

# RAV AVRAHAM YITZCHAK KOOK: THE NATION AND THE INDIVIDUAL

RABBI MICHAEL FRIEDMAN

Avrech, YU Torah Mitzion Kollel of Chicago

When we examine different sections of Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook's plethora of writings, we may sense an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, he is a thinker who seems to prefer the forest to the trees, writing in broad, often abstract terms about the spiritual and philosophical aspects of Jewish belief. This character is perhaps what Rav Kook is most well known for. On the other hand, many areas of his writings are intricately detailed, closely analyzing both Jewish law and Israeli life. Delving further into the thought of Rav Kook, we see that these two styles are in fact one in his eyes, two aspects that speak particularly to his views of the Land of Israel, a place where the Jewish people can be at home both as individuals and as a nation.

Rav Kook lived and led in the British Mandate of Palestine at a time when nationalism was taking hold across the world. While he never merited to see the formation of the State of Israel, he saw this as a revolutionary moment fundamentally related to the beginnings of the ultimate redemption. Similarly, he envisioned the Jewish people leaving their individual communities and regrouping as the Jewish nation, a self-governing body that could think, live and perform Torah, unhindered at last after millennia of exile.<sup>1</sup> This entity is a body much greater than the sum of its parts, and could only occur in the land of Israel, both from a pragmatic sense and, even more so, a metaphysical sense. The Jewish people, Rav Kook writes, cannot think, act or serve

Hashem like a nation without a connection to our homeland.<sup>2</sup> He saw the establishment of such in the broadest terms, one that allows the spiritual treasure of Torah to once again be manifest.

While Rav Kook placed tremendous value in the Jewish nation and the "big ideas" of Torah, he clearly recognized the indispensability of each detail. This observation is not just in the sense of a mosaic, where every stone is necessary to make the entirety of the work of art; he saw every portion of Torah, every Jewish person, as expressing a component of the whole within its personal sphere.<sup>3</sup> Rav Kook describes how the minute details of halacha both manifest and reflect the most esoteric and lofty ideas in Torah as a whole. He illustrates the precision of every Jewish soul being born at the exact moment needed for his or her role in the world, as well as the world waiting for them to develop their spiritual stature.<sup>4</sup> Every fine point, every person is a world unto itself, yet is also infinitely important to the completion of the Jewish nation, Jewish state, and Jewish mind.

When we examine Rav Kook's leadership, this multifaceted approach becomes clear. His decisions were for the sake of the entire early Israeli society, and he stressed study of subjects such as *emunah* (faith) and the Jewish spiritual belief system — the forests of Torah thought. However, a glance at his letters indicates countless specific issues to which he gave his nuanced insight.



**Rav Avraham Yitzchak  
Kook zt"l**  
1865–1935

This was all in addition to his personal scholarship, which ranged from deep philosophical treatises to poetry, and even a super-commentary to the Vilna Gaon's nuanced glosses to *Choshen Mishpat* (*Be'er Eliyahu*). He was a master of Judaism in every facet.

When we look at Israeli society today, we see the fulfillment of Rav Kook's dreams: a place where both the Jewish nation as a whole, and every individual within it, can be fully realized, can be fully at home.

## Endnotes

1 *Orot HaTeshuva* 4; *Orot*, Eretz Yisrael 1.

2 *Orot*, Eretz Yisrael 4-6.

3 *Orot HaTorah* 4:4.

4 *Olat Ra'aya* on Yom Kippur "Elokai ad shelo notzarti."