated (and said that Lord Balfour concurred!) that the university could only provide the secular tools for building the Land of Israel and the Jewish nation but that the foundations, the holy ideals and the generations of pining for *Mashiach* and the glorious Temple were all rooted in Torah. Rav Kook himself then stated that Heaven forbid one should ascribe the fulfillment of the holy dream of Torah going forth from Zion to the scholarship disseminated from the Hebrew University. He concluded by criticizing the existence of a plaque in one of the shuls in Rabbi Kossovsky's town that related the verse from Isaiah to the university.

Interestingly, the verse was in fact applied to the Hebrew University at its inauguration, but not by Rav Kook. It was used by Professor Abraham Buechler (1867-1939; see *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 4:1458-9), then principal of Jews' College in London. It was also implied by the organizers of the event, who had the choir and orchestra per-

form cantor Salomon Sulzer's "From Zion Shall Go Forth the Law." Furthermore, Rabbi Dr. Israel Levinthal (1888-1982), a popular Conservative rabbi in Brooklyn, applied the verse in 1918 and even spoke about the Hebrew University in terms of a yeshivah.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike many harmless misconceptions that I have addressed in this column, this one is particularly serious as it involves the denigration of a Torah scholar and, according to the Talmud, it was due to this sin that Jerusalem was destroyed (*Shabbat* 119b; Rambam, *Hilchot Talmud Torah* 6:11). In listing the categories of those who are deprived of their share in the World to Come, the Mishnah (*Sanhedrin* 90a) includes an *apikoros*. Commenting on the *mishnah*, Rebbi and Rabbi Chanina (*Sanhedrin* 99b) define an *apikoros* as one who is *mevazeh* (denigrates) a *talmid chacham* and Rambam codifies (*Hilchot Talmud Torah* 6:11) that a person who denigrates a *talmid chacham* is denied a share in the World to Come. I highly recommend that one read Rav Kook's masterful sermon in either the original Hebrew or in the English translation, and that one be cautious about fostering this untruth. ■

#### Notes

1. I thank Rabbi Sholom Gold for making me aware of this misconception.

2. This canard sometimes includes the false claim that Rav Kook compared the Hebrew University to the third *Beit Hamikdash*.

3. Many were unaware that, according to Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, in exchange for his attending the event Rav Kook had extracted a pledge from Dr. Chaim Weizmann, founding father of the Hebrew University, that Bible criticism would not be included in the curriculum of the new university. For this interesting tidbit, a general introduction to and a full translation of the invocation, see Professor Shnayer Z. Leiman, "Rabbi Abraham Isaac Ha-Kohen Kook: Invocation at the Inauguration of the Hebrew University," *Tradition* 29, no. 1 (fall 1994): 87-92. For a look back at the Hebrew University and its founding, see the series of articles in *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought* 45:2, no. 178 (spring 1996). For the Orthodox response to the Hebrew University, see Marc B. Shapiro, "Rabbi David Tsevi Hoffman on Ortho-

dox Involvement with the Hebrew University," *Tradition* 33, no. 3 (spring 1999): 88-93.

4. It is truly shocking how facts can be presented so as to give a misimpression and besmirch a person's reputation. In the three-volume biography of Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld (Yosef Moshe Sofer, ed., *Marah D'arah Yisrael*, vol. 2 [Jerusalem, 5734], 206-8), the story of Rav Kook's attendance at the inauguration is strongly condemned. The book states that Rav Kook opened his remarks with the prayer of Rabbi Nechunia ben Hakana (*Berachot* 28b) and concluded with the Biblical verse "*Ki miTzion tetzei Torah*," For out of Zion shall go forth Torah." But no explanation is given, leaving the impression that he applied the verse to the Hebrew University. A summary of the program, including excerpts from Rav Kook's remarks, is included but in type too small to read—lest one discover what he really said. Finally, a sharp letter from the Chofetz Chaim is reprinted condemning those who view the new university as a substitute for the third *Beit Hamikdash*. The implication is, of course, that the Chofetz Chaim's reproach included Rav Kook. Nothing could be further from the truth.

5. The letter is published in the pamphlet "*Lichvodah shel Torah*." Rabbi Messas had written to Rav Kook regarding the accusation, and, after receiving Rav Kook's response, wrote a scathing letter to the editor of *Beis Va'ad Lechachamim* in which, among other things, he added the sarcastic comment that he was comforted by the Talmudic statement (*Sotah* 49b) that the generation preceding the *Mashiach* will be one in which chutzpah dominates and youngsters malign elders.

6. Rav Kook's speech can be found in "*Lichvodah shel Torah*" by Rabbi Moshe M. Alharar (1988), pp. 90-95, taken from the official university inaugural publication published in 5686. In response to the libel being spread, it also appeared in a pamphlet by Rav Kook's son Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook in 1925. Additionally, the speech appeared in *Chazon Hageulah*, p. 266, and *Ma'amarei Harayah*, vol. 2, pp. 306-308.

7. The letter is published from a manuscript by Rabbi Alharar, pp. 74-78.

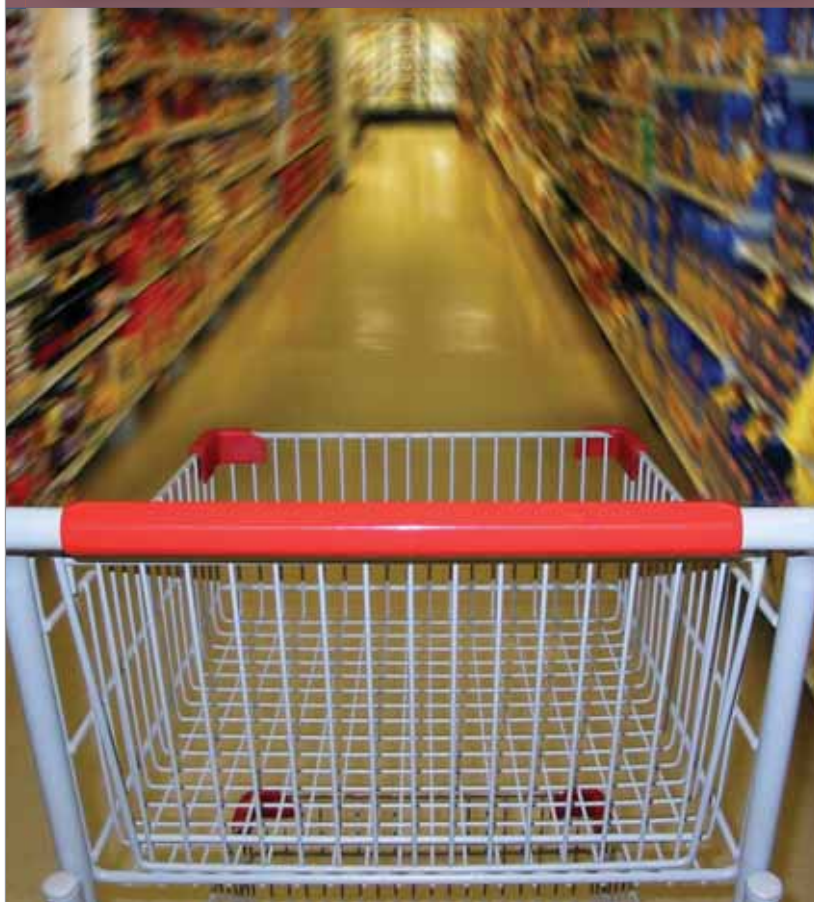
8. See Leiman, p. 92, n. 5. Also, Kimmy Caplan, "The Significance of a Jewish University: A Sermon on the Founding of the Hebrew University," *American Jewish Archives* 53:1-2 (2001): 65-82.

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