

HISTORY

Statehood and spirit

The message of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook's eulogy for Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism

By BENNY LAU

On 20 Tamuz 5664 (July 3, 1904), Theodor Herzl died suddenly at the age of 44.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac (HaCohen) Kook made aliyah two months prior to Herzl's death and was appointed rabbi of Jaffa and the colonies. As part of his position he was requested to eulogize Herzl.

For a rabbi raised and educated in the world of the yeshivas of Lithuania it was a difficult and challenging act. Herzl was far from Rabbi Kook's spiritual world. Herzl did not believe traditional Judaism was meaningful or relevant to the nation's revival, and wished to keep religion secluded in synagogues, far from the strongholds of political influence.

Rabbi Kook, who was to become the chief rabbi, labored to create the eulogy through an in-depth project that sought to compare the roots of traditional Judaism and Herzl's role in building the nation. The eulogy was based on a hidden verse written by Prophet Zechariah at the period of return of Zion. The verse depicts a national grief in which everyone eulogizes a central figure who would be stabbed by a sword. The mourning would be as if for an only son or a firstborn son.

"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son. On that day the weeping in Jerusalem will be as great as the weeping of Hadad Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. The land will mourn, each clan by itself" (Zechariah 12:11).

What does it mean "the weeping in Jerusalem will be as great as the weeping of Hadad Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo?"

The key to understanding the verse was given to us by Yonatan ben Uziel, the first-century BCE translator of the books of Prophets. According to his translation, this eulogy comprises a eulogy for two kings from the time of the First Temple: Ahab, king of Israel, and Josiah, king of Judah.

King Ahab was slain in Ramot Gilad by Hadad, King of Aram, hinted by the words "Hadad Rimmon." And King Josiah was killed by Pharaoh in Megiddo Valley, mentioned as "the plain of Megiddo."

Rabbi Yosef said, "If it weren't for the translation of this verse we would never know what it means. Yonatan ben Uziel's translation says: 'On that day the lamentation in Jerusalem would be as the mourning of Ahab son of Omri, slain by Hadad Rimmon in Ramot Gilad and the lamentation of Josiah son of Amon slain by Pharaoh in the plain of Megiddo.'"

A combination of these two kings together is the secret of mourning in Jerusalem.

Ahab is mentioned as a courageous king who took good care of his people in every aspect, including foreign and security policies, economic growth and national pride. Ahab's act of bravery, standing on his chariot bleeding and wounded as he hid his wounds from his own soldiers earns great respect and is praised as noteworthy by Jewish sages.

ON THE other hand, Ahab's biggest sin was his attitude toward the Jewish religion. The Prophet Elijah called him "hater of Israel" because he brought the god of Sidon into the kingdom of Israel through his wife, Jezebel, who was the daughter of king of Sidon. The story of Kerem Navot, which Ahab coveted, and which through a fake trial inherited the vineyard by killing its owner, makes the character controversial. Does he deserve being regarded to as a national hero, or should he be remembered for shame and disgrace?

Josiah is tagged in complete opposition to Ahab. No other king was credited with so many detailed praises, which reached their zenith in Book of Kings.

"Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the Lord as he did with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength (2 Kings 23:25).

This is a one-of-a-kind description that uses the words of the Bible, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." That is how the ideal follower of God is depicted. There is no higher rank than that.

How does the Prophet Zechariah compose the lamentation in Jerusalem during its salvation with the combination of these two opposite kings?

This unique combination empowers the hidden power of the two and the waste in their deaths. Ahab's roots come from the legacy of the tribe of Joseph (sons of Rachel), and Josiah's roots come from house of David, who is linked to the tribes of Judah (sons of Leah). The dispute between these two legacies is created during the days of the tribes; is mended during the days of David and Solomon; and breaks again during the days of Rehoboam, son of Solomon and Jeroboam from the tribe of Ephraim. Joseph was to take care of material life, and Judah was to take care of spiritual life.

The distribution of the kingdom of Israel into two nations gave birth to a significant disadvantage in each of the kingdoms. Even in the days of Ahab and Josiah these disadvantages were still visible. Ahab was a man of doings and passionate care for his people, while spirituality was far from him. Josiah was a man of vision and mending of religion but his vision of the state was flawed. Josiah's temptation in attempting to stop Pharaoh in Megiddo cost him his life. His ambition of being a single ruler



Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, 1924.
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to all the tribes of Israel without a touch of foreign rule gave birth to hastiness.

RABBI KOOK writes in his lamentation: "And here is the trait of national affection that was seen in Ahab who liked Israel very much. And he held the doings of his ancestors by adding one more city to Israel, and 'Record holders said everyone is coming to life in the afterlife, Lee Gilad, it's Ahab who fell in Gilad, that God pretends to be at war even after having been struck by arrows so as not to scare Israel. This kind of courage comes from excessive and wonderful love. He also respected the Torah by guarding it's outwardly composure with honor, in front of Hadad, and with all that he did not recognize the value of Torah and its specialty where all of Israel's advantages lie. Thus he went in the ways of Jezebel and in the abominations of the nations of the land according to the extent that would then rule in the spirit of time."

On the other hand, Josiah enhanced his spiritual side like no other among all the other kings. As the Bible says, "Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the Lord as he did with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength," to the point where he did not want to relate Israel with the nations of the world, and thus the Prophet Jeremiah forfeited on that which he was tasked to allow the soldiers of Egypt to pass through Israel.

For that reason the two points converged in Ahab and Josiah, those of Joseph and Judah, the power of the Messiah of the house of Joseph and the house of David. Thus by removing the next disadvantage of

preparing the nation, to not use its power, the individuals are well remembered. Eventually it was possible to unite forces and combine the two into a complete being. That way the eulogy would expand by adding the two tendencies, as their purpose in practice happens. That shall be their sacrifice and recognition to each other, and double, to become the lamentation of Ahab and Josiah together, to stand as a lesson to unite forces, to be wise into putting them together in a system that would bring general good.

Every political leader has its strong and weak points that are unique to him. Ahab was the "responsible" leader who took care of the economy, security, foreign relations and statehood. His statehood was impeccable. His disadvantage was the lack of value in the spiritual life of Israel, and his dragging behind his wife, Jezebel, was his demise.

Josiah knew well the meaning of the spirit of Israel. But by sticking to the Torah he was seeking to reach the ultimate goal of a nation that is independent from the rest of the world. He was ahead of his time and stuck to his goal even by disregarding Jeremiah.

Only a future merging of the two – between the calculated maturity and statehood of Ahab and the acknowledging of the value of spirit of Josiah – could bring hope to the future of the State of Israel. ■

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