

[Back to previous page](#)

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- [eTable of Contents](#)
 - [eBook Index](#)
 - [List of Illustrations](#)

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Page 289

KOOK (Kuk), ABRAHAM ISAAC

KOOK (Kuk), ABRAHAM ISAAC (1865–1935), rabbinical authority and thinker; first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of modern Erez Israel. Born in Greiva (now Griva), Latvia, **Kook** received the type of Jewish education that was customary in 19th-century Eastern Europe. At a very early age he showed independence of mind and far-reaching curiosity. Desirous to supplement his traditional education which was restricted to the study of Talmud, he undertook the study of the Bible, Hebrew language, Jewish and general philosophy, and mysticism. In 1888 he was appointed rabbi of Zauemel, and in 1895 became rabbi of Bausk (now Bauska). In 1904 he immigrated to Erez Israel, where he served as rabbi of Jaffa and the surrounding towns. There he fostered close ties with people of all shades of opinion and belief. He identified with the Zionist movement, thus antagonizing the rabbinical establishment, and at the same time, engaged in a vigorous debate with the irreligious pioneers and laid the foundations for a Religious Zionism that did not settle for the political pragmatism of the [*Mizrachi](#) (the Religious Zionist Movement) or that of [Binyamin Ze'ev Theodor *Herzl](#), the founder of the Zionist Movement, but sought to view Zionism as a process of redemption, of repentance, and of an overall Jewish renaissance. Rabbi **Kook** was a man of complexity whose persona unified opposing spiritual worlds: the Lithuanian Torah scholarship with the ḥasidic spiritual experience, a commitment to *halakhah* and Jewish tradition with a modern worldview and Western culture and philosophy, a tendency towards spirituality and mysticism with full involvement in the practical matters of rabbinic and public leadership. In his effort to urge traditional Jews to fulfill the Zionist ideal, he traveled to Europe in 1914 to participate in a conference of [*Agudat Israel](#). Unable to return to Erez Israel because of the outbreak of World War I, **Kook** spent the war years 1914–18 in Switzerland and accepted a temporary position as the rabbi of the Mahzikei ha-Dat congregation in London, where he was very active in trying to influence the Jews of England to back Zionist political activity. Upon returning to Palestine after the war, **Kook** was appointed chief rabbi of Jerusalem, and with the formation of the chief rabbinate in 1921 he was elected the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Palestine.

Kook developed his own views on the role of [*Zionism](#) in Jewish history. He held that the return to Erez Israel marked the beginning of divine redemption (*athalta di-ge'ullah*), and that the [*Balfour Declaration](#) of 1917 had ushered in a new era in the renewal of the Jewish people. However, in his view, the existing Zionist movement was incomplete insofar as it had taken up only the revival of the secular and material needs of the Jewish people. In the beginning of 1918 he published an open letter, in which he called upon Jews the world over to help in setting up the Degel Yerushalayim movement, which was to emphasize the spiritual aspects of the national revival. For a short while **Kook's** movement created some interest. However, this interest soon spent itself, and before long, the movement was entirely forgotten.

Kook was often misunderstood by the irreligious and despised by religious extremists. His relations with the religious Zionist party, [*Mizrachi](#), were ambivalent. He made it clear that, while he was glad of its existence, he viewed it as a political party which was out to safeguard purely practical religious interests. He was also continually at odds with the rabbis. While **Kook** thought of the chief rabbinate in Palestine as the first step toward the revival of the Sanhedrin, the majority of the rabbis were concerned with the preservation of the traditional patterns of rabbinical authority.

Kook also formulated a new program for yeshivah education. Critical of the yeshivot of his time for excluding secular subjects from the curriculum, **Kook** dreamed of establishing a yeshivah which would present to the student an integrated program of higher Jewish education. Students would be chosen not only on the basis of proficiency in Talmud but also on the basis of their knowledge of Bible. Emphasis would be placed on the development of a lucid style in both writing and speaking, for **Kook** hoped that the graduates would become teachers and spiritual leaders in their communities. While this ambitious program was never put into practice, **Kook** did, in 1924, set up a yeshivah in Jerusalem which was unique among yeshivot in its religious philosophy and its positive attitude to Zionism. This yeshivah became known as Merkaz ha-Rav.

In the last years of his life, **Kook** took up an extremely unpopular stance in defense of Stavsky, who was accused of the murder of [*Arlosoroff](#), placing himself in the painful position of fighting the Zionist Labor movement. At the same time the [*Neturei Karta zealots](#) kept up their unrelenting campaign of vilification against him. Through out all this, **Kook** never gave up his love for the whole of the Jewish people, and not surprisingly, this love has been requited by the Jewish masses.

Mysticism

Kook is an example of a rare 20th-century phenomenon – the deeply religious mystic who takes an active interest in human affairs. Rabbi **Kook's** thought is based on a mystical intuition and on a radically monistic perception. He views reality as an absolute unity whose source is the divine infinity and is expressed in all dimensions of existence: in the cosmic, natural, and physical dimension, in the historical-political and in the cultural dimension. All reality is a revelation or manifestation of the divine. This view led, in turn, to his tolerant and pluralistic outlook, according to which all cultures, each worldview and every ideology, are partial expressions of the divine truth. Despite **Kook's** basic assumption that no single philosophical or kabbalistic theory can contain the multiple dimensions of existence, and that, therefore, each theory is partial and relative, he nonetheless usually formulated his ideas within a Neoplatonic mystical framework, using concepts borrowed sometimes from the Kabbalah and sometimes from the idealistic European philosophy of the 19th century. He did not regard the Kabbalah simply as an ancient tradition, but also as a discipline of free thought and creativity, which springs from the depths of a person's spirit, and deciphers the secrets of Torah. His contemplative works were, for the most part, not written in a systematic fashion; his writing was automatic and spontaneous, and in general he did not later edit and arrange these writings in book form. His student and friend Rabbi David Cohen ("Ha-Nazir"), who edited a large portion of his works, arranged them in the book called "Lights of Holiness" according to the major topics of philosophical inquiry: epistemology, ontology, and anthropology (including ethics and morality). His nationalist thought is mostly to be found in several essays which were collected in the book "Lights," which was edited by his son, Rabbi Zevi Yehudah [*Kook](#).

There existed in **Kook's** personality a harmonious blending of mystical speculation and practical activities, which led to a synthesis of these two elements in his thought. Most mystical systems insist that man divest himself of the restraints of physical life in order to enable his soul to unite with the ineffable, i.e., to achieve the *unio mystica*. In **Kook's** system, however, the mystical urge for unity was meant to combine the communicable with the ineffable – to infuse the physical life of man with a religious purpose. There was no stress on self-abnegation in his mysticism.

Kook's personal religious experience moved him to be deeply concerned about the contemporary opposition to religion, and throughout his life he carried on a relentless search for the meaning of religion in the modern world. While identifying with the Zionist movement, he felt that it was a great tragedy that Zionism had sprung up toward the end of the 19th century, at a time when there was a general decline of all religions, including Judaism. Zionism, in his view, was a movement of rebellion, which attracted many of the young Jewish intellectuals who had shaken off their religious faith. He believed that the movement of return to the national homeland should be an essentially religious movement, for it was only [Page 291 | Top of Article](#) in the Land of Israel that the Jewish people could work out its full religious life.

Modern Challenges to Religion

In Jewish life the beginning of the 20th century witnessed the most corroding assimilation and the most exhilarating national revival. **Kook**, who thoroughly understood his age, characterized his generation in dialectical terms as consisting of clashing opposites: "Ours is a wonderful generation... It consists of opposites, darkness and light exist in confusion."

Kook was convinced that in spite of the decline of religion, humanity had moved to a higher stage in cultural growth. The tragedy of modern man was that he had made tremendous progress in everything but religion, so that religion appeared to have stood still. In **Kook's** eyes, the secular Zionist undertaking was to be neither ignored nor discounted; it mandated confrontation with the attitudes and philosophical methods pervading contemporary literature and setting the wheels of that generation's social and scientific revolution in motion. **Kook** could not but remark the progress, the blessing, and the promise brought by these events. In his eyes, the sincerity, search for truth and hatred of fraud expressed in the great rebellion of his era were commendable, and he shared the sense of freedom that characterized it. He felt compelled to find religious meaning for the central processes and spiritual cultural phenomena that deemed religion, at the very least, to be superfluous and completely irrelevant.

Against this background, **Kook's** thought is revolutionary as well in the realm of Jewish religious thought, as a general philosophy seeking to propose an alternative to all existing systems by reinterpreting reality, human nature, and religion itself. Historical and social reality yields no direct revelation of the religious meaning it contains, and even the classical sources of religious literature do not speak in a language disclosing their "true" meaning in modern concepts. Both reality and religion, therefore, must be interpreted if they are to be understood, enabling one to respond to the divine summons issuing from them. If the most virulent contention of Nietzsche's thought consists in his biting criticism of morality, with its hypocrisy and falsehood, in order to build a new morality on its ruins, we can say that **Kook** sought to wage war against the religiosity of his age, against the hypocrisy and lies infecting it, not to create a new religion but rather to develop renewed understanding of the meaning of religion. Only through a reinterpretation of religion could one engage in combat on the battlefield of general culture and theology and emerge victorious. What is mandated is by no means a mere apologetics but rather an essential reorientation. His message was addressed first and foremost to observant Jews and to the Jewish people as a whole, and only afterward was it meant to spread further.

Social Philosophy

While criticizing social ideologies that limit their interest to material conditions, **Kook** at the same time criticized religious people who were not interested in social questions, lashing out against "any ideology that ignores the need of improving the state of the world... and instead hovers in a rarefied atmosphere and

boasts of the perfection of the soul."

It is interesting, in this context, to note the surprising resemblance between **Kook**'s reaction to European cogitation and that of another philosopher and theologian of his time, propelled as well by profound religious and moral motives, whose theological formation was also greatly influenced by 19th century philosophy. The man in question is Albert Schweitzer, whose thought is also characterized as "ethical mysticism" and in it a concept of self-perfection is central as well.

The similarity, in other aspects, between **Kook** and Leonard Ragaz and Teilhard de Chardin has already been pointed out. For Schweitzer and Ragaz, as for **Kook**, the interest of freedom is primordial. In Ragaz's view, the church and theology would like to imprison God within the narrow confines of ecclesiastical thought, while the holy spirit in fact finds true expression out in the wide world. The kingdom of heaven, which is in effect the kingdom of justice, freedom, and social equality, comes into being wherever God's will is realized in human freedom. These views resemble those expressed by **Kook**. He addressed the subject directly in one of his letters. "We would not regret it if some quality of cultural justice could be built without any spark or mention of God, for we know that the very aspiration to justice, in any light, is itself the more luminous divine influence" (*Iggerot Rayah*, vol. 1, p. 45).

The Sacred and the Profane

Regarding the idea of holiness, in accordance with his harmonistic view of man and of the world, **Kook** refused to see a sharp dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, maintaining that all that was essential to human life was potentially sacred. All the advances that men achieved in science were part of the intellectual growth of mankind, and if these advances appeared to undermine religion, this was no reason to suspect their intrinsic value. What was wrong, **Kook** argued, was not the progress of science but the fact that religious thinking did not progress intellectually at an equal rate.

The physical concerns of man are inseparable from his spiritual aspirations. **Kook** wrote: "The sacred and the profane together influence the spirit of man and he becomes enriched through absorbing from each of them whatever is suitable." In order for holiness to be achieved, the sacred and profane must be synthesized. The activation of the intellect is a prerequisite for the attainment of holiness, and only the man who is physically healthy can activate his intellect. Using the metaphor of ascending a ladder to describe the process of attaining holiness, **Kook** compared the physical needs of man to the lowest rungs of the ladder. Just as the lower rungs of the ladder must be climbed before the higher rungs can be reached, so man must satisfy his physical needs before he can attain spiritual perfection.

The interpretation of holiness as being in continuous relation to the profane is "the natural view of holiness." The opposite view of holiness as a state of pure spirituality was criticized [Page 292 | Top of Article](#) by **Kook** for its one-sidedness and lack of balance. He maintained that this view of holiness became prevalent among the Jewish people in the course of their dispersion, when they were cut off from a normal existence in their homeland and, therefore, called this "the holiness of the exile." The renaissance of a normal Jewish life in the national homeland should bring about the return to the ideal of "normal" holiness.

Science

In an address delivered at the opening ceremony of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1925, **Kook** advocated the synthesis of religious and secular studies. He maintained that the study of the secular sciences should be complementary to the study of Torah, but warned that the exclusive preoccupation with scientific research would alienate man from ultimate religious values.

Kook was critical of the modern predilection for pure scientific research that deliberately ignores ultimate objectives and consequences. Although pure science can explain much about the things that exist, it cannot "create" their meaning and significance, nor can it give shape and direction to man's life. Contrasting the biblical account of man's origin with the Darwinian theory of the origin of the species, **Kook** wrote: "It is

absolutely immaterial to us whether there was in fact in antiquity a golden age when man enjoyed an abundance of material and spiritual wealth, or whether life began from the bottom and rose from the lowest rung of existence toward a higher, and that it continues upwards. What we must recognize is that it is distinctly possible that man, even after he has risen high, can forfeit everything by wickedness, and that he is likely to harm himself and generations to come. This is what we should learn from the story of Adam in paradise." Rejecting the literal exegesis of the second chapter of Genesis, he maintained that the creation chapters required a profound mystical interpretation. While many people regarded the concept of evolution as a threat to religion, **Kook** considered evolution congenial to the deeper insights of Jewish mysticism which has always viewed the world as continuously evolving toward the goal of ultimate perfection. Unlike Bergson, who regarded evolution as the product of a blind and undirected *élan vital*, **Kook** maintained that there was a passionate purpose and direction in evolution – the overwhelming longing of man to cleave to God, which can be attained only through the progressive effort of generations, each moving closer to the goal of holiness.

Universalism and Nationalism

Kook believed that the world is continually evolving toward universalism, which is at present only an ideal toward which man must be educated within individual national units. Nationality is, accordingly, an essential step in the divine scheme of evolution toward universalism. In this scheme Jewish nationality is marked by the concept of "chosenness": the Jews are a people who were designated to "work and toil with the utmost devotion" to further the divine goal of human perfection and universalism. According to **Kook**, God imposed a divine task upon the Jewish nation, but it is up to the Jews to accept upon themselves and carry out this divine task. **Kook's** approach to the Zionist Movement was based both on his "historiosophical" religious and metaphysical worldview and on his personal experiences of direct contact with the pioneers of the Second Aliyah. In his eyes, Zionism was an opportunity for an overall Jewish renaissance, and he yearned to witness a far-reaching renewal, not only of the Hebrew language and the Jewish settlement in Israel, but also of Jewish literature, Torah scholarship, and the creative arts, as well as an expansion of the meaning of the Torah itself. All of these changes, he believed, would bring about the establishment of the State of Israel in the Land of Israel, an ideal state that would actualize in all dimensions of its existence the noble ideals of Judaism and thus reveal the kingship of God in the world. He valued the Zionist movement as a practical-political instrument whose function was to realize this vision. He also admired and loved the pioneers, in whom he saw unadulterated idealism and innate moral values. However, he also voiced harsh criticism of both wings of the Zionist Movement, the religious and the secular for their narrow understanding of their role. **Kook** was actively involved in the Zionist public life and the British Mandate related to him as one of the representatives of the Zionist leadership.

Works

Kook was a prolific writer, who, according to his students, wrote out of the constant urge to create. He never attempted to construct a comprehensive system, and his style mirrors the quality of his personal insights and mystical reflections. **Kook's** extensive writings traverse a wide range of literary styles and forms. He wrote contemplative compositions, halakhic books, ideological articles and essays, a commentary to the Talmud, poetry, and many letters. His language and style reflect the complex nature of his spiritual world. The unique synthesis found in his writings between mystical concepts and kabbalistic ideas on the one hand, and philosophical thought and his bold and novel interpretation of the meaning of Judaism on the other, as well as the personal and original nature of his thought, required the creation of a new mystical language.

Kook's speculative writings are contained in the following works: *Orot ha-Kodesh*, 4 vols. (1963–64²); *Iggerot ha-Re'ayah*, 3 vols. (1962–65²); *Orot* (1961²); *Orot ha-Teshuvah* (1955²), translated into English as *Rabbi Kook's Philosophy of Repentance* (1968); *Ereẓ Hefez* (1930); *Eder ha-Yekar ve-Ikvei ha-Zon* (1967²); and E. Kalmanson (ed.), *Ha-Maḥashavah ha-Yisre'elit* (1920). The following are among his halakhic works: *Shabbat ha-Areẓ* (1937²); *Da'at Kohen* (1942); and *Mishpat Kohen* (1966²).

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