YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**RAV KOOK’S LETTERS**

**By Rav Tamir Granot**

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**Shiur #26a: Isolationism vs. Socialization**

Introduction

Rav Avraham Yitzchak Ha-kohen Kook was a man of contrasts. In a letter to Chayim Brenner, he famously wrote, "Whoever said that my soul is split knew what he was talking about!" In a certain sense, the route that his life took and the major decisions that he made created this rift. In practice, he lived between political, religious, social, and cultural extremes, and the oscillation between them was the essence of his life.[[1]](#footnote-1)

On the one hand, Rav Kook was connected to the Jewish settlement in *Eretz Yisrael* and the pioneers dedicated to this endeavor – many of whom were staunchly secular. On the other hand, in terms of his own lifestyle, he was a radical, ultra-Orthodox Jew. He was well-versed in European culture, with knowledge of philosophy and world events, but at the same time an outstanding halakhic authority, kabbalist, and classical scholar. He was on friendly terms with Zionist leaders and public figures, would greet everyone, and was liked by all, but he was a lonely man who felt that his thoughts and insights were not understood, even by those closest to him.

Perhaps the most fundamental schism within him concerned his attitude towards contrasts themselves. While in practice he was connected to different extremes and lived an enormously complex existence, he was a man of all-encompassing unity. The picture of his religious and ontological world was one of great harmony – and this was also the deepest motivation behind his teachings:

To the extent that a person overcomes himself and ascends in holiness and repentance, all separations come together in him and he starts to feel how all things are interconnected and how everything is rooted in the Supreme spiritual Source. And the great demand which his supernal soul makes of him – that he should live in a world of unity and harmony and coherence – starts to be fulfilled. (*Orot Ha-Kodesh*, part 4, p. 104)

I believe that this was the greatest of schisms for him, the source of his greatest pain.

Rav Kook had the merit of having many students study and disseminate his teachings, and academic scholars also dedicate themselves to researching his work. This results in different, and sometimes contradictory, elements being stressed and revealed. In their attempts to explain the contrasts in Rav Kook, the parties arrive at opposite conclusions. Thus, for example, concerning the question of whether Rav Kook was a general philosopher or an esoteric kabbalist, their debates ended inconclusively. In approaching his halakhic thought, they found a contrast between his great vision of unifying halakha with other disciplines and rejuvenating it inwardly, and his extensive halakhic activity, which is conservative in nature and contains almost no innovation in terms of either form or content.

The huge scope of his teachings and the contradictions which, to a considerable extent, are inherent in his thought and activity, have led to a situation in which Rav Kook’s teachings are often studied or interpreted in a manner that considers only one aspect, emphasizing one source and then using that approach to explain a different source or to suppress it. Those seeking to explain his thought often end up describing it instead.

In these final *shiurim* of the series, I would like to focus on the subject set forth in the title – the internal contrasts in Rav Kook’s social approach. We shall consider the question of whether, based on Rav Kook's educational and religious world-view, he was in favor of social involvement, educational and religious integration, the coexistence of different communities, and the involvement of the elite among the masses, or whether his approach was fundamentally one of separatism, preferring social isolationism and personal aloofness.[[2]](#footnote-2)

As mentioned, and as we shall see in the sources below, in this regard as well, Rav Kook's writings, his practical guidance to his students, and his personal actions were seemingly self-contradictory.

Another related ideological issue is that of culture. How did Rav Kook view the involvement of the religious public, including his own students, in the general, secular cultural scene? Here, too, the question is raised from between the two poles of isolation – between the maintenance of barriers keeping out the general culture (i.e., religious education only, non-consumption of literature, philosophy etc.) and mutual acceptance and influence. Theoretically, it is possible for a community to be integrated into the broader society on the practical level (residence, organizational and political cooperation, etc.) but culturally separate. In practice, however, the different levels affect one another, and here, too, it seems that Rav Kook addresses the questions in a single manner.

Our discussion will center on Rav Kook's teachings themselves, with an attempt to understand the theory and principles upon which his positions regarding these questions are based. At the outset, it cannot be denied that the fundamental dilemmas still exist and are subject to fierce debate. Amongst the charedi community, the questions have much less power, since neither its everyday reality nor its ideology is balanced between two extremes. The Religious-Zionist (or "Modern Orthodox") public, on the other hand – which includes the students of Rav Kook – exists in a permanent theoretical and practical tension between the idea of isolation and that of involvement and belonging.

From the socio-historical perspective, it would seem that there is a connection between the growing influence of the students of Rav Kook and of his son, Rav Tzvi Yehuda Kook –the graduates of Yeshivat Merkaz Ha-Rav and its daughter institutions – on the general religious public, and support for models of isolationism. As an example, on the social level we might cite the model of the "religious *yishuv*," or even the "Torani-religious *yishuv*," which became dominant starting in the late 1970's, both as part of the settlement enterprise in Judea and Samaria as well as within the Green Line (for completely different reasons). On the cultural level, the same development is reflected in the trend towards a purely religious education devoid of secular components representing either the natural or human sciences (or limiting these to professional training) at Zionist-Religious Talmud Torahs, *yeshivot* *ketanot*, and the public expression of rabbinical views.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Part of the social discourse surrounding these educational and ideological issues relies on Rav Kook's position on the matter. As noted, it is not at all difficult to cite excerpts from Rav Kook's writings to support either position, since his work is characterized by contrasting aspects.

I would like to add an element to this important discussion. I believe that, despite its internal contradictions, Rav Kook does maintain a fundamental approach, and defining it will help us to explain sources that appear to be contradictory. If, in addition, we are able to draw some insights relevant to our contemporary situation, our reward will be all the greater.

Chapter 1 will deal with a presentation of examples from Rav Kook's writings concerning the dilemma of isolationism vs. participation and belonging on the social and cultural levels, and will present the various positions of his students and commentators in explaining his teachings.

In Chapter 2, I will attempt to argue that these internal contradictions can only be understood within Rav Kook's general system of metaphysical coordinates, and specifically from within an understanding of the concept of the "*kodesh*" (holiness), which is so central to his thought.

Chapter 3 will present Rav Kook's position, as I understand it, in its theoretical form, with specific attention to educational and ideological issues.

Finally, we will summarize and consider the contemporary implications of our theoretical discussion, as well as the advantages of Rav Kook's approach and the difficulties that it raises.

**Chapter 1**

As noted, Rav Kook's students and commentators are divided in their interpretations of his approach. Here are some positions:

A) Prof. Nachum Arieli[[4]](#footnote-4) highlights the element of unity and emphasizes the aspects of cultural openness and a sense of social partnership.[[5]](#footnote-5)

B). R. Yishayahu Hadari[[6]](#footnote-6) notes the contradictory sources and writes that Rav Kook demonstrates an understanding of the need to balance social obligation, on one hand, with the need for separatism, on the other. He highlights this need mainly as a personal need for spiritual elevation.[[7]](#footnote-7)

C) In the debate that raged a few years ago concerning the establishment of a teachers' training college at Yeshivat Merkaz Ha-Rav, great emphasis was placed on the need for a distinction between the methodologies and material in the sphere of *kodesh* and those in the sphere of general studies. The purity of the *kodesh* is the secret to the power of education. R. Tzvi Tau, one of the most prominent disciples of R. Tzvi Yehuda Kook, founded Yeshivat Har Ha-Mor as a breakaway from Yeshivat Merkaz Ha-Rav, which had been founded by Rav Kook himself. The reason for the split was that R. Tau viewed the attempt to introduce the study of pedagogy, with its source in academia, as the introduction of “an idol in the Sanctuary,” as it were. The *kodesh* (i.e., the yeshiva) which integrates the profane (i.e., a teachers' college) is not pure, and it loses the power of its impact. R. Tau's criticism was aimed not at science, nor at the existence of academic institutions in and of themselves, but rather at the mixture of holiness and profane. All his claims were presented in the name of Rav Kook and his teachings.[[8]](#footnote-8)

D) R. Yaakov Filber, also a student of Rav Tzvi Yehuda, in his book *Torat Ha-Geula Ha-Sheleima*, explains that Yaakov was chosen to be the leader of the Jewish nation because, according to the *midrash*, only he built a "house" or "structure" (*bayit*), in contrast to Avraham and Yitzchak, who are associated with mountain and field respectively. In his view, the message behind this famous *midrash* concerns the proper social approach. Avraham and Yitzchak were open to the world; there was no barrier between them and it. This is an approach which cannot be maintained in the present historical reality. Only Yaakov, who creates a defined environment with clear boundaries by building a house, merits to be the father of the nation. Here again, then, isolationism is viewed as a central ideological principle.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. For instance, he wrote: "How great is my inner war… and I am full of pain, and seek salvation and light" (*Orot Ha-Kodesh*, part 4, p.402). The context of this quote is a discussion of the contrast between the all-encompassing inner, spiritual life and everyday reality, with its details and boundaries. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Of course, these two issues may be treated separately. One may support the idea of isolationism on the social level, while opposing withdrawal and seclusion on the personal level, or vice versa. Nevertheless, we see that in general, there is a correlation between these two areas. In Rav Kook's teachings in particular, I believe, they are in fact one question with two results, which must be understood within the framework of similar modes of thought. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On the theoretical level, see Michael Rosenak's discussion: "Anarchism, Closure and What is Between Them: A Social and Cultural Interpretation" (Hebrew) in N. Ilan (ed.), *Ayin Tova (A Good Eye: Dialogue and Polemic in Jewish Culture)* (Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuchad Publishing House), pp. 547-630. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Nachum Arieli, “Integration in the Thought of Rav Kook” (Hebrew) in Binyamin Ish-Shalom and Shalom Rosenberg (eds.), *Yovel Orot* (World Zionist Organization), pp. 129-152. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sample excerpts in favor of cultural openness: "The hand of destruction and ruin which struck us caused the wealth of our secular life to be lost from our midst. All the science books, all the business of life that a great nation such as ours was involved in while living upon its land – all this was erased and completely lost… But the time has come for us to have to take cognizance of the reality of life and to broaden our perspective." (*Ma'amarei Ha-RAY"H*, 2, p. 505); "But not to limit our literature only to [the domain of] the 'holy sanctuary', as you suggest, but rather to broaden the boundary of the holy to all of mundane life and all its demands and all the sciences which it requires, 'On that day it shall be [written] upon the bells of the horses, Holy unto God'" (ibid.). Examples concerning socialization: "Love of all of existence fills the hearts of the good, the righteous among people. They hope for the happiness of all, they yearn for light and joy for all, they draw love for all of existence, disparate in the multitude of its creatures, from the supreme love of God, from love of the absolute and complete wholeness of Him Who is the reason for everything, the cause for everything, and gives life to everything" (*Orot Ha-Kodesh* 2, p. 442); "In keeping with the principle of unity, we recognize that the common quality is much higher and more eternal that the separate quality of existence" (ibid., p. 437); "To the extent that a person elevates himself in his spiritual form, he has a more developed sense of the great value of the many; the community begins to take on a life inside of him; in his heart and the recesses of his will he feels the many needs of the community, the great value of the life that beats within the community as a whole, which appears in his mind's eye as a single solid figure; he feels the tangible reality of the community, and is filled with infinite love and respect for it" (ibid. 3, p. 157); "The most supreme level of love of humanity must include love of man, and this, too, must spread over the entire person. Despite differences of opinion in matters of faith, and despite divisions of race and regions, it is proper to investigate in depth the various nations and groups, as far as possible, to study their natures and their traits, in order to know how to base the love of humanity upon foundations which can lead to practical expression" (ibid. 4, p. 20). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Yishayahu Hadari, *Perakim Be-Mishnato Ha-Iyyunit shel Ha-Rav Kook* (Jerusalem, 1976), 78-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The following are two typical examples from Rav Kook's writings: "It is extremely detrimental to the pious ones, full of might for God, to be joined in spirit with lower people who have only external fear, and they are full of fright, evil and lowly sadness, which extends over the entire area of their spiritual lives. The sorrow of the soul in joining them in conversation, in prayer, and in all matters of sanctity is exceedingly great, and much preparation is necessary so as to amplify one's spiritual power and the clear Divine light of the soul in order to protect himself so that his soul will not be brought down by the lowliness of the diminutive stature of those with external fear; they have no tremendous desire, only the weakness of their sad fear" (*Orot Ha-Kodesh* 4, p.422); "Man, whose soul illuminates within him, must practice extensive self-isolation. The perpetual companionship of other people, who are usually ponderous in relation to him in their spirituality, too, dims the clear light of his supreme soul…" (ibid. 3, p. 271). See further "*Kevatzim*" 3, p. 304; 8, p. 83 ; 6, p.261. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. All of this was presented in an introductory booklet on Yeshivat Har Ha-Mor, which brought together several programmatic addresses by the Roshei Yeshiva, and especially by R. Tau. It seems that the debates amongst the religious community in recent years surrounding study of *Tanakh* and the study of Gemara likewise turn on this point of principle. Both debates developed mainly around the question of the use of academic tools to study *Tanakh* and Talmud. The opposition of R. Tau and other rabbis arose mainly from the very idea of integrating foreign perspectives in religious studies, an integration which threatens the boundary/barrier – that is, it threatens the politics of isolation. We will discuss this point further in later *shiurim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)