

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2025, Term III.2

Opening Comments

Last week, we heard the voices of Palestinians testifying to their traumatic experience of what they term the Nakba or catastrophe, when they were forced to flee their homes in Palestine to live in exile in the surrounding territories and countries. The return of the Jews from exile tragically meant the exile of the Palestinians from their land, including becoming strangers in their own land for those Arabs who became citizens of Israel (and it is important to remember that Christian, Muslim, Druze and Bedouin Arabs make up over 20% of the Israeli population).

This week we turn from the Palestinian experience to examine a major development in the Zionist movement, one which has direct implications for life in Israel today. It is important to remember that the Zionist movement of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries was a secular and political movement, which sought a political solution to the anti-Semitism Jews were subjected to during their millennia of exile, especially in Christian lands, which intensified with the pogroms in Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Theodor Herzl says in his classic book, *The Jewish State*, or rather *The Jews' State*: “I think the Jewish question is no more a social than a religious one, notwithstanding that it sometimes takes these and other forms. It is a national question, which can only be solved by making it a political world-question to be discussed and settled by the civilized nations of the world in council.” The Zionist movement therefore made no reference at all to the Bible, or to the covenant with Abraham, or to God’s promise to give the land of Canaan to his descendants forever. The Zionists were secular intellectuals coming out of the Jewish Enlightenment, and sought human solutions to the plight of the Jews in exile, which they thought would only arrive when the Jews attained sovereignty over themselves in their own land, be it in Argentina, Uganda, or Palestine.

For this very reason, the rabbinic leaders of the Jewish community in exile—be they Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform—did not support, and in many instances opposed the Zionist cause, since it directly contradicted the rabbinic consensus about how the Jews would return from exile. According to the rabbis, only God could deliver the Israelites from exile, as God had delivered their ancestors from Babylon.

The Gemara answers that another verse is written: “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and by the hinds of the field, that you not awaken or stir up love, until it please” (Song of Songs 2:7). Rabbi Yehuda derived from here that no act of redemption should be performed until a time arrives when it pleases God to bring about the redemption.

This position was intensified by the teaching of Maimonides, who was one of the greatest of the rabbinic

authorities. According to Maimonides,

In the future, the Messianic king will arise and renew the Davidic dynasty, restoring it to its initial sovereignty. He will build the Temple and gather the dispersed of Israel.

He bases this claim on the promise Moses makes to Israel before he dies:

God will bring back your captivity and have mercy upon you. He will again gather you from among the nations... Even if your Diaspora is at the ends of the heavens, God will gather you up from there... and bring you to the land.... (Deuteronomy 30:3-5).

The daily prayers of pious Jews have for millennia reinforced the idea that only God can gather the Israelites from exile and return them in safety to their home, where they would be governed by their Davidic king:

Look upon our affliction and plead our cause, and redeem us speedily for your name's sake, for you are a mighty redeemer. Blessed are you, O Lord, the redeemer of Israel.

Sound the great shofar for our freedom, raise the ensign to gather our exiles, and gather us from the four corners of the earth. Blessed are you, O Lord, who gathers the dispersed of his people Israel.

Return in mercy to Jerusalem your city, and dwell in it as you have promised. Rebuild it soon in our day as an eternal structure, and quickly set up in it the throne of David. Blessed are you, O Lord, who rebuilds Jerusalem.

Since the Zionists were taking matters into their own hands, and looking to other political leaders for help in bringing about the gathering of the exiles, the rabbis could not support this movement. Indeed, until the Holocaust, there was only marginal interest in Zionism in the global Jewish community.

One of the great exceptions to this rule was the Orthodox Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, whose writings we read this week. Rabbi Kook was born in Latvia in 1865. Kook studied the Talmud, philosophy, and mysticism, and he devoted his life to harmonizing all three. Kook moved to Palestine in 1904, and directly engaged the secular Zionists who were at work in the land. He thought that God was using the secular Zionist movement to redeem the Jewish people. In his view, the rabbis needed to engage and support this secular movement, which infuriated other rabbis, even as Zionism needed the moral and spiritual grounding that only Orthodox Judaism could give it. He expressed this in his catch phrase: "The old will be renewed, the new will become holy." Kook fled Palestine during WWI, but returned to Jerusalem after the war, and became the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem in 1921. Rabbi Kook was a deeply conciliatory person, seeking to unite Orthodox Jews with secular Zionists, which led him to be opposed by both groups. Indeed, the haredi Orthodox community expelled him for his heresy of supporting secular Zionists. However, his writings and teachings, some of which we read tonight, made him one of the most important rabbinic authorities in the new state of Israel, even though he died in 1935. His influence also increased through the Central World Yeshiva he founded in Jerusalem, which is now known either as the Rav Kook Central Yeshiva, or more commonly Mercaz Harav.

We can see the way Rav Abraham Kook tried to give the Zionist movement a deeper spiritual foundation in the opening selection of his writings.

The land of Israel is not some external entity.
 It is not merely an external acquisition for the Jewish people.
 It is not merely a means of uniting the populace.
 It is not merely a means of strengthening our physical existence.
 It is not even merely a means of strengthening our spiritual existence.

Rather, the land of Israel has an intrinsic meaning.
 It is connected to the Jewish people with the knot of life.
 Its very being is suffused with extraordinary qualities.

The extraordinary qualities of the land of Israel and the extraordinary qualities of the Jewish people are two halves of a whole.

Eretz Cheifetz I

This means that the renewal of the Jewish people can only take place in the land of Israel, even as the land of Israel can only be fulfilled by the presence of Jews living on it.

The unique quality of the land of Israel and the unique quality of the nation of Israel are complementary. The nation of Israel has the unique ability to come to a divine elevation in the depths of its life-force. Correspondingly, the land of Israel—which is the land of God—improves the Jewish nation that dwells upon it as its eternal inheritance, an inheritance sealed with a covenant, a vow and a promise. The Jewish people’s eternal nature is founded upon the divine nature permanent in the imprint of this wondrous desirable land, which is united with the people whom God has chosen as His special ones. Together, the soul of the people and the land bring to the fore the foundation of their being. They demand their goal: to bring their holy yearning to fruition.

Kook’s reference to the covenant, vow, and promise indicate that unlike the secular and political Zionists, Kook will root the right of the Jews to establish their homeland in Zion in the irrevocable promise of God to give the entire land to Abraham and his descendants, as we see in his reply to the controversy over who controls the Western Wall in Jerusalem. As he exclaims:

“The entire world is the possession of the Holy One, blessed be He, the Creator of the world. And the Holy One, blessed be He, gave the nation of Israel possession of the entire land of Israel, including the Western Wall. No power in the world, no League of Nations and not this commission can suspend this divine right.”

The commission head commented that almost two thousand years had passed since the Jews had possessed the land of Israel, including the Western Wall. To this, Rav Kook replied quietly and calmly:

“In Jewish law, there is a concept of an owner’s giving up his right to his property—including his land. But when a person’s land was stolen from him, and he protested and continues to protest, his rights never expire.”

As we shall see, Kook’s reference to “the entire land of Israel” will become increasingly important in the religious Zionist movement which he started. The reference is to the description of the boundaries of the

land described by God to Moses in Numbers 34, which includes all of Israel and the West Bank, as well as a large amount of land on the east bank of the Jordan River, in present day Jordan.

Rabbi Kook's son, Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook, spent decades after his father's death editing and publishing his father's voluminous writings. He also assumed leadership of the Central World Yeshiva in Jerusalem. Like his father, Tzvi Kook was an Orthodox Religious Zionist, and like his father, he taught that God has given all of Israel, as described in Numbers 34, to the Israelites as a perpetual inheritance. Hence he was dismayed when the United Nations divided the land of Biblical Israel and only gave the nation of Israel part of it.

I could not accept the fact that indeed "they have...divided My land." (Joel 4:2)! Yes, where is our Hebron—have we forgotten her?! Where is our Shechem? Our Jericho? Where? Have we forgotten them? And what about all the land beyond the Jordan—each and every clod of earth, every region, hill, valley, every plot of land, that is part of the Land of Israel? Have we the right to give up even one grain of the Land of God?

However, after his initial dismay, he came to see the establishment of the State of Israel as the work of God, which is the beginning of God's work of redemption as foretold by the prophets. He justifies the work of the secular Zionists by appealing to his own reading of Ezekiel 36. The order of redemption does not begin with the exiles repenting and returning to the Torah of the Lord, after which God will gather them in, as the previous rabbinic tradition had taught. Rather, the order of redemption is: "(1) agricultural settlement, (2) the establishment of the state, and as a consequence (3) the uplifting of that which is sacred, the dissemination of the teaching of Torah, its increase and glorification." In contrast to Deuteronomy 30, which states that only when the exiles return to the Lord will the Lord return them to the land, Rav Tzvi Kook teaches that "The repentance of the people will come only after the Ingathering of the Exiles." Thus the goal has to be increasing the role of Torah and the increasing sanctification of God's name in Israel.

Rav Tzvi Kook took the swift and decisive victory of Israel's army in the six-day war of 1967 to be a divine vindication of the State of Israel, and a unique opportunity to reverse the mistake made when the United Nations divided the land of Israel. From this point onward, he repeated his father's reference to God's promise of the land to Israel: "our rule over Eretz Yisrael is founded upon the Divine Promise of the Land to the Jewish People," which means that "the Arabs had, and have, absolutely no national right to the Land." Over against those who would trade land for peace, or who call the settlements in the West Bank illegal under international law, Tzvi Kook insists that "we must instead strengthen our rule over Israel, throughout all of our Biblical borders, and that all interference on the part of the Gentiles is null and void." We can see the influence that the teaching of Rav Tzvi Kook has had on the settler movements in the West Bank, especially in the Gush Emunim movement and its successors. There is still controversy over whether Tzvi Kook expanded on or distorted the teaching of his father.

Our final reading is from an interview with the founder of the Kach party, Meir Kahane (1932-1990). Kahane was a highly controversial transplant to Israel from the United States. He had roots in the

Revisionist Zionist and Religious Zionist movements, but he had a unique vision all his own. As he says, “For me, the word Zionism means G~d’s order that we live in Israel. And to have this state is a miracle that comes from G~d. As far as I’m concerned, we are living the end of time. We are living a messianic era.” This is why he wanted to reform the Jews in Israel so that they turned from secularism to his version of Orthodox Judaism. “I am fighting so that the Jews become good Jews, so that there is not a catastrophe at the coming of the Messiah.” Kahane rejected the idea that the State of Israel should be a democracy, for in that way its status as a Jewish State is vulnerable to the explosive growth of the Arab citizens in Israel. This is why he wanted the state to drive the Arab citizens of Israel out, before it is too late.

Once the Arabs have a majority in this country, they’re going to do what any self-respecting nationalist would do. They are not going to accept living in a country called a Jewish state, in a country with a Law of Return that applies solely to the Jews. Once the Arabs have gained a majority, they’ll change the laws and the nature of this state, and they’ll be right. Completely right. And this is why I want to move them all out now.

In spite of efforts by Israeli leaders, both political and cultural, to marginalize Kahane, his influence continues to grow in Israel, and it is stronger after October 7 than it ever has been before.

I am sure you have many questions about the readings, and I look forward to discussing them with you!