'Alien' Culture in the Circle of Rabbi Kook

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Introduction

The question of exposure to non-Jewish thought and culture is one of the central issues of contention and discussion within traditional Jewish circles confronting the modern world. It is often tacitly assumed that the Religious Zionist movement, like the overlapping movement of Modern Orthodoxy, favors such exposure, even if it is controlled or limited in various ways. The thought of Rabbi Avraham Yizhak Hacohen Kook, one of the most central and influential figures of Religious Zionism, has often been interpreted in light of this assumption. Thus some writers, most notably the late Eliezer Goldman,1 have stressed the impact of Western philosophy on Rabbi Kook's thought. Others have already noted the marked influence of Kabbalistic ideas on Rabbi Kook's oeuvre,2 which outweighs that of philosophy. This reading has been reinforced by the recent publication of writings previously censored by Rabbi Kook's own followers - especially the Eight Notebooks of his personal diary.3

3 As noted by Y. Avivi, 'Meqor ha-Orot - Shemonah Qevazim me"et ha-Rav Avraham Yizhak Hacohen Kook', Tzohar 1 (2000), pp. 93-111. On the diaries
One may also further buttress the latter assessment if one accepts the testimony of Rabbi Kook’s close student, Rabbi David Cohen, the Nazir. When meeting Rabbi Kook in 1915, Cohen - who already had an extensive background in the history of Western culture - audited a conversation between Rabbi Kook and his son, Rabbi Zevi Yehudah Hacohen Kook, which dealt with Greek philosophy. The Nazir recorded his impression (so to speak, as he was not greatly impressed by their discussion) that their knowledge was based on secondary sources. One can extend this observation to modern philosophy, and claim that Rabbi Kook’s linguistic and bibliographical resources limited him to study Western thought through digests found in the Russian, Yiddish and Hebrew periodicals. One cannot at all compare this partial exposure to the depth of his immersion in Rabbinical and Kabbalistic writings. Furthermore, one should not compare this contact with Western philosophy to that of the giant of Modern Orthodoxy, Rabbi Dov Yoseph Halevi Soloveitchik. The latter, like the disappointed Nazir, was familiar with both classical and modern philosophy through original texts. This striking difference should be considered not only in attempts to compare these two figures, but also when discussing Religious Zionism and Modern Orthodoxy in tandem.

However, we have seen that the Nazir was indeed conversant with Western thought and indeed, as Dov Schwartz has shown, his knowledge of philosophy had a marked influence on his editing of the writings of his teacher, Rabbi Kook. Smooth movement between Kabbalistic and philosophical sources also characterizes the Nazir’s magnum opus,

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4 Introduction to *Orot ha-Qodesh*, Jerusalem 1963, p. 18. The Nazir’s decision to become Rabbi Kook’s disciple was not based on this impression, but rather on his exposure to Rabbi Kook’s mystical prayer. For a discussion of this encounter, see Y. Garb, ‘Ha-Rav Kook’, p. 78, n. 48.


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*Qol ha-Nevu'ah*, as is apparent in the recently published full edition.\(^7\) However, as we shall see, this openness to Western ideas was not shared by other members of Rabbi Kook's circle.\(^8\) What I shall essay here, is an examination of attitudes towards Western culture in the writing of the above-mentioned son, Rabbi Zevi Yehudah Kook, as well as Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Harlap, perhaps the closest disciple of Rabbi Kook the father. I will then briefly trace the source of these attitudes in Rabbi Kook's own writing, and especially in the recently published diaries.

**Attitudes to 'Alien Culture' in the Circle of Rabbi Kook**

It was Rabbi Zevi Yehudah who transformed the circle of Rabbi Kook from a small and rather marginal sect to a mass movement which still has a marked impact on Israeli cultural and political life.\(^9\) For this reason, it is advisable to commence with an examination of his position.\(^10\) This is most clearly stated in the first of the articles published in the collection *Le-Netivot Yisrael*.\(^11\) This essay, 'The Israeli Culture', was reviewed by Rabbi Kook the father, and is considered an essential part of the curriculum in the Central World Yeshiva founded by him (known as 'Mercaz Harav').

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8 On the idea of the 'circle' as a methodological tool for examining the thought of Rabbi Kook in relation to his close followers, see D. Schwartz, 'Derakhim be-Hekeq ha-Ziyyonut ha-Datit', in: N. Ilan ed., *’Ayin Tovah: du-Sia ve-Pulmus be-Tarbut Yisrael*, Tel Aviv 1999, pp. 576-577. See also my concluding remarks.
The central premise in his article may be summarized as follows: The issue of culture is extremely important for what he perceived to be the process of redemption. He describes the question of culture, Jewish or universal, as the bone of contention between the Zionist movement and its Ultra-Orthodox opponents. Rabbi Zevi Yehudah is critical of Religious Zionist circles for side-stepping this central question, rather than confronting it head-on, as he does here.12

He then goes on to posit the necessity to adapt education to the nature of its subject. This premise is followed by the claim - found inter alia in the writings of Maharal of Prague13 - that the Torah is the nature of the Jewish person.14 It then follows, according to the author, that a nations' culture should be adapted to its 'public psychology' and express, as it were, the stirrings of its soul. This rhetorical slippage between individual education and public culture,15 within the general framework of naturalism (The Torah as nature), leads to the need to restrict the cultural horizons of the renewed Jewish collective in Israel to Jewish thought, which is the most suitable for its national psychology. Thus, the 'true culture', the 'Israeli culture', can only be the Torah - the natural national psychology of the Jewish people.16

12 In my opinion, the focus on culture found here should balance the prevailing tendency in both media and scholarship to stress the more political issues in the thought of Rabbi Zevi Yehudah.
14 One can compare this view to an understanding of education as designed to transform the nature of its subject.
15 It is in the light of this connection that we should understand the fierce opposition on the part of Rabbi Zevi Yehudah to the inclusion of English language studies in the curriculum of the 'Yeshiva for the Young [adolescents]' at the Central World Yeshiva.
16 According to Rabbi Zevi Yehudah, the Torah represents the quest of the Jews for totality and unity, as opposed to the 'private' and fragmented nature of non-Jewish culture. In this circular argument, public psychology should be nourished by such a culture which is adapted to the idea of the collective. Whilst for Rabbi Kook the father, the connection to the one God is the central and unique aspiration...
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As Schwartz has already pointed out, in this context Rabbi Zevi Yehudah writes approvingly of the *Volkerpsychologie*, or 'national psychology'. Though similar forms of discourse were adopted by Fascist movements, it is an irony of history that it was initiated largely by Jewish intellectuals, such as the late 19th century Herman Steinthal, founder of the journal of National Psychology and Philology. It is a further irony that this discourse, developed, even if not established, by anti-Semitic circles, is used here as part of the rationale for the insular character of Israeli culture.

One should especially note Rabbi Zevi Yehudah's conclusion, where he writes as follows: 'The impure air of the Exile, full of the filth of alien cultures, blocks the movement of our life and its ideals'. Therefore, he continues, the renewal of the Jewish people in Israel should be accompanied by a rejection of this influence, in favor of drawing on the pure and holy air of the Land of Israel, the source of vitality of Jewish culture: 'There, amidst the air of the Exile, it is only possible that the first stirrings of spiritual movements may be revealed to us, movements of culture from any direction, and these can never in themselves have any durability of existence or power of renewal for Israel except by inhaling the air of Ere|Ω| Yisrael, our holy and pure air, the land of our natural and full life, the source of vitality and growth of our culture'. His stress on the centrality of the Land of Israel is here closely related to the question of culture.

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18 However there is no place for a connection between *Volkerpsychologie* and the Nazi movement. See A. Brock, 'Was Wundt a "Nazi"? Volkerpsychologie, Racism and Anti-Semitism', *Theory and Psychology* 2 (1992), pp. 205-223.

19 Steinthal is mentioned by Rabbi Zevi Yehudah in *Le-Netivot Yisrael*, p. 8, n. 5.

20 Ibid., p. 11.

21 This stress is again over-emphasized, in my view, by many, including some of his own students. On the corresponding question of the 'Torah of the Land of Israel' in the thought of Rabbi Kook the father, see A. Rosnak, 'Halakhah, Aggadah ve-Nevu|Ω|ah be-Torat Ere|Ω| Yisrael le-Or "Abdut ha-Hafakhim" be-
I now wish to move to a text composed by Rabbi Harlap, which echoes the themes just discussed, though in a more Kabbalistic manner. The general thrust of his argument is that admixture leads to degeneration.22 Though Rabbi Harlap expresses a general sense of the degeneration of culture,23 it is especially the Torah which cannot tolerate admixture. This claim leads him to a strong rejection of influence by non-Jewish sources:

The People of Israel is a holy one, which dwells alone, and is not counted amongst the nations.24 Any drawing from alien sources nullifies its purity [...]. And the other nations as well shall not be able to attain their sources except through surrender to the light of the pure and original truth of Israel, and the calm of all the worlds depends on this, and only on this [...] and any rebellion that the nations will rebel against the high exaltedness of Israel, undermines them and brings destruction and desolation to the world. And of course, if Israel will lower itself to the others and graze in alien pastures, there will be no calm in the world and a wild spirit will seize all of the nations and cause them to shed innocent blood of Israel, and turn the entire world to sword and ruin.25

According to this text, the Torah should be established as a source of influence on other cultures. In Harlap's rhetoric, any drawing on alien source pollutes the purity of Jewish sources. Rabbi Harlap goes as far

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22 This is a common theme in classical Kabbalistic writing, as in discussions of the biblical prohibitions on mixing cloths or plants. See e.g. Menachem Recanati, Perush 'al ha-Torah, Jerusalem 1961, p. 64a. For a theoretical discussion of this theme, see M. Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo, London 1966.


24 Num. 23:9.

25 Y. M. Harlap, Mei Marom: Ma'iyenei ha-Yeshufah, Jerusalem 1979, pp. 122-123. For a further discussion of Rabbi Harlap's radical view of the superiority of the Jewish people, see Schwartz, 'Yishuv 'Am Yisrael', pp. 495-498.
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as to adopt the argument, usually found in anti-Zionist texts,26 that the Holocaust was a result of the mixture of Jewish and non-Jewish culture.

Jewish and Non-Jewish Culture in the Thought of Rabbi Kook

Finally, I wish to address the question of the origin of these ideas regarding culture in the thought of Rabbi Kook the elder. In general, some scholars claim that the views of Rabbi Kook were given a nationalistic bent by his followers,27 while others have emphasized the reciprocal interaction between the various members of the circle.28 I believe that the texts I shall adduce here will corroborate the latter claim, at least with regard to this issue.

In the seventh of the newly published notebooks, Rabbi Kook writes as follows:

We see that even on a similar subject, if the styles are different, sometimes one study may counteract and obstruct another […] as with Rabbi Zeira29 who fasted in order to forget the Talmud of Babylonia, so as not to be distracted when in the Land of Israel and studying the Talmud of the Land. All the more so, one should abstain from dealing with external and secular knowledge so as not to distract the soul from its internal connection when weaving the supernal holiness. As for the Collective of Israel (Klal Yisrael), how worthy is this restraint, to restrict the concentration of thought only to the Source of Israel, in order to dredge the pearls found in the depths of our sea, and not to scatter the forces for strangers […] and all the treasures of knowledge and from all the worlds themselves flow drops of Torah and the light of holy life towards the supreme treasure of the Divine Soul30 which draws from the Source of the Torah, the great sea of Wisdom.31

26 See e.g. E. Wasserman, Qovez Ma’amari m ve-Iggerot, Jerusalem 2001, p. 298.
27 See e.g. Ravitzky, Messiahism (above, n. 9).
28 See above.
29 See B.T. Baba Mezi’a 85a.
30 The term 'soul' is central in this text, as well as in Rabbi Kook's writing in general, as I hope to show elsewhere.
Like his son, Rabbi Zvi Yehudah, Rabbi Avraham Yizhak Kook makes a seemingly smooth move from individual psychology to national psychology. The nation is described as a person who needs to concentrate, 'go deeper inside himself', and not scatter his forces. A further parallel is that between the return to the land and the safeguarding of cultural insularity. The renewed Jewish nation should be like the talmudic Sage and fast, abstaining from the foreign influences of the Exile in order to merit the pure Torah of the Land of Israel. Like Rabbi Harlap, Rabbi Kook goes on to state that the source of the Torah, once guarded from outside influence, can be a source of influence and blessing for world culture.32 Thus, though less strong in language, and while leaving some scope for limited exposure to secular knowledge, at least on an individual level, perhaps like his own limited exposure, Rabbi Kook's text echoes the themes we have seen in those of his followers, namely: The renewal of Jewish culture should be based on internal sources, and should influence world culture, rather than be influenced by it.33

One can readily reinforce this reading of Rabbi Kook's position from numerous recently published texts, and I shall cite only a few of these (further parallels may be found in the notes). Elsewhere in Shemonah Qevazim, Rabbi Kook writes as follows:

The life of a people which is founded on a spiritual basis, is the life of its poetry. The poetry of the nation cannot admit any admixture, it must be wholly its own. If there are any alien mixtures, it […] is already completely blemished in the essence of its form. The poetry of Israel is the Torah.34

We see that not only culture in general should be entirely national - and thus for Rabbi Kook Torah-based - but also literature, and

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32 A further parallel is the employment of the 'hydraulic' imagery of water sources and flow. For this imagery in Kabbalah, see Y. Garb, Manifestations of Power in Jewish Mysticism from Rabbinic Literature to Safedian Kabbalah (Hebrew), Jerusalem 2004, pp. 73-104.
33 For a somewhat different reading of Rabbi Kook's position on this issue, see Schwartz, 'Yehuda shel 'Am Yisrael' (above, n. 2), p. 490.
34 Shemonah Qevazim 8, 124 (Volume 3, p. 282). For a discussion of this text from a different angle, see Garb, 'Rav Kook' (above, n. 2), p. 90.
specifically poetry,35 should be free of any 'alien mixture'. This text sheds light on Rabbi Kook's view of the direction the renewal of Hebrew literature should take.

Elsewhere in his notebooks, Rabbi Kook writes the following general assessment of the culture of the non-Jewish nations:

All the nations are as nothingness and chaos, chaos without complete form, and their elevation will come through the total nullification of their previous form [...] The basic content, the vessel in its form, has not yet been completed amongst all the nations, the human form has not yet descended on them: 'And you are my people, the sheep of my pasture, man you are (Ez. 34, 31) - you are called "man" [adam] and the nations of the world are not called "man"'.36 All the knowledge and sophistication, intellectual and practical, which seem so rich in their external form, do not bring about the internal soul, which fixes the inner will of the people and its intrinsic character in a clear ideal form, worthy of the complete human contour, the divine image [zelem] in the clarity of its existence.37 And compared to the holy, they are in this unformed and limited state, and any holiness they imagine is but impurity relative to the exaltedness of true holiness of Israel [...] and from this [the people of] Israel will know how much it should preserve its form, how far it should escape from mixing its zelem, which is holy in the holiness of the holy of holies with the 'Aramaic [i.e. gentile] zelem', for all that God has granted them under the sky (Deut. 4, 19) is an abomination for Israel.38

Finally, in a recently published collection,39 Rabbi Kook states explicitly that one should not accept spiritual influence from the nations of the

35 For Rabbi Kook's poetics, see Garb, op. cit., and the sources cited there.
36 See B.T. Baba Mezi'a 114a.
37 Compare to Rabbi Kook's halakhic ruling that the bodies of non-Jews should be used for autopsies as they lack the 'greater clarity' of the zelem or divine image (Da'at at Kohen, Jerusalem 1985, Response 199).
38 Shemonah Qevazim 6, 193 (Vol. 3, p. 71); see also194 (p. 72).
39 Me'orot HaRaYaH, Jerusalem 2004, pp. 21-22, 33-34.
world. Like his son, he attributes this influence to the Exile and to the decline in the stature of the nation. Another position which is identical to that of Rabbi Zevi Yehudah is the Kabbalistic claim that the Exile lead to the influence of the air of the countries of the nations.\(^{40}\) Rabbi Kook's conclusion is but slightly more moderate than that of his son: He is willing to 'barely' [bedo\(\bar{\text{\`a}}\)aq] leave room for the adoption of fashionable opinions derived from alien sources, as a 'temporary injunction',\(^{41}\) designed to assist in the presentation of the Torah to individuals influenced by these views. Once this task has been accomplished, these views should be discarded. One may regard the limited presence of non-Jewish notions in Rabbi Kook's own writings in light of this limited sanction, rather than as a deep or even primary aspect of his thought, as some have suggested.

**Concluding Remarks**

In this article, I have traced a theme - the insularity and superiority of Jewish culture - through the writings of Rabbi Kook and two of his major followers. The issue of Rabbi Kook's general attitude to Western culture has been raised in previous research.\(^{42}\) However, the publication of numerous new texts, as well as the need to address the circle of Rabbi Kook, more than warrant a specific examination of the issue of study of non-Jewish culture.

I do not wish to claim that this is the only strand in the thought of the founder of the school, as the more universalistic approach of Rabbi David Cohen, the Nazir, is also rooted in sources found in the writings of his teacher. In fact, the latter often deliberately contain seemingly

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\(^{40}\) See *Shemonah Qevazim* 1, 287 (Volume 1, p. 105), where Rabbi Kook writes that just as a change of climate can be harmful, both physically and psychically for the individual, so the soul of the nation must remain in 'spiritual Israeli air' and if it wanders in 'alien fields' it will weaken.

\(^{41}\) On temporary injunctions in Rabbi Kook's halakhic and Kabbalistic thought, see Y. Garb, 'Nevu'\(\text{\`a}\)ah, Halakhal ve-Antinomizm be-Shemonah Qevazim shel ha-Rav Kook', in: Z. Gries, H. Kreisel and B. Huss eds., *Shefa Tal: Me\(\text{\`a}\)qarim be-Ma\(\text{\`a}\)shevet Yisrael Mugashim le-Professor Bracha Sack*, Beer Sheva 2004, pp. 267-277.

contradictory messages. However, the Nazir’s own testimony has pointed out a structural limitation - the relatively minor exposure of Rabbi Kook to non-Jewish thought. Together with the texts cited here, this biographical fact enables us to conclude that the interpretations given by his son and by his closest student, Rabbi Harlap, are at least as valid, and should not be dismissed as deviations from the path of the founder. It is important to add that these positions were also continued by the following generation of thinkers in Rabbi Kook's circle. While it is well known that Rabbi Kook's circle stridently uphold the physical boundaries of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel, their equal commitment to maintaining cultural boundaries, as evidenced here, is less generally known. This position shaped the approach of Rabbi Kook's circle to numerous specific cultural and literary issues, which are beyond the scope of this paper.

It is often tacitly assumed that modernization leads to greater liberalism or universalism. However, it should be recalled that one of the most central effects of modernity is the formation of the nation-state, which enhanced particularistic cultural discourses. Thus, paradoxically, modernization has often accentuated or even constructed national and ethnic distinctness. We have traced here the transformation of Kabbalah


44 On the strident opposition to any form of secular learning in Yeshiva, on the part of R. T. I. Tau, the major spiritual figure in the contemporary circle, see Y. Rozen-Tzvi, 'Metaphisika be-Hithavuta: Ha-Pulmus be-Yeshivat Mercaz ha-Rav: 'Iyyun Bikorti', in: Sagi and Schwartz, Me'ah Shenot U'iyyonut Datit (above n, 17), pp. 421-445. See also Y. Kelner Pluralizm, Fanatizm, Kelaliyut: Ha-Qeriteriyon le-Emet, ha-Qeriteriyon le-Musar, Jerusalem 2001, p. 144, who interprets the biblical concept of the 'mixed multitude' ['erev rav] as corrupt psychological traits whose source is 'psychic intermixing' with alien cultures and psychic inclinations. Kelner stresses that this term can be expanded to include political leaders who exhibit these traits (compare to Wasserman, Qovez Iggerot, p. 295). These statements continue the discourse on the dangers of admixture, found in the texts of Rabbi Kook and Rabbi Harlap cited above.

45 One example is the harsh critique directed by Rabbi Kook and his followers at the 'Torah with Derekh Erez' founded by Rabbi S. R. Hirsch in Germany. See e.g. Shemonah Qeva'zin 6, 28 (Vol. 3, pp. 12-13) on the 'rottenness' of the 'fruits' of this school.
and other classical Jewish discourses into 'national mysticism'\textsuperscript{46} by the circle of Rabbi Kook, which in turn drew on earlier sources, such as the writings of the Maharal.

This transformation, which is part of the modernization of Kabbalah, led to an accentuation of the more particularistic aspects of Jewish culture, and especially those found in the Kabbalah, which was usually more particularistic than philosophy or \textit{musar}. The result of this enhancement of nationalistic discourse, in Rabbi Kook's circle and elsewhere, was a dismissal of the influence of other cultures. Ironically, this rejection resulted from the impact of non-Jewish nationalism, so that the critique of alien influence was in itself influenced by modernity and European nationalism. However, this is but the paradox of modernization, which rather than being a universalizing process, as the proponents of the 'end of history' thesis would wish us to believe, creates ever-fragmenting 'multiple modernities'.\textsuperscript{47} In other words, modernity, rather than being a uniform and linear process, takes on a complex variety of forms, which lends itself to particularistic interpretations, such as those that we have examined here.

In the texts we have seen here there is a constant rhetorical slippage from the soul of the individual to that of the nation. This move reflects the adoption of 'national psychology' by Rabbi Kook's circle, whose interpretation of Jewish mysticism merged two of the salient discourses of modernity: Nationalism and psychology.\textsuperscript{48}

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\item \textsuperscript{46} On this concept see Y. Garb, 'Rabbi Kook and His Sources: From Kabbalistic Historiosophy to National Mysticism', in: M. Sharon ed., \textit{Studies in Modern Religions, Religious Movements and the Babi-Bahai Faiths}, Leiden 2004, pp. 77-96.
\item \textsuperscript{47} See S. N. Eisenstadt, \textit{Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities}, Leiden and Boston 2003.
\item \textsuperscript{48} See Y. Garb, 'The Chosen will become Herds': \textit{Studies in Twentieth Century Kabbalah} (Hebrew), Jerusalem 2005, pp. 71-98.
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