YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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INTRODUCTION TO THE THOUGHT OF RAV KOOK

by Rav Hillel Rachmani

LECTURE #12: KNESSET YISRAEL (the Nation of Israel)

The subject of Knesset Yisrael, which is central to Rav Kook’s thought, is a difficult one, with ramifications in many spheres.

There is a certain amount of tension between the concepts of nationalism and national identity on the one hand, and universalism, or belonging to the human race as a whole, on the other. Is the existence of a separate nation an ideal in principle, or is their existence merely a flawed status quo*,* which should be replaced by a "universal nation" in an ideal world?

Both options are supported by R. Kook in different areas of his writings. However, the dominant idea that emerges is that individual nationhood is an ideal. Each nation has a particular purpose in the world; its own color to paint; a specific quality which it emphasizes. Each nation is a unique integral part in the family of nations that make up the human race. Nevertheless, writes R. Kook, the world will reach a stage when all nations have imparted their unique contribution, and then the nations will be disbanded. The nation of Israel, however, will still remain.

Rabbi Yehuda Halevi (medieval philosopher and poet) emphasizes the importance and singularity of the nation of Israel. To illustrate Israel’s relation to and influence on the other nations, he employs the metaphor of the heart's relationship with the rest of the body. This will be dealt with at length in future seminars. This week, we will focus on what makes Israel special.

[Note: I use the term "Israel" to refer to the Nation of Israel, not in the modern-day context of the State.]

In "Orot Ha-Techiya" (page 64), Rav Kook writes that the essence of Israel is its connection to God on a national level. The focal point around which Israel was created and continues to draw its existence is its relationship with God. It is impossible to relate to Israel outside the context of God. This is reflected by the fact that Judaism is ideally structured at the national level, embodying laws governing kings, taxes, the army and detailed civil laws. It follows from this that according to R. Kook, the nation and religion are inseparable. The religious outlook and our understanding of God derive from the relationship between God and Israel. Tanakh is meaningless without Israel. Conversely, there is no significance to the Jewish People without the religious element. The relationship with God forms the character of the people and its history. There is no other people whose national structure is so dependent on God.

This does not mean that non-Jews do not relate to God. On the contrary, there are many religious, righteous non-Jews who believe in God and have a connection with Him. However, they relate to God as individual human beings, individual creations of God. They do not approach him within the larger context of a national group's relationship with Him.

This being the case, how would R. Kook relate to the relatively modern phenomenon of the secularization of Jews, which seems to prove that Jews can survive as a nation without connection to God?

The analogy can be drawn to a married couple that separates, but does not get a divorce. With time, either the marriage will break down completely, or the couple will reunite. They cannot remain thus forever. Similarly, R. Kook would claim that secularized Judaism would either lose its secularism or its Judaism, for without its "energy supply", Israel cannot survive. This is true on a cultural level as well. The Jew comes from a culture that is thousands of years old and draws from generations of Jewish thinkers, leaders and writers. It is hard for the Jew to be satisfied with a 100-year-old culture of secular Judaism which lacks the resources on which to draw and which embodies a more superficial outlook on life than his original one. This often leads to dissatisfaction, and the person has to look elsewhere for deeper meaning in life. Although this phenomenon is not limited to Jews alone, it is particularly true with regard to Jews.

Therefore, R. Kook's response to the current secularization of Judaism would probably have been, "Wait and see!" Did R. Kook actually foresee the present situation? His writings hint to such an awareness. He writes of the probability of a great crisis. However, he writes this not as a "prophet", but as a "researcher", taking into account the situation in his time. He continues to maintain that this phenomenon will be temporary and will pass quickly (of course, when dealing with a history measured in millennia, "quickly" is a relative term). R. Kook himself was pained by the denial of God among Jews, understandably, as in his eyes this severs Israel from its source. However, he adds that when this period passes and the couple is reunited, their love for each other will be even more intense than before. Not only that, but new qualities will become apparent in the rediscovered love. R. Kook optimistically believed that Judaism will emerge from this period stronger.

Given that Israel’s existence as a nation is based on a direct relationship with God, what, therefore, is the basis of the other nations? R. Kook writes [in the above passage from Orot] that their nationality is based on material and economic needs that create pragmatic entities. Beyond these basic needs, these nations individually possess a common culture, history, and folklore. There may be additional factors, but in any event, their existence does not derive from the connection to the idea of God.

Why were the Jews chosen? Was this choice a random one, or does the Jewish nation possess special qualities? If so, what are these qualities? This topic will be covered in the next shiur.

(This lecture summary was prepared by: Hillel Maizels)