

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kuk.

Commemorative date: 3rd Ellul (1935)

[Written by Rabbi Moshe Zurie]

Rabbi Avraham Kuk was a true genius. The literary heritage that he left us is prodigious, tens of volumes that have been already published and yet tens of others yet in manuscript form.

These cover every field of Torah study: Halacha and Aggada, Jewish philosophy and Kabbala, Talmudic dialectics and Midrashic homilies, Mussar works and Responsa, delicate poetry and abstruse investigative thought.

His mental vigor and constant activity gave him astonishing mastery in any intellectual endeavor that he undertook.

Although his paternal grandfather was a Mithnaged, his maternal grandfather was a Hasid of the famous Tzemach Tzedek of Lubavitz. This double capacity bequeathed wide ranging capacities, clear-headed thought alongside with powerful emotions. Being granted a pure unselfish soul, and so too very articulate literary ability, we have here a perfect candidate to be the Chief Rabbi of the Jewish community (as he was between 1921-1935). Certainly he left a powerful impact on the Religious Zionist community.

During his youth he learnt in the world-famous Yeshiva of Wolozhin, under the tutelage of the Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin). It was there that he picked up his wide-embracing theorem that it is forbidden to split the Jewish nation into "camps" (see his work "ma'amarei Re'iya" page 76). Unison is, or should be, our hallmark. Therefore the tactical solution suggested by the Hatam Sofer and so too by Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsh that we detach ourselves completely from the Reform groups, do not accept them in our congregations and have no affiliations at all with them in any project – this attitude was rejected by Rabbi Kuk ("ma'amarei Re'iya" pp. 55-60, "Orot" p. 73). We can be certain that this approach was inculcated by his mentor the Netziv ("She'elot U'tshuvot Meshiv Davar, responsum 44 p. 53).

As a young student in Yeshivat Wolozhin, Rabbi Kuk habitually wore T'fillin all day (as he did for the rest of his life).

- One of the lecturers there complained to the Rosh Yeshiva (the Netziv) that this was objectionable ostentation.
- The Netziv rejoined that the lad (he was then less than 20 years old) **was a Tzadik**.
- The objector answered that there were many other Tzadikim in Wolozhin, yet they didn't do so.
- The Netziv answered "But he always does **Hassidus**".
- Again the objector replied "we have here several students who are Hasidic, yet they feel wearing T'fillin publicly is improper".
- Once again the Netziv answered "but he is **a Kodosh**".
- Here the objector assented. "you are right. He is the one and only (of the 400 students then in the yeshiva) that can be so categorized. So it is proper that he be the one and only".

(This story was told by Rabbi Meir Bar Ilan, the son of the Netziv).

A childhood companion of Rabbi Kuk testifies that that he learnt "mishmar night" "hevrusa" with Rabbi Kuk who was then aged 13, he each night made a break at midnight, took off his shoes and sat on the floor, weeping and mourning the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. (Recorded by Rabbi Maimon, in his biographical work "Azkara").

At the age of 23 Rabbi Kuk edited a journal called "Iturei Sofrim". This was to be a literary platform for young authors from all sections of Jewry, Hasidim and Mithnagdim, Haskalah and ultra-Orthodox, Zionists and non-Zionists. Each was to air his thoughts publicly and all readers were invited to participate with their written criticisms and suggestions, on all and every problem current then. This ambitious journal came out in three numbers (now republished in "Otzrot Ha-Re'iya").

The plan involved is admirable.

Rabbi Bar-ilan notifies us (in his bibliographical essay on Rabbi Kuk, published as the foreword to "Hazon Ha-Geula") that amongst the unpublished manuscripts of Rabbi Kuk we have "Moreh Nevuchim Hadash"; conciliation between Torah and science.

So too Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kuk (the Rabbi's son) tells us that his father wrote a dictionary of Kabbalistic terms, arranged alphabetically (this is still in manuscript form).



Before Rabbi Kuk reached the age of 40, he made Aliya.

He was invited to be the Rabbi of Yafo. This was then a very small town with only a hundred or so families, amongst them many liberals and Maskilim. At that time there was a great rift between the ultra-Orthodox in Jerusalem ("the old Yishuv") who looked askance at the influx of the new emigrants who were religiously lax, more so some of them were out and out apostates. Rabbi Kuk with his characteristic "love of all" had no qualms and did his best for "outreaching".

We have in his collection of letters (volume one p. 362, volume 2 p. 222) correspondence between Rav Kuk and Eliezer ben-Yehuda, written with dignity.

At that period (prior to World War One) Rabbi Kuk went on a three week round of the irreligious Kibbutzim in the Galilean area, attempting to reach even those who never encountered an orthodox Rabbi and therefore suffered delusions concerning our faith. At that time there were no automobiles nor were there paved roads. The trip was done by horse and wagon. The journey from Yafo till Haifa itself took five days! The story of the travelogue is given in detail by Frankel ("Sinai Jubilee Edition" Ellul 1985, page 16).

Rabbi Kuk put out a very important handbook for the repentant called "**Orot Ha-Teshuva**". This has been republished many times and is very popular for study during the ten days of repentance.

Rav Kuk was such a prolific writer that according to one historian's calculation, if we count the responses that he wrote and correspondence (whether published or as yet unpublished) we have over a period of forty prolific years an average of seven items a day. For a man as busy with public matters as Rabbi Kuk this is certainly an astonishing figure. Rabbi Neryia, who personally studied with Rabbi Kuk, tells that from writing so many hours and constantly Rabbi Kuk's hand fatigued and cramped. Nevertheless he trained his left hand to be able to substitute, flipped the pen to his left hand and did not interrupt his writing and stream of thought.

Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer (Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Etz Haim) says that Rabbi Kuk had a photographic memory. He could easily quote at random any and every passage in the Gmorro, Tosfos and Rambam just as if he had studied that passage the day of quoting.

When the son of the Gerer Rebbe, Reb Avrohom Mordechai, paid a visit in Jerusalem, he was flabbergasted to see that Rabbi Kuk quoted to him entire and long passages of the "S'fas Emes", by heart.



Rabbi Kuk was a tender soul.

- He felt full compassion for all those who were suffering. Many a time he emptied his pockets of all monies so to aid an impoverished pauper. Once, Rabbi Harlap saw him afar off treading the sandy dunes of the Yafo expanses. When asked why he didn't take pocket money so to hire a wagon, he answered that he really did but on the way he met a homeless individual and gave him all that he had.
- He never owned a pocket watch, since he pawned it to aid others.
- Once a poor bridegroom came to his house begging aid since he was dressed in tatters (as was quite prevalent in that Turkish-rule period) and Rabbi Kuk gave him as a gift his Sabbos frock. Only when Shabbos arrived and he didn't change his garb, did his wife recognize the act. She immediately ascertained the address of that young groom and got that frock back. Due to this compassionate trait, the community members of the Yafo village arranged to give his monthly salary to his wife, and not to him.
- It is told that when young impecunious wives brought to him for "kashrus" rulings slaughtered chickens that they had purchased, and sometimes perforce due to great "yiras shomaim" in cases of ritual doubt he took a stringent ruling, he was in the habit of then paying the questioner from his pocket the purchase price of the chicken.



Rabbi Kuk's house was open unto all.

Some came to receive a legal decision; some came to receive a "blessing". Some came to request a letter of recommendation or a "haskomo" for a book. Some came to see the face of a famous individual (The painter Chagall came, so too Albert Einstein).

Rav Kuk arose to pray Shach'ris with sunrise. And of course stayed awake till midnight to recite "Tikkun Ha-tzos". He slept only four hours over a twenty-four hour span (This I heard from Rabbi Aryeh Levine).

Of course he was left no respite for private introspection, since each visitor thought that he was "one and only". Once a family member saw Rabbi Kuk's great fatigue, and the fact that many a time he skipped his noon-hour dinner (he didn't permit himself to eat and have as visitor "wait") therefore he posted a short notice on the external door to the residence "Please don't knock between 1-2 p.m."

When Rabbi Kuk found out about that he immediately made short shrift of it. He remonstrated "Don't you know that I am a servant of the Jewish people? I am obligated to them, not to myself!" (This story I was told by Rabbi Kuk's daughter's brother-in-law, Rabbi Rieger).(see his finale to letter 30 "Letters", vol. One page 29).

Rabbi Kuk was one of the great protagonists of the "Heter Shmitta". If every seventh year the land-laborers were to cease tilling the land, they would lose economical independence and some of them would have to leave the Holy Country. Knowing that Mitzvas Shmitta is in our period (when most of the twelve tribes are not in Israel) only a Rabbinical enactment, he made a simile to the "selling" of "hametz" to a gentile before Pesach. This is a legal fiction, and this one too.

Of course the rabbis of the "old yishuv" attacked this stand and Rabbi Kuk lost many friends. Wall posters and anonymous circulars slandering his character were widely circulated. Yet as a strong champion of justice, he shrugged it all off (see "Letters" vol. 2 page 2).

At a later date, when the Leftist leader Arlozoroff was murdered (truly by an Arab, as Israel's first Police Minister Shitrit attested) due to sharp interfacial strife against the right wing groups a Jew called Stavsky was (falsely) accused of the murder. The British wished to bring him to trial so to execute him. However Rabbi Kuk spearheaded a communal front to exonerate Stavsky. The British warned Rabbi Kuk that he would be charged with contempt of court. More so, the Leftists black-painted on the walls of his house "woe to the generation that its high priest (Rabbi Kuk was a Cohen) protects murderers". These wild attacks hurt his sensitivities. Nevertheless he stood fast against accusations from all sides. As he wryly writes "From those who cannot understand it is impossible to be beware, and many times it is not necessary to be beware" ("Letters", vol. One, p. 154).



Due to his good connections with most of the most prominent rabbis of the age (see the collection of letters written to him with the most honorary appellatives heading those letters, in the book "Iggerot Le-ri'iyah") Rabbi Kuk was invited to one of the "Moetzet Gedolei HaTorah" of the worldwide Agudas Israel convention in Berlin (1913). However after arriving there, the First World War broke out. Rabbi Kuk was stranded in Europe with no transportation opportunities to return home. He spent the first period in Switzerland.

Afterwards he was offered a position as synagogue Rabbi in London. While there he had a most influential position for the pro-Zionist elements that eventually brought about the Balfour Declaration. Some British assimilated Jews (who were lords of Parliament) claimed that it was an unloyal act for British citizens to agitate for another political homeland. Rabbi Kuk used his vast Torah knowledge and so too his earnest tongue and pen, so to counter this mistaken idea.

After the war, due to his increasing fame as a lover of Zion, the majority of the Jews of Jerusalem requested him to be their Rabbi. He arrived to fulfill this capacity. In 1921 he was elected unanimously as the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of the country.

It is interesting to note that already in 1898 Rabbi Kuk dreamed of re-establishing the high synod of the Sanhedrin (see "Otzrot Re'iyah" p. 928). Therefore upon becoming Chief Rabbi in 1921 he instituted a Rabbinical Council with 23 members (Just like the minor Beit Din of the Sanhedrin) with this thought in mind. So Rabbi Tikochinsky tells us ("Otzrot ha-r'iyah" vol. One p. 32 so too vol. 3, article one).

With the noble and impactful plan of rejuvenating the ranks of great talmidei chachomim, he founded "The Central Universal Yeshiva" (afterwards renamed "Merkaz HaRav"). He had remarkable educational plans.

- He limited the period of study to six years (about age 22) except for talented individuals.
- He wished the yeshiva to include a curriculum of general studies (languages, some science etc.).
- He wished that all students be somewhat acquainted with secret lore.
- He wished the Talmud to be studied broadly ("B'kius") and not by isolated "pilpul". (see "otzrot re'iyah" pp. 70-73)

Rabbi Kuk led the yishuv during the Hebron massacre and the period following. At that time the Arab Mufti pressured the Jews to relinquish their rights to the Kotel Ha-ma'aravi (and of course renege all rights to the Holy Mount). The Mufti uttered threats that much Jewish blood would be spilt if this declaration would not be forthcoming.

All heads of the contemporary Zionist Movement pressured Rabbi Kuk to make the necessary commitment. However despite the fact that he would cry at even a wound of one individual suffering, he could not allow himself to abandon any part of the Holy Country, much more so Jerusalem, much more so the Holy Mount. His son Rav Zvi Yehuda tells us that his sainted father lost health, but stood firm. Even when asked after the Hebron riots if he did not regret his decision, he answered "the land is not ours to waive. It belongs to G-d and it is He that delivered it to us. We are not legally empowered to forfeit it".



Rabbi Kuk went up to join the angels in Heaven on the 3rd of Ellul, a full sixteen years from day to day after his second Aliyah to Israel (to become the Rabbi of Jerusalem).