

## CHAPTER 12

## Judaism

## Contemporary Expressions

## Eliezer Segal

Although the ideal of justice remains a central concern for the Jewish religion in all generations, the attitudes of Jewish thinkers or activists in the post-Enlightenment age are more likely to be shaped by the prevailing values of the surrounding society than by their engagement with a distinctively Jewish tradition. I have therefore chosen to focus this presentation on two seminal twentieth-century thinkers whose ideas and sensibilities were deeply rooted in the teachings of Jewish religious works: Rabbis Abraham Isaac Kook and Abraham Joshua Heschel.

The spiritual and intellectual trajectories of Rabbis Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935) and Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972) reveal many remarkable similarities. Both were the products of the intensely traditional Jewish religious milieu of eastern Europe. Each received a conventional rabbinic ordination certifying his erudition in the Talmud and Jewish religious law. Kook was an outstanding student of the celebrated Volozhin Yeshiva (talmudic seminary) in Lithuania (Yaron, 1974: 13; Dresner and Kaplan, 1998: 47–48).

In the family background of each was a strong influence of Hasidism, that powerful charismatic movement of popular mystical piety that had been founded by Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov in eighteenth-century Ukraine. Rabbi Kook's maternal grandfather had been an adherent of the Kapust branch of the movement, whereas Heschel was heir to the distinguished hasidic dynasties of Apta (Opatow) founded by his eighteenth- and nineteenth-century namesake, as well as that of Berditchev (Dresner and Kaplan, 1998: 4–9). As an ideology that was based in large measure on the teachings of the Kabbalah, Hasidism tended to focus on the theurgic or symbolic aspects of Jewish observance rather than on social ethics (Segal, 2005: 41–42), notwithstanding the widespread tendency of later popularizers to portray the Ba'al Shem Tov and his successors as champions of the poor against the wealthy establishment (Rosman, 1996:

116–119, 176–179). To take one instructive example, both Kook and Heschel equate the Good with harmonious unity, whereas Evil is identified with division, contentiousness, and disunity – a perspective that would seem to derive from kabbalistic usage (Kook, 1924: 9: 6 (34–35); Scholem, 1961: 235–239; Heschel, 1972: 120; Bokser, 1978: 71).

Both men spent formative stages of their lives in central or western European centers where they acquired a genuine interest in developments in European intellectual currents (see Goldman, 1991; Rosenak, 2007a: 119 n. 48, 135–143). In Rabbi Kook's case, it would appear that he was most strongly influenced by the historicist ideologies of Hegel (cf. Yaron, 1974: 105 n. 40; Rosenak, 2007a: 130), Marx (Yaron, 1974: 37–38 n. 3), and Darwin (Yaron, 1974: 224–225; Bokser, 1978: 304 ff.). Heschel's philosophical antecedents are to be sought principally among the exponents of religious existentialism and phenomenological approaches to religious experience (cf. Dresner and Kaplan, 1998: 115–136).

## Discovering the Bible

Both Kook and Heschel were students of the Hebrew Bible. While this might sound superfluously self-evident when one is speaking of Jewish religious scholars, it was not obvious at all in their cultural environment. The predominant religious curriculum that had evolved among Ashkenazic Jews since the Middle Ages had been so ardent about placing the Talmud at the center of its religious culture that, typically, the Bible was rarely studied on its own merits (Talmage, 1987; Kanarfogel, 1993). The scriptural texts that were taught in the schools were the ones that were incorporated into the liturgy – mainly the Torah (the Five Books of Moses), which was the source of the 613 commandments on which rabbinic Judaism is founded and which are read in the synagogue over the course of each year. Notwithstanding ongoing attempts by leading religious authorities to raise the profile of biblical and Hebrew studies in the Jewish schools, the only exposure that many eastern European Jewish students had to the Bible was through the rote learning and translating of the weekly lections from the Torah, along with the authoritative eleventh-century commentary by Rashi (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac of Troyes) that consisted largely of interpretations selected from the Talmud and ancient midrashic works. The remaining parts of the Hebrew Bible received little or no attention (Stampfer, 1988). The section classified as the “prophets” (which includes historical books as well as the books that recorded the teachings of the prophets of ancient Israel) was known to most Jews by virtue of the individual passages that are appended to the Torah reading on sabbaths and festivals (*haftarah*): consequently, they were likely to be approached as mere supplementary commentaries to the themes in the Torah lections (Dresner and Kaplan, 1998: 23, 27).

With the advent of modernism and the influences of the European and Jewish Enlightenment ideologies since the latter part of the eighteenth century, there was a revival of interest in the study of the Hebrew Bible in its entirety, whether as a way of undermining the stifling hegemony of the traditionalist rabbinic leadership, or in recognition of the fact that Christian reverence for the Hebrew Scriptures was a crucial

factor in creating a climate of acceptance for Jews in European society (Shavit and Eran, 2007). At any rate, this revived interest in biblical studies had limited success in penetrating the traditionalist ranks of the Polish and Russian Jewish communities – especially after it had been stigmatized as quasi-heretical, and therefore subversive, by conservative factions. Therefore, there is something quite remarkable in the fact that Rabbis Kook and Heschel derived meaningful inspiration from their study of the whole Bible, and particularly from the teachings of the great prophets of ancient Israel.

## The Aggadah

Closely related to this phenomenon is the fact that both religious teachers attached much importance to the “aggadah” component of the rabbinic corpus. The classic texts of ancient rabbinic literature were divided up into two main topical groupings: halakhah, which analyzed the technical intricacies of religious law; and aggadah, which embraced everything else, but whose main focus was the homiletical expositions of Scripture as they had been embodied in sermons delivered to synagogue audiences on sabbaths and festivals (Segal, 2009: 48–54). Aggadah is the genre to which one most readily turns in search of moral values, spirituality, theological doctrines, and most of the other features that western culture normally classifies as “religious.” While there is evidence that already in antiquity halakhah had a somewhat higher status in the rabbinic program of study, in modern times aggadah was virtually eliminated from the curricula of the *yeshivot* (talmudic seminaries), especially those that followed the “Lithuanian” model that stressed profound and incisive analysis of talmudic law. Like the marginalization of biblical studies, the dismissal of aggadah can be ascribed to a number of factors, such as the prestige that attached to students who mastered the intellectual complexities of the Babylonian Talmud and its commentaries, or a wish to avoid some of the thorny theological questions that might be provoked by intensive pondering of aggadic texts. Heschel took an extreme position in opposition to this trend, insisting that it is the aggadah that ultimately defines the religious significance of the halakhah, whether in its totality or with respect to the interpretation and application of specific precepts (Heschel, 2005; Brill, 2006: 5–7; Kaplan, 2007: 207–209).

Rabbi Kook understood prophecy and aggadah as being very similar in their essences. He wrote:

prophecy and the holy spirit emanate from the innermost parts of the human being, and from within it it flows out to everything that has anything to do with the world. Similarly with regard to Aggadah, it flows out of a person's spiritual core and then it also arranges its matters with respect to the external aspect of the world.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, both Kook and Heschel were opposing the dominant attitudes of their cultures when they actively proposed that the aggadah be reclaimed and assigned a central position in the Jewish religious corpus, especially as a repository of ethical values (Bokser, 1978: 13–14; Rosenak, 2007b: 137–138).

## Prophetic Justice

Zvi Yaron identifies prophecy as one of the principal factors that had an impact on Kook's distinctive blending of mysticism with vital concerns for society and nature. Prophecy injected into Judaism a moral passion and a deep concern for the plights of humanity and society, including a consciousness of how urgent it is to correct social inequities and strengthen justice on the practical plane (Yaron, 1974: 110–111). In explaining the context for Kook's attitude toward prophecy, Avinoam Rosenak observed that in the medieval Jewish philosophical tradition, the concept of prophecy had taken on an additional meaning alongside its social-historical dimension: rationalist thinkers perceived it as the culmination of a process of moral, metaphysical, and intellectual discipline that was required to bring the individual to a state of receptivity to communications from God. This doctrine differs radically from the simple sense of the biblical narratives, where the prophets are often simple, uneducated figures who are compelled to take up their calling out of an overpowering divine imperative. In his teachings Kook integrated both models of prophecy, stressing as well its special connections to the Holy Land and to the messianic era (Rosenak, 2007b: 136–137). Evidently he had experienced moments of spiritual elevation of his own that he regarded as prophetic revelations (Rosenak, 2007a: 117–119, 127–128).

Heschel chose to write his doctoral dissertation for the University of Berlin on the subject of the prophets of the Bible (Dresner and Kaplan, 1998: 163–171, 198–202). The dissertation was completed in 1933 and published as a book two years later under the tightening grip of the Nazi terror (Dresner and Kaplan, 1998: 173–181). His fascination with the prophetic ethic coincided with his growing conviction that the philosophical path was unable to provide a credible metaphysical underpinning to the basic questions of human life and values. These, he came to believe, could be more effectively achieved through the study and emulation of those divine spokespersons of ancient Israel, the *nevi'im* [=prophets]. Notwithstanding the need to conform to the prevailing academic norms of source-critical biblical research, Heschel did utilize his dissertation as a platform for making an outspoken argument (at least, as a historical claim about the prophets' thinking) for the idea of a “God of Pathos” who has a very real concern for the affairs of his creatures as they reveal themselves in the successes and failings of history (Sherman, 1970: 31–37; Brown, 1985: 125; Merkle, 1985; Dresner and Kaplan, 1998: 129–132, 163–164). He had the dissertation translated into English in an extensive revision in 1962 (Kaplan, 2007: 210–213). In the Introduction to that edition he recalled that “the most important outcome of the inquiry has been for me the discovery of the *intellectual relevance of the prophets*” (emphasis in original). He contrasted their passion with the fruitless aridity that typified the philosophical climate he had encountered himself as a student of philosophy; and he described his growing realization that “some of the terms, motivations and concerns which dominate our thinking may prove destructive of the roots of human responsibility and treasonable to the ultimate ground of human solidarity” (Heschel, 1962: 1: xiv–xv; Brown, 1985: 133; Dresner and Kaplan, 1998: 14–15).

Though he was ostensibly describing a bygone historical phenomenon from the ancient Near East, it is clear that Heschel was presenting the message of the ancient prophets as one whose relevance has not diminished in the modern world. Central to that message was the conviction that “the primary way of serving God is through love, justice, and righteousness” (Heschel, 1962: 1: 195, 197, 198). God’s principal concern is with the “material needs of widows and orphans” (Heschel, 1962: 1: 197):

righteousness is not just a value; it is God’s part of human life, *God’s stake in human history*. Perhaps it is because the suffering of man is a blot upon God’s conscience; because it is in relations between man and man that God is at stake. (Heschel, 1962: 1: 198)

## Theology and Justice

Arguably, Rabbi Kook’s most concerted discussion of ethical questions is to be found in his treatise *The Lights of Repentance* (1924) (cf. Bitty, 1998). Though the direct authorship cannot be completely ascribed to him (it was assembled by his son Zvi Yehudah Kook from his father’s notes), it was printed with the elder Kook’s approval during his lifetime and appears to be consistent with his known views. In this work, composed in the rabbi’s characteristic mixture of flowery rabbinic Hebrew and modern neologisms, he examines the traditional religious concept of repentance, in the sense of turning away from sin and coming back to God’s correct path as defined by the Torah. Kook expands this concept into an all-inclusive trajectory that begins from the spiritual malaise of the individual, and then leads the confused soul to the finding of spiritual direction and the improvement of one’s true religious character, which will culminate in national and universal redemption (Kook, 1924: 4:10 (12); Bokser, 1978: 52–53).

In Kook’s awkwardly poetic style, it is not always possible to know with certainty whether he is speaking about justice and righteousness as ethical principles governing interhuman social relationships or as theological concepts in their kabbalistic sense of divine attributes. According to the kabbalistic symbolism, Justice (*Din, Gevurah*) is the divine power that manifests itself in punishment and in choking off the descent of celestial blessings into the human world (Scholem, 1961: 213). As such, justice is associated with a metaphysical divisiveness that prevents the actualization of the complete unity that defines ultimate redemption (Kook, 1924: 12:10 (53); Bokser, 1978: 87–88). Kook’s mystical universe is so pervaded by the divine light that at times he portrays evil as illusory, a sort of veil that is necessary to channel the undifferentiated light (Kook, 1924: 16:12 (93); Bokser, 1978: 124–125).

To a much more decisive and unmistakable degree, Heschel placed the quests for social justice and compassion at the center of his theology. While this is not the appropriate place to recapitulate all the subtleties of his philosophy, there are a number of theological points that must serve as essential background to a proper appreciation of Heschel’s ethical thought. My main source for this description is his 1951 treatise *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (Kaplan, 2007: 118–120). In that work, Heschel began from the experiential and undeniable assumption of a “radical amazement” that places human beings in an existential relationship with the “ineffable” God. It is this

stance that allows us to perceive our surroundings as constituting “the universe” in the literal sense of an all-embracing, coherent entity. This fundamental perception, Heschel argues, cannot be the result of any scientific analysis. “The idea of the universe is a metaphysical insight” (Heschel, 1972: 104). Though all existing things share in a “kinship of being,” man, as a being with a conscious soul, possesses a crucial distinctiveness that transcends the generic commonalities of being or of nature (Heschel, 1972: 105). The recognition of human brotherhood, with all the implications it has in the realms of ethics, compassion, and mutual responsibility (Heschel, 1972: 121), makes sense only as a corollary of the unifying monotheistic principle.

It is only in the mirror of a divine unity, in which we may behold the unity of all; of necessity and freedom, of law and love. It alone gives us an insight into the unity that transcends all conflicts, the brotherhood of hope and grief, or joy and fear, of tower and grave, of good and evil. (Heschel, 1972: 108, 226)

It is typical of Heschel that, alongside his theological formulation of this premise, he also cites a source from the prophet Malachi (2:10) “Have we not all one father? Has not one God made us? Then why do we break faith with one another, every man with his fellow, by dishonoring our time-honored truth?” (Heschel, 1972: 120). He invokes the prophets as his precedent for the idea that God is not a distant or abstract supernatural being, but rather is identical with “justice, mercy; not only a power to which we are accountable, but also a pattern for our lives” (Heschel, 1972: 133). Often the prophets established their social agendas of justice and righteousness in opposition to what many still see as the main concerns of “organized religion,” such as cult, worship, solemnity, or devotion.

In a similar vein, Heschel argues that “we could not own the power for goodness if it were lacking in God. If there is morality in us, it must eminently be in God. If we possess the vision of justice, it must eminently be in God” (Heschel, 1972: 132). Furthermore, while people may need some discipline in order to enable them to live up to their ideals (“the idea of justice and the will to justice are not twin-born”; Heschel, 1972: 51), Heschel’s world was clearly not built on the classic dualistic antagonism between our altruistic moral conscience and our selfish physical instincts. Rather, he believed that it is possible to educate people so that the desire for justice becomes a natural part of our thinking that is stronger than the will to do or to tolerate evil.

## Religious and Secular Ethics

Modern philosophy has acknowledged since at least as far back as David Hume that scientific discourse can not legitimately progress from descriptive statements about what is to prescriptive statements about what ought to be. For many, the “is–ought problem,” “fact–value distinction,” or “naturalistic fallacy” (as formulated by G.E. Moore) precludes the possibility of a purely secular ethic.

Kook and Heschel shared very similar views about the relationships between religious and secular ethical sensibilities. Kook’s views were very much colored by his

personal encounters with the idealism of the young Zionist pioneers in Palestine, who were strongly motivated by secular, antireligious ideologies, especially Marxist socialism, and who saw their activities as a rejection of the antiquated religious values with which they had grown up in Europe (Bitty, 2005; Rosenak, 2007a: 134–135). Indeed, the Orthodox religious establishment of the day declared an ideological war against Zionists as outright heretics whose values stood in irreconcilable opposition to the Torah. Rabbi Kook, however, recognized that the Zionists' passion for justice was fundamentally a religious one, even if they themselves did not acknowledge that fact.

We would not be upset if some sort of social justice could be established without the slightest inkling of a religious reference; because we are aware that the very desire for justice in whatever form it may take is essentially the most illuminating divine influence. (Iggerot RA"ta" H. 1: 143, cited by Yaron, 1974: 39)

In other writings he deeply regretted people's failure to appreciate that ethical sensitivity is, at its root, a spiritual capacity that is implanted in the human soul, an inescapable striving for absolute goodness. In the ultimate scheme of things, secular ethics alone are not capable of bringing people to complete perfection, which remains a religious objective.<sup>2</sup>

## Universal Justice

Kook believed that a striving for justice is integral to the human psyche. "The moral instinct demands from man righteousness and goodness," though we must struggle to actualize the ideal of absolute justice in the world (Kook, 1924: 5:6 (15); Bokser, 1978: 54–55). If we succeed in that endeavor, then the divine light will embrace all mankind and all reality "in everything that is capable of containing the quality of morality" (Kook, 1924: 13:2 (57); Bokser, 1978: 92). It is in this grand context that Rabbi Kook includes glimpses of a world in which universal justice may be realized. The process begins with "the individual and communal soul, the global and the universal souls, like a fearsome lioness crying out in its torments for a total repair, for an ideal reality" (Kook, 1924: 4:1 (8); Bokser, 1978: 49). He speaks of a "general repentance" that entails the elevation and repair of the whole world; as well as "all those cultural improvements by means of which the world is removed from its desolation, social and economic life-structures" (Kook, 1924: 4:3 (9), see also 15:12 (86); Bokser, 1978: 49, see also 118). Ultimately, it is the combined repentance of individuals that will translate into the general vanquishing of evil and ignorance (Kook, 1924: 15:11 (91–92); Bokser, 1978: 118). In the redeemed world, evil will be eradicated by means of the voluntary repentance of the wicked (Kook, 1924: 16:12 (94); Bokser, 1978: 124).

It should be noted as well that Rabbi Kook is rare, if not unique, among traditional Jewish thinkers in his insistence on establishing "justice for animals" in a way that leads to vegetarianism, an ideal whose roots he discerns in the biblical dietary laws (Bokser, 1978: 317). And yet, though he has come to be widely perceived as Judaism's most illustrious vegetarian, Rosenak has demonstrated that this image is a false one that was

imposed on him and the works published under his name by prominent disciples who did indeed practice vegetarianism. Rabbi Kook evidently envisaged universal vegetarianism as an aspect of the future redeemed world, but he believed that it should not be implemented in the present (Rosenak, 2007b: 358–364).

In Kook's eschatological doctrine, true to the traditional Jewish visions of redemption, the people of Israel are to play an essential role in ushering in the utopian age. Following rabbinic and kabbalistic usage, the Jewish national spirit is personified as "the congregation of Israel." "The soul of the congregation of Israel is absolute justice, in whose realization is contained all practical moral goodness" (Kook, 1924: 4:7 (10), 13:1 (56); Bokser, 1978: 50, 91). The national dimension of the repentance process will include healthy civic values: "political order and love for the improvement of the community in good manners and tolerance" (Kook, 1924: 4:9 (12), 14:30 (74); Bokser, 1978: 52, 107). Israel will stand at the vanguard of what will become a universal repentance and redemption (Kook, 1924: 5:9 (16), 17:1 (94); Bokser, 1978: 55, 126).

For all his stress on the primacy and spiritual superiority of Israel in the redemption process, the dominant tone of Kook's eschatological vision appears to be universalistic – though there are some significant exceptions. (See Bokser's discussion [1978: 12–13], texts on pp. 136–137, 210, and so on.)

Heschel's model of the just society is essentially a universalistic one in all important respects (Dresner, 2002: 16–17). Although he very frequently quotes sources from the Bible, from the hasidic masters, or from other Jewish traditions, *Man Is Not Alone* is true to its subtitle "a Philosophy of Religion" and not a philosophy of *Judaism*. Its principal message is addressed to humanity in its entirety – and there is a powerful sense of urgency that the message must be shared by all peoples. In fact, Heschel evinces pointed hostility to the historical tendency of institutional religions to emphasize the differences between them: "Parochial saintliness may be an evasion of duty, an accommodation to selfishness" (Heschel, 1972: 237).

## Law and Justice

In his discussions about the biblical ideal of justice, Heschel noted that Hebrew used two different lexical roots to convey the relevant concepts, producing the nouns *mishpat* and *tsedek*, conventionally rendered as "justice" and "righteousness" respectively. Though the two terms are often employed interchangeably, there is a sense to which justice refers to a "mode of action," especially by acting in accordance with the law, whereas righteousness denotes a type of personality that cultivates concern for others (Heschel, 1962: 1:200–201). While much of the wrath of the biblical prophets was directed against the abuse of the legal system by those in power, neither they nor Heschel wished to diminish the importance of a judicial system that administers the law fairly. After all, civil and criminal law were essential components of the divinely revealed Torah; and accordingly, what secular laws regard as crimes are now classified as sins (Heschel, 1962: 1:217). Nevertheless, Heschel insisted that "righteousness goes beyond justice" (Heschel, 1962: 1:201). Justice by itself is not a sufficient vehicle for imprinting God's will on society and history. Because of their righteous personalities,

the prophets were often reactive – protesting against the injustices and oppressions that they witnessed around them. Apart from some significant exceptions (like Moses, Deborah, and Samuel), prophets did not occupy positions of judicial authority, but stood on the margins, remonstrating and condemning the abuses of the ruling establishment. Citing Deuteronomy 16:20, Heschel declares: “The demand is not only to respect justice in the sense of abstaining from doing injustice, but also to strive for it, to pursue it” (Heschel, 1962: 1:207). In a society that succeeded in implementing true justice and righteousness, there would likely be no need for prophets.

Thus, in the opening address that he delivered at the National Conference on Religion and Race in 1963, at the height of the American civil rights struggle, Heschel admonished his audience:

Most of us are content to delegate the problem to the courts, as if justice were a matter for professionals or specialists. But to do justice is what God demands of every man: it is the supreme commandment, and one that cannot be fulfilled vicariously. Righteousness must dwell not only in the places where justice is judicially administered. There are many ways of evading the law and escaping the arm of justice. (Kaplan, 2007: 215–218)

In a similar setting at another conference on race, he declared:

There are no administrative solutions to spiritual problems. The United States Senate, the courts, and the laws will only enable us to embark upon the task; it will remain a challenge to our wisdom, to our power of love to complete the task. (Heschel, 1966: 91, cf. 106; Kaplan, 2007: 219–220)

Clearly, the exploitation of the judicial system as an instrument of racial oppression was very much part of the American social landscape at that time; however, Heschel's statement was not merely a response to contemporary conditions. It reflected a coherent philosophical position at which he had arrived on its own merits. As is well known, Heschel achieved international prominence during the 1960s for his activism on social and political issues, chief among them being the struggles against racial segregation and discrimination and the opposition to the Vietnam war. At the famous Alabama civil rights protest march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, Heschel stood in the front row along with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., subjecting himself to considerable risks to his safety (Kaplan, 2007: 220–224). From 1965, he was in the forefront of the religious opposition to America's war in Vietnam. He was a founding member of the National Emergency Committee Concerned about Vietnam, and participated actively in numerous rallies against the war (Kaplan, 2007: 300–310). His activist engagement was also directed toward causes like the rights of the Jews of the Soviet Union, the security of the state of Israel, and the treatment of the elderly (Dresner, 2002: 21–22; Kaplan, 2007: 202, 225–229, 313–318). Acquaintances testified that this public profile did not come naturally to his scholarly, retiring personality, but that he was compelled to act by his religious commitment to justice and compassion (Sherman, 1970: 11–14; Dresner and Kaplan, 1998: 22; Kaplan, 2007: 198). In this respect as well, Heschel's

conflict paralleled that of Rabbi Kook, who expressed intense frustration at the need to occupy himself with public affairs when his personal desire was for a life of solitary scholarship (Rosenak, 2007a: 133–134, 141–143).

Unlike Heschel, Rabbi Kook's vision of social justice did not draw its primary inspiration from the image of the indignant prophet fulminating at the city gates and at the hubs of political power. It sometimes had more in common with the spirit of a platonic state that is founded on a substratum of equitable laws. Evidently, he did not feel that true justice can be achieved in a piecemeal manner by correcting individual wrongs. Nothing short of a universal reorganization of society's structures and laws can accomplish this goal in a satisfactory way. For Kook, of course, the source of those perfectly wise laws was the Torah, as expounded according to the classic rabbinic interpretations, encompassing both the 613 commandments that were revealed through Moses at Mount Sinai and the oceans of exegetical and supplementary material contained in the “oral Torah” preserved in the Talmud and codes of religious law. The fulfillment of the repentance process demands adherence to the minutiae of observance in accordance with the written and unwritten Torahs (Kook, 1924: 13:2 (57), see also 16:11 (91); Bokser, 1978: 92, see also 123). Yaron (1974: 110–111) observes how for Kook the greatness of the halakhah is to be found in the way in which it translates the divine spirit into a day-to-day regimen of practical discipline, thereby deepening Judaism's involvement in human civilization.

More specifically, Kook subscribes to the attitude of traditional rabbinic culture when he equates authentic repentance with the intense scholarly study of civil and criminal law. It is this endeavor that will “remove all the obstructions to the heart in life and establish divine justice on a dependable foundation” when it is supplemented by other domains of the Torah, especially those that deal more broadly with moral and philosophical matters (Kook, 1924: 13:4 (58); Bokser, 1978: 93). (Rabbi Kook does nonetheless acknowledge that interpersonal problems are best dealt with practically rather than theoretically [Kook, 1924: 14:15 (68); Bokser, 1978: 103].) Menachem Klein has argued that Kook's preference for scholarship over prophecy as a way of life was a consequence of the fact that, from a historical perspective, prophecy had failed in its quest to achieve a permanent transformation of the world, whereas the halakhic scholarship of the rabbis has succeeded to a great extent in shaping and guiding Jewish life for many centuries (Klein, 1986; cited by Rosenak, 2007b: 138).

There is nevertheless another, very different direction to be discerned in Kook's writing that has been characterized as “antinomian.” In these passages he contrasts the cold, impersonal character of talmudic scholarship with the animated spirit of aggadah and prophecy, presenting the former as a relic of the stunted development of exilic Judaism (Rosenak, 2007a: 120–123, 129).

It is questionable whether these contrasting attitudes can be fully reconciled, and they may well reflect shifts in Rabbi Kook's thinking or reactions to differing circumstances or target audiences. Rosenak has argued that the halakhic system that Kook envisages as the basis for his ideal just society will be one that has undergone a revolutionary transformation as the legal system is rejuvenated in the spirit of prophecy and aggadah (Rosenak, 2007b: 139). At any rate, *Lights of Repentance* is directed primarily at individual Jews who are seeking to correct moral flaws and strengthen their religious

personalities. As such, it often appears that the references to social justice and other forms of interpersonal ethics are being presented not as social goals that ought to be pursued for their own sakes, but rather as aspects of the individual's moral perfection (e.g., Kook, 1924: 14:29 (73–74); Bokser, 1978: 107).

In Yaron's synthesis of Kook's philosophy, which contains a chapter devoted to his social teachings, one finds very little explicit information about the topic. For example, Kook wrote extensively about the biblical sabbatical and jubilee years, in which the rights of private ownership are overridden and purchased property reverts to its original owner, who sold it out of economic need. The Torah grounds this law in God's declaration "for the land is mine, no land shall be sold permanently" (Leviticus 25:23). And yet Kook is very restrained about deriving a political or social theory from this precedent, preferring to characterize the sabbatical years as times of spiritual renewal. Only one source quoted in Yaron's book deals directly with the issue and asserts:

without determining which social system is endorsed by the Torah, it is possible to state with certainty that the consistent observance of all the laws of the Torah in the social and economic domain without compromise, would not tolerate the existence of a system based on private ownership.

This quotation, however, is cited from a listener's private notes and does not appear in any of Rabbi Kook's published works (Yaron, 1974: 162–164). Kook does, however, insert a remark about "the legal inequity in the ownership of property" into his allegorical interpretation of the Torah's prohibition of mixed wool and linen (Deuteronomy 22:11; Bokser, 1978: 320).

### Kook and Heschel: Explaining Their Differences

To be sure, religious and philosophical positions cannot automatically be reduced to their historical contexts, particularly when we are dealing with original, creative thinkers of the calibers of Kook and Heschel. Nevertheless, I think that an awareness of the historical settings in which they wrote does contribute to a clearer understanding of some of the issues that distinguish their approaches to social justice.

Rabbi Kook flourished at the beginning of the twentieth century, during a time when western thought was still heady in its faith in progress as an inevitable force that made each generation superior to the previous one (Nisbet, 1980) and that would imminently be arriving at its glorious culmination (Gellman, 1991: 53, 159, 161, 214, etc.; Rosenak, 2007a: 137–138). The perception that history is preset in a divinely guided direction that leads toward the "end times" was fundamental to ancient prophetic teaching, and in the nineteenth century it had been given secular revisions, as a metaphysical working out of the Spirit in Hegel, as the class struggle giving way to the classless society in Marx, or as the evolutionary path to higher biological adaptability in Darwin. Even the modernist exponents of the Jewish Enlightenment appealed to utopian assumptions as a way of justifying the introduction of far-reaching changes in religious practice and theology, by arguing that their times were radically different

from anything that the Jewish past had hitherto encountered (Meyer, 1988: 59). Rabbi Kook integrated these views with kabbalistic eschatological themes and with Zionist ideology to produce an outlook that was, in its historical setting, typically optimistic. The secular doctrines that stood at the forefront of the Zionist movement in Palestine were imbued with socialistic ideals of equality and concern for the downtrodden proletariat and peasantry, so these were not issues that had to be placed at the top of Kook's ethical agenda (Bitty, 2005). Jews were on the threshold of restoring their sovereignty and, Kook presumed, this would be accompanied by the restoration of their divinely authored judicial system. In Europe and even in the land of Israel, the Jewish societies with which Kook was familiar were subject to foreign control, existing on the peripheries of states that differed from – and were likely hostile to – the values of Judaism. However, the nations of the world were acquiring a level of enlightenment that would allow them to appreciate the greatness of Israel's Torah and to emulate its sublime values. When the Torah will be removed from the ritualistic compartmentalization that characterizes the exile, and restored to its fitting place as the comprehensive legal system of a utopian society, then injustices will disappear and humanity will be freed to pursue its proper spiritual vocation.

Rabbi Kook died in 1935, before the full extent of Nazi and Stalinist atrocities were discernible, or perhaps even imaginable, and before the Jews of Israel declared independent statehood and were launched into a prolonged military conflict with the Arab world.

Heschel, on the other hand, was an eyewitness to the rise of Nazism in Germany and the rest of Europe. He was himself deported from Frankfurt to Warsaw in 1938 and narrowly succeeded in escaping to England months before the Nazi invasion (Dresner and Kaplan, 1998: 266–290). Most of his immediate family were murdered by the Nazis (Dresner and Kaplan, 1998: 306). Unlike the dominant perception among traditionalist Jews, which viewed the Holocaust as but the latest and most intense manifestation in a millennial pattern of Christian antisemitism, Heschel saw it as a disturbing and perhaps inevitable consequence of modern humanity's distance from the basic values and moral sensitivity of true religion. In 1944, while the war and genocide were still in progress, he wrote:

Let Fascism not serve as an alibi for our conscience. We have failed to fight for right, for justice, for goodness: as a result we must fight against wrong, against injustice, against evil. We have failed to offer sacrifices on the altar of peace; now we must offer sacrifices on the altar of war. (Sherman, 1970: 45–46; Dresner, 1985: 21; Fierman, 1990: 17; Kaplan, 2007: 46, 120; cf. Faienstein, 1999)

The mindset that confronted Heschel in postwar America was in many ways a negative image of what Kook had encountered in Palestine during the early twentieth century. Heschel found American society to be mired in complacency, materialism, nationalistic insularity, and insensitivity to spiritual messages. Thus, when confronted by the moral outrages of racial segregation and the Vietnam war (Kaplan, 2007: 214–234, 298–313), both of which were being perpetrated in a democratic state that was governed by the rule of law, it is not surprising that Heschel found himself unready to

equate the prophetic ideals of righteous justice with the mere enforcement of a legal regime, equitable though it might be. Unlike the situation in the Old World, the Jewish minority in America in the latter half of the twentieth century was able to identify with and participate fully in the social and political life of its country.

Although it is true that theological and ideological thinkers typically have limited influence among the Jewish public, the teachings of Rabbis Kook and Heschel continue to have a broad readership. Rabbi Kook's writings have acquired quasi-canonical status in the religious Zionist stream of Israeli culture, including the state religious school system. In those circles, the principal focus is often placed on his eschatological and nationalistic views, and yet the fact remains that his full corpus is studied quite widely, including his ideals of ethics and justice. There is no comparable institutional backing behind the philosophy of Abraham Heschel, and yet the eloquent charm of his writing and the passion of his message have attracted a large audience in the English-speaking world. Whether by mapping out the equitable structures of a messianic society or by honing our sensitivity to the injustices of our contemporary world, each thinker in his own way has played a crucial role in transmitting and interpreting the heritage of traditional Jewish religious values to coming generations.

## Notes

- 1 Kook (2007a: 137), citing a version of Kook's text that was not subjected to emendation by his editor and son-in-law Rabbi David Cohen (cf. Schwartz, 2002: 198–234; Rosenak, 2007a).
- 2 See sources assembled by Yaron (1974: 39–40, 43). In n. 8 he compares Kook's position to that of Heschel.

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