The Unique Vision of Rav Kook: Book Review

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Rabbi Dr. Drazin served in the US Army for 31 years and attained the rank of Brigadier General. He is the author of 61 books, most on the Bible. He and his wife live in Pikesville, Maryland.

The best book I have read in years

Marc B. Shapiro's books and articles are always superb. His writings are filled with fascinating information. His presentation of scholarly ideas and religious and secular practices, ancient and modern, Jewish and non-Jewish, is explained engagingly. Even people who are generally uninterested in the subjects, Jews and non-Jews who have no background knowledge of it, find what he writes to be eye-opening and riveting.[1]

Shapiro's 2025 book

"Renewing the Old Sanctifying the New: The Unique Vision of Rav Kook" is such a book.[2] Dr. Shapiro reveals Rabbi Kook's surprising, sometimes radical, and breathtaking ideas, prompting us to rethink what we have accepted as sensible.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935) was pre-state Israel's first Ashkenazi chief rabbi. Ashkenazi Jews were from the area in and near Germany, in contrast to Sephardic Jews who lived in Israel and Muslim countries. He introduced many interpretations of Jewish ideas to please Jews and non-Jews of all persuasions.

He was born in what is today Latvia, served in two rabbinic positions there from 1896 until he moved to the Land of Israel in 1904, was appointed Chief Rabbi in 1921, and served in this position until he died in 1935.

He was a talented student in his youth at the famed Volozhin Yeshiva. However, he rejected his time's traditional Talmud-only, single-minded, study-only system, which is still followed by many ultra-Orthodox yeshivas today. He insisted that such studies ruin the minds and behaviors of Jews who must learn secular studies in addition to Jewish ones. While he introduced many rational teachings, he also liked Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism. Still, here, too, he stressed that people studying Kabbalah must also learn secular subjects, meaning scientific advances, for the Torah can and must coexist with current scientific truths.

He asserted that total immersion in Talmud often resulted in basic morality being preserved more truly by the uneducated public than among learned scholars. Many pious people devoted so much time to their acts of piety that they ignored the behavior that the traditional practice was meant to teach. The pious disregarded the idea that the best way to honor God is to honor fellow humans and what He produced, but the ordinary folks did not ignore it.

Among many other teachings, he was convinced that sacrifices would not be made in the messianic age. He describes this age as the age when people will become vegetarians.

He stressed that we do not have to accept introductory biblical stories as facts because they were not written to teach actual history but moral lessons. He does not tell us how far he would take his non-literal approach, but Dr. Shapiro describes how others understand the stories.

The opening chapters of Genesis could be understood as a long development period. We can even speak of a million years from the creation of humans until they realized they were different from animals. We can accept the ideas of evolution and realize that the tale of the serpent in the Garden of Eden is part of an allegory, that Eve was not taken from Adam’s rib and the story is a way of teaching that husbands and wives should create a partnership to be successful, the long life spans in Genesis are not to be taken literally because the people were no different from us – and views are given to explain the longevity such as the text is speaking of clans or groups of people, the story of Cain killing his brother also never happened but is a tale that should be mined for many lessons. One can consider the first “ten generations” in Genesis until Noah as allegories.

Rabbi Kook reveals that biblical prophets, being human, can err in their prophesies and gives examples. He tells how the Torah style is filled with exaggerated figures of speech, such as Israel flowing with milk and honey and cities fortified to heaven. Similarly, the Torah incorporates all sorts of untruths because these were what people believed when the Torah

was given. For example, Jacob's wives, Rachel and Leah, think mandrakes help women conceive. Likewise, the Torah uses language that is not accurate but reflects the mistaken beliefs of the masses, such as Exodus 15:11, "Who is like You, Lord among the gods."

Maimonides explains in his *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:28 that the Torah needed to do this because the general population would have been unable to accept the Torah if the truth, which was contrary to their mistaken notions, had been stated explicitly. Maimonides called these untruths "Essential Truths."

Rabbi Kook taught that even if a person is convinced that the Torah is not from God but is authored by humans, it can still be respected as a repository of wisdom and a guide to one's life.

He often repeated that we must treat others as we want them to treat us. This includes people with other religious beliefs, even atheists. He goes so far as to write, "Every religion has some value and a divine spark, and even idolatry has a good spark because of the small morality in contains. He notes that Maimonides recognized that non-Jews could receive prophecy.

In summary, the foregoing is only an outline of some of what Dr. Shapiro reveals of Rabbi Kook's many wise teachings. Rabbi Kook's views of the Torah and Judaism will surprise readers of all persuasions. The teachings will serve as a grounding for a rational approach to many subjects and a stimulant to seeking further learning and observance of the Torah's goal of honoring all that God provided. Rabbi Dr. Shapiro has made a remarkable contribution to our thinking and behavior.

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[1] An example is "Changing the Immutable, How Orthodox Judaism Rewrites its History," The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2015, 347 pages. In it, Shapiro shows that many rabbis in the Orthodox community rewrite the past by snipping out of books of prior rabbis and scholars, even well-respected ones, what does not fit into their personal worldview.

A small sample of many that Shapiro reveals is the "offending view" of Rashi's grandson Rashbam on Genesis 1:5 that the day began in the morning in the Bible. They conceal the conviction of many sages that parts of the Five Books of Moses" were composed

after Moses' death, such as Abraham ibn Ezra and the famed pietistic Rabbi Judah HaHasid. They hide the fact that the codifier Moses Isserles felt it is permissible to drink non-Jewish wine. They censored Joseph Karo's "Shulchan Arukh," where he states that the "kapparot" ceremony on the day before Yom Kippur in which people transferred their sins to a chicken was a "foolish custom." They excised the statement of Rabbi Joseph Messas from his "Mayim Chayim," where he ruled that married women have no obligation to cover their hair, a decision also held by Rabbi Joseph Hayim and many others. They obscured the ruling of the highly respected codifier Rabbi Yehiel Mikhel Epstein that one is allowed to turn on electric lights on festivals. They expunged the opinion of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch that everyone does not need to devote his life to Torah study and the opinion of Maimonides in his Introduction to his opus "Mishneh Torah" that Jews need not study the Talmud. They erased the Vilna Gaon's belief that it is only a custom for males to cover their heads and that in Orthodox families in Germany, male Jews only covered their heads when at prayer or saying a blessing. They hide what Rabbi Kook and Maimonides taught: that people must exercise.

[2] The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, Liverpool, 212 pages, including 27 pages of a Bibliography and Index.

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