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# LEHRHAUS

Over Shabbat

## Kedoshim

### A PREHISTORY OF RAV KOOK

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There is a particularly jarring type of experience that most people have had at one point or another: they run into a teacher outside of school, or they hear stories about their parents' pre-parenthood youth. When this happens, the parent or teacher suddenly becomes unfamiliar as the student or child learns new things about who they are, who they were, or who they could have been.

Something similar is at play in Yehudah Mirsky's [Toward the Mystical Experience of Modernity: The Making of Rav Kook, 1865–1904](#).<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen Kook has long been seen as the spiritual “father” of Religious Zionism in Israel (though this was not always the case).<sup>2</sup> With time, and as English translations have become more accessible, Rav Kook's influence has grown outside of Israel as well. His writings are vast, covering a huge variety of topics and genres. Despite this, he is often pigeonholed as “the Zionist Rabbi” or simply dismissed and ignored by people who do not identify with Religious Zionism. This narrow vision of Rav Kook derives from both the way Religious Zionism claims him as its founder and from the way Rav Kook's editors and

publishers very carefully curated how he would be presented to the public.

This picture of Rav Kook was dominant until relatively recently—and still persists in many circles—and [Toward the Mystical Experience of Modernity](#) seeks to break it wide open. In the book, Mirsky explores Rav Kook's writings from before he immigrated to the land of Israel, inviting the reader to expand their notion of who Rav Kook was and who he could have been. As Mirsky notes, Rav Kook's most popular and accessible writings all either derive from his post-1904 life in the land of Israel, or they were published in such a manner as to obscure their pre-1904 origin.<sup>3</sup> Since the end of the twentieth century, more of Rav Kook's other texts have begun to be published, and Mirsky's 2007 dissertation was an early attempt to flesh out a picture of Rav Kook that took the newly released texts into account.<sup>4</sup> The present volume updates and expands upon his dissertation, including analyses of both the primary texts by Rav Kook and the secondary texts on Rav Kook that have emerged in the intervening years.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Olat Re'iyah, commonly thought of as Rav Kook's commentary on the siddur, was composed by Rav Kook's son, Rav Tzvi Yehudah Kook, from his father's writings, primarily from Ein Ayah Berakhot, Rav Kook's commentary on the narrative portions of the first tractate of the Babylonian Talmud.

<sup>4</sup> Yehudah Mirsky, “An Intellectual and Spiritual Biography of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhaq Ha-Cohen Kook from 1865 to 1904” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2007). Readers interested in a fuller biography of Rav Kook's life are directed to Mirsky's *Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), recently published in an expanded Hebrew translation as *Ha-Rav Kook: Mabat Hadash* (Shoham: Kinneret Zmora-Dvir Publishing, 2021).

<sup>1</sup> Yehudah Mirsky, *Toward the Mystical Experience of Modernity: The Making of Rav Kook, 1865–1904* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2021). Parenthetical page numbers refer to this text.

<sup>2</sup> For a felicitous demonstration of this, see Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Shagar)'s essay, “Rav Kook as a Father Figure.”

An illuminating blend of intellectual biography and textual analysis, *Toward the Mystical Experience of Modernity* charts the course of Rav Kook's intellectual development throughout his first twenty years of public life. Avoiding the twin pitfalls of historical determinism and ideological essentialism, Mirsky shows how the contingencies of Rav Kook's life—such as his father-in-law's monetary woes, or the death of his first wife—shaped Rav Kook's writing and teaching in this period.<sup>5</sup> The vicissitudes of Rav Kook's life and his own inner experiences, Mirsky suggests, both develop over time and radically shape his literary output in ways nearly unrecognizable in his later life—such as his brief stint traveling around polemicizing about the proper wearing of *tefillin* based on *Hevesh Pe'er*, a book he anonymously authored on the topic (109–121).<sup>6</sup>

### Intellectual Ferment

Throughout the book, Mirsky returns to another aspect of Rav Kook's "prehistory," attempting to position him within the diverse intellectual currents of European Judaism in his day, such as the Mussar movement, medieval rationalism, and Lithuanian Kabbalah influenced by Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto (Ramhal). The Mussar movement had a widespread, institutionalized presence in the yeshiva world of Rav Kook's day (150), and while he appreciated the movement's concern for individual piety and virtue, he was concerned that they privileged emotional ecstasy in Torah learning. Torah learning, Rav Kook argued, should be an intellectual endeavor, though it was central to a larger process of human perfection (154).

This concern for the role of the intellect carries over to Rav Kook's engagement with medieval rationalism as well. Rav Kook was deeply engaged with the texts of Saadia Gaon, Maimonides, Yehudah ha-Levi, and others. After turning down the position of *mashgiah* at the Telz yeshiva, Rav Kook suggested they institute "a curriculum of Bible, midrash, Zohar, Ha-Levi's *Kuzari*, Se'adyah's *Emunot Ve-De'ot*, Maimonides's *Eight Chapters*, and Bahya's *Hovot Ha-Levavot*"

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<sup>5</sup> In several places, Mirsky translates and analyzes passages from Rav Kook's poetry, with the most emotionally compelling pieces quoted originating from the immediate aftermath of his first wife's death (137–138).

<sup>6</sup> The book's conclusion helpfully lays out seven points of contrast between Rav Kook's thought in the years under discussion and how it would develop later, as well as noting threads of continuity.

(153).<sup>7</sup> His early discussions of prophecy in the rabbinic periodical he founded, *Ittur Sofrim*, strike a distinctly Maimonidean note (82–85). His aggadic commentary on the stories of the Babylonian Talmud, *Ein Ayah*, similarly explores the relationships between imagination, intellect, and body (a topic of widespread medieval concern) repeatedly and at length. The volumes of *Ein Ayah* on *Berakhot*—completed by 1902, by Mirsky's estimation (188)—are the focus of a full chapter in the book. Tracking subtle thematic shifts in the text as the commentary progresses, Mirsky shows how Rav Kook drifts over time from his once more austere Maimonidean intellectualism toward a richly expressive understanding of the self.

This new understanding of the self flowed together with a final critical element of Rav Kook's intellectual context: Lithuanian Kabbalah, and particularly the elements it carried forward from Ramhal. This Kabbalah was both intellectual and messianic, with a particular emphasis on "the arc of history"—the details of how God guides history toward its eschatological end.<sup>8</sup> Painted in this mystical, teleological light, Rav Kook sees the development of the individual self as an irreplaceable element of the cosmic process of redemption. This conceptual move would be key to a later development in Rav Kook's theology, what Mirsky calls his "Theodicy of Modernity" (223, 275–279, 301), wherein Rav Kook provided theological justifications for the emergence of secularization, "normative nonobservance" (305), and mass heresy among his fellow Jews.<sup>9</sup>

Eastern Europe, where Rav Kook lived during these years, was rife with intellectual ferment, both Jewish and non-Jewish. In addition to the intellectual developments discussed above, the rise of secular Zionism—in all its forms—rocked European Jewry. Mirsky shows how Rav Kook slips into place among dominant intellectual trends, blending and

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<sup>7</sup> Rav Kook's thorough engagement with R. Isaac Arama's *Akedat Yitzhak*, a text of medieval Jewish thought structured according to the weekly Torah portion, is duly noted by Mirsky (throughout, but particularly at 72, 118, and 123).

<sup>8</sup> The classic text on Rav Kook's and Ramchal's thinking about providential history—cited by Mirsky throughout—is Yosef Avivi's article, "History as a Divine Need" (Hebrew).

<sup>9</sup> As Mirsky notes, this might well be termed an "ethnocracy," given that the theological crisis in need of justification stems from the Jewishness of the rebellious individuals.

adapting them in a search for novel theological ideas which might be able to respond to the demands of the day.

### ***Ein Ayah* and the *Ha-Peles* Essays**

Two chapters from the book deserve particular mention. The first is the chapter on *Ein Ayah Berakhot*. While *Ein Ayah* is far from Rav Kook's most esoteric work, it often goes understudied. The reasons for this are not hard to guess. First, it is structured as a commentary on the non-halakhic portions of the talmudic text, so people often refer to it when looking for interesting interpretations rather than studying it as a primary text. Second, while individual passages from the *Ein Ayah* can be quite gripping, it can be hard to grasp the text as a coherent whole. This results in part, as Mirsky notes, from the fact that it simply isn't fully coherent. It is "a textual laboratory" which "begins as a philosophical commentary in an expository mode, then... increasingly dramatizes Rav Kook's internal conversation, much of which is his attempt to reflect on the increasingly expressionist stances he works to articulate" (186). For example, early in the work, Rav Kook frames the development of the intellect as the peak of religious life and gives the imagination a central but merely instrumental role in this process. Later, however, he gives the intellect the instrumental role and makes the imagination the central religious faculty. Of course, "intellect" vs. "imagination" is a binary holdover from medieval discourses and, as Mirsky shows, in *Ein Ayah* it slowly and gently makes room for the more modern "feeling" (*regesh*) over the course of the work (187, 201). In tracing these and other themes throughout *Ein Ayah Berakhot*, Mirsky provides the reader with a framework for reading the work as a whole. While a full study of *Ein Ayah* would be a book unto itself (184), Mirsky's chapter will serve as a useful guide until such a book exists.

The penultimate chapter of the book focuses on a series of essays on Jewish nationalism that Rav Kook published in the Orthodox rabbinic journal *Ha-Peles* during the period of 1901–1904. Beginning with the "Little Notebooks of Boisk"—Rav Kook's personal spiritual diaries from that same era—Mirsky shows how Rav Kook's thinking on Jewish nationalism developed. In this period, Rav Kook saw Zionism as a source of cultural renaissance which should challenge religious Jews both to renew their Judaism and to join the ranks of Zionism itself (rather than creating a separate Religious Zionist movement), while he calls for the secular Zionists to appreciate the value of traditional religious life

and take it up once again (the *mitzvot*, he said, could be seen as instruments of national unity). He similarly calls for both sides to lay down the barbs of cynicism and sarcasm and to engage with one another in good faith—different understandings of national destiny need not tear a people apart. Moreover, the secular Zionists must be willing to embrace their national past, without which they can never succeed in Israel's universal historic mission: the liberation of all humanity (271). Rav Kook thus depicts Jewish nationalism as rooted in unity, a common past, and a national mission with a universal horizon. Notably, the land of Israel is largely absent from his writings of this period, and when it does appear, it lacks the metaphysical proportions it sometimes takes on in his later work (277).

### **Conclusion**

[\*Toward the Mystical Experience of Modernity\*](#) paints a picture of Rav Kook's early life that flows from one point to the next, showing shifts and developments, without flattening individual links in the chain into a homogenous whole. Each step has its own significance, while also taking part of a coherent narrative. [\*Toward the Mystical Experience of Modernity\*](#) also displays particular sensitivity to the issue of genre, and it is worth pausing to reflect on it here.<sup>10</sup> As Mirsky highlights, Rav Kook moves through different genres of writing over the course of his life, beginning with traditional genres like the sermons collected in *Midbar Shur* or the polemical pamphlet *Hevesh Pe'er*, through the model of the aggadic commentary that was popular at the time, before eventually settling primarily on the genre of spiritual diary for most of his writing. Most of the books in which Rav Kook's writings can be found (at least until recent decades) consist of texts carefully culled and curated from his private notebooks in which he spilled out his soul, teasing out the threads of his theology and his experiences through the medium of text. This shift in genre reflects quite fittingly Rav

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<sup>10</sup> A similar sensitivity can be found in Yoel Finkelman's *Strictly Kosher Reading: Popular Literature and the Condition of Contemporary Orthodoxy* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011), which explores the way Orthodox popular literature draws boundaries between the Orthodox community and broader American culture while also absorbing elements of that culture—a key example of which can be found in the very genres of popular literature (self-help, fiction, parenting and marriage guides, cookbooks, etc.), none of which originated within Orthodoxy itself.

Kook's expressivist sensibility of the self, together constituting an important facet of Rav Kook's engagement with modernity. (This is not to draw a teleological picture from the traditional to the modern; Rav Kook wrote essays throughout his early life for the paradoxically modern genre of the Orthodox rabbinic periodical.) Thus it is not just in the content of Rav Kook's ideas that he was grappling with modernity, but also in the very forms in which he wrote those ideas down.

Perhaps the most significant theme that arises throughout the work is Rav Kook's burgeoning "expressivism": his sense that the individual self is something of great significance, and that realizing it fully (both in terms of internal development and in terms of practical life in the world) is very important.<sup>11</sup> Mirsky shows how Rav Kook begins with a stronger sense of engagement with Torah as something outside the self, with individual perfection as a religious goal that is strictly mediated by the intellect. Then, over time, the inner life of the individual takes on both larger proportions and a greater sense of ultimate importance. Ultimately, developing and expressing this inner life becomes a key religious ideal.

It is this expressivist vision of Rav Kook that his students (and their students) took up and have carried forward in the near century since his death. Mainstream Religious Zionism in Israel remains deeply expressivist, both on the individual and national levels. Just as the individual self must be nurtured and expressed, Kookian thought argues, so too must the national self. Even somewhat iconoclastic thinkers like Rav Shagar and Rav Froman who were willing to challenge Religious Zionist assumptions have tended to remain within this expressivist sensibility.

Confronted with Rav Kook's early thought, we can see that religious expressivism was not Rav Kook's only theological

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<sup>11</sup> Mirsky's theoretical touchstone for this idea is Charles Taylor, specifically his magisterial work, *The Sources of the Self*, first published in 1989, which also underlies much of the analysis of Kookian Religious Zionism by Shlomo Fischer, another scholar whom Mirsky cites frequently. Mirsky's other theoretical basis for conceptualizing modernity is the work of Shmuel Eisenstadt, whose insistence on the multiplicity of "modernities" paves the way to recognizing the way thinkers like Rav Kook navigate their relationship with western modernity complexly.

sensibility, and it was far from inevitable that he would end up there.<sup>12</sup> He could have been a polemicist, a rationalist, or a *mussarnik*, or a Micha Josef Berdyczewski!<sup>13</sup> It thus becomes easier to imagine Religious Zionist nationalism taking a different path as well, one that might avoid some of the pitfalls of religious-nationalist expressivism, such as what room does or does not exist for a plurality of ways of life in the state. A Kookian nationalism modeled on intellectual self-discipline looks very different from contemporary Religious Zionism's romantic nationalism. [\*Toward the Mystical Experience of Modernity\*](#) thus invites the reader to reconsider not just how they imagine Rav Kook, but how they imagine their individuals selves and the Jewish people.

**RENEW OUR DAYS AS DAYS OF OLD**  
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**C**hildhood memories have a power that is difficult to put into words. Most of what we experience when we are young fails to stay with us. We may remember events for a stretch, but eventually, the tide comes in, and the memories wash away as we get older. There are, however, moments that linger, perhaps just an image, sound, or feeling that leaves an indelible mark. When I was four years old, my parents and I made the trek into Brooklyn to visit an elderly cousin. He was a rabbi, a Satmar Hasid, and a Holocaust Survivor. I was too young to be aware of how long we were there or what was discussed, but something about the visit always stayed with me.

When I decided to make a greater commitment to religious observance as a young adult, the memory of our visit was often in my mind. It was a reminder that my decision need not be felt as departure from my past but rather a return to it. Not long after I started studying at yeshiva in Jerusalem, my parents shared with me that the purpose of the visit had been to reconnect with family roots torn up by the Holocaust. Our

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<sup>12</sup> Not that the other options would be radically different—they certainly share elements of his religious expressivism—but the differences are salient.

<sup>13</sup> Micha Josef Berdyczewski was a radical Zionist thinker who studied at Volozhin at the same time as Rav Kook and to whom Mirsky draws incredible, unexpected parallels time after time.



cousin had in fact sent us a letter detailing that my father was descended from Rabbi Shlomo Gross, a beloved student of the first rebbe of Munkatch, the [Bnei Ysoscher](#), who had served as a rabbinic judge there and was greatly admired for his piety and humility.

At the time, I felt a strong sense of pride in knowing my family had such prestigious lineage, but the news was also disconcerting. Being a passionate Religious Zionist, I could only imagine how my forebearer might think of me. The *Bnei Ysoscher* was a strident opponent of modernity, and the rebbes descended from him did little to hide their hostility to Zionism. Would Rabbi Shlomo Gross have taken pride in his descendant, who deeply identified with both? While I maintained an interest in Hasidic teachings even after my time in yeshiva, it was many years before I seriously opened up the books of the [Bnei Ysoscher](#).

Only after making *aliyah* and being impacted by the works of [Rav Shagar](#) was I able to overcome my ambivalence towards my own history. Though the Jewish tradition thrives on continuity, Rav Shagar makes clear that the Jewish people's relationship to the past has never been simple, and the events of the last century have only made this infinitely more complicated. In a powerful essay, "The Gates of Jerusalem," he explores the challenges and possibilities faced by the Jewish people's greatest attempt to bring the past into the present with the creation of the modern State of Israel. To do this he offers a fascinating reading of two *midrashim* that discuss the gates of the Temple. For Rav Shagar, each *midrash* reflects a different orientation to the Jewish past and the impact it has on the Jewish future.

### **No Past, No Future**

The first *midrash* attempts to imagine the fate of Korach and his sons after the earth swallowed them up in the wake of their failed rebellion. Though it would have been reasonable to assume they had perished, the rabbis envision a different outcome, one Rav Shagar describes as Kafkaesque.<sup>1</sup> Rather than die, they were condemned to a ghost-like existence far

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<sup>1</sup> While Rav Shagar does not refer to it explicitly, this *midrash* bears distinct similarities to Franz Kafka's famous parable, "Before the Law." For an example of Rav Shagar's use of "Before the Law," see "Al ha-Hoda'ah, ha-Ashmah, ve-ha-Kippurim," in *She'erit ha-Emunah: Derashot Postmoderniyot le-Moadei Yisrael* (Resling Publishing, 2014).

beneath the earth. According to Rav Shagar, the *midrash's* depiction of them serves as a powerful metaphor for the Jewish condition during two thousand years of exile.

Those [Korach and his sons] that descended deep into the earth thought they would stay there forever until Hannah came and prophesized about them as it says, "The Lord deals death and gives life, Casts down into Sheol and raises up." (1 Samuel 2:6) However, they still did not believe that they would be brought up from the depths until the Temple was destroyed and the gates were swallowed by the earth as well... the gates came to Korach and grasped them. Right away, they had faith and said, "When these gates are be raised up, so too will we along with them." Until that day, Korach and his sons were to be the guardians of these gates.<sup>2</sup>

Neither dead nor quite alive, Korach and his sons found themselves trapped in limbo, a fate, Rav Shagar argues, that is worse than death.

Human beings are afraid of death, but they are even more afraid of being stuck...a ghost-like existence, a state of fixation that one cannot be freed from. In a deeper sense, this is the fear of a life lacking life, a life behind which there is nothing but an empty existence.<sup>3</sup>

Because ghosts cannot pass on to the next world, they are instead condemned to haunt this one. They remain tied to the places that were important during their lives and become fixated on rectifying what they failed to accomplish in life. The same, Rav Shagar explains, is true for Korach and his sons. Until the day of their redemption, they must continue to fulfill their traditional role as Levites, looking after the gates of the Temple. However, until that day arrives, they are condemned to an existence of absurdity, for these doors lead not to God's presence as they once did but rather to nowhere.

A similar fate befell the Jewish people after the Temple's destruction. Being in exile meant remaining stuck in a state of limbo, unable to live life in the here and now and powerless

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<sup>2</sup> *Otzar Midrashim*, vol. 1 (New York, 1915), 19.

<sup>3</sup> *Ba-Yom ha-Hu: Derashot u-Ma amrim le-Moadei Iyar* (Mechon le-Kitvei ha-Rav Shagar, 2012), 349

to shape the future. Though the Jewish people strived to remain loyal to their past, they also remained at a distance from it. In their prayers, they faced towards the Land of Israel and prayed for their return to it, but few imagined they would live to see it in their lifetime. In the words of Gershom Scholem, it was a “life lived in deferment.”<sup>4</sup> God would eventually redeem the Jewish people, but the arrival of that day was not in their control. Until then, the Jewish people were destined to be trapped in limbo.<sup>5</sup> They had a past they could not return to and a future they could only pray for. Like Korach, all they could do was wait.

### **Only the Past Can Open the Gates of the Future**

While this description is tragic, the Jewish people eventually discovered that other options were available to them. Though the Temple’s gates may remain closed for Korach and his sons, they need not be closed for all others. To illustrate this, Rav Shagar turns to a second *midrash* which depicts Solomon’s dedication of the Temple and in his opinion, describes the very essence of Zionism itself. According to the *midrash*, when Solomon attempted to bring the Ark of the Covenant into the Temple, he discovered there was a significant problem. The width of the Temple’s gates was the same length as the width of the Ark of the Covenant making it impossible to bring it inside.

“O gates, lift up your heads! Up high, you everlasting doors, so the King of glory may come in!” (Psalms 24:7). Solomon recited this verse as he brought the Ark of the Covenant (*aron hakodesh*) into the Temple to rest in the holy of holies. However,

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<sup>4</sup> Gershom Scholem, [\*The Messianic Idea in Judaism: And Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality\*](#) (Schocken Books, 1995), 35

<sup>5</sup> Rav Shagar does note that this ghost-like existence can grant a sort of immortality to Jewish existence. Elsewhere in his writings, he cites Franz Rosenzweig to argue that the Jewish people’s exclusion from history can also serve as a source of holiness. See *Ba-Yom ha-Hu*, 273, citing [\*The Star of Redemption\*, trans. Barbara Galli](#) (University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 322 (Rav Shagar cites from the Hebrew translation): “And again the eternal people purchases its eternity at the price of temporal life. For it, time is not time, not a field it cultivates and a share in its inheritance. For it, the moment is solidified and remains fixed between an augmentable past and motionless future, so the moment ceases to fly away.”

Solomon had made the Ark of the Covenant ten cubits wide, and when it arrived at the entrance of the Temple, he discovered that the Temple’s gates were also ten cubits wide. It is not possible for ten cubits to be brought inside ten cubits... Solomon stood back, felt deeply embarrassed, and did not know what to do. He began to pray before the Holy One Blessed be He [and his prayer was not answered].<sup>6</sup> What did Solomon do? Our rabbis said he went and got the coffin (*aron*) of his father, brought it to the Temple and declared, “O Lord God, do not reject Your anointed one; remember the loyalty of Your servant David” (2 Chronicles 6:42)... At that moment, David lived... for David had said, “O Lord, You brought me up from Sheol, preserved me from going down into the Pit.” (Psalms 30:4). Solomon stated, “Master of the universe, act for his merits as it says, ‘remember the loyalty of Your servant David.’ (2 Chronicles 6:42).” Solomon’s prayer was immediately answered... the glory of God filled the Temple, and the holy spirit cried out, “I praise those long dead as more fortunate than those still living.” (Ecclesiastes 4:2)<sup>7</sup>

Solomon’s dilemma, as described by the *midrash*, is not unlike that faced by Korach and his sons. Despite his dream to build the Temple and see it completed, the gates will not open for him. Nevertheless, Solomon’s story offers a different ending than Korach’s, for he discovers that he does, in fact, have agency. He is not forced to remain in limbo forever. While he may not be able to open the gates himself, he can do so with his father’s help. Solomon then brings David’s coffin to the Temple, the gates open, and Solomon puts the Ark inside, fulfilling both his dream and that of his father’s as well. In doing so, Rav Shagar explains, the *midrash* teaches a fundamental lesson about the Jewish past:

...not all which appears dead is truly dead. David, even in death, is able to impact the world and act upon it even more than his son Solomon, the living king. The *midrash* attempts to impart to us the understanding that the past, though it appears to us

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<sup>6</sup> The section in brackets appears in the version of this *midrash* from [\*Numbers Rabbah\*](#) 14:3.

<sup>7</sup> [\*Exodus Rabbah\*](#) 8:1.

as inaccessible, as buried and gone, is the only way to open the gates that lead to holiness.<sup>8</sup>

Though the past may appear beyond our reach, this is not the case, for we will inevitably encounter moments when we hear the past calling out to us, its echoes reverberating in the present. When we hear it, we are faced with a choice: Do we seek to answer its call and give it life once more, or do we close our ears to it forever, leaving it dead and buried? The rabbis contend that by heeding the call of the past, we gain the ability to unlock doors previously closed to us, and in opening them, we discover the possibility of a new and different future.

Whereas Jewish life in exile was a ghost-like existence—a life lived outside of history—Zionism, Rav Shagar explains, was an attempt to do as Solomon did. Zionism sought to reach out and bring the past into the present by returning to the Land of Israel, thereby opening up the gates of the Jewish future.

The notion that Zionism can accomplish this is perhaps most powerfully articulated by Theodore Herzl, viewed as the father of modern political Zionism. Though it is often assumed that Herzl only pursued Zionism as a political solution to the Jewish problem of antisemitism, this is incorrect. He also recognized that Zionism embodied more profound aspirations for the Jewish people, which he expressed in his novel *Altneuland*, translated from the German as *Old-New Land*.<sup>9</sup> The book imagines the Jewish state twenty years after its establishment and attempts to show the various ways in which the Jewish past will come alive once more in the Land of Israel. In the novel, Passover celebrations in the Jewish state recount the story of the Exodus from Egypt and include narratives of the New Exodus, the immigration of Jews around the world to the Land of Israel. In Herzl's imagined future, the Temple is rebuilt, and while no sacrifices are offered there, it serves as a

<sup>8</sup> *Ba-Yom ha-Hu*, 353.

<sup>9</sup> When *Altneuland* was first translated into Hebrew, it was given the name “Tel Aviv.” “Tel” is the Hebrew word for a small man-made hill containing the layers of ancient civilizations, while “Aviv” is the word for spring symbolizing renewal. The name became so popular that it was eventually given to the settlement that would become Israel's largest city.

national synagogue unifying the Jewish people. Though rooted in Herzl's secular European worldview, the novel reflects how Zionism has always dreamt of renewing the Jewish past in order to give life to the Jewish future.

### **Redeeming the Past, Redeeming the Torah**

[Unlike Herzl, most Secular Zionists](#) did not believe that much of the Jewish past could be saved. Most of it, including nearly all of its religious elements, had to be jettisoned in order to build a thriving Jewish future in the modern world. In truth, Zionism appealed to many Jews precisely because it offered a way to be Jewish without holding on to outdated religious practices and beliefs. Returning to the Land of Israel may have created new opportunities for the Jewish people, but for many Jews, doing so meant leaving the Jewish tradition and most importantly the Torah behind. In the decades following the establishment of the state, Secular Zionism came to recognize the error of its ways. It too began to realize that the Jewish people have always drawn their strength and vitality from the Torah and that Jewish identity cannot be sustained without an active and enduring relationship to it.<sup>10</sup>

If Secular Zionism did its best to jettison the past, Religious Zionism took the opposite approach and claimed that Zionism was the natural extension of it. For Religious Zionism, the Torah was seen as the ideal blueprint for the state, and despite the fact that many of its laws had not been put into practice for thousands of years, it could be easily shown how they were to be applied to contemporary times.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> A clear example of this can be found in Ruth Calderon's moving speech when appointed a member of Knesset in 2013: “The Torah is not the property of one movement or another. It is a gift that every one of us received, and we have all been granted the opportunity to meditate upon it as we create the realities of our lives. Nobody took the Talmud and rabbinic literature from us. We gave it away, with our own hands, when it seemed that another task was more important and urgent: building a state, raising an army, developing agriculture and industry, etc. The time has come to reappropriate what is ours, to delight in the cultural riches that wait for us, for our eyes, our imaginations, our creativity.” Calderon's speech can be found in English at <https://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/the-heritage-of-all-israel/>.

<sup>11</sup> Rav Yitzhak Herzog's efforts serve as a clear example of this. See Alexander Kaye, [The Invention of Jewish Theocracy: The Struggle](#)

Rav Shagar, however, is much more circumspect about such claims and contends that Religious Zionism still struggles to understand the full weight of Israel's existence from a religious perspective. To emphasize this, he points to the example of the eclectic prayer service composed by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate for *Yom Ha'atzmaut*. Rather than fitting naturally within the *siddur*, the prayer service of *Yom Ha'atzmaut* is a hodgepodge of different prayers caught somewhere between weekday and holiday.

In practice, it is a collection of prayers from different times of the year. You will find in it chapters of psalms, the prayer "*Lekhah Dodi*" from *Kabbalat Shabbat*, which are appropriate of course for the essence of the day; the concluding prayers of Yom Kippur, the *mi she-asah nisim of rosh hodesh*—all of this recited in the tune of *yom tov* with the Zionist addition of *shir ha-ma'alot* in the melody of *ha-Tikvah*... This is the way things are in the night when the holiday begins, and in the morning, the situation is worse: *hallel* without a *berkchah*, and a *haftarah* without a Torah reading... What was the motivation of those who created the service to organize it like this? Its artificiality is grating on the Jewish ear that is accustomed to the consistency of other prayer services throughout the year.<sup>12</sup>

The Yom Ha'atzmaut prayer service's lack of coherence, Rav Shagar explains, is in part psychological. The sanctity of Halakhah depends on the feeling that it reflects an unchanging and eternal past. As a result, "any attempt, even one that is justified, to introduce a new practice which is not rooted in that same memory, is destined to failure because it is not able to establish itself in the past."<sup>13</sup> Despite Religious Zionism's self-confidence that the Torah can easily be brought into the present, the prayer service of *Yom Ha'atzmaut* appears to demonstrate otherwise.

If Religious Zionism desires to be a part of the Zionist goal, to return the Jew to the historical reality of land and home, in the religious dimension as well—to bring the *shekhinah* to the earth in order to be part of the historical events that the Jewish

people experience in the present—the prayers of *Yom Ha'atzmaut* prove how difficult this is.<sup>14</sup>

Trapped in a liminal moment that is neither exile nor redemption, how then is Religious Zionism to accomplish its lofty aspirations of bringing the Torah into the present and opening up the gates of the Jewish future? If up until now, it has focused primarily on redeeming the Land of Israel, Rav Shagar explains, it must now begin to focus on redeeming the Torah of Israel. To explain what this might mean, he turns to Walter Benjamin, the great German Jewish thinker of the early twentieth century and his "[Theses on the Philosophy of History](#)". Though an ostensibly secular thinker and most certainly not a Zionist, Benjamin saw a necessity for combining theology and philosophy in a way not unlike Rav Shagar. He too recognized that the past is not easily brought into the present and that too often progress demands that the past must die for the future to live. Though the last two centuries have brought about extraordinary advancements in all aspects of society, we rarely pay attention to what was lost along the way and to those who paid the price. According to Benjamin, when history is viewed as an unfolding process of inevitable improvement, it barrels forward, leaving only destruction in its wake.

This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned towards the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at its feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in its wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows towards the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm.<sup>15</sup>

For Benjamin, Judaism provides a redemptive alternative to modern progress, and in a certain sense, it also provides an alternative to the path most often taken by both Secular and

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[for Legal Authority in Modern Israel](#) (Oxford, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> *Ba-Yom ha-Hu*, 267.

<sup>13</sup> *Ba-Yom ha-Hu*, 269.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 271

<sup>15</sup> "Theses on the Concept of History," Thesis 9. Translation from Michael Lowy, [Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's On the Concept of History](#) (Verso Books, 2016), 60–62.



Religious Zionism. Through the power of memory, Judaism retains a connection to the past, which creates the possibility of redeeming those voices long since believed to be lost to the destructive forces of history. However, to do this, Benjamin explains, one must “brush history against the grain.”<sup>16</sup> Instead of allowing a single narrative to dominate, those voices swept aside must be recovered and given life once more. If Secular Zionism sought to kill most of the past, Religious Zionism failed to allow it to find its own voice in the here and now. The same approach, Rav Shagar argues, must be applied to the Torah to redeem what has been lost in the transformations and ruptures brought about by both modernity and Zionism. One must look into the tradition and find a way to “tell the story differently” to allow it to be “turned into a song in a manner that brings forth its light.”<sup>17</sup>

Rav Shagar saw the redemption of the Torah and its many voices as his life’s mission. After being seriously wounded in the Yom Kippur War, he was forced to recuperate in the hospital for many months. During that time, he came to realize the following:

I was wrapped in bandages and wounded. There, I understood that the Torah is wrapped in bandages, covered in infinite wrappings and that it, like me, needed to get out of her bandages and constraints. Since then, I have gone about with this awareness in all that I learn and teach: to take the Torah out of its bandages and expose it to the light.<sup>18</sup>

Rav Shagar hoped that the Torah of the Land of Israel could redeem the past and transform the future. Like Solomon, he understood that the gates which lead to redemption could only be opened when the bandages are removed and the dead are brought back to life—when that which had been deemed lost and gone is given new vitality once more.

### **Reading the *Bnei Ysoscher* in Jerusalem**

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Thesis 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Shiurim Al Likkutei Moharan*, vol. 1 (Mekhon le-Kitvei ha-Rav Shagar, 2012), 150. Rav Shagar also compares this to *ha’alat nitzotzot*, the raising up of the divine sparks scattered throughout creation.

<sup>18</sup> Elchanan Nir, “Be-tzel ha-Emunah,” *Makor Rishon* (June 18, 2017).

I have been blessed to experience such a transformative Torah during my own time in the Land of Israel. When I first read the letter sent to my parents by our cousin outlining the family history, it had been more than a century since Rabbi Shlomo Gross was alive, more than twenty years since the letter had been written, and nearly a decade since my cousin’s passing, but in reading his words, I could hear his voice, the voice of the past, calling out to me as if he were right before me. Over the years, I found myself trying to answer them by returning to the books of the *Bnei Ysoscher* out of the conviction that if his teachings had spoken so profoundly to my ancestor, perhaps they could speak to me as well.<sup>19</sup>

After making *aliyah*, the *Bnei Ysoscher’s seforim* became a fixture of the Torah I study with my children on Shabbat. It feels, if only in some small way, that his Torah serves as a bridge between my family’s distant past and its still undetermined future. I like to think Rabbi Gross would have appreciated this, as would my cousin Rabbi Steinberger. The letter he wrote to my parents expresses this hope by closing with a verse from Malachi, which describes the prophet Elijah as the harbinger of redemption. Elijah’s role is not only to announce the messiah’s arrival but also to provide another critical function: He will heal the rupture that exists between past and present. He will “bring together parents with children and children with parents.”<sup>20</sup>

It was only recently that I discovered that my parents made an audio recording of our visit to Brooklyn, and in it, one can hear my cousin recount our family’s history and reflect upon his own experience during the Holocaust. He mentions he is writing a *Yizkor* book for those from Munkatch, because without such a record those who died once will die again. Their very memory will be forgotten forever. When my father heard this, he responded with something profound, something Rav Shagar and Walter Benjamin would have agreed with wholeheartedly: “If there are books, there is hope. Someone will read it and remember it. We know this. You open the Talmud, and they are still here.”

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<sup>19</sup> After many years, I even discovered that the *Bnei Ysoscher* also comments on the *midrash* of Korach and the gates of the Temple. See *Bnei Ysoscher, Ma’amarei Chodshei Tamuz-Av*, Maamar 3:11.

<sup>20</sup> Malachi 3:24.

Though it may appear at times as though the gates of the Temple remain closed and that we are cut off from both our past and future, we must remember they are never permanently shut. Walter Benjamin himself makes this point explicit by drawing on the same image of the gate described in the *midrash* discussed by Rav Shagar.

We know that the Jews were prohibited from inquiring into the future: the Torah and the prayers instructed them in remembrance... This does not imply, however, that for the Jews, the future became homogeneous, empty time. For every second was the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter.<sup>21</sup>

If we refuse to see the future merely as the inevitable result of a long series of events, it becomes open to infinite possibilities. The gate to such a future can only be opened if we, like Solomon, are carrying the Jewish past with us—as much of it as we can possibly hold in our hands including those voices we struggle to make sense of. By remembering them, we find a way to bring them into the present and breathe new life into them. In doing so, we give them the chance not only to speak but sing, and when they do, the gates of the Temple open just a little bit wider.

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<sup>21</sup> “Theses on the Concept of History,” Thesis B. *Fire Alarm*, 102.