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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**FESTIVAL OF FREEDOM: ESSAYS ON PESAH AND THE HAGGADAH**

**by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik**

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Shiur #26d

Isolationism vs. Socialization (continued)

**Chapter 3**

Let us now return to the question we raised in Chapter 1 – how the concepts which we presented as guiding principles of religious consciousness and the perception of the "*kodesh*" in the philosophy of Rav Kook are applied to the issue of separatism or socialization, on the social and cultural levels.

It seems that a distinction must be drawn between everything that Rav Kook says on the level of metaphysical and value judgment, on the one hand, and the practical ideological guidelines that he recommends. In other words, the theoretical ideas that he expresses about the need for loving every person, and certainly every fellow Jew (which are also expressed in strong personal language), or the fact that he acknowledges the necessity of having different sectors within *Am Yisrael*, including those engaged in material activity, cannot be translated directly into a practical guide for education or social life. By the same token, the (correct) view that every idea and teaching that has some positive purpose in improving and enhancing human life and the world in general has religious and moral value, and that the good that is manifest in the ideas of writers and philosophers of all stripes is indeed good and that we should learn from it,[[1]](#footnote-1) is not a platform for a study curriculum. In attempting to establish a practical policy, first and foremost we must consider practical considerations. Hence, our question is not, “Is there holiness within all of *Am Yisrael*, or in their actions, or in their ideas,” etc., leading us to an operative conclusion (what to study, whom to draw close to). Rather, our question will be: Which educational direction, study curriculum, social ideology, etc. (i.e., means, rather than aims or values) are able to nurture people and a society with religious roots and vision, which will be able to contain an all-encompassing view of Divinity and of unity, and which will be able to look out from within that view and perceive and accept all that is holy and good which exists in all of reality and inside all people.

Rav Kook provides the answer to this question in his treatment of the statement from the *Zohar*: "The Other Side (*Sitra Achra*) starts with unity and ends with division" (and vice versa concerning the Side of Holiness). The "start" and "end" are metaphors for the chasm that separates the path from its result, or the seeming disconnect between the ideals and the means of attaining them. Rav Kook's interpretation of this teaching is as follows: The connection between people or communities may be accomplished in a lower *Sefira* or in a higher *Sefira*. The world that we encounter through our initial, immediate perception, is a world of contrasts. Some people are engaged in holy occupations; others are mired in the profane. Some people entertain elevated thoughts; others have narrow, constricted thoughts. There are those who occupy themselves with *tikkun olam* – making the world a better place – while others are concerned only with their own honor. The atmosphere that some people surround themselves with is material and dense, while others breathe the clear, clean air of the highest pinnacles. The same may be said of the different styles of language that people adopt.

While it is true that there is an inner, more profound perspective than that reflected in this evaluation, that perspective is not our initial, immediate perception. It depends on a person's ability to radically change the manner in which he perceives and understands the world, and to elevate himself beyond the subjective, revealed appearance of reality. In other words, that view is the *end result* of a long educational and religious process, rather than its *point of departure*. This is because an observer who is used to ordinary people doing ordinary things will view them as such, and not as manifestations of some hidden holiness. If he wishes to engage in holiness and surround himself with a different atmosphere, he has no choice but to sever himself from that ordinary reality. Connecting, at the first stage, means – almost of necessity – a blurring of the distinction between the material and the spiritual or between the sacred and the profane. A connection between people, or between communities, requires finding a common denominator in terms of lifestyle, spheres of interest, aims, etc., and this precludes the possibility of ascending and progressing within the sphere of holiness, with spiritual objectives. For this reason, the aspiration for connection, at the first stage, is a sort of temptation by the *Sitra Achra,* since it is ultimately going to lead either to a deterioration and degeneration to a lower state or to separation and strife, since on the revealed level the contrasts exist and are quite profound. They will inevitably end up confronting one another.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The same is true in the cultural sphere. The truth and goodness that exist within every scientific discovery, cultural phenomenon, ideology, or work of art can be perceived only from within a higher perspective which views every human thought aimed at goodness and *tikkun*, as a manifestation of Divinity in our reality. Such a view can even regard sources of heresy as holy points of light, and view the phenomenon of heresy as part of the revelation of a higher truth. From a regular, practical perspective, different truths compete with one another. Each is built on the negation of other truths: Heresy denies faith; liberty negates the acceptance of a yoke; liberalism negates idealism; socialism negates individualism. On this level, it would be correct to say that Torah and faith likewise follow a specific path that is distinct and different from other paths. The intermingling of different truths during the process of study and education – teaching everything all at once – is, on this level, inherently contradictory. More importantly, it prevents the development of that higher faith perspective which, once attained, has the power to overcome those contradictions.

The operative conclusion arising from this analysis is that, paradoxically, in order to attain a level that allows containment of contradictions and the revelation of the *kodesh* and the Divine in every aspect of life, a person needs to disconnect and separate himself from that very reality which he encounters, at the outset, in its external appearance.

This conclusion has implications for both the social and the educational spheres:

In the social sphere, we conclude that we must separate the society of sanctity from the society of profanity. To state this point more accurately, it should be pointed out that this does not necessarily entail a separation between "religious" and "secular" societies; rather, any society which aspires to transcendence and sanctity in relation to its surroundings, or any individual who feels that his environment is preventing the inner listening and spiritual work that he needs in order to ascend spiritually, must be separated from the environment that sees and seeks nothing beyond the here-and-now. This guidance should not be identified with the more common idea of isolationism (after all, the Rambam and Rabbeinu Bechaye, for example, expressed similar ideas), as an ideal and end in itself. Rav Kook maintains that the path starts with division, but "concludes with unity." In other words, the purpose of the separation is not to have a person or a society that is separate; rather, this is a condition for the spiritual work that will make it possible to return to the surrounding society, or into the culture from which the individual or the group removed themselves, equipped with a perception of the Divine unity that is revealed in all of reality.

Let us explain further. How can a person free himself from the theistic illusion or, in psychological terms, from the consciousness of the separate self, from the image of a world of multiplicity and division, when this form of perception is a very early component of consciousness, serving to establish the subject's status vis-à-vis the world?

Rav Kook acknowledges that liberating oneself from the confines of this illusion (*dimayon*, as he refers to it), is no less difficult than freeing oneself from actual slavery. It may be that the task will never actually be fully accomplished, and that he will not succeed in adopting permanently a new consciousness.[[3]](#footnote-3) Nevertheless, it is possible, and it may be attained, by means of two main processes:[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. A learning process of contemplating concepts and ideas that are the source for the change in perception (Divinity, unity, the *kodesh*, etc.). This study is not just an analytical examination of the concepts, but rather real contemplation, with internalization of and unification with the ideas. In real terms, there can be no doubt that Rav Kook refers here to the study of kabbalah – i.e., study of the Divine presence in our world, attained through contemplation of holy wisdom. (Rav Kook terms this “*chokhmat ha-kodesh*,” although he is not necessarily referring to the texts that are defined as kabbalistic works, but rather, more broadly, to the inner forms of contemplation arising from kabbalah, even if they assume aggadic or philosophical form.) Rav Kook explains that such study starts out as an intellectual process, but ultimately it illuminates and changes one's emotions and will.
2. A psychological, experiential process that is directed towards a person's primal perceptions concerning the reality around him. Its purpose is to bring about a fundamental change in his self-perception. In the language of *mussar* and *Chassidut*, we might say that the intention here is to work on one's *middot* (moral attributes), but in truth, Rav Kook means more than this. A person must indeed work on humility, magnanimousness, patience, love, etc., but his work is not focused on each trait individually; rather, it is directed towards a single over-arching purpose whose attainment will inform all of these discrete qualities. The purpose of "inner work" is nullification (*bittul* – a negative movement) of the self-contained, complete self that stands before reality and is defined by its otherness and its separateness. It also entails the acquisition (a positive movement) of a consciousness of the self that acts from within reality and as part of it, out of identification and belonging, and senses its differentness as just one aspect out of many of the manifestations of Divine light within reality – manifestations which he must bring to realization as part of the process of the perfection and revelation of reality. In psychological terms, we might say that Rav Kook calls for an expansion of the self beyond the boundaries of the individual. To illustrate, we might say that in a spousal or parental relationship, there is partial containment of the beloved, such that when a parent is devoted to his child, he does not necessarily feel that he is foregoing something of himself; rather, he feels a fulfillment and expansion of himself. Similarly, out of spiritual work, which is partially intellectual and partially psychological and consists of humility, love, and more, one may come to feel a sort of self-love towards the other members of one's nation, or towards other people, and even towards the non-human reality that surrounds us. Even morality, according to Rav Kook, is not based on closeness and foregoing, but rather on a self-love which includes within it far more than the limited individual himself; hence, love is directed towards others whom I perceive as an integral part of myself.

The possibility of achieving such a complete self exists because unity is the foundation of reality and it exists within it in potential, even if it is not revealed openly. (Malkhut, with its root in strict justice, in the concrete and the divisive, is its external manifestation.) The knowledge that reality is a Divine manifestation and therefore at its root is one gives us the confidence that this achievement is possible, and the illusion of the ego can be burst.

To put this more concisely: Both on the level of awareness and on the deeper psychological level, we are speaking of a fundamental change of perception and sense of reality. This change cannot take place so long as a person is bound to a world and a society which are ruled by the concepts of divisiveness and multiplicity, a world which lives in an alienated state – in short, so long as he lives in constant attachment to the world of phenomena. A preliminary condition is the possibility of inner concentration, self-listening, erasing the surroundings from one's consciousness, changing one's perspective. All of these require alienation, on the psychological and cognitive level, from the environment.

Obviously, as noted, this seems paradoxical: How can a philosophy of love and unity require social and cultural separation? The answer is that the love and unity that are the goal must be based on a real and true awareness of and perception of reality as it is. Love of man which is based, for example, on relativism or moral apathy is unstable and transient. For this reason, a severance from reality and its perceptions, which are the source of divisiveness, conflict, and moral weakness, is essential. This will allow personal, spiritual growth, whose essence is a fundamental change in the way one knows and feels reality, orientated around its Divine, unified foundation. The result of this change is indeed a positive perspective on all of reality – both its material and spiritual aspects; people and culture; love of everything. This brings us back to the teaching from the *Zohar*, as cited by Rav Kook: "The Side of holiness starts with division but ends with unity."

I believe that debates that have raged in recent years around certain cultural and educational issues, led by the leading ideologues among the students of Rav Tzvi Yehuda Kook – such as Rav Tzvi Tau and Rav Shlomo Aviner – are related to precisely this point of principle.

I refer here to the debate led by Rav Tau that led to the division of Yeshivat Merkaz ha-Rav, surrounding the initiative to offer a teachers' training program within the framework of the yeshiva, as well as debates concerning the use of academic methodology in the study and teaching of *Tanakh* and Talmud.[[5]](#footnote-5) To this we may add a trend which began some twenty years ago and which has become increasingly popular in recent years: the establishment of educational institutions which offer a religious curriculum with almost no general instruction at all, in contrast to the Religious-Zionist tradition of State-religious education and the "yeshiva high school" model.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The problems raised were not in the metaphysical realm; they were all educational issues. In other words, the question was: Does the study of certain content at a yeshiva or a yeshiva high-school, or the use of certain methods which all have their origin outside of our tradition, not harm the pure spiritual environment which is a precondition for the religious and spiritual education that we seek? We have already explained that the precondition for the study and internalization of chokhmat ha-kodesh is a severance from the world and its profane perception. The introduction of content or methods from the outside does not allow for this severance, and hence obstructs the spiritual concentration and elevation to which we aim.

To emphasize the crux of the issue: The process of separation and isolation, on the social as well as the educational, cultural level, is not based, as I see it, on an abandonment of the purely theoretical teachings of Rav Kook. The fundamental concepts of chokhmat ha-kodesh, the holiness of Israel, and love of man in general, illuminate the path of Rav Kook's students and disciples to this day. Rather, the process is motivated mainly by educational and cultural perceptions whose context is historical and practical, and which are based on the assumption that the ability to educate and produce pious, learned scholars, as well as lay members of the community, who follow a path of holiness, is dependent on an environment that is separate, both intellectually and socially, and on the radical practical application of these views.[[7]](#footnote-7)

To this aspect we must also add the historical perspective. Rav Kook anticipated that the Zionist movement would represent the source for a process of spiritual growth amongst the entire nation. The hopes that were attached to the establishment of the State of Israel were great, as were the hopes for the secular idealism that pushed for its establishment. The disillusionment over the spiritual and cultural reality of the State match the dimensions of that hope and anticipation. On the political level, the way in which this disappointment is handled is mainly ideological: the redemption of Israel is a slow, gradual process; complications are part of this process; etc. On the spiritual, cultural level, we observe a process that recalls the disillusionment following the Hasmonean revolt. The Religious-Zionist enclave is being formed in order to allow for the continued anticipation of the redemption which is delayed by the spiritual impoverishment of the general society. The enclave is created and nurtured out of a belief that its inner spiritual work and its accumulated influence on society at large will be an alternative platform for the progression of the process of redemption, which is being held up by the decline of the main culture. In other words, there is a direct link between the redemptive view and the disappointment at the lack of a speedy realization of the redemption, on one hand, and the process of the creation of the Religious-Zionist enclave, which is meant to be a nucleus of “kodesh” which will either become an alternative to the greater nation, or succeed in influencing its spiritual state.[[8]](#footnote-8) We might say that there is a clear similarity between the appearance of sectarianism in the days of the Hasmoneans and the processes which are spearheading a new type of sectarianism, here and now, in Israel.

To go back and summarize, using the terms that served our discussion in the previous *shiur*, I believe that the Religious-Zionist stream that follows the students of Rav Tzvi Yehuda Kook has made a significant move towards an existence as an "active enclave" – i.e., as a distinct group that seeks to influence the stance of the majority, or to replace it, while in the process creating thick walls around itself.

(to be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Rav Kook's own writings, of course, are full of such insights, which are assimilated in his teachings. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Orot Ha-kodesh II*, 439, on separation and inclusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For the same reason, a supreme *tzaddik* does not remain in the psychological realm of the *kodesh* that is beyond contrasts; he must return to the practical world, to halakhic problematique, with all the difficulty that this entails. For more on this difficulty, see *Orot Ha-kodesh II*, 499 on. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rav Kook addresses this issue in diverse contexts. What I present here is my own analysis arising from his writings in several different sources, and with respect to elements which he appears to have adopted from the Admor ha-Zaken and from Chabad in general. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rav Tau's students published a book of his *shiurim* on this subject, entitled "*Tzaddik be-Emunato Yichyeh*." Rav Shlomo Aviner, the Rabbi of Beit El and Rosh Yeshiva of Ateret Kohanim in the Old City of Jerusalem, published a response in the "*Be-Ahava ve-Emuna*" newsletter distributed weekly in synagogues, entitled, "*Tanakh be-Gova ha-Enayim*." A year later, around the end of 2002, a debate arose surrounding the method of Gemara study which was called the "layers system." In both instances, the conflict arose out of opposition to new, non-traditional study methods which borrow from academic disciplines (literary analysis, historical reading, etc.). Of course, various arguments were enlisted by both sides in the debates. I address here only one point which, from a reading of the viewpoints published by the opponents and statements which I heard orally, convinced me that this was the root of the conflict. As an aside, it should be pointed out that although our classical commentators also sometimes used literary devices and historical criticism in their exegesis, there can be no doubt that while such devices were occasionally employed, they were not treated as a discipline. Likewise, historical criticism or analysis are rare in commentaries on the Gemara and certainly do not represent the mainstream approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. To this we must add the processes described at the beginning of Chapter 1 (*shiur* 26a). Religious-Zionist Talmud-Torah frameworks of this sort exist in many cities and communities in Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In the next *shiur*, I raise further considerations which might support or raise questions about these educational decisions. Here my intention is not to judge or to express an opinion, but rather simply to argue that, as I see it, the debate should not be settled by arguing about metaphysical questions or philosophical problems such as pluralism, etc. The debate is conducted in the sphere of education and politics (in the sense of social decisions). Rav Kook's teachings do justify the raising of these considerations, even where the conclusion may create a discrepancy between practice and the metaphysics or philosophy behind it. In these sense, I believe that Rav Kook's students are correct in the way they perceive the essence of their own role as leaders and educators. This does not necessarily mean that every one of their instructions is the best or wisest guidance; there are, of course, fiery debates on these issues among *talmidei chakhamim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A similar model was presented by Rav Yuval Cherlow concerning the problem of tolerance. See Y. Cherlow, "*Ve-erastikh Li le-olam*" (Chispin, 5756), 185-213. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)