



ZIONISM



# Theodor Herzl vs. Rabbi Kook

• YITZCHAK WEISZ

The notion that there is an intrinsic contradiction between Theodor Herzl's Zionism and that of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook, first chief rabbi of Israel, is prevalent in many national-religious circles. Indeed, Rabbi Benny Lau asserts in "Statehood and spirit" (*Magazine*, August 30):

"As rabbi of Jaffa, Kook was requested to eulogize Herzl who passed away just two months ago. 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 Rav 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."

On the face of it, it appears that perhaps these circles are justified in assuming that to have been Rabbi Kook's attitude. In a lengthy letter he wrote to members of the Mizrahi Movement on the eve of the 11th World Zionist Congress in 1913, Rabbi Kook describes Herzlian Zionism as "the narrow orbit of Dr. Herzl's dream." Rabbi Kook then elaborates that "though [Herzlian Zionism] has sublime aspects, it is nothing but the material body of Zionism, and its soul must immediately be added to it... Zionism emanates from the Holiest Source, the Tanach, not from a weak whisper of a hated people seeking a safe refuge from those persecuting it."

In other words, it seems that according to Rabbi Kook, Herzlian Zionism is limited to the liberation of the body alone, and is seen here as a partial and distorted solution to the plight of the Jews.

Indeed, Rabbi Lau asserts that there is a complete disconnect between Rabbi Kook's spiritual vision and Herzl's materialistic venture, which is devoid of spirituality. And so, there is nothing of value for us to find in the vision of the renowned Zionist leader.

It's not surprising, then, that a number of academics (both secular and religious) have adopted this view and mistakenly interpreted Herzl's manifesto, *The Jewish State*, as aspiring for a state that is devoid of any Jewish characteristics.

In the conclusion of *Der Judenstaat* (*The Jewish State*), Herzl implores his readers to "im inneren der Worte zu lesen," to read the inner meaning of his words. His request has been regrettably ignored by many pundits.

Herzl himself was already aware of the distortions being made of his ideas, and shortly before the first Zionist Congress in Basel, he wrote the following to the editor of the *Jewish Chronicle*: "I've gotten so used to distortion of my character by others, that I am surprised when my words are not distorted." Less than three months after *The Jewish State* was published, Herzl hu-

morously recounted to an audience at the London Maccabi Club that, "Many people have not actually read my book, and instead believe it contains contemplations from their own hearts. Some of them only know the title of the book."

In fact, it was important to Herzl to anchor his venture, not as a manifestation of a national liberation movement, as Ze'ev Sternhell argues, but as a deep desire to connect with a divine plan. In the first few pages of his diary, Herzl writes of his idea: "Am I the one who labors over this concept? No! It is laboring over me... These kinds of circumstances can be called inspiration." Anyone who's read Herzl's writings meticulously – not just *The Jewish State*, but also *Altneuland*, and especially his diaries and correspondence – cannot but see that Jewish identity was at the core of Herzl's thinking and was an indispensable prerequisite, not just for returning to the Land of Israel, but as the single guarantee of the continuing connection between the Jewish people and their homeland.

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Herzl despised the idea of cosmopolitanism, and repeatedly wrote about the uniqueness of Jewish identity, firmly stating that, "a generation that has grown apart from its Jewishness is deprived of this internal unity and is unable to take its past into consideration or to look onto the future. We, therefore, yearn to reunite with our Jewishness, and never again allow ourselves to be thrown out of this stronghold."

THE QUESTION ARISES, upon what does Rabbi Kook base his position on Herzl? Perhaps upon hearsay and upon Ahad Ha'am, whom Rabbi Kook quotes in his letter (The philosopher from Odessa who so deeply resented Herzl, distorting and falsifying Herzl's ideas). Indeed, it is important to note that in 1913, when Rabbi Kook wrote his letter to the Mizrahi activists, he had not yet read any of Herzl's writings, which were only published in 1922 in German, and translated to Hebrew in 1930 just five years before the rabbi's passing. Therefore, Rabbi Kook would not have had an opportunity to read firsthand the actual words written by Herzl.

On the other hand, the rabbi's son, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, did read Herzl's writings and had no doubt about the intentions of the Zionist leader. In fact, Rabbi Zvi



Yehuda hung a picture of Herzl in his study next to pictures of the Chofetz Chaim and the Vilna Gaon.

RABBI ZVI YEHUDA KOOK (right) – whose father Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook founded Mercaz HaRav – stands outside the Jerusalem yeshiva with Rabbi Avraham Shapira, who went on to lead the yeshiva, in 1980. Rabbi Zvi Yehuda hung a picture of Herzl in his study next to pictures of the Chofetz Chaim and the Vilna Gaon. (Wikimedia Commons)

A study of Herzl's writings reveals a conceptual closeness with Rabbi Kook. Unlike what one might think, Herzl viewed the Zionist idea of establishing a state for the Jews as much more than just a territorial solution to the problem of antisemitism.

Herzl intertwines the two components of Jewish identity – its uniqueness and its universality – as threads of thought throughout his writings, and this occurs more and more often over the years. Rabbi Kook, similarly, even before he made aliyah, warned of the dangers of nationalistic fever that is cut off from its spiritual origins.

The dialectic between uniqueness and universality is one of the main elements in Rabbi Kook's thinking, both in relation to Torah study (see his work *Orot Hatorah*) and his connection with the Land of Israel. He writes in *Orot Hatorah*, "Man's ultimate purpose is not national uniqueness alone, but the aspiration to unite all the people of the world in one family, to call upon the name of God," (even though a unique center is needed, that is not the ultimate goal, which is its impact for the greater good.)

Contrary to Rabbi Lau's claims, a non-selective reading of Herzl's writings emphasizes the opposite – a conceptual closeness with Rabbi Kook. Herzl's writings are currently readily available to the public for perusal. Would the people who continue to discredit his name still be able to claim that they were speaking the truth?

On the contrary – the demand for social justice, for a corruption-free public life, and a society made up of people who show compassion and genuine concern for the destitute – all of these are part of Herzl's legacy that we are still missing today.

Herzl's message has never been more pertinent than it is today. Indeed, the time has come to return to following Herzl's teachings. ■

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