

# *Hebrew Universalism: The Future Vision of Rav Kook*

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*“Human, rise above, rise! Because a fierce strength is part of you; wings of spirit animate you, the powerful wings of an eagle. Don’t deny your wings, seek them. Seek them, Human, and they will be revealed to you, promptly.” ~Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hacohen Kook*

This powerfully poetic charge and call to action was declared by Rav Kook roughly a century ago and subsequently became adapted into a well-known hymn for the Hebrew month of Elul—signifying Jewish renewal and return to the Divine. Yet this symbolic charge can perhaps be viewed as an overarching motif and ethos that is expressed throughout much of Rav Kook’s writings. It is an empowering call of repentance, one that requires critical self-evaluation and repair of one’s character yet is fueled with a profound sense of loftiness and encouragement for man-kind’s innate desire to change and strive for greatness. In Rav Kook’s eyes, each individual has their “fierce strength” that animates them at their core, and by developing and sharing that strength with the collective whole, that will be the impetus to bring about macro-level change for the Jewish nation, and perhaps as will be shown, even beyond that as well.

For several decades, much of Rav Kook’s writing have been widely under-studied amongst the vast majority of Diaspora Jewry, due to the cryptic Hebrew language that was difficult to translate in his most seminal work, *Orot*. His writings span across several different topics from those that pertain to the settling of the Land of Israel, the essence of the Jewish people’s mission, the rebirth of Jewish nation, and various other topics of interest of the spirit of Jewish contemporary revival in Palestine. Nevertheless, with the recent translation of *Orot* into English by famed Rav Kook scholar, Betzael Naor, a new field of opportunity has become accessible to the modern English reader. Another challenge that many religious historians have struggled to grapple with when it comes to understanding the nature of Rav Kook is an inability to neatly categorize his works into a certain philosophical label and category. Yet in order to better understand the revolutionary ideas in his works, one must first appreciate the context of the generation he found himself living in, in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and leading to the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Certainly, Rav Kook was perceived at a young age to be a child prodigy in the Volozhin Yeshiva, the prestigious seminary of Lithuanian Torah scholarship. Simultaneously, he also had a familial background in the world of Hasidut and would eventually go on to become steeped in the world of Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism—an area of expertise that he would be revered for among his fellow rabbinical colleagues. He lived in an era where both the Jewish people and the nations across the globe were undergoing significant ideological transformations. Firstly, with the proto-Zionist work of organizations like Leon Pinsker’s *Hibat Tzion* and the subsequent birth of Political Zionism, the world witnessed increased Jewish immigration to Palestine. Naturally, the once radical idea of re-establishing a nation-state in the territory of the Jewish ancestral homeland, came to the fore-front of consciousness for many Jews across the world. Further with new voices calling for Marxist-inspired revolution to take foot in Russia and eventually in countries all across the region, a radical sense of political *change* was taking the masses by storm. And lastly, the rising nationalist sentiments stoked in Europe in elsewhere would eventually bring the world to the brink of its first truly global calamity.

Whereas most Orthodox rabbis during this time viewed these radical changes unfolding and their influence upon Jewish thinkers and thought leaders as a catastrophe that required condemnation and a recoiling amongst its religious and mostly insular communities, Rav Kook saw these very same events through an entirely different lens—he saw it as an opportunity to engage with. His view on the rise of nationalist and universalist ideas, both of which began to manifest in the Jewish world and in the world at large, was not happenstance but rather a part of a Divinely inspired message to take careful note of. As Rabbi Zach Truboff from the Hartman Institute states, “his mystical philosophy perceived modernity as not just another stage in Jewish history, but as history’s culmination<sup>14</sup>.” Indeed, this notion is in line with one of Rav Kook’s

most famous understanding of historiosophy—the philosophical understanding of the unfolding of human history. As such, Truboff explains that Rav Kook became the only modern religious Jewish thinker during his era to develop a theological framework to explain the advent of Jewish secularism—one which often embraced the socialist and universalistic values of equality, humanity, and justice—and Jewish nationalism, one whose Zionist cause was being pioneered both by politically-motivated thinkers like Herzl and Jewish cultural ideologues like Ahad Ha'am.

One of the most monumental texts that introduces one into the worldview of Rav Kook during this time of world-wide transformation can be found in the text of *Orot Ha'Tchiya*, or *Lights of Rebirth*, Chapter 18. To begin, Rav Kook states that there are *three forces* fighting each other for dominance on the global stage, and that the struggle between them is even greater amongst the Jewish nation, during the time of his writing. Before identifying these three forces, Rav Kook stipulates that the existence of these forces is not something that is purely unique to his era of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but rather a phenomenon that has existed throughout Jewish history as the powers of these forces have their deeply rooted sources in the spirit and consciousness of every Jew and indeed all of mankind.

The three forces that he identifies are as follows: 1) Ha'Kodesh- The Holy 2) Ha'Umah- The Nation and 3) Ha'Anshiyut- The Humanist. Conceptually, upon first reading, one can naturally understand which individuals fall into the first two categories of the “holy” and “national”. Presumably, as Rav Kook goes on to explain, the first camp of *Kodesh* represents the religious and Orthodox Jewish sect and *Umah* represents the nationalist, largely secular Zionist camp that had been revived among the Jewish people, and that had been vocal in calling for the return of Jews to their homeland. The third camp of *Ha'Anshiyut*, although broadly understood to

represent a type of universalist and humanist mission amongst individuals, however, remains less obvious in terms of how they relate to the first two and its practical significance and implementation.<sup>11</sup>

Rav Kook continues to add to that each camp represents a unique voice within the Jewish people, and that in the future, the three forces will have “no choice” but to come together and unite. The mission, he explains, is for the divine virtues of each camp to balance one another out, as he warns that if any one camp maintains too much dominance over the other, it will be dangerous to the collective body. Similarly, if any camps remain insular, this too will be unhealthy for the whole, as it will lead to a tendency towards extremism in any of the given camps.<sup>11</sup>

But given this incredibly broad introduction to Rav Kook’s general philosophy, it is imperative to dissect first, how he believes that a universalist mission can in any way be compatible with a narrow and particular nationalist Jewish mission called Zionism and secondly what exactly he means in reference to a universalist mission and how it can be accomplished? Seemingly, these visions are philosophically at odds with diametrically opposing goals—with one mainly concerned with the establishment of a Jewish nation-state and the other preaching for humanistic unity for all mankind. Where can they possibly meet?

However, such a difficulty is only valid, Rav Kook alludes to, from the perspective that obtains a philosophically secular understanding of both nationhood and universalism. Rather, from the perspective of Jewish history, understanding, and the plethora of Jewish literature and texts as sources, one can see that such ideals are not in opposition but rather instrumental complements of one other. Thus, in Rav Kook’s vision, it follows that the concept of Jewish Universalism, or otherwise titled *Hebrew Universalism*, is something that is unique in mission,

purpose, and worldview. Its goal is to bring harmony among various voices and ideological camps in the world at large, as opposed to stifling the concept of individualism and nationalism of countries around the world. Hebrew Universalism is thus a movement that is both a revolutionary and liberating force and that will be the spiritual fuel for progress and prosperity for all mankind.

Prior to expounding upon textual sources that are the basis of Hebrew Universalist thought, it is necessary to understand what propelled Rav Kook to initially reconcile the strictly anti-nationalist and Orthodox religious establishment with the newly born phenomenon of a mostly secular, political Zionism. The answer can begin to be understood through an evaluation of Rav Kook's most famous collection of essays, which was translated by Betzalel Naor titled, "When G-d Becomes History." In these essays, Rav Kook deals with the topic of historiosophy or divine understanding of human history through various historical and religious examples. Notably distinct from other ancient civilizations that simply saw time and history as on-going period without any higher significance, Judaism, he explains, always saw time and history as having a sense of direction and purpose.

Yet it is not just the case that G-d directs and guides history from afar, but that he becomes an active part in its fulfillment. The reason for active Divine participation in history, is in order so that this imperfect physical world to be transformed into a perfected spiritual home for the Divine. But the question the greatest Jewish philosophers and thinkers throughout time have struggled to answer is why would a perfect and Infinite G-d create a finite and imperfect world?

To rationalist thinkers like Maimonides, the answer to such a question is truly unanswerable because a perfect G-d has no need to create this lowly, limited world. However,

for Rav Kook and other thinkers who were steeped in the world of Lurianic Kabbalah, the answer can be found in nuanced understanding of what the idea of *Divine perfection* is really all about. As Truboff explains, it begins by first understanding that according to the Kabbalistic tradition, “G-d is not divorced from creation” and that “all of existence is a manifestation of the Divine,” as it says in the Zohar “He *fills* the world.” Therefore, this world is really just an extension of His Divine perfection. Thus, it must be the case that this world has the ability to undergo improvement and growth, because if this world did not have such a capacity for improvement, that would be a deficiency. As Rav Kook explains in Orot Hakodesh:

*“... However, if there is no possibility of growth then this in itself is a deficiency. Perfection that comes from growth and constant improvement has an advantage and satisfaction that we deeply yearn for, to go from strength to strength. Therefore, it is not possible for divine perfection to be lacking the quality of improvement. This is the impetus for divine creativity<sup>14</sup>.”*

But most importantly, as it relates to our discussion, Rav Kook did not view history’s striving for divine perfection as linear process. Rather, he viewed its unfolding of events as a dialectical progression of movements and ideals that are at philosophical ends of the spectrum. Nevertheless, the ultimate path to achieve that state of divine perfection is through a *higher synthesis* of the opposing philosophies and movements. Examples, as Truboff explains include the oscillating between physical forces and spiritual forces or between national tendencies and universal tendencies. In his writings, this is what Rav Kook describes as *Ahdut Hafakhim*, or the unity of opposites.

In the first and perhaps one of the most famously studied essays titled, “The Lamentation in Jerusalem,” Rav Kook delivers his eulogy to Theodore Herzl, although never mentioning him by name, but clearly addressing his and the secular Zionists accomplishments until the present day. In the address, Rav Kook describes the unique

roles of the two Messiah's in Judaism that come in a specific order: Mashiach ben Yosef and Mashiach ben David. The role of Mashiach ben Yosef is to first redeem the body of the Jewish people, and then the role of Mashiach ben David, is to be the redeemer of the Jewish soul. Thus, we can begin to see how this unique philosophy shaped his view on modernity in the early 20<sup>th</sup>. The secular, and often atheist Zionist philosophy, whereas to most religious leaders was determined to be an outright threat, for Rav Kook served as an opportunity for Judaism's elevation. Although on its surface, political and cultural Zionism appear to be a replacement of traditional religious Judaism, for Rav Kook, it was a profound portrayal of a love of Jewish peoplehood that serves to strengthen the Jewish national body, that will then in turn be the foundation for Jewish spiritual revival and rejuvenation in our homeland.

Now given this background to the national-religious debate, one is in a greater position to dissect the next major dialectic that Rav Kook focuses on throughout much of his work in Orot, and that is defining the nature of what Jewish nationalism actually is and demonstrating how it is not in contradiction to the ideals of a universalist philosophy. Rabbi Moshe Kaplan, who is a scholar and long-standing expert on the teaching of Rav Kook and who teaches at Machon Meir Institute in Jerusalem, helps illustrate this point further.

Rabbi Kaplan begins by noting that when it comes discussing the nature of nationalism in general, that is from a secular perspective, there are stark inherent difference in its goals, both materialistically as well as spiritually, from what Rav Kook views the mission of Jewish nationalism to be. Generally, the concept of a strong national identity, especially as it was expressed during Rav Kook's earlier life, was one that was



rooted in physical prowess of a nation and its ability seek global influence through tactics of imperialist measures of each respective empire. Indeed, this is not a new phenomenon of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one that but has been consistent since time immemorial— whether it was the Empire of Alexander the Great or the modern British Empire. From that perspective, there cannot exist a space for a genuine universalist mission that is rooted in the notion of integrity of each individual nation-state and cherishing the values of each of their own cultures, identities, histories.<sup>8</sup>

However, Rabbi Kaplan explains, that in Rav Kook’s writing of *Orot Yisrael*, he expounds that this philosophy stands in complete contrast to the Jewish notion of nationalism, as it is outlined from a Torah and biblical perspective. To begin, when our people were chosen as a nation with our forefather Abraham, it was decreed that for all our history, we would remain a small nation in numbers. Yet, G-d promised Abraham that “through you, I will bless all of the families of the world (Genesis 12:3).”

For the Jewish nation, our national sovereignty in ancient times was never one purely of physical conquest and domination. But rather the restoration of Hebrew civilization was and continues to be about uplifting the nations of the world, far beyond our own personal and narrow needs as a people. Building upon sources of Chazal in the Talmud as well as the Maharal’s thoughts on the Jewish soul, Rav Kook begins to explain that the nature of Jewish nationalism is one intertwined with the nature of the Jewish soul. As he states in *Orot Yisrael* chapter five, that the desire to bring about limitless divine good for all humanity is “the inner-nucleus of the essence of the soul of the Jewish people<sup>7</sup>.” That deep intrinsic desire, he explains, is the ultimate reason for our longing to seek sovereignty in our homeland. Rav Kook highlights this phenomenon is something

that is a priori in the discussion of the existence of man, as the Sages say that “the thought of creating the Jewish people was one that preceded G-d’s creation of the world” and therefore Rav Kook highlights the mission that was attached to our people was created prior to the world itself as well<sup>8</sup>.

In his personal diaries titled *Shmoneh Kevatzim*, Rav Kook further develops the notion of why a strong sense of Jewish nationalism does not stand to be mutually exclusive from the universalist mission of equality, justice, and peace for all of mankind. In fact, in *Leumanat Iteinu* Volume 1, he describes that our nationalism has a dual quality to it: initially, it is one that is narrowly focused on the rebuilding of our own sovereignty and only afterwards—by uniting the conflicting forces within our own camp of the religious, nationalist, and universalist—it overflows and transcends into being one that serves as a model for the rest of the world as its spiritual source of blessings and sustenance.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, the entire concept of Jewish nationalism is not one that remains stagnant and pre-occupied solely with overcoming the challenges of the Jewish people, but one that naturally must evolve to satisfying the needs of the world. Jewish nationalism is one that is universalistic by its very nature; it is a “universalistic nationalism” as Rabbi Moshe Kaplan states. And this fusion between the two camps—first which must originate within the Jewish nation itself via its own smaller camps and then expand beyond—is one that is accordance with his philosophy of dialectics as previously discussed in length.

Rabbi David Aaron points out that if one takes a closer look at the morning, afternoon, and nightly prayer services, the theme of the duality of a nationalist Jewish

mission to be appropriately followed by a universalist Hebrew vision is one that is at the center-piece of our nearly 2,000 -year-old liturgy. He states that both the Amidah and the Aleinu prayer each highlight this matter with great significance. After the first three blessings of the Amidah focus on the individual praise and connection of man with G-d, the subsequent supplications and requests for blessings, focus on the broader Jewish nation. Notably, in the prayers for healing- *Refa'einyu*, knowledge- *Choneinu*, livelihood- *Barech Aleinu* and others, all of the blessings are written in the plural form, indicating the purposeful intention in mind is for the entire Jewish people. This section culminates with our asking of G-d to usher in era of redemption with the Messiah through the blessing "*Tzemach David*." And only then, explains Rabbi Aaron, the Amidah is concluded with the blessing of "*Sim Shalom*" which calls for the unity of all of mankind and envisions a times of peace, goodness, and justice for all humanity. This is the natural progression, for only when we are unified as a Jewish people, can that unity expand beyond to the rest of the nations of the world.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, when we examine the Aleinu prayer that concludes the traditional prayer services, we see a similar phenomenon unfold. The Aleinu prayer begins with a mandatory recognition that the Jewish nation was created with a unique mission and purpose. As it states, "...*that He has not made us like the nations of the world, nor caused us to be like the families of the Earth; that He has not assigned us a portion like theirs, nor a lot like that of all their multitudes....*" This last statement is perhaps indicative of the fact that the Land that was destined to be given to the Israelites was not one that would be vast in physical size compared to the nations of the world. The

message is one of recognizing our particular national status and the responsibilities that are tied to it. However, when the reader turns toward second paragraph of the Aleinu prayer, the message takes on a much broader shift in tone. The broader mission statement of Judaism is invoked to be “*Litaken Olam Bi’Malchut Shakai;*” that is, “To perfect the world under the sovereignty of the Almighty”. The verses continue:

*All mankind shall invoke Your Name, to turn to You all the wicked of the earth. Then all the inhabitants of the world will recognize and know that every knee should bend to you...they will bow and prostrate themselves...on that day the Lord will be One and His Name One.*

The purpose now expands beyond a particularistic Jewish nationalism and into a more expansive vision of Hebrew Universalism, just as was seen in the Amidah service.

Now that this duality of nationalism and universalism has been established, how does each individual, and by extension the collective Jewish people, achieve this harmonious balance between the three forces—given that Rav Kook mentioned, this balance is necessary for ushering in a redemptive period? As a reminder, the struggle between the Orthodox, Nationalist, and Liberal (Universalist) camps arises from the fact that members of each camp are threatened by the perceived negative qualities of the other. Counter-intuitively, Rav Kook explains that a harmonious balance will be able to be achieved not simply by looking past their differences and finding the “positive” common ground for which they agree and come to a compromise. But rather, harmony will be able to be achieved when the camps recognize their perceived *negative qualities* of one another and realize that there is an aspect of truth, goodness, and positivity in their message. As Betzalel Naor explains in *Orot*:

“But beyond this, the positive content of the negative aspect of each faculty in proportion, he will recognize as good, and know that for the good of the particular faculty which he tends to, he must be influenced to a degree by the negating aspect... In this manner, we can hope to arrive at a state of living worthy of one nation in the land<sup>6</sup>.”

It is a charge to confront the differences head-on and not shy away from what makes each camp distinct; on the contrary, they should deeply engage in hearing what they have to say and offer, precisely where they differ in order to learn from them.

For instance, for those trapped in a narrow Jewish nationalist ideology, they may perceive the liberal humanist message of the Universalist camp to be a threat to the creation of a strong Jewish nation-state with say a robust military, borders, and defined political institutions that are integral to creating a uniquely Jewish state. However, as we have seen from Rav Kook’s previous statements, this line of thinking is not just limited and lacks foresight, it is also flawed in a respect. The reason being since it *excludes* the inherently universalistic message of bringing Divine goodness to the world, that Rav Kook explained lies at the heart and soul, literally, for the very purpose of Jewish nationalism. Furthermore, it excludes recognizing the value of each nation of the world and trades in a superficial and secular notion of nationalism for what the true idea of Jewish nationalism is ought to be. Similarly, to Rav Kook, a completely Universalistic mission that is devoid of any idea of establishing a physically and spiritually strong nation-state, is equally flawed for its omission of this integral aspects that is fundamental if one seeks to bring about change on a larger scale.

Rav Kook further poetically discusses aspects of his Jewish Universalism in various excerpts of his writings in *Arpelei Tohar* and *Orot Hakodesh*. In two notable examples, he discusses the intrinsic love for mankind as being an outgrowth of his love

for his fellow Jew and a value that is of paramount importance. In the first excerpt from the piece titled, “*The Glory of All*,” Rav Kook states:

*I love all; I cannot but love all: All the nations. From my very depth, I want the glory of all, The perfection of all. My love to Israel burns more greatly. And is deeper; But this inner desire spreads out in the force of its love to all. I have no need at all to force this feeling of love-- It wells directly from the holy depth of Wisdom of the Godly soul.<sup>13</sup>*

Appropriately, Rav Kook understood that the biblical commandment to “love your fellow as yourself” was in fact not exclusive to Jews, but actually all of humanity. In fact in *Orot Yisrael* 4:5, he goes even further in affirming this belief stating that “*the love of Israel requires the love of all of mankind; and when it instills hatred for any part of mankind, this is a sign the soul has not been purified from its filth...*” Indeed, this sort of perception of the non-Jewish world, especially at a time when Rav Kook lived where the tsunami of world-wide anti-Semitism was on a steady rise, is a radical notion. Yet as we can see, this perception did not stem from a sort of arbitrary, idealistic opinion of the world but as a value rooted in a divine commandment, which is integral to a divinely ordained mission of a Jew in this world.

At the same time, Rav Kook cautions that if the only reason we were to believe and act upon this precept was due to a biblical commandment, the action itself would become rote and mundane without a genuine feeling of what the source of that affection is stemming from. In the passage of “*The Liberated Light*” from *Orot Hakodesh*, he states:

*From the well of kindness, your love for humanity must burst forth—not as an unreasoned commandment, for then it would lose the clearest aspect of its brilliance, but as a powerful movement of the spirit within you. This love must withstand very difficult*

*challenges. It must overcome many contradictions, which are scattered like boulders upon which you may stumble.*<sup>13</sup>

Thus interestingly, although Rav Kook concedes that that origin of the command is biblical and can be found in Halacha- Jewish law, relegating it to a purely legalistic obligation weakens the profound nature of its true origins, stemming from a soul-level, and minimizes its effect in action.

Furthermore, it is worthwhile to emphasize this point as it relates to the idea of “Jewish Chosen-ness,” as David Dishon, co-founder of the Shalom Hartman Institute points out. He notes that Rav Kook greatly differed from other major Orthodox rabbinic and Kabbalistic thinkers of the last several centuries for his insistence of how Jews should treat and look at the gentile world. He notes, “for Rabbi Kook a superficial reading of sacred Jewish texts could lead to hostility or apathy towards the non-Jew.” As Dishon notes, despite the fact that Rav Kook ascribed to an *essentialist perspective*, rooted more in Jewish mysticism that believes in the divine-uniqueness of the Jewish Soul (similar to thinkers like Yehudah Halevi), this did not serve as a weapon for ridiculing non-Jews as being inferior and being subject to Jewish scrutiny and skepticism at all times. But rather in fact, it fueled his humanistic beliefs in seeing non-Jews as an integral part of the Jewish mission and advocated that more Jews should see gentiles in the same light.

So much so that in the aftermath of the 1929 Hebron Massacres that saw the murder of 67 Jews with dozens more injured by Arab perpetrators, Rav Kook called for an easement of the rising tensions and reminding the Jewish and Arab populations that they are not natural-born enemies of one another in the land, stating as follows:

*Ultimately, I know full well that that the Arab people in general, and also the greater part of the Arabs of the Land of Israel, are filled with sorrow and shame for the despicable acts performed by a small minority in their midst as the result of incitement...we hope that the same tradition of ways of peace and mutual support of building together with all inhabitants of the Land of Israel...will triumph.*<sup>1</sup> (Article published in Hebrew newspaper, *Ha'Olam*: 1929)

Nevertheless, his openness to other cultures and nations should not be mistaken to ascribe the belief that Rav Kook held to a form of the modern Western notion of *multiculturalism*, that believes that all cultures are inherently equal from a values perspective. As Dishon explains, the Rav believed in a hierarchy of nations and their cultures, and he saw the role of the Jewish people to be like a “distiller” to purify all of that which is good within the other nations of the world. This phenomenon can be traced back to Jewish people’s mission since ancient times in Egypt which was to elevate the attributes of holiness that is found scattered across the world, even in the most depraved and immoral of civilizations like ancient Egypt. This is noted in the story of Exodus when the Jewish nation, in their marching out of bondage, took with them the gold of the Egyptians. Some of this gold was used by rebels of the Jewish nation for the greatest sin of the Israelites by the Golden Calf, and some of which was sanctified and implemented to be used in constructed the Mishkan—the portable dwelling place of the Divine. But how is this possible?

Rav Kook and other kabbalist understand this lesson to be indicative of the fundamental Kabbalistic principles called “*Shvirat Hakelim*”- or “*Shattered Vessels*” and *Nitzotzot Hakedushah* or “*Sparks of Holiness.*” *Shvirat Hakelim* understands that when G-d created the world, and thus contracted his infinite light from it, the light that was left within the world was too strong and was thus forcibly shattered and spread throughout all nations of the world. This shattering subsequently created these divine sparks, *Nitzotzot Hakedushah*, that are to be found scattered around the world. Eventually, with the ultimate redemption, these shattered vessels



would be reunified through the mission and work of the Jewish nation to sanctify these inherently holy qualities found within other nations. As such, Rav Kook refers to the nation of Israel as *Am Tamzrit*- a “distilled nation” just as it was our mission to distill the holy from the impure gold in ancient Egypt, it remains our mission to do so today.<sup>5</sup>

In this light, Rav Kook is not calling for an unadulterated influx of the values of other nations, but rather it must be the goal to remain as a separate, particular nation that seeks to find the positive contribution of others. He uses Maimonides usage of Aristotle’s philosophy in the *Guide for the Perplexed* to defend the claim for using “external” philosophical concepts for clarifying spiritual questions, quoting the Talmudic saying that there exists the “beauty of Yefet [the forebear of Greek and Western civilizations] in tents of Shem [the forebear of the Jewish nation]”<sup>5</sup>. ” And so, it remains our duty to achieve that same mission today.

To elaborate on this point of elevating certain features and qualities that are found within other nations of the world, Rav Kook in the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of *Orot Yisrael* discusses that in fact the Jewish nation actually has a type of void that must be filled by the nations of the world. However, he forewarns that this void is not something of an *internal void*, as from a purely spiritual perspective, we are not lacking and are perfectly content with our insight and knowledge of the Divine that can all be sourced in the Torah. This point, for Rav Kook, is something that is unnegotiable.<sup>10</sup>

However, there is a type of lacking from an *external perspective*, where the Jewish people have what to gain, learn, and implement from foreign nations, and that is where those sparks of holiness must indeed be *distilled* to fit into the Jewish worldview. Examples can include a deep understanding for the philosophical mechanisms of other nations or an appreciation for the unique cultures, as it is famously noted that Rav Kook was an enthusiast of

Rembrandt and his works. Practically, this can also include taking the positive features of seemingly conflicting political ideologies, such as capitalism and socialism, and realizing how both have their roots Torah, and thus it is imperative upon our generation to debate and discuss what constitutes a just and moral way to govern a society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—first and foremost, beginning with the modern state of Israel. Another notable contribution of modern Western civilization is the political, social, and educational advancement of women in society that has that has undoubtedly permeated and transformed modern world Jewry and the contributions that women of various backgrounds have bestowed upon the Jewish world at large. These principles are but just a few examples to consider and of course the appropriate integration of these philosophies is not close to complete. However, understanding that this co-dependent relationship exists between the Jewish nation and that of the world, Rav Kook seems to hold, is the first and most important step we must take towards seeing this vision of world harmony come to fruition.

Contemplating this fundamental principle of the role of the Jewish people as a *distilled nation* also has a direct effect on how we should consider the current laws and policies of the state of Israel. If Israel is really meant to stand as the one and only Jewish state in the world, are we to be satisfied with the fact that we have created a state whose court system is based off of British and Ottoman common law? Or do we believe that our rich history, texts, and thousands year old tradition has what to say about how we can and should establish a modern court system rooted in Jewish ideals. This does not translate into advocating for the establishment of a theocratic state of Israel based on halacha- Jewish law, but perhaps it does include being open to the fact that we have our own unique concepts of establishing a moral judicial system and unpacking the Jewish vision of what it means to create a more fair economy that works for all

citizens of the country. Further, given the increasing sentiment among Israelis today, especially religiously consciousness ones, to live alongside Palestinians in a one state reality, perhaps there is no more appropriate a time to consider what Jewish sources have to say about the treatment of a gentile in a Jewish society based on the biblical principle of *Ger ViToshav*. It may be applicable, therefore, to recall the words of Maimonides who advocates that non-Jews—who are law-abiding under Jewish sovereignty—should be treated to the same manner as a fellow Jew (*Hilchot Melachot:10:12*)<sup>5</sup>.

Perhaps, the last essential text that is key to touch upon prior to explaining the differences between the modern notion of Secular Universalism and Hebrew Universalism is Rav Kook's short piece on the *Fourfold Song*. In the *Fourfold Song*, Rav Kook expounds upon the four types of individuals, as he sees exist in the Jewish people who chant a different song stemming from the inner essence of their soul. The first type of individual is the one who sings the "song of his soul" and finds his full spiritual satisfaction exclusively from his own individual nature and desire to seek growth and ultimately perfection of the self. Then there is the second person who sings the song of a nation, stepping out from just himself, as Rav Kook states:

*He clings with a sensitive love to the entirety of the Jewish nation and sings its song. He shares in its pains, is joyful in its hopes, speaks with exalted and pure thoughts regarding its past and its future.*<sup>12</sup> (*Orot Hakodesh II, p. 444*)

Third, there is the individual, who goes beyond just Jewish nation and chant the "song of humanity." He seeks the enlightenment and betterment of all of mankind and from this, "he draws all of his thoughts, insights, ideals, and visions." Lastly, there is the individual whose soul rises above mankind and seeks to unite all of creation, existence and the world; he sings the "song of the universe." Most importantly as Rav Kook points out, the

culmination of all of these songs is the Song of Songs, that encompasses and harmonizes the mission of each of the individual songs into a greater whole.<sup>12</sup>

In culmination of this analysis of Rav Kook's Hebrew Universalist vision, it's necessary to return to one of the earliest passages in the bible and gain a deeper understanding of what took place and the fundamental lesson it can teach our generation regarding the notion of true Jewish Universalism. On the backend of Parshat Noach after humanity witnessed the flood that destroyed almost all of mankind, we read the story of the Tower of Babylon. It is stated that the 70 nations come together to build a tower large enough to reach the heavens, to contest with G-d. A superficial reading of this passage may only seem to indicate it is a story of rebellious nations, once again challenging the authority of G-d. However, upon further analysis of the text comparing the generation of flood with that of the Tower of Babylon paints quite a more nuanced picture.

The verses in Breishit 10:31 begins by stating: "These are the children of Shem, according to their families, their *lashon-* tongue, and in their lands, according to their nations." Then a few verses later in the first verse of chapter 11, we read, "Now the entire earth was of one *Safa-* language and uniform words." And the fourth verse continues, "...Come let us build a city and a tower with its top in the heavens and let us make ourselves a name lest we be scattered upon the face of the entire earth." As Rabbi Gavriel Reiss points out, the goal and mission of the generation of the Tower of Babylon was to rectify the sin of the generation of the flood. They knew that the reason G-d destroyed the world was because of the violence and animosity that was shown towards each other, which was exacerbated by the fact that humanity was divided into many nations. Thus, their solution was to create a completely homogenous society, devoid of any national

differences, and with a uniformed *Safa- language* which would finally bring about true peace to the world<sup>2</sup>.

It is possible to understand, within this context, the frame of mind and motivations of the generation of the Tower of Babylon. As Rav Kook states in Orot that when nations are left to their own devices, and sense of nationalism takes root, it really is an extension of egoism, as the goal of a nation becomes to gain influence and dominate on the world stage<sup>8</sup>. However, although, their efforts may have had virtuous intentions, their plan was ultimately rejected by G-d, since the way to go about achieving peace and prosperity is not by forcing the masses to conform to one common way of life, because as Rabbi Reiss states, that is in fact an act of hatred, for it is wiping out all senses of individuality and uniqueness amongst the nations. As he notably points out, their *internal lashon-* tongue, which includes the culture, history, and ethnic identity differences remained distinct, while they attempted to conceal those differences with an *external Safa-* language that they all spoke in their building of the Tower of Babylon.

In essence, this form of uniformity that is sought to be achieved via identity standardizations in many ways represents the modern notion of secular Universalism that seeks to erase all of the differences between people and nations by promoting a one-size-fits-all value and belief system to abide by—whether it be in the form of cultural homogeneity that is experienced in American society today or through a more overtly aggressive form of territorial conquest that has historically and recently been more exemplified by countries in the East like the former Soviet Union and modern Russia. It is a notion that is predicated on the assumption that ultimately, we are all simply human and therefore, at our core there should not exist any underlying philosophical differences

between us that shape our worldviews — whether they be religious, social, or political differences. And, if we do believe that such differences exist, it is merely because we have not been enlightened enough to see the greater value in cultural and national hegemony. It assumes that the only path to genuine harmony will come about when mankind all believes the same political ideals, converses in the same manner, and thinks the same way. There is no room for core fundamental differences of beliefs in this ideology or that there exists distinct features and values to be learned from every nation. It is willing to accept the other, but only if the other submits to its notion of being a fine, worldly citizen that sees no differences in mankind. In essence, it really just represents a modern representation of what the generation of the Tower of Babylon represented thousands of years ago. Frankly, it is weak, shallow, and superficial from a moral perspective when one really considers what it is ultimately attempting to convey.

Of course, Judaism advocates for the notion that we are all fundamentally humans “Created in the image of G-d,” but the subsequent story of Abraham, the birth of the Jewish people, and our mission to mankind stands steadfast against this notion that peace and harmony will only be achieved when the nations of the world forget all of their differences. On the contrary; true Hebrew Universalism is based on the belief that true peace will come about only when we begin to embrace the differences that exist between us and what the various nations uniquely have to offer.

As the next chapter begins with the story of Abraham, the resolution to this conflict in the world, G-d states is the creation of a 71<sup>st</sup> nation, called the Jewish people whose goal is to transform the “nations” back into their original status which is “families”. As G-d states to Abraham in the first few verses of Parshat Lech-Lecha, “And

all of the *Mishpachot* of the land will be blessed through you<sup>3</sup>.” *Mishpachot* comes from the Hebrew root word *Mishpachah* which means *family*. In other words, the Jewish mission, as the 71<sup>st</sup> nation, is to be the unifier of all of the nations of the world, and to bring them back to being as a family—prior to what existed before the episode of the Tower of Babylon.

As we can see, the Hebrew Universalist mission stands in stark contrast with that of the modern notion of secular Universalism. The primary first step towards achieving that goal begins with a level of consciousness and understanding of the world that is deeply rooted within the Torah and the texts of our sages. The Hebrew Universalist mission maintains that we are not attempting to seek peace through uniformity of mankind, but rather through its very diversity. And as the Jewish nation serving as a *distilled nation*—as Rav Kook eloquently stated—we will position ourselves appropriately to create a model society in Israel that will serve as a true light unto the nations. In turn, this model society will be the impetus for the nations of the world to follow in her path and thus usher in a time of redemption and prosperity for all of mankind.

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