

THREE PARADOXES OF RELIGIOUS ZIONISM

Secular Zionism's patriotism elevates, not replaces, religion. Its anarchism reflects its passion rather than undermines it. And heresy is part and parcel of faith in God. These are the three significant statements of inverse logic proposed by Rabbi Kook.

Micah Goodman Sep 11, 2015 Haaretz

Messianic Jewish tradition has, over the generations, placed high expectations on the historic turnaround that would take place at the End of Days. When redemption came, it was believed, the world would be witness to two major events: the Jewish people would return not only to their land, but also to their God.

However, when the people finally began to return to the Promised Land, at the end of the 19th century, they did not return to their God. In fact, the pioneers who took action to restore the people to their land were actually those who rebelled against God. To religious thinkers, secular Zionism became an unresolved riddle: How could one explain the fact that the movement that fulfilled the expectations of generations of Jews simultaneously shattered those same expectations?

The greatest Jewish theologian to tackle this enigma was Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hacoen Kook, popularly known as Rav Kook. According to his surprising explanation, the new secularism was not an abandonment of God at all, but the opposite – the new secularism was part of an unconscious return to God. We will attempt to understand Rav Kook's inverse logic by shining a light on three paradoxes that form the crux of his doctrine.

The paradox of secular Zionism

Many 19th-century European philosophers, including Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, viewed the nation as a living organism, which, like all organisms, has a living soul motivating it. And what is the soul of this national organism? The spirit of the nation. This spirit is invisible, but lives and develops through the concrete history of the nation. It could be said that, according to Hegel, the history of a nation is the biography of the spirit within it.

These European ideas evidently influenced Rav Kook as well, but Hegel wasn't his only influence. Rav Kook constructed most of his world on kabbalistic foundations. "The assembly of Israel" (Knesset Israel) is his midrashic nickname for the Jewish collective, but in kabbala, "Knesset Israel" is also another name for one of the revelations of divinity: Malchut

(kingdom) is the 10th of the 10 sefirot in the manifestations of divinity, and is also known as “Knesset Israel.”

Rav Kook drew a comparison between Hegel’s “spirit of the nation” and the kabbala’s “Knesset Israel,” and this provided the springboard for developing his very radical idea: the spirit of the Jewish nation is godliness. “The spirit of the people and the spirit of God are one and the same.”

This idea is key to understanding the secret of secular Zionism, says Rav Kook. A secular Zionist is someone who abandoned his religion for the sake of the nation. Instead of worshipping God, he devotes himself to the people. But from the comparison made between the spirit of the people and the spirit of God, the following surprising conclusion arises: Dedicating oneself to the people is precisely the same act as dedicating oneself to God!

If the spirit of God is reflected in the spirit of the people, then any revelation of nationality is a revelation of religiosity, and the passion of belonging to the people is the passion of belonging to God. According to Rav Kook, in the realm of consciousness, nationality is a substitute for religion. But in the mystical and subconscious realms, nationality is a new version of religiosity.

The paradox of secular anarchism

Sifting through the writings of Rav Kook, one finds dramatic moments in which his strong religious passion takes on anarchistic expression – as reflected, for example, in the following radical quotation:

“Expanses, expanses, for God’s expanses my soul yearns. Close me in no cage, material or spiritual. My spirit soars in the wide heavens, the walls of the heart cannot contain it. Nor can stony walls of action, morals, reason or law. Above all these she soars in flight, higher than all that has a name. All delight, loveliness and beauty. Beyond the most sublime and emanated.”

The aspiration toward godliness is expressed, in fact, through the act of being released from restrictions and laws. If God is infinite and above any categorization and beyond any restriction, then the passion for him must be expressed by breaking free from law and restriction. As a distinguished man of halakha (Jewish religious law), Rav Kook was known to be a strict arbiter of the law. He never called for violating or cancellation of halakha, but as a thinker and mystic, he had other voices inside, too. This is how, in his diary, Rav Kook describes the religious sensibility of an individual who has achieved the highest possible spirituality:

“If the individual who possesses a holiness of the utter silence then lowers himself to a reduced level of prayer or Torah, weakening his morality and

engaging in details of specifics, he will suffer and will be depressed. He will feel that a soul that is full of the entire universe is being squeezed tight by pincers.”

When an individual is raised up in holiness, he is not capable of being reduced to the narrow boundaries of halakha. The passion of the great expanses is a pure, refined religious energy, and this is an eruptive energy that threatens the entire system of the commandments. This is precisely what Rav Kook found in the secular Jews of his time. He saw in them an asymmetric experience between passion and halakha. Their passion was for expanses, but the halakha reduced, narrowed and restricted them. Therefore, precisely because of their unconscious passion for God, they were renouncing his commandments.

We saw earlier how the nationalism of the Zionist is not a substitute for religion, but rather a religious transcendence. Now it emerges that even with the anarchism of the early Zionists, Rav Kook proposed a similar inversion of the conventional wisdom: Breaking free from the commandments is not breaking free from religion, but in fact stems from religious energy. Again, we encounter a key paradox of Rav Kook: Something that overtly seems like heresy is, in the hidden dimension, actually an advanced form of faith.

The paradox of heresy

The third paradox of secularism lies in the denial of God’s intellectualism. The secular builders of Israel are not only patriots and not only anarchists; some of them are also atheists. But in the same way that Rav Kook saw patriotism as religiosity and anarchism as holiness, he proposes a similar reversal of attitude to atheism: In his view, as we will see below, heresy is part of the evolution of faith.

“The essence of faith is found in the awareness of the wholeness of infinity.” Faith in God means recognition of his endless wholeness, and this has far-reaching implications. Since human achievement is finite, every formulated version of belief in God constrains and reduces God into the narrow boundaries of human consciousness. Therefore, any formulation of belief is heresy.

“Any attempt to define godliness leads to heresy. The act of definition is itself spiritual idolatry. Merely defining intelligence and desire, and even Godliness and the name of God, is considered definition.” Rav Kook’s words are sharp and explicit. The jargon of religious faith places limits on God and contradicts his endless wholeness. Even the word “God” is a denial of God.

To complete the inversion: In the same way that what is considered faith is, in the deeper sense, heresy, so too what is considered heresy is, in the deeper sense, faith: Kook writes: “As time passes from one period to the next, it becomes increasingly clear that the pure faith of the individual becomes diluted by the darkness of consciousness. And each time that a known element of the consciousness falters, it seems as if the faith falters. But subsequently it develops that faith did not falter, but rather, it became clear.”

Rav Kook tells of the evolution of monotheism. Faith becomes increasingly more refined and pure, and does so by means of moments of heresy. If every attempt to define faith is “spiritual idolatry,” then every heresy aids in peeling away spiritual idolatry and helps refine faith.

These are the three logical inversions that Rav Kook attributed to secular Zionism: Its patriotism does not replace religion, but elevates it; its anarchism does not undermine the religious experience, but expresses its passion; and, finally, heresy is just part of the evolution of faith.

Secularism heals religion

Rav Kook viewed secularism not merely as a hidden expression of religion, but as much more than that too. He interpreted secularization as an unconscious demand for refinement and elevation of religion. A good example of this was his assertion that, due to secularization – what he termed “the chutzpah of ikvata demeshicha” – the secrets of the Torah were being revealed. (The Aramaic phrase “ikvata demeshicha” refers to the period that the Talmud says will precede fulfillment of the messianic redemption, a time characterized by a deterioration and rebelliousness – “chutzpah” – in religious and political conditions.)

“Without the chutzpah of ikvata demeshicha, it would not be possible to explain the enigmas of the Torah with complete revelation,” he wrote. “Only through the condensing of the feelings that result from this chutzpah will it be possible to receive supreme rational enlightenment, and in the end, all will return to the absolute correction.”

Secularism not only brings revelations about the mysteries of the Torah; it also purifies the concept of godliness. According to Rav Kook, part of the redemption is the appearance of a noble and clean concept of godliness, and this process is accelerated by the new and rejectionist secularism:

“Since the time has come that the national revival has to occur, and the sprouting of the pride of the redemption comes into reality and must be

revealed ... and it is possible for the nation to come together and achieve depth in life and the secrets of its power ... only through purified understanding ... This is the reason that the great negative force comes to the fore in the chutzpah of ikvata demeshicha, and this negativity will burn away everything weak and ugly in the conceptions of God.” The heresy that strengthens the nation also restores the concept of godliness and brings about revelation of the mysteries of the Torah.

One of Rav Kook’s more surprising statements is that redemption will come not only when religious Jews bring the secular back into the fold, but also when secular Jews bring the religious back: “The repair that will be brought about by the light of the Messiah ... is that the Jewish people will be made into a single union, and the soul of the God-fearing observers of the Torah will be mended by means of the completion of the spirit in the good criminals in relation to affairs of the general public, and the material and spiritual hopes to be attained through the human recognition and feelings.”

It is said that when Rav Kook arrived for a visit to the socialist-Zionist Kibbutz Merhavia, the pioneers saw him, his beard and his clothing as the epitome of all they were rebelling against. They were certain he had come in order to influence them and return them to the right path. All of their defense mechanisms were up and when the rabbi entered the dining hall, a kibbutz member stood up and announced to him and the other rabbis in his entourage, verbalizing what many of his friends were also thinking: “You won’t succeed in influencing us.” To which Rav Kook offered a surprising response: “We didn’t come to influence, we came to be influenced.”

So, on the overt level, secularization rebels against religion – but on the hidden one, it heals it. It’s very possible that when Rav Kook said, “We came to be influenced,” he was not merely being polite, but that he genuinely meant it. The ills of the religion could be remedied only through an encounter with those who had rebelled against it. And perhaps a more precise way to phrase it is that, as opposed to the religious Jews, who are called upon to bring the secular Jews back into the fold, the secular Jews are called upon to bring religion itself back into the fold.

According to Rav Kook, secularization is an unconscious demand for changes in religion, and therefore paves the way to a more complete Judaism – a Judaism that doesn’t shrink the personality of the individual into the narrow boundaries of halakha, and a religion that doesn’t shrink God into the narrow boundaries of the definition of God. A Judaism in which God is bigger and the individual is bigger. This gives rise to the explanation for the historic conundrum of how the same secular Jews who are shattering the expectations of the generations are also those fulfilling

them.

Secularism, per Rav Kook, is not opposed to the messianic forecast, but is in fact part of its fulfillment. Secularism is an unconscious movement of “new Jews” returning to the faith, and at one and the same time also an unconscious demand for change and elevation of religion.

From father to son

For decades, religious Zionism was peripheral to Zionism, and Rav Kook was peripheral to religious Zionism – he was on the periphery of the periphery. But in the 1970s, something changed. The philosophy of Rav Kook began to be absorbed deep into the consciousness of religious Zionism, and as a result, its sons and daughters were imbued with a new energy and charisma. The effect was dramatic. In next to no time, they began to influence the agenda of the entire country. They proposed an exuberant alternative to secular Zionism, whose enthusiasm was fading. Socialist Zionism found itself in crisis at the exact same moment that messianic religious Zionism was filled with energy.

However, Rav Kook’s philosophy didn’t suddenly emerge unchanged onto the stage of history. It did so in a form that was adapted by his son, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook. The latter excised its more anarchistic aspects, moderated its radicalism, and censored its revolutionary side. Rav Kook’s philosophy is full of varying layers and contradictions. It can be sincerely stated that, in the same manner in which I have offered a selective presentation of his doctrine and emphasized its anarchistic and radical sides, so too Rabbi Zvi Yehuda and his students created a selective interpretation of Rav Kook’s teachings, emphasizing mainly its national and conservative sides. However, the way in which the son shaped the philosophy of the father enabled the father’s philosophy to reshape religious Zionism.

In the second installment, I will recount the transition of Rav Kook’s philosophy from the periphery of religious Zionism to its center, which in turn enabled the transition of religious Zionism from the periphery of Israeliness to its center.

Micah Goodman is the author of three books on canonical Jewish texts: “Moses’s Final Speech,” “The Dream of the Kuzari” and “Maimonides and the Book That Changed Judaism,” the latter of which was published in English this year by the Jewish Publication Society.