

Rabbi Kook's Legacy

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The huge Jerusalem yeshiva, [Merkaz HaRav Kook](#), is nowadays the Alma Mater of the [religious Zionist movement](#) and is associated with the settlers and those demonstrating against the planned removal from Gaza, more than any other (and there are, of course, others).

The yeshiva was founded by [Rav Avraham Yitzhak Kook](#) (1865-1935), but it was his son, [Rav Zvi Yehuda Kook](#) (1891-1982), who turned some of his father's ideas into a political platform when, immediately after the [Six-Day War](#), he came out publicly against any territorial concessions, and emerged as the spiritual head of the movement, attracting thousands to hear his words of strident, apocalyptic nationalism.

I studied in Merkaz in 1961 when it was still in its old building in the centre of town in Rav Kook Street and I shared a rented apartment in Rehov HaChabashim just opposite the Ethiopian Monastery up the hill. There were very few students there at the time. It was run down and neglected. I went there because I wanted to be in Jerusalem and I was attracted by the extra curricular lectures and classes given by [the Nazir](#), the Nazirite, a friend and associate of the "original" Rav Kook (and father of the present Chief Rabbi of Haifa, Rav Shear Yashuv Cohen). He talked about philosophy, mysticism and ethics and was regarded by most at the time as the one really creative mind of the old Kook movement.

Rav Kook the son, Zvi Yehuda, gathered around him a coterie of faithful ideologues who seemed to be in a world of their own and most of the yeshiva at the time ignored them and him. They preferred to listen to Rabbi Shapiro (who later became Chief Rabbi and is one of the rabbis presently [insisting that Israeli soldiers refuse orders](#)). Indeed, at that time, very few people other than his faithful bothered to turn up to hear Rav Zvi Yehuda talk at all. When I was there, he was regarded as something of a wild man living in cloud cuckoo land. But after the Six Day War he blossomed and became an icon. Proof, I guess, that is not "the man who maketh the hour" but rather "the hour that maketh the man".

Rav Kook's ideology—indeed, that of Nachmanides, Yehuda HaLevy, the Maharal, Rabbi Loewe of Prague and many others—was that the Land of Israel is sacred and its original sanctity was reiterated during the Second Temple (Makkot 19a, etc.). The Land, the Torah and the People formed an inextricable bond ("The threefold rope cannot easily be broken." [Ecclesiastes 4:12](#)) that was the very essence of Jewish peoplehood. It was this emphasis on Land that was controversial—not its position as part of the "three", but the extent to which it was considered obligatory to inhabit the Land, and the impracticality of such an ideal.

For many, including the most extreme Hassidic sects, Land was inextricably bound up with the Messiah and nothing should or could be done practically

until the Messianic era. In fact, to this day, this really [differentiates the Ultra-Chareidi](#) world from the religious Zionists, although many Hassidic sects are happy to compromise and take advantage of the very State they profess to disapprove of.

Rav Kook, the father, believed that anyone building the Land of Israel and a Jewish State, regardless of his or her religious practice, was [helping to fulfill a Divine command](#). He regarded them as the elite of the Jewish people. Whereas the Chareidi world regards Torah as the absolute priority (sometimes I think over God, too) and takes the halachic line that human life comes before land. [Chabad Lubavitch are the exception](#), but then they are the exception to about everything in Judaism.

There is something beautiful about passion—passion for life, passion for love and passion for God. I have always admired Rav Kook, the father, as the greatest spiritual mind of the twentieth century. His writings are so poetical, universalist and humanitarian, as well as powerfully and intensively Jewish. He would be my hero if I had one (apart from [my father!](#)).

But I have to say I cannot really get worked up about the passion for land. Its not the Land, as such—after all, I love the Land of Israel with a passion and there's nowhere I'd rather live if it were up to me. It's the notion of state and political nationalism (secular Zionism in a way) that I have difficulties with.

I guess it's all connected to my jaundiced view of politics and politicians. When ideologies are turned into gods, then I part company. Everything I value about religion is concerned with the relationship between humanity and God that makes people better, and makes the world a better place to live in. Other things come lower down on the priority scale. Even Torah, to me, is a means to this end.

So is the protest at withdrawal from Gaza religious or political? If it's political, well there is a debate, and frankly I don't have the military expertise to know what's right, although it has always struck me that occupation is an evil, even if sometimes it's a necessary evil. If it's religious, then, with all due respect, there are other religious viewpoints and it becomes a matter of which club you belong to. And I have never been much of a joiner. So long as Judaism does not have a totally unambiguous, indisputable position then, as far as I'm concerned, there's always room to disagree. And if one ignores other points of view, then the borderline between conviction and fanaticism is a very, very fine one.

Important as the Land of Israel is to us, Moses (and God) were willing to allow the two and half tribes to stay and settle outside the Land of Israel ([Numbers 32](#)). Were they traitors to the Jewish people? I don't think so.

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