

ON RAV KOOK'S 70TH YAHRZEIT

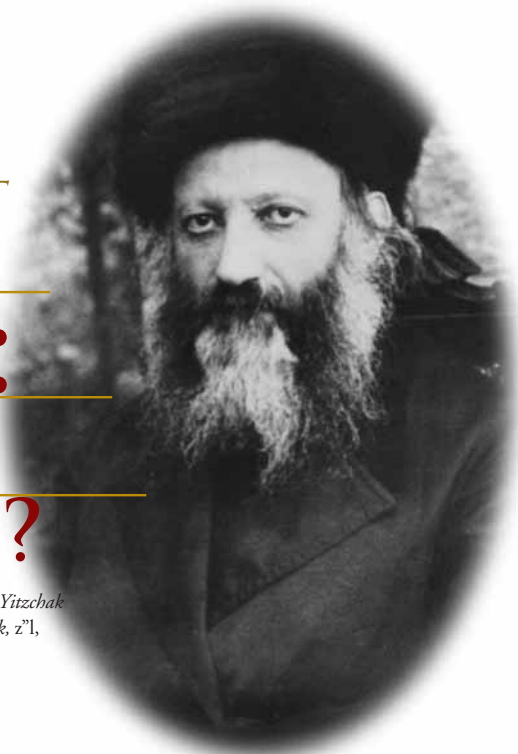
RAV KOOK'S VISION: TIMELY OR PREMATURE?

BY YOSI AVNERI

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW

BY DAVID LOUVISH

*Rav Avraham Yitzchak
HaKohen Kook, z'l,
1865-1935.*



A vision, by its very nature, relates to the future, touching the horizon of reality. It is woven into the first dim light of dawn, its warp and woof spun from a mixture of dreams and reality. The roots of a non-utopian vision reflect the conditions of their time and place, and the vision itself is designed to leave a new, sometimes revolutionary, imprint on reality. This vision is simultaneously timely and premature, which is by no means an inner contradiction: A vision may be timely as far as its objective necessity is concerned, and premature in the sense that its realization within a reasonable timeframe is unfeasible. Most great revolutions in history were spurred by a problematic reality that gave rise to a premature vision. Such is the way of the world: The first inklings of a great vision occur before the time is ripe for

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their implementation. Most thinkers are aware of the gap between the emergence of a vision and its implementation, and of the danger that the vision might dissipate and never reach maturity.

I believe that Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook's vision of Degel Yerushalayim is a good example of a vision that was both timely and premature. Degel Yerushalayim was a national-religious Jewish movement that aimed at uniting all of the factions of the religiously observant community. The movement was to work alongside the Zionist movement and help shape the process of *Shivat Tzion*, the Return to Zion.¹ The founding of Degel Yerushalayim placed Rav Kook's political positions into sharper perspective, putting two relationships in Jewish society, in Eretz Yisrael and in the Diaspora, to the test: 1. The relationship between religious and secular participants in the rebuilding of Eretz Yisrael, and 2. The relationship between various elements within the religious community.

I wish to deal with these two relationships, since they constitute the central pillars of the soul-searching currently taking place among those reared on Rav Kook's teachings—those for whom

concepts such as "Israeli unity" and "Klal Yisrael" were once paramount.

Degel Yerushalayim was created toward the end of World War I, a time of tremendous importance both because of the change in the political status of Eretz Yisrael and because it marked the beginning of new developments in the Jewish community there. The British occupation of Palestine, the Balfour Declaration and, some time later, the resolutions of the San Remo Conference all seemed to imply that the Zionist goals were within reach. The international sanction afforded to the Jewish nation and its land seemed to blunt the *Chareidi* camp's religious objections to acting "against the will of the Gentile nations." From now on, Eretz Yisrael could be settled with international consent.

An era of great prospects, it was also fraught with internal perils. After the Second Aliyah (1904–1914), during which Rav Kook served as rabbi of Jaffa and the new settlements, he could appreciate the magnitude of the spiritual, religious and social changes that the Yishuv was going through. The secularization of the Yishuv, which had already been in progress during the First Aliyah

(1882-1903), accelerated dramatically during the Second Aliyah; the entire Zionist pioneering endeavor in Eretz Yisrael bore a secular imprint and threatened the Jewish identity of the Yishuv, whose way of life was circumscribed by the four ells of *halachah*.

Rav Kook, perhaps more than any other religious leader of his generation, created a profound theological basis for religious-secular cooperation in the rebuilding of the Homeland. However, at the same time, he was acutely aware of the danger threatening the Zionist vision if brought to fruition on the waves of a secular nationalist ideology. At the same time that he praised the secular pioneers, he expressed profound apprehension lest Jewish life in the developing Yishuv be shaped by secular Zionism. Concerning this he wrote:

*...If we abandon the opportunity to begin the development of the Yishuv; if physical and spiritual weakness and a lack of tools of war reach their peak among the faithful believers of Eretz Yisrael; if the raised hand, armed with lawlessness and Gentile ways, without a trace of the real sanctity of Israel, coating its shards with the dross of false nationalism, with specks of history and love of the language, clothing life with a Jewish exterior and an empty interior, about to be converted to a destructive monster, ultimately leading to hatred of Israel and of Eretz Yisrael, as we have already experienced—if this impure hand prevails, there are no words to express the magnitude of the calamity...*²

The implication of this passage, like many passages in Rav Kook's writings, is that Eretz Yisrael should not be abandoned to the Zionist movement.

As early as 1904, when Rav Kook eulogized Herzl and devoted his speech to the distinction between the terms "Mashiach, son of Joseph" and "Mashiach, son of David," he predicted that the historical process would be led by secular Zionism only up to a point, beyond which Zionism was doomed to failure.³ The real objective of *Shivat Tzion* would never be achieved by the secular Zionist movement alone. On the other hand, given the historical circum-

stances, the process could not be advanced without the Zionist movement, which would play a long-lasting and important role before it collapsed. Rav Kook was ahead of his time in his view of the historical process, in his prediction of a profound crisis in the secular national endeavor. On the basis of this prognosis, and because he sensed that secular Zionism would enjoy accelerated growth after World War I, he proposed the creation of Degel Yerushalayim. Only "the faithful believers of Israel," he insisted, were capable of leading the redemptive process to its ultimate goals and were duty-bound to do so.

As mentioned earlier, the establishment of Degel Yerushalayim demanded a reevaluation of two complex relationships: that between the religious community in Eretz Israel and the Zionist movement, and that between segments of the religious community itself. Rav Kook was careful to emphasize at every opportunity that Degel Yerushalayim was not hostile to the Zionist movement. On the contrary, it wished to work together with Zionism and complement its efforts, to provide it with the spiritual dimension it lacked so that working together they would be able to rebuild an ideal Land of Israel. Such declarations were intended to allay fears in Zionist and Religious Zionist circles that the new movement would have a negative effect.

Despite the reassuring messages aimed at the Zionist movement, the very establishment of Degel Yerushalayim signified disappointment, if not despair, at the Zionist movement ever serving as the instrument through which the traditional national vision would be implemented. Degel Yerushalayim was, in a sense, an alternative to the Zionist movement, though there was no question of direct confrontation or challenge (in contrast to the Revisionists' secession from the Zionist movement and establishment of the New Zionist Movement in 1935). For Rav Kook, however, the establishment of Degel Yerushalayim reflected

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his realization that cooperation between religious and secular Jews in the Zionist endeavor was limited. Only a minority of the religious community was willing to cooperate with the Zionists in a single political body. Rav Kook believed that the remainder who objected to Zionism should be enlisted for nationalist activity in Eretz Yisrael in a separate national-religious framework. While such activity might have led to cooperation between Degel Yerushalayim and the Zionist movement, it also held the potential for confrontation. However, Degel Yerushalayim chose to close ranks among the religious community, rather than aim for unity in the Zionist camp as a whole. This choice, motivated by ideological and pragmatic considerations, was, Rav Kook believed, both timely and necessary. As he saw it, failure to work together might be disastrous for the religious and spiritual identity of the Yishuv in Eretz Yisrael. However, it soon became clear that any hope of unity was premature.

Rav Kook, sincere but politically naive, believed that such a desirable goal—the rebuilding and renewal of Eretz Yisrael—would bridge the political gaps within the religious camp. The founding of Degel Yerushalayim reflected his understanding of the two major religious political bodies then in existence: the Religious Zionist Mizrachi movement and Agudat Yisrael, which was then consolidating its anti-Zionist position. Each of these bodies, Rav Kook believed, had a valuable contribution to make in its own sector of society, but he discounted each movement's ability to increase its followings within the religious community and spearhead a dramatic national-religious revival in Eretz Yisrael. He hoped that both movements, while continuing their normal activities, would join Degel Yerushalayim as part of the religious community as a whole. Put differently: While maintaining his sympathy for the individual movements, Rav Kook tried to create a united religious front to contend with the Zionist movement.

As far as the non-Zionist *Chareidi* community was concerned, Rav Kook was, as it were, wielding the revolutionary reality of the times as a hammer on the anvil of *Chareidi* complacency. Despite his efforts, he did not succeed in communicating his sense of imminent redemption to the conservative camp.

As far as the Religious Zionist camp was concerned, Rav Kook did not believe that Mizrachi would be able to conquer the Zionist leadership from within, or even become a dominant force within the Zionist movement. Only a major united religious force would be able to change the face of the national enterprise in Eretz Yisrael and influence the activities of the Zionist movement. Thus, he found himself at loggerheads with the leaders of Mizrachi, in particular, Rabbi Yehuda Leib HaKohen Maimon and Rabbi Meir Berlin (Bar-Ilan).

Rabbi Maimon agreed that the ideas behind Degel Yerushalayim were important but felt that the concept was premature. Degel Yerushalayim, he thought, should join the Zionist movement, which, following World War I and the Balfour Declaration, had the appearance of a leading, triumphal movement of the Jewish people. He urged Rav Kook to call upon the

Blazing Trails in Jewish Thought

Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, the first chief rabbi of Eretz Yisrael, was one of Judaism's greatest scholars and one of the greatest leaders of the Jewish people in recent generations—a spiritual giant who blazed unique new trails in Jewish thought.

Rav Kook immigrated to Eretz Yisrael in 1904, the first year of the Second Aliyah, which is generally considered the most formative of all the *aliyot* in the modern era. From 1904 until 1914, he served as chief rabbi of Jaffa and the *moshavot* (colonies) established during the First Aliyah. His work in the Eretz Yisrael community—a complex mix of religiously observant and secular Jews, Chassidim and *Mitnagdim*, Zionists and non-Zionists—was a challenge for Rav Kook. He exemplified the meeting of inner and outer worlds, and represented a variety of systems and streams of opinion: old versus new, tradition versus modernism, *halachah* and mysticism, strict Orthodoxy and tolerance, the practical world side-by-side with the world of philosophy and poetry.

Rav Kook became one of the only religious leaders who could boast sympathizers and admirers from far beyond religious circles. However, his unique qualities also created a sizable number of enemies, mainly in the *Chareidi* camp, who were uncompromising in their opposition.

Rav Kook was convinced that redemption was imminent, and expressed this feeling with great power. All Jewish factions, religious or otherwise, were worthy and vital partners in the redemptive process. Throughout his public activities, he was guided by *ahavat Yisrael* (love of Israel) and a belief in the unity of the Jewish people. Though these were his guiding lights in all his activities, they did not prevent him from waging an intense battle against the manifestations of secularism, which were spread throughout the Yishuv.

Rav Kook spent the years of World War I abroad, but upon his return he became one of the leaders of the Jewish community in Eretz Yisrael until his death.

Rav Kook's thought, his practical work and his way of life left an indelible mark on his contemporaries, on future generations and on all walks of Israeli society. His students, and their students in turn, are guided by his teachings, which continue to not only attract seekers of religious and spiritual perfection but also to provide a source of inspiration for public and political activities. It is this timelessness that makes a careful examination of his life so important.

Y. Avneri

Chareidi community as a whole to join forces with Mizrahi and help it conquer the Zionist leadership from within.⁴

In Rabbi Maimon's view, the Zionist movement would feel no obligation toward the religious community unless it were an integral part of the movement. Rav Kook, however, had no doubt that this was unrealistic. He therefore suggested that a religious organization outside of the Zionist framework might have a greater chance of success. Rabbi Maimon's arguments were mainly political, whereas Rav Kook's centered on the ideological and the spiritual. Both rabbis shared the belief that the time was ripe for an appeal to the *Chareidi* community and an attempt to win it over to the national cause. They were divided to some extent on tactics, namely the way to succeed in generating an attitudinal change among the *Chareidim*.

In response to Rabbi Maimon's appeal to bring Degel Yerushalayim into the Zionist movement, Rav Kook called upon Rabbi Maimon to let Mizrahi operate simultaneously both inside and outside of the Zionist movement. Simultaneous operation in both political arenas, he argued, would benefit both Degel Yerushalayim and Mizrahi. By building up its strength outside the establishment, Mizrahi would secure more backing on the internal front. Degel Yerushalayim would exert tremendous pressure on the Zionist movement as a group or as a political alternative to the Zionist movement. In any case, it would not be possible to ignore its positions.

But did the establishment of a religious umbrella organization mean that there was no room at the same time for additional religious movements? And did such movements have any chance of success? Rabbi Maimon was apprehensive that many supporters of Mizrahi would get the message that the movement was essentially superfluous: If a new movement was being established, perhaps that meant that the old one had failed? Some Religious Zionist

circles saw in Degel Yerushalayim a threat to both the unity of the Zionist movement in general and to the Religious Zionist community in particular. What Rav Kook had defined as a move toward unification of the religious camp was seen by Rabbi Maimon as potentially divisive, both on the national level as well as within the religious sector. For Rav Kook, the conquest of Eretz Yisrael, through a concentrated

Rav Kook predicted that the historical process would be led by secular Zionism only up to a point, beyond which Zionism was doomed to failure.

effort of the entire religious community, was both necessary and timely. That generation, however, was not up to the task, and the failure was due to the inadequate leadership of the various religious factions. Because of sectarian political interests, among other things, the existing political movements refused to recognize the great advantage of consolidating their forces. They lacked the desire to invest efforts in building a strong common base for the religious community as a whole; in addition, they lacked vision, and many in *Chareidi* circles were overly conservative.

Despite the fact that Degel Yerushalayim failed to become a religious umbrella organization, it nevertheless enjoyed partial success in connection with some of the challenges it had set for itself, such as the establishment of the Chief Rabbinate and of a central world yeshiva (a yeshiva in Jerusalem with a unique curriculum, which served the world Jewish community).

Degel Yerushalayim was supposed to fulfill Rav Kook's vision of a "State of Israel" that was not to be a state like all

other states; it was not to be a government that solely fulfills the physical needs of its citizens, but rather an ideal state:

[One] with the most supreme ideal content inscribed in its being, that is, the greatest happiness of the individual. This state is in truth uppermost on the scale of happiness, and this state is our state, the State of Israel, the foundation of God's throne in the world, whose sole desire is that the Lord will be One, and His Name One, for that is indeed the most sublime happiness.⁵

Judging by the realities of today, Rav Kook's vision of such a state was premature. The public Jewish identity of the State of Israel in our times, as far as one can tell, is weak and shameful; in blunt terms, the State of Israel is not visibly a Jewish state. However, Rav Kook did not limit his vision to a particular timeframe; he believed that even if the vision was premature, the time was ripe to discuss it, for it would surely be fulfilled at some point in the future. As he phrased it in his inimitable style:

We have begun to speak of a great thing among ourselves and in the hearing of the entire world, but we have not yet completed it. We are currently in the middle of our speech, and we neither wish to stop, nor can we....⁶ JA

Notes

1. See the first two manifestos concerning Degel Yerushalayim in Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, *Iggerot Haravayah* III (Jerusalem, 1965), 143-151; 182-200.

2. *Iggerot Haravayah* I (Jerusalem, 1962), 182-183.

3. For the eulogy, see Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, *Ma'amarei Haravayah* I (Jerusalem, 1980), 94-99.

4. See Rabbi Yehuda Leib HaKohen Maimon, *Iggerot HaRav Maimon* I (Jerusalem, 1979), 224-226.

5. Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, *Orot* (Jerusalem, 1993), 160.

6. *Ibid.*, 136.