

## Behar-Bechukotai

In this week's double parasha, we learn the commandment of shmittah, the year of remittance, the sabbatical year, the seventh year; and yovel, the Jubilee year, the fiftieth year. This year, 5775 on the Hebrew calendar, happens to be a shmittah year, so consequently, it is an appropriate time on this Shabbat of Bahar-Bechukotai to discuss issues relating to shmittah. I will do this through the lens of Rav Kook.

This past December I had the good fortune to spend a week at the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem learning at an Executive Learning Seminar with a focus on Rav Kook. We studied Rav Kook from different perspectives with some of the brightest scholars in Israel coming from all over the English speaking world. In the seminar, we looked at Rav Kook's approach to shmittah, which was a reflection of Rav Kook's philosophy in general. I thought I would share some of what we learned about Rav Kook's shmittah and philosophy, but first a little background on Rav Kook.

Much of the information you will hear can be found in Yehuda Mirsky's excellent biography of Rav Kook called *Mystic in a Time of Revolution*. HaRav Avraham Yitzchok Ha-Cohen Kook, or Rav Kook, was the Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi of Pre-State Palestine. But before he came to Palestine, Rav Kook grew up in Europe in a unique environment. He attended the great Volozhin Yeshiva, the most famous of the Lithuanian yeshivas, founded by a disciple of the Vilna Gaon; but his maternal grandfather was a chassid, and from him he learned to daven. Rav Kook's most important follower, David Cohen, who was also known as "the Nazir" said, that when he heard Rav Kook speak, he wasn't so impressed, but when he heard him daven, the Nazir knew he was to become Rav Kook's disciple. Through relatives and friends, Rav Kook also had familiarity with the ideas in currency in the secular world of capitalists and entrepreneurs, socialists and communists, Zionists and the proponents of the Haskalah, the Jewish enlightenment. He read and spoke several languages, including English, which he used when he was a rabbi on the East End of London, and when he traveled to America. During World War I, he got stuck in Switzerland for several years waiting out the war, overlapping time there with Russian revolutionaries and parlor intellectuals. As a result of these interactions with many different types of Jews and streams of thought, Rav Kook added a unique and worldly perspective, added to his religious and mystical upbringing.

In 1904, he made aliyah to Jaffa in Palestine to take a job as Jaffa's chief rabbi. In leaving Europe, Rav Kook was motivated not to find the Golden Land in New York, as were many of the Eastern European Jews escaping persecution and pogroms; he was instead looking for the Promised Land. For Rav Kook, moving to Palestine was a spiritual journey whose goal was to bring the mashiach. When he got to Palestine though, he found a group of struggling Jews, living off of American and European tzedaka, in a very poor and backward province of the Ottoman Empire. Rav Kook made it his number one task to support all efforts to settle the land, grow its agriculture and economy, to create the platform for the formation of a state. He knew that if Israel was not transformed into a hospitable country that could support millions of Jews, it would never attract emigration to Palestine, the ingathering the exiles, which is a necessary precondition to the redemption.

I will talk about two incidents that occurred soon after Rav Kook arrived in Jaffa that demonstrate his priorities and philosophy. The first is a story of sesame oil and Pesach. An entrepreneurial Russian Jew moved to Jaffa soon after Rav Kook. He came up with a great idea to both solve a problem in halakhah and to create a new industry. He invented a process to extract oil from sesame seeds without the use of water. This process eliminated the problem that the extraction of sesame oil potentially causes fermentation, and renders the resulting product prohibited for Passover as chametz. Rav Kook was

impressed with this man who invested his own funds to build a factory to produce the kosher for Passover sesame oil, after studying the manufacturing method, Rav Kook was satisfied that the process was halakhically sound. He supported the entrepreneur's efforts, writing a ringing endorsement of his product for use during Passover. But when the rabbis in Jerusalem got word that the Chief Rabbi of Jaffa gave a heksher to sesame oil, they went bananas, and threatened to stop what they believed was a forbidden product that would lead Jews to violate Passover from entering into Jerusalem. They lived up to their promise and demonstrated against the sesame oil plastering posters on buildings banning the oil and denouncing Rav Kook and destroyed the bottles when the shipments arrived in Jerusalem.

Story two: as important as Rav Kook thought promoting the growth of the state was, he loved the shmittah even more. He wrote a beautiful book called *Shabbat Ha-Aretz*, the introduction of which has been elegantly translated by Julian Sinclair and recently published by Hazon. In it, Rav Kook explains the significance of shmittah: "what Shabbat does for the individual, shmittah does for the nation as a whole. The Jewish People in whom the Godly creative force is planted eternally and distinctively, has a special need to periodically reveal the divine light within itself with full intensity. Our mundane lives, with their toil, anxiety, anger and competition do not entirely suffocate this creative force, and on shmittah our pure inner soul can be revealed within us as it truly is." Unfortunately, Rav Kook's two priorities came into conflict during the shmittah year of 1909-10. Idealistic socialists were coming to Israel to live on kibbutz and were draining the swamps, planting crops to grow food for the Israeli population, and settling and protecting the land they were settling. These secular socialists and communists immigrants to Palestine were doing God's work to build a self-sustaining state in a way that pious Jews learning Talmud all day in Jerusalem could never do. These anti-religious Jews were redeeming the land, laying claim to it, feeding the people, and creating jobs and the beginnings of an economy.

The work of these pioneers excited Rav Kook, who in his duties as chief Rabbi of the district of Jaffa, would travel to the neighboring kibbutzim to see the wonderful progress they were making. These ideological and atheist farmers abandoned Jewish religion and tradition in Europe when they emigrated and were certainly not concerned with keeping halakha. He saw them as they worked and smoked on Shabbat, they ate non-kosher food, men and women danced together around bon fires, but he loved them because he was watching his dream being fulfilled. But he also knew that the last thing on their minds was keeping the esoteric commandment of shmittah, something that had not been practiced in 2,000 years. Even if they wanted to keep the laws of shmittah, he understood that if they left their land fallow for a year, the markets they were creating for their agricultural products would collapse, they would be unable to repay the debt service on the loans the kibbutzim used to purchase agricultural implements and seed; in short, by keeping the shmittah, agriculture, the main industry in the nascent state would be destroyed. Rav Kook knew that there was no way to tell these kibbutzniks to become halakhic Jews, let alone to tell them to practice the laws of shmittah.

At the same time, Rav Kook understood the importance of the shmittah law, both practically and mystically. Now that he was in the land of Israel, he wanted to figure out a way to keep this mitzvah and promote its observance in the general population, while at the same time encouraging the growth of the agricultural economy. In the 1909-10 shmittah year, Rav Kook advanced a novel argument in his introduction to *Shabbat Ha-Aretz* to address this situation. He developed and promoted the concept of the Heter Mechira, the permitted sale of agricultural land from Jews to non-Jews during the shmittah year. This concept is premised on the idea that the shmittah only applies in the land of Israel, and only on land owned by Jews and worked by Jews. If the land was sold during the shmittah year, it could be worked on the shmittah year by the kibbutzniks without violating the laws of shmittah. The kibbutz produce grown on the farms owned by non-Jews, albeit temporarily, could be purchased by Jews observing the laws of shmittah. The farm industry, and the economy would be saved, and the laws of

shmittah would be honored, even in their breach. By developing this legal mechanism to fix the problems with keeping the laws of shmittah during the early years of pre-state Palestine, the respect for the mitzvah of shmittah was preserved for a time when Israel could afford to keep it. As you can imagine, many then, and many today, have had trouble wrapping their minds around this flexible approach to shmittah and halakhah, but others welcomed the creativity which found a workable solution to an important problem. It took a rare and open mind to navigate this rocky terrain between the needs of the state and the needs of observance, and bringing together the fiercely anti-religious, with the equally fierce religious.

I apologize for retelling a story I related in an earlier d'var torah, but it is relevant here. When I lived in Israel in the late 1980s, I heard an oft-repeated story about my Kibbutz, Kibbutz Hazorea, which was of course named "the sower" to capture the image of the pioneering kibbutznik settling the land with agriculture. It was told that during the 1930s, on Yom Kippur, the kibbutznikim from Hazorea would dafka make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to eat ham sandwiches at the Wailing Wall made from the pork raised on platforms on the kibbutz. As you can imagine, this "ritual" drove the haredim in Jerusalem crazy. One year, a particularly angry group went to Rav Kook, who by this time was the chief Ashkenazi rabbi of Palestine, to get him to do something about these blaspheming Jews. Rav Kook pondered their request to censure the kibbutzniks and immediately told them, "these are not the Jews you have to worry about. The ones without the Yom Kippur ritual are the ones that should trouble you."

For years I have thought about this story, trying to figure out its meaning, not fully appreciating Rav Kook's complex attitude toward the kibbutzniks from Hazorea. Now I think I understand a bit of what he may have been thinking.

When Rav Kook through his travels and connections with kibbutzniks and their work, he developed a love for them that transcended the wooden idea of apikorsim that the Jerusalem establishment wanted him to enforce, and by demonstrating his love, the kibbutzniks came to love him. Rav Kook believed that the kibbutzniks were engaged in a holy task of cultivating the land of Israel, regardless of the ideology or religious observance of the farmers. And because of the mystical properties of the Land of Israel, Rav Kook believed that the very process of redeeming the land would ultimately transform the kibbutzniks and their beliefs. They would drop their secular anti-religious views, and over time and become ba'ale tshuvah. Because he deeply believed in the mystical power released by the redemption of the land of Israel by the kibbutzniks, he showed the redeemers love and not scorn that many of the Jews in Jerusalem showed them.

This complex and nuanced view of Rav Kook is something we sorely lack today. In many of our communities we feel that anyone who is less observant than we are is not an authentic Jew, and anyone who is more observant than we are is a fanatic. There is precious little of the love of klal Yisrael, as shown by Rav Kook of those across the entire Jewish spectrum. We need more of this love shown to Jews who are different from us, recognizing the holiness in their pursuits.

I would like to end with my favorite teaching from Pardes which gives an even deeper perspective on Rav Kook's unique philosophy. It is a poem written by Rav Kook, not for public consumption, but as a private musings of his own benefit. It was taken from his personal notebooks, and published posthumously. The poem is called the Fourfold Song. This meditation explains how Rav Kook saw the world and his approach to loving all Jews.

There is one who sings the song of his own life, and in his self he finds everything, his full spiritual satisfaction.

And there is another who sings the song of the nation. He leaves the circle of his own individual self, because he finds it without sufficient breadth, without an idealistic basis. He aspires toward the heights, and he cleaves himself, with a gentle love, to the whole community of Israel. Together with her he sings her songs. He feels grieved in her afflictions and delights in her hopes. He contemplates noble and pure thoughts about her past and her future, and probes with love and wisdom her inner spiritual essence.

And there is another who reaches toward more distant realms, and he goes beyond the boundary of Israel to sing the song of man. His spirit extends to the wider vistas of the majesty of man generally, and his noble essence. He aspires toward man's general goal and looks forward toward his higher perfection. From this source of life he draws the subjects of his meditation and study, his aspirations and his visions.

And there is one who rises toward wider horizons, until he unifies himself with all existence, with all God's creatures, with all worlds, and he sings his song with all of them. It is of one such as this that tradition has said that whoever sings a chapter of this song each day is assured of having a share in the world to come.

And then there is one who rises with all these songs in one ensemble, and they all join their voices. Together they sing their songs with beauty, each one gives vitality and life into the other. They are sounds of joy and gladness, sounds of jubilation and celebration, sounds of ecstasy and holiness.

The song of the self, the song of the nation, the song of man, the song of the universe all merge in him at all times, in every hour.

And this full comprehensiveness rises to become the song of holiness, the song of God, the song of Israel, in its full strength and beauty, in its full authenticity and greatness. The name "Israel" stands for shir el, the song of God. It is a simple song, a twofold song, a threefold song and a fourfold song. It is the Song of Songs of Solomon, Shlomo, which means peace or wholeness. It is the song of the King in whom is wholeness.

Shabbat Shalom.