YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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RAV KOOK’S LETTERS

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<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/igrot/17b-igrot.htm>

Lecture #17b: Rav Kook’s Approach

Where does Rav Kook fit in among the views listed in the previous lecture concerning the relationship between Torah and history? Here once again his approach is original, not conforming to any of the usual molds. Before addressing what he says on this subject in Letter 89, let us have a look at an earlier article, written in 1903 (slightly more than a year before our letter), entitled “*Afikim Ba-Negev*” and focusing mainly on the relationship between the future and the present:

The foundation of morality is built on two illuminations: the illumination of Torah and the illumination of the intellect. The illumination of the Torah brings about the illumination of the intellect; when it is perfected in man, he continues to walk in the path of great and exalted righteousness, and the purpose of the illumination of Torah is also to bring man to perfection in intellect… The Torah prepared the Torah illumination in accordance with the degree appropriate for the man, with the considerations of God, Who knows every personality… in a manner that man will come through it to an illumination of the intellect when he is fitting for it… But we must look to those indications that the Torah gave, through which the divine light of the intellect will once again come. (*Afikim Ba-Negev*, p. 66)

The differentiation that the Rav makes is based on the distinction between two sources of morality and education, two modes of guidance, which he calls “illuminations,” following the example of Rabbeinu Bechayei in *Chovot Ha-Levavot*.

Here too we note the difference between classical philosophy and the philosophy of Rav Kook. The two “illuminations” of Rabbeinu Bechayei are two different points of view, two “guidances,” which point to the same thing. Both sources establish the same truth or good trait. For Rav Kook, the two illuminations are completely different. They are mutually complementary and supportive, but they are connected to different foundations and are even contradictory. The illumination of intellect is the ideal, the complete and final truth. The illumination of Torah is the educational, pragmatic-historical truth, directed towards the perfect and ideal truth.

This analysis relates to the discrepancy that exists between ideal morality and actual human reality. The Torah is a historical power; it attempts to uplift individuals and society as a whole from their present situation to a higher level. As such, as it must take into consideration the prevailing moral and cultural situation, in order to be able, in its own way, to draw man to a higher level. This may be compared to a person who stretches out his hand in order to lift someone else out of the mud in which he is immersed. If he does not stretch all the way to the drowning man, the latter will have no hope of raising himself up. The Torah “stretches its arm” all the way to us; therefore it is not ideal, and its paths are grounded in reality. Hence, on the normative level, the Torah is indeed historical.

However, at the same time that the Torah’s statutes are grounded in the present, they are orientated towards the future. The Torah’s aims are indeed ideal: its objective is perfect existence in a perfect world. The *mitzvot* are the function of these two vectors: the vector of the present and the vector of the future.

Rav Kook himself compares this, in his letter, to the ever-changing horizon that appears to a person as he proceeds on a long journey. At any given moment, he sees a certain horizon, which determines the direction of his journey in the present. Obviously, the means must be adapted to the ends, in order that he may indeed arrive at that destination. But progress will not bring him nearer to the end-point (the horizon that he saw before making that progress), but rather establishes a new horizon, which – at this new point in time – now determines his direction. In any cultural reality, we aspire to progress and to transcend our present state –we look at the horizon. But this horizon is not objective and final; it is the horizon of the observing society or culture. Development is infinite, and therefore horizons must be exchanged.

How is the correlation between a historio-cultural situation and Halakha carried out in practice? What is the mechanism that allows Halakha to adapt itself to the changing horizons? This is the question that Seidel was asking, and it is answered in Letter 91, which we will address at a later point.

How does Rav Kook address the above questions?

His historiosophic world-view is unlike any of the alternatives set out in the previous lecture, and he therefore resorts to a different way of answering the problem – at the same time opening a window for us onto a whole new perspective. The world is torn between the possibility of its (Divine) perfection and its actual, deficient appearance. This contrast is the source of the constant changes going on in the world, whose general direction is one of development. For Rav Kook, the idea of development is not troublesome; on the contrary:

The personal Divine soul is given life by it constant elevation, its Divine foundation, which calls upon it to exist and develop. (*Orot Ha-Kodesh* 2, p. 532)

Reality is manifest to us as deficient, but the aspiration for ascent and perfection always exists, within man and nature alike. Were reality static, or were its changes arbitrary, we would conclude that the world is not Divine. But humanity today shares the awareness (scientific, cultural, and philosophical) that the world is constantly evolving. The center of this development is human morality, but the same trend extends to the other layers and levels of nature.

In many different places in *Orot Ha-Teshuva*, Rav Kook connects this idea to the concept of *teshuva* (repentance). Here is one example:

Penitence emerges from the depths of being, from such great depths in which the individual stands not as a separate entity, but rather as a continuation of the vastness of universal existence. The desire for penitence is related to the universal will, to its highest source. From the moment the mighty stream for the universal will for the life turns toward the good, many forces within the whole of existence are stirred to disclose the good and to bestow good to all. “Great is penitence for it brings healing to the world, and an individual who repents is forgiven and the whole world is forgiven with him” (*Yoma* 86a). In the great channel in which the life-sustaining force flows, there is revealed the unitary source of all existence, and in the hovering life-serving spirit of penitence all things are renewed to a higher level of the good, the radiant and the pure.

Penitence is inspired by the yearning of all existence to be better, purer, more vigorous and on a higher plane than it is. Within this yearning is a hidden life-force for overcoming every factor that limits and weakens existence. The particular penitence of the individual and certainly of the group draws its strength from this source of life, which is always active with never-ending vigor. (*The Lights of Penitence, Lights of Holiness, The Moral Principles, Essays, Letters, and Poems*, p. 56 (translation of *Orot Ha-Teshuva* by by Ben Zion Bokser)

The possibility of *teshuva* lies in what Rav Kook perceives as the most primal forces in the world – the “cosmic will.” The act of repentance on the part of the individual is not just the result of a momentary decision or of an individual’s personal accounting. The will for improvement, for perfection, lies at the foundation of the personality and desire of every person, because every individual shares in the general cosmic will. This is the Divine aspect of reality. *Teshuva* is an act of connecting to the universal, cosmic forces of perfection.

This is also the meaning of *Chazal*’s teaching that *teshuva* preceded the creation of the world:

Penitence was planned before the creation of the world, and it is for this reason the foundation of the world. The quest for the perfection of life is a phase of its manifestation according to its nature. (Ibid, p. 55)

For Rav Kook, *teshuva* is not undertaken despite nature or in opposition to it, but rather is facilitated specifically by virtue of nature and because of it.

From all of the above we learn that not only does Rav Kook not oppose the idea of development; he views it as the most fundamental movement of existence, carrying it towards redemption. From the human perspective, the development of culture and morality render humanity fit to be connected to the perfect, complete Divine good, of which it could previously absorb only vague impressions.

The appearance of Torah in the world represents a mighty push for the development of culture. The Torah, whose influence has penetrated every layer of western culture and even beyond, has worked its action on human culture and allowed it to be elevated to higher moral levels. Hence, there is no need for us to regard phenomena of moral progress in a suspicious or negative light.

The main question is how the natural forces are to be coordinated with the normative system. Shortcuts will not only fail, but may also cause grave harm to the aim of elevating culture itself. Therefore, Rav Kook argued, sometimes the Torah suffices with the absolute minimum requirements for normal functioning of society, leaving anything beyond that to the discretion of kindness and positive traits. This is the explanation for the important place awarded in Halakha to the realm of action that is “beyond the letter of the law.” It is specifically the voluntary, free element, not subject to the authority of the law, which allows a society to develop and progress naturally, discovering by itself and within itself its own positive foundations.

From all of the above, we conclude that a perception of the laws of the Torah as fixed laws that are eternal is incorrect – not only because this would render the Torah irrelevant, but also because the correct perception of eternity is not one of static transcendental existence, but rather one of a gradually improving reality, constantly moving in an upward direction.

The discrimination between Jew and gentile in certain matters operate within this historical dialectic. In a reality in which the Jewish People is surrounded by pagans with a primitive consciousness and abominable practices, the separation between Jews and non-Jews was vital even on the normative level, to preserve Israel’s uniqueness among the nations. Returning a lost article to its owner is a lofty moral ideal, but in order to educate humanity about it, there must first exist some society that is characterized by such ideals.

The same applies in relation to the laws of warfare. Towards the end of the letter, Rav Kook describes Israel’s political situation in the world. The Israelite nation could not survive, with Amalek and Aram as neighbors and with Midian and Ashur next door, if it were to adhere punctiliously to the Geneva Convention. The war against paganism and abominations required stiff measures. Nevertheless, the Torah does not submit to the present, but rather indicates, through its laws, the way to the future: the commandment of extending an offer of peace before launching the war, the prohibition against destroying fruit trees, and the like, all represent the basis for building a higher system of values related to war.

**The Cunning of Divine Providence in History**

However, Rav Kook does not suffice with what we have said thus far. If culture is progressing, then historical reality must adapt itself accordingly. History, which reveals God’s will and His Providence, sometimes creates new conditions that should be viewed as an expression of moral elevation. We shall consider two examples.

First, we have already seen that in Letter 90, Rav Kook describes modern technology as a manifestation of Divine will, rendering slavery almost redundant, and hence also undesirable.

A second example relates to the laws of warfare. Rav Kook views exile as a necessity that was also backed up by an “inner will” (in the sense of a moral feeling or aspiration):

We left the world of politics by force of circumstance that [nevertheless] contains an inner desire, until a fortunate time will come, when it will be possible to conduct a nation without wickedness and barbarism – this is the time we hope for. It is understood that in order to achieve this, we must awaken with all of our powers to use all the media that time makes available – all of our powers to use all the media that time makes available – all is conducted by the hand of God, Creator of all worlds. However, the delay is a necessary one; we were repulsed by the awful sins of conducting a nation in an evil time. Behold, the time is approaching, the world will be invigorated and we can already prepare ourselves, for it will already be possible for us to conduct our nation by principles of good, wisdom, rectitude, and clear divine enlightenment. “Jacob sent to Esau the royal purple” (*Mishlei* 12:25, *Chagiga* 12b); “Let my master pass before his servant.” (Based on the blessing after the reading of the *Haftara*, which in turn is based on *Yeshayahu* 55:11). It is not worthwhile for Jacob to engage in statecraft when it must be full of blood, when it requires an ability for wickedness. We received but the foundation, enough to found a people, but once the trunk was established, we were deposed, strewn among the nations, planted I the depths of the earth, until *the time of song arrives and the voice of the turtledove* will be heard *in our land* (*Avoda Zara* 10b). (*Orot*, “War,” par. 3, translated by R. Bezalel Naor)

What is the status of violence as a legitimate political tool – whether used internally (police, etc.) or outwardly (war)? Rav Kook answers: We received a small dose of this “Esav” element. Rome, which *Chazal* identified with Esav, was – and perhaps remains to this day – “the mother of all empires.” Esav is an expert at statecraft, in matters of strategy and army, and we cleared this historical stage for him: “Let my master, I pray you, pass before his servant, and I shall proceed at my slow pace” (*Bereishit* 33:14). Yaakov, the man of peace, does not wish to be identified with “now” militancy. The use of force, even where it is essential, causes us discomfort. In the midst of the First World War (during which the article on “War” was composed), Rav Kook prayed and hoped that its conclusion, when it came, would herald the establishment of the new Israelite kingdom, with no violence and no bloodshed.

It is difficult to think of a more humanist, almost pacifist, quote from any thinker, religious or secular: the entire exile is understood here as an expression of repulsion at war and at the violence, wickedness, and bloodshed that it entails. (Of course, it also has other levels of significance, but we shall not elaborate here.) “It is not worthy for Yaakov to engage in matters of state while these must entail much bloodshed!”

To bring this to the level of our discussion: There was an historical situation in which violence and war were necessary. The long exile is understood here as a Divine and human act (the two dimensions are inseparable here) which *de facto* solved the conflict between the historical situation requiring violence and bloodshed and the moral sensitivity which recoils from violence, and certainly from war. The solution is astonishing: We shall wait, even two thousand years.

The implications of the above for our own times are inescapable. We did not merit the awaited result. We still need war. Paradoxically, it is the Zionist-Religious right-wing, the students and followers of Rav Kook, who are perceived as militant and as not recoiling from violence. I believe that, in general, this view is inaccurate and distorted. However, once we remove the distortion, we must acknowledge its grain of truth. That grain is located, in my view, in the centrality of the national idea in Zionist-Religious thought (and especially among the followers of Rav Kook) – an idea which is not always pursued to the same depth and breadth as they were in Rav Kook’s own thought.

We have seen that Rav Kook maintained that *Am Yisrael* is called a “nation” only in the borrowed sense, and that *Am Yisrael* is better defined as a treasury containing every spirit, the essence of existence and of humanity. I believe that many of us – whether because of our teachers or because of the prevailing cultural and historical climate – came to absorb Rav Kook’s national world-view in processed form, within a modern national outlook that is referred to in political parlance as “right-wing.” Rav Kook’s pathos, in speaking of the uniqueness of *Knesset Yisrael* and when processed through modern national conceptualization, can seem like a right-wing, even militant national ideology. This is significant on the level of political positions, but also with regard to the disdainful, even arrogant, attitude towards world culture and towards anything that takes place outside of the confines of *Am Yisrael*.

Returning to Zionism – it is possible to defend the fact that we are today a fighting nation. Unquestionably, that is what reality demands of us, and there is no doubt that it is quite moral to fight against enemies who come to destroy us or to claim parts of our land. However, it would seem that from a spiritual perspective – and I refer here specifically to the spiritual and moral aspect – it must be understood that war and bloodshed keep us far away not only from President Shimon Peres’s “vision of a New Middle East.” They also show how far removed we are from Rav Kook’s vision of redemption. It may be that even in our own times, it is necessary to establish a state using war and violence; it may even be that when all is considered, this violence entails less evil and bloodshed than the alternatives. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that this historical situation as a whole is very far removed from Rav Kook’s vision.

What are the possible responses to this from within the framework of Rav Kook’s thought? For the present, I leave this question open, and in one of the future lectures, we shall attempt to address it from different angles.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)