

The Missing Manuscript

By Bezalel Naor

As a young man, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935) had a clear sense of his mission in life. A younger contemporary of Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk, he knew that unlike Reb Chaim, he would leave his mark on the world not as the innovator of a new method of halachic analysis, but rather as a groundbreaker in the field of Jewish thought. In the introduction to *Midbar Shur*, a collection of sermons on the portion of the week and the holidays, Rav Kook writes:

I am eminently aware that though my written halachic novellae contain correct comments and straight thinking, I cannot claim to have paved any new way that would significantly advance halachic dialectic (pilpul) beyond the already existing numerous literature. Contrariwise, though I have labored therein but little, I see that my way in the field of aggadah and derush (homiletics) is a new way, not to be found in the sermonic literature.

In a sense, this collection of sermons delivered by Rav Kook in his first pulpit, the small congregation of Zoimel, Lithuania, was designed as a prospectus of the new approach to the study of *midrash*.

Further along in the introduction, the young author (Rav Kook was all of 30 years old at the time!) concedes that he is not the first to embark on the systematic study of rabbinic lore, hinting to the fact that this revolution actually began with Rabbi Judah Löw of Prague (1520?-1609). “Though among the many works devoted

to *aggadah*, there are also those written with a deep logic — especially commendable are the works of Maharal of Prague — nevertheless, they are not so numerous that we may consider unnecessary a contemporary attempt to fashion of *aggadah* a depth theology.”

There is a well-known saying of the *Zohar*, “Everything requires luck, even the Torah scroll in the ark.” The book which should have been the author’s literary debut, appeared exactly one hundred years later. In 5759/1999, students of the author’s son, Rav Zevi Yehudah Kook, published the work in Jerusalem. What happened in the interim? Rav Zevi Yehudah was rather vague about the mysterious disappearance of his father’s manuscript:

When Jewish thieves were caught in his home in the very act, he did not allow them to be prosecuted, especially because of the terrible Chillul Hashem [desecration of the Name of God] the publicity would bring. By the same token, he warned at the onset of his fatal illness, and again in his final hours, not to attempt to recover through advertising, one of his manuscripts that had been lost a while back (LiSheloshah b’Elul [Jerusalem, 5738/1978], p. 41).

From what we are able to gather, the manuscript was stolen from Rav Kook’s home. However, on his deathbed, Rav Kook predicted that one day the missing manuscript would return. Many years later, the book was in fact returned to the heir, Rav Zevi Yehudah.

One of the teachings contained in *Midbar Shur* is that Divine ideas are staggered, to be revealed in this world only when the time is ripe for their reception:

The Lord Who weighs the spirit, determines, based on the need of general human evolution, how much of the Divine spirit will appear in each generation; how much Divine wisdom will spread in each generation (Midbar Shur, p. 101).

Evidently, on High, it was decreed that now is the time for the reception of Rav Kook’s ideas.

The following is an adaptation of Rav Kook’s *drashah* for Shemot (Sermon 31). Some of the themes in this early work are by now familiar to readers of Rav Kook’s later works. For instance, the difference between sudden and gradual spiritual transformation is the subject of the second chapter of the classic *Orot haTeshuvah* (Lights of Return). Nevertheless, it is interesting to see new ideas in a state of germination.

Rabbi Isaac Hutner, a disciple of Rav Kook, was wont to write in *haskamot* (letters of approbation) to first works by young authors, that one who beholds trees blossoming in the spring recites a blessing (*TB Berachot* 43b). It is that freshness of spring that is so exhilarating about Rav Kook’s very first work of Jewish thought.

RAV KOOK ON LEADERSHIP

Moshe Rabbeinu reluctantly assumes leadership of the Jewish People. Perhaps “reluctance” is not strong enough a word. Moses musters every possible argument to decline the role God forces upon him. How puzzling then the remark of our rabbis, that at the Burning Bush, Moses requested priesthood (*kehunah*) and kingship (*malchut*), no less!

In an attempt to reconcile this glaring contradiction, Rav Kook embarks on an analysis of two types of leadership: What one might term, the organizational leader versus the charismatic leader. The organizer brings to the situation his managerial abilities. His job is to actualize the people’s latent spiritual talents. Since he is not on a higher spiritual level than the people he leads, he is powerless to bestow upon them any abilities they themselves are lacking. The charismatic, on the other hand, possesses spiritual resources unavailable to the people. He brings to

Rabbi Naor has translated several works of Rav Kook: Lights of Prophecy (Orthodox Union, 1990); Orot (Jason Aronson, 1993); Of Societies Perfect and Imperfect (Sepher-Hermon, 1995). Most recently, he co-authored God’s Middlemen: A Habad Retrospective (White Cloud, 1998) and authored Post-Sabbatian Sabbatianism (Orot, 1999).

the situation a radically new dimension. There is another touchstone as well. In terms of duration, organization requires time; it is a process. Contrariwise, charisma is of the moment; the incursion of Divine inspiration transcends time.

The Almighty had promised Jacob our father, “I will descend with you into Egypt and I will also surely bring you up again.” According to the *midrash*, implicit in this statement was that God Himself, and no other, would one day redeem the Jewish People from Egypt. Moses, aware of this earlier promise of redemption, reminded God of His responsibility. By sending a mortal to redeem the Jewish People, Moses felt God was not fulfilling His promise.

What was required was an influx of Divine energy. Moses felt unequal to this task. Not that Moses had any doubts as to his own chosenness. The miraculous events of his life — his rescue in infancy from the Nile, his being raised to maturity in the house of Pharaoh — all pointed to the fact of his election. However, he felt his destiny was as an organizational leader, a king, a priest. Once God Himself had effected the redemption of the people from Egypt, there would be needed a leader to act as a unifying factor and to continue the momentum. God explained to Moses that his role was to be more than that. Precisely through him, would flow to the Jewish People new, enhanced powers.

Rav Kook pursues this line of inquiry in the *haftorah* from Isaiah 29. There we find the phrase, “Jacob who redeemed Abraham,” and its mystifying rabbinic commentary, that Jacob “bailed” Abraham

out of the fiery furnace into which Nimrod had cast him on account of his unbending monotheism.* By way of explanation, Rav Kook explores two varieties of spiritual experience: Gradual growth versus sudden transformation. Saul is the paradigm of the sudden calling. The prophet Samuel tells him: “You will meet a band of prophets going down from the high place, having before them a lyre, a drum, a pipe and a harp, and they will be prophesying. And the spirit of the Lord will suddenly come over you and you will prophesy with them, and you will be changed into another man.”

In Rav Kook’s view, this is the essential difference between Abraham and Jacob. Abraham’s spiritual experience was a series of sudden bursts of energy: Circumcision, the Binding of Isaac, etc. His life of the spirit was a constant act of *mesirut nefesh*, self-sacrifice. Left to his own resources, he would have ended his life a martyr in the fiery furnace. Jacob, on the other hand, lived life as a growth process; his was a life of Torah study. For this reason, he is referred to as “a perfect man, a dweller of tents,” a person who perfects himself gradually through Torah study. “And I will lead on slowly.” In this sense, by offering an alternative approach to spirituality, Jacob spared Abraham the fate of self-immolation.

Rav Kook takes it a step further. The dichotomy outlined is also the divide between Abraham and Shem (or Malchitzedek). According to the *midrash*, the final name of the city, “Jeru-salem,” is the synthesis of two earlier designations: Abraham referred to the site as *Yir’eh* (“[The

Lord] will see”); Shem called it *Shalem* (“Perfect”). Abraham, the visionary, was focused on the sudden, incursionary aspect of the spiritual experience; Shem concentrated on the aspect of slow, organic growth through self-perfection. Abraham looked always to the “hand of God;” Shem preferred to dwell on human striving. In the “tent of Shem,” the study house of Shem, Jacob learned this other outlook on life. **JA**

Notes:

* Isaiah 29:22; *Midrash Tanchuma, Toldot*, 4. Of course, Jacob “redeeming” Abraham involves an anachronism. One needn’t posit “time travel” to account for the yet unborn Jacob rescuing his grandfather from the fiery furnace. The *midrash* states that the Holy One saved Abraham from the fiery furnace for the sake of his future grandson Jacob. Rabbeinu Bachaye explains that it does not mean literally in the merit of Jacob per se, but rather for that “gene,” so to speak, of Jacob already contained in Abraham himself. Rabbeinu Bachaye speaks in terms of “root” and “branch.” (*Kad haKemah*, s.v. *halbanat panim*.) For a kabbalistic interpretation, see Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, *Tanya* I, 32 (41b); idem, *Likkutei Torah, Re’eh*, 32c; *Shir haShirim*, 43b. The *drash* occurs also in *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin* 19b.

Excerpted from Rabbi Bezalel Naor’s English version of Midbar Shur, due for publication in the spring. (In the Desert — A Vision, Orot, Inc.)