

Evolutionary Ethics: The Ta'amei Ha-Mitzvot of Rav Kook¹

By: DON SEEMAN

*“A nation such as this...whose whole current existence draws upon its future, must certainly be tied to its future destiny with exceedingly powerful bonds. The stamp of the future is impressed upon all of its lifeways.”*²

*“Evolution...is the foundation of optimism in the world, for how is it possible to despair when one sees that all is evolving and ascending?”*³

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Ha-Cohen Kook (1865–1935) was one of the most prolific and provocative writers on the question of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* (“reasons for the commandments”) in modern times.⁴ This was a central topic of works including *Afikim Ba-Negev* (1903–1904), *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk* (written 1902–1904 and posthumously published as *Le-Nevu'kei Ha-Dor*), *Talelei 'Orot* (1910), and *Eyn Ayah* (published 1987–2000), but it also appears in almost every one of his notebooks or published works.⁵ Reasons for the commandments were, in fact, a primary

¹ This essay is dedicated in love to my son, Noam Eliezer, and in gratitude to the members of the New Toco Shul.

² R. Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Isaac Kook, “*Afikim Ba-Negev*” In R. Moshe Yehiel Tzuril ed., *'Ozrot Ha-Ra'ayah* Vol. 2 (Yeshivat Ha-Hesder Rishon Letzion 2002), 83. All translations from Hebrew are my own unless otherwise noted.

³ R. Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Isaac Kook *'Orot Ha-Kodesh* Vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1985), 537 (*Ma'amar* 5: 19).

⁴ For overviews of this topic in Jewish religious literature, see Isaac Heinemann, *The Reasons for the Commandments in Jewish Thought: From the Bible to the Renaissance*. Translated by Leonard Levin (Brighton, MA: Academic Press, 2008), and the entry under *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* in Shlomo Josef Zevin editor, *Talmudic Encyclopedia*, Volume 20 (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Talmudic Encyclopedia Institute, 1998), 568–596.

⁵ Yoel Bin-Nun, *Ha-Makor Ha-Kaful: Hasbra'ah ve-Sambut Ba-Mishnat Ha-Rav Kook* (Tel-Aviv, Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuchad, 2014), 20 notes that R. Kook's lengthy notebook from his time as rabbi in the town of Boisk (1902–1904) was his first major contribution in the area of Jewish thought. Bin-Nun describes the circumstances that led to this notebook remaining unpublished during R. Kook's lifetime, though it has since appeared in two versions, the second of

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idiom for some of R. Kook's most important and daring reflections on topics like human evolution and burgeoning Jewish nationalism, faith and heresy, universal aspiration and particularistic Jewish need. By viewing the commandments through an understanding of their rootedness in the unfolding future rather than the receding past, he sought to reverse the whole polarity of post-Emancipation Jewish thought, which had revolved around the question to what extent Jews could *still* be obligated to their ancient laws. Rabbi Kook, by contrast, insisted that the real question was how the light of the commandments could draw Israel and all humanity along the open-ended course of their evolutionary development. The discipline of seeking reasons for the commandments was an intrinsic part of Torah study and divine service for R. Kook, but it was especially important to him because of his characteristic and longstanding desire to reconcile modernity with tradition, halakha with aggadah, and Jewish philosophy with kabbalah.

A Neo-Maimonidean Project?

In the introduction to his youthful Torah commentary, *Midbar Shur*, R. Kook confessed that while he knew he was a competent halakhic scholar, he expected to make his signal contribution through writings related to *mussar* (ethics) rather than law.⁶ This is significant because he also describes reasons for the commandments as a form of ethical reflection related to other *mussar* disciplines inasmuch as they help to explicate the goals towards which the Torah directs our attention and striving. R. Kook was well versed in the medieval tradition of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* pioneered by thinkers like Saadiah and Maimonides and was also aware of the many controversies they had engendered.⁷ But he was committed to charting his own path. If he frequently invoked Maimonidean themes in

which included some previously censored material. See R. Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk* In *Pinkasei Ra'ayah* Vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Machon R. Tzvi Yehudah Kook, 2010); R. Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, *Le-Nevukhei Ha-Dor* (R. Shachar Rahmani ed., Jerusalem: *Yediot Aharonot*, 2014). The first published essay on the subject was *'Afikim Ba-Negav*, which appeared in several installments in the journal *Ha-Peles*, beginning in 1903.

⁶ R. Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, *Midbar Shur* (Jerusalem: Machon R. Tzvi Yehudah Kook, 1999), 5-6.

⁷ On controversy related to Maimonides' reasons for the commandments, see Moshe Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," In *Studies in Maimonides*, I. Twersky ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 31-82; Don Seeman, "Reasons for the Commandments as Contemplative Practice in Maimonides," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 103 (2013): 298-300.

his *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*, therefore, it was because of their power to enrich his own integrated thinking in this regard.

Maimonides was the single most frequently cited authority in *Moreh Le-Nevokei Ha-Dor* (“Guide to the Perplexed of the Generation”), a posthumously published notebook centrally concerned with *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* that R. Kook authored while he was the rabbi of Boisk (Bauska) in Latvia between 1902 and 1904. Yehuda Mirsky, who notes that Maimonides was also the most frequently cited author in R. Kook’s later *mussar*-focused commentary to aggadic portions of the Talmud, *Eyn Ayah*, calls R. Kook’s whole approach to ethics “neo-Maimonidean” during this period.⁸ Mirsky also claims, like many scholars, that R. Kook began to distance himself from the Jewish philosophical tradition in favor of more mystical concerns after his immigration to the Land of Israel in 1904, but I do not think his writings on *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* bear this out. Despite undeniable shifts in emphasis and detail among his various works, I will argue that R. Kook’s approach to reasons for the commandments remained surprisingly consistent over many years and that the formative importance of Jewish philosophical writers like Maimonides to this theme hardly wavered. Indeed, even when he was openly critical of Maimonides’ reasons for the commandments, as in his relatively late essay *Talelei ‘Orot* (published 1910), R. Kook began by acknowledging that Maimonides was the single most important early expositor on this theme and never retreated from his view that all commandments have rationales that are at least partly accessible to human reason.⁹

Some traditionalist followers of Maimonides have glossed over elements of his approach that seemed to stand in tension with widely accepted Jewish doctrines like the creation of the world. A perceptive reader may note, for example, that even a confirmed Maimonidean like the author of *Sefer Ha-Hinnukh* puts affirmation of creation *ex nihilo* at the heart of his understanding of various commandments such as the

⁸ See Yehudah Mirsky, “*Ha-Rambam ve-ha-Ra’ayah Kook: Behinab Mehudesbet.*” In Barukh Yaakov Schwartz, Avraham Melamed and Aharon Shemesh eds., *Ha-Mikra Ve-Olam: Sifrut Hazal Ve-Mishpat Ivri U-Mahshevet Yisrael* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2008): 399, 401.

⁹ Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, *Talelei ‘Orot: Masa’ el-ha-Higayon ha-Penimi shel ‘Olam ha-Mitzvot.* Haggai Londin editor (Jerusalem: Machon Binyan Ha-Torah, 2001), 27. Also see the notes by R. Kook’s preeminent student R. David Cohen (“the Nazir”) in R. David Cohen, *Derekh Emunah* in *Ha-Emunot VeHa-De’ot Le-Rabbenu Saadiyah Gaon ‘im Derekh Emunah Bi’urei Ha-Rav Ha-Nazir* Vol. 3, *Ma’amar* 3:2 (Jerusalem: Ariel-Mifalei Yehadut Va-Hevrah Bi-Yisrael, 2004), p. 34 n. 91. See also Bin-Nun, *Ha-Makor Ha-Kaful*, 21, 153-54.

Paschal sacrifice where these are quietly absent from Maimonides' account.¹⁰ Not so R. Kook, who not only notes his own willingness to follow Maimonides in reading the first chapters of Genesis allegorically, if required by reason to do so, but also acknowledges unflinchingly that Maimonides' goal, in many passages, was to demonstrate the potential compatibility of Torah with Aristotelian eternity.¹¹ R. Kook was personally unsympathetic to Aristotle on this matter, but he clearly understood that responding to the science of his own day—dominated by the dynamism of evolutionary and historicist paradigms rather than theories of eternity—would require him to transpose elements of Maimonides' approach into contemporary terms.¹² Another way of saying this would be that following in Maimonides' footsteps at the beginning of the twentieth century required him paradoxically to break with key elements of Maimonides' own twelfth-century approach to reconciling Torah with science.

This is undoubtedly how we ought to understand R. Kook's sharp apparent critique of Maimonides' *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* in the introduction to his last major essay devoted entirely to this theme, *Talelei 'Orot*:

The connecting thread that links all of the explanations for the commandments by Maimonides is: the uprooting of idolatry. We have here a noble cultural force of the past, which continues to release an idealistic spirit, the pride of our people in having been an important participant in building the spiritual and cultural world, but by its nature this is bound to weaken, since its brightest epoch is in the *past*. In truth, however, the basic principle immanent in the reasons for the commandments points to the *future*. The past, by itself, though it is very important can...only bring to us values of ar-

¹⁰ See for example *Sefer Ha-Hinnukh*, Mitzvah 21 (*sippur yetziat mitzrayim*) and mitzvah 380 (*pesah sheni*). In Mitzvah 32 (the prohibition of Sabbath labor), *Hinnukh* does quote from Maimonides' discussion of the Sabbath in the context of rejecting Aristotelian eternity in *Guide* II: 32. But Maimonides himself notes in *Guide* I: 71 that he assumes eternity in his defense of Jewish doctrine. *Hinnukh's* formulation may have been influenced by Nahmanides' stricture on Maimonides' *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* for failing to include a prohibition of belief in eternity. See R. Hayyim Dov Chavel ed., *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot la-Rambam 'im hasagot ha-Ramban* (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1981), 395. On debates about Maimonides' true view of the matter, see Moshe Halbertal, *Maimonides: Life and Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 202–208, 318–321.

¹¹ *Le-Neukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 23a), 130–131; *Pinkas me-Tekufat Boisk* (chap. 22), 87–88.

¹² On the rejection of Aristotelian eternity and embrace of a more dynamic paradigm, see *Le-Neukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 1), 27–29; *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk* (chap. 1), 15–19.

archaeological information that have no substantial contribution to ongoing life.¹³

The “archaeological” critique reverberates through all of R. Kook’s writings on *ta’amei ha-mitzvot* whether or not he mentions Maimonides by name.¹⁴ It is clear on reflection, however, that the real target of his concern lies substantially closer to home, in modernist use of Maimonides by Western European Jews:

Indeed, we have already seen this development [the rendering of Judaism as mere archaeology] in Western Europe in the Mendelssohnian movement, for whom Maimonides’ logic of reasons for the commandments became the most significant factor in their interpretation of Judaism. The respect for Judaism grew among individuals, and the historical value of the past occupied a major place in the literary efforts of the generations that were influenced by this spirit. But these works were not touched by the inner light of Maimonides in which the past merges with the present and future.¹⁵

Like Maimonides, Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) emphasized the rational and this-worldly benefits of the commandments for human felicity.¹⁶ R. Kook was not entirely insensitive to this position and I have

¹³ *Talelei ‘Orot*, 29. Translation from Abraham Isaac Kook, “Fragments of Light: A View as to the Reasons for the Commandments,” In Ben-Zion Bokser editor and translator, *Classics of Western Spirituality: Abraham Isaac Kook* (Mahwah New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1978), 303.

¹⁴ A version of this critique, though devoid of R. Kook’s attention to historical change, may be implicit to Nahmanides’ attack on Maimonides’ reasons for the commandments in his commentary to Leviticus 19:1. There is some evidence moreover, that this is an attack Maimonides himself foresaw and took steps to avoid in some of his works. See Moshe Halbertal, “*Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* of Maimonides—His Architecture of Halakha and Theory of Interpretation,” (Hebrew), *Tarbiz* 49 (1990): 457–480; Seeman, “Reasons for the Commandments as Contemplative Practice,” 320n190.

¹⁵ Translation based on Bokser’s “Fragments of Light,” p. 304 but corrected to reflect R. Kook’s specific critique of the circle around Moses Mendelssohn, which is for some reason missing from Bokser’s translation. See *Talelei ‘Orot*, pp. 35–36.

¹⁶ “God is not a being who needs our benevolence, requires our assistance, or claims any of our rights for his own use, or whose rights can ever clash or be confused with ours.” It follows then, that the commandments are given only for the sake of human benefit and development. Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: On Judaism and Religious Power*. Trans. Alan Arkush (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 1983), 35. See Don Seeman, “God’s Honor, Violence and

already argued elsewhere that he and Mendelssohn shared similar readings of Maimonides' teaching on divine honor and reasons for the commandments. Both argued, in particular, that divine honor was better served through human self-improvement than through sheer obedience.¹⁷ But Mendelssohn was focused on Jewish political emancipation, to which end he advocated the abridgement of Jewish civil law as the price of integration.¹⁸ He did appeal to Jews' sense of ancestral duty to preserve the so-called "ceremonial" or ritual laws, such as dietary and Sabbath restrictions, but this was an argument that many reformers who came after him found unpersuasive.¹⁹ This was, at any rate, part of the "archaeological" frame against which R. Kook railed. "It is only when the past flows on toward the great and progressively unfolding future," he writes, "that this branch of scientific knowledge [reasons for the commandments] can meet the conditions of life, both in establishing the worth of this noble branch of knowledge and in contributing to the revitalization of Judaism."²⁰

Like many rabbinic writers, R. Kook expressed his preference for Maimonides' explanation of the commandments in his *Code of Law* over the more philosophical account of the *Guide*. The "light of Maimonides," he writes, is "expressed not in the logical form of the past-oriented *Guide of the Perplexed*, but in the holy and simple piety of the *Mishneh Torah* [*Code of Law*], where refined feeling transcends the bounds of logical reasoning."²¹ I have argued previously that many of the discrepancies between the *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* of the *Guide* and the *Code* stem from their

the State" in Robert W. Jenson and Eugene Korn eds., *Plowshares into Swords: Reflections on Religion and Violence* (The Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding, 2014).

¹⁷ "From this source [the mistaken association of divine honor with sheer obedience] flow all the unjust presumptions which the ministers of religion have at time permitted themselves...All the violence and persecution which they have perpetrated, all the discord and strife, all the mutiny and sedition...are purely and simply the fruits of this pitiful sophistry." See Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, p. 58; Seeman, "God's Honor, Violence and the State." For R. Kook's view of divine honor, see for example, R. Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, *Middot Ha-Ra'ayah* in *Mussar Avikha* (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1971), 134–137; Don Seeman, "Ethics, Violence and Divine Honor in Modern Jewish Thought," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73 (2005): 1–32.

¹⁸ See Arnold E. Eisen, *Rethinking Modern Judaism: Ritual, Commandment, Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 39–42).

¹⁹ See Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 102–103, 133–134, 220n102: 34–103; David Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment* (London: Peter Halban, 1996), 60, 84.

²⁰ "Fragments of Light," 304; *Talelei 'Orot* 35–36.

²¹ "Fragments of Light," 304–305; *Talelei 'Orot*, 36.

respective preoccupation with legislative and performative reason—the aim of a law from the legislator’s point of view vs. the possibly subjective meaning or significance of that same law from the point of view of the ordinary practitioner.²² It is also significant that the *Code of Law*, unlike the *Guide*, is oriented towards—and concludes with—a sweeping vision of collective future redemption that would have appealed to R. Kook. Yet it is telling that, despite any protestations to the contrary, it is overwhelmingly the *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* of the *Guide* that inform R. Kook’s approach.

According to Maimonides’ *Guide*, the commandments are divided broadly into *mishpatim* whose rationale is generally accessible to human understanding, and *huqqim*, whose rationale may be harder to grasp because they respond in large measure to ancient forms of idolatry whose details are now unfamiliar.²³ One may uncover their meaning and learn to appreciate the divine wisdom they embody through a process of historical reconstruction limited only by our knowledge of those times and religions.²⁴ The biblical practice of animal sacrifice, for example, emerges in this view as a gracious ruse to wean the people of Israel from idolatrous worship; the prohibition of mixed meat and milk, by contrast, works directly to stamp out a practice associated with pagan religion.²⁵

R. Kook also adopts the *huqqim/mishpatim* binary, despite critiquing Maimonides for failing to chart a course in *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* that others would follow. “We know of almost no resultant stimulation and apparently no resultant emulation in response to [Maimonides’] work,” he opines in *Talelei ‘Orot*. “The facts indicate...that we have here a certain deficiency [in Maimonides’ approach] that needs to be mended so that this beloved subject can be filled by a new vitality and creativity.”²⁶ Rather than reject the Maimonidean binary, R. Kook simply turns the paradigm around so that human difficulties in apprehending the purpose of *huqqim* are engendered not by their rootedness in a distant and vanishing past, as Maimonides insisted, but through their rootedness in an ap-

²² Seeman, “Reasons for the Commandments as Contemplative Practice in Maimonides,” 319-320. See also David Shatz, “Worship, Corporeality and Human Perfection: A Reading of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, III: 51–54,” In *Jewish Thought in Dialogue: Collected Essays*, ed. D. Shatz (Boston, 2009), 55; Josef Stern, *Problems and Parables of Law* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 36–48.

²³ *Guide* III: 29.

²⁴ See Seeman, “Reasons for the Commandments as Contemplative Practice in Maimonides.”

²⁵ See for example *Guide* III: chapters 32, 37, 46, 48.

²⁶ “Fragments of Light,” 303-304; *Talelei ‘Orot*, 27.

proaching and still opaquely-distant future. He will explain both animal sacrifice and many of the dietary laws, for example, by reference to their role in promoting the future and still unattainable moral development of human respect for animal life. Though his chronological orientation is at odds with Maimonides', he agrees that these commandments represent levers of historical change whose rationale is contingent, in a very real sense, on the changing moral and intellectual condition of humankind.

R. Kook's *mishpatim* also frequently betray Maimonidean influence. Though his understanding of circumcision, for example, incorporates many Kabbalistic and Hasidic elements, R. Kook follows *Guide* III: 49 in at least one important passage by linking it closely to kinship and socio-political relations.²⁷ Elsewhere in the same essay, he refers to the Torah's interest in fostering a correct political order (*tikkun medini*, parallel to Maimonides' *tikkun ha-guf*), and insists throughout, as we shall see, on the overriding importance of the national dimension of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*.²⁸ Elsewhere, he refers approvingly to the "ancient reason for circumcision" in the reduction of sexual lust that is tied with moral and intellectual accomplishment, just as it is in the *Guide*'s treatment of this mitzvah.²⁹

One of the most controversial issues in Maimonides' account of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* was the degree to which some details of commandments may be considered arbitrary or simple reflections of divine will rather than expressions of divine wisdom and purpose. For example, Maimonides writes in the *Guide* that while animal sacrifice in general supports an important purpose of combatting idolatry, there may well be no particular reason for the choice of a particular kind or number of

²⁷ *Talelei 'Orot*, 151, including notes by Haggai Londin; also see R. Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, 'Orot Ha-Mitzvot, In *Talelei 'Orot: Masa' el-ha-Higayon ha-Penimi shel 'Olam ha-Mitzvot*. Haggai Londin editor (Jerusalem: Machon Binyan Ha-Torah, 2001), 219–223. On Maimonides' treatment of circumcision in the *Guide* as a foundational act of friendship and socio-political identification, see Don Seeman, "Maimonides and Friendship," *Jewish Studies Internet Journal* 13 (2015): 21–26. For more on the kabbalistic resonances of R. Kook's approach to this mitzvah, see Hanoah Ben-Pazi, "Holiness Streams toward the Future: Sexuality in Rav Kook's Thought," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues* (2011): 160–178. This may usefully be read in light of Ramban's commentary to Leviticus 19:23 and Don Seeman, "Where is Sarah Your Wife: Cultural Poetics of Gender and Nationhood in the Hebrew Bible," *Harvard Theological Review* 91 (1998): 107–111.

²⁸ *Talelei 'Orot*, 153. For *tikkun ha-guf* as a gloss for moral and political perfection, see Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation of *Guide* III: 27.

²⁹ 'Orot Ha-Kodesh Vol. 3, 300-301 (*Sba'ar 2 Seder 3*: 39).

animals being offered on a particular date.³⁰ This view was anathema to many kabbalists as it was to adherents of modern symbolic readings like R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, who argued in his *Nineteen Letters* that Maimonides' doctrine would render the Talmudic preoccupation with legislative detail into little more than "a wearisome mass of hair-splitting subtleties, useful only for the accumulation of dust and moths."³¹ This was a conclusion that Hirsch himself rejected but that some of his reformist contemporaries clearly welcomed.³² It was also a reading of Maimonides to which R. Kook would have had to respond.

In an apparently youthful gloss to *Guide* III: 27, R. Kook asks directly whether Maimonides' view of the details of the commandments should be taken to mean that divine purposes could be attained through merely general observance of the Law without attention to the minutiae of halakhic practice.³³ He does not offer any answer in that context, but he does return to this theme in later writings, where he always insists on the importance of detailed observance but remains ambivalent about the relationship between those details of practice and *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*. A sense of spiritual connection to the exalted general purpose (*ba-takhlit ba-klalit*) of a commandment, he admits in *Eyn Ayah*, may weaken one's "natural feeling of connection" to the more distant details of its traditional performance, yet he also insists that neglect of the details in favor of such broad, general goals and themes would constitute a devastating error. To the contrary, with sufficient intellectual strength it should be possible to engender love for "the precision of even the smallest details" by relating them to one's love for the greatness of the Torah's general

³⁰ *Guide* III: 27. See Arthur Hyman, "A Note on Maimonides' Classification of Law," *PAJR* 46-47 (1980): 323-343, who argues that Maimonides' denial of meaning for many details is rooted in the classical philosophical problem of "Buridan's donkey" who, faced by two equally accessible choices of food, must in the end make an arbitrary decision. Stern, *Problems and Parables of Law*, makes the contrary claim that Maimonides thinks all details really do have meaning, though these may be grounded in historical knowledge we no longer possess.

³¹ Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters*, Bernard Drachman trans. (New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1969), 124.

³² See Noah H. Rosenbloom, *Tradition in an Age of Reform: The Religious Philosophy of Samson Raphael Hirsch* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1976), 204-206.

³³ R. Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, "He'arot Ha-Ra'ayah Le-Moreh Nevukhim," in R. Moshe Yechiel Tzuril editor, *Ozrot Ha-Ra'ayah* Vol. 2, pp. 261-268 (Jerusalem: Yeshivat Ha-Hesder Rishon LeTzion, 2002).

purposes.³⁴ Here and elsewhere, he also identifies the details of the commandments with the power of *segulah* (sometimes *segulah le'umit*), which can be understood as a kind of trans-rational efficacy associated with Kabbalah but inaccessible to normal human reason.³⁵

Yet while this approach affirms the irreducible significance of the details of commandments in one way, it also more or less acknowledges Maimonides' claim (and Hirsch's complaint) that they do not contribute to *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*. *Segulah*, in this sense, stands in tension with reason.³⁶ One particularly enigmatic passage seems to suggest that the details of the laws (*halakhot*) are recalcitrant to *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* precisely because they do not derive from the same powerful vital flow "as the mitzvot themselves in their essential naturalness."³⁷ This is not an entirely surprising formulation given the frequent association of natural reason and vitality with broad conceptions of divine purpose in R. Kook's teaching. It is not a formulation to which Maimonides himself would have assented, but still it bears the traces of a distinctively Maimonidean architecture, distinguishing as it does between details of practice and the broad legislative purposes to which the divine law has been dedicated.

"To the Bird's Nest Extend your Mercies!"

At least one other typically Maimonidean conundrum commands R. Kook's attention throughout his teaching on *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*. The Mishnah (*Berakhot* 5:3 and *Megillah* 4:9) rules that a person who invokes divine compassion during prayer by saying, "Your [God's] mercies extend even to the nests of birds!" must be silenced. This is a reference to the Torah's law (Deut. 22:6-7) that a person who is collecting wild bird's eggs or fledglings must first send the mother bird away from the nest before collecting her young. In his commentary on the Mishnah, Mai-

³⁴ R. Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, *Eyn Ayab, Berakhot* Vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Machon Ha-Rav Tzvi Yehudah Kook, 2000), 210 (*Perek* 7:18).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 209–211. Also see *Eyn Ayab, Shabbat* Vol. 2, 280–281 (*Perek* 14:8) and (for what seems to be an early formulation of this theme) *Ma'amarei Ha-Ra'ayah*, 540–544; also Avinoam Rosenak, *The Prophetic Halakhab: Rabbi A. I. Kook's Philosophy of Halakhab* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2007), 348–352.

³⁶ R. Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, *Orot Ha-Mitzvot*, in Haggai Londin ed., *Talei Orot* (Eli: Machon Binyan Ha-Torah, 2011), 214.

³⁷ *Orot Ha-Mitzvot* p. 215. For a different (and in my view more difficult) reading of this passage, see Rosenak, *The Prophetic Halakhab*, 350. Rosenak reads this passage as if R. Kook is commenting on the *reasons* for the commandments rather than the details of the commandments.

mionides asserts that the reason this law must not be referenced in this way during prayer is that the Torah's requirement to send away the mother bird "is a 'traditional' commandment [using Saadiah's terminology] which has no reason."³⁸ In his later *Code of Law*, Maimonides remains closer to the original Talmudic language but argues in a similar vein that "these commandments are not mercy but rather decrees [גזירות]. Had they [the commandments] been given for the sake of mercy [towards birds] then the slaughter would not have been permitted at all!"³⁹ This would seem to constitute a rejection of reasons for the commandments in general or at least of this particular reason for the law of the mother bird. Yet it is noteworthy that in his later philosophic work, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides goes out of his way to identify this very commandment with the Torah's concern for the suffering of animals (who should not have to witness the predation of their offspring) and to use this very mitzvah as a paradigm for rationality of the commandments.⁴⁰ Many solutions to this apparent contradiction have been suggested, but none is without problems.⁴¹

R. Kook returns to this issue at least a half dozen times in different contexts. In a 1934 letter of support to the head of the Rabbinical Court in Cape Town, South Africa, for example, he invokes the law of the bird's nest in a local dispute over an attempt by some Jews to introduce

³⁸ See *Mishnah 'im Perush Ha-Rambam: Seder Zera'im*, R. Yosef Kapah trans. (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1963), 42; similarly, on *Megillah* 4:7, see Idem. *Seder Mo'ed*, 238. The terminology of 'rational' and 'traditional' commandments that Maimonides would later reject on grounds that all commandments have reasons comes from Saadiah.

³⁹ *Hilkhot Tefillah U-Nesiyat Kappayim* 9:7. See *Berakhot* 33b; *Megillah* 25a. For extended discussion, see Eliezer Segal, "Justice, Mercy and a Bird's Nest," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42 (1991): 176–195; Heinemann, *The Reasons for the Commandments in Jewish Thought*, 23–25. Some commentators have suggested that while other authorities limit this rule to a leader of public prayer, Maimonides' formulation may extend even to an individual engaged in private prayer.

⁴⁰ *Guide of the Perplexed* III: 48. See Roslyn Weiss, "Maimonides on *Shiluah Ha-Qen*," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 79 (1989): 346–66.

⁴¹ It is of course possible that Maimonides simply changed his mind after completing his commentary and *Code of Law*, before writing the *Guide*. Yet Avraham Feintuch has shown convincingly to my mind that Maimonides groups the law of the mother bird together with other commandments devoted to the promotion of good character traits in his *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, which preceded the *Code*. See Avraham Alter Feintuch ed., *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot La-Rambam 'im perush Piqudei Yesharim* Vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot Press, 2000), 961–970.

cremation to their local cemetery.⁴² R. Kook points out that though the relevant Talmudic passage discusses several possible reasons for the Torah's opposition to cremation, Maimonides cites none of them in his simple ruling that burial of the dead is a mitzvah.⁴³ Thus, R. Kook writes, Maimonides undercuts the attempt by some contemporary Jews to offer rationales or reasons for upending this law. "Once we have decided that burial is a mitzvah," R. Kook writes, "we do not follow the reasons for the mitzvah whatever they may be, and it is prohibited to change the form of a mitzvah even if the reasons might suggest that there is room for such a change."⁴⁴ He then takes the unusual step (in a legal responsum) of citing Shem Tov's medieval commentary on Maimonides' *Guide* III: 48, in which the latter argues (citing the law of the mother bird) that while Maimonides' *philosophical* position was to unreservedly affirm reasons for the commandments, his ruling *as a jurist* was that these reasons are irrelevant to religious practice and should not be invoked. For R. Kook, this is an expression of the Talmudic doctrine '*ain dorshin ta'ama de-kra*: a principled opposition by some sages to speculation about God's legislative intent in matters of law.⁴⁵ This Cape Town responsum is cited by R. Kook's disciple R. Tzvi Neriya as evidence for the generalized irrelevance of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* to practical rulings of Jewish law.⁴⁶

The only problem is that R. Kook complicates this view in other contexts, where he describes a far more liberal application of Scriptural reason (*ta'ama de-kra*). He writes in *Eyn Ayab* for example that the halakhic stricture on evoking God's mercy over the bird's nest applies only to contexts of prayer, where the emphasis must be on perfect faith and submission, unlike Torah study where asking questions about legislative intent is perfectly in order.⁴⁷ Elsewhere, he writes that the decision to

⁴² R. Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, *Da'at Cohen*, Resp. 197 (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1969), 378–382.

⁴³ *Hilkebot Evel* 12:1. R. Avraham De'Boton, *Lehem Mishneh*, ad. Loc., also finds Maimonides' choice not to cite a reason for the halakha noteworthy in this context.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 380.

⁴⁵ Shlomo Josef Zevin, ed., *Talmudic Encyclopedia* s.v. *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1998), 20:568–96. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. Israel Abrams (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), I: 382–385.

⁴⁶ R. Zvi Neriya ed., *Mishnat Ha-Rav* (Beit-El: Orot Publishers, 1992), 54.

⁴⁷ R. Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, *Eyn Ayab: 'Al Aggadot Hazal She-B'Ain Yaacov, Berakhot* Vol. 1 (Jerusalem: R. Tzvi Yehudah Kook Institute, 1993), 160 [*Perek* 5:104]. A slightly different version of this teaching is reported in R. Kook's name by his son R. Tzvi Yehudah in his introduction to R. Avraham

refrain from making use of reasons for the commandments in legal contexts applies only to current historical conditions. When a future Sanhedrin is established, it will hardly be bound by such concerns and might certainly decide to revise Jewish law in light of *ta'ama de-ker* as they come to understand it.⁴⁸ This is not just a technical legal matter for R. Kook but also reflects a conception of the organic relationship between national life and moral intuition: “When Israel is standing at its uppermost height and with a totally pure heart, then it is possible to make use of more general principles, such as ‘*dorshin ta'ama de-ker*’...and to issue rulings, since power is accorded to the sages to uproot a matter from the Torah when there is [textual] proof as well as need.”⁴⁹

As for Maimonides’ ruling that one must silence a person who invokes the law of the bird’s nest in prayer, R. Kook writes that this does not indicate a rejection of reasons for the commandments at all. It seeks only to insulate judgement from the shifting moral passions of the moment: “the soul’s immature feelings, which advance in accord with the needs of the moment and isolated circumstance,” and might therefore derail the life of the nation.⁵⁰ The observance of Torah in a state of exile sometimes requires a suppression of natural moral feeling, R. Kook writes, but as redemption nears, “it is important in truth to explain that the plan of the [divine] decree is to keep justice alive for all time and even through a period of decline... The reasons for Torah and its secrets must therefore be revealed in the period of preparation for the

Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, *Olat Ra'ayah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1983), 10.

⁴⁸ See for example *Le-Nevukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 13), 85-86; (chap. 51), 249–251; *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk* (chap. 48), 168-169; *Afikim Ba-Negev*, 93. *Pinkas Ha-Dappim* 1 (par. 61), 88; *Iggerot Ha-Ra'ayah* Vol. 1 (letter 90), 103; Vol. 2 (letter 410), 66. R. Moshe Zuriel, in a personal communication, points to R. Menachem Ha-Meiri, *Beit Ha-Behirah*, *Sanhedrin* 17a (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1971), 49 as a source for R. Kook’s approach.

⁴⁹ *Le-Nevukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 51), 249–251. *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk* (chap. 48).

⁵⁰ *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk* (chap. 48), 171; *Le-Nevukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 51), 251-252. There may be echoes here of Maharal’s insistence that the objection to invoking God’s mercy over the bird’s nest comes not from rejection of the idea that there are reasons for divine commandments but rather in response to the idea that God might be motivated by something like shifting human emotion rather than divine wisdom and judgement. See Ha-Maharal mi-Prague, *Sefer Tiferet Yisrael* chapter 6. Hayyim Pardes ed. (Tel-Aviv: Yad Mordecai, 1985), 115–124. Similarly, see *Sefer Ha-Hinnukh* mitzvah 445 on the mitzvah of sending away the mother bird, and Segal, “Justice, Mercy and a Bird’s Nest,” pp. 192-193.

messiah [*ikva de-meshiha*].”⁵¹ “Natural moral feeling can only be reconciled with the divine law through recognition of the law’s redemptive purposes. “Someone who portrays God’s attributes as mercy is to be silenced, for they are nothing other than [divine] decrees,” he writes. “But what manner of decrees are these? Decrees that bring about such mercy that they sustain the world in perpetuity!”⁵²

Evolution: Towards a Future Moral Life

Like Maimonides, R. Kook sought to turn the greatest heresies of his day into opportunities for faith and religious life.⁵³ But in lieu of Aristotle, he identified three areas in which modern sensibilities had been transformed: a change in understanding of the social order (reflected in both nationalism and socialism) a change in cosmology (represented by new understandings of the immensity of the universe) and a well-nigh universal adoption of evolutionary historicism applied to both natural and human affairs.⁵⁴ The latter concern was invoked at the dramatic conclusion to Aḥad Ha-Am’s 1891 essay “Slavery in Freedom,” where he argues against the narrowly “religious” conception of Judaism popular among the rapidly acculturating and religiously liberal Jews of Western Europe. He argues both that Western Jews’ desire for political integration has made them incapable of acknowledging the sweeping nature of European antisemitism and that the accompanying idea of Judaism as a [mere] religion has forced them to adopt artificial standards of shared

⁵¹ Ibid. (see sources there in footnote). On the importance of revealing “secrets of Torah” in the period of national rebuilding, see in particular Yosef Rivlin ed., *Kol Ha-Tur: Tamzhit mi-tokeb sheva pirkei ge’ulah she-kibel R. Hillel Mi-Shkelov me-Rabbo Ha-Gra* (Israel: Mifitzei Kol Ha-Tur, 1994), 22, 25, 31, 69. Many aspects of R. Kook’s approach to messianic teaching are shaped by the Gaon’s teaching.

⁵² *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk* (chap. 48), 171; *Le-Neukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 51), 251-252.

⁵³ *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk* (chap. 22), 86-88; *Le-Neukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 23:1), 129-131.

⁵⁴ R. Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, *Orot Ha-Kodesh* Vol. 2 (*Ma’amar 5:21*) R. David Cohen ed. (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1985), 543. See Shmuel H. Bergman, “*Torat Ha-Hitpathut Ba-Mishnato shel Ha-Rav Kook.*” In *Sbitato shel Ha-Rav Kook Ba-Maḥshavah Ha-Yehudit* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education, 1963) pp. 59-69; Shai Cherry, “Three Twentieth-Century Jewish Responses to Evolutionary Theory,” *Aleph* 3 (2003): 247-290. Daniel R. Langton, “Abraham Isaac Kook’s Account of ‘Creative Evolution’: A Response to Modernity for the Sake of Zion,” *Melilah* 10 (2013):1-11 argues that R. Kook’s treatment of evolution needs to be evaluated in relation to contemporary Zionist politics, whereas I think that *ta’amei ha-mitzvot* are the more immediate context and key to understanding his approach to this topic.

belief to justify their perfectly natural feelings of collective Jewish existence. His own national or familial understanding of Jewishness by contrast allows him to reckon more honestly with antisemitism as well as contemporary moral and intellectual issues. It allows him, for example, to adopt “even “the scientific heresy which bears the name of ‘Darwin’ without any danger to my Judaism.”⁵⁵ Little more than a decade later, R. Kook notes in his own context that “the perplexed of this generation believe, through lack of knowledge, that the evolutionary approach identified with Kant, Laplace and Darwin...brings with it, heaven forbid, the destruction of Torah.”⁵⁶ He is not, like Aḥad Ha-Am, trying to free contemporary Jews from the possibility of doctrinal constraint, but he is disputing the common perception that evolutionary thinking is anathema to Judaism.

This does not appear to have been merely a concession to his audience. R. Kook’s disciple R. David Cohen, who edited his master’s *Orot Ha-Kodesh*, devotes a major part of his introduction to the context of R. Kook’s evolutionary teaching and devotes much of the second volume to “the world’s ascent,” including a section on *ha-bitpatḥut ha-mit’aleh*, which might be translated “Development [or Evolution] Rising.”⁵⁷ “The evolutionary teaching which is now progressively conquering the world,” R. Kook asserts, “is more appropriate to the secrets of Kabbalah than to any other philosophical teaching. Evolution...is the foundation of optimism in the world, for how is it possible to despair when one sees that all is evolving and ascending?”⁵⁸ This became a significant theme of all his writings on *ta’amei ha-mitzvot*, including *Talelei Orot*, where he notes that Jewish thought makes better progress by directly confronting what seem like contradictory opinions (as Maimonides did with Greco-Arabic philosophy) rather than simply avoiding them. “When evolution, which is extending its scientific dominance, confronts all of these [Torah ideas],” he writes, “it opens before us a new stream [of thought], expressed very clearly in...reasons for the commandments, promising a firm his-

⁵⁵ Aḥad Ha-‘Am, “Slavery in Freedom,” In Leon Simon trans., *Selected Essays of Aḥad Ha-‘Am* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962), 194.

⁵⁶ *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk* (chap. 5), 31; *Le-Nevekehei Ha-Dor*, (chap. 5), 43. Cherry, “Three Twentieth-Century Jewish Responses to Evolutionary Theory,” points out that while evolutionary approaches were ascendant at the time of R. Kook’s writing, Darwinian approaches based on natural selection were not. R. Kook relates to evolution as a broad intellectual trend without much interest in the widely differing forms it might take: hence, “Kant, Darwin and Laplace.”

⁵⁷ R. David Cohen, *Mavo Le-Orot Ha-Kodesh*. In *Orot Ha-Kodesh* Vol. 1, 31–38.

⁵⁸ *Orot Ha-Kodesh* Vol. 2 (*Ma’amar* 5: 19), 537.

torical standing [for conceptualizing *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*] also with respect to the future.”⁵⁹

These reflections on progress and evolution have very practical ramifications for thinking about reasons for the commandments. In one of the recently published notebooks from his time in Jaffa (1904–1914), R. Kook suggests that the prohibition of tattoos must have been designed, in part, to avoid undermining the human commitment to clothing by discouraging the decoration of naked bodies.⁶⁰ The prohibition of *shatnez* (garments of mixed wool and linen), which he will explain elsewhere with reference to the question of justice for animals, is here also described as a hedge against humankind’s “return to barbarism” since clothes of mixed material are more likely to be cut from multiple pieces that leave body parts uncovered.⁶¹ The commandment of *tzitzit* or fringes, similarly, emphasizes the dignity and beauty of clothing, which helps human beings set themselves apart from nature, while the *tekelet* or blue dye with which they are colored points to the hue of the sky and, by extension, to human responsibility for all life beneath the heavens.⁶² There is a whole moral-evolutionary schema embedded in the interplay of just these three commandments related to clothing and it is worth noting that they seem designed, in this view, not for the unique national needs of Israel but for guidance that will promote and safeguard the general ethical inheritance of humankind. The Torah’s prohibition of *mechir kelev* (donating the price of a dog to the Sanctuary) points to the dog’s role in hunting and subjugating other species, according to R. Kook. But it also emphasizes the importance of private property and civilization, since the association with dogs, which are associated with hunting and shepherding and were once humankind’s only possession, might cause us to disavow in some measure the benefits of a settled, agrarian way of life.⁶³ The

⁵⁹ *Talei Orot*, 105-106. Here I depart from editor Chaggai Londin’s reading as well as from Bosker’s translation in “Fragments of Light,” 310-311. For reasons that are unclear to me, both scholars treat R. Kook’s reference to *hitpatbut* in this passage as a general comment about “intellectual development” rather than evolution. It seems clear to me both from the context of this essay and from the nearly parallel passage cited above from *Orot Ha-Kodesh* Vol 2, 537, that R. Kook has evolutionary theory in mind. He is saying that *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* are energized by their confrontation with evolutionary thought.

⁶⁰ R. Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, *Pinkas Ha-Dappim* 1, par. 19; In *Kevatzim Me-Ktav-yad Kadsho* Vol. 2 (Jerusalem: *Maknon Le-Hotza'at Ginzei Ha-Ra'ayah*, 2008), 58–60.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

moral importance of the human shift to agriculture is marked by the prohibition of *kilayim* (sowing mixed seeds), which promotes mindfulness of the potential for sanctity in farming.⁶⁴

These passages, which were never published during R. Kook's lifetime, are extraordinary for a number of reasons. For one thing, despite his protestations elsewhere, these *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* look to the past, like those of Maimonides, rather than the future for inspiration. They point clearly, moreover, to R. Kook's preoccupation with the march from Barbarism to Civilization, which was a major trope of nineteenth and early twentieth century evolutionary anthropology and part of the underpinning of socialist theory.⁶⁵ Talk of milestones like the shift to agriculture, the adoption of clothing and the domestication of animals points to a naturalistic and non-Scriptural account of human origins as well as a deeper timeline than quotidian biblical theologies would seem to allow. Already in his pre-aliah essay *Afikim ba-Negev*, R. Kook had established the plausibility of a deep time horizon for evolutionary change by alluding to kabbalistic accounts of recurrent *Shemittah* cycles occurring across eons of time, but these journals from his Jaffa period make no mention of kabbalistic prooftexts, further complicating the account of a decidedly mystical shift in his writing upon contact with the Land of Israel.⁶⁶ On this matter at least, he seems to be experimenting with far more radical (but decidedly non-mystical) accounts of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* and evolution than those that were published in essays of the period.

In a 1905 letter to R. Moshe Seidel, R. Kook writes that many dilemmas of faith arise from the failure to inquire deeply enough about what are considered to be sources of heresy, such as evolutionary theory. He advances various ideas for reconciling the biblical creation story with contemporary scientific cosmology, but also cautions that current scientific theories are likely to prove fallible or "small-minded" over time. More germane to our purposes here, however, is the calibrated moral thrust of his approach, which echoes his teaching on reasons for the commandments:

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ For one quite influential account of human social evolution that informed the socialist theory of Marx and Engels and could ostensibly have been known to R. Kook, see Louis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society* (Tuscan: University of Arizona Press, 1985 [1877]). It was an important source for Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Andesite Press, 2015 [1884]).

⁶⁶ *Afikim Ba-Negev*, 94. R. Kook also cites or alludes to R. Moshe Cordovero (p. 94), Arizal (pp. 87, 101), *Tikkunei Zohar*, Gra and Ramhal (pp. 93-94) in the same essay.

What is most important about the act of creation is what we learn in regard to the knowledge of God and the truly moral life.... What would have happened if the myriad worlds of the present state of science were known then [in ancient times]? Man would have been like a speck and his morality of no consequence, and it would have been impossible to foster within him a spirit of greatness and universal glory. Only now...is he truly no longer frightened by the vastness of creation.⁶⁷

This approach, which assumes that the content and scope of revelation may be limited in order to avoid overwhelming its recipients, is already present in Maimonides' treatment of the law of animal sacrifice in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, and it fundamentally conditions R. Kook's *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*.⁶⁸ In his published essays, for example, R. Kook describes the prohibition of *shatnez* (the mixture of wool and linen in human garments) as a compromise between our current inability to make consistently fine moral distinctions between plant- and animal-derived products and the future moral force such distinctions will hold. Both wool and linen are individually permissible for use in clothing according to Jewish law, but their mixture would blur the distinction between different levels of "injustice" required to harvest them.⁶⁹ Covering the blood of a slaughtered wild animal (but not a domestic one), similarly, conveys the added shame we ought to feel (but cannot yet be expected to act upon) for slaughtering an animal we neither raised nor cared for.⁷⁰ Animal sacrifice itself will turn out, as we shall see, to reflect a temporary state of human moral development. The commandments themselves are expected to condition new moral consciousness over time.

With R. Kook's permission, R. Cohen appended an epigraph from R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto (1707–1747) to the section of 'Orot Ha-

⁶⁷ R. Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, *Iggerot Ha-Ra'ayah* Vol. 1, Letter 91 (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1985), 105–107. English translation based on Tzvi Feldman ed., *Rav A. Y. Kook, Selected Letters*, (Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot Publications, 1986), 8.

⁶⁸ See *Guide* III: 32 and Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 131–47.

⁶⁹ *Afikim Ba-Negav*, 98-99; *Talelei 'Orot*, 191. However, for alternate reasons see *Pinkas Ha-Dappim*, (par. 19), 58–60 and *'Orot Ha-Mitzvot*, 237-8, citing Ramhal in part 1 of *Adir Ba-Marom*.

⁷⁰ With relatively minor variations in *Afikim Ba-Negav*, 93-94, *Pinkas Me-Tekifat Boisk* (chap. 10), 50-51; *Le-Nevukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 10), 69-70; *Talelei 'Orot*, 181-182; *Eyn Ayah*, Shabbat Vol. 1 (*Perek* 2:15), 68-69.

Kodesh dealing centrally with evolution.⁷¹ It speaks of the gradual ascent of all worlds towards “the final perfection (*sbelemut*) which is in the future redemption.”⁷² This is an apt choice because Luzzatto (known as “Ramḥal”) looms large in R. Kook’s conceptual framework. R. Cohen emphasizes the mostly gradual upward movement of all things in both thinkers’ approach, despite apparent setbacks and complex tribulations along the way.⁷³ Tamar Ross adds that for R. Kook, as for Ramḥal, divine *tzimtzum* (contraction) is conceived as a way of making space for the ongoing perfectibility (*bishtalmut*) of all things through human moral action.⁷⁴ Yet the precise relationship between R. Kook and Ramḥal continues to provoke controversy. Yosef Avivi has argued that while R. Kook did indeed adopt Luzzatto’s terminology and broadly evolutionary ethos, he nevertheless pushed that teaching in a unique and radical direction through his vivid sense of the moral and political history of humankind as the stage upon which metaphysical *tikkun* plays out.⁷⁵ While Ramḥal’s perfection (*sbelemut*) is ultimately a static achievement of human consciousness according to Avivi (we need not pause to adjudicate that reading here), R. Kook’s *bishtalmut* points to an open-ended striving towards cosmic perfection that can never be final. “It is as if the ultimate perfection [*ha-sbelemut ha-muhlelet*],” R. Kook writes, “is itself perfected [*mishtalemet*] by means of the ongoing perfectibility [*ha-bishtalmut*] that comes from the manifestation of smallness becoming greatness.”⁷⁶

⁷¹ Cohen, *Mavo Le-Orot Ha-Kodesh*, 32.

⁷² ‘*Orot Ha-Kodesh* Vol. 2 (*Ma’amar* 5), 513, citing chapters 30–31 of R. Luzzatto’s work. See R. Moshe Ḥayyim Luzzatto. *Klah Pitchei Hokhmah Im Bi’urei Pitchei Ha-Pardes: Bi’urei Maran Nazir Elokim* R. David Cohen (Jerusalem: Nezer David, 2009), 238–271.

⁷³ Cohen, *Mavo Le-Orot Ha-Kodesh*, 31–38.

⁷⁴ Tamar Ross, “*Musag Ha-‘Elobut shel Ha-Rav Kook*,” Part I, *Da’at* 8 (1982): 25.

⁷⁵ Yosef Avivi, “*Historiya Tzorekh Gavoab*,” In Moshe Bar-Asher ed., *Sefer Ha-Yovel Le-Rav Mordecai Breuer* (Jerusalem: 1992), 709–771. For a related but differently nuanced comparison of R. Kook with Ramḥal, related to the inherent infinitude of human potentiality, see Ross, “*Musag Ha-‘Elobut shel Ha-Rav Kook*,” Part I, 26n.76. Also, for a critique of Avivi’s attempt to describe R. Kook through a purely Lurianic lens, see Benyamin Ish Shalom, “*Bein Ha-Rav Kook Le-Spinoza ve-Geta: Yesodot Moderniyim u-Mesortiyim ba-Haguto shel Ha-Rav Kook*,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 13 (1996): 527–556.

⁷⁶ ‘*Orot Ha-Kodesh* Vol. 2 (*Ma’amar* 5:15), 530. Yosef Ben-Shlomo, “*Sbelemut ve-Hishtalmut*,” *Iyyun* 33 (1984): 296 emphasizes the words “as if” in support of a non-pantheistic reading of this passage (and against Tamar Ross’s pantheistic interpretation). Both Ben-Shlomo (p. 294) and Ross, “*Musag Ha-‘Elobut shel*

Not for nothing did R. David Cohen associate his master's thought with that of the contemporary philosopher Henri Bergson, whose *elan vital* or "vital impetus" (coined for his 1907 *Creative Evolution*) described a self-organizing and open-ended, progressive impulse of all life and matter.⁷⁷ Yet as R. Cohen notes, R. Kook also criticizes Bergson for the lack of a transcendent divine ideal against which *hishtalmut* can be measured.⁷⁸ Within absolute divine perfection, R. Kook writes, we perceive two kinds of value whose unity must one day be made plain: unchanging divine infinitude (glossed as sanctity or *kodesh*) and open-ended growth, need, or coming into being (glossed as blessing, or *berakbah*).⁷⁹ S. H. Bergman calls this the most radical aspect of R. Kook's writing, since it describes divine perfection as gaining even more perfection through the upward and open-ended movement of created beings, but this is also a play on well-worn Kabbalistic tropes.⁸⁰ Clearly, it is Nahmanides rather than Maimonides upon whom R. Kook is playing when he writes, "this service [the constant and unending *ascent* of created beings] is a divine need [*tozrech gavo'ah*]."⁸¹

Ha-Rav Kook," Part 2, *Da'at* 9 (1982): 46-47, compare R. Kook's view with R. Hayyim of Volozhin.

⁷⁷ R. David Cohen, *Mishnat Maran Ha-Rav Ztz"l*. In *Shitato shel Ha-Rav Kook Ba-Maḥshavah Ha-Yehudit* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education, 1963) pp. 5–12. See Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, Arthur Mitchell trans. (New York: Dover Books, 1998 [1911]). This comparison was also made during R. Kook's lifetime by a journalist from Vienna who visited with him in 1912; Rabbi Dr. I Epstein, "Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook: His Life and Works" (London: Brit Hlutzim Datiyim, 1951); apparent discrepancies between Bergson's and R. Kook's views are emphasized in Yosef Ben Shlomo, *Poetry of Being* (Tel-Aviv: MOD Books, 1990), 47 and Cherry, "Three Twentieth-Century Jewish Responses to Evolutionary Theory," 252-253.

⁷⁸ 'Orot Ha-Kodesh Vol. 2 (*Ma'amar* 5: 17), 533; *Shemonah Kevatzim*, 4: 68; see Cohen, *Mavo L'Orot Ha-Kodesh*, 34; Ben-Shlomo, "Shelemut ve-Hishtalmut," 300-301.

⁷⁹ 'Orot Ha-Kodesh Vol. 2 (*Ma'amar* 5: 17, 18), 532–534.

⁸⁰ See Bergman, "Torat Ha-Hitpathut Ba-Mishnato shel Ha-Rav Kook"; Cohen, *Mavo L'Orot Ha-Kodesh*, 33-34.

⁸¹ 'Orot Ha-Kodesh Vol. 2 (*Ma'amar* 5:15), 530. Also see R. Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, *Mussar Avikbah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1971), 46–49. Clearly, this is a paraphrase of the Kabbalistic credo that "human service [*avodah*] is a divine need discussed, for example, by Nahmanides (Exodus 29:46), R. Bahya ben Asher (Exodus 39:46, Numbers 15:41) and R Meir Ibn Gabbai' in the second part of 'Avodat Ha-Kodesh, where this is a central tenet in his polemic against Maimonides. It is worth noting that R. Kook's own teacher in Kabbalah, R. Shlomo Elyashiv ("Leshem") expressed some discomfort with this idea. R. Shlomo Elyashiv, *Sba'arei Leshem Shevo ve-Ahalama* (Jerusalem:

Symbolism, Time and Efficacy

R. Kook's commitment to perfectibility and ascent obviously raises the question of efficacy or of the specific mechanisms through which evolutionary ascent was meant to occur. If we limit ourselves to his teaching on *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*, we might ask how the Torah's commandments are supposed to contribute to the changes in human moral consciousness that R. Kook describes. Many modern writers have assumed that the commandments function as symbols, which is to say that they are meant to convey specific meanings or ideas that are themselves the objects of the Torah's educational goals for humankind. The laws of ritual purity might teach about the importance of free-willed control over instinct, the laws of the Sabbath might teach the equal value of masters and servants who both must be given time to rest, and so forth. The only problem is that R. Kook famously appears to reject this approach. "Not symbolic are the mitzvot of the adepts who serve [*ba'alei ha-avodah*]," he exclaims, "but rather acts which raise and cause everything to shine, bring good to everything and bring happiness to all."⁸² "One of the most fundamental forms of knowledge," he teaches elsewhere, "is that commandments are not symbolic, like pneumatic devices, but creative actions...that nevertheless provide sufficient room for all symbolic beauty."⁸³

Commentators have too easily assumed that R. Kook's repeated critiques of symbolic thinking are directed primarily at R. Samson Raphael Hirsch or the German Neo-Orthodoxy with which he is identified. In their commentary to the passage from *Orot Ha-Kodesh* cited in the previous paragraph for example, Rabbis Shlomo and Avraham Toledano argue that this is directed squarely at R. Hirsch's essay on "The Commandments as Symbols," which claims, they argue, that mitzvot are meant "to arouse ideas in human consciousness, such as *tefillin* as a symbol that the Torah should always be before us... or circumcision as a

Aharon Barzani, 1990), 1–10. See Don Seeman, "Honoring the Divine as Virtue and Practice in Maimonides," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 16(2008): 241–242nn 136–137.

⁸² *Orot Ha-Kodesh* Vol. 1 (*Sha'ar* 1:109), 123. "*Ba'alei ha-avodah*" are defined here as adepts who serve God while "gazing upon the secrets." See also *Talelei Orot*, 143–145; R. Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, *Ikve Ha-Tzon* (Jaffo, 1906), 25; the undated essay "*He'arah Kollelet*" in *Ma'amarei Ha-Ra'ayah*, 541; and Benjamin Ish Shalom, *Rav Avraham Itzhak Ha-Cohen Kook: Between Rationalism and Mysticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 92.

⁸³ R. Neriya, *Mishnat Ha-Rav*, 52, citing *Zerayim*, Issue 7, Sivan 5696 [1936].

symbol to make us remember Abraham's covenant."⁸⁴ The Toledanos, by contrast, think that R. Kook understood the mitzvot as a kind of metaphysical "technology" operating at the level of kabbalistic Sefirot. "Servants of God," they write, "do not see the mitzvot as symbolic, as a pantomime of beliefs and ideas but as operative procedures to improve existence."⁸⁵ The person who performs a mitzvah is not "like the Indian ascetic who moves his limbs and body to imitate the desired outcome such as the descent of rain or victory over the enemy," they insist, "but like the technologist who performs actions to increase the rain in the clouds or to build a victorious army...."⁸⁶ Now, whether any of this represents an adequate account of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch's approach (or of Indian ascetics, for that matter) is at least open to question. R. Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, for example, writes that he always thought Hirsch's "symbols" were about more than just the representation—and certainly not the mere pantomime—of abstract ideas!⁸⁷

R. Kook himself seems to have had a more nuanced appreciation for R. Hirsch's approach than many have assumed. We know that he taught Hirsch's *Horeb* (his magnum opus on reasons for the commandments) during his tenure as the rabbi of Boisk, during the very period when he was also writing some of his formative essays on *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*.⁸⁸ R. Hirsch's discussion of *huqqim* as "laws devoted to the justice of our relation with the non-human world" seem clearly to have influenced R. Kook's treatment of laws like *kelayim* (planting of mixed seeds), *shatnez* (mixtures of wool and linen) and covering the blood of a slaughtered wild animal, in which "justice towards the non-human world" is arguably even better developed than it was in *Horeb*.⁸⁹ Nor does R. Kook

⁸⁴ Rabbi Shlomo Toledano and Rabbi Avraham Toledano, *Havayot Ha-Kodesh* in *'Orot Ha-Kodesh Sikkum Ve-Perush* Vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Sifriyat Beit-El, 2014), 172-173. Others who identify R. Kook's critique primarily with the approach of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch include R. Tzvi Neriya, *Mishnat Ha-Rav*, 52-53; Haggai Londin in his edition of *Talelei 'Orot*, p. 145n.1; Rosenak, *The Prophetic Halakhab*, 338n.76, 343-344, and R. Yoel Bin-Nun, *Ha-Makor Ha-Kaful*, 147-148.

⁸⁵ Toledano and Toledano, *'Orot Ha-Kodesh Sikkum Ve-Perush* Vol. 1, 172-173.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ R. Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, "Torat Hayyim: Mishnat shel R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch," in *Lifrakim: Perakim be-Toldotam U-Mishnatam shel Ba'alei Ha-Mussar ve-Anshei Mofet* (Jerusalem: [1921] 2006), 207-231. See however Rosenbloom, *Tradition in an Age of Reform*, 200-201.

⁸⁸ Yehuda Mirsky, *An Intellectual and Spiritual Biography of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhaq Ha-Cohen Kook, 1865-1904* (Doctoral Dissertation, Harvard University 2007), 173.

⁸⁹ With respect to the prohibition of *kelayim*, R. Kook echoes Hirsch's assertion that the commandment seeks to ensure the continuity of individual species,

ever completely eschew symbolism as one facet of the Law's efficacy. "Revealed matters (*nigleh*) in the Torah," he writes, "show the symbolic side of the mitzvot and their influence upon life and souls, while the hidden matters (*nistar*) show their trans-rational (*segulah*) action upon the world and then, from great actions upon the world, come [back] to [influence] the depths of souls."⁹⁰ *Segulah*, as I mentioned above, should be understood as a form of efficacy that stands in some tension—but never flat-out contradiction—with reasons for the commandments accessible to human reason. R. Kook rejects the reductionism of purely symbolic approaches, but this does not mean that he rejects symbolism entirely.

In one early formulation of the problem, R. Kook makes the target of his critique more transparent:

Once we recognize that the commandments are not empty symbols that can be filled with any remembrance or content that humanity fabricates out of its own heart and spirit, but rather...substantial laws that fulfill the great purpose of drawing humanity...to its desired future... then [it] will become clear that we cannot treat the *intent* [*kavvanah*] of the commandment as its content and the *practice* [*ma'aseh*] as a gross shell for the *Maskilim* to make light of.⁹¹

It wasn't Hirsch who treated the commandments as arbitrary symbols whose ideological "intent" was more important than their practice but rather Hirsch's own immediate adversaries, like Abraham Geiger, whose reform of Judaism was premised on the preservation of Judaism's alleged "content" or symbolic "core," while its external "shells" or "ceremonial laws" (i.e. the practical commandments) were being weighed and discarded.⁹² This was also, incidentally, the same critique leveled by the Zionist writer Aḥad Ha-Am against Western Jews in his Hebrew language essay "Sacred and Profane," but it is not a critique that could have fairly been leveled against Samson Raphael Hirsch.⁹³

though he adds that the law also allows for genetic experimentation within limits! See *Orot Ha-Mitzvot*, 225.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁹¹ *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk* chap. 12, pp. 62-63; *Le-Nevukhei Ha-Dor* chap. 12, p. 82. Emphasis added.

⁹² Abraham Geiger, "On Renouncing Judaism," In Max Weiner ed. *Abraham Geiger and Liberal Judaism: The Challenge of the Nineteenth Century* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1981), 283-293. See Eisen, *Rethinking Modern Judaism*, 135-155.

⁹³ Aḥad Ha-Am, "Sacred and Profane" in Leon Simon trans., *Selected Essays of Aḥad Ha-Am* (Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962) pp. 41-45.

It was, if anything, Hirsch's response to writers like Geiger that posed a different kind of challenge for R. Kook. Faced by the reformist claim that the practical performance of the commandments was just an arbitrary "shell" for the symbolic "core" of Judaism on the one hand and by a nascent secular historicism on the other, Hirsch labored to develop a "scientific" philological and hermeneutic practice that he hoped would yield a more stable and objective understanding of God's legislative intent. "For Hirsch," writes Ken Koltun-Fromm, "the academic study of Judaism (*Wissenschaft*) underscores the timeless and uniform meaning of Jewish ritual observance... Hirsch understands that religious reform begins with recognizing discontinuities in religious traditions. Therefore he turns away from historical studies in order to provide a more stable base for religious practice."⁹⁴ Against the claim that the symbols embodied by the commandments (or their details) were merely arbitrary conveyances of abstract thought, Hirsch's *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* emphasized both the importance of mandatory practice and the non-arbitrary nature of the relationship between the form and content of mitzvah symbolism. Crucially to this approach, notes Koltun-Fromm, Hirsch argues that correct symbolic interpretation requires a shared cultural framework between symbol-maker and recipient. The only way for contemporary Jews to share a cultural framework with the Torah is to accept fealty to Jewish law and to engage in correct philological analysis of both biblical and rabbinic texts. "A symbol," writes R. Hirsch, "cannot be communicated to a recipient in which the symbol expresses a truth that is completely new to him."⁹⁵ But while this view may offer a degree of stability and protection from interpretations that run contrary to the accepted halakhah, it also threatens to impose a static limit to the unfolding of reasons for the commandments.

R. Kook's evolutionary theory of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*, by contrast, is grounded in the presumption that the commandments can and do engender *new* moral truths and perceptions in human consciousness over time. "The Torah is called a primordial parable [*masbal ha-kadmoni*]," he writes in one of his early notebooks. "But the meaning of the parable is always deeper than the parable itself, and thus in the future the reasons

⁹⁴ Ken Koltun-Fromm, "Public Religion in Samson Raphael Hirsch and Samuel Hirsch's Interpretation of Religious Symbolism." *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 9 (2000): 73–79.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 81. See also Rosenbloom, *Tradition in an Age of Reform*, 200–201.

for Torah [*ta'amei Torah*] will be revealed.”⁹⁶ This is not just a matter of new information conveyed but of new moral sensibilities cultivated and of their power to engender new understandings and obligations. This is clear already in his earliest published essay on reasons for the commandments, *Afikim Ba-Negev*, where it is significant that the specific mechanism for this open-endedness is grounded not directly in kabbalistic sources as has often been suggested but in a distinctive reading of a medieval philosophical and pietistic classic, R. Baḥya Ibn Paquda's *Duties of the Heart*.

Like Saadiah before him, Baḥya argued that a person must accept the commandments on authority, but that habituation to their practice prepares the ground for a higher level of service grounded in intellect and understanding.⁹⁷ Baḥya adds that the discipline of observance itself may help to “prompt” or activate even greater enlightenment:

The prompting of the intellect [*be'arat ha-sekbel*] is like a seed planted in the earth; the Law is a way of cultivating the earth and purifying it. The intellect needs the prompting of the Law [*be'arat ha-Torah*] to bring it to life....⁹⁸

Diana Lobel notes that while Baḥya's Arabic term *aql* (rendered in Hebrew as *sekbel* by Ibn 'Ibbon) has commonly been translated as “intellect,” he actually has in mind a kind of “natural moral instinct” or rational-intuitive appreciation for moral duty.⁹⁹ A person might offer thanks to God in prayer simply because Jewish law requires this, for example, but the very act of discharging one's ritual obligation repeatedly over time helps to prompt a more rational-intuitive appreciation or “prompting of the intellect” (*be'arat ha-sekbel*) that strengthens appreciation for the need to show gratitude and might reinforce practical observance of related commandments in turn. It might even prompt the

⁹⁶ R Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, “*Mabbarot Ketanot Boisk 1-2*,” par. 36 in *Kevatzim M-Ktav-yad Kadsbo* Vol. 2 (Jerusalem: *Makbon Le-Hotza'at Ginzei Ha-Ra'aya*, 2008), 35.

⁹⁷ *Sba'ar 'Avodat Hasbem* [*Sba'ar 3:2*] in Baḥya Ibn Paquda, *Torat Hovot Ha-Levavot Maqor Ve-Targum*, R. Yosef Kapach ed. (Jerusalem: Yad Mahari Kapach, 2001), 136–144; See R. David Cohen, *Ha-Emunot Ve-Ha-De'ot Le-Rabbenu Saadiah Gaon im Derekh Emunah*, 34–36.

⁹⁸ *Torat Hovot Ha-Levavot Maqor Ve-Targum*, 137.

⁹⁹ Diana Lobel, *A Sufi-Jewish Dialogue: Philosophy and Mysticism in Baḥya Ibn Paquda's Duties of the Heart* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 223.

development of new practical expressions, since “duties of the heart” are in principle infinite and always seeking additional means of expression.¹⁰⁰

This is precisely how R. Kook invokes these terms throughout *Afikim Ba-Negav*, where he repeatedly argues that the “Torah’s prompting” through the practical performance of commandments will ultimately lead to a “prompting of intellect” that exceeds the Torah’s current demand.¹⁰¹ The “prompting of the Torah” that comes from observing the law of forbidden fats, for example, will engender a “prompting of the intellect” that discourages even the slaughter of animals for food absent great human need.¹⁰² Covering the blood of slaughtered wild animals and separating wool from linen, as mentioned already above, will also lead to a prompting of the intellect towards greater appreciation of justice for animals.¹⁰³ In *Le-Nevukhei Ha-Dor*, similarly, R. Kook insists that prompting of the intellect may transcend, but may not violate, the prompting of the Torah; the intellect’s prompting will eventually demonstrate the unity of the particularistic law of the Jews revealed by Moses and the universal “call upon the name of God” first undertaken by Abraham.¹⁰⁴ In a 1904 letter that explicitly references Baḥya’s *Duties of the Heart*, R. Kook notes that the prompting of the intellect should not be confused with the letter of the law but with the aspiration to willingly exceed it under the right circumstances.¹⁰⁵

Baḥya wrote that the promptings of the intellect may differ with national context—the Israelites, for example, have special reason to feel the intellectual-intuitive prompting of gratitude for God’s redemption of them from Egypt, which is then amplified by the many commandments—prayers, holidays, certain sacrifices—devoted to thanking God.¹⁰⁶ R. David Cohen, the Nazir, points out that for Baḥya, the prompting of the intellect can also bring a person closer to the level of

¹⁰⁰ See Lobel, *A Sufi-Jewish Dialogue*, 201–223. For more on the role of study in generating novel moral teachings, see chapter 12 of R. Moshe Ḥayyim Luzzatto’s *Messilat Yesharim* including R. Kook’s summary of that chapter in *Messilat Yesharim ‘im kitzur Messilat Yesharim me’et Ha-Ra’ayah Kook* (Jerusalem: Nahum Stepanski, 2006), 137–138.

¹⁰¹ For example, *Afikim Ba-Negav*, 95, 97, 98; also compare with R. Kook’s enigmatic comments on the relationship of “feeling” to reasons for the commandments in *Eyn Ayah, Berakhot* Vol. 2 (*perek* 9: 197), 333–334.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 93–94.

¹⁰⁴ *Le-Nevukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 51), 253–54; *Pinkas Me-tekufat Boisk* (chap. 48), 173–4.

¹⁰⁵ *Iggerot Ha-Ra’ayah* Vol. 1 (letter 89) 93–100.

¹⁰⁶ *Torat Hovot Ha-Levavot Maqor Ve-Targum*, 141.

prophecy.¹⁰⁷ R. Kook's generative expansion of this idea is that the Torah's preparation for intellectual prompting can apply not just to individuals but to a whole generation or to the destiny of the entire nation. One reason the commandments cannot be treated as merely symbolic in the Hirschian sense, therefore, is because the prompting of the Torah introduces a dynamic and open-ended element to their significance, a future unfolding of truths that can only be dimly perceived in the historical present. This is apparently true even for rabbinic enactments, since the "prompting" of the rabbinic ruling to "break the middle matzah" on Passover night helps, according to R. Kook, to cultivate an intuitive appreciation for the inner unity of spiritual and material human need.¹⁰⁸

Lack of appreciation for Baḥya's formative influence may help to explain the impression that Hirschian "symbolism" and Kabbalistic "technology" are the only two forms of efficacy to which R. Kook had access.¹⁰⁹ If it was not symbolism he had in mind, some writers assume, it must have been metaphysics. To be sure, R. Kook's deep time horizon and long-term evolutionary adaptation of Baḥya's theory do draw upon kabbalistic sources that are mentioned explicitly in *Afikim Ba-Negev* and elsewhere.¹¹⁰ One should never discount the potential for unification of disparate Jewish intellectual trends in R. Kook's capacious moral and intellectual imaginary—the unification of the hidden and the revealed aspects of Torah is, after all, a major motif in his published works. Yet I would emphasize that though a huge and ramified kabbalistic literature on the subject of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* was available to him, R. Kook chose to emphasize the development of a "natural moral instinct" described in

¹⁰⁷ R. David Cohen, *Ha-Emunot Ve-Ha-De'ot Le-Rabbenu Saadiah Gaon im Derekh Emunah*, 35.

¹⁰⁸ *Haggadah shel Pesach im perush Ha-Rav Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook* (Jerusalem: Machon Ha-Rav Tzvi Yehuda Ha-Cohen, 2008), 47-48.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Toledano and Toledano, *Orot Ha-Kodesh Sikkum Ve-Perush* Vol. 1, 172-73. For a partial exception, see R. Michael Tzvi Nehorai, "Ta'amei Ha-Mitzvot Ba-Mishnat Ha-Rav Kook," in Aryeh Morgenstern ed., *Matitya: Sefer Ha-Asur Le-Yeshivat Bnei-Akiva ba-Netanya* (1971), 211-223.

¹¹⁰ R. Kook was not the first rabbinic writer to adopt a modern geological timeline or respond to evolutionary theories. He was no doubt familiar with the 1842 essay by R. Israel Lipschitz, "*Derush Or ha-Hayyim: A Theological Reflection on Death, Resurrection and the Age of the Universe.*" Yaakov Elman trans. In Aryeh Kaplan, *Immortality, Resurrection and the Age of the Universe: A Kabbalistic View* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1993), 65-135. Also see Raphael Shuchat, "Attitudes Towards Cosmogony and Evolution Among Rabbinic Thinkers in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries: The Resurgence of the Doctrine of Sabbatical Years." *Torah U-Madda Journal* 13 (2005): 15-49.

Bahya's well-known pietistic and philosophical work instead. He insisted, moreover, that this natural moral instinct can sometimes be identified with the tumult and impatience of secularizing modern Jews, whose embrace of ideologies like vegetarianism or animal rights, as we shall see, is not so much wrong as premature. Without denying the obviously generative influence of Jewish mystical sources on R. Kook's *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* therefore, I do want to insist that such influences need to be examined in light of a much broader palette of sources than has sometimes been acknowledged.¹¹¹ The mechanism for change associated with reasons for the commandments is more determinedly "Bahyanistic" than Lurianic, more prophetic moral psychology than mystical metaphysics.¹¹²

Jewish Modernity, Nationalism and the Commandments

Reasons for the commandments inevitably served as a platform for R. Kook to address some of the most intractable problems in modern Jewish life. What, for example, is the proper relationship between national and religious conceptions of Judaism? Spinoza helped to inaugurate modern discussion of the topic by arguing that the biblical commandments—including the so-called ceremonial laws—should be viewed as a kind of political constitution aimed at the temporal happiness of the ancient Israelites.¹¹³ Though drawing on political themes in Maimonides' *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*, Spinoza broke with Maimonides by asserting that since the Jews lacked any realistic hope for present-day sovereignty, those laws were now defunct. Shortly thereafter, Moses Mendelssohn argued that while modern Jews should consider themselves honor-bound to maintain the purely ritual or private ceremonial aspects of Judaism, Emancipation would require the subordination of most public aspects of Jewish

¹¹¹ My reading of R. Kook's *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* is consonant in this regard with Benny Ish-Shalom's critique of narrowly kabbalistic readings of R. Kook's theology in "*Bein Ha-Rav Kook Le-Spinoza ve-Geta*," 548-549.

¹¹² I will also take issue here, therefore, with Rosenak, *The Prophetic Halakhah*, 327, who complains that R. Kook never spells out a mechanism for the efficacy of the commandments.

¹¹³ See Daniel J. Lasker, "Reflections of the Medieval Christian-Jewish Debate in the *Theological-Political Treatise* and the *Epistles*," in Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Michael A. Rosenthal editors, *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 56–71; Donald Rutherford, "Spinoza's Conception of Law: Metaphysics and Ethics," *Ibid.*, 157 n47. On R. Kook's relationship to Spinoza's thought more broadly, see Ish Shalom, "*Bein Ha-Rav Kook Le-Spinoza ve-Geta*."

law to the law of the State.¹¹⁴ Reformers like Abraham Geiger went further still, arguing that while distinctive ritual practices may once have been necessary to the national and religious cohesion of Israel, these must now give way to a more ecumenical spirit of “ethical monotheism” in which both Jews and Christians participate.¹¹⁵

Given this context, it is not entirely surprising that traditionalists like Samson Raphael Hirsch in Germany and Samuel David Luzzatto (“Shadal”) in Italy tried to frame their reasons for the commandments in mostly apolitical terms that would avoid calling their loyalties into question or raising thorny questions about the relationship between the commandments and contemporary Jewish political aspirations. Shadal took Maimonides and Spinoza alike to task for emphasizing the political significance of many commandments at the expense, he thought, of their role in private moral edification.¹¹⁶ He also rejected Maimonides’ historical gradualism as well as his assertion that the commandments include obligations of belief. For Shadal, most commandments are best explained by the Torah’s desire to promote self-discipline and compassion for both people and animals.¹¹⁷ So, it is telling that while R. Kook never mentions Shadal by name in this context, he takes aim precisely at the undue emphasis on self-discipline and compassion among some writers on reasons for the commandments.¹¹⁸ His critique is partly rooted in the fact that writers like Shadal seem to identify the Torah’s moral ideal with something like the best mores of contemporary Europe, while R. Kook insists that this identification threatens to derail the Torah’s

¹¹⁴ See Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 102-103, 133-134, 220n102: 34–103; Eisen, *Rethinking Modern Judaism*, 40-42, 118; Rosenbloom, *Tradition in an Age of Reform*, 3–18.

¹¹⁵ See for example Abraham Geiger, “A General Introduction to the Science of Judaism” in *Abraham Geiger and Liberal Judaism*, 149–169; Christian Wiese, “Struggling for Normality: the Apologetics of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Wilhelmine Germany as an Anti-colonial Intellectual Revolt against the Protestant Construction of Judaism,” in Rainer Liedtke and David Rechter eds., *Towards Normality? Acculturation and Modern German Jewry* (Tubingen: Mors-Siebeck, 2003), 77–102; George Y. Kohler, *Reading Maimonides’ Philosophy in 19th Century Germany: The Guide to Religious Reform* (New York: Springer, 2012).

¹¹⁶ Shmuel David Luzzatto, “‘*Avavat Ha-Briyot Ba-Yahadut*,” trans. R. Menachem Emanuel Hartoum. In ‘*Al-Ha-Hehmlab Ve-Ha-Hashgahah* (Tel-Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2008), 112.

¹¹⁷ See Shmuel David Luzzatto, “Yesodei Ha-Torah,” in ‘*Al-Ha-Hehmlab Ve-Ha-Hashgahah*, 46, 52 and “Mahut Ha-Yahadut,” in ‘*Al-Ha-Hehmlab Ve-Ha-Hashgahah*, 95, 100.

¹¹⁸ ‘*Afikim Ba-Negev*, 93, 99.

plan for slow but open-ended moral ascent.¹¹⁹ “‘*Huqqim* and *mishpatim* such as these,’ [Deut.4:8],” he writes, “are only appropriate to a great nation, a ‘wise and understanding nation’ that is ready to give itself over entirely to...ideals whose height matches the distance of their path to realization.”¹²⁰ Long-term change requires steady and careful calibration over time. Shadal’s shallow time horizon and his narrow individualism (focusing on individual moral edification while rejecting any form of contemporary Jewish nationalism) both render his *ta’amei ha-mitzvot* inadequate to their object.

R. Kook constantly emphasizes the national context of reasons for the commandments. “There is an obligation to know Israel,” he asserts in *Afikim Ba-Negav* (riffing, perhaps, on the more familiar Maimonidean obligation to know God). “Those who have not learned ‘Israel’ or have not studied it in its depth certainly cannot know what Israel will do with respect to its national purpose that looks to the future.”¹²¹ In an early notebook, he insists that reasons for the commandments are not always accessible from the perspective of individual development—a clear swipe at predecessors like Shadal—but require an eye to the development of the nation as a whole.¹²² In another source from the same period, he opines that reasons for the Torah (*ta’amei Torah*) can be understood only from the perspective of *Knesset Yisrael* (the metaphysical community of Israel) whose national spirit is bound up with the love and knowledge of God.¹²³

One outcome of this national focus and its deep time horizon is to constrain individuals from acting on their own idiosyncratic assessment of *ta’amei ha-mitzvot* or to abrogate normative halakha in light of personal or short-term perceptions of moral good. “If the essence of the Torah

¹¹⁹ Ibid. See also *Le-Nevukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 12), 80; *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk* (chap. 12), 61.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 100.

¹²¹ *Afikim Ba-Negav*, 84. In the context of the essay, this is also a critique of those who would seek the meaning of the Torah’s commandments through comparison with the laws of other nations rather than recognizing the uniqueness of Israel.

¹²² *Le-Nevukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 47), 236; *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk* (chap. 44), 158. On the tension between national and universalistic motifs in *ta’amei ha-mitzvot*, see Rosenak, *The Prophetic Halakha*, 332–336. “Rav Kook’s distinction is in emphasizing the connection and mutual influence [in *ta’amei ha-mitzvot*] between the particular and the universal” (p. 336).

¹²³ *Mahberot Ketanot Boisk* 2 (par. 2), 27. Also see *Orot HaMitzvot*, 218. Thus, in *Iggerot Ha-Ra’ayah* Vol. 2 (letter 409), 65–66, he writes that the word “nation” can only be used of Israel in an equivocal sense, since its existence is tied to the divine ideals.

were just to prepare souls in morality and spiritual feeling then it would truly be subject to change in each generation.... But since the Torah's goal is not just the present but the most distant and broadest, most elevated future, and since all the acts and commandments in the Torah are a great chain linking the present to the future, therefore [consistent] practical observance [*ha-shemirah ha-ma'asit*] is the great essential."¹²⁴ Maimonides already emphasized that individuals (like the biblical King Solomon) might go astray by assuming that the reasons for specific commandments did not apply to them.¹²⁵ A national approach assumes that since the commandments are addressed to the whole people, it follows that even extraordinary individuals must sometimes constrain their moral ambition by committing to normative practice that brings good to others.¹²⁶ Despite his clear and well-known affinity for many Hasidic personalities and teachings,¹²⁷ R. Kook does not hesitate to frame the outbreak of the great controversy between the Gaon of Vilna and early Hasidim in just these terms:

This was the essential argument between GRA [the Gaon R. Elijah of Vilna] and Hasidism, that they [the Hasidim] privileged *kavanah* [intention] over *ma'aseh* [performance] based on their understanding of human perfection, whereas a national perspective would say that the individual must conform to the level of the nation on matters that have been normatively decided.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ *Le-Neukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 12), 80; *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk* (chap. 12), 61.

¹²⁵ See Negative Commandment 365 in R. Moshe ben Maimon, *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot: Maqor ve-Targum*, R. Yosef Kapach ed. (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1971), 346-347; Seeman, "Reasons for the Commandments as Contemplative Practice in Maimonides," 314-315.

¹²⁶ *Le-Neukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 47), 236-237; *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk* (chap. 44), 158-159.

¹²⁷ See R. Reuven Raz, *Ha-Rav Kook bein Hasidim Le-Mitnagdim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 2016); Ross, "Musag Ha-'Elohit shel Ha-Rav Kook," Part 2, *Da'at* 9, 39-70; Smadar Cherlow, *Tzadik Yesod 'Olam* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2012). On R. Kook's desire to effect a synthesis of Hasidic and Mitnagedic Kabbalah, see Bezalel Naor ed., *Kana'uteh de-Pinchas* (Spring Valley, New York: Orot Inc., 2013).

¹²⁸ *Mahbarot Ketanot Boisk* 1 (par. 2), 13. This passage also mirrors a claim by scholars such as Gershom Scholem that early Hasidism represented an attempt to neutralize active Jewish messianism by focusing on individual rather than collective redemption. See Gershom Scholem, "The Neutralization of the Messianic Idea in Early Hasidism," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 176-202; Yosef Ben-Shlomo, "Kabbalat Ha-Ari ve-Torat Ha-Rav Kook," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish*

Kavvanah here refers to the ideal or purpose towards which the commandments point, “based on their understanding of [individual] human perfection.” If the goal of prayer is cleaving to God, many Hasidic authorities taught, then one may delay the time of prayer beyond the established times in pursuit of that goal. This passage is consonant with a much broader critique of Hasidic emphasis on *kavannah* over normative practice by thinkers like R. Hayyim of Volozhin, the Gaon’s disciple, but R. Kook’s national interpretation of the critique is fascinating.¹²⁹ When his disciple, R. David Cohen, asked him about the difference between his own approach and that of the “new Hasidism,” R. Kook’s response was that “Hasidism builds the individual while I am building the nation.”¹³⁰

In fact, R. Kook insists that the subordination of *kavvanah* (intention) to *maaseh* (normative practice) is dependent on the moral development of the nation as a whole and may be reversed when circumstances warrant. With respect to the Talmudic opinion that “mitzvot will be nullified in the future” (*Niddah* 61b), R. Kook insists that this does *not* mean the commandments will be discontinued but only that the *reasons for the commandments* which are now secondary to practical performance will be made primary, conditioning the shape of future practice on better appreciation of their intent.¹³¹ In some passages, he suggests that the commandments will be observed more willingly in the future, through a better-integrated (and possibly prophetic) identification with their purpose, rather than through external imposition of authority, as they are today.¹³² Here, perhaps, Maimonides’ insistence on rationally perceptible

Thought 10 (1992): 455; Naftali Loewenthal, “The Neutralization of Messianism and the Apocalypse,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 13 (1996): 59–73. The Gaon’s national approach, by contrast, is reflected not just in his normative approach to halakha, but also in his practical emphasis on proto-Zionist projects like the ingathering of exiles and building of Jerusalem undertaken by his students.

¹²⁹ See for example R. Hayyim of Volozhin, *Nefesh Ha-Hayyim* (*Sha’ar* 2:13; *Perakim* 4–8); Ross, “*Musag Ha-Elohut*,” Part 2, 48–53; Rosenak, *The Prophetic Halakha*, 343. Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism* (Jonathan Chipman trans.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 326–339.

¹³⁰ See R. David Cohen, “*Mavo le-Orot Ha-Kodesh*,” *Sinai* 12 (1943), 289.

¹³¹ *Pinkas Ha-Dappim* 1 (par. 61), 88. Also see *Iggerot Ha-Ra’ayah* Vol 1 (letter 90), 103 and above, n. 45.

¹³² *Le-Nevukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 8), 54–55; *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk* (chap. 8), 39–40; also *Orot Ha-Kodesh* Vol. 4 (*Ma’amar* 5:6), 516 as discussed in Bin-Nun, *Ha-Makor Ha-Kaful*, 166–167. Bin-Nun does not to my mind sufficiently explore the extent to which the shape of future halakha is influenced according to R.

ta'amei ha-mitzvot is wedded to Naḥmanides' description of the fully internalized covenant (the "heart of flesh") Israel will one day attain.¹³³ Be that as it may, R. Kook is open to the possibility that this enhanced future understanding of reasons will also change the shape of normative practice once—and only once—the nation as a whole is ready.

"The Compromise is Also Holy"

Despite his oft-cited affinity for vegetarianism, R. Kook consistently defended both meat eating and animal sacrifice against critics. More than once, he alludes approvingly to the medieval thinker Joseph Albo's contention that the Torah's concession to the killing and eating of animals by humans in Genesis 9 was designed specifically to strengthen and emphasize the taxonomy that disallows killing or eating other humans.¹³⁴ This is a plausible view of the biblical verses that juxtapose the Torah's first grant of permission for the eating of meat with the first explicit prohibition of murder in Genesis 9: 3–6.¹³⁵ Following Albo, R. Kook

Kook by growth in knowledge of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* along with the changing experience of practice. However, also see *Iggerot Ha-Ra'ayah* Vol. 2 (letter 630), 240-241, where he limits the nullification of commandments with respect to a time in which many aspects of physicality (such as eating and drinking) will no longer apply.

¹³³ See Naḥmanides' commentary to Genesis 26:5. "Now it appears to me from a study of the opinions of our Rabbis that Abraham our father learned the entire Torah by means of *ruah ha-kodesh* (the holy spirit) and occupied himself with its study and *the reasons for its commandments* [emphasis added] and its secrets, and he observed it in its entirety, in the status of one who is not commanded but nevertheless observes it." The Baal Shem Tov is said to have taught in the name of Naḥmanides that this will also be the manner in which the Torah is observed in the messianic future. See Rabbi Moshe Ḥayyim Efraim, *Degel Mahane Efraim* (Jerusalem: Mir Publications, 1994), 145 (*parashat Tzav*).

¹³⁴ See *Afikim Ba-Negev*, 99–101; *Le-Nevukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 10), 65; *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk* (chap. 10), 47. See R. Joseph Albo, *Sefer Ha-Ikkarim* Vol. 3, *Ma'amar* 3: 15 (Issac Hussik trans; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1930), 128–137. Albo crucially uses the example of meat eating to show that the Torah's rules of permissibility may change in accord with the needs of the generation, an idea to which R. Kook applied an evolutionary consciousness.

¹³⁵ For more on vegetarianism as the Torah's first intention, see R. Shlomo Efraim Lunschitz's *Keli Yakar* to Genesis 27:3 and Deut. 12:20; Abravanel to Isaiah 11:8; and R. Kook *Eyn Ayah*, Shabbat 1 (perek 1:19), 14. Some immediate precursors to R. Kook's view of vegetarianism and the future of animal sacrifice are described in Sperber, "Korbanot Le-'Atid Lavo Ba-Mishnat Ha-Rav Kook," 108-109.

worries that doctrinaire vegetarianism might upend the taxonomic distinctiveness accorded by the Torah to human life and effectively weaken the deep-seated repugnance that most people have learned to feel towards murder.¹³⁶ Unlike Albo, however, he also explicitly frames this dynamic as part of a long-term moral-developmental process. He acknowledges, for example, that “the deeper strata of Torah” recognize vegetarianism as a part of the ultimate human ideal that will one day be put into practice, though he is adamant that the premature imposition of holy ideals leads only to heresy and destruction.¹³⁷ In *‘Afikim Ba-Negev*, he uses the Lurianic metaphor of *shevirat ha-kelim* (vessels shattered by an overabundance of light) to describe the dangers of such a breach; he also likens premature idealism to a pig that lies with its split hooves sticking out from underneath its body to fool people into thinking that it has the signs of a kosher animal.¹³⁸ In a 1917 letter to his son R. Tzvi Yehudah, R. Kook acknowledges that while some exalted souls may be drawn to vegetarianism, he worries that abstinence would affect his son’s health and warns him to avoid groups that ostensibly stand for the prevention of cruelty to animals but are in fact subtly misanthropic or antisemitic.¹³⁹ The desire to promote ideals before their time, he writes in another pointed letter, led to the absurdity of Christians burning people alive in the name of the commandment to love their neighbors as themselves.¹⁴⁰

This does not stop R. Kook from offering a quite daring account of future vegetarianism that includes a significant shift in sacrificial ritual. The biblical sacrifices, he writes, served as an important link between humanity and the divine while the Jerusalem Temple stood. They also served to unify the center of religious and national life.¹⁴¹ Ultimately, when the Temple is rebuilt, animal sacrifice will resume just as Maimonides and other halakhists insist; animals slaughtered there can be thought of as a kind of “tax” paid by the species for the betterment of the world

¹³⁶ *‘Afikim BaNegev*, 87.

¹³⁷ *Le-Neukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 47), 237-238; *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk*, (chap. 44), 159.

¹³⁸ *‘Afikim Ba-Negev*, 87.

¹³⁹ R. Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, *Iggerot Ha-Ra’ayah* Vol. 3 (letter 802), 82. See R. David Sperber, “*Korbanot le-‘Atid lavo ba-Mishnat Ha-Rav Kook*,” in R. Shmuel Sperber ed., *Essays and Studies in the Teaching of Rav Kook* (Jerusalem: Beit Ha-rav, 1992), 97–112 [resp. 882].

¹⁴⁰ *Iggerot Ha-Ra’ayah* Vol. 1 (letter 89), 99.

¹⁴¹ *Orot Ha-Mitzvot*, 224-225.

they inhabit, like soldiers or martyrs (*kedoshim*) killed for their nation.¹⁴² Adopting the kabbalistic teaching that sacrificial worship repairs or elevates the souls of animals, R. Kook writes that the very demonstration of their perfectibility will work over time to help constrain and diminish the human desire for flesh.¹⁴³ This is significant, because the whole sacrificial worship is meant to resonate with the centrality of desire for meat among the people; once they have stopped desiring meat for their own tables, a future Sanhedrin armed with supporting verses and reason (*svara*) would be within their authority to annul the sacrifice of animals altogether.¹⁴⁴ Divine service might even revert in some part to the first-born males of each family, who were not so directly tied to blood sacrifice as the *kobanim* who replaced them after the sin of the Golden Calf.¹⁴⁵ Ultimately, the ascent of animals toward sentience (from *hai* to *middaber* in medieval parlance) will also perforce require an end to the sacrifice of animals.¹⁴⁶ In the meantime, R. Kook insists on the sanctity of the current “compromise” that allows for the sacrifice and consumption of animal flesh.¹⁴⁷ His gradualism may help to suffuse contemporary practice with an awareness of ideals and values far beyond the immediate horizons of possibility, but also frequently pushes off the realization of those values to an uncertainly distant future.

R. Kook acknowledges that *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* are complicated by the need to balance competing values whose realization may require a degree of moral tension over time. In his Boisk notebook later published

¹⁴² *Afikim Ba-Negev* 101-103. On the resumption of sacrifice see for instance ‘*Orot Ha-Mitzvot*, 241 and many sources discussed in Sperber, “*Korbanot le-Atid lavo ba-Mishmat Ha-Rav Kook*.” Sperber thinks that R. Kook’s various statements on the subject can be reconciled by assuming two very different time horizons in R. Kook’s thinking, a relatively short horizon in which the pristine halakha of sacrifice is restored and a far more distant one in which sacrifice has been wholly discontinued.

¹⁴³ *Mabberot Kketanot Boisk* Vol. 1 (par.7), 14. See also *Afikim Ba-Negev*, 101–103.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* See *Le-Nevukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 51), 249–251; *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk* (chap. 48), 168-169.

¹⁴⁵ *Mabberot Kketanot Boisk*. 1 (par.8), 15-16. I am grateful to R. Bezalel Naor for pointing out to me that R. Kook’s reference to the return of the service to the firstborn is grounded in *Sifre* to Numbers 11:16 as discussed in R. Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin’s *Emek Ha-Netziv* Vol. 1 (Jerusalem: 1973), 288-289; as well as R. Ḥayyim ben Attar, ‘*Or Ha-Ḥayyim* to Genesis 49:28 and Numbers 3: 45. See also Netziv’s *Ha’amek Davar* to Exodus 34: 19.

¹⁴⁶ *Mabberot Kketanot Boisk* Vol. 1 (par. 8), 15-16; *Afikim Ba-Negev*, 99–101, citing R. Ḥayyim Vital, *Shaar Ha-Mitzvot (defus yashan)*, 42, 99.

¹⁴⁷ *Afikim Ba-Negev*, 89-90.

as *Le-Nevukhei Ha-Dor*, R. Kook identifies five different human capacities or areas of perfection to which the divine commandments are directed: (1) health and the body, (2) feelings, including natural morality and aesthetics, (3) the nation, (4) the sphere of the “religious” (*dat*), and (5) the intellect (*sekhel*).¹⁴⁸ A single mitzvah, like sacrifice or the obligation to procreate, can be explained simultaneously on each of these levels, though relative emphasis on one may come at the expense of others.¹⁴⁹ Indeed, R. Kook avers that the struggle between the old (Orthodox) *yishuv* and the new (Zionist) settlement is in large measure due to a failure to find a correct balance between the national and religious spheres that the Torah calls for.¹⁵⁰ This is by nature a dynamic process that may require one set of values to (temporarily?) suppress or condition others. While the “national” dimension of his *ta’amei ha-mitzvot* distinguishes R. Kook from modern writers like Hirsch and Shadal, for example, he is also consistent about subordinating it in some very real sense to what he calls “the religious,” which seems to include traditional faith and practice. In one notebook, he writes explicitly that the national *leads* to the religious dimension of life.¹⁵¹ Yet both together are secondary to what R. Kook calls the “intellectual (*sikhli*),” which includes for him—as it did for R. Hayyim of Volozhin—the unfettered and transcendent love of God, born of understanding.¹⁵² Neither religion nor nationalism, those two shibboleths vying in their narrow forms for the loyalty of Reform, Orthodox and Zionist Jews in his own day, was ranked

¹⁴⁸ *Le-Nevukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 26), 139-140; *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk*, (chap. 25), 96-97.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*; A similar point is raised in the epilogue to *Talelei ‘Orot*, 199–206.

¹⁵⁰ *Talelei ‘Orot*, 199–203.

¹⁵¹ *Mahberot Ketanot Boisk* Vol 2 (par. 12), 30. In *Shemonah Ketatzim* 7:131 R. Kook insists that narrow movements like Zionism and Hasidism are both important for what they ultimately contribute to the broad community of Torah-observant Jews. I am grateful to R. Moshe Zuriel for bringing this reference to my attention.

¹⁵² See the first chapter of *‘Orot Ha-Teshuvah*, which similarly treats both nature and traditional faith as preparations for the repentance based on intellect, identified with *teshuvah me-ahavah* (repentance out of love). I believe that this is all grounded in R. Hayyim of Volozhin’s description of the soul in the first section of *Nefesh Ha-Hayyim*, though R. Kook characteristically prefers non-technical language where possible and substitutes R. Hayyim’s *neshamah* (the aspect of the soul responsible for higher intellect and connection with God) with *sekhel* or intellect.

supreme or self-sufficient.¹⁵³ In his later formulation in *Talelei 'Orot*, R. Kook reduces the five dimensions of human capacity to just four spirits or *nubot* (I assume he has the German *Geiste* in mind) that he presents in descending order: (1) the spirit of the divine, (2) the spirit of absolute morality, (3) the spirit of faith or religion, and (4) the spirit of nationalism or of the social. Even the spirit of absolute (and therefore static) morality (*ba-mussar ba-muḥlat*) must ultimately stand subordinate to infinite divine freedom.¹⁵⁴

Conclusion: What Good are 'Reasons for the Commandments'?

Happy and well-provisioned nations, R. Kook tells us in the prologue to *'Afikim Ba-Negev*, do not typically probe too deeply into the *telos* [*taḥlil*] of their national existence.¹⁵⁵ The Jews have not been so lucky though, and since “we suffer...on a magnitude unlike those nations whose lives are rooted in the present,” suffering encourages us to seek a source of coherence and solidarity that can only be rooted in future promise. “Were it not for the downtrodden and destroyed state of the present, the *telos* of the future would not be rooted so deeply in the heart of the nation.”¹⁵⁶ This is one of the few passages in which the deep pathos of R. Kook's fascination with *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* comes to the fore. There is an urgency to the question of meaning and coherence that outstrips our commitment to the endless procession of individual, atomistic acts of obedience (*ma'asei mitzvah*) that sometimes seem to define religious life. Before any question of apologetics or reconciliation between Torah and other philosophies, therefore, comes the more basic significance of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* as a ground of inner life. The inner life of the individual is connected for R. Kook to the universal ascent of all things, inasmuch as the goal of the *mitzvot* is the perfection of all creation and an end to suffering.¹⁵⁷

In *Le-Nevukehei Ha-Dor*, R. Kook begins by emphasizing how important it is for scholars to show that there is nothing in Torah that in-

¹⁵³ See R. Yehuda Amital, “The Significance of Rav Kook's Teaching for our Generation,” in Benjamin Ish Shalom and Shalom Rosenberg eds., *The World of Rav Kook's Thought* (Jerusalem: Avichai Foundation, 1991), 423–435.

¹⁵⁴ See *Talelei 'Orot*, 59. I read this passage to mean that “absolute” (and therefore static) morality can no longer serve as the secure basis for *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* because of the evolutionary tenor of contemporary conceptions. See *Iggerot Ha-Ra'ayah* Vol. 1 (letter 89), 94.

¹⁵⁵ *'Afikim Ba-Negev*, 77–79.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁵⁷ *'Afikim ba-Negev*, 103–105.

evitably contradicts natural morality or human and national development.¹⁵⁸ But just as in *Afikim Ba-Negev*, this is a project of intrinsic and not just apologetic significance. *Ta'amei Ha-Mitzvot* allow a person to perform the commandments out of love and identification with their end rather than fear of punishment.¹⁵⁹ When focus upon the endless details of the *mitzvot* has come to feel too narrow or spiritually constricting, reasons for the commandments help to “expand the mind.”¹⁶⁰ Indeed, we must resist the narrowing of vision that may accompany or engender a more limited view of the commandments or of God.¹⁶¹ At its most expansive, apprehension of “the divine idea” and “the national idea” that underlie all of Jewish life will breathe new vitality into the practice of all the commandments, especially the so-called “traditional commandments” whose particular rationale (as Saadiah and Maimonides taught) can be harder to perceive.¹⁶² Moral development demands a reflective practice in which performing, studying and reflecting upon the noble ends of the commandments all go hand in hand.¹⁶³

This self-conscious philosophical register is not however the only one in which *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* operate. There is also a more mystical or vitalistic aspect to reasons that R. Kook is eager to accentuate. “Anyone who performs all the mitzvot and studies Torah without wearying, the life power that is hidden within the reasons of the Torah do their work on him, even though he feels nothing at the time”:

The light of life and of good, of potency and actuality and of general power, go forth to the individual person and to the nation as a collective from the beauty and the good, the power and eternity,

¹⁵⁸ *Le-Neukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 10), 63; *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk* (chap. 10), 45.

¹⁵⁹ R. Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, *Pinkas 13* (Jerusalem: R. Tzvi Yehudah Kook Institute, 2004) [par. 70], 5. Also *Le-Neukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 51), 253; *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk* Boisk, (chap. 48), 172.

¹⁶⁰ *Le-Neukhei Ha-Dor*, (chap. 47), 236; *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk* (chap. 44), 159.

¹⁶¹ *Mahberot Ketanot Boisk* 1 (par.7), 14–17.

¹⁶² R. Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, *Mahalakh Ha-Ideiyot b'Yisrael*, Haggai Londin ed. (Jerusalem: Maaliyot, 2005), 33-34n2, 279-282n16. R. Tzvi Tau compares the national and divine “ideas” in this essay to the categories of reasons for the commandments laid out in *Talelei 'Orot*. See Yosef Kelner, *Milon Ha-Ra'ayah* (Jerusalem: 1999), 388.

¹⁶³ *Le-Neukhei Ha-Dor*, (chap. 38),188; *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk* (chap. 36), 132. See R. Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, *Mussar Avikhab* (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1971), 21–33. In his summary of chapter eight of *Messilat Yesharim*, R. Kook also suggests that divine service requires reflection upon the noble purposes of the divine commandments. See *Messilat Yesharim 'im kitzur Messilat Yesharim me'et Ha-Ra'ayah* Kook, 93, 93-94n.24.

that is hidden in the secrets of the reasons for the commandments that are done with faith, for the sake of heaven.¹⁶⁴

“Sometimes,” R. Kook writes elsewhere in his pre-*aliyah* notebooks, “we latch onto reasons for Torah as rational matters [*devarim sikhliyim*] because we know that the light of the intellect is a spark of the divine light.”¹⁶⁵ Here the philosophical *ta'am* or reason appears like a more external expression of the inner kabbalistic *raz* or secret behind the Torah’s mandate. Just as the universal *elan vital* finds expression in a particular physical body with its distinctive form and pattern, writes R. Kook, so divine thought and vitality find expression in the specific forms of particular commandments.¹⁶⁶ Even here, however, R. Kook seems to want to bring the mysteries closer to intellect or to show how both registers of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*, the mystical and the philosophical, ultimately coincide. He speaks for example of the “universal ideals” that will “one day be unified in depth with the Torah’s intention [*kavvanah*] and its commandments in all their detail.”¹⁶⁷

R. Kook often invokes *kavvanah* in the context of this vitalistic conception. “By means of positive intentions [*kavvanot*] all of the holy secrets of Torah, prayer and mitzvot are included together, with all of their particulars, paths by which is revealed that exalted light of *Hokhmat Ha-Kodesh*, in order to bring that sanctity into this world, to satisfy the desire of every living thing.”¹⁶⁸ R. David Cohen has pointed to the importance of R. Moshe Cordovero’s *Sha'ar ha-Kavvanah* to his teacher’s approach. “Once it has been explained that man is a portion of God above,” Cordovero writes, “that when he acts with justice and righteousness, and intends this with his thought, through him everything is unified.”¹⁶⁹ It may well have been the juxtaposition of moral and metaphysical inten-

¹⁶⁴ R. Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook, *Orot* (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1973), 123.

¹⁶⁵ *Le-Nevukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 32), 168; *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk* (chap. 30), 114.

¹⁶⁶ *Iggerot Ha-Ra'ayah* Vol. 2 (letter 378), 39-40.

¹⁶⁷ *Le-Nevukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 39a), 198; this whole chapter is missing from the version published as *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk*. The ideal of unification of “revealed” and “hidden” aspects of the Torah is a frequent theme of R. Kook’s teaching. See for example *Orot Ha-Kodesh* Vol. 2 (*Sha'ar* 1: 14–28), 21–38 and *Iggerot Ha-Ra'ayah* Vol. 1 (letter 43), 41-42.

¹⁶⁸ *Orot Ha-Kodesh* Vol. 1 (*Sha'ar* 1:3), 3.

¹⁶⁹ See *Sha'ar* 32 of R. Moshe Cordovero, *Pardes Rimonim*. Moshe Tzuril ed. (Jerusalem: Yerid Ha-Sefarim, 2000), 582–585, cited by R. David Cohen, *Shiurei Rabbeinu David Cohen—Ha-Rav Ha-Nazir—ba-Sefer 'Orot Ha-Kodesh* (Jerusalem, 2001), 30. On Cordovero’s influence, see also Ben-Yosef, *Shelemut Ve-Hishtalmut*, 305.

tionality represented by this passage that R. Cohen had in mind. “Humanity needs to develop a great deal before it recognizes the great value of *kavannah* [intention],” suggests R. Kook. “All the great moral acts in the world...are nothing other than minor instantiations of the great torch of perfect intention...The resurrection of *kavannah* is the resurrection of the world.”¹⁷⁰

Perhaps most fundamentally, reasons for the commandments served R. Kook as a fulcrum between the normative world of *halakhab* and the world of meaning and purpose that he identified in the broadest terms with *aggadah*, including philosophy, kabbalah and *musar*. The earliest authorities, R. Kook writes in *Eyn Ayah*, used their understanding of Scriptural reason (*ta’ama de-ker*) in First Temple times to shape the law, though this practice was gradually abandoned during the period of the Second Temple as the nation began its inner spiritual preparation for many long centuries of exile and decline.¹⁷¹ This corresponds to two different legal hermeneutics that R. Kook identifies as *be’ur* (clarification) and *perush* (interpretation) respectively. He identifies *be’ur* with periods of organic national sovereignty that enhances the conditions for prophetic insight and clear understanding of how reasons for the commandments may be applied in law. *Perush*, by contrast, is associated with the absence of all of these conditions and with a more restrained style of exegesis. While the two forms of textual practice may sometimes overlap in time (R. Kook associates them with the biblical paradigms of priest and judge, or *cohen* and *shofet* respectively), the gradual dominance of *perush* in the life of the nation was also signaled by the abandonment of the original pre-exilic Hebrew script in the time of Ezra in favor of what we now know as “Assyrian script” (*ktav Ashuri*)—a rabbinic rather than prophetic script.¹⁷²

In another volume of the same work, R. Kook offers a subtle homiletic reading of the Talmudic rule that “only a great man is permitted to read by the light of a candle on the Sabbath,” since a lesser person would be tempted to adjust the flame in violation of Sabbath law:

A person should not rely on his own mind to change matters of practice through reasons and fundamentals of Torah. However, this is permitted to an important person for when an important person interprets the reasons of Torah according to his intellect he

¹⁷⁰ ‘Orot Ha-Kodesh Vol. 1 (Sha’ar 1: 110), 124; see R. Cohen, *Shiurei Rabbeinu David Cohen—Ha-Rav Ha-Nazir—ba-Sefer ‘Orot Ha-Kodesh*, 129.

¹⁷¹ Introduction to *Eyn Ayah*, *Berakhot* Vol. 1, 15-16.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 17. See also *Mahberet Ketanah Boisk* Vol. I (par. 20-21), 21–23. This whole passage is reminiscent of Maharal’s *Hiddushei Aggadot* to *Sanhedrin* 21a.

knows how to draw out what is beneficial, those things that strengthen the fundamentals of Torah and its rootedness in people's hearts... No stumbling block will come from it for his power is great and it is fitting for him to stroll in *Pardes* [esoteric knowledge] and to draw out shoots and fruits of *ta'amei Torah* from his own personal intellect, from the light of *ner Hashem nishmat adam* ["God's candle is man's soul"] that is within him, because of which there is no fear that he will turn aside from "the straight, paved path" (Proverbs 15:19).¹⁷³

This is a close encapsulation of R. Kook's preoccupation with anti-nomian abuse of *ta'amei Torah*, though it also signals his rejection of such concerns when "great people" are involved. In the extended passage from which this citation is taken, R. Kook distinguishes between *penimi-yut ha-Torah* (the inner dimension of Torah) which relies upon clear understanding of "the reasons and fundamentals of commandments," and casuistic readings (*pilpul* and *sevara*) that rely more heavily on analogy from known cases.¹⁷⁴ The first is identified with broad principles of Scriptural reason (*kelalim*) and with *be'ur*, the latter with more local textual considerations (*peratim*) and with *perush*. *Perush* is clearly the more familiar mode of study and exegesis among contemporary jurists.

It is unclear from these passages whether R. Kook thinks that both jurisprudential models might be available to contemporary scholars.¹⁷⁵ But it is abundantly clear that the movement towards exile and greater reliance on *perush* is also reversible as exile recedes. "Only when the propitious time comes and it is visible and clear to the eye," he writes in *'Afikim Ba-Negev*, "...when our judges and counselors will return as they were in the beginning, from Zion... from the place where God has chosen, *interpreting the Torah according to its reasons*, our nation will be found prepared already to bring these holy sprouts to fruition."¹⁷⁶ Here and in *Le-Nevukhei Ha-Dor*, he goes on to describe at length the power of a future Sanhedrin, established by the redeemed nation living on its land, to use *ta'ama de-dera* (Scriptural reason) to shape and reshape Jewish law,

¹⁷³ *Eyn Ayah, Shabbat* Vol. 1 (*Perek* 1:52), 33-34.

¹⁷⁴ For what appears to be an earlier version of this teaching, see *Ma'amarei Ha-Ra'ayah*, 543-544.

¹⁷⁵ For a view of R. Kook as a creative jurist who makes use of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* in practical contexts, see Hagi Ben-Artzi, *The New Shall be Sacred: Rav Kook as an Innovative Posek* [Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2010). For a view stressing his halakhic conservatism, see Eliezer Schweid, "*Ha-Historiya ve-ha-Halakha ba-Hagut ha-Yehudit shel ha-Meab ha-'Esrin*." *Hebrew Union College Annual* (50) 1979: 1-10.

¹⁷⁶ *'Afikim Ba-Negev*, 99 (emphasis added).

even in opposition to Talmudic precedent.¹⁷⁷ Through authoritative rabbinic interpretation and enactment of the Torah's "ideals" (or "reasons") in a centralized court or Sanhedrin, even Torah law can be made responsive, suggests R. Kook, to the ongoing movement of human moral development over time.¹⁷⁸ This is the context within which all of R. Kook's *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* (including his musings about the eventual nullification of animal sacrifice) should be understood.¹⁷⁹ He distinguishes between "reasons for the commandments" associated with *aggadah* that are available for speculative use in every generation and those associated with halakhah that are among the secrets of Torah, only to be revealed as redemption draws near.¹⁸⁰ In his youthful commentary *Midbar Shur*, R. Kook writes that Moses' request to see God's glory in Exodus 33 ("Show me Thy glory!") was partly a request to perceive the true legislative reasons for the commandments, which may not be revealed to living persons until the time of the Messiah ("man shall not see Me and live!").¹⁸¹ Maimonides wrote that this divine refusal revealed the limitations of intellect imposed upon corporeal humanity, which might only be eased as the power of the body recedes with approaching death. R. Kook, similarly, offers in *Eyn Ayah* that some people attain greater understanding of reasons for the commandments only through bodily suffering that weakens the hold of the flesh.¹⁸²

One thing is clear. R. Kook began to raise the problem of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* in his earliest writings and returned to this theme with some urgency throughout his career. Reasons for the commandments engaged him as an educator and community leader and provided grist for some of his own most sophisticated reflections on the specificities of Jewish law, ethics and philosophy—as well as their relationship to universal human values that are identified with the unfolding of divine will through history. Always, the sheer open-endedness of his approach is astounding. It is worth concluding with an extraordinary passage from *Eyn Ayah*, in which R. Kook distinguishes between two modes of Torah study and observance, distinguished in part by their different perceptions of *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*:

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. and *Le-Neukhei Ha-Dor* (chap. 13), 84–90; missing from *Pinkas Me-Tekufat Boisk*.

¹⁷⁸ In *Iggerot Ha-Ra'ayah* Vol. 1 (letter. 90), 103, R. Kook speaks explicitly about the Sanhedrin's authority to limit the applicability of commandments that have come to seem at odds with moral reason. See Meiri to Sanhedrin 17a.

¹⁷⁹ *Mahberot Ketanot Boisk* Vol 1 (par. 7), 14–17

¹⁸⁰ Introduction to *Eyn Ayah, Berakhot* Vol. 1, 15–16.

¹⁸¹ *Midbar Shur* to Exodus 33: 20.

¹⁸² *Eyn Ayah, Berakhot* Vol. 1 (par. 2:71), 87. See *Guide* III: 51.

[In] the fulfillment [of commandments] that comes without inner awareness and personal preparation for the light of Torah and its *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*, the shining of life, uprightness and justice with which it is filled... must flow according to the Torah's set order [*sidra shel Torah*]. A person such as this can only perform the will of his Creator according to what is clearly specified but cannot innovate or judge any matter involving true innovations [*hiddushei emet*], through which all of [a person's] thoughts and the opinions that are engendered upon his heart from the Torah's sanctity join together and multiply without limit.¹⁸³

For this person, Torah is best characterized as a kind of fixed manual for study and practice. But that is not the only guise in which Torah can appear. "Not so," suggests R. Kook, "for a person who has already ascended to the level of readiness to conceptualize Torah, who has come to know his Creator and to comprehend the supernal desire sought through the generalities of Torah [i.e., the reasons for the commandments], as well as the hidden power of the supernal light contained within its details." For such a person, whom the Torah sanctifies, Torah is more of a grammar than a mere manual. It can express the whole unfolding course of the human future, and its reach is correspondingly unlimited:

He makes use of every matter of Torah, its commandments and their intentions (*kavvanot*) the way a person uses letters that include every combination in the world, to express a multiplicity of infinite thoughts and feelings. These are the people who cleave to the Torah themselves and in their own flesh, and the Torah's light shines even upon their faces. For them the whole Torah is on the level of letters that include every expression, newly engendered expressions at every moment. "For your commandments are speech to me" (Psalms 119:99).¹⁸⁴ ❧

¹⁸³ *Eyn Ayah, Shabbat* Vol. 2 (Perek 5:34), p. 37. One cannot read this passage without noting its resonance with Ramhal's discussion of *hiddushim me-makor ha-emet* in chapter 12 of R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto's *Messilat Yesharim 'im kitzur Messilat Yesharim me'et Ha-Ra'ayah Kook* (Jerusalem: Nahum Stepanski, 2006), 137-138.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.* Compare with the teaching of R. Israel Hopstain, the Hasidic Maggid of Koznitz (1737–1814): "For your commandments are speech to me. 'Speech' [*siba*] is a combination [*tziruf*] of the letters *sa"b ya"b* [God has spoken], which is the inner speech of a righteous man's heart, the pure thoughts clothed in words even if they are not heard, since they are clothed in words they will, in the fullness of time, achieve and stand upon wisdom." See *Tebilim 'im Perush Ha-Zohar* (Warsaw, 1926), 400-401.