YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**On Being Chosen:**

**A Philosophical Investigation into the Election of the Jewish People**

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**Dedicated in memory of Israel Koschitzky z"l,**

**whose yahrzeit falls on the 19th of Kislev.**

**May the world-wide dissemination of Torah through the VBM**

**be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements**

**exemplified the love of Eretz Yisrael and Torat Yisrael.**

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**Shiur #37: Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook**

In the early stages of this series, I developed and defended a number of views that some Jewish thinkers might dismiss as *galuti* (literally: deriving from the exile). The thought that underlies this accusation is that the long years of exile, during which we were restrained from shaping our own destiny as a sovereign people in our own land, took a toll on our national spirit. According to Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the subject of this week’s lesson, the effect of living in exile has been to diminish the scope and scale of Jewish ideals. As he put it:

The Divine idea was confined… throughout the whole period of exile, to a small, impoverished nest; within the little holiness left in synagogues and study houses, in the purity of family life and in the observance of religion and Torah.[[1]](#footnote-2)

Exile made Jews and Judaism somehow smaller, socially and religiously. In fact, as religious Zionists continued to reflect upon the character of religious life in exile, a sense of embarrassment began to take root at the allegedly debased form of life that exile had imposed upon us. In their new Zionist reality, religious Jews would no longer be confined to demeaning professions, such as money lending, but would flourish as farmers, and soldiers, with strength and pride. Eliezer Don-Yehiya cites an article published in the journal, *Hapoel Hamizrachi*, in 1925, that described the dream of the religious workers’ movement as

to produce a working, perfect and holy people in our newly reborn country, where Galut transactions of ‘horse-trading,’ procuring, money-changing and the like would be alien to the Jewish spirit. A peddling people and a holy people are self-contradictory.[[2]](#footnote-3)

But it wasn’t until Israel’s victory in the Six-Day War, thirty-two years after the passing of Rabbi Kook, that this negative attitude towards the mentality and lifestyle of the exile arrived at its zenith within the religious Zionist community – especially under the influence of Rabbi Kook’s son, Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook.

Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda described the fundamental tragedy of the exile in terms of the “pride and heavenly majesty of the Jewish people” being “taken away from them.”[[3]](#footnote-4) He describes the need for Jewish leaders to negotiate with and represent Jewish interests to gentile governments as a “humiliation of the Jewish Spirit.”[[4]](#footnote-5) Fundamentally, it was the military might of Israel in the 1960s that undid this humiliation, in the eyes of Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda. No longer were the Jews a groveling, subservient, and weak conglomeration of misfits. Instead, we could stand proud, in our own land, with the strength to ensure that nobody could push us around. In his words:

The establishment of a Jewish army constitutes the completion of our national renewal process. We are no longer simply the *Galut*-ridden ‘People of the Book’ as we have been depicted by the gentiles of the desert [the Arabs], but also the people of God, a holy nation for whom ‘the book and the sword descended simultaneously from heaven.’[[5]](#footnote-6)

How does this perspective fit with the outlook developed so far in this series? I have, in previous lessons, advocated lines of thought that some might dismiss as *galuti*. For example, I have suggested that the military conquest of the land of Israel, in Biblical times, either was less bloody than it may have seemed, or – if it really was that bloody – missed the mark with regard to the Bible’s own ideal. I have argued that there was never really a mandate to wipe out the people of Amalek, and that the commandment was actually to wage a *symbolic* war, against the will to power within us.[[6]](#footnote-7)

I have argued that those who look at our current geo-political situation and claim we should return to the ethics of the Bible, and deal ruthlessly with all potential enemies, have actually misunderstood the ethics of the Bible – at least as that ethic refracts through Rabbinic tradition. Moreover, I have claimed that the election of Israel, as it was presented in the book of Genesis, was a repudiation of any sort of nationalism that takes pride in its own might or sees itself as inherently entitled to rule over the land of Israel.[[7]](#footnote-8)

Don’t get me wrong. I recognize that military might is essential for our protection in these treacherous times, and I’m glad for it. But I have also argued that Judaism must regard our military might as nothing more than a necessary evil. To some, these conclusions will look like a regression to the sheepishness of exilic Judaism. They will be written off as *galuti*.

In response to that concern, I would argue that we were sent into the exile for a reason, and thus we shouldn’t dismiss the various insights and perspectives that we developed while there – especially if we want God never to send us back.

Having said all that, my purpose, in this week’s lesson, isn’t to defend myself against possible detractors. Rather, and since our journey through the history of Jewish thought has arrived at the early stages of the twentieth century (CE), I want to argue that Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook – one of the greatest Jewish mystics of that generation, and the spiritual father of Israeli religious Zionism – would likely have agreed with the very conclusions that others, including his son, might have written off as *galuti*. I will then turn to Rabbi Kook’s approach to the election in general.

**Zion and Jerusalem**

Rabbi Kook (and from hereon in, I’ll be referring to Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, rather than to his son) was a dialectical thinker. What this means exactly will come into better view as we delve more deeply into the waters of his writings. In the meantime, it means, at least, this: truth is something at which humanity arrives over the passage of time; it emerges as we reconcile the apparent contradictions that hold between different, but equally important, perspectives on the world.

We see this dialectical model at play in Rabbi Kook’s leadership of the Jerusalem Movement (*Degel Yerushalayim)* which he founded to function as something like a constructive dialectical opposition to Zionism. The Jerusalem Movement was an organization for religious Jews, inspired by the reawakening of Israel’s national spirit but unwilling to act as a minority faction within the secular institutions of the Zionists. These two movements, Zionism and Jerusalemism, despite their seeming opposition, would both play an essential role in healing the Jewish nation from two diseases that Rabbi Kook diagnosed.

One illness mainly infected the religious community. It was an illness that led to a type of quietism that removes itself from history. The sort of transcendence from political activism and history that Rosenzweig celebrated[[8]](#footnote-9) is precisely what Rabbi Kook diagnosed as a *disease* that was eating away at swaths of the Jewish world, impairing their *gevura* (their might). The other illness mainly infected the secular world: an illness that led them to be less sensitive to religiosity and holiness. Both of these diseases, Rabbi Kook maintained, were a result of the exile. In the words of Jerome (Yehuda) Gellman:

The[se] two movements [i.e., Zionism and Jerusalemism] are apparently Rav Kook’s solution to the two diseases. “Jerusalem” is to be the instrument for returning to Judaism the richness and depth of holiness diluted in exile, and “Zion” is to restore the Jewish people to a life of active engagement in the world.[[9]](#footnote-10)

With the devastation of the First World War seemingly leading Europe to the brink of Armageddon, Rabbi Kook wrote with the conviction that he was witnessing the beginning of the end of history, and the birth of a messianic utopia. This utopia would be manifest in the emergence of a new Jewish State, but that State wouldn’t merely be the fruit of Zionism. It would emerge from a true synthesis of Zionism and Jerusalemism.

In fact, Rabbi Kook seems to have thought that Biblical Israel and the exile were both essential parts of a Hegelian dialectic. The mighty kingdoms of ancient Israel were the thesis. The powerlessness of the exile was the antithesis. The messianic kingdom would serve as the synthesis. This isn’t a rejection of all that the exile gave to us, but a progression that draws from both stages of Jewish history – the stage of Jewish power, and the stage of Jewish powerlessness.

What does this synthesis look like? One thing is clear: it will not have a militaristic appearance. Military power was a feature of the thesis; weakness was a feature of the antithesis; neither phenomenon will appear in their original form in the synthesis of the future State of Israel. Indeed, Rabbi Kook writes:

We abandoned world politics unwillingly, yet with an inner will, until that happy time shall come when it shall be possible to conduct a kingdom without wickedness and barbarity.[[10]](#footnote-11)

In the exile, we were forced to abandon power. When the future State emerges, we won’t *require* military power, because this state will only be born when Zion and Jerusalem – and Jewish power and powerlessness – are finally synthesized; when God is fully revealed in His world. Rabbi Kook didn’t live to see the establishment of the State of Israel. But a state that requires an army simply isn’t the state that Rabbi Kook yearned to see. Indeed, he wrote:

It is not fitting for Jacob to engage in statecraft at a time when it must be full of blood, at a time that demands the ability to be wicked.[[11]](#footnote-12)

Rabbi Kook was deeply opposed to what some would call a return to the ethics of Biblical warfare and statecraft. That was for an earlier and more primitive time. Speaking in praise of the Jewish National Fund, and its attempt to acquire territory in the holy land by financial means, he said:

When we now return to our land we conquer it not with force and not with the sword, but by peaceful means; and we pay good money for each and every inch of land…[[12]](#footnote-13)

He was speaking in May 1930. This was less than a year after the Arab uprisings of 1929, which killed many Jews and eradicated – indeed, ethnically cleansed – the historic Jewish community of Hebron. And yet, fully aware of the genocidal hatred of many of our neighbors, he said, “We want to fulfill the commandment of *love thy neighbor as thyself* not only with regard to individuals, but also with regard to the nations.”[[13]](#footnote-14)

What Rabbi Kook would have made of the historical developments than unfolded after his passing, from the Holocaust to the establishment of the secular State of Israel and the various wars and conflicts that have ensued in its wake, is impossible to know for certain. It is possible that he would have been horrified by the rise of a secular state propped up by military might. Alternatively, he would have recognized that the utopic end of days was not as imminent as it had seemed. Perhaps he would have adopted various pragmatic compromises with the gritty realities of our time – recognizing, as I do, our military power to be a necessary evil, and our non-ideal State to be a gift from God and a wonderful opportunity, even if it doesn’t yet approach the sort of State that Rabbi Kook had in mind.

As we shall see later, Rabbi Kook anyway seems to have thought that the eschaton would unfold in stages, each one closer to the final ideal. Perhaps that unfolding has begun but remains at an early stage. But one thing seems clear: those who would criticize elements of this series for being objectionably *galuti* will not easily be able to base their case upon the words of Rabbi Kook, the greatest representative of *Torat Ha-Aretz* (the renewed and non-*galuti* Torah of the land of Israel). The State for which he yearned was not a return to Biblical times, but an ascension to a whole new plane of being, a synthesis of Statehood and exile, residence and alienation, *gevura* and holiness – indeed, of Zion and Jerusalem.

**Israel and the Nations**

Rabbi Kook’s writings are often very poetic. In some of his works, and certainly in his posthumously published notebooks, his prose can seem like a stream of consciousness, sometimes conjured in the midst of profound religious experience. His writings are invested with great and evident love – for God, the Torah, the land of Israel, and the people of Israel. The challenge is often how to put the various fragments of this passionate stream of consciousness together to form a coherent whole. Admittedly, we will later return to question whether readers of Rabbi Kook *should* be seeking to render his various reflections coherent. But the scale of that challenge – i.e., the challenge of *trying* to reconstruct Rabbi Kook’s general philosophy – is well reflected by the strikingly different conclusions that scholars of his work have come to regarding his attitude to gentiles.

Picking up on expressions of various forms of Jewish supremacy, even while noting that, perhaps somewhat bizarrely, this supremacism was supposed to be benevolent towards the gentiles, Elliot Wolfson contends that Rabbi Kook’s attitude to the spiritual status of non-Jews was “moral[ly] deficient.”[[14]](#footnote-15) Despite whatever attempts Rabbi Kook made to articulate a Judaism focused on the well-being of gentiles, Wolfson insists that, given his Jewish supremacy, those efforts failed to amount to a “genuine acceptance of alterity.”[[15]](#footnote-16)

A different Rabbi Kook emerges in the writings of Yehudah Mirsky. Mirsky concedes that, according to Rabbi Kook, Israel forms a nation in a thicker ontological sense than any other nation – such that, in a sense, Israel is the only *real* nation.[[16]](#footnote-17) And yet, Mirsky insists that Rabbi Kook adopts a type of “epistemological humility”[[17]](#footnote-18) – aligned to what philosophers would call fallibilism – according to which no human being should feel entirely confident that their way of viewing the world latches on to the truth better than various contending viewpoints. As far as Mirsky is concerned, this humility creates space for a degree of tolerance towards other faiths that is quite radical for an Orthodox theologian and serves as a counterbalance to Rabbi Kook’s ethnocentrism. Indeed, Mirsky could argue, Rabbi Kook had to be committed to the notion that even his ethnocentrism might be wrong, and that he should be open to other (and non-Jewish) perspectives. Therefore, where Wolfson sees moral deficiency, Mirsky sees enlightenment.

Benjamin Ish-Shalom goes further still and holds Rabbi Kook up as a paragon of inter-religious tolerance. He attributes two principles to Rabbi Kook which allegedly served as the basis for this tolerance. The first is that, in the words of Ish-Shalom, “the truth is too great, too rich, and too multifaceted to be grasped or exhausted by any one particular theory.”[[18]](#footnote-19) The second is that “all dimensions of reality, including history and human culture, should be seen as a sort of revelation or manifestation of the divine.”[[19]](#footnote-20) The first principle entails that Judaism, as it exists in our hands today, as a system of thought, cannot exhaust all truth, even if all of its teachings are true and even if it is the religion with the largest share of the truth. The second principle entails that we have what to learn from looking at the religious lives of others. Ish-Shalom also points to the sort of epistemic humility that struck Yehuda Mirsky, which amounts to an opposition to certainty.[[20]](#footnote-21)

What emerges from this background is a form of religious inclusivism that falls short of out-and-out religious pluralism.[[21]](#footnote-22) The idea isn’t that all religions are equally true. Instead, as Ish-Shalom presents matters, Judaism – for Rabbi Kook – sits at the top of a hierarchy,[[22]](#footnote-23) with the greatest share of the truth. But, since (1) Judaism has no monopoly on truth, (2) embracing one’s own belief with too much certainty is an illegitimate form of epistemic hubris, and (3) other religions have things to teach us, Rabbi Kook makes room for an attitude of respect and openness towards the religions of others.

Avi Sagi goes further still and presents Rabbi Kook in ways that make him seem like an extreme religious pluralist who refuses to believe that, at root, any two religions can be in conflict. As Sagi describes the view, the world is so united, as one creation of one God, that the appearance of contradiction between any two perspectives, or any two views, must be somehow illusory. You might think that, say, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are in conflict, but Rabbi Kook writes:

The various thoughts are not really mutually contradictory. Everything is but one united revelation visible in various sparks…[[23]](#footnote-24)

The size, the width, the height, the depth, the supernality, the sparkling, the renewal, the fertility, the ﬂow … all of them in all their glory are really nothing more than one shining point, the point of the cosmos, a drop of the divine spark.[[24]](#footnote-25)

So, what was Rabbi Kook *really*? Was he a Jewish supremacist who, despite his efforts, failed to make room for the other, as Wolfson insists? Was he a thinker with the humility to recognize that his own views were open to critique from the outside, as Mirsky claims? Did this humility go so far as to recognize that even if his religion were wholly true, it could never encompass the whole of the truth, leaving room for other religions to teach us important supplementary lessons, as Ish-Shalom contends? Or was he, as Avi Sagi presents him to be, a radical pluralist who thought that all religions, despite their apparent conflicts, are in a deep harmony that we have yet to reveal?

**Will the real Rabbi Kook please stand up?**

Each of the thinkers quoted in the previous section were reacting to passages of Rabbi Kook’s writings which, in isolation, look to be overwhelming evidence for their various contending claims.

We’ve already seen textual evidence for Avi Sagi’s contention that, according to Rabbi Kook, all religions, and indeed, all thoughts, are actually in harmony.

Ish-Shalom’s claim that Rabbi Kook regarded Judaism as holding the greatest share of the truth, while allowing that it nevertheless has something to learn from other systems of thought, is supported by the following words of Rabbi Kook:

We must study all the sciences of the world, all the teachings of life, all the different cultures, and the religious and ethical doctrines of every nation, and with great broad-mindedness must understand how to purify them all.[[25]](#footnote-26)

Here, the implication isn’t that all religions are equally true, but that every system of religion is liable to contain a *kernel* of truth that can be discovered and then, presumably, worked into the warp and woof of the unfolding Torah. That is to say, these truths can be appropriated by Judaism, once they have been purified. This is far from a full-blown pluralism – indeed, it presumes a sort of cultural imperialism – but it certainly manifests an openness to other religions that is uncommon among Orthodox theologians. In fact, Rabbi Kook forcefully opposes narrow-mindedness:

Narrow-mindedness – which causes one to see all that is outside the bounds of one’s own nation, even if it be outside the bounds of the Jewish people, as naught but ugliness and impurity – is one of the worst kinds of darkness, which completely destroys the whole structure of spiritual good for whose light every noble soul yearns.[[26]](#footnote-27)

This reads like a condemnation of the *Zohar*, which – as we saw in lesson #31 – would seek to identify all non-Jewish souls with the forces of impurity. And yet, Wolfson’s reading, according to which Rabbi Kook is a supremacist very much in the mold of the *Zohar*, can also be supported, by the following shocking words:

The difference between the Jewish soul, its essence, its inner desires, its aspirations, its character, and its position, and between the souls of all the gentiles, in all their ranks, is greater and deeper than the difference between the human soul and the animal soul. Since between the latter, only a quantitative difference is found, but between the former, there is an essential qualitative difference.[[27]](#footnote-28)

This sounds like the supremacism of the *Zohar*. Moreover, it seems like the sort of narrow-mindedness regarding all things non-Jewish that Rabbi Kook elsewhere derided as corrosive to the spiritual good.

These discordant writings that give rise to such different impressions of his views are difficult to reconcile. Perhaps, though, we go wrong in trying to reconcile them. Some of Rabbi Kook’s works are more like collections of insights that came to him at different times and in different contexts. He wasn’t, generally, writing philosophical treatises in which he would carefully develop a system of thought. Perhaps he wrote some of the foregoing excerpts in one sort of mood, and others in a different sort of mood, such that we would be misguided to try to make sense of them all together. Just as we would be ill-advised to look for systematic coherence between the views expressed in all of Shakespeare’s poems, one could argue we would be wrong to look for a systematic coherence between the views expressed in the varied and poetic reflections of Rabbi Kook.

Having said that, I do think there is a way to strike a harmony between all of these seemingly conflicting Rabbi Kooks. Sketching his theory of the election is, I hope to demonstrate, a good way to find that harmony.

**The Role of the Jewish People**

According to Rabbi Kook, the Jewish people have a unique role to play in the history of the world. As we’ve already seen, he calls upon his Jewish readers to study all of the great systems of thought in the world because he sees that we have a role to play in purifying the kernels of truth that lie within them, so that we can appropriate them into the body of the Torah itself. Drawing from various places in Rabbi Kook’s writings, David Shatz summarizes the basic idea in the following terms:

Each nation has its distinctive talents… but the talent distinctive to the Jews is their capacity to absorb, synthesize and transform the best elements in surrounding cultures… The mission of the Jews in history is to exercise their talent for integration and creativity and then to bring to the outside world the new product they had fashioned. Only in that way will Israel be able to execute its sacred task: to elevate all of humanity and all of existence.[[28]](#footnote-29)

So far, we can’t avoid the appearance of supremacism, even if the aim is benevolent towards the non-Jewish world. *We’re* the ones with the special ability, and the fruits of other cultures are only truly worthy once *we’ve* played our role in purifying them. This appearance of supremacism starts to evaporate, however, once we weave in other dimensions of Rabbi Kook’s thinking.

Many strands of Jewish mysticism are committed to the notion that nothing other than God truly exists. When they read the words of the Torah, “know this day, and lay it on thy heart, that the LORD, He is God in heaven above and upon the earth beneath; there is nothing else,”[[29]](#footnote-30) they take the final clause of that verse quite literally. They don’t take it to mean that there is no other god beside God. They take it to mean that, in some sense or other, nothing at all exists besides God. I call this doctrine “Jewish nothing-elsism.” Now, in actual fact, there are many different ways to unpack exactly what this doctrine means. As we shall see next week, for instance, the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s nothing-elsism is quite different from the nothing-elsism of Rabbi Kook. Rabbi Kook takes this doctrine as literally as it can possibly be taken. On his view, if you had to count all the things that *really* exist, you wouldn’t count more than one thing. There *is* only one thing. That thing is God.

This understanding of nothing-elsism amounts to what contemporary philosophers call “existence monism.” According to the existence monist, all things are actually parts of one whole, and when they take their place within that whole, it becomes clear that they don’t really exist at all. All that *really* exists is the whole itself.

There is a tendency among existence monists to think that no thought can be wholly true, and that no thought can be wholly false. To the extent that every thought draws from reality, every thought has a foot in the whole, and so every thought is partially true. On the other hand, to the extent that any finite and isolated thought will only manage to represent some aspects of reality, shorn asunder from the whole, no thought can hope to be wholly true, and so every thought will contain a trace of falsehood. No single thought could hope to capture the whole of reality, so long as it remains a thought that stands aloof from the world that it portends to represent. Only if a thought somehow dissolved into the whole of reality could it hope to be wholly true; that is to say, only when it ceases to be a thought at all. Francis Herbert Bradley, one of Britain’s greatest existence monists, called this phenomenon, “*thought’s happy suicide*.”[[30]](#footnote-31) No thought can escape being host to a trace of falsehood, so long as it remains a thought.

If you want to avoid *error*, instead of falsehood, as an existence monist, you must always note that the truths you have grasped are partial. As Harold Joachim, another British existence monist, put the point: “the erring subject’s confident belief in the truth of his knowledge [is what] distinctively characterizes error, and converts a partial apprehension of the truth into falsity.”[[31]](#footnote-32) Unsurprisingly, similar attitudes can be found in the writings of Rabbi Kook. He writes:

Schopenhauer’s conception of will itself is not unreasonable. Its defect is that Schopenhauer, instead of seeing it as one phenomenon of reality, perceives it as all of reality...[[32]](#footnote-33)

When we combine Rabbi Kook’s dialectical method with his existence monism, the following picture emerges: the process of synthesizing theses and antitheses should end in the ultimate synthesis of all, in which we apprehend the oneness of everything – a oneness in which no contradictions can be found.

Why are the Jews so well placed to play this role? The answer that Rabbi Kook provides is that the Jewish soul, so to speak, is simply tailored to play that role. But, surprisingly, I think a deeper answer to the question will have to relate to atheism and the role it plays both in the life of the Jewish people and in the thinking of Rabbi Kook. At this point, I should warn, we approach perhaps the most radical elements of his thinking.

**The Role of Atheism**

In the world of unity (*olam shel achdut*) – i.e., in the world as it really is, and as it will one day be revealed to be – every conceivable distinction is transcended. As Wolfson puts the point, Rabbi Kook aspires to apprehend, and to lead humanity to the apprehension of

the immeasurable unity wherein it is no longer viable to distinguish between the antinomies that orient us in the world spatially, temporally, morally, legally, religiously, sociologically, and psychologically.[[33]](#footnote-34)

Rabbi Kook describes this as the “great sea of the light of infinity [in which] everything is unified, everything is elevated, everything is exalted, and everything is sanctified.”[[34]](#footnote-35)

Taking these words at face value, it seems that even the distinctions between good and evil, being and non-being, and theism and atheism, will have to be unified (or transcended) in the eschaton. To be sure, while we continue to live on this side of the eschaton, we have to make pragmatic concessions to the distinctions that impose themselves on our experience, and thus we have to respect all of the halakhic distinctions that Judaism commands. Rabbi Kook never endorsed an antinomian rejection of Jewish strictures. But, at the very *end* of history, there will be no distinctions left for us to mark – there won’t even be a distinction between faith and heresy. As Rabbi Kook puts it:

With regard to the supernal divine truth, there is no difference at all between the conceived belief and heresy. Neither of them offer the truth, but faith brings one close to truth and heresy to deceit, and, as a result, good and evil ensues from the[se] opposites... However, in relation to the light of Ein Sof [the Infinite], everything is equal. Heresy, too, is the disclosure of the force of life, for the light of life of the supernal splendor is garbed within it, and, consequently, spiritual warriors gather very good sparks from it.[[35]](#footnote-36)

And thus, Rabbi Kook makes a distinction between the Jewish faith as it currently has to be configured, and the Jewish faith in its ideal and final state. As currently configured, Jewish faith is in opposition to heresy. But in the ideal faith, Rabbi Kook writes, “there is no blemish of heresy at all because it is above the concept of heresy just as it is above the concept of faith.”[[36]](#footnote-37)

Rabbi Kook seems to be saying that the ideal faith isn’t accurately called a *faith* at all, because it transcends faith. The final ascent, it seems, will have to pit the thesis of theism (*faith*) against the antithesis of atheism (*heresy*), to arrive at a synthesis, which shall be the ideal “faith” of the end of days. Now, it seems as if the end of days itself will come in stages, as far as Rabbi Kook is concerned. Indeed, this is one way to reconcile his conflicting writings about animal sacrifices. It seems that, in the first stage of the eschaton, Jewish law as we understand it today will very much be in force. The Temple will be rebuilt, and animal sacrifice will be reinstituted in accordance with its laws. At a later stage, animal sacrifices will be discontinued, in favor of vegetarian offerings.[[37]](#footnote-38) At a later stage still, it seems that the very notion of law will be transcended in its entirety, as will the conflict between faith and heresy.

The struggle between theism and atheism – to be resolved in the end of days – was similar, in the mind of Rabbi Kook, to the struggle between negative and positive theology.

Negative theology (otherwise known as apophaticism), in its most extreme form, is the view that nothing can be truly said of God – that God is entirely beyond linguistic description. The problem with this view, of course, is that even to describe God as indescribable is, in the final analysis, to *describe* him. Likewise: if nothing can be truly said of God, then we shouldn’t be able to say, truly, of God, that nothing can be truly said of Him! Positive theology (otherwise known as cataphaticism), in contrast, insists that we can and must use language to describe God.

Unsurprisingly, Rabbi Kook saw essential roles, in the religious life, for both negative *and* positive theology. Theological explanations, couched in theological language, are the only tool we have for coming close to the “source of faith”; how could we draw close to it, in thought, if we had no concepts or words to help us on our way? But the source of faith itself is actually an infinite light that is beyond all representation. This places us in something of a bind. We need to utilize positive descriptions of God, but when they serve their proper purpose, they point to a God that our descriptions fail to represent. Worse still, these descriptions, despite their utility, always end up misrepresenting divinity. In the words of Rabbi Kook, atheism therefore plays a sociological role: “to eliminate the dross that has clung to faith because of a dearth of knowledge and worship.”[[38]](#footnote-39) In her conflict with atheism, the theist will be drawn towards a purer form of faith. In the words of Wolfson:

The function of atheism is to remove the “specific forms” (*ha-surot ha-meyuhadot*) from our conception of divinity, to uproot the refuse that separates the human from the divine light, to cleanse the mind so that the more sublime knowledge of God (*da’at Elohim ha-nisgavah*) can erect its temple.[[39]](#footnote-40)

As we purify our faith, we have to get rid of every last vestige of corporeality from our conception of God. The very last hurdle in that process, Rabbi Kook says, is to transcend even the “attribution of existence in general to divinity, for in truth all that we define by existence is incalculably removed from divinity.” Real divinity, after all, is a unity that transcends *all* distinctions – even the distinction between being and non-being. So, there’s a sense in which our negative theology has to negate *being* (as well as non-being) of God. Rabbi Kook calls atheism the “shadow of this negation.”[[40]](#footnote-41)

We’ve arrived at the following picture: The Jewish people have been tasked with synthesizing all of the kernels of truth to be found in all of the cultures of the world, so that we will eventually arrive at a Judaism that constitutes the ideal faith. This ideal is a faith that will embrace all of humanity and usher in a stage in our history where all distinctions will be seen for the illusions that they are – even the distinctions between faith and heresy, between theism and atheism. All these conflicts are harmonized when they find their place within the whole, in which they altogether dissolve to reveal that there is nothing other than God; a God who transcends even the distinction between being and non-being.

**Two Questions**

Now, I must be honest. I have described the picture, but it’s not clear to me that I really can grasp it. Perhaps nobody can grasp it in anything other than a mystical experience in which all distinctions are finally transcended.[[41]](#footnote-42) And whatever support this picture might receive from mystical experience, I fear that the whole edifice of Rabbi Kook’s thinking, thus constructed, is liable to collapse under the weight of the criticisms lining up to attack it. But before we go on to explore those criticisms, let us see how the picture suggests answers to two pressing questions.

First, how might we resolve the debate between Wolfson, Mirsky, Ish-Shalom, and Sagi, regarding whether Rabbi Kook was an inclusivist, a pluralist, or a supremacist? Second, without appealing to some brute metaphysical quality in the soul of the Jew – since I don’t see any *a priori* reason for belief in such a thing – why might the Jews be particularly well suited to play the role that Rabbi Kook’s thinking gives to them?

The first question, I think, is relatively easy to resolve. Rabbi Kook can’t truly be characterized as a religious pluralist. As Ish-Shalom demonstrates, he consistently represents Judaism as containing *more* truth than any other religion. Admittedly, in the underlying monistic reality, both sides of every conceivable conflict somehow find their place. But I don’t see how that can be enough to render Rabbi Kook a *pluralist*. The monistic reality of the universe hasn’t yet been made manifest. Our process of synthesizing all the different perspectives isn’t yet complete. Until it *is* complete, we live in the world of distinctions and not in the world of unity. In neither of those worlds is religious pluralism true: in the world of distinctions, conflicting religions cannot all be true in everything that they teach, and Rabbi Kook seems committed to the claim that Judaism is, of all the religions of the world, the *most* true; in the world of unity, we can’t distinguish between multiple religions about which we could hope to be pluralistic. In the world of unity, all religions merge into the ideal faith. Therefore, there’s no room in either world (the world as it appears to be, or the world as it really is) for religious pluralism.

Instead, Rabbi Kook is an inclusivist. Judaism is the religion that currently has possession of the most truth, and it will grow to encompass all the truths it can harvest, and synthesize, from all of the other religions and systems of thought, until all become one.

Is Rabbi Kook a supremacist? Well, yes and no. He certainly maintains that there’s a massive distinction between the souls of Jews and gentiles, and between the collective soul of the Jewish nation, on the one hand, and the spirits that animate other nations, on the other. But we must here note two things. First, he is, somewhat paradoxically, committed to the claim that all thoughts harbor some falsehood, and that all truths, on this side of the end of days, are partial. And thus, he must concede that his supremacism isn’t *entirely* true. More fundamentally, his supremacism itself is only endorsed at one stage of a dialectical process that will, he believes, one day result in the apprehension of the world as it *really* is: a world in which there can be no distinction between Jew and gentile.

These two considerations combine to make sense of the various open-minded and loving ways in which Rabbi Kook so often relates to the gentile world. Not only did he want us to exercise a deep love for our non-Jewish neighbors, and to learn from all religions and systems of thought, but even as he denied that other nations have the same sort of collective soul that animates the Jewish people, he was conscious of the fact that we hold no monopoly over truth, righteousness, or even holiness. Indeed, he writes:

There are in the [non-Jewish] world pious men, philosophers, holy men, men of God, but in the world there is not a nation – besides Israel – whose essential soul cannot be whole other than by the purpose of the sublime divine idea in the world.[[42]](#footnote-43)

Why are the Jews so well placed to play the role that God has given them? Rabbi Kook’s own explanation, of course, draws from his conviction that the Jewish nation’s soul is different from the spirits that animate other nations. But other explanations, which would sit easily with Rabbi Kook’s view without making tendentious metaphysical claims, suggest themselves. Already in our analysis of chosenness in the book of Genesis, we detected the implication that chosen people are to be perennial outsiders, so that we can function as a counter-cultural voice in the conversation of humanity.[[43]](#footnote-44) This liminality perhaps provides us with a unique vantage point for the role of synthesizing the contributions of each and every culture.

In his homily on *Parashat Vayishlach*,[[44]](#footnote-45) Rabbi Kook comments upon the two names that attach to Jacob – Jacob and Israel. The first name is rooted in the fact that Jacob was born holding onto the heel of his older brother. It therefore alludes to Jacob’s cunning and the shrewdness, necessary in order to navigate the ugly realities of this world. His other name, Israel, refers to his striving with angels, and thus alludes to his spiritual aspirations. And so, for Rabbi Kook, the two names are related to the dialectical role that the children of Israel are to play in this world, synthesizing the physical and the spiritual, the profane and the holy.

I would like to offer a different homily about the name of Israel, based on Rabbi Kook’s thinking.

According to the Genesis Model of the election, one of our functions as a chosen people is to wrestle with God Himself. What we couldn’t quite make sense of, at that point in the series, was *why* God would require such opposition from His elect. But, if the ideal faith that the Jews are called upon to bring into the world requires a synthesis between both theism and atheism, then the image of a people who wrestle with God takes on a new salience. The general stance of the theist is to embrace God. The general stance of the atheist is to shun Him. The stance of the people charged with synthesizing all distinctions is the stance of he who *wrestles* with God.

This enables us to see why Judaism is particularly well suited to our task. We are a people who are characterized by the connection to a particular theistic faith – such that a non-Jew can become Jewish (even in the eyes of most atheist Jews) by adopting that faith – and yet a person can remain Jewish, and even proudly Jewish, *without* believing in God. To the extent that other religions are creedal, a person loses their religious identity upon the adoption of atheism. This isn’t so with the Jewish identity, which is only loosely tethered to any theological commitments, and is quite consistent with the rejection of God and His Torah. So perhaps only a people like ours can be expected, in the end of days, to usher in the synthesis of atheism and theism.

**Assessment**

I admire the way in which Rabbi Kook utilized his kabbalistic monism to overcome the appearance of supremacism within the kabbalistic tradition. In a sense, he gives tremendous weight to even the most problematic elements of the mystical tradition, but then shows how those elements point the way to their own rejection (or, more accurately, transcendence). It must also be counted as a philosophical achievement to have provided some explanation for why a perfect God might have called upon His elect to serve as His *opponents*, to the extent that we have been called upon to wrestle with God. This calling makes sense if the ultimate destination is a synthesis of theism and atheism.

But ultimately, though it stands as an option on the Jewish intellectual map, I cannot endorse Rabbi Kook’s conception of the election because I cannot see a way to escape from certain logical consequences of his extreme existence monism.

A mystic might argue that the following concerns are the product of an over-reliance on reason. But, though I think mysticism does have a crucial role to play in the religious life, and though I think mystical experience can, in some ways, transcend the limits of reason and logic, I cannot accept that even mystical experience can be allowed to *contradict* the edicts of logic and reason. And it is those sorts of contradictions that, I fear, emerge from the thought of Rabbi Kook, as a consequence of his existence monism.

The existence monist thinks there is only one object. An absurd consequence of this is that, in the final analysis, any proposition that seems to be about two things will have to be transformed into a proposition about one thing, since there is only one thing for propositions to be about: i.e., God. But Bertrand Russell (a great critic of Bradley and Joachim) argues that there are certain obviously true propositions that *cannot* be transformed into propositions about a single thing. He writes:

The proposition ‘*a* is greater than *b*’, we are told, does not really say anything about either *a* or *b*, but about the two together. Denoting the whole which they compose (*ab*), it says we will suppose, ‘(*ab*) contains diversity of magnitude.’ Now to this statement … there is a special objection in the case of asymmetry. (*ab*) is symmetrical with regard to *a* and *b* [since, if there’s only one thing, there can’t be two distinct fusions of *a* and *b*, each in a different order], and thus the property of the whole will be exactly the same in the case where *a* is greater than *b* as in the case where *b* is greater than *a*.[[45]](#footnote-46)

In other words, the existence monist can’t distinguish the true proposition that 2>1 from the false proposition that 1>2. This constitutes a serious blow to the hopes of reconciling existence monism with the truth of mathematics. Now, of course, the existence monist can say that mathematics is true without being *wholly* true. Mathematics is *partially* true. But existence monists seem to think that their existence monism itself is, somehow, even truer than the partial truths of mathematics. So, we can register two complaints: first, a low-grade partial truth just doesn’t seem fitting for an indubitable theorem of number theory, such as the claim that 2>1; secondly, to say that the simple sums of arithmetic are *less true* than the wild speculations of metaphysicians and theologians is to beggar belief.

But the problems with existence monism run deeper still. If no proposition is entirely true, then the monistic theory itself cannot be entirely true. And, as Russell points out, if “the partial truths which embody the monistic philosophy” are not entirely true, then “any deductions we may make from them may depend upon their false aspect rather than their true one, and may therefore be erroneous.”[[46]](#footnote-47) That is, by the lights of existence monism, we shouldn’t trust any conclusions that seem to follow from existence monism: the monist concedes that his own premises are merely partially true. How then do we know what conclusions he would have come to had he started with *totally* true premises? We’ve opened the door to a pernicious form of skepticism.

Remember that on Joachim’s account, error has nothing to do with truth or falsehood: every proposition with which mere mortals deal is somewhere between true and false; error, on the other hand, resides in the confident belief that a partial truth is wholly true. This conclusion seemed to Russell “the only possible one for a monistic theory of truth,” but then he went on to conjure up the following scene: A jury has to decide whether a man has committed a crime. If the jury keeps in mind the monistic theory of truth, and thereby remembers that any verdict they come to can only ever amount to a partial truth, then their verdict will be right, whatever their verdict. If they forget the monistic theory, the same verdict will be erroneous![[47]](#footnote-48)

Given the monistic theory of truth, the existence monist can sacrifice goats to Baal, and libate wine to Hermes, providing that, when doing so, she remains humble in the knowledge that all truths are partial. This will not be an error, so why should it count as idolatry? But if the Jewish existence monist takes part in a traditional Jewish prayer service, confident in the belief that to do so is mandated by God, she falls into error – and perhaps even idolatry – since she is confident that her belief is wholly true. While I am sympathetic to the notion that theological certainty is analogous to a form of idolatry, this goes too far! Nothing-elsism is a mainstay of the Jewish tradition, but I think – as we shall see next week – that it can sometimes be interpreted in ways that fall short of existence monism. The principle of charity (according to which we don’t attribute incoherent views to people if we can plausibly avoid doing so) dictates that nothing-elsism be interpreted in these less extreme ways.

Unfortunately, it really does seem as if Rabbi Kook was an existence monist, and that his theory of the election depends upon it.

I am a Jewish philosopher committed to the sovereignty of logic and reason, and thus Rabbi Kook’s view, though resplendent in many ways, and though his writings serve as a beautiful example of mystical rapture and God intoxication, cannot serve as the basis for my theory of the election.

1. *Orot, Lemahalach Haideyut B’Yisrael, Hamatzav Begalut,* as translated by Eliezer Don-Yehiya, in ‘The Negation of Galut in Religious Zionism,’ *Modern Judaism*, 12/2 (1992), p. 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Ibid., p. 133 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Cited ibid., p. 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Cited ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Cited ibid., p. 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. I developed these points in lessons 5 and 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. See lesson 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. See Lesson 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Jerome I. Gellman, “Zion and Jerusalem: The Jewish State in the Thought of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook,” in Lawrence J. Kaplan and David Shatz (eds.), *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), p. 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. This is Gellman’s translation of *Orot*, *Ha-milchama,* 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Cited in Gellman, “Zion and Jerusalem,” p. 287. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Elliot Wolfson, “Secrecy, Apophasis, and Atheistic Faith in the Teachings of Rav Kook,” in M. Fagenblat, *Negative Theology as Jewish Modernity* (Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2017), p. 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Yehuda Mirsky, *Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Benjamin Ish-Shalom, “Tolerance and Its Theoretical Basis,” p. 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Ibid., p. 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. I here use “inclusivism” in the sense developed by my PhD student, Barry Kleinberg (in work in progress). Alan Brill also describes Rabbi Kook as an inclusivist, but not with quite the sense developed by Kleinberg (Alan Brill, *Judaism and Other Religions: Models of Understanding* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), chapter 4). According to Kleinberg, an inclusivist is someone who believes their religion (i.e., their home religion) is wholly true, but that it doesn’t have a monopoly on truth, such that other religions (i.e., alien religions) can play a role in teaching and refining the content of one’s home religion. Ish-Shalom, like Kleinberg himself, seems to think that Rabbi Kook was an inclusivist in just this sense of the word. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Ish-Shalom, “Tolerance,” p. 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. *Orot Ha-kodesh,* volume 1, *sha’ar* 1, *ot* 12, as translated in Avi Sagi, *The Open Canon: On the Meaning of Halakhic Discourse* (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2008), p. 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. *Shemona Kevatzim* 2:178*,* as translated in Avi Sagi, *The Open Canon*, p. 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. *Arpilei Tohar* 32-33, as translated by Ish-Shalom, “Tolerance,” p. 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. This is a translation of an unpublished manuscript, cited by Ish-Shalom, “Tolerance,” p. 193, with minor edits to punctuation to enhance clarity. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. *Shemona Kevatzim* 3:347, my translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. David Shatz, *Jewish Thought in Dialogue: Essays on Thinkers, Theologies, and Moral Theories* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009), p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Deuteronomy 4:39. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Francis Herbert Bradley, *Appearance and Reality: A Metaphysical Essay* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 1897), p. 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Harold H. Joachim, *The Nature of Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906), p. 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. *Orot Ha-kodesh*, volume 2, p. 484, as translated in Ish-Shalom, “Tolerance,” p. 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Wolfson, “Secrecy,” p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. *Shemona Kevatzim* 8:259, as translated by Wolfson, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. *Shemona* *Kevatzim* 2:120, as translated in Wolfson, ibid., p. 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. *Shemona Kevatzim* 1:317, as translated in Wolfson, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. For the conflicting sources and this style of reconciling them, see Rabbi Ari Zivotofsky’s “*Korbanot*,” <https://outorah.org/p/33325/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. *Orot*, *Zeronim*, *Yisurim Mamrikim*, as translated in Wolfson, “Secrecy,” p. 149. This whole paragraph is based upon the section of *Orot* from which this quotation is drawn. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. Wolfson, “Secrecy,” p. 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. *Orot, Zeronim*, *Yisurim Mamrikim*, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. For the role of *mystical perception* in the thought of Rabbi Kook, see Benjamin Ish-Shalom, *Rav Avraham Itzhak HaCohen Kook: Between Rationalism and Mysticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), especially chapter 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. *Orot, Orot Meofel, Orot Ha-techia*, I take this translation from Bezalel Naor’s, *Orot: Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (translated and with an Introduction by Bezalel Naor* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1993), pp. 148-149). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. See lesson 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. Genesis 32:4–36:43. The homily is found in Rabbi Kook’s *Midbar Shur*,chapter 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. Bertrand Russell, *The Principles of Mathematics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), §217. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. Bertrand Russell, “On the Nature of Truth,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 7/1 (1907), p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. Ibid., p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)