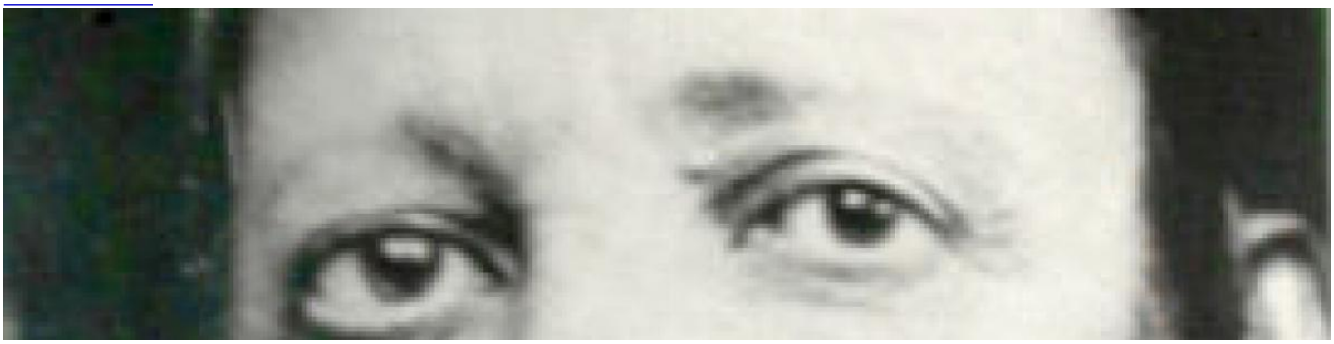
The Spiritual Revolution of Rav Kook: a Book Review

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Rabbi Dr. Israel Drazin is author of many books, and often writes reviews of books of current Jewish interest.

Even rationalists like me can read, enjoy, and learn from the writings of mystics. We do not have to accept everything they say as being true, but there are things they say which are true.

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook was born in Latvia in 1865 and died in Jerusalem in 1935. His father was a Mitnaged, opposed to mysticism. His mother was a descendant of Chabad, a Chasidic group. When asked “What will you be?” he answered “I will be both.” In 1920, at the age of fifty-five, he moved to Jerusalem and became its Ashkenazic chief rabbi.

Rabbi Kook’s writings are generally, but not always very mystical and difficult to understand. However, Rabbi Ari Ze’ev Schwartz’s book “The Spiritual Revolution of Rav Kook” unravels the writings with a new translation, with each chapter being divided into clearly stated topic headings added by Rabbi Schwartz, such as the individual, Torah, God, teshuvah, prayer, creativity, Zionism, science, and vegetarianism. Rabbi Schwartz also introduces each section with a clear explanation of what Rabbi Kook is saying.

Rabbi Kook became Ashkenazic chief rabbi long before the State of Israel was reestablished in 1948. He lived during a period when the vast majority of pioneers who sacrificed their lives and came to Israel and faced difficulties in their attempts to build up the land of Israel were irreligious Jews, often men and women who were antagonistic to religion. He is properly credited and even commended for working to draw all people close, even those who rebelled against

religion. He taught that each person should want to influence friends and be influenced by them for the increase of the greater good. It is through the combining of different talents within each individual that a society is formed. He also taught that everyone should find a personal Torah and realize that there is not just one type of Torah, but an endless variety that can speak to countless individuals in different ways.

The following are some other of Rabbi Kook's ideas:

The highest type of thinking remains open to new ideas. No one has a monopoly on truth. There is truth in other religions.

Secular knowledge is important. We must teach our children what is necessary for them to know as they confront the trials of life.

I walk around with an overwhelming jealousy of the secular world. It is a jealousy that consumes me. For is it really possible that the power of creativity has ceased within the religious world?

Atheists may be on the right track. They may be denying an immature and distorted image of God. In other words, their denial of God is really a deeper quest for a higher, more sophisticated understanding. Atheism comes to purify the dirt, the embarrassments, that have stuck to a religion that lacks any comprehension. Religious people should understand this, and pay attention to what is bothering them.

One should not only study a religious text to receive a new idea; it should serve as a tool toward understanding oneself.

The role of an author of any book is to begin the discussion of an idea, yet it is the reader's responsibility to respond by searching for personal meaning.

The ideal perfection of a person can only be accomplished by focusing one's energy on improving one's own individual self as much as possible. Yet at the same time a person should keep in mind that one's own individual perfection will never be completed until the Jewish people have successfully reached national perfection.

People should realize that being totally perfect is unattainable and should understand that a person's true greatness is found in the journey of constantly striving to become a little better.

More than asking God to forgive our misdeeds, we should learn to forgive ourselves and work to assure we do not repeat our mistakes.

Personal growth requires us to first clarify what is the character trait we want to assume, and only after knowing this to try to embody it.

A person who thinks that prayer changes God’s will is blaspheming.

The demand for physical activity is enormous. We need healthy bodies. But we have focused on our souls and have forgotten the holiness of the body.

We must agree with Maimonides who taught that the stories of creation told in the Torah should not be understood literally; rather, they have a deeper lesson to teach.

It is hard to believe that God created a world that Genesis 1:31 calls “very good,” and yet made it impossible for humankind to survive without distorting its moral sensitivity by murdering animals.