

Rav Abraham Isaac Kook's *Orot* *HaTeshuva*: Repentance as Cosmology

Dr. Daniel Rynhold

Repentance is a uniquely religious concept. Morality may dictate that there are occasions when we ought to apologize to our fellows and even seek their forgiveness when we have wronged them. But the specific cluster of ideas that surround the concept of repentance, such as sinning against God, atonement, and divine punishment, along with the idea that repentance is the culmination of a lengthy spiritual exercise, for want of a better term, is specifically religious. Repentance, as generally conceived, is also a particularly personal matter, something that we engage in as individuals. As Ephraim Urbach noted in relation to the rabbinic view, repentance is “entirely a matter for the individual: he is both its subject and object.”¹

1. Ephraim Urbach, “Redemption and Repentance in Talmudic Judaism,” in *Collected Writings in Jewish Studies*, Robert Brody and Moshe D. Herr, eds. (Jerusalem, 1999), 264.

Yet alongside this pointedly individual conception of repentance, the rabbinic tradition also contains a number of grandiose statements linking repentance to more cosmic concerns. Thus, “R. Yonatan said: Great is repentance, because it brings about redemption, as it is said, ‘And a redeemer will come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob (Is. 49:20)’” (Yoma 86a–b).

The precise nature of the relationship between repentance and redemption is admittedly a matter of rabbinic dispute (see Sanhedrin 97b–98a). Everyone agrees, however, that there *is* a fundamental relationship between the concepts, so it comes as no surprise to find rabbinic texts in which repentance takes on even greater cosmic weight. Take, for example, the following *baraita*:

Seven things were created before the world was created, and these are they: The Torah, repentance, the Garden of Eden, Gehenna, the Throne of Glory, the Temple, and the name of the Messiah Repentance, for it is written, “Before the mountains were brought forth” (Ps. 90:2), and it is written, “Thou turnest man to contrition, and sayest, ‘Repent, ye children of men’” (v. 3). (Pesahim 54a)

Repentance is here presented as one of the foundations of Creation – before the mountains were created, we are told, God told humanity to repent, a claim that for all its grandeur is not easy to understand. Note that the claim here is no longer simply that everyone repents, but the rather more sensational claim that repentance was instituted prior to Creation, before there were any human beings to repent. So is this just an example of rabbinic overstatement, or should it be understood as a genuine claim about the role of repentance in the universe?

In 1925, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, the son of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (better known simply as Rav Kook), edited a short work culled from his father’s writings called *Orot HaTeshuva* (*The Lights of Repentance*). In the introduction, Rav Kook writes that particularly for us moderns “this subject [of repentance] is still a closed book and is in

need of clarification.”² Some will find this claim surprising, and point to the many references to repentance throughout Jewish literature, and to extended discussions such as Rabbi Jonah ben Abraham Gerondi’s (1180–1263) *Shaarei Teshuva* (*The Gates of Repentance*), or Moses Maimonides’ (1138–1204) *Laws of Repentance* in his *Mishneh Torah*. But it might be that Rav Kook has one eye here on the neglect of these cosmic aspects of repentance, at least popularly (it is certainly a theme in the Zohar), and is concerned that they should reclaim their rightful place in Jewish accounts of repentance. Maybe this is what he meant when he wrote that despite repentance being a central concern of both the Bible and the rabbis, “our literature, which explores every area where there is manifest the poetry of life, did not probe at all into this wonderful treasure of life.”³ Rav Kook’s eclectic combination of mysticism and modernity was uniquely placed to revive these elements of repentance for the modern Jew, and in *Orot HaTeshuva*, the cosmic claims are taken very seriously. Repentance is placed both literally and figuratively at the very epicenter of Rav Kook’s universe.

RAV KOOK’S LIFE AND WORKS

Rav Kook was born on September 7, 1865 (10 Elul 5625), in Grieva, Latvia, the first child of a father, Shlomo Zalman, schooled at the famous Volozhin Yeshiva, and a mother, Perel Zlota, brought up in the world of Chabad Hasidism, a cultural mix that with hindsight can be seen as setting a precedent for the broad-based combination of influences that would eventually inform Rav Kook’s own worldview. After being schooled by a succession of rabbis in the first two decades of his life – an education that did not prevent him from also being exposed to maskilic

2. Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot HaTeshuva* (Jerusalem, 1985), 9 (henceforth, *OHT*). References to the Hebrew text are to the version reprinted in a volume together with *Orot HaTorah*, *Musar Avikha*, and two other works. Translations, which I have sometimes modified, are based on Ben Zion Bokser, ed., *Abraham Isaac Kook: The Lights of Penitence, Lights of Holiness, The Moral Principles, Essays, Letters and Poems* (Mahwah, 1978), 41–128. References first give the page numbers for the Hebrew text and then the corresponding page number in this English translation.

3. *OHT*, 9; 41.

literature – Rav Kook spent a year and a half studying in Volozhin under the Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin), while continuing to absorb all manner of other formative influences. Following a move to Ponevezh in 1886, where he married Batsheva Rabinowitz-Teomim, the daughter of the Aderet (Rabbi Eliyahu David Rabinowitz-Teomim), he became increasingly steeped in the study of Kabbala, an interest that continued to deepen when, as a matter of economic necessity, he had to take up appointments as a communal rabbi. His first appointment in 1888 was in the small Lithuanian town of Zeimel, and it was here in the following year that Rav Kook’s life took a tragic turn with the death of his first wife, though with the Aderet’s encouragement he would remarry her cousin Raiza Rivka Rabinowitz within the year. Subsequently, in 1896, Rav Kook became the rabbi of Boisk, a community larger than that of Zeimel. His most significant geographical move, though, came on May 13, 1904, when, with the support of the Aderet, who was now the deputy chief rabbi of Jerusalem, Rav Kook moved to what was then Ottoman Palestine to take up the position of chief rabbi of Jaffa.

Rav Kook had not been, up to this point, a Zionist himself, at least not in any formal capacity. He had opposed the formation of the “separatist” Mizrahi camp in 1902 and had not joined the Eastern European *Hibbat Zion* movement. This all changed, however, when he was faced with the reality of life in Israel, where he often found himself caught in the crossfire between the Old Yishuv, with whom he shared a deep commitment to Torah and tradition, and the New Yishuv, whose critique of the traditionalists also resonated with Rav Kook’s more expansive soul, a soul that quickly developed a growing appreciation for the redemptive qualities of the apparent “heresies” of secular Zionism and chafed against the confined view of Judaism put forward by his rabbinic colleagues. Indeed, imparting some of this acquired wisdom was part of the motivation behind Rav Kook fatefully setting sail in 1914 for Frankfurt, Germany, for the worldwide conference of Agudat Yisrael, a journey that stranded him in Europe for five years as a result of the outbreak of the First World War. After spending some time living in St. Gallen, Switzerland, in 1916 he moved to London to become rabbi of the Machzikei Hadas Synagogue in the East End of London, a period during which he would clash with the English Jewish establishment

over his support for the Balfour Declaration, Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour's statement of British support for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

Rav Kook eventually returned to Israel in 1919 when a cohort of influential rabbis made him a formal offer to be chief rabbi of Jerusalem, despite the reservations of one of the leading rabbis of the Old Yishuv in Jerusalem, Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld. Rav Kook subsequently became the first chief rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine in 1921, a year in which he also set up a beit midrash adjacent to his residence called the *Merkaz*, which would eventually evolve into Merkaz HaRav Yeshiva. Renowned for his gentle and tolerant nature, Rav Kook ironically spent much of his life embroiled in communal controversies, from his early support in 1907 for the Tachkemoni school of Jaffa in opposition to the Jerusalem rabbis, to his deeply unpopular defense of Avraham Stavsky in the case of the murder of the Zionist leader Chaim Arlosoroff in 1933. On the one hand, he came into conflict with the traditionalists over, for example, his permissive ruling on *Shemitta*, while on the other, his later opposition to women's suffrage alienated the modernists. And he managed to offend all sides simultaneously with his 1925 speech at the inauguration of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; his very participation was anathema to the ultra-Orthodox, yet his defense of tradition as the measure of scholarly integrity proved too much for the academics. A man of peace, his life was rife with conflict, and there is a sad irony to the fact that on September 1, 1935 (3 Elul 5695), the day he eventually succumbed to cancer, the newspapers were reporting the sentencing of four members of the Histadrut for their part in violent summer conflicts occasioned by a labor dispute in Haifa.

Even in death, controversy continues to rage around Rav Kook's contributions to Jewish modernity. While he composed (though did not always publish) various works and articles as early as his time in Zeimel, including *Havash Pe'er* (published in 1891, a short work extolling the mitzva of tefillin, which for many years Rav Kook would wear all day), *Midbar Shur* (a collection of his Zeimel sermons of 1894–1896), and *Musar Avikha* (the first work written in what would become his signature style – the spiritual diary), it was the edited collections drawn from his intense spiritual diaries on which his reputation was built, for good and ill. In particular, the 1920 publication of selections from

these diaries under the title *Orot*, pieced together by his son Rabbi Zvi Yehuda, precipitated a very public controversy. A ban of excommunication claiming that *Orot* contained “all manner of poison” was put out by a group of zealots devoted to the leading rabbis of the Old Yishuv – the aforementioned Rabbi Sonnenfeld and Rabbi Yitzhak Yeruham Diskin – whose signatures were appended to the ban.

The only two other books edited from his diaries and seen through to publication during his lifetime came out in 1925. *Orot HaKodesh* (*Lights of Holiness*) – a three-volume magnum opus composed between 1910 and 1919 and edited by Rabbi David HaKohen (“the Nazir”) from eight notebooks – is a majestic but diffuse collection best suited to sustained study by scholars. In contrast, *Orot HaTeshuva*, edited again by Rabbi Zvi Yehuda, is a concentrated study of a single topic – repentance – which, as the focus of the High Holy Days, has both the appeal and the occasion for mass annual study.

Even from this brief account though, one immediately becomes aware of a methodological issue with the study of Rav Kook’s works. Other than the challenge of the often poetic and unsystematic form of the original diaries, which were not written with publication in mind, the three major works mentioned were not published by Rav Kook himself but were all edited from these diaries by other hands, and there is certainly evidence that Rav Kook and his son were sometimes at odds regarding what ought to be included for publication. Shai Agnon writes that he heard Rabbi Zvi Yehuda counsel his father to remove one of the passages in *Orot* that went on to cause much of the ensuing controversy⁴ – section 34 of *Orot HaTeḥiya*, in which he writes that the physical exercise of Israel’s youth “raises up the *Shekhina* (Divine Presence) just as it rises through songs and praises uttered by David, King of Israel, in the Book of Psalms.”⁵ We also know that the one diary notebook that Rav Kook himself prepared for publication in 1914 as *Arpelei Tohar*, the printing of which was halted with Rav Kook exiled in Europe after only eighty pages had been typeset, never saw the light of day in its full form,

4. See Shai Agnon, *Sefer, Sofer, VeSippur* (Tel Aviv, 1978), 352.

5. Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot* (Jerusalem, 2005), 80. The translation is taken from *Orot*, trans. Bezalel Naor (Jerusalem, 2015), 233.

partly because of pressure from Rabbi Zvi Yehuda, concerned to save his father from himself given some of the bold views expressed in its unedited pages.⁶ The nature of the editorial input is therefore a key question for Rav Kook scholars, though we now at least have access to the unedited diaries of 1910–1919, published as *Shemona Kevatzim (Eight Files)*.⁷ Our interest, however, is in the content of *Orot HaTeshuva*, and the picture of repentance it paints. Our primary purpose is to describe a book which has had an influence due to its revolutionary content, rather than reconstruct the precise original words of the man who was its (edited) author. Even if the original passages have a slightly different flavor, or even contain some significant particulars missing in the edited versions, there is little question that the analysis below broadly reflects the general philosophy of Rav Kook himself.

THE CONTEXT

We have already mentioned that, as far as Rav Kook was concerned, the context for his work on repentance was the very *lack* of context in his eyes. On the basis of what we will present of the book itself, we have conjectured that his dissatisfaction with the existing literature may have stemmed from its failure to take the cosmic significance of repentance, clearly signaled in the talmudic era, sufficiently seriously. From that perspective, the concept of repentance had not been adequately clarified, and thus his work was filling a lacuna. But, again based on evidence that

6. Some unbound 1914 versions of the eighty-page printing did find their way into certain hands – one was put up for auction in 2015 – and the full but edited version was published in 1983. Professor Rivka Schatz had a verbal agreement with Rabbi Zvi Yehuda prior to his death to publish the work in its original form, an agreement made within earshot of his students according to Schatz. After Rabbi Zvi Yehuda died, illness prevented her from publishing immediately, and upon her recovery, her intention to publish was thwarted by the rush by Mossad HaRav Kook to publish an “approved” edition, much to her immense displeasure. See her interview in Haggai Siegel, “*Orot BeOfel*,” *Nekudah* 113 (September 28, 1987), 20–21.
7. See Avinoam Rosenak, “Hidden Diaries and New Discoveries: The Life and Thought of Rabbi A. I. Kook,” *Shofar* 25:3 (2007): 111–147, for discussion of the publication of these key volumes. See also Marc B. Shapiro, *Changing the Immutable: How Orthodox Judaism Rewrites Its History* (Oxford, 2015), ch. 5, for further discussion of the editing of Rav Kook’s works.

emerges from *Orot HaTeshuva* to be discussed, I want to suggest an additional concern that Rav Kook may have had with the existing literature.

Of that literature, to this day Rabbenu Yona's (Rabbi Jonah ben Abraham Gerondi, 1180–1263) *Shaarei Teshuva* (*The Gates of Repentance*) is probably one of the few works that competes for contemporary readers with *Orot HaTeshuva* when the month of Elul comes around, though the latter is likely prevalent in Modern Orthodox circles, along with Rav Soloveitchik's *On Repentance*.⁸ As the first major theological monograph focused exclusively on repentance – Maimonides' *Laws of Repentance* of course is a single part of a much larger halakhic work – Rabbenu Yona's work has been, and continues to be hugely influential. Yet one cannot help but notice that his description of repentance is at odds with some key modern virtues. Thus, one of Rabbenu Yona's central principles of repentance is sorrow, or *yagon*, and he tells us that “the levels and degrees of repentance correspond to the magnitude of bitterness and the intensity of sorrow.”⁹ This would be relatively unremarkable were it not for the fact that this sorrow appears to be inescapable when combined with a further principle that he terms *daaga* (worry). Worry seems to be sorrow's mirror image. While sorrow pertains to the past, worry pertains to the future. The repentant person, we are told,

must worry too, lest he has fallen short in repentance; in suffering, bitterness, fasting, and weeping. And although he may have suffered and wept much, he must tremble and fear that he may have sinned over and against this and that with all of his suffering, weeping, and fasting, he has not paid his debt.¹⁰

So for Rabbenu Yona, not only must we be sorrowful over the past and worry about the future, but we must also worry that we have not been sorrowful enough about the past, leading to a cycle of psychological

8. Pinchas Peli, *On Repentance: The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Ramsey, 1984).

9. Rabbi Jonah ben Abraham Gerondi, *The Gates of Repentance*, trans. S. Silverstein (Jerusalem, 1967), I:13, 21. (Henceforth, *ST*, followed by gate, chapter, and page number.)

10. *ST*, I:16, 23–24.

torment that is never-ending. Similarly negative themes are emphasized throughout his treatise, with Rabbenu Yona keen to highlight the links between sin, guilt, and punishment so as to drive one's fears to an extreme and motivate one to repent. The third Gate of the book is entitled "The Stringency of Mitzvot, the Exhortations, and the Different Kinds of Punishments," and is there precisely so that one can "investigate, know, and recognize the magnitude of the punishment for each of his transgressions... so that he may be aware of the greatness of his sin when he confesses it."¹¹

One could expound at length on the bleak account of repentance exemplified by Rabbenu Yona and found in much of medieval Judaism, though doing so here would take us too far afield.¹² What is significant is that the level of psychological distress required, indeed encouraged, by this view of repentance is the target of sustained modern critique, particularly at the hands of two of modernity's most significant thinkers.

The first of these is Baruch Spinoza, who tells us in proposition 54 of Part IV of *The Ethics* that repentance cannot be a virtue since it arises from passion rather than from reason. More importantly for our purposes, he writes that "he who repents what he has done is twice wretched" since he "suffers himself to be conquered first by an evil desire, and then by sadness."¹³ While Spinoza thinks that repentance can be useful for keeping the masses in check, guided as they are by their passions rather than by their reason, for Spinoza its "wretchedness" is revealed in the way it manifests this irrational foundation by preying on the sort of fear and distress on which Rabbenu Yona focuses.

A similar line of attack is developed further in the latter part of the nineteenth century by Friedrich Nietzsche, for whom guilt, as a feeling of inadequacy stemming from the sentiment that one has transgressed ethical or religious norms, yields feelings of self-loathing that he believes

11. Ibid., I:37, 51.

12. For some further discussion see Daniel Rynhold and Michael J. Harris, "Modernity and Jewish Orthodoxy: Nietzsche and Soloveitchik on Life-Affirmation, Asceticism, and Repentance," *Harvard Theological Review*, 101:2 (2008): 253–284, esp. 269–272.

13. Baruch Spinoza, *The Ethics*, in *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, ed. E. Curley (Princeton, 1994), 228.

are taken to depraved depths when placed within a religious context. Repentance is, for Nietzsche, a concept that is deeply damaging, of a piece with a worldview that not only serves those who are too weak to face their suffering honestly, but that also creates conditions that hamper the development of the type of great individuals that would, once upon a time, have elicited our admiration. It is a prime manifestation of modern man's disgust with himself, and one that is psychologically injurious to an alarming degree:

One need only ask psychiatrists what happens to patients who are methodically subjected to the torments of repentance, states of contrition, and fits of redemption.... In the wake of repentance and redemption *training* we find tremendous epileptic epidemics ... ; as another aftereffect we encounter terrible paralyses and protracted states of depression.¹⁴

It is clear that Rabbenu Yona's account of repentance would have done Nietzsche proud – or rather, would have made him nauseated.

It is important to note that both Spinoza and Nietzsche begin with the idea that guilt for one's sins is a concept that does not answer to any external religious reality, given that they do not believe in the sort of objective values that could underpin any religious reality in the first place. So it might be thought that a religious thinker like Rav Kook would have limited sympathy for their views. And yet, what will emerge from our discussion is that whether or not one agrees with these critiques in all of their details, like Spinoza and Nietzsche, Rav Kook has little time for the weak and servile traits expressed in certain religious forms of self-abnegation and their accompanying accounts of repentance that paint it as a form of backward-looking psychological torture. We find him instead echoing their interest in promoting the more modern virtues that stress human adequacy, self-assertion, and strength.

It is impossible to know the extent of Rav Kook's knowledge of Spinoza and Nietzsche given that he did not have the type of formal

14. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York, 1967), 142.

secular education where he would have studied them systematically; any knowledge he did have was likely from secondary sources. Nonetheless, we are aware of his admiration for Spinoza, whom even in the published writings Rav Kook describes, despite his faults, as a person “in whose soul the thought of God’s unity had planted such deep roots” that his ideas concerning God, albeit “in a broken and crooked manner,” still reflected – or in this case maybe refracted – “the great light.”¹⁵ There is also evidence of his acquaintance with Nietzsche’s work, and even of his sympathy with some of that infamous German atheist’s more penetrating psychological insights. As Benjamin Ish-Shalom has written, “Rather than rejecting Nietzsche’s claims, [Rav Kook] accepted some of his seemingly basic assumptions.”¹⁶ In what follows, therefore, I suggest that in addition to his concern at the neglect of the cosmic significance of repentance, Rav Kook was also troubled by the psychology lurking in the background of some of the most influential medieval Jewish accounts of individual repentance.¹⁷ As we will see, whether or not directly influenced by Spinoza and Nietzsche, conceptually speaking there is no question that Rav Kook’s account of repentance reflects their concerns and counters the life-negating accounts of his medieval Jewish forebears.

MONISM AND RAV KOOK’S THEORY OF REPENTANCE

Rav Kook is probably one of the most mystically inclined modern Jewish thinkers to be taken seriously by those with little sympathy for mysticism. When it comes to *Orot HaTeshuva*, both the mystical and modern strands are prominent, which allows Rav Kook to deal with both of the

15. Rabbi Kook, “*Ikvei HaTzon*,” in *Eder HaYekar* (Jerusalem, 1985), 134. For discussion of censored passages containing more fulsome praise, see Shapiro, *Changing the Immutable*, 168–170.
16. Benjamin Ish-Shalom, *Rav Avraham Itzhak HaCohen Kook: Between Rationalism and Mysticism*, trans. Ora Wiskind-Elper (Albany, 1993), 77. See also Naor’s aforementioned English edition of *Orot*, 61–64 with the corresponding notes, and Yehudah Mirsky, *Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution* (New Haven, 2014), 39–40.
17. Not to mention more modern ones, such as those found in the *Musar* movement. See Mordechai Pachter, “Repentance in the Thought of Rav Yisrael Salanter and the Musar Movement,” in Benjamin Ish-Shalom and Shalom Rosenberg, eds., *The World of Rav Kook’s Thought*, trans. Shalom Carmy (New York, 1991), 322–348.

deficiencies in prior theories of repentance that we have suggested may have been at the back of his mind when writing on repentance.

The cosmological foundations of repentance first emerge in only the second chapter of *Orot HaTeshuva*; it is worth noting that the opening three chapters are directly from the pen of Rav Kook himself. There Rav Kook writes that “the good and nobility in ourselves [is] but an expression of our relatedness to the All,”¹⁸ giving us an early indication of the foundational role that a view known as monism plays in Rav Kook’s theology generally, and his theory of repentance specifically.

For Rav Kook, Spinoza’s pantheism contained an important kernel of truth. God, for Rav Kook, is the only true reality, so our world is, in a sense, identical with God. But while Spinoza identified God with nature, for Rav Kook, the world is merely one “element” of God’s nature, so to speak. The basic idea found in the *Shema* that “God is One” is not simply a statement that when speaking of God we are speaking of a set with only one member. The point, rather, is about the nature of God as a perfect indivisible unity. While every existent can be split into parts, whether in a literal physical sense or by being broken down into its conceptual ingredients, God is not made up of parts at all. Moreover, in accordance with the kabbalistic concept of God as the *Ein Sof*, this unified being is also an infinite being without limits. The implication of this for Rav Kook (though those familiar with modern theories of infinity might balk at this) is that God, since He is infinite, must encompass all of reality and is therefore the “place of the world.” Combining this with the idea of God’s unity, he is led to conclude that reality must actually in some sense be one. This view, known as monism, leads Rav Kook to assert that “all of being is divine, that there is nothing at all other than God.”¹⁹

The idea that everything is somehow divine has a number of very significant ramifications, not least that our natural perception of the world as having an independent existence and being composed of innumerable individual things – ourselves included – is somehow an illusion. So Rav Kook states:

18. *OHT*, 12; 45–46.

19. *Orot HaKodesh* (Jerusalem, 1985), vol. 2, 396. (Henceforth, *OHK*.)

True reality is the divine, and all existence that descends from God's ultimate transcendence is no more than the descent of will in its imperfect choice, which causes yet more deficiency until, at last, all impurity will perish, and the will in its freedom shall rise to the absolute good, and the Lord will be one and His Name one. The return of all to the Divine is the highest perfection of existence, and one cannot conceive its worth.²⁰

When, therefore, Rav Kook writes that “through repentance all things return to God,”²¹ he is literally speaking of the act of repentance – a word that in Hebrew is drawn from the root meaning “to return” – as returning the world to this original unity in God, to its foundation in holiness. As we see it, the world is a fragmented multiplicity of conflicting ideas and ideologies, but in its “natural” divine state, the world is perfect and unified. Repentance, therefore, is “an effort to return to one's original status, to the source of life and higher being in their perfection.”²²

It is unquestionable that Rav Kook means this in a literal sense. There truly is no reality independent of God. There are questions, however, of what this actually means, especially regarding its implications for our full “return” to this divinity. There are those who argue that Rav Kook is arguing for the explanatory dependence of all existence on God, but this is an extremely common view among Jewish thinkers that would amount to the simple search for an underlying religious “theory of everything” analogous to the type of theory that physicists seek. As we will see, at times Rav Kook clearly presents a more radical acosmic view whereby God is the only reality and any form of independent existence is illusory in a more significant sense, such that in a full return to God, our individuality will in some literal sense “dissolve” back into this divine unity – not an uncommon idea in kabbalistic texts.

While we will have cause to return to this controversial issue, what matters to us for the moment is that on his monistic account, repentance reflects an inbuilt “yearning of all existence to be better, purer, more

20. Ibid., 395–396.

21. *OHT*, 15; 49.

22. Ibid., 37; 87.

vigorous, and on a higher plane than it is,”²³ a yearning that manifests itself at every level. It is not just repentant individuals who have a will that yearns for this return to unity; the divine lights contained in all existence mean that there is a cosmic yearning in every existent that is as dynamic as that expressed in the will of human beings. Everything is a refraction of God’s will, and the various forms of repentance in which everything engages “all constitute one essence”²⁴ – the will to return to their source in the divine will.

Significantly, therefore, the talmudic idea with which we began, quoted by Rav Kook – “Repentance preceded the creation of the world, and it is for this reason the foundation of the world”²⁵ – has a literal truth to it that he clearly believes has not been sufficiently brought to the fore in writings on repentance, even if the monistic metaphysical view it reflects is relatively common in mystical thought. The idea here would be that repentance must have been created “first” as it is a necessary condition for seeing creation as it truly is: as an element of the unified reality of God. Creation represents a “fall from unity,” since the created world is seen as existing independently of God. But it *must* eventually return to its divine origins, otherwise God would remain forever in disunity, which would presumably be impossible. So repentance, on this account, is a logical condition of creation. Without it, God is not a unity, which would contradict the very definition of God.

Maimonides famously writes:

A person should *look at himself* throughout the year as equally balanced between merit and sin, and the world as equally balanced between merit and sin. If he performs one sin, he decides the balance for himself and for the entire world on the side of guilt and causes their destruction. If he performs one mitzva, he decides the balance for himself and that of the entire world to the side of merit and causes their deliverance and salvation.²⁶

23. *OHT*, 20; 56.

24. *Ibid.*, 15; 49.

25. *Ibid.*, 18; 55.

26. *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance* 3:4.

For Rav Kook, it is not a matter of seeing oneself *as if* this were so. For Rav Kook, it genuinely is the case.

THE NATURE OF SIN AND HOW TO CORRECT IT

Given the monistic view outlined in the previous section, whereby everything is in some sense divine, it is inevitable that Rav Kook would ultimately have to see sin as a form of illusion, or at least a distortion of what really exists. It is no surprise, therefore, when he writes, “Existence, in its overall character, is sinless. Sin appears only in the evaluation of particulars. In the perspective of the whole everything is related in eternal harmony.”²⁷

This, however, has radical implications both for Rav Kook’s understanding of sin as it appears in our lives, and for how we ought to go about rectifying it.

The first point to make is that sin now has to be seen as an unnatural state for man to be in. Given the divine nature of the All, and our yearning to return to it, at the individual level it must be that sin “oppresses the heart because it disrupts the unity between the individual person and all existence.”²⁸ Basically, sin obstructs the healthy functioning of an individual. Sin disturbs the unity that underlies all existence, and this malfunctioning can be recognized, Rav Kook writes, through “marks on the face, in gestures, in the voice, in behavior, in the handwriting, in the manner of communication, in speech, and especially in the style of writing, in the way one develops one’s thoughts and arranges them”²⁹ – though I’m obviously hoping that the last two don’t manifest themselves too clearly.

Note that there seems to be an ambiguity here in Rav Kook’s use of the term “natural.” On the one hand, if everything is divine, then at some level, at least descriptively, everything, including sin, is “natural” for man – though of course for Rav Kook everything is in actual fact “(super) natural” – since, in a quasi-Spinozan sense, everything man does reflects God and is therefore an element of our divinely created human “nature.”

27. *OHT*, 37; 87.

28. *Ibid.*, 24; 63.

29. *Ibid.*, 26; 67.

It must be, then, that when Rav Kook speaks of sin as unnatural, he uses the term “natural” in a normative sense, to indicate the perfected unity of God for which we strive. This sense of “natural” is teleological, referring to the ultimate perfection of man, and rendering all “deviations” from this unity unnatural.³⁰ The idea of sin as unnatural, therefore, would refer to the fact that it is primarily a deviance from our ideal telos, or purpose.

This view is further confirmed by the first in a list of three levels of repentance with which Rav Kook opens the book: repentance according to nature, repentance according to faith, and repentance according to reason.³¹ The first, repentance according to nature, he then splits into its physical and spiritual manifestations. The former, defined somewhat cryptically as being “related to all transgressions against the laws of nature, and such laws of morals and the Torah as are linked to the laws of nature,”³² appears in part to be a function of literal physical damage given that he mentions that “the science of medicine concerns itself a good deal with this.”³³ One presumes that smoking could be seen as such a transgression that requires “repentance” to restore us to physical well-being. Thus, while the damage caused by smoking is perfectly “natural,” it is something that impedes healthy human functioning, and is therefore “unnatural” in the normative sense. While, as we will discuss, there are further levels of repentance, this underlying idea of the “natural” disturbance that is a consequence of sin is a recurrent theme.

How, then, is repentance achieved? Rav Kook’s third level of repentance from the listing in the opening chapter is “repentance according to reason,” which, we are told, “represents the peak of penitential expression” and *includes* previously defined forms of repentance. What it adds to them is “a comprehensive outlook on life... [that] transforms all past sins into spiritual assets.”³⁴ As Rav Kook puts it later, “the deeds of the

30. I am indebted to Dr. David Shatz for pointing out this distinction.

31. Rav Kook makes various overlapping but non-equivalent distinctions between types of repentance throughout *Orot HaTeshuva*. I should note here that it is not my intention in this essay to précis the work and map out these variations, but rather to give a more thematic account of what strikes me as most significant about the work.

32. *OHT*, 11; 43.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*, 11; 44.

past... are not eliminated from the thrust of life” for instead “the will can impose a special configuration on past actions.”³⁵

What is most notable about this “configuration” is the transformation of the very nature of an act from a sin to a “spiritual asset,” presumably in line with the saying of Resh Lakish that “great is repentance for because of it premeditated sins are accounted as merits” (Yoma 86a). The manner in which repentance effects this is by allowing the individual to learn from past sins and utilize them as a springboard for an ascent to greater “spiritual heights.” When a person sins he has separated himself from God, “entered the world of fragmentation, and then every particular being stands by itself, and evil is evil in and of itself.”³⁶ Through repentance out of love, however, “there at once shines on him the light from the world of unity” and therefore “the evil is joined with the good... the willful wrongs become transformed into real virtues.”³⁷

This is not an unusual view in itself. Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik writes similarly of repentance from love in which we can transform prior sins to merits through a reinterpretation of the narrative of our lives, a view in which

sin is not to be forgotten, blotted out or cast into the depths of the sea. On the contrary, sin has to be remembered. It is the memory of sin that releases the power within the inner depths of the soul of the penitent to do greater things than ever before.³⁸

For Rav Kook, however, this is not the end of the process, for the transformation must run deeper given the cosmic background that we have set up. Rav Kook puts the contrast above between the worlds inhabited by the sinner and the repentant individual respectively in the language of the Zohar, distinguishing between the *alma deperuda* and the *alma deyihuda*. When he goes on to say that “any action

35. Ibid., 21; 58.

36. Ibid., 36; 85.

37. Ibid.

38. Peli, *On Repentance*, 276–277. For a fuller comparison between Rav Soloveitchik’s and Rav Kook’s views on repentance, see Reuven Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility: The Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (New York, 2012), ch. 22.

that deviates from the norm, that is not oriented toward its source, is reoriented to its source when the will is mended,”³⁹ the change he is speaking about is not, therefore, simply one whereby the sin becomes a virtue from a psychological standpoint. Rav Kook’s view is that “the perception of truth is the basis of penitence,”⁴⁰ and the truth in question is that of the divine nature of all existence. Repentance comes “from the depths of being... in which the individual stands not as a separate entity, but rather as a continuation of the vastness of universal existence.”⁴¹ The movement between the two “worlds” must then be a matter of cognizing this truth, though cognition here is bound up with the will as much as it is with reason.

What, though, is the nature of this cognitive shift? Pure rational reflection deals with the type of analysis and conceptualization that for Rav Kook simply cannot grasp the underlying unity of reality. Rav Kook is speaking here of a more mystical reparative vision based on the perception that “all existence... must be seen from one comprehensive perspective, as one essence constituent of many particularities.”⁴² Since at its root this unified essence is God, and God cannot be evil, correctly reconfiguring one’s individual existence as part of a greater harmonious whole in this way presumably means that one no longer sees the act for which one is repenting as evil, and inasmuch as we are able to make sense of this, it might be explained by contrasting our temporal grasp of reality with God’s atemporal perspective. Our perception of sin is entirely a function of our limited temporal view of reality. From our perspective, sins take place at a certain point in time, and even if we do manage to repent, the balancing out of the sin takes place at a different time, meaning that the sin still has its own independent existence at the point at which it was done. Given, however, that a God’s-eye-view is not subject to such temporal limitations and that He sees reality from the perspective of a timeless eternity, as if it were all set out simultaneously – what Spinoza refers to as *sub specie aeternitatis* –

39. *OHT*, 37; 86.

40. *Ibid.*, 50; 112.

41. *Ibid.*, 20; 56.

42. *Ibid.*, 15; 50.

sin never stands uncorrected, as a discrete moment unconnected to its counterbalancing act of repentance. To God, the “sin” is simultaneous with the repentance that counteracts it, and thus sin never really exists as such. The challenge is for us to gain this mystical perspective on reality where repentance is equivalent to understanding the divinity inherent in all of reality, even human sin.

This suggests, returning to Rav Kook's cosmic concerns, that there is a symbiotic relationship between the various levels of repentance. Individual repentance is necessary to repair the world, but at its highest levels, absolute individual repentance comes about only through our ability to see the world as it really is, that is, as already repaired, so to speak, with its apparent independence (however we understand that) just the result of a veil of illusion, which is the evil that we must address. If we can reconfigure the manner in which we understand our place in the cosmos correctly “the vision of penitence transforms all sins and their resultant confusion ... to concepts of delight and satisfaction.”⁴³ So, if we repent, the world will be repaired; but at the same time, seeing the world in its unified “repaired” state is the highest form of individual repentance.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE REPENTANT MAN

The discussion so far might have begun fulfilling the task of giving repentance its appropriate redemptive and metaphysical due, but how does Rav Kook's discussion relate to the type of repentance of the individual that is our annual focus on Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur?

In the view sketched above, we mentioned that given our metaphysical relation to the Divine, repentance is primarily seen as a natural reaction to sin. Rav Kook's monism renders the separation from the All through sin an unnatural state that presumably cannot be a stable form of existence. His is a dynamic universe in which the constant yearning for return at every level of existence means that “the world must inevitably come to full penitence.”⁴⁴ Repentance therefore is “always present in the heart.”⁴⁵ But as a result it also, unavoidably, is a spur to health, given

43. Ibid., 22; 60.

44. Ibid., 18; 54.

45. Ibid., 20; 57.

that “the nature of the will that is forged by repentance is an expression of the will immanent in the depth of life... [and] represents the most basic essence for the foundation of life.”⁴⁶

Thus, rather than seeing repentance as a function of an unhealthy obsessing over our moral guilt, Rav Kook writes that at the individual level repentance “is the healthiest feeling of a person.”⁴⁷ Since we all participate in God’s divinity, the desire to return from sin becomes a natural desire to return to psychological health, contrasting starkly with the psychically tortured soul that is the target of modern critiques of repentance. This takes on practical significance for the individual since rather than focusing on the guilt of one’s past actions, Rav Kook counsels that we need to start with the future, and only then turn to the past; our focus “must always be directed toward improving the future.... If he should immediately begin by mending the past he will encounter many obstacles, and the ways of repentance and the nearness of God will seem too hard for him.” We are, for Rav Kook, to work on the future first, at which point “it is certain that divine help will also be granted him to mend the past.”⁴⁸

This future-oriented approach to repentance is a recurring theme for Rav Kook, and seems primarily intended to guard against precisely the sort of psychological self-flagellation and extreme moral guilt that reaches such tortuous levels in Rabbenu Yona’s account. Agonizing over the past is simply not in the driver’s seat for Rav Kook, who tells us instead that we must take care “not to fall into depression to the extent that it will inhibit the light of repentance from penetrating to the depths of the soul.”⁴⁹ And the notion that one should worry in case one has not been sorrowful enough about the past is directly opposed when Rav Kook writes, “Let him not become depressed because of the portion of offenses he has not yet managed to rectify. Instead let him hold firm to the pursuit of the Torah and the service of God with a full heart in joy, reverence, and in love.”⁵⁰ Indeed, Rav Kook points out that

46. *Ibid.*, 27; 69.

47. *Ibid.*, 18; 53.

48. *Ibid.*, 42; 95. It is unclear how directly he believes such divine help manifests itself.

There is very little talk in the work of direct divine help or “grace.”

49. *Ibid.*, 26; 67.

50. *Ibid.*, 23; 62.

even concerning the sins that are more difficult to redress, a person must “always anticipate that he will redress them.”⁵¹

That is certainly not to say that there is no place for moral guilt or for suffering in repentance. The repentance according to nature mentioned earlier deals, in its spiritual manifestation, with transgressions against nature that trouble our conscience, clearly appealing to some form of moral guilt at transgressing against natural law, a guilt that spiritually disturbs a person and will “cause him disquiet”⁵² thereby motivating him to repent. And the second level of repentance that he mentions – repentance according to faith – is the particularly religious form of repentance that we generally associate with the term; in Rav Kook's words it is the form of repentance with which “all the admonitions of the Torah deal.”⁵³ Guilt certainly has an important role to play then, as does suffering. Sinners have an “anger with the whole world ... the bitter melancholy that consumes spirit and flesh.”⁵⁴ In the last of the three chapters from Rav Kook's own hand, he distinguishes between repentance that is focused on a particular sin or sins and a more generalized repentance which is not focused on any particular deficiency but instead is precipitated by the experience of being “embittered against oneself; ... [and] his whole being is as though in a torture chamber.”⁵⁵ So repentance is far from easy. There is suffering and struggle involved, particularly since “the more resolute he becomes in pursuing the upright way and the more committed he becomes to the service of God, the stronger the evil impulse becomes in him.”⁵⁶ Indeed, at certain points, Rav Kook seems to say that the more struggle the better,⁵⁷ though at the same time, the pain felt through the process can be one of the reasons we are discomfited by the thought of repentance and delay doing it.⁵⁸

51. Ibid., 41; 99.

52. Ibid., 11; 44.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid., 24; 64.

55. Ibid., 13; 47.

56. Ibid., 46; 105.

57. See, for example, *ibid.*, 51; 115–116.

58. Ibid., 59; 128.

So repentance, understood as the navigation of our passage back to harmony with self and God, is a challenging skill to master. But even so, it is always portrayed as a natural result of the pain engendered by leaving one's native state. Guilt is a natural feeling of alienation from our true nature which "emanates from the source of repentance"⁵⁹ – the higher lights of divine illumination. Rather than driving one's thought of sin to depths of depravity then, for Rav Kook even the mere thought of repentance makes one "happier and more at peace with himself than he was before."⁶⁰ Given that we are in some sense a manifestation of God, whatever suffering is involved does not come from an inordinate fear of punishment or the concern that one's sins can never be forgiven. What we experience is a "natural remorse that burns in the heart as an expression of repentance."⁶¹ Consequently, while we are currently in an imperfect state, as a result of what seems to be for Rav Kook a form of cognitive error, it is natural that we constantly strive for perfection. We do not find the sort of obsession with unhealthy levels of moralizing prevalent in those earlier accounts that so disturb Spinoza and Nietzsche, though Rav Kook is clearly more comfortable with some level of guilt than is Nietzsche.

In this context, it is interesting to note just how much Rav Kook equivocates even regarding the reduced levels of psychological anguish that he does invoke. Thus, at times he discusses lower and higher forms of repentance that are distinguished precisely by their relation to negative emotional content. Of the lower form, despite the fact that anguish plays a role in the subsequent joy at one's release from it, he nonetheless writes that it "weakens a person's will and thereby damages his personality."⁶² Indeed, Rav Kook believes that in all forms of repentance there is at least initially a "weakening of the will related to the remorse felt for past misdeeds"⁶³ and that at the individual level repentance "necessarily bears within itself a certain weakness that even the most heroic

59. *Ibid.*, 51; 114.

60. *Ibid.*, 22; 62.

61. *Ibid.*, 52; 113.

62. *Ibid.*, 28; 71.

63. *Ibid.*, 32; 79.

spirits cannot escape.”⁶⁴ His point here is that “when one restrains the life force through inner withdrawal and the inclination to avoid any kind of sin... the vitality of the virtuous life is also weakened.”⁶⁵ This is why, in his view, the High Holy Days are followed by a period of unfettered joy, to “restore the will for the good and the innocent vitality of life.”⁶⁶

Echoing Nietzsche then, Rav Kook seems concerned that the weakening of our more powerful drives that can result from repentance may block our ability to “identify the good that is embodied in the depth of evil.”⁶⁷ But he goes even further than this when speaking of the highest levels of repentance that transcend the anguish of prior depression altogether. Such repentance is seen as a form of pure light that does not require a contrast with prior pain for its identity. The anguish is entirely submerged by the new orientation provided by repentance. This sort of repentance from “the perspective of wisdom (*bina*) ... was never involved in the weakening pain of remorse,”⁶⁸ since “everything has been converted to virtue, from the very beginning, through the manifestation of discernment in the soul.”⁶⁹ The use of *bina* here no doubt alludes to the third of the *sefirot*, which is often seen as the object of repentance in kabbalistic texts.

Yet beyond even this level, Rav Kook’s very highest degree, which refers to the highest of the kabbalistic *sefirot* – the crown (*keter*) – takes us back to our discussion at the end of the previous section, and appears to barely be a form of repentance at all given that it is “the manifestation of the light of the ‘universal crown,’” which is “the mysterious vision of the All,” according to which “there is no deficiency or darkness at all.”⁷⁰ While the prior forms of repentance all deal in their differing ways with the sin that motivates the entire process, this form, we are told, is “beyond the action of discernment that voids [the wrongs, through

64. Ibid., 29; 73.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid., 28; 71.

68. Ibid., 33; 79.

69. Ibid.

70. Ibid.

penitence].”⁷¹ As such, though, it seems to almost render repentance otiose. If there is no darkness, there is no need for repair. While this startling account of repentance could be understood to reflect the taking up of the “eternal” perspective on sin discussed earlier, there is no question that it verges on an antinomian view whereby there is no real sin to be atoned for.

At its heights then, Rav Kook’s view of repentance takes us into the realms of the perfect mystical vision of the original unity, to which we all strive to return, one in which “death loses its name ... [and] individual identity continues to expand, it becomes part of the general being of the people in a very real fusion, and from there it is absorbed in the general existence of the whole world.”⁷² Given that he here explicitly references the *sefira* of *keter*, which is also known as *ayin* (nothingness), we seem here to have a picture from which particularity has disappeared altogether. While there might be no sin in such a picture, there are no individuals either.

While Rav Kook does at times speak of this type of elimination of particularity, which is the implication of the most literal reading of his monism whereby all is God, it is difficult to see how to practically assimilate such an approach into our own temporal lives, and Rav Kook often struggles with this tension between the universal and the particular. As human beings, one would imagine that we cannot achieve actual unity with God, at least not if we are to remain individuals. The apex of human achievement would seem to have to be a level below this, the level of the rare *tzaddikim* who are able to maintain their awareness of the divine essence unifying all of reality without collapsing into it.

Regardless of these tensions, the unavoidable takeaway of all of this is that in general Rav Kook’s phenomenology of repentance could hardly be more opposed to that described by Rabbenu Yona. In direct contrast to his view that the level of repentance is proportional to the degree of sorrow and bitterness one experiences, for Rav Kook the level of repentance is in inverse proportion to such emotions. Rather

71. Ibid.

72. Ibid., 33; 80.

than expressing despair and sorrow, “the degree of penitence is also the degree of the soul’s freedom.”⁷³ Echoing Hegel, Rav Kook writes that repentance “restores the world and life to its original character precisely by focusing on the basis of their highest attribute, the dimension of freedom,”⁷⁴ though this is a freedom that can only manifest itself in one way – as the realization of one’s inherent holiness. While his mysticism would be anathema to Spinoza and Nietzsche, Rav Kook’s alignment with their psychological critique of traditional theories of repentance nonetheless emerges very clearly. His higher form of repentance aims “to strengthen [man’s] will and to heighten his self-esteem.”⁷⁵ As Benjamin Ish-Shalom notes, “Nietzsche’s basic interest, the aggrandizement of selfhood, becomes Rav Kook’s own, yet he [Rav Kook] proposed a truly alternative view.”⁷⁶ The irony is that the endpoint of this alternative aggrandizement of selfhood recalls the early Chabad idea of *avoda bebitul*, “the annihilation of being into nothingness, the effacement of each person’s separate being and its reinclusion within the Divine,”⁷⁷ an idea that we have seen Rav Kook occasionally toying with. Saying that though, Rav Kook is nothing if not a dialectical thinker.

REPENTANCE, MYSTICISM, AND TORAH

One thing that has been barely mentioned in our discussion so far is Judaism. Up to this point, the theory of repentance outlined could be used in any religion. In a sense, this is no surprise. Given the divine origins of all of creation, there must be an element of truth in every manifestation of the religious impulse, so that even with specific regard to repentance:

73. Ibid., 22; 61.

74. Ibid., 19; 55.

75. Ibid., 28; 71.

76. Ish-Shalom, *Rav Avraham Itzhak HaCohen Kook*, 77. The contrast between Rav Kook’s view and theories that stress self-degradation has also been noted in Lawrence A. Englander, “On Repentance,” in Ezra Gellman, ed., *Essays on the Thought and Philosophy of Rabbi Kook* (New York, 1991), 121–132. See also Shalom Carmy, “On Optimism and Freedom,” in *ibid.*, 114–120.

77. Rachel Elijior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God: The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (Albany, NY, 1993), 143. Of course, Rav Kook’s emphasis on the more joyous and assertive elements of repentance are likely also of hasidic descent.

Everything helps to elevate the spirit, to achieve a higher level of repentance: all one's knowledge of Torah, all one's general culture, all one's energies, everything one knows about the world and about life, every contact with people, every disposition to equity and justice.⁷⁸

But while, in this sense, all religious expressions are therefore equal, some are more equal than others, and there is no question that the Torah is the superior expression of divinity. As Rav Kook writes:

Morality, the impulse for equity and good, represents the central direction of the will of existence In the Torah, this moral conformity in all its manifestations is represented in the light of holiness, adapted to each community according to its stature, and to the Jewish people in its most authentic form.⁷⁹

Thus the Jewish people play a pivotal role in redeeming the world and restoring it to its divine essence, and their Torah observance is the axis around which everything revolves: repentance “necessitates full penitence for all the detailed acts of wrongdoing and transgression, on the basis of the Written and Oral Torah, all of which express the divine soul embodied in the Jew.”⁸⁰

At the first level then, it is through the repentance of the *tzaddik* that “the whole world is renewed in a new light.”⁸¹ In Rav Kook's understanding, the righteous person “by looking at the basic nature of existence with an eye for the good . . . exerts an influence on existence and on the complicated processes of life that they emerge from their deficiencies.”⁸² But the Jew who repents in this manner must attach to the universal soul of the nation of Israel if he is to exert a cosmic influence. A person must unite himself with “the divine good in the soul

78. *OHT*, 47; 107.

79. *Ibid.*, 37; 86.

80. *Ibid.*, 40; 92.

81. *Ibid.*, 24; 65.

82. *Ibid.*, 27; 69.

of the community of Israel,⁸³ for it is only nationally, through Israel, that the transformation through repentance of the world as a whole is mediated – “the community of Israel holds within itself the divine good, not for itself alone, but for the whole world,”⁸⁴ since Israel in its very essence aspires to universality. Rav Kook has an essentialist account of the chosen people who as a result “of their added spiritual sensitivity, will be the first with regard to penitence,”⁸⁵ though such sensitivity also means that among them, those “noble spirits who seek the light of God suffer because of the sins of society as a whole.”⁸⁶

There is, then, a clear emphasis on the national agenda over that of the individual in his theory of repentance. This national revival is the “foundation of the great repentance... and the repentance of the world that will follow it,”⁸⁷ drawing a clear line between his theory of repentance and his famously messianic understanding of Zionism, which is therefore the foundation of this ultimate repentance.⁸⁸

For all the grandiose talk of this cosmic influence, Rav Kook initially describes the nuts and bolts of such repentance in a relatively prosaic manner, spending a few paragraphs on one of the mundane activities best known as being a focus of Jewish law – that of eating, which features prominently in mystical literature and practice. Rav Kook here discusses, in far from mundane fashion, how the wrong motivations when eating are a barrier to repentance in their inability to raise the holy sparks in

83. Ibid., 40; 92.

84. Ibid.

85. Ibid., 19; 55.

86. Ibid., 36; 85.

87. Ibid., 58; 126.

88. Jonathan Garb argues that this use of kabbalistic mysticism in the service of historical and nationalistic forms of redemption reflects a general trend that began with Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (the Ramhal) in the eighteenth century and was picked up by the Vilna Gaon and his students. Secular Zionism was particularly fertile ground for Rav Kook's application of this idea. See Jonathan Garb, “Rabbi Kook and His Sources: From Kabbalistic Historiosophy to National Mysticism,” in Moshe Sharon, ed., *Studies in Modern Religions, Religious Movements and the Baha'i Faiths* (Leiden, Neth., 2004), 77–96.

the meal.⁸⁹ In addition, he also emphasizes on a number of occasions straightforward civil matters: “The most original and the best approach to repentance, which is inspired by the light of the Torah in the world, consists in the study of civil law... the *Hoshen Mishpat*.”⁹⁰

At the same time, he adds that “one must always sensitize the heart and the mind through the other branches of the Torah,”⁹¹ and notes that once such broadened study instills the desire for justice, it raises one’s observance of those very same civil laws to an even higher spiritual level which in turn reinforces “a special love for the study of those laws that define man’s obligations to his neighbor, and the largest section of the Torah, the laws dealing with money matters.”⁹² Study and practice here seem to be mutually supportive. We study in order to spread justice, while the love of justice this engenders leads to further study and ennobled practice.

Nonetheless, the tensions that grow out of Rav Kook’s monism reemerge even here in his attitude toward Torah. While writing, on the one hand, of the need to study and practice Torah in what seems to be its most exoteric sense, on the other hand, Rav Kook often expresses reservations about the external level of understanding Torah, reservations that are best approached by looking at what he says of those who rebel against Torah altogether.

When Rav Kook speaks of the motivations for repentance, a primary stimulant, indeed a “special factor in this process will be the anguish felt over the humiliation visited on the great spiritual treasure of our ancestral heritage.”⁹³ Though such anguish is a primary motivation to repentance, Rav Kook also believes that from such religious denials “positive elements may be garnered from the different paths of straying on which they stumbled.”⁹⁴ Rebellion against religion has to be valuable to Rav Kook given his monism – after all, every phenomenon is at some level divine – but it is the claim that such a revolt indicates a defect in

89. *OHT*, 44; 101.

90. *Ibid.*, 40; 93.

91. *Ibid.*

92. *Ibid.*, 41; 93–94.

93. *Ibid.*, 16; 51.

94. *Ibid.*

our Torah observance that marks out his approach. The “chutzpah” of the rebels is grounded in the holy sparks of divinity and indicates a lack in *our* understanding of the world, and indeed in our approach to Torah, specifically, our inability to see all particulars as part of the universal spiritual whole. As he tells us elsewhere, heresy “is needed to purge away the aberrations that attached themselves to religious faith because of a deficiency in understanding and divine service.”⁹⁵ Thus, despite writing that the “rebellion against the divine law is a frightful moral regression,”⁹⁶ a simple rejection of those who rebel against the Torah fails to see that in their rebellion lies an idealistic yearning for perfection, or at least a dissatisfaction with the status quo, which, in Rav Kook’s eyes, can only find a voice if our ideologies are indeed unsatisfying and lacking perfection. There is a clear tension here between, on the one hand, the sinfulness of religious rebellion, and on the other, the necessity for such rebellion to refine the Torah.

Rav Kook goes on to tell us that when the mitzvot and teachings of Torah are not combined with “the noblest of principles,”⁹⁷ and are enforced upon those who are not ready for them, the results can be destructive and nihilistic. In such cases “their influence on ill-prepared students have led so many to reject them and to mock them.”⁹⁸ At this point then our approach to Torah, both as individuals and in our teaching of it, is itself part of the problem. It is “as a result of negligence, the light of the inner Torah whose pursuit needs a high state of holiness has not been properly established in the world.”⁹⁹ The influence of the righteous and their participation in Israel’s historical redemptive task might be key to the cosmic levels of repentance, but the manner in which religious Jews relate to the rest of the nation can also be a significant obstacle.

This is unsurprising given that Rav Kook believes that we are unaware of the inner mystical meanings of the higher Torah, but this lack of awareness becomes particularly problematic given that full

95. “Yissurim Memarekim,” in *Orot*, 126. Translated as “The Pangs of Cleansing,” in Bokser, *Abraham Isaac Kook*, 264.

96. *OHT* 21: 58.

97. *Ibid.*, 17; 53.

98. *Ibid.*, 16: 52.

99. *Ibid.*

repentance requires a level of contemplation that addresses these very same “deeper levels of Torah and divine wisdom concerning the mystical dimension of the world.”¹⁰⁰ Full repentance requires the study of this higher Torah, which requires the desire for a constant cleaving to God. At the same time, “one cannot succeed in the study of the mystical dimension of the Torah without repentance,”¹⁰¹ leaving us apparently in a vicious circle where repentance requires awareness of this mystical Torah, but study of mystical Torah requires repentance. One might argue that it is only the *awareness* of this higher Torah that is required for repentance, and that it is through repenting that we actually come to *understand* this mystical level of which we had become aware.

Prayer is presented as having a role in unlocking the doors to repentance,¹⁰² which may suggest that the awareness of the higher mystical Torah motivates prayer as a route to repentance and subsequently to mystical understanding. But however we are to understand this, the key idea seems to be that repentance, at least in the fullest sense, is not a straightforward return to the Torah as we currently understand it. It cannot simply be about saying sorry, or redressing the errors one has made regarding particular mitzvot. What is needed is for people to study Torah in the correct manner “to enlarge our spiritual perspective so as to recognize the proper connection between the particulars and the universal categories of the spiritual.”¹⁰³ It will only be through the reestablishment of Torah in its true sense that we will be able to achieve the type of individual repentance that connects us to the nation of Israel which can then go on to redeem the world.

CONCLUSION

Rav Kook’s *Orot HaTeshuva* is one of a number of twentieth-century works that co-opt ideas originally intended as a critique of religion in the service of religious ends.¹⁰⁴ But it is the combination of these

100. Ibid., 30; 73.

101. Ibid., 31; 77.

102. Ibid., 32; 78.

103. Ibid., 16; 52.

104. Many of Rav Soloveitchik’s works are further examples. See Rynhold and Harris, “Modernity and Jewish Orthodoxy.”

modernist sympathies with deeply mystical foundations that renders Rav Kook such a unique and fascinating character, and makes his work on repentance stand out. Certainly his version of the Torah revolution is yet to materialize. When he wrote that the “profound disturbance of the spirit” that manifests itself in repentance “must come to expression in literature,” and that what we need most of all is a “poet of repentance, who will be a poet of life, a poet of rebirth,”¹⁰⁵ he probably wasn’t envisaging a contemporary religious world dominated by utilitarian religious institutions that seem unlikely to produce such visionaries. Saying that, it is not as if “poets of life” are a type that can be produced to order by institutional design. As things stand then, Rav Kook’s own work is probably the closest we will come to the type of literature he thought we needed, and while in a sense its continuing attraction is surprising, that we continue to read him may yet indicate that we still aspire to some of his ideals.¹⁰⁶

FURTHER READING

The standard version of *Orot HaTeshuva* is the oft-reprinted version published by Mossad HaRav Kook, currently found in a volume together with a selection of his other works, including *Orot HaTorah* and *Musar Avikha* (Jerusalem, 1985). It has also been translated as “Lights of Penitence” in Ben Zion Bokser, ed., *Abraham Isaac Kook: The Lights of Penitence, Lights of Holiness, The Moral Principles, Essays, Letters and Poems* (Mahwah, 1978), 41–128. As mentioned, we now also have available the uncensored notebooks from which the passages assembled as *Orot HaTeshuva* were taken: *Shemona Kevatzim*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem, 2004). As has hopefully emerged in this chapter, the structure of Rav Kook’s thought is such that one could almost see everything he wrote as being

¹⁰⁵. *OHT*, 58; 128.

¹⁰⁶. I am very grateful to Dr. David Shatz, Dr. Jonathan Dauber, and Rabbi Shalom Carmy for their comments on and discussion of this chapter. Thanks are also due to Dr. Yoel Finkelman for his helpful comments on the final version. I am also grateful to Jay Orlinsky and Chaim Zakheim for our weekly study sessions on Rav Kook over recent years that helped me to place his views on repentance in a broader context.

Dr. Daniel Rynhold

related to repentance at one level or another. Thus most of his major works could be listed here as supplementary reading.

Regarding secondary literature, other than the various monographs, collections, and articles mentioned in the footnotes, Zvi Yaron, *The Philosophy of Rav Kook*, trans. Avner Tomaschoff (Jerusalem, 1991), is a good clear survey of Rav Kook's thought, and I recommend the following collections of essays: Lawrence J. Kaplan and David Shatz, eds., *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality* (New York, 1995); Benjamin Ish-Shalom and Shalom Rosenberg, eds., *The World of Rav Kook's Thought*, trans. Shalom Carmy (New York, 1991). This latter volume appears in the notes, but I mention it here to draw attention to Part II of the collection, which is dedicated to *teshuva*, and contains chapters on *Hasidei Ashkenaz* and the *Musar* movement, among others, rather than being exclusively focused on Rav Kook.