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Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaCohen Kook and the Religious-Zionist Aspiration

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Ideas for Today:
Essential Texts of Zionist Thought and Modern Jewish Identity
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I. Holistic, Unifying Worldview	1
1. Light of Rebirth, 18	1
2. The Value of Opposition (Light of Holiness, 11)	1
3. The Basis of All Thought (Lights of Holiness, 13)	2
4. The Goal of Unification (Lights of Holiness, 107)	2
5. Concerning the Conflict of Opinions and Beliefs (<i>Orot</i>)	3
6. A Fourfold Song (Lights of Holiness)	3
II. People of Israel, Land of Israel, God of Israel	4
7. <i>Orot</i> , Eretz Yisrael, 4	4
8. <i>Orot</i> , Eretz Yisrael, 5	4
III. Relation to Secular Jews and Secular Zionism	5
9. Light of Rebirth, 43	5
10. Souls of Chaos (<i>Orot</i>)	5
11. The Pangs of Cleansing (<i>Orot</i>)	7
12. Light of Rebirth, 9	8

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I. Holistic, Unifying Worldview

1. Light of Rebirth, 18

Three forces are currently contending among us. The conflict between them is especially discernible in Eretz Yisrael, but their activity derives from the general life of our people, and their roots go back to human nature itself. These three forces need to be united among us, so that each will help the other and seek to perfect it. [...] We shall be most unfortunate if these three forces should be left in their separateness and their mutual hostility.

These are the three basic claims to which our life and the life of all humanity must relate in some form: the call of the holy, the call of the nations and the call of humanity. The combination of these three claims varies. [...]. But we shall not find any form of human life where these three will not be in some correlation. [...]

We now have three noteworthy factions among our people. The first is Orthodoxy, as we are accustomed to call it. It champions the cause of the holy; [...] The second is the new nationalism that battles for everything toward which the national spirit aspires. [...] The third is liberalism, which was an advocate of the Enlightenment in the recent past and still has a following in many circles. It does not confine itself to the domain of the national but demands general human enlightenment, culture, morality and much else.

It is understandable that in a healthy setting there is need for each of these three forces. We must always seek to reach this healthy state, where those forces will act in our lives jointly, with nothing in excess or in diminution.

2. The Value of Opposition (Light of Holiness, 11)

Ideologies tend to be in conflict. One group at times reacts to another with total negation. And this opposition becomes more pronounced the more important a place ideas have in the human spirit. To one who assesses all this opposition on the basis of its inner significance, it appears as illustrating the need for the spatial separation of plants, which serves as an aid to their growth, enabling them to suck up [from the earth] their needed sustenance. Thus will each one develop to its fullness, and the distinctive characteristics of each will be formed in all its particularities. Excessive closeness would have blurred and impaired them all. The proper unity results only from this separation. One begins by separation and concludes by unification.

3. The Basis of All Thought (Lights of Holiness, 13)

We know automatically that there is no thought which is wholly devoid of significance. There is nothing that is without its place, for everything emanates from the realm of wisdom. If we encounter a thought which seem to us defective or empty, their defect or emptiness is only in their outer expression. If we reach deeper, into their inner essence, we shall find the elements that sustain life, for wisdom is the source of life.

In every person there are treasures of thought which embody higher life, and which are destined to be refined and to take their place in exalted splendor when the world reaches its perfection.

The more a person progresses and the closer he is related to the inner content of existence and life, the more he draws from every thought its eternal, logical, good core which stems from the source of wisdom, whether this be his own or that of others. He grows through them, and they develop through him. "Who is wise? He who learns from all men" (Avot 4:1)—without any exception.

No wonder then that for those zealots for the spiritual life, those who are upright of heart, there is no darkness or distress. From every subject, whether close or remote they draw the element of the good, the fruitful, the holy, and bring them closer to the realm of the holy, as indeed they are part of it. All things find their unity in the source of the holy.

4. The Goal of Unification (Lights of Holiness, 107)

All the deficiencies in the world, both the physical and the spiritual, derive from the fact that every individual comprehends only one aspect of existence which appeals to him, and all other aspects which are outside his comprehension, as far as he is concerned, might as well disappear. And the notion registers its impact on individuals and societies, on generations and epochs, that whatever is outside one's sphere of interest is disturbing and destructive. [...]

To cope with these deficiencies, of which the whole world suffers, and we especially, is the mission of the *zaddikim* [the righteous] who, by reason and will, strive for unification. It is their vocation to mend, to integrate, and to extend peace in the world by effecting peace in the inner realm of their own soul, by exemplifying an outlook which is comprehensive and universal, which always releases light and life in all directions.

5. Concerning the Conflict of Opinions and Beliefs (*Orot*)

Thought has become impotent because of the influx of strange ideas, especially the strange ideas of idolatry. They stream into our midst and they have trapped many hearts, they have perverted the paths and have turned many of our youths from the way of life to the way of death. Those who defend the concepts of Judaism have raised an outcry, they refute the wrong opinions, exposing their falsehood by defining the concepts of Judaism. But it is very doubtful if it will be possible through this strategy to defeat what has erupted with the force of an earthquake.

Particularly mistaken are those who seek to formulate specific definitions of Judaism from the aspect of its soul and its spiritual essence, though it may be possible to define it from the point of view of its objective manifestation as a historic phenomenon. **Everything is embraced in its soul, it includes all spiritual inclinations, the open and the hidden, in a higher generalization, just as everything is included in the absolute reality of the divine. Every such definition in Judaism is heresy and is analogous to establishing an idol or a molten image to explain the character of God.**

6. A Fourfold Song (Lights of Holiness)

There is one who sings the song of his own life, and in himself he finds everything, his full spiritual satisfaction.

There is another who sings the song of his people. He leaves the circle of his own individual self, because he finds it without sufficient breadth, without an idealistic basis. He aspires toward the heights, and he attaches himself with a gentle love to the whole community of Israel. Together with her he sings her songs. He feels grieved in her afflictions and delights in her hopes. He contemplates noble and pure thoughts about her past and her future, and probes with love and wisdom her inner spiritual essence.

There is another who reaches toward more distant realms, and he goes beyond the boundary of Israel to **sing the song of man**. His spirit extends to the wider vistas of the majesty of man generally, and his noble essence. He aspires toward man's general goal and looks forward toward his higher perfection. From this source of life he draws the subjects of his meditation and study, his aspirations and his visions.

Then there is one who rises toward wider horizons, until he links himself with **all existence**, with all God's creatures, with all worlds, and he sings his song with all of them. It is of one such as this that tradition has said that whoever sings a portion of song each day is assured of having a share in the world to come.

And then there is one who rises with all these songs in one ensemble, and they all join their voices. Together they sing their songs with beauty, each one lends vitality and life to the other. They are sounds of joy and gladness, sounds of jubilation and celebration, sounds of ecstasy and holiness.

The song of the self, the song of the people, the song of man, the song of the world all merge in him at all times, in every hour.

And this full comprehensiveness rises to become the song of holiness, the song of God, the song of Israel, in its full strength and beauty, in its full authenticity and greatness. The name "Israel" stands for *Shir El*, the song of God. It is a simple song, a twofold song, a threefold song and a fourfold song. It is the Song of Songs of Solomon, Shlomo, which means peace or wholeness. It is the song of the King in whom is wholeness.

II. People of Israel, Land of Israel, God of Israel

7. *Orot, Eretz Yisrael, 4*

A Jew cannot be as devoted and true to his own ideas, sentiments, and imagination in the Diaspora as he can in Eretz Israel. Revelations of the Holy, of whatever degree, are relatively pure in Eretz Israel; outside it, they are mixed with dross and much impurity. However, the greater is one's yearning for and attachment to Eretz Israel, the purer his thoughts become, for they then live in the air of Eretz Israel, which sustains everyone who longs to behold the Land.

8. *Orot, Eretz Yisrael, 5*

In the Holy Land man's imagination is lucid and clear, clean and pure, capable of receiving the revelation of Divine Truth and of expressing in life the sublime meaning of the ideal of the sovereignty of holiness; there the mind is prepared to understand the light of prophecy and to be illumined by the radiance of the Holy Spirit. In gentile lands the imagination is dim, clouded with darkness and shadowed with unholiness, and it cannot serve as the vessel for the outpouring of the Divine Light, as it raises itself beyond the lowness and narrowness of the universe. Because reason and imagination are interwoven and interact with each other, even reason cannot shine in its truest glory outside the Holy Land...

III. Relation to Secular Jews and Secular Zionism

9. Light of Rebirth, 43

The *nefesh* of the sinners of Israel in the era preceding the coming of the Messiah – of those who connect with love to matters concerning the entirety of the Jewish people, the land of Israel and the renaissance of the nation – is more perfected than the *nefesh* of those fully faithful Jews who lack this quality of an intrinsic sensitivity to the good of the whole and the building of the nation and the land.

But the *ruach* is much more perfected in those who fear God and who keep the Torah and the commandments, even though an intrinsic sensitivity and impulse to act in matters concerning the whole of Israel are not yet as strong in them as they are in those in whom a spirit of transgression fouls their heart to such a degree that they connect themselves to foreign perspectives and to deeds that pollute their physicality and prevent the light of the *ruach* from being rectified [in them]. As a result, the *nefesh* [of these sinners] too suffers from their blemishes.

The rectification – which will come about via the light of the Messiah [and] which will be greatly aided by the spreading forth of the teaching of the secrets of the Torah and the revelation of the lights of the wisdom of God in all of its forms that are worthy of being revealed – is that Israel will come together in one bond.

And [then] the *nefesh* of those who are [God-]fearing, who keep the Torah, will be rectified by means of the perfected *nefesh* of the sinners, who are good in regard to matters of the entire [community] and [in regard to] the hopes, material and spiritual, that can be understood by human awareness and sensitivity.

And the *ruach* of the sinners will be rectified by means of the influence of those who fear God, who keep the Torah and who are great in faith. And thus a great light will come to both [groups]. The manifestation of complete *teshuvah* will come to the world, and then the people of Israel will be prepared for redemption.

10. Souls of Chaos (*Orot*)

The conventional pattern of living, based on propriety, on the requisites of good character and conformity to law—this corresponds to the way of the world of order. Every rebellion against this, whether inspired by levity or by the stirring of a higher spirit, reflects the world of chaos. But there is a vast difference in the particular expressions of the world of chaos, whether they incline to the right or the left [positive or negative in motivation].

The great idealists seek an order so noble, so firm and pure, beyond what may be found in the world of reality, and thus they destroy what has been fashioned in conformity to the norms of the world. The best among them also know how to rebuild the world that has thus been destroyed, but those of lesser stature, who have been touched only slightly by the inclination to idealism—they are only destroyers, and they are rooted in the realm of chaos, on its lowest level.

The souls inspired by the realm of chaos are greater than the souls whose affinity is with the established order. They are very great; they seek too much from existence, what is beyond their own faculties to assimilate. They seek a very great light. They cannot bear what is limited, whatever is confined within a prescribed measure. They descended from their divine abode in accordance with the nature of existence to generate new life; they soared on high like a flame and were thrust down. Their endless striving knows no bounds; they robe themselves in various forms, aspiring constantly to what is beyond the measure of the possible. They aspire and they fall, realizing that they are confined in rules, in limiting conditions that forbid expansion toward the unlimited horizons, and they fall in sorrow, in despair, in anger, and anger leads to—wickedness, defiance, destruction and every other evil. Their unrest does not cease—they are represented by the impudent in our generation, wicked men who are dedicated to high principles, those who transgress conventional norms defiantly rather than because of some lust. Their souls are of very high stature; they are illumined by the light that shines from the realm of chaos. They chose destruction and they are engaged in destroying, the world is undermined by them, and they with it. But the essence of their aspiration is a dimension of holiness, that which in souls content with measured progress would yield the vigor of life.

The souls inspired by a destructive zeal reveal themselves especially at the end of days, before the great cataclysm that precedes the emergence of a new and more wondrous level of existence, when the old boundaries expand, just prior to the birth of a norm above the existing norms. In times of redemption insolence is on the increase. A fierce storm rages, more breaches appear, acts of insolence mount continually because they can find no satisfaction in the beneficence offered by the limited light. It does not satisfy all their yearnings, nor does it unravel for them the mystery of existence. They rebel against everything, including also the dimension of the good that could lead them to a great peace and help them rise to great heights. They rebel and they are indignant, they break and they discard; they seek their nourishment in alien pastures, embracing alien ideals and desecrating everything hallowed, but without finding peace.

These passionate souls reveal their strength so that no fence can hold them back; and the weaklings of the established order, who are guided by balance and propriety, are too terrified to tolerate them. Their mood is expressed in Isaiah (33:14): "Who among us can dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us can dwell with those who destroy the world?" But in truth there is no need to be terrified. Only sinners, those weak in spirit and hypocrites, are frightened and seized by terror. Truly heroic spirits know that this force is one of the phenomena needed for the perfection of the world, for strengthening the power of the nation, of man and of the world. Initially this force represents the realm of the chaotic, but in the end it will be taken from the wicked and turned over to the hands of the righteous who will show the truth about perfection and construction, in a great resoluteness, inspired by clear perception and a steady and undimmed sense of the practical.

11. The Pangs of Cleansing (*Orot*)

All the ideological controversies among people and all the inner conflicts that every individual suffers in his world outlook are caused by the confusion in the conception of God. This is an endlessly profound realm and all thoughts, whether practical or theoretical, are centered in it. [...]

Atheism has a temporary legitimacy, for it is needed to purge away the aberrations that attached themselves to religious faith because of a deficiency in perception and in the divine service. This is its sole function in existence—to remove the particular images from the speculations concerning Him who is the essence of all life and the source of all thought. When this condition persists for a period of several generations, **atheism necessarily presents itself as a specific cultural expression, to uproot the remembrance of God and all institutions of divine service. But to what uprooting did divine providence intend? To uproot the dross that separates man from the truly divine light, and in the ruins wrought by atheism will the higher knowledge of God erect her Temple.** To cleanse the air of the arrogant and evil aberration of focusing thought on the divine essence—a preoccupation that leads to idolatry—a thoroughgoing atheism arises, in itself no better than the former but opposed to it in absolute terms. **Out of the clash of these two opposites will mankind be aided greatly to reach an enlightened knowledge of God, which will bring near its temporal and eternal happiness.** In place of the presumptuous and vain preoccupation with the divine essence, the human heart will be oriented to concern itself with pure morality, and the heroism for higher things, which emanate as flashes from the divine light and are at all times connected with its source, showing man the way of life and placing him in the light of God. [...]

The violence of atheism will cleanse away the dross that accumulated in the lower levels of religious faith, and thereby will the heavens be cleared and the shining light of the higher faith will become visible, which is the song of the world and the truth of the world.

12. Light of Rebirth, 9

There is an eternal covenant which assures the whole House of Israel that it will not ever become completely unclean. Yes, it may be partially corroded, but it can never be totally cut off from the source of divine life. Many of the adherents of the present national revival maintain that they are secularists. If a Jewish secular nationalism were really imaginable, then we would, indeed, be in danger of falling so low as to be beyond redemption.

But Jewish secular nationalism is a form of self-delusion: the spirit of Israel is so closely linked to the spirit of God that a Jewish nationalist, no matter how secularist his intention may be, must, despite himself, affirm the divine. An individual can sever the tie that binds him to life eternal, but the House of Israel as a whole cannot. All of its most cherished national possessions-its land, language, history, and customs-are vessels of the spirit of the Lord.

How should men of faith respond to an age of ideological ferment which affirms all of these values in the name of nationalism and denies their source, the rootedness of the national spirit, in God? To oppose Jewish nationalism, even in speech, and to denigrate its values is not permissible, for the spirit of God and the spirit of Israel are identical. What they must do is to work all the harder at the task of uncovering the light and holiness implicit in our national spirit, the divine element which is its core. The secularists will thus be constrained to realize that they are immersed and rooted in the life of God and bathed in the radiant sanctity that comes from above.