

The Jewish Thinker of the Millennium

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers. Brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, your host.

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast, and a conversation with Aryeh Ben David. Originally from the United States, Aryeh Ben David moved to Israel in 1978 where he has taught at the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem for 20 years, serving on the senior faculty and as director of spiritual education. He is the founder of Ayeka: Center for Soulful Education, which trains rabbis and educators of all denominations, how to teach Jewish subjects with more soulfulness, personal meaning and impact on life. He is the author of, among other books *Around the Shabbat Table*, *A Guide to Meaningful Shabbat Conversations*, *the God file 10 Approaches to Personalizing Prayer*, *Becoming a Soulful Educator*. And the topic of our conversation today, *The Secret Of Love. A Glimpse Into The Mystical Wisdom Of Rav Kook*. Aryeh Ben David, welcome and thank you for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

Aryeh Ben David: Thank you, Josh. Honored to be here.

JH: Introduce us if you would, to the personage of Rav Kook.

AD: Rav Kook, Rav Abraham Isaac Kook lived from 1865 to 1935. Moved to Israel in 1904, became the chief rabbi of Raffa, New Tel Aviv before Tel Aviv was Tel Aviv. And then after World War I became the Chief rabbi of Jerusalem, where he served until 1935. Many George Scholars and professors consider him to me the most important Jewish thinker in the last thousand years, which I don't know if that's true, but it's an incredible state. Why do they say though? Rav Kook wrote about everything he wrote about Jewish subjects, he wrote about other religions, he wrote about politics, he wrote about exercise. He wrote a book on vegetarianism.

AD: He wrote a book about everything. If you were to come into our house, you would see a giant portrait of Rav Kook, which although of course were not related, I would consider him to be my spiritual grandfather. For over 15 years, Rav Kook helped rival diaries, he would put himself into a mystical trance, usually after midnight and just write. And nobody saw all these diaries.

They were his private and spiritual meditative thoughts. They were the words of his soul. And over 50 years after his death, these diaries became public. So we have the unique opportunity to get an inside glimpse, the private diaries of a Jewish mister, and we see how raw and personal and honest he speaks from the depths of his souls. Unlike any other book in Jewish history.

JH: You introduce us to Rav Kook with his approach to learning, and in particular it's relational and spiritual qualities. You quote him "According to the quality and clarity of one's yearning to grow, soulfully and improve before learning will be the depth and clarity of the learning." Is ignorance, that is to say a vacuum of knowledge, actually a merit in so far as all vacuums yearn to be filled.

AD: What an interesting question? I'd don think Rav Kook would say that ignorance is ever a value or praise word. But for Rav Kook, learning was never a goal. Learning was the means. Aura was the means. Talmud was the means. Kabbalah a Jewish mysticism was the means. What was the goal? The goal of learning is always... Transformation. And how should I be transformed? I should become my better self. Learning should always impact and change me to become what I call REA 2.0. It should change me in my behavior toward God, and it should change me in my behavior toward other people. If learning does not transform me, does not affect me, does not change my behavior, then Rav Kook would say, you didn't really learn Judaism, you didn't learn Torah. You just learned content. It's like reading a cookbook but never actually cooking. The goal of learning is to change us, and that's why this yearning book or learning creates the mindset for me to learn and grow at the same time. Without that yearning, I might just think that learning was to acquire more information.

JH: So I'd like to follow that line of thinking about the fact that learning has to reveal itself in our actions and our lives in ways that make us better and enrich us and help us enrich the world around us. Given the polarization of Israeli society. Today, I'd like to ask about Rav Kook's capacity in his day to relate to secular Zionism, despite his profound and life-defining commitment to traditionalist Judaism.

AD: In Rav Kook's eulogy to Theodor Herzl, he referred to Herzl as a Messiah, the Messiah of Joseph, and that was astonishing. How can you refer to a clearly secular Jew as a harbinger of the Messiah? But this was typical of Rav. Rav Kook was not afraid of any idea. Rav Kook believed and wrote about that every idea has a grain of truth, a sliver of truth, what he would call a sliver of light. And what we always have to do is not reject an idea, but to discover and work hard to reveal the light that is in the idea. And I think regarding politics both then 100 years ago and especially today, Rav Kook's wisdom could really guide us. Rav Kook said like this, "Whenever you encounter a new idea, an idea, which may be very antithetical to you, the first thing to do is to say to yourself, two maybes." Maybe I do not understand that idea completely and deep enough, and maybe there is a grain of truth in this idea, which I need to acknowledge and I have to grow from this truth. It's never for Rav Kook an approach of rejection. This creates a completely different tenor in the public discourse.

JH: In the course of your book, especially on these diaries that you've introduced us to, you point out the fact that the writings are largely unsystematic. How do you understand the relationship between form and content in this particular case?

AD: Well, Rav Kook at heart was a poet, and he was a poet who lives with great loving passion, so if you put those things together, you never get a logical system. He wrote that his ideas came faster than his pen. They flowed from him, they burst from him. They were like music. It reminds me of Beethoven talking about his creations. There were melodies that Rav Kook heard. Rav Kook wrote that the whole universe, the cosmos, had an inner humming, a melody, the cosmos, the universe was not static or quiet, it was singing to everybody. And Rav Kook, I believe, heard this melody. And in his mystical trance he just created. The amazing thing is he wrote beautiful poems, poems that are epic Jewish poems, and he never edited them. They just burst forth complete from him. Rav Kook believed that poetry had a greater spiritual depth than clothes, and I think that's why he couldn't rank in any other way. His Hebrew is magnificent. The poet Glory of Israel, who rarely had something positive to say about rabbis said, "If you wanna read the perfect Hebrew sentence, read Rav Kook."

JH: Regarding this outpouring. I wonder if you see something of the Platonist in Rav Kook in the sense that he believes our humanity, our soul, our consciousness already contain the great divine wisdom of love, and we just have to perceive it.

AD: Rav Kook wrote at length of the nature of the soul. A person's soul is not stale, and the soul contains, possesses all wisdom that we need to learn. So what we need to do is listen to our soul. Our soul is always Rav Kook would say, "Reign to us, singing to us, whispering to us." And what is it saying? It's saying, REA, be your better soul. Come closer to God. Evolve, grow. For Rav Kook, prayer especially was not about saying the words or talking, the act of prayer for Rav Kook was the act of listening, listening to our soul. And Rav Kook writes an astonishing statement in his diaries. He writes that "I wonder if for need struggling is actually a negation of smoke. Because what I should be doing is listening to my soul because God is talking to me directly through my soul."

AD: Sometimes it's very subtle. Sometimes God is whispering through my soul, but sometimes he refers to it as a spiritual lightning bolt. Bam, bam. In a moment, there's this blinding light, and I just have this intuition, this knowledge. I don't even know where it comes from, but it can change my life. Now I, I'm a Rav Kook to go tell, because at different times in my life, I had moments of the spiritual lightning bolt. It just hit me and I decided to make major changes where I lived, how I lived, like to get married, after 45 minutes meeting, Sandra, and this is what Rav Kook talks about as the spiritual lightening bolts that hit us at periodic times in our lives. And they are the revealing of the inner voice of the soul to us.

JH: The College Cummins podcast belongs to HUC Connect, the online platform for continuing education from the Hebrew Union College. HUC Connect includes webinars, syllabi for community learning, and master classes for HUC alumni with interviews, expert panels, and classroom materials on topics ranging from the arts to civil society, Israel, and much more. Check us out, huc.edu/hucconnect. Now back to our interview. The chapter you dedicate to

loving and forgiveness, I found particularly beautiful, and I wanna thank you for it. I wonder if there is anything so indicative, so reflective of human interdependence as forgiveness, and in the context of Rav Kook's thinking, I wonder if you might plum the question of analogous reciprocity embedded in divine forgiveness.

AD: Josh, that's a wonderful question. For Rav Kook, our soul was always saying to us, one thing, love, be a force of oneness in the world. God, the creator of the world is one, oneness. God is always emanating oneness. God created a unified, organic world, and I am created in the image of God. So just like God is a force of oneness in the world, I need to be a force of oneness in the world. And Rav Kook would say that my heart is always bursting with love, wanting to create oneness in the world. What is love? Love is bringing things together. Now, what happens when love breaks down? Somebody has hurt somebody else, either by an act or by omission, and there's a great, there's a rupture in the oneness. What happens then? Then we need forgiveness. Forgiveness heals the brokenness. Forgiveness is a godly act.

AD: Rav Kook would say forgiveness draws from the highest level of holiness because it brings healing to the world. Rav Kook would say, there are three stages in the act of forgiveness. The first stage is, I just have to forgive myself or I have to give, forgive somebody else. I did something wrong, he or she did something wrong and I can't carry it. I can't carry a grudge. I can't carry this feeling of revenge that's carrying brokenness. I wanna let go of brokenness and be a force of wonder, so I have to forgive. But the second stage means then I have to forget. Don't linger on it. Don't hold it. Don't let it take any of your bandwidth up. Let it go. Forget it. Even the things that I did wrong that people should forgive me, I have to forget it. And the last stage in forgiveness, after forgiving and forgetting is, and this is the mind-boggling, Rav Kook, celebrating.

AD: I need to celebrate the mistakes that somebody else has made or celebrate the mistakes that I have made. Because it is not or not. I learned the best from the mistakes. I learn the best from the mistakes somebody else made. Or I may and Rav Kook will say, "I don't regret any of the things I did wrong because I needed all of my mistakes as springboards to help me to grow." How do we grow, if not to stumble? How do we grow if not to mess up? And we're always messing up, but when we mess up and we need to forgive ourselves. We don't beat ourselves up. We don't hit our chests again and again like we do on Yom Kippur. Rav Kook would say, we need to celebrate our mistakes because they are the greatest brain lords for helping us to grow into what we need to grow into.

JH: Tell us if you would, about the mini assignments that pepper your book. And in particular, tell us what those mini assignments tell us about you.

AD: I discovered Judaism, Josh, after college when I was 23, I came to Israel. I knew six words of Hebrew. It was quite a shock, and it was a big shock to my parents too. And I spent the next almost 10 years learning in Yeshiva, trying to acquire as much information and knowledge as I could. Torah, Mishnah, Gemara, halacha or Jewish law, Jewish list. We studied all day for almost 10 years, and I passed the test to become a rabbi. At the end of 10 years, I realized I still really didn't know who I was. I didn't know what I believed, and I felt that my Judaism wasn't

really changing me. I was just kind of the same person with a lot more knowledge. And I started looking into Jewish wisdom and educational wisdom to discover how can we learn to grow? How can we bring wisdom and knowledge from our minds into our hearts? From our mind to our heart is the longest distance in the world.

AD: And I wanted to learn how to do it from my mind, to my heart, to my soul, and then into my life. And I realized something that changed myself as a person, and as a teacher. I learned that the whole idea of learning was to change. And I learned that the most important moment of my teaching occurred after the class is over. For many years as a teacher, I thought that the most important moment in my teaching was when the students were fully engaged or when they would ask a good question or when we would have a great conversation. But that kind of dies at the end of class. And I realized the goal of learning was not the class, but the goal of learning is life. So then the question is, how can I take what I've learned in this class into life? And that that only happens when we focus on life after the class, during the class.

AD: So that's the idea of the four questions at the end of every chapter. And the four questions are always the same template. The first question is very neutral. Where are you vis-a-vis this subject? Let's say we're talking about loving myself. Where are you on a 1-10 vis-a-vis loving yourself? What number would you give you? What number would you give yourself? Second question would be, okay, if I could magically give you a potion and you would now be two numbers higher, you were a six on the self-love parameter, and now you're an eight or a nine, how would that change your life? What would be different about your lives? Talk about that, write about that. Third question is, what's holding you back? There's always some obstacle. Everybody has a different obstacle. We have to own it, name it, and reflect on it. What is holding you back from loving yourself more? And the fourth question is the point of action question. The most important question, and that is, what piece of advice would you give yourself to grow in loving yourself?

AD: These are the four questions always. It's the template. It's very simple, but it's very powerful. A person has to write about it and then hopefully discuss it with a friend. Now, what's important about this is I, as a teacher, I never give advice. I don't know what is your small step. Only you know your heart and yourself and can prescribe to yourself the best medicine for you to grow. Only you know yourself. This is very humbling for the teacher, but it's very empowering for the student.

JH: I'd like to ask you a bit about contradictions, which you cite quite a bit about Rav Kook, and he is somewhat known for. But I wanna preface my question by pointing out that in Jewish thought, especially in biblical commentary, it is often the task of the commentator to point out a contradiction, to recast the contradiction as merely an apparent contradiction. And then to tutor us, the reader, in understanding why what appears to be a contradiction is in fact a consistency. In opposite fashion, what contradiction in Rav Kook's writing that is really a contradiction, that is a bonafide challenge to comprehension cognition, particularly moves you or challenges you or spurs you on?

AD: Rav Kook wrote from soul. He did not write through his head. He wrote from his soul. And Rav Kook would say, of course there are contradictions. Life is not linear. I wanna offer two contradictions that Rav Kook himself talked about. And for me, this was life-changing also. Rav Kook said, "God is beyond." There is no name you can give to God. There's no name you can give to something which is transcendent and beyond. And then Rav Kook says, "But I will not be deterred." He uses the name Elohim, even though I know that there can be no name for God, nevertheless, I will call God Elohim, and I love Elohim. How incredible? He states the contradiction and he says, "Yes, I will hold by that contradiction. I don't have an answer, and it doesn't bother me." One more contradiction and isn't very powerful. Rav Kook says, "It is absolutely impossible to know God."

AD: How can you know something which is beyond? It's like asking a fish, what is it like to live on land? We have no idea of this dimension of holiness. And at the same time, while I absolutely know nothing about God, and I have no knowledge of God, I absolutely do know that God exists. I experience God, and in my heart of hearts, in my own holy of holies inside me, I'm left with this daunting contradiction. I absolutely know nothing about God. I absolutely know that God exists, and this is the basis, right? Rav Kook of a spiritual life and a spiritual relationship. For me, this was very dope because I thought, being a rabbi, that I had to have all the answers. And often it would impel me to offer an answer where I really didn't know, or to try and spin things to make them smoother and work out better than they actually are. And one of my teachers once said to me, you are only as deep as your deepest contradiction. And so between that statement and Rav Kook's owning his own contradictions, I found that very liberating as an educator, "Okay, I contradict myself, but you know what? Life is contradictory also. And so I can accept that from Ola and I may never resolve it."

JH: I'd like to close out the interview by asking you what surprised you in writing this book?

AD: What surprised me in writing this book was the painful awareness that for decades of my life, as someone engaging in Judaism, someone teaching Judaism, and as even a public figure in Judaism in the Jewish world, I had gotten it all wrong. That's a pretty harsh admission, but I wish I'd gotten it right in my 20s or maybe my 30s, or at least my 40s, but it took me almost into my 60s to realize, oh my God, I had misunderstood Judaism. I always thought Judaism was about doing its role to having a relationship with God, trying to be a mensch, being a good person. No one, not a rabbi or professor, family member, or a Jewish public figure had ever said to me, Aryeh Judaism is about becoming a loving human being. Judaism is a vow expressing love to everyone, not just your friends and family. Judaism is about being a force of love with people that you have very limited relationship with, with people that may be difficult to you, that have maybe personalities that are highly antipathetic to you that may press your wounds.

AD: Judaism is about being a force of love to every person and all in that Rav Kook writes astonishingly that every cell that God created has a memory and is yearning to go back to God. Every cell of an animal, even a flower or a grain of sand has a cell in it and carries God's light in it. So if in every cell of creation there is God's light, then who are you Aryeh not to love it? Who are you not to love God's light? And for me, this changed my daily life. I walked through the world in an ecstatic state of just acknowledging and appreciating and trying to feel God's light in

every cell of creation. I may have good days, I may have bad days. Certainly for the last year, for the Jewish people, there have been many, many heartbreaking days, and yet I walked through life on an emphatically happy level, having been gifted the opportunity to dwell in this beautiful and broken world. And for me, Josh took close up. The biggest change for me was really to feel and sense and try and identify God's light in every cell of creation. And that hopefully has made me become a more grateful and loving human being.

JH: Aryeh Ben David, thank you for joining us on the College Commons Podcast and the delightful conversation. And congratulations on the publication of your book, *The Secret of Love*, a glimpse into the mystical wisdom of Rav Kook. It was a real delight to talk to you.

AD: Thank you Josh. Honored and appreciate your wisdom.

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