

## SUMMARY

### SACRED AND PROFANE IN RAV KOOK'S PHILOSOPHY

by

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Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hacoen Kook thought that "the ultimate goal in life is holiness". What did he mean by holiness? In itself holiness is "the light of the Universe which transcends Nature", but holiness demands purification of Nature and its elevation to the holy. Holiness is indicated by its being a state of man's and the world's self-denial before God, yet man is summoned to live a full life for holiness.

Holiness cannot exist without "a healthy feeling of humanness". Man should acquire courage and love of life and get to know things in themselves "with his carnal senses and in organised study", through full participation in life and human society; only through a healthy and natural way of life can he be elevated to the holy way of life. All study, all spiritual uplifting, is to be based on the foundation of the natural feeling and the natural education. Not only does physical exercise not hinder spirituality, but "whatever strength the body gathers will enrich the spiritual powers". The body needs to be healthy and wholesome in order for the soul to shine out.

All is one whole and one cannot cut off one aspect from the whole. The spiritual aspects and "the social and economic orders of life" are one whole. Even the "natural will to life" acquires "a delicate form". One cannot attain perfection if one worships God only with one's higher powers: "For we have to worship Him with all our natural powers which we have received through His mercy". Sanctity is not opposed to self-love (which is stamped firmly on every soul). It puts man on such a high level that as he loves himself better, so the good in him spreads out to everything, to his whole surroundings, to the whole world, to the whole universe.

Thus holiness is conceived of in a dialectic way: it is lofty and exalted, yet is very near. The man who penetrates to the holy unity of existence is not a stranger to the world; on the contrary, his whole life is sanc-

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tified. "The beat of his heart, the course of his blood, his breath, the look in his eyes, all is true life." Such a man does not do anything special for holiness, he does not "sanctify", he lives a life of sanctity.

There is no holiness without profanity. "Holiness and profanity together influence the spirit of man, and man is enriched by absorbing from each one the appropriate thing: from holiness, the light of life and the essential inner vision; from the profane, the vessel, the outer conception." The relation between the sacred and the profane is interpreted according to the old philosophical distinction – which was absorbed by Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah – between matter and form. The profane is matter and the sacred form. The sacred is the end and the meaning, but it cannot exist without the profane. "The sacred is to be built on the foundation of the profane. The profane is the material of the sacred, and the sacred is its form. The stronger the material, the better will be the form." The way the sacred and the profane connect is comparable to a ladder on which man ascends from the profane to the sacred. First and foremost, man has to be physically healthy. Only then can he exercise his natural mental power. And just as the mind cannot work satisfactorily in an unhealthy body, the sacred cannot exist in a man whose mental powers are defective. The way of man on the steps to the sacred starts with his physical prowess; on this basis he continues with the development of his intelligence; and from the "manifest intelligence" he rises to the "height of the sacred fount", cleaving close to his God and directing his heart to the love of God. Every rung on the ladder prepares man for the next one. But even after he attains the topmost one, the level of sanctity, he cannot neglect the lower rungs. The sacred has to be linked to the profane. The relation between the sacred and the profane, the spirit and the body, is one of perpetual motion and mutual influence. And therefore the sacred gets stronger and more powerful by being tied up with the man in whom it lives.

It is, however, not to be concluded that all is sacred and that there is no difference between the sacred and the profane. "The differences between the sacred and the profane are a fact; to blur them is a catastrophe." Even though the differences are not eternal but "temporary things" – until all rise to sanctity – nevertheless in the reality of the world in which we live these differences exist and there is no escaping them. The world of the profane stands in opposition and contrast to the world of the sacred, and it is impossible to bridge the gap between the two except by a gradual passage, by unrelenting religious work for "love, peace, justice, truth and mercy".

One cannot cancel the tension between the body and the soul by flagellating the body and mortifying it, but by strengthening and purifying it and directing it to the sacred. The true way is "that the Divine Thought completes the world, it gives all of creation its true value. One may not separate one's self from the world, one must elevate it to the divine eminence."

Man may not enjoy this world without blessing it. For enjoyment without a blessing is material enjoyment only, but the purpose is "to enjoy happiness morally". Material engagement should be a means to spiritual perfection, but when the material pleasure is not directed to the spiritual purpose, man "becomes beastly". The blessing over material enjoyment gives the pleasure a spiritual dimension; it links the material-profane to the spiritual-sacred. The natural reality is grasped as an inseparable part of the spiritual-religious life.

The nature worship of polytheism is to be rejected, but the "highest worship of God is that which is linked close to nature". The war against the "vulgar nature of life" is not meant to deny nature, but to turn "the profane nature of man to a holy and divine nature; the law of the Lord shall be on his tongue naturally and in the thoughts of his heart". The difference between Pesach (Passover) and Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles) is interpreted thus: on Pesach we celebrate our freedom, for we are free from the limits of nature which tie down people and nations, for the history of the Jews is nursed by "an eternal element which precedes and is loftier than any natural limitation or law". Sukkot, on the other hand, which is the harvest feast, brings us closer to nature. "We sit in the Sukkah, holding in our hands a bundle of fresh saplings, rejoice in the water festival, in the joy of natural plenitude which derives from God's blessing on the universe, which exists within the prescribed circle of the iron laws of nature . . . therefore we stamp the glory of the holiness which is above nature upon nature, its beauty and splendour in the depths of nature, in the heart of flesh, in the large material body, in the coarse earthly nature, in the spoiled earth, the earth cursed by God. In the depth of darkness we spread light and we are happy and glad in the glory of God even though the darkness is so thick. 'For in the darkness God is a light unto me' (Micah 7:8)."

In Rabbi Kook's opinion the influence of the Christian nations among which the Jews lived for many years gave birth to the idea of a dichotomy existing between sanctity and the desire for a healthy and natural life. The opposition in the modern age to asceticism and turning away from the physical life caused "a pent-up hatred for the spirit of faith in general". But actually there is no reason why the demand for a natural life should become the subject for controversy over faith. On the contrary, this demand is founded on feelings of holiness in man's heart.

The greatness of man is precisely that he lives in the world of every day and acts in it to elevate it to holiness. The holiness of the profane is loftier and holier than the holiness of the sacred. "Sometimes the holy treats the profane cruelly so that it depletes the material." The outcome is that the profane rebels, demands its rights from the holy with usurious interest and is fortified at the expense of the sacred. Afterwards there will be a balance between the holy and the profane.

One can of course eliminate the naturalness of life and thereby live a life without sin. But the elimination of the natural life is "the greatest sin", as we learn from the Nazirite who was called a sinner because he abstained from drinking wine.<sup>1</sup> Therefore spiritual perfection is only to be found in natural life, notwithstanding the fact that in that life there is no escaping sin, as is written (Ecclesiastes 7:20) "For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not". Thus opposition to nature is the expression of a psychological withdrawal, from fear that the occupation with the profane will stain the purity of the sacred.

The ideal sanctity is anchored in the desire to mend the material world and is connected to a normal life of a nation and its land. Therefore this sanctity exists only in the Land of Israel, whereas in the Diaspora holiness focuses itself on war against nature. When the Jewish People was exiled from its land and the sanctity of nature was taken away from it, it had only a capability of holiness in opposition to nature. Only the national revival in our time, expressing itself in the rebuilding of our Land, can give back to our people the spiritual glory of the splendour of nature "until the possibility is born to look not only upon its earthliness but also upon its heavenly glory".

In the Diaspora we could not have the holiness of nature and therefore "we fought nature and came out the victors". This war was necessary in order to subdue coarse nature. But in this generation the sanctity of nature which is the sanctity of the Land of Israel is again increasing. Instead of the struggle with nature, with the purpose of subduing it, there is a period of rapprochement between us and nature.

In the time after the destruction of the Second Temple, the tendency to cut ourselves off from transitory life for the sake of the eternal life intensified, for Israel "was cut off from its land and forced to learn its destiny only from its abstract spiritual status". But with the return of Israel to its land in our time the practical need for "political and social arrangements" increased. A position of sanctity was given to the widening practical aspects "for those are essential elements of the Torah". Thus "the spirit filled with sanctity and the life of truth will work on the world and on life". In the time of the Diaspora the natural power of the nation weakened and this is "the real reason for the spiritual degeneration". The Jewish People therefore has to exert itself to revive and rebuild naturalness, and "to return to its natural source, to make all its emotion flower from the source of the Torah". It has to object to the religious conception which contains a "weak spirit" and to cultivate longings for a healthy and natural life. "Israel in its national life in the Diaspora abandoned its concern over all things material. It turned its eyes and its heart only towards the heavens above. Its heart

<sup>1</sup> B Talmud, *Nedarim* 10, a.

was not set to increase material and military power, as any nation on its own soil, and in general the nation had no material occupations. At the same time the people stopped hankering after all the impurities of the many nations. Then the spirit of the Lord began to inspire them and to teach them about the value of man and the meaning of his soul, and to hold dear especially the spiritual value of the nation and her divine superiority."

In this generation it is impossible to correct the spirituality except by "filling the material world" so as to strengthen the physical forces and to have them serve as a "basis for sanctity", for sometimes a spiritual decline is the outcome of a "physical failure". "When the holy nation is healthy and strong of body, the holiness in the world will be greater and stronger. When Jewish children are strong and healthy and well-built, the air in the world will be holy and pure."

We abhor the "hard and dry heroism which is totally material, dripping with blood, and leading the people in the end to baseness and vulgar bestiality". A national heroism should be cultivated which will be a mixture of the love of our people and our land with "a lifting up of the soul and noble-mindedness and recognition of our special worth", that is the heroism of a people living according to the Law of the Lord "whose way is law and justice". "Israel's heroism is of a special kind, a heroism which is characterised not by conquest of others, by subduing them or wiping them out, but a heroism which is first and foremost concerned with man's conquest of himself, the heroism of the divine soul, the noble spirit of man, which conquers the animal body and the vulgar, stormy passions. 'The heroism of him that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city' (Prov. 16:32). That is the heroism of Israel which is the foundation of pure morality and of raising the value of man over that of animals."

This leads Rabbi Kook to the conclusion that there is great spiritual value in engaging in sport. In strengthening one's power and courage, one partakes of a sacred act. The spiritual power of the greatest saints is increased by "exercises in which Israeli youths participate in the Land of Israel in order to strengthen their bodies to be courageous sons of the nation". Rabbi Kook is convinced that even in this field sanctity will become pure and clear and in the end the physical activity will become totally holy.

The same viewpoint brings him to the recognition that physical labour in the Land of Israel is a holy task. The longing for redemption of the People of Israel in its land "must come precisely from our work, the work of brothers, settlers on land and its actual builders, by the sweat of their brow and the work of their hands" - therefore physical work is sacred. The national revival in the Land of Israel contains "spiritual and physical labour, sacred and profane labours, all in one". Not only is the settlement of Israel "an important principle among the principles of the Torah", but work in the

orchards of Israel is a sacred vocation containing "a clinging to the precepts of the Lord, blessed be his name".

Just as the way of linking the sacred to the profane is like a ladder on which man rises from the profane to the holy, so is the road of repentance. Sanctity cannot exist in man unless he tries hard to be "full of the vigour of life and physical prowess" according to the maxim *mens sana in corpore sano* (a healthy mind in a healthy body). In the preface to his book, *The Lights of Repentance*, Rabbi Kook calls "corporeal repentance" the first step on man's road to repentance, and only afterwards and on the basis of it can one build the spiritual repentance. This corporeal repentance is connected with "all the transgressions against the laws of nature, against morality and Torah related to the laws of nature. For all bad behaviour leads ultimately to illness and pain." Man must recognise that he himself is to blame, by his behaviour, for the impoverishment of his physical life. This recognition will lead him to the decision to repent and keep the laws of physical health. "Medicine is devoted to the improvement of physical health", but evidently it has not yet perfected this great task and has not yet found the right answer to all the questions of corporeal repentance.

Translation by Chanah Arnon

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