

The Loss and Revival of Prophecy in the Thought of Rav Kook

In truth, the lack of ru'ach ha-kodesh in Israel is not only a lack of perfection but a blemish and sickness. And in the Land of Israel it is a painful sickness that must be healed, "for I am Hashem your healer."¹

To the spring of prophecy we are summoned. Parched with thirst we are, but the spring of gardens, the source of living water is before us.²

We generally associate Tisha B'av with the destruction of the Beit ha-Mikdash, the loss of Jewish sovereignty and our exile from the Land of Israel. We mourn these losses and pray for their reversal. However, a study of Megilat Eicha and Kinnot illustrates that these processes were accompanied with another loss, one less publicly apparent than a burning edifice or thousands of people being led to exile, but no less significant regarding our relationship with Hashem. I refer to a basic shift that occurred in inner spiritual consciousness of the Jewish people — the loss of *nevu'ah* (prophecy).³ On Tisha B'av, we mourn the loss of our most direct path of communication with Hashem, and pray for its return.

In order to better appreciate the significance of this loss, I will outline aspects of *nevu'ah's* role based on Rav Kook's spiritual historiography. In Rav Kook's historical essays, the loss of prophecy is not a mere detail but rather is the major fulcrum in the spiritual winds of the world. The



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waning of prophecy represents a basic shift in several key areas of our religious lives, including⁴ the form of Torah that is emphasized⁵ and the primary method of connecting with Hashem.⁶

The Prophet and the Sage

A cursory read of Nach illustrates that the recorded legacy of the prophets focuses on the general values of Torah. The *nevi'im* passionately and lyrically call for a strengthening of our love of Hashem, fear of Hashem and of the high standards of interpersonal morality that the Torah demands. One would be hard-pressed to find a passage in Nach imploring the people to tie their left shoe before their right shoe or any other of the details of halacha.⁷

It was the role of the Sages, beginning with the *Anshei K'nesses ha-Gedolah*, the Men of the Great Assembly, to focus on how these lofty general ideals can become a detailed framework for every aspect of our lives. It was during the post-prophetic period that the halachot of *Torah she-Ba'al Peh*, the Oral Tradition, developed into the mesmerizingly intricate system that we have today. Instead of focusing on

inspiring the people with high ideals, the Sages mainly exhorted the people to meticulously observe the all-encompassing way of life — *halichot olam lo, al tikrei halichot ela halachot*.⁸

Together with this shift in content came a change in method of connection with Hashem. Tanach describes a world permeated with the palpable presence of Hashem. It was a time of open miracles and of clear divine providence, a time in which the masses were able to witness the heavenly fire descending onto the Mizbeach. Prophecy itself is described as a full body experience, a sensuous spirituality that creates a profound sense of contact with the transcendent.

As opposed to this “psychic current of actual spirituality” of the prophets, in the post-prophetic period this level of spirituality was no longer attainable. Instead, the major conduit of connection with Hashem becomes “academic spirituality” or the learning of Torah — *Talmud Torah k'negged kulam*.⁹ This connection is oftentimes less palpable and less overtly spiritual. Academic spirituality is of a calmer nature, more cerebral and less experiential than the practices of the prophets.

The Interdependency of the Prophet and the Sage

According to Rav Kook, both of these time periods contribute crucial elements to the broader panoply of *avodat Hashem*. And yet independent of each other they are severely lacking. The fiery prophets who intimately felt Hashem and beautifully imagined a utopian world still inspire us today, but we must remember that ultimately they utterly failed in their own enterprise.

After eight centuries of continuous prophesy, Jewish society was a complete dystopia from the perspective of the prophets. Every general value that the prophets emphasized was being blatantly violated on a massive scale.¹⁰ Even the sense of palpable spirituality was misused and ended up leading people astray to *avodah zarah* (idol worship).¹¹ Without an emphasis on intellectual *talmud Torah* or the framework created by the details of halacha, prophecy did not have the power to create an ongoing mass movement.

It was only when the spiritual winds of the world shifted to a focus on Torah study and the details of halacha that the Torah way of life had staying power. Perhaps less intensely powerful in the moment, it was these more modest enterprises that kept Judaism alive throughout the long exile, bereft of a geographic cohesiveness. In this sense, “the sage is better than the prophet.”¹²

But even as this shift in emphasis made Judaism more stable and durable, there are inherent shortcomings to this swing of the pendulum. When there is too much of a focus on the details of halacha

then there is a danger that “the general principles begin to weaken; they will be swallowed by the details and not be seen outside.”¹³ When there is too much of an emphasis on “academic spirituality” then “great troubles, the depletion of life will at times cause [the Jewish people] to forget the feeling of the soulful flow and the learning remains dry and alone.”¹⁴ Even disciplines such as Nach, aggadeta¹⁵ and kabbalah,¹⁶ which retain some of the flavor of the prophetic period, were not part of the mainstream curriculum.

The Dream of Bayit Shlishi

The full Judaism can only be expressed by a synthesis of the sage and the prophet, of the details with the general values.¹⁷ It was for this reason that Rav Kook saw the return of Jewish people to the Land of Israel not only as the beginning of the process for political sovereignty, but as a time for the slow reintegration of the prophetic period’s themes back into the limelight of Jewish life. The process that culminates in the establishment of the ideal Jewish state, which is “the foundation for the throne of Hashem in this world,”¹⁸ must be accompanied by a process that culminates in the return of prophecy to the Jewish people.¹⁹

Without abandoning the significance of traditional Torah study and a focus on details, as Jews return to the Holy Land, their souls will demand a broadening of these traditional horizons in terms of both curriculum and experience. Education should include more Nach, aggadeta, Jewish philosophy and Chassidut,²⁰ and the foundations of kabbalah need to be popularized.²¹ The curriculum change should dovetail with a new



Rabbi Abraham Yitzchak Kook

Rav Kook was born in Griva, Latvia in 1865. His father was a student of the Volozhin Yeshiva, the center of ‘*mitnagdut*,’ whereas his maternal grandfather was a member of the Hassidic movement. He entered the Volozhin Yeshiva in 1884, where he became close to the Rosh HaYeshiva, Rav Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (the Netziv). Already in his youth, he was well-known as a prodigy. At the age of 23, he entered his first rabbinical position. In 1904, he came to the Land of Israel to assume the rabbinical post in Jaffa, which also included responsibility for the new secular Zionist agricultural settlements nearby. His influence on people in different walks of life was already noticeable, as he attempted to introduce Torah and Jewish Law into the life of the city and the settlements. The outbreak of the First World War caught him in Europe, and he was forced to remain in London and Switzerland for the remainder of the war. While there, he was involved in the activities which led to the Balfour Declaration. Upon returning, he was appointed the Rav of Jerusalem, and soon after, as first Chief Rabbi of Israel (though the State had not yet been born). Rav Kook was a man of Halakha in the strictest sense, while at the same time possessing an unusual openness to new ideas. This drew many religious and nonreligious people to him, but also led to widespread misunderstanding of his ideas. He wrote prolifically on both Jewish Law and Thought, and his books and personality continued to influence many even after his death in Jerusalem in 1935.

(Bard, Mitchel G.) “Abraham Isaac Kook” 1998, www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Rav_Kook.html

focus on developing the personal orientation of the student²² instead of a uniform program of Gemara and halacha, allowing for greater positive religious experiences. These processes will provide the necessary skills and broadness to cultivate our sense of the “psychic current of actual spirituality,” and ultimately create a community ready for the return of prophecy.

This process of spiritual redemption is intertwined with the process of material redemption. Part and parcel of Rav Kook’s Religious Zionism was a return to nature and the natural.²³ The natural place for the Jewish people is in the Land of Israel, which embodies *kedushat ha-teva* (the holiness of nature).²⁴ In the Land of Israel, natural forces that in exile needed to be fought and beaten can be embraced and channeled. *Nevu’ah*, the highest expression of the Jewish people’s divine soul, represents the ultimate return to their nature.²⁵

It is no secret that Rav Kook saw himself as part of this process. A study of his personal diaries and correspondences reveals that Rav Kook felt that he merited certain levels of divine revelations.²⁶ Perhaps the most famous passage of this sort relates to the sources of Rav Kook’s Torah. The following passage appears in Rav Kook’s notebook:

And I am attentive and I listen from the depths of my soul, from the feelings of my heart, the voice of Hashem calls. And I am terrified with a great fear — have I descended as such that I will become a false prophet, to say Hashem sent me and the word of Hashem has not appeared to me?

And I listen to the voice of my soul stirring, the sprouts of prophecy are growing, and the children of prophets are arising, the spirit of prophecy is

traveling in the land, searching for itself a refuge, seeking mighty ones, full of strength and holiness, they will know to digest the matter, the truth they will tell, they will relate how the word of Hashem was revealed to them, they will not lie or flatter others, their spirit with faith they will bring out.

And the spirit of faith, precious and necessary, will elevate a nation, and Israel will stand on its feet. It will begin to sense its treasure from ancient days, it will know that not falsehood was clothed in pride... [the nation] will remember that it has a valued land, a land of breadth for it, and family by family, one by one they will gather, and the desolate land will be built, and the spirit of Hashem that is on it will begin to pump in its children that were neglected, and from darkness the eyes of the blind will see.

It is quite clear that Rav Kook realized the innovative nature of many of his ideas and after some hesitation identified their source as “the sprouts of prophecy,” which was to develop into full blown prophecy.²⁷

The Dream Lives On

This goal of Rav Kook was mainly inherited by his student Rav Dovid Cohen, the Nazir. The Nazir spent the majority of his life trying to make Rav Kook’s prediction a reality. By his own admission, his becoming a nazir was a step on his personal journey toward becoming a *navi*.²⁸ To this end he lived a life of holiness, Torah, and abstinence, fasting from food and speech for days on end.²⁹ His diary also reveals that at times he felt that he merited revelations of a sort.³⁰

And even if the Nazir did not fully reach his aim, the dream still lives on in sectors of the Religious-Zionist community. In the last two decades

there has been a marked turn toward Chassidut and spirituality in the younger generation. In the view of some, these new interests are part of the unfolding of the process that Rav Kook predicted.³¹

Only Hashem knows when He will restore His spirit to the Jewish people. Until then we will mourn the loss of our most direct path of communication with Hashem and pray for its return. The desire for the closeness to Hashem that permeates the writings of Rav Kook should inspire us to yearn for the closeness that is *nevu’ah*. May we merit to quickly see the fulfillment of the words of Yo’el 3:1:

וְהָיָה אַחֲרַי כֵּן אֶשְׂפּוֹךְ אֶת רוּחִי עַל כָּל בֶּשָׂר וְנִבְּאוּ בְּנֵיכֶם וּבָנֹתֵיכֶם זְקֵנֵיכֶם חֲלֵמוֹת יִחְלְמוּן בַּחֲזֵרֵיכֶם חֲזִינֹת יִרְאוּ.

And it will happen after this, that I will pour out My spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters will prophesy; your elders will dream [prophetic] dreams, and your young men will see visions.

Notes

1. Rav Kook, *Shemonah Kevatzim* 1:820.
2. *Shemonah Kevatzim* 4:21.
3. See, for example, Eicha 2:9; Kinnah 12 (pg. 301 in *The Koren Mesorat HaRav Kinot* [OU Press, Koren Publishers, 2010]), Kinnah 37 (pg. 571), Kinnah 38 (pg. 579).
4. Another major shift was from a focus on the nation as a whole to a focus on individual people. See Rav Kook’s essay “*le-Mahalach ha-Idiyot be-Yisrael*,” *Orot* 102-118, and especially 109-110.
5. This is discussed in Rav Kook’s essay “*Chacham Adif mi-Navi*,” *Orot* 120-121.
6. This is discussed in Rav Kook’s essay “*Derech ha-Techiyah*,” *Ma’amarei ha-Reiyah* 1-9.
7. “*Chacham Adif mi-Navi*” 120.
8. *Ibid*, 121.

9. "Derech ha-Techiyah" 4-5.
10. "Chacham Adif mi-Navi" 121.
11. "Derech ha-Techiyah" 2.
12. Together with these shifts came a change in the methodology of pesak. Rav Kook elaborates on this theme in his introduction to *Ein Ayah, Berachot* volume 1.
13. Paraphrase of "Chacham Adif mi-Navi" 121.
14. "Derech ha-Techiyah" 6.
15. See *Orot ha-Kodesh* Volume 1, 23; *Igrot ha-Reiyah* Volume 1, Igeret 103.
16. See *Mama'arei ha-Reiyah*, 79; *Shemonah Kevatzim* 3:317.
17. This synthesis ideally takes place at the highest level of *nevu'ah*. Therefore, among all *nevi'im*, it was only Moshe Rabbeinu who was able to deliver both prophetic narrative and detailed halachot in the Chumash. See "Chacham Adif mi-Navi" 121.
18. *Orot Yisrael* 6:7.
19. "Chacham Adif mi-Navi" 121; *Ma'marei ha-Reiyah*, 403.
20. See the planned curriculum for ha-Yeshivah ha-Merkazit ha-Olamit in *Ma'amarei ha-Reiyah*, 62-65.
21. See *Shemonah Kevatzim* 1:597.
22. See *Orot ha-Torah* 9:6; "ha-Oneg veba-Simcha" in *be-Ikvei ha-Tzon*.
23. See *Orot ha-Techiyah*, perakim 29-35, and especially perek 30.
24. *Orot ha-Techiyah*, perek 28.
25. See *Shemonah Kevatzim* 1:774. See also, *Shemonah Kevatzim* 5:127, where Rav Kook describes *nevu'ah* as flowing from the inner soul of the prophet.
26. See S. Cherlow, *Tzadik Yesod Olam: ha-Shelichut ha-Mistit veba-Chavayah ha-Sodit shel ha-Rav Kook*, 296-328, who gathers and elaborates on these passages in Rav Kook's writings. See, also, Y. Bin-Nun, *Mekor ha-Kaful: Hashra'ah ve'Samchut be-Mishnat ha-Rav Kook* 99-144 who treats these passages.
27. See also, the testimony of his student and editor, the Nazir, *Mishnat ha-Nazir* (Nezer Dovid, 2004), 89: "The words of [Rav Kook] were said and written with *ru'ach ha-kodesh*, with a vision. And this is what he used to say: 'In a vision the words were written.'"
28. *Mishnat ha-Nazir*, 70.
29. *Mishnat ha-Nazir*, 67.
30. *Mishnat ha-Nazir*, 69; 73; 100.
31. Statements connecting this turn toward spirituality and Chassidut with the ultimate return of prophecy have been made by rabbis in different corners of the Religious-Zionist community. See, for example, Rav Yehoshua Shapira of Ramat Gan, <http://shaalvim.co.il/torah/view.asp?id=241> (last paragraph) and <http://www.yrg.org.il/show.asp?id=61470>; and Rav Shagar, *Luchot ve-Shivrei Luchot* (2013), 164-179.



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