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## Secrecy, Apophasis, and Atheistic Faith in the Teachings of Rav Kook

ELLIOT R. WOLFSON

Rien ne pèse tant qu'un secret.

—Jean de La Fontaine

ומה נכבד סוד זה וזה שער השמים ואין פותח

יצחק אבן לטיף—

איש בלי סוד כאוצר בלי מפתח

אברהם אבן חסדאי—

In this chapter, I will focus on apophaticism and esotericism in the writings of Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935). Needless to say, many studies have been written on the mystical underpinnings of Kook's religious Zionism as well as the Kabbalistic sources that may have influenced his thinking, which Gershom Scholem tellingly described as a “veritable *theologia mystica* of Judaism.”<sup>1</sup> What is lacking is a sustained analysis of the role of the rhetoric of secrecy in his teaching and especially how it relates to the aporetic claim that we cannot know the divine essence, an approach well attested in the history of Jewish philosophy and mysticism. This study is an attempt to fill that gap by assessing the relationship between the apophatic and the esoteric in Kook's religious philosophy. As I shall argue, a critical aspect of his hermeneutic of secrecy, which is now far more transparent since the uncensored diaries have come to light, is the atheistic relativization of theistic belief. If one follows the *via negativa* to its logical conclusion, we come to the paradox of needing to believe categorically in the relative truth of what we know to be untrue. Belief, on this score, would not only encompass unbelief but, paradoxically, would be most fully instantiated as unbelief. In a previous publication, I cited the succinct expression of this paradox by Henri Atlan: the “personal God” of monotheistic theology is the “ultimate idol,” since “the only discourse about God that is not idolatrous is necessarily an atheistic discourse. Alternatively, whatever the discourse, the only God who is not an idol is a God who is not a God.”<sup>2</sup> This

dimension of Kook's thought has been noted, but its precise relation to his notion of secrecy and apophysis has not been adequately explored.<sup>3</sup>

### Kabbalah and the Secret of Secrecy

To set the tone of this inquiry, let me cite the observation of Eliezer Schweid that Kook's "teaching is in no way intended to decipher that which remains in the realm of 'secret' and mystery." The author qualifies his categorical judgment by noting that while Kook "certainly embraces those supernal sources which contain within them an infinite truth remaining beyond all human knowledge and comprehension," he "only engages in speculation in order to reveal and understand in depth those things which he holds as truth which have already appeared within the ken of the scientific and philosophic-speculative reflections of contemporary man." Schweid concludes that Kook was not engaged in "revealing secrets" nor was he "concerned with the difficulty characteristic of most Kabbalists and mystics concerning the question—what and how much of what is known to them may they reveal?—even though he is aware of the problem."<sup>4</sup>

A different perspective was offered by Yehuda Mirsky's description of Kook as a "good Lithuanian Kabbalist," insofar as "he practiced his esotericism with regards to the study of Kabbalah."<sup>5</sup> But what is implied by this practice of esotericism? Ostensibly, what is intended is that Kook deliberately concealed secrets or withheld elaborating them in writing. But if so, what was his motivation? Even if we were to accept that there is a peculiar Lithuanian penchant for reticence in the diffusion of esoteric matters, the question that begs to be answered is what purpose, intellectual or practical, is served by a hypothetically intentional desire to safeguard the secrets? If we assume this to be Kook's *modus operandi*, what is behind his frequent deployment of the traditional expression "mysteries of Torah" (*razei torah*)? Should this be viewed merely as a rhetorical device divested of substantive meaning, or is there a specific connotation the unearthing of which might shed light on Kook's utilization of esoteric language?

On the face it, it would seem that Kook transformed the esoteric into the mystical, divesting the notion of the secret of its secrecy. One of the strongest advocates for such a position is Benjamin Ish-Shalom, who argued that, for Kook, the term *mysteries of Torah* "refers not only to the *sefirot* of kabbalistic teaching but to those same speculations and thoughts common to the mind of every individual, and it makes no difference whether they are expressed in kabbalistic language or otherwise."<sup>6</sup> In support of his contention, Ish-Shalom cites a passage where Kook mentions the "mystical thinking" (*hegyon ha-razi*) that constitutes the quality of "independence" (*hofesh*) exclusive to the Jewish soul (*neshamah ha-yisra'elit*). When that sense of autonomy ascends to its peak, then the "unique soul" (*neshamah yehidah*), possessed only by the Jewish people, is nourished from the "dew of life"

that issues from the Shekhinah, referred to as the Assembly of Israel (*keneset yisra'el*).<sup>7</sup> Through the agency of this “pure holiness,” the mysteries of Torah are formed within the souls of individual Jews, whether they are expressed in the language and style customarily used by masters of the mysteries (*ba'alei ha-razim*) or in another literary form. The tradition transmitted to Moses on Sinai (*qabbalah le-moshe mi-sinai*), according to the time-honored locution, is identified symbolically as the Assembly of Israel, whence the efflux of the holy spirit overflows, illumines, and inspires the production of novel secrets.<sup>8</sup> According to Ish-Shalom's interpretation, Kook broadened the import of the term “kabbalah,” for it connotes not “only a tradition of knowledge handed down from Adam to Moshe to our own day, as the kabbalists held, but also the original creation of the individual Jew. We find here an awareness and legitimization of innovation itself.”<sup>9</sup>

Leaving aside the complex interplay of conservative and innovative tendencies attested in older Kabbalistic sources, the main point raised by Ish-Shalom is well taken.<sup>10</sup> In contradistinction to the formula of esotericism adopted by Kabbalists, in no small measure due to the influence of Maimonides, Kook seems not only to have been dedicated to the proliferation of mystical teachings, perhaps due to his messianic utopianism and the campaign to combat secularization, but also to encourage the fabrication of new ideas that would expand the parameters of the Kabbalah.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, as he put it in one passage, since the mysteries of Torah (*sitrei torah*) derive from the “supernal source,” the “hidden strength of the inwardness of the soul [*hevyon ha-oz shel penimiyyut ha-neshamah*], which is the portion of the divine from above [*heleq eloha mi-ma 'al*],” they can enter into all hearts, even the hearts of those “who have not reached the measure of the expansive mindfulness [*de'ah reh'avah*] for the attainment of the wide and deep knowledge [*mada rahav we-amoq*].”<sup>12</sup> According to another passage, the disclosure of the mysteries of Torah (*gilluy razei torah*) brings about the revelation of the light of the mysteries of the supernal by means of which the “idle matters” (*devarim betelim*) are elevated and transformed through the light of the messiah into holiness. In sharp contrast to the Maimonidean hermeneutic, the inclination toward the supernal mysteries (*razei elyon*) is not consequent to the acquisition of scientific or rational understanding; on the contrary, it is precisely the humility of people wanting this training that brings blessing to the world, and through “their pure will” they have the capacity to reveal the “great light of the knowledge of the holy ones” (*or gadol shel da'at qedoshim*), that is, the gnosis of the angels, which is superior to the discursive or scientific wisdom of human beings (*hokhmat ha-adam*).<sup>13</sup>

Passages such as these attest to the fact that the breach with the traditional code of esotericism was a crucial facet of Kook's orientation. But is there something of the secret that persists in Kook's worldview even as he overtly and repeatedly affirms that the disclosure of the mysteries is the means to promulgate the

consciousness of the unity of the divine in all things? Is there a way of reading Kook such that the dilemma of communicating the secret is still a matter of concern for him or has any vestige of a real esotericism disappeared in his mystical vision? The ensuing analysis will grapple with this question and attempt to offer a more nuanced understanding of the role of secrecy and apophysis in Kook's mystical teaching.

### Disseminating the Secret and Israel's Spiritual Vocation

In reassessing Kook's statements about secrets and the nature of esotericism, let me begin by mentioning an illuminating and self-revealing comment in which he writes about God planting in him the "constant desire for all that is concealed [*nistar*], for all that is exalted and lofty," and instilling in him—in spite of his "innumerable weaknesses and failings"—a "daring spirit" and an "inner purity" so that he could "illumine the world," by creating a "literature replete with the light of the mysteries of Torah," albeit presented in a fashion that is "popular" and "accessible."<sup>14</sup> Kook acknowledges both his craving for the esoteric and his ability to render it exoterically so that it may become available to all Jews. Indeed, we can detect a conspicuous passion for the secret. Consider the following candid self-disclosure:

My soul yearns for the mysterious secrets [*nafshi sho'efet le-sitrei peli'ot*], for the hidden strength of the supernal mysteries [*le-hevyon oz razim elyonim*], and it does not find comfort in the abundance of knowledge, since they turn to trite matters. My feelings and the path of my thoughts lead me constantly to the supernal dimension, to the exalted and to the elevated, to contemplate the sublimity of the holy, in the breadths of the pneumatic emanation [*be-merhavei ha-ašilot ha-nishmatiyim*]. It is no accident that the essence of the nature of my soul is that I experience pleasure and contentment by being engaged in the divine secrets [*ha-nistarot ha-elohiyot*] abundantly and freely.<sup>15</sup>

This extract is proof enough that Kook's embrace of the esoteric entailed the confluence of the theosophic and the ecstatic. The secrets for which the soul yearns are the supernal mysteries, which comprise the sphere of the holy and which are identified further as the pneumatic emanations. To be engaged in the divine secrets, therefore, means to be engaged in contemplation of the *sefirotic* potencies. With regard to this engagement, Kook feels no constraint or tension; on the contrary, it is the source of his pleasure (*oneg*) and contentment (*naḥat ruah*).

The transmission of this mystical knowledge, unencumbered by technical jargon, is clearly the overarching impulse motivating Kook in his prolific literary creativity.<sup>16</sup> I would add that this impulse is reflective of the predilection for popu-

larization and propagation of esotericism attested more broadly in the twentieth century. In one passage, Kook went so far as to argue that publicizing the mysteries was necessary for the survival of Judaism in his time, and that the deterioration of the status of the Jews should be viewed as the descent (*yeridah*) that precedes and is, in some sense, identical to the ascent (*aliyyah*).<sup>17</sup> Anyone familiar with his writings, however, knows that Kook routinely retained the rhetoric of esotericism. In one passage, for instance, he remarks that the superlative esoteric knowledge (*ha-yedi'ot ha-sodiyot ha-yoter elyonot*) is not meant to be broadcast extensively in the world (*lehitpashet be-olam be-hitpashshetut kamutit*) lest the masses become conversant with this knowledge. At best, the multitude should be restricted to the “outer expression” (*signon ha-ḥiṣon*) of the secrets so that they know nothing of their “inner content” (*tokhen ha-penimi*). Insofar as the widespread circulation of occult wisdom could prove to be more detrimental than beneficial, the secrets infiltrate only into those who have the “supernal property” (*segullah elyonah*) of the “lofty contemplation” (*histakkelut gevohah*), the elite individuals (*yeḥidim*), who in their “spiritual stature” (*govham ha-ruḥani*) elevate the world from its depraved state just by their existence and not on account of any palpable influence. Even though the inner secrets (*razim ha-penimiyyim*) cannot be revealed, their illumination is refracted through whatever is manifest in the world and thus everything mundane is sanctified. The “universal propensity” (*megammah ha-kelalit*) of Israel’s influence in the world—a comportment that is unrivaled among the nations—can be expressed in this manner: in virtue of having received the Torah, they possess knowledge of the mysteries but also the wisdom not to distribute it indiscriminately. The onus for the Jewish people, accordingly, is to elevate the world by embodying the “inner property” (*segullah penimit*) in the treasure of humanity—a disposition that corresponds to the higher level of prophecy ascribed to Moses, seeing the glory through a translucent speculum (*aspaqlarya ha-me'irah*).<sup>18</sup> The preeminence of mystical wisdom (*hokhmat ha-razim*), the true and original wisdom of the Jews (*hokhmat yisra'el*), is that it stimulates the overflow of the holy spirit that elevates all corporeality to spirituality, and all of the sensible and imaginary forms are hoisted to the “summit of emanation” (*merom ašilut*) and the “supernal enlightenment” (*haskalah ha-elyonah*).<sup>19</sup>

In the final analysis, the imaginative faculty allows one to sense the “reality of the divine light” in the soul and in the world. Subsequent to that feeling (*hargashah*), there is the “pious comprehension” (*hassagah ha-torit*) through which one is illumined in the “great light,” the holy spirit that begins “to appear in the world in majesty and splendor, to lift up the nations, and to sustain the spirit of the contrite.”<sup>20</sup> Kook identifies this as the ethos of the Jewish people (*mussar ha-yisra'eli*), which he further labels as an “individualistic ethic” (*mussar indiwwidu'ali*) as opposed to one that is familial (*mispaḥti*), nationalistic (*le'umi*), or related to humanity

in general (*enoshi kelali*). Kook is quick to point out, however, that Jewish particularity is expressive of the universal, or in his precise language, it is all-encompassing (*ha-kol kalul bo*), but there can be little doubt that Judaism is accorded a privileged status; the ethnic pride and strength derive from its divine status, which is linked to the fact that the Torah, the emanative force of creation (*hamshakhah shel yeširah*), is the inimitable inheritance of Israel.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, in one of his earliest compositions, Kook admonished against teaching words of Torah to the nations of the world for their “imperfect souls” (*nefashot bilti mushlamot*) may not be capable of assimilating the trace of holiness contained therein, even though, by his own admission, that trace is a boon for the physical and spiritual welfare of both Jews and non-Jews.<sup>22</sup> The shared task of the other nations is to cultivate the “universal culture” by perfecting human nature, but the incomparable part played by Israel is to spread the pure knowledge of God’s unity. Even though the procurement of this knowledge is the common telos of the human species without qualification, it is an undertaking borne by the Jews alone.<sup>23</sup> Hence, the Jewish people, as Kook unabashedly affirms, are the “center of the world” (*merkaz ha-olam*) and the “center of humanity” (*merkaz ha-enoshiyyut*) on account of the institution of prophecy, which is indicative of the “eternal praise” of Israel. In spite of the prevailing doubt and skepticism characteristic of modernity, Kook is committed to the traditional epistemology that “there is one truth that stands forever, and this truth is engraved on the forehead of the celestial beast that walks upon the earth in the form of the nation whose name is Israel. The whole world knows that we are the ‘choicest vine, entirely the true seed’ (Jeremiah 2:21).”<sup>24</sup> The unity of the spiritual-ethical and the material-practical realms is expressed in the world by means of the people of Israel and uniquely in the land of Israel.<sup>25</sup> Only Israel can receive the faith of the true God (*emunat elohei emet*), whereas the other nations are collectively branded as the “human filth” (*zuhamah ha-enoshit*), embodying “an alien and foreign culture” (*tarbut zarah we-nokhrit*) that is innately antagonistic to the spiritual temperament of the Jews.<sup>26</sup> The difference between the Jewish soul and the soul of the gentiles is greater than the difference between a human soul and an animal soul, since in the case of the latter, the difference is quantitative (*kamuti*) and in the case of the former, it is substantial (*ašmi*) and qualitative (*eikhuti*).<sup>27</sup>

One might be inclined to attenuate this ethnocentrism by appealing to the universalism presumed to be implied in the particularism—the exclusivity of the chosen people is the means to achieve a greater inclusivity that is the utopian ideal expressed in the prophetic idiom of the ingathering of all nations to worship the God of Israel, who is the one true God.<sup>28</sup> However, one cannot deny the problematic repercussions of maintaining that the source of the general culture is Israel,<sup>29</sup> that only with respect to the Jews is there no conflict between the national spirit and the universal spirit,<sup>30</sup> that all the religions of the world are sustained by the

light that emanates from the Torah,<sup>31</sup> and that the rectification of the world (*tiqqun ha-olam*) can come about only through this ethnos.<sup>32</sup> I recognize that Kook maintained an isomorphic homology between God and Israel such that just as the former is all-inclusive and thus any delineation of one aspect apart from the entirety is a form of idolatry or cutting of the shoots, so with respect to the spiritual demeanor of Judaism, it is erroneous to restrict it to specific qualities to the exclusion of additional possibilities.<sup>33</sup> The Jewish soul comprises all spiritual tendencies, whether revealed or concealed, in the manner that emulates the enclosure of everything in the absolute divinity (*ha-elohut ha-muḥleṭet*).<sup>34</sup> The exclusiveness associated with the Jews is thus inclusive of its own others. We read, for instance, that the community of Israel is called *ṣedeq*, “righteousness,” because its foundation is to bring eternal justice (*ṣedeq ha-olamim*) to the entire human species.<sup>35</sup> Or again, “Israel toils perpetually for the liberation and redemption of the point of faith, which is the point of destiny for every human and every creature.”<sup>36</sup>

Throughout his long career, Kook tirelessly argued that the nationalism of the Jewish people is tied to its universal mission on behalf of all humanity.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, one would be hard-pressed to rationalize or justify claims to exceptionality masked under the pretense of universality. Interpreting the rabbinic dictum—linked exegetically to Ezekiel 34:31—that Israel is called Adam and not the idolatrous nations of the world, Kook explains that the term *adam* in its truest sense (*shem adam ha-amitti*) applies to the perfection of the intellect (*shelemut ha-sekkel*), but since the intellect cannot be perfected except by the Torah, the term is attributed exclusively to the Jews.<sup>38</sup> I do not think it is necessary to elaborate on the moral deficiency of this view. To take one final striking example: after arguing that the division into disparate nationalities makes it impossible for one to receive the spiritual overflow except through the garment of the channel that is unique to one’s ethnicity, Kook writes that the community of Israel is unique in this matter because with respect to Judaism it is not just the garbing of the channel (*hitlab-beshut ha-šinnor*) that is necessary for the spiritual life but also the essence of the content (*ašmiyyut ha-tokhen*). In the end, the other nations will become adapted to the essence of Judaism (*mistaggelet el ha-ašmiyyut ha-yahadutit*) and they will come to know and accept the name of the God of Israel.<sup>39</sup> The absorption of the other in the identity of the same cannot be viewed as a genuine acceptance of alterity.<sup>40</sup>

### Silence and the Rhetoric of Esotericism

While Kook may have not systematically expounded many of the theosophic mysteries with which he was no doubt familiar, he is beholden to the predominant hermeneutic of secrecy espoused through the centuries by Kabbalists: the language appropriate to express the secret is the language of secrecy; that is, the secret

can be revealed only as the secret that is concealed.<sup>41</sup> What is ultimately revealed, therefore, is the concealment.<sup>42</sup> In Kook's own words:

Mysteries [*razim*] must be explicated and comprehended solely by means of mysteries and not by means of revealed matters [*devarim gilluyim*], and this is the natural method of the disclosure of truths, which is inestimably superior to the method of translation [*targum*], which is numerologically equivalent [to the word for] slumber [*tardemah*]. The concealed [*ne'lam*] is explained exclusively through the concealed; and [in the] myriad of branches of mystery, each illumines the other, and the mystery is brought to light.<sup>43</sup> . . . The gradations that are on a par reveal and illumine one another, mystery united with mystery, and the torch of light will be disclosed.<sup>44</sup>

The method of disclosing truths is contrasted with the method of translation. The latter, which requires rendering one language into another, supposedly is a form of enlightenment but in fact it is a form of slumber, an allegation anchored in the numerical equivalence of the words *targum* and *tardemah* (the consonants of both equal 649). By comparison, the method of disclosing truths is evocative of a far greater suspicion about the efficacy of language as a suitable means of communication. The mystery must be exposed as mystery, the concealed revealed through the revelation of the concealment of the concealed.

In another aphorism, Kook writes about the "language of mysteries" (*sefat ha-razim*) as the "supernal language" (*ha-safah ha-elyonah*) that "speaks the absolute truth" (*ha-emet ha-muḥlatah*) without any sense of recoil. And yet, even in this context, the apophatic sentiment is apparent. Mystical discourse is identified as a "pure language" (*safah berurah*) that necessitates protection lest it fall "from the place where the secret light [*or ha-sodi*] dwells in its nature, and the linguistic connection [*ha-qishshur ha-sefati*] is bound to it in the depth of truth [*be-omeq ha-emet*]," to the "lowly place of this world of action, where there is naught but the language of deceit [*leshon sheqer*], and lies become a kind of acceptable content and naturally pass for truth." Those who articulate the "supernal language from the source of truth" in the guise of the "falsehood that is misappropriated [*mitgannev*] in the garb of the truth [*bi-levush ha-emet*] of the deceit of human beings [*kezev benei adam*]" will end up "destroying the world."<sup>45</sup> To speak of the mysteries that originate in the source of truth in language apposite to the world of action, which is the domain of duplicity, implicates one in cloaking truth in deception.

The language in which esoteric wisdom should be expressed, the pure language, brings to mind Benjamin's *reine Sprache*, the unspoken and wordless language that comprises the symbolic potential for phonemic and graphemic communicability in general rather than any existing semantic morphemes tied to a

specific cultural-semiological milieu.<sup>46</sup> Kook's *safah berurah* is likewise a language that is qualitatively different from the preponderant modes of aural and written exchange. Moreover, in a manner that is reminiscent of the Buddhist distinction between absolute truth (*paramārtha-satya*) and conventional truth (*samvṛti-satya*), the forms of representation that prevail in the intersubjective sphere are predicated on the arrayment of truth unveiled in the veil of untruth, whereas the pure language is bound to the depth of truth to the extent that it obviates the viability of expression through the ploy of dissimulation.<sup>47</sup> We may surmise that this implies that the supernal language of mysteries, when judged from the standpoint of the sentient world, is an apophatic gesticulation, a language beyond language, a semantic field where letter is interchangeable with light. The secrets of Kabbalah belong most properly in this realm of the untainted truth that can be expressed only through its inexpressibility.

The paradox of apophasis, the verbal act of unsaying, is addressed in a poignant way in the following passage in which Kook poetically describes the circular motion of the *via contemplativa*:

We must greatly expand thought, in length, width, depth, height, extension and size. . . . And we traverse repetitively from the great to the small and from the small to the great, from particularity to universality and from universality to particularity. We fly from emanation, from ideality, to embodiment, to materiality, to practicality, and we return and ascend from practicality to emanation, to ideality, and we are engaged continually in motion. . . . We desire to pronounce the name, we yearn to elucidate the supernal light, we are filled with transcendent thirst, saturated with delight, to fill the mouth with the praise of the God of gods. From the abundance of the pure fear, from the strength of the holy reverence, we return to the silence.<sup>48</sup>

The contemplative expansion of thought involves the mind going from one thing to its opposite, from the great to the small, from the immaterial to the material, from the ideal to the practical. The movement, which is cyclical and repetitive, is also expressed as the desire to vocalize the ineffable name and to explicate the supernal light. Even though one may be filled with the kataphatic desire to offer praises before God, in the end one returns apophatically to the silence (*demamah*). "From the perspective of the absolute and necessary essence of the divine reality, no praise [*shevah*] or adoration [*tehillah*] is appropriate, for what is essential is not praiseworthy. But the contemplation of the substance of the greatness of truth and goodness consummately perfects everything, and then we understand that the prevention of praise [*meni'at ha-shevah*] is above every blessing and veneration, for the dispersion of the volitional governance [*ha-hanhagah ha-reṣonit*] is constricted

[*mešumšemet*] vis-à-vis the complete loftiness [*ha-elyoniyyut ha-gemurah*], and it is especially the contracted [*ha-memu'etet*] that imparts place for adoration and praise."<sup>49</sup> Concerning the unspeakable and undefinable, the eschewal of adulation is the highest adulation. Kook writes fervently about the distress and frustration he felt from not being able to depict his experience adequately in words: "I hunger for the truth. Not for the comprehension of truth, and thus I am riding upon the skies, and I am entirely engulfed within the truth. I am utterly pained from the anguish of expression, how will I express the great truth, which fills my whole heart? . . . All that I will speak only covers my splendor and clouds my light. Great is my suffering and great is my pain."<sup>50</sup> From the innermost pangs of his existential angst, Kook was able to summon the words to express the fact that any expression of the inexpressible of necessity entails covering what has been uncovered. Every articulation of the ineffable—speaking what cannot be spoken—must be symbolic insofar as the symbol is an image of unlikeness. It stands to reason that the imagelessness specularized through an image must be in conflict with that image inasmuch as it is without image. What is hidden in the exposure of the hidden is the hiddenness that has been exposed. Discovery of truth perforce is an act of recovering, concealing the concealment.

### Ontological Dimensions of the Secret

Kook proffered an ontological understanding of the secret that is prevalent in Kabbalistic literature. Secrecy is not merely an epistemological or hermeneutical category, as it is often assumed by scholars, but rather one that relates to the nature of being as it is apprehended by the mystic visionary,<sup>51</sup> that is, the one who experiences the world through a "spiritual contemplation" (*histakkelut ruhanit*), a way of "gazing at everything together" (*seqirat ha-kol be-yahad*), in contrast to one who experiences it through the "ordinary intellectual contemplation" (*histakkelut hasikhkhit ha-peshutah*), which is preoccupied with allegedly discrete objects and properties.<sup>52</sup> Something of the elitism of the esoteric posture persists to the extent that the knowledge of the secrets relates to a transformative vision that is limited to the few who are considered to be the foundation of the world. Hence, as he writes in another passage, the "light of the mysteries of God" (*or razei el*), which sustains the supernal souls of the righteous, is compared to the "spirit of the resurrection of the dead," and it is through this "supernal light that is sown in the righteous" that the messiah will appear "to raise the horn of the eternal people."<sup>53</sup> Other comments, however, offer a perspective that seemingly undercuts the elitism and democratizes the esoteric ideal. To mention one conspicuous illustration: Kook informs the reader that conjecture with respect to the mysteries of Torah (*hashra'at razei torah*) is based on a "supernal capability that has no end or limit," but what ultimately ensues from such contemplative activ-

ity is a “phenomenological disclosure” (*gilluy hofa’ah*) of the “light of the life of all lives,” the infinite energy that sustains reality, which is potentially available to all people.<sup>54</sup> The dissemination of the secret, therefore, is no longer restricted to exclusive fraternities of the cognoscenti in the manner that Kabbalists insisted for centuries, even if their own innovative exposition of traditions—often elicited exegetically from scriptural and/or rabbinic texts—complicates the degree to which they themselves subscribed to a rigid conservatism. “The current culture,” muses Kook, “according to how it is presently established in the world, is built entirely on heresy and hatred, for they are the negation of the essential life. It is only possible to overcome this disease by revealing all the treasures of good from their storages of faith and love, and this is the goal of disclosing the mysteries of Torah.”<sup>55</sup>

Further support for this may be elicited from an aphorism wherein Kook distinguishes philosophy (*filosofyah*) and esotericism (*sodiyut*) on the grounds that the former is an “aristocratic” mode of thinking that is incapable of comprehending the underlying oneness of all phenomena, whereas the latter “discerns the unity that is everything,” and therefore it penetrates to the profundity of all thoughts, feelings, inclinations, and strivings throughout the entire chain of being that is the multiverse. Precisely because the infinite, the “cause of all causes” (*illat kol ha-illot*), is beyond comprehension, it can be spoken of as an “esoteric surplus” (*ha-yitaron ha-razi*) through which all the “thoughts” and “spiritual sparks” comprised within it are unified. The secret (*sod*), accordingly, is identified as the “soul of faith” (*nishmat ha-emunah*) and the “soul of Torah” (*nishmata de-orayyta*). “The open unity of the mystery [*ha-aḥdut ha-mefuleshet shel ha-raz*] comprises all the creations, all the conditions of thought and feeling, all types of poetry and oratory, all the inclinations of life, all the aspirations and all the hopes, all the ambitions and all the ideals, from the depth of their foundation to the summit of their elevation. The oil of life of the supernal height of the divine loftiness [*ha-govah ha-elyon shel ha-illuy ha-elohi*], which only the splendor of prophecy and the translucent speculum [*zohar ha-nevu’ah we-aspaqlarya ha-me’irah*], the splendor of the first Adam and the supernal lights, can reveal.”<sup>56</sup> For Kook, the expansive spiritual condition is one in which the mysteries of the world (*razei olam*), the mysteries of Torah (*razei torah*), and the secret of God (*sod ha-shem*) lay claim to the individual.<sup>57</sup> In another aphorism, he goes so far as to say that it is a matter of “deceit” (*sheqer*) to demand of the soul to attain the “true divine conjunction” (*devequt elohit amittit*) without the “amplification of the study of the depths of the mysteries of Torah.”<sup>58</sup> The directive to interpret the Torah according to the four levels of meaning (*lidrosh et ha-torah be-fardes*), which includes the literal (*peshat*), allegorical (*remez*), homiletical (*derash*), and mystical (*sod*), is for the sake of widening the boundary and magnifying the light of vitality in the world.<sup>59</sup>

Here we see a convergence of the ontological and the hermeneutical connotations of the term *raz*: it is through study of the mysteries conveyed in the scriptural text that one can be conjoined with the mystery of the divine light. There is thus an

inclination in the soul for the image of the encompassing oneness [*ha-ahdut ha-kolelet*], which discerns only divinity, and it knows as well that every disclosure of the particular is not the matter of divinity, but rather the totality, and the source of the totality, and that which is way above this. However that which separates the disclosure of the particular from divinity is not the matter of truth per se; this is caused by the blindness of our eyes, for we discern only the particularity. . . . This reality of the return of the totality to divinity [*hazarat ha-kol el ha-elohut*] is the supernal perfection in being [*ha-sheleimut ha-elyonah be-hawayah*], and there is no capacity to comprehend its value.”<sup>60</sup>

From this vantage point, it might be more appropriate to render the critical term *sod* as mystical rather than esoteric, since the secretive knowledge consists of discerning the interconnectivity of all things through the infinite potency (*ha-gevurah ha-ein sofit*) as opposed to the more accessible and pervasive discernment of allegedly self-subsistent substances, which are reified through contraction (*šimšum*) of the unlimited and impenetrable light.<sup>61</sup>

At the heart of Kook’s worldview is the intersection of the esoteric and the political.<sup>62</sup> Prima facie, it seems untenable for the esoteric to serve as the basis for a sociopolitical movement, insofar as the latter calls for divulging and transparency and the former for obfuscating and opacity. To speak candidly, one would not expect that the spreading of secrets could serve as the spiritual underpinning of an ideological movement such as Zionism. It is reasonable, therefore, for Kook to have shifted from an elitist and exclusionary esotericism to an ideal of mysticism that is more inclusive and embracive. Kook transformed the rhetoric of esotericism as his thought matured and the Zionist component became more central to his vision. For the most part, as we have seen, the matter of disclosing secrets is not a revealing of the concealed by concealing the revealed, but rather the promulgation of the theomonic belief that reality partakes of the light of infinity that is present in all things by being absent from all things, the light that is both immanently transcendent and transcendently immanent, indeed the one because the other, since transcendence can be manifest only through the façade of immanence. Nature evolves, according to Kook, to the point that there is an ever-increasing appreciation of the underlying unity of the untold differentiated beings—an inchoate aggregate whose form is incessantly being shaped by the ever-changing multiplicity of beings—often designated in his writings by the metaphor of the

elevation of all things to the one true source of life. In that respect, immersion in the depth of the mysteries and hidden secrets has the task of enhancing the sense of good in the world and thereby rendering existence in its entirety nobler.<sup>63</sup>

### Apophesis and the Atheistic Overcoming of Theolatriy

The ontological claim regarding the underlying divine unity of all things corresponds to an epistemological presumption that there is a proper way to see the world such that the fragmentariness of what exists is overcome; our typical modes of perception and cognition through which we negotiate and navigate the world of discrimination compel us to see particularity and difference, one thing distinguished from another, but the mystical sensibility is a mode of perceiving the inter-relatedness of all things in the “supernal holiness” (*qodesh elyon*), which cannot be discerned through intellection (*sekhel*) or sensation (*regesh*) but only through faith (*emunah*), the “inner yearning in the depth of the supreme holiness” (*she’ivah penimit be-omeq ha-qodesh ha-meromem*).<sup>64</sup> Kook further associates this faith with the “deeper wisdom” (*ha-ḥokhmah ha-yoter amuqah*), also identified as the “fear of the Lord.”<sup>65</sup> Interestingly, he notes that the source whence this fear is formed is in the “depth of the soul” on account of the “wondrous combination of two opposites [*ha-harkavah ha-nifla’ah shel shenei ha-hafakhim*] related to the divine comprehension [*ha-hassagah ha-elohit*], the privation of absolute knowledge of the essence of divinity [*he’der ha-yedi’ah ha-muḥleṭet be-mahut ha-elohut*] and the certain knowledge of its perfect existence [*wada’ut ha-yedi’ah bi-meši’utah ha-sheleimah*].”<sup>66</sup> Mystical gnosis ensues from the *coniunctio oppositorum* of the apophatic and the kataphatic: the lack of knowledge of the divine essence ensures the certitude of the divine existence—to know that God exists means, therefore, to know that we cannot know the nature of that which we presume to exist. In place of striving to apprehend the divine essence, the accomplishment of which is humanly impossible, it is best to direct one’s attention to the ethical mandate that follows from the apperception of the nothingness that is the matrix of all that is real, the supernatural transcendence that is immanent in every dimension of nature.<sup>67</sup>

Alternatively expressed, when seen through the mystical prism, the certitude of divine existence implies that all things ascend to the “unified substance” (*tokhen ha-aḥduti*) that is the source “above every image of divisions” (*ṣiygur shel havdolot*), including the division between existence and nonexistence, the godly and the ungodly.<sup>68</sup> This unity—the one beyond the mathematical binary of the one and the many—is characterized as the “equanimity of values” (*hishtawwut shel arakhim*).<sup>69</sup> The supposition that differences among what appear to be oppositional—physical and spiritual, imaginative and intellectual, darkness and light, good and evil, holy and impure—are rendered indifferent in light of the fact that the various parts of reality are in accord with each other, and thus the particulars illumine the whole,

each from its singular perspective. Whereas the “rational viewpoint” (*ha-habaṭah ha-rašyonalit*) tends to incorporate particularities in the “universal illumination” (*he’arah ha-kelalit*), secrecy (*raziyyut*) involves seizing the universal through penetration into the details of the particular. The peril of esotericism is that it can lead the mind to be submerged in the “smallness of the particulars,” but in the end its success consists precisely of showing the capaciousness of the hidden in the minutiae of the manifest, the wonders of the celestial in the configuration of the terrestrial.<sup>70</sup> Kook hints at this process when he writes that if any “revealed part” (*heleq galuy*) is not appropriately discerned, it stands as a “curtain” (*masakh*) that hides the “extolled light” (*ha-or ha-nisgav*) of the “hidden and concealed part” (*ha-heleq ha-havuy we-ha-nistar*), which can only be seen through a “luminous inner vision” (*šefiyah penimit behirah*). Sometimes a miracle is possible and the light breaks through as a crack in the wall, but the “enduring order” (*sefer tediri*) is “to go from the revealed [*ha-gilluy*] to the hidden [*ha-nistar*], from the particulars [*ha-peraṭim*] to the general [*ha-kelal*].”<sup>71</sup> One thus fathoms that in the “light of the supernal, divine unity” (*or ha-aḥdut ha-elyonah ha-elohit*), the opposites found below in the world of differentiation are united in an indivisible oneness.<sup>72</sup>

Apropos of the stipulation to traverse from entanglement with singularity to absorption in generality, it is of interest to consider Kook’s appropriation and condemnation of the *via negativa* promulgated by Maimonides. The latter argued that comprehension of the negative attributes bestows upon a person a superior form of negative knowledge (*yedi’ah ha-shelilit*) that brings one in closer proximity to the unknowable and incommensurable God. Kook challenges this viewpoint by noting that the heart is generally gladdened by positivity and not negativity. He acquiesces to Maimonides, however, and grants that if a person rises to “this quality of unity with the light of truth” (*middah zo shel hitaḥadut im or ha-emet*), then even negative truth (*emet shelili*) brings one joy, for indeed at this level “everything negative changes into something positive” (*kol shelilah nehpekhet le-ḥiyuv*) and every “privation” (*he’der*) is transmuted into an “absolute attribution” (*qinyan gamur*). Nevertheless, Kook significantly modifies the Maimonidean perspective and argues that to bolster the popular diffusion of the knowledge of God (*da’at elohim*) in the world, it is necessary to overturn the apophatic orientation by kataphatically increasing the “positive images” (*šiyurim ḥiyuvim*) of God. If the logic of apophysis dictates that all the demarcated attributes are negated in the inexhaustible perfection of the divine, it is equally true that this negation must be negated. The insufficiency of these attributes is linked to considering their specificity in isolation from the totality in which they are incorporated, that is, in treating them as autonomous or self-subsisting entities rather than as coexisting and interdependent networks.

Necessity implies that everything contained within the nondifferentiated unity of divine perfection is as an actual possible of the possible actual. What we

must negate, therefore, is the overemphasis on the delimitation (*haqbalah*) and particularity (*peratiyyut*) of the attributes, for this fallacy of misplaced concreteness, to borrow the Whiteheadian phrase, is what brings one to a state of sadness. However, when one contemplates these attributes from the perspective of *Ein Sof*, the indifferent substratum of the world of difference—the substance (*yesh*) of the all-encompassing insubstantiality, the indiscriminate emptiness that is the discriminate thusness of all that exists—then the particulars are elevated without being obliterated, and the knowledge of the divine is intensified.<sup>73</sup> Utilizing technical Zoharic terms, Kook describes evil as the “world of separation” (*alma di-feruda*) in which every particular stands by itself, and good as the “world of unity” (*alma de-yihuda*) in which everything forms “one collective” (*ḥaṭivah aḥat*) held together by one “comprehensive bond” (*qishshur ha-kelali*).<sup>74</sup> Echoing a quietistic note well attested in both Kabbalistic and Ḥasidic sources, Kook writes that the “supernal happiness” is strengthened by means of the “complete annihilation” (*bitṭul gamur*) of the reality of one’s self (*mahut ašmo*). The desire to be assimilated into the “infinite perfection of the supernal splendor” (*shelemut ein sof shel no’am elyon*) requires a preliminary act of “extreme modesty” (*ha-anawah ha-gemurah*) and “deep humility” (*ha-shiflut ha-amuqqah*), a sentiment (*hargashah*) that Kook—problematically in my opinion—contends is unique to the Jewish people, “for they belittle themselves with respect to every greatness that is bestowed on them.”<sup>75</sup>

Kook’s perspective is based on the firsthand experience of the “world of unity” (*olam shel aḥdut*), which is marked by harmony (*harmoniyah*) and coincidence (*hat’amah*) in which distinctions are no longer discernible;<sup>76</sup> the speculative roots for this notion, however, can be found in the characterization of *Ein Sof* or Keter in some of the earliest Kabbalistic texts as the indifferent oneness (*aḥdut ha-shaweh*), the immeasurable unity wherein it is no longer viable to distinguish between the antinomies that orient us in the world spatially, temporally, morally, legally, religiously, sociologically, and psychologically. To be properly attuned to the apophatic nothingness of infinity—the *complexio oppositorum* in relation to which we cannot discriminate between the nonbeing of being and the being of nonbeing, the affirmation of negation and the negation of affirmation—is disorienting as the polarities by which we empirically calibrate our everyday lifeworld are fundamentally disrupted.

The logical consequence of this insight is drawn frequently by Kook.<sup>77</sup> Thus, for example, he describes the “great sea of the light of infinity” (*ha-yam ha-gadol shel or ein sof*) as the site where “everything is unified, everything is elevated, everything is exalted, and everything is sanctified.” Insofar as the supernal source is beyond all disparities, we can formulate a response to the age-old philosophical problem of theodicy: good and evil cannot be differentiated and this provides the justification for the “spiritual afflictions” that befall the magnanimous soul and

bring it to the “lofty felicity” (*osher ha-meromem*).<sup>78</sup> Afflictions are only apparent since there is no evil that is not a manifestation of the good. On the face of it, the righteous individual (*ṣaddiq*) is marred by relentless suffering, but this suffering is the path that leads to the most pristine bliss, the realization that in the meontological source of all beings—the self-negating negativity that yields the positivity of the manifold that constitutes the fabric of the cosmos—there is no way to extricate exultation from misfortune and hence pain itself is transposed into pleasure. The pragmatic need to constrict oneself to the particularities of the differentiated world that we inhabit is the catalyst that causes the mind of the expansive soul (*ha-neshamah ha-reḥavah*) to endure such torment, but the travails must be borne out of love because they eventually bring one to the greatest fortune (*osher ha-yoter gadol*).<sup>79</sup> “Who knows the depths of my pain,” opines Kook, “and who can estimate it? I am confined by many borders, in different boundaries, and my spirit craves the elevated expanses. ‘My soul thirsts for God’ (Psalm 42:3). The light of emanation is the life of my spirit. . . . All that is delimited is mundane vis-à-vis the supernal holiness.”<sup>80</sup>

Kook utilized an older Kabbalistic motif, attested in Zoharic literature, but exploited in Lurianic, Sabbatian, and Hasidic sources: the descent of the virtuous to the depth of sinfulness. Volitional acts of transgression provide the mechanism by which the *ṣaddiq* liberates the sparks of light entrapped in darkness as part of the messianic duty of rectifying the world. In this respect, the hardships of the righteous augment light in the world and thereby facilitate redemption.<sup>81</sup> More profoundly, just as within the boundlessness of infinity opposites are no longer ontically distinguishable, so each collapse is the means by which one psychically comprehends not only that there is no joy without grief but that grief is the most sublime exhibition of joy. The full magnitude of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the true sign of spiritual wakefulness, implies knowing that the descent is not simply for the sake of the ascent but rather that the descent itself is the ascent.<sup>82</sup>

The positive value accorded rebelliousness (*meridah*) and dissent (*kefirah*) is attested in the ideal of repentance (*teshuvah*), the highest rung on the ladder of human perfection and the crux of Israel’s eschatological mission to rectify the world. Without self-doubt, no one would suffer the shame and remorse necessary to seek amends for past indiscretions. The rupture (*qilqul*) caused by heresy (*harsah*) fosters the degradation (*shiflut*) that provokes one to repent in order to bring redemption to the world.<sup>83</sup> Occasionally, Kook was bold enough to draw the hypernomian implications of this radical shift in consciousness: heresy is the means that leads one to a deeper faith, a faith that takes the form of doubt, a piety that entails casting away the yoke of the commandments. To be sure, time and again, he insisted that in the current situation the commitment on the part of Jews to the ritual laws and customs must be upheld. Nevertheless, he painted the messianic

future, which can be experienced proleptically by the spiritual elite, as a time in which the laws will be abrogated, since in the state of nonduality associated with that future, there is no basis to differentiate between permissible and forbidden, pure and impure. As Kook openly avowed, it is difficult for the righteous man to be limited by the exoteric study and practice of Halakhah. Adherence to the law, therefore, is a mandatory concession demanded by the sociopolitical need for communal cohesion, but it increases the agony of the magnanimous soul, who desires, above all, to be bound to the limitless light that transcends the constriction of the nomian framework predicated on the structure of duality.<sup>84</sup>

In the enlightened state, even the distinction between faith (*emunah*) and heresy (*kefirah*) is subverted. This idea was articulated already in the thirteenth century by Azriel of Gerona;<sup>85</sup> it is audaciously expressed by Kook in the following aphorism:

With regard to the supernal divine truth, there is no difference at all between the conceived belief and heresy. Neither of them offer the truth, but faith brings one close to truth and heresy to deceit, and, as a result, good and evil ensue from these opposites, “the righteous will walk on them, while sinners will stumble on them” (Hosea 14:10). The world in its entirety, with all its spiritual and material values, it is all in relation to our assessment, and in relation to our assessment truth is revealed in faith, which is the source of good, and deceit in heresy, which is the source of evil. However, in relation to the light of *Ein Sof*, everything is equal. Heresy, too, is the disclosure of the force of life, for the light of life of the supernal splendor is garbed within it, and, consequently, spiritual warriors gather very good sparks from it.<sup>86</sup>

From the relative perspective of human judgment, we distinguish faith and heresy, and the good and evil that derive therefrom, but from the absolute perspective of *Ein Sof*, the two are transmutable. Indeed, in the sea of infinite indifference, the renunciation of faith is converted into the profoundest proclamation of faith, and the debris of darkness amassed from the deconstructive gesture of heresy becomes the foundation upon which the edifice of divine light is reconstructed.<sup>87</sup> As Kook put it in another passage: “The faith of Israel is affixed in *Ein Sof*, which is above all content of faith, and hence the faith of Israel is considered in truth to be the ideal of faith, the faith of the future, which is inestimably higher than the content of faith in the present. . . . The blemish of heresy occurs in the faith itself, but in the ideal faith there is no blemish of heresy at all because it is above the concept of heresy just as it is above the concept of faith.”<sup>88</sup>

The faith of the future, which exceeds the faith of the present, is rooted in the indeterminate infinite and hence it transcends every positive content of faith. The

utopian faith—the faith beyond faith, the faithless faith—is glossed with the words *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, “I shall be as I shall be,” the divine name revealed to Moses at the epiphany of the burning bush (Exodus 3:14), a name that defies the standard function of a name insofar as it does not denote anything definitive but only indexically alludes to the absolute necessity of being that is concomitantly the pure potentiality of becoming.<sup>89</sup> Just as this ideal faith is above all faith, so it is above all heresy. In Kook’s words: “There is no place in the ideal for anything opposing the ideal of faith even though there is the matter of the opposite [*hippukh*] and the parallel [*haqblah*] vis-à-vis the body of faith.” In the ideal of faith—the *fons vitae* (*meqor hayyim*), the fiftieth gate of understanding, which was not even transmitted to Moses—the shell of heresy (*qelippat ha-kefirah*) is completely subjugated because the force of the unholy, the demonic other god (*el aher*), is no longer antagonistic to the holy.<sup>90</sup>

In accord with Maimonides, Kook was sensitive to the fact that theistic depictions of God are inescapably idolatrous, since they promote an imagistic portrayal of that which is inherently imageless.<sup>91</sup> The metrics by which we measure the “essence of faith” (*iqqar ha-emunah*) is the immeasurable “greatness of the perfection of the infinite” (*gedullat shelemut ein sof*), and thus whatever we imagine in our hearts about God is a glimmer that is “completely obliterated” (*battelet legamrei*) when viewed against what really exists. Every name we assign to the infinite, whether in Hebrew or any other language, is “but a small and dim spark from the hidden light to which the soul aspires when it utters the word ‘God’ [*elohim*]. Every definition of divinity brings about heresy [*kefirah*], every definition is spiritual idolatry [*eliliyyut ruhanit*], even the attribution of the intellect and the will, and even divinity [*ha-elohut*] itself, for the name ‘God’ [*elohim*] is a definition.” Without the knowledge that every verbal or visual image applied to God is an inadequate definition, all positive God-talk would engender heresy. To be disdainful of the kataphatic descriptions of the indescribable infinity, which Kook refers to as the “limbs of the king” or the “garments of the king,” is also to be guilty of irreverence. Even though these descriptions are fallacious, they serve a utilitarian purpose if the practitioner keeps in mind a clear distinction between them and the “essence of faith.” The theistic depictions are “explanations” (*hasbarot*) that help bring one to the “source of faith,” the infinite light that is beyond all linguistic, conceptual, and imaginary representation. However, as Kook points out, these explanations can have the adverse effect of diminishing an individual’s material and spirituality vitality; indeed, the “greatest impediment” (*ma’sor gadol*) of the human spirit to achieving maturity is that the “conception of God” (*mahashavah ha-elohit*) is fixed in a “particular form,” which is “known amongst people on account of juvenile habit and imagination.”<sup>92</sup> The ascendancy of atheism in the time that precedes the messianic liberation (*iqveta di-meshiḥa*) can be seen in a constructive light: the

repudiation of belief is necessary “to eliminate the dross that has clung to the faith because of a dearth of knowledge and worship.” The function of atheism is to remove the “specific forms” (*ha-šurot ha-meyuḥadot*) from our conception of divinity, to uproot the refuse that separates the human from the true divine light, to cleanse the mind so that the more sublime knowledge of God (*da’at elohim hanisgavah*) can erect its temple.<sup>93</sup>

What separates the faith of Israel and idolatry is that the former unconditionally prohibits such images and in their place posits an “elevated and lofty image” (*šiygur na’aleh we-nisgav*) of the divine, which is “above every sentient figure” (*na’aleh mi-kol temunah muḥashit*).<sup>94</sup> Kook already noted in his commentary on the aggadic passages in Berakhot that the admixture of “pure monotheism” (*emunat ha-yiḥud ha-ṭehorah*) and the “murkiness of corporeality” (*maḥashakei ha-hagshamah*) is purified periodically when an aspect of the anthropomorphism falls away. What might appear as the toppling of faith turns out to be its refinement. Israel’s worship of God through the commandments is signaled out as being directed to the spiritual form (*ha-šurah ha-ruḥanit*) that is free of any corporealization.<sup>95</sup> The decisive return of the human spirit to the sphere of “pure belief” (*ha-emunah ha-barah*) will take place when the “last subtle shell of corporeality” (*qelippat ha-hagshamah ha-aḥaronah ha-daqqah*) collapses. This last shell consists of the “attribution of existence in general to divinity [*yaḥas ha-meši’ut bi-khelalut el ha-elohut*], for in truth all that we define by existence is incalculably removed from divinity.” The “shadows of this negation” resemble the heresy of atheism—denying the existence of God—but in reality the expunging of any proclivity to represent the divine unity anthropomorphically or anthropopathically is the “highest level of faith.”<sup>96</sup>

Ironically, insofar as the true expression of monotheism induces one to divest God of all positive attributions, atheism is the only elocution about God that is not culpable of endorsing a false image. As Kook writes about the relation of idolatry and monotheism in an epistle to Samuel Alexandrov, dated 13 Kislev 5557 (November 30, 1906), “By our values he is like one who is not [*hu ke-mi she-eino*], no intelligible or metaphysical form is found in him, but we know that it is impossible for it to be otherwise, since everything is from him. We do not speak or contemplate the source of sources, but from the fact that we do not negate him, everything lives and exists forever.”<sup>97</sup> Insofar as the God of Judaism is presumed to have no form, it is not invalid ideationally or experientially to consider that God as nonexistent. The aniconic ramification of the monotheistic creed is the undoing of theism.<sup>98</sup> Although the tendency toward atheism might appear to damage and to contradict the general principle of religious faith, in fact, it brings one closer to the “pure divine unity” (*ha-aḥdut ha-elohit ha-šerufah*), which is the “foundation of the source of Israel,” to the degree that it cleanses the mind of the pernicious impact

of the imagination.<sup>99</sup> The absolute lack of similarity between the divine and every other existent renders even the attribution of existence to God equivocal. This is the meaning of Maimonides's utilization of the language of Avicenna to name God the "necessary of existence" (*wājib al-wujūd*; *meḥuyav ha-meši'ut*), that is, the being whose existence is necessitated by its very essence, a taxonomy of being that cannot be ascribed to any other existent.<sup>100</sup> It follows that to proclaim that God exists is an ambivalent and misleading statement. Kook found confirmation of the Maimonidean view in the Kabbalistic insistence that one cannot declare of the *Ein Sof* that it exists.<sup>101</sup> If the infinite, as I have argued elsewhere, is truly neither something nor nothing, then it is not merely a presence that presents itself as nonpresent, but it is a nonpresence that is outside the either/or calculus that informs the economy of the binary of presence and absence indispensable to the vernacular of negative theology; it is, in short, the chiasm that resists both the reification of nothing as something and of something as nothing. To speak of this nothingness as the absence of presence is as inadequate as it is to speak of it as the presence of absence; it is technically beyond both affirmation and negation.<sup>102</sup> The final iconoclastic achievement, therefore, would call for destroying the idol of the very God personified as the deity that must be worshipped without being idolized.<sup>103</sup> The apophysis of apophysis implied herein would represent the last stage on the path of purging monotheism of its incipient theolatriy, a process that Kook deemed to be the distinctive vocation of the Jewish nation, to lead all of humanity to the ultimate perfection, the discernment of the one God, which means the discernment that there is naught but one reality, the divine light that permeates the pleromatic abyss at being's core.<sup>104</sup> When one reaches this shore of enlightenment, one awakens to the faith of the future, the faith that is marked by the signpost *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, as we already noted, the name that refuses to be named, the name that denotes neither something that is nothing nor nothing that is something, the name that signifies the insignificant, the infinity that both is what it is not and is not what it is because it neither is what it is not nor is not what it is. Within this imaginal space, there is no more distinction between faith and unfaith, belief and disbelief, and hence atheism emerges as the most pertinent and enhanced enunciation of theism.

## Notes

1. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1954), 354n17. For an incomplete but representative sample of scholarship on the relationship of Kook to Jewish mystical sources, including bibliographic references to earlier scholarship, see Tamar Ross, "Rav Kook's Conception of Divinity" [in Hebrew], *Da'at* 8 (1982): 109–128 and *Da'at* 9 (1982): 39–70; Yehudah Leon Ashkenazi, "The Use of Kabbalistic Concepts in Rav Kook's Teaching," in *The World of Rav Kook: Presentations from an Avi Chai-Sponsored*

*Conference Held in Jerusalem August 19–22, 1985 on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of Rav Kook's Death*, ed. Benjamin Ish-Shalom and Shalom Rosenberg, trans. Shalom Carmy and Bernard Casper (Jerusalem: Avi Chai, 1991), 149–155; Joseph Ben-Shlomo, “Lurianic Kabbalah and Rabbi Abraham Isaac ha-Cohen Kook’s Philosophical System” [in Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 10 (1992): 449–457; Yosef Avivi, “History as a Divine Prescription” [in Hebrew], in *Rabbi Mordechai Breuer Festschrift*, ed. Moshe Bar-Asher (Jerusalem: Academ Press, 1992), 709–771; Avivi, “Introduction to the Kabbalah of R. Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen” [in Hebrew], *Or Hadash* 13 (2011): 16–32; Lawrence Fine, “Rav Abraham Isaac Kook and the Jewish Mystical Tradition,” in *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality*, ed. Lawrence Kaplan and David Shatz (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 23–40; Mordecai Pachter, “The Kabbalistic Foundation of the Doctrine of Faith and Heresy in the Teaching of Rav Kook” [in Hebrew], *Da’at* 47 (2001): 69–100; Jonathan Garb, “Rabbi Kook and His Sources: From Kabbalistic Historiosophy to National Mysticism,” in *Studies in Modern Religions, Religious Movements and the Bābī-Bahā’ī Faiths*, ed. Moshe Sharon (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 77–95; Yuval Kahan, “Divine Faith: The Metaphysical Orientation of Rav Kook—Metaphysics, Theology, Mysticism” [in Hebrew] (MA thesis, Hebrew University, 2004), 97–120; Jerome Gellman, “Repentance in the Kabbalah: The Sources of Rav Kook” [in Hebrew], in *Shefa Tal: Studies in Jewish Thought and Culture Presented to Bracha Sack*, ed. Zeev Gries, Howard Kreisel, and Boaz Huss (Beer Sheva, Israel: Ben-Gurion University, 2004), 261–266; Jonathan Meir, “Longing of Souls for the Shekhina: Relations Between Rabbi Kook, Zeitlin and Brenner” [in Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 19 (2005): 771–818, esp. 775–777; Elchanan Shilo, “Rav Kook’s Explication of Lurianic Kabbalah: The Appearance of New Souls and Rectification of the World” [in Hebrew], *Iyyunim bi-Tequmat Yisra’el* 18 (2008): 55–77. For a detailed analysis of mystical experience, prophecy, and the pattern of creation in Kook’s teaching, see Semadar Cherlow, *The Tzaddiq Is the Foundation of the World: Rav Kook’s Esoteric Mission and Mystical Experience* [in Hebrew] (Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2012), 219–328.

2. Henri Atlan, *The Sparks of Randomness*, vol. 2: *The Atheism of Scripture*, trans. Lenn J. Schramm (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 346–347 cited in Elliot R. Wolfson, *Giving beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), xvii.

3. Benjamin Ish-Shalom, *Rav Avraham Itzhak HaCohen Kook: Between Rationalism and Mysticism*, trans. Ora Wiskind-Elper (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 87–88; Bezalel Naor, “Rav Kook and Emmanuel Levinas on the ‘Non-Existence’ of God,” *Orot: A Multidisciplinary Journal of Judaism* 1 (1991): 1–11. See also Tamar Ross, “The Cognitive Value of Religious Truth Statements: Rabbi A. I. Kook and Postmodernism,” in *Hazon Nahum: Studies in Jewish Law, Thought, and History Presented to R. Norman Lamm on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Yaakov Elman and Jeffrey S. Gurock (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1997), 479–528.

4. Eliezer Schweid, “‘Prophetic Mysticism’ in Twentieth-Century Jewish Thought,” *Modern Judaism* 14 (1994): 167–168.

5. Yehuda Mirsky, “An Intellectual and Spiritual Biography of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook from 1865–1904” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2007), 236n55.

6. Ish-Shalom, *Rav Avraham Itzhak HaCohen Kook*, 36. See also Yuval Cherlow, *The Torah of the Land of Israel in Light of the Teaching of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook* [in Hebrew] (Hašpin, Israel: Yeshivat ha-Golan, 1988), 81–84, 226–227. In part, Cherlow follows the view of Steinsaltz; see note 16.

7. With respect to the view that the pneumatic aspect of *yehidah* is unique to the Jews, I presume Kook was influenced by Ḥabad literature. See Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 70, 183–184, 232, 275, 301n1. The affinity between Ḥabad and Kook has been noted by previous scholars. See Cherlow, *The Tzaddiq*, 182–184, and notes 33, 54, and 64.

8. Ish-Shalom cites the passage from Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot ha-Qodesh*, ed. David Cohen (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1963), 1:135, sec. 118, which parallels Abraham Isaac Kook, *Shemonah Qevašim*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem, 2004), 4:43, 16. Compare *Shemonah Qevašim*, 8:11, 432: “The mysteries of Torah are not revealed through the mundane intellect [*ha-sekkel ha-ḥuloni*] but rather through the holy overflow of the holy spirit [*shifaf ha-qodesh shel ruah ha-qodesh*].” Regarding the publication of the *Shemonah Qevašim*, which first appeared in 1999, see Avinoam Rosenak, “Who’s Afraid of the Hidden Treatises of Rav Kook?” [in Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 69 (2000): 257–291, and the revised English version, “Hidden Diaries and New Discoveries: The Life and Thought of Rabbi A. I. Kook,” *Shofar* 25 (2007): 111–147.

9. Ish-Shalom, *Rav Avraham Itzhak HaCohen Kook*, 36–37. See *ibid.*, 195.

10. It must be pointed out, however, that Ish-Shalom challenges the view (proffered, for instance, by Adin Steinsaltz) that Kook was committed to the popularization of Kabbalah (see note 16). Ish-Shalom affirms what might appear to be contradictory viewpoints: on the one hand, Kook extended the purview of Kabbalah to include creative innovations, but, on the other hand, he demonstrated a conservative restraint in transmitting esoteric lore. In many of my publications, I have questioned the reigning distinction between the so-called conservative and innovative Kabbalists. For instance, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “The Anonymous Chapters of the Elderly Master of Secrets: New Evidence for the Early Activity of the Zoharic Circle,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 19 (2009): 159–172.

11. On the influence of Maimonides on Kook, see Itamar Gruenwald, “The Concept of *Teshuvah* in the Teachings of Maimonides and Rav Kook,” in *The World of Rav Kook*, 283–304; Lawrence Kaplan, “The Love of God in Maimonides and Rav Kook,” *Judaism* 43 (1994): 227–239; Kaplan, “Rav Kook and the Jewish Philosophical Tradition,” in *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook*, 39–77; Yehuda Mirsky, “Rav Kook and Maimonides: A New Look” [in Hebrew], in *Iggud: Selected Essays in Jewish Studies*, vol. 1, ed. Baruch Schwartz, Abraham Melamed, and Aharon Shemesh (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2008), 397–405; Uriel Barak, “The Formative Influence of the Description of Prophecy in the Guide on the Perception of ‘The Beginning of Redemption’ by Rabbi A. I. Kook’s Circle” [in Hebrew], *Da’at* 64–66 (2009): 361–415; James A. Diamond, “R. Abraham Isaac Kook and Maimonides: A Contemporary Mystic’s Embrace of Medieval Rationalism,” in *Encountering the Medieval in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. James A. Diamond and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 101–128, esp. 104–106; Diamond, “A Kabbalistic Reinvention of Maimonides’ Legal Code:

R. Abraham Isaac Kook's Commentary on *Sefer Hamada*," *Jewish Studies Internet Journal* 11 (2012): 11–40. On Kook's messianism and secularization, see Jonathan Garb, *The Chosen Will Become Herds: Studies in Twentieth-Century Kabbalah*, trans. Yaffah Berkovits-Murciano (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 23–29. Many have weighed in on the messianic dimension of Kook's religious philosophy. For a recent discussion with reference to previous scholarly analyses, see Cherlow, *The Tzaddiq*, 331–371.

12. Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot ha-Torah* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1985), 30.

13. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 2:188, 300.

14. *Ibid.*, 3:259, 437. The passage appears as well in Abraham Isaac Kook, *Ḥadarav: Peraqim Ishiyyim*, ed. Ron Sarid (Mevaseret Tsiyon, Israel: Ra'ot, 1998), 95.

15. Kook, *Ḥadarav*, 96.

16. This is the position adopted by Adin Steinsaltz, "Problematics in Orot ha-Qodesh," *Ha-Re'ayah: Qoveš Ma'amarim*, ed. Isaac Raphael (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1966), 103, cited by Ish-Shalom, *Rav Avraham Itzhak HaCohen Kook*, 193. Steinsaltz compares the method of Kook to that of Judah Loewe, the Maharal of Prague, who wrote Kabbalah in a way that was not overtly Kabbalistic. Ish-Shalom opposes Steinsaltz's explanation because it "is at odds with Rav Kook's own words and does not correspond with the basic assumptions underlying his teaching." Ish-Shalom (194) cites in support of his own view several passages from Kook's oeuvre where he upholds the more traditional sense of esotericism and the need not to expose the secrets to the masses or to translate those secrets in a way that is not faithful to their arcane nature. On the question of the term "popularization" to characterize Kook's writings, see Ish-Shalom, *Rav Avraham Itzhak HaCohen Kook*, 316n5.

17. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 2:182, 299.

18. *Ibid.*, 1:253, 82–83.

19. *Ibid.*, 8:226, 472.

20. *Ibid.*, 2:192, 301.

21. *Ibid.*, 1:860, 237. Compare *ibid.*, 8:246, 474: "The overflow of the holy spirit is unique to Israel, and it is greatly elevated in its gradation, and it is sui generis in comparison to all the means of the overflow of the holy spirit merited by everyone else in the world in accord with their actions. The Jewish overflow issues from the inwardness of the Torah."

22. Abraham Isaac Kook, *Li-Nevukhei ha-Dor* (Jerusalem, 2009), 73–74. See note 31.

23. *Ibid.*, 189–191.

24. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 7:202, 391–392. Compare Abraham Isaac Kook, *Eder ha-Yeqar* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1985), 38. On the attribution of prophecy uniquely to the Jews, and the further assumption that every Jew, as a consequence, is a perfect manifestation of the divine, see *Shemonah Qevašim*, 3:436, 459.

25. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 3:269, 439. Compare *ibid.*, 3:365, 463: "The universal soul [*hameshamah ha-kelalit*] of the Assembly of Israel does not dwell in the individual person [*ba-ish ha-peratit*] except in the land of Israel. Immediately when a person [*adam*] comes to the land of Israel, his individual soul [*nishmato ha-peratit*] is extinguished [*mitbattelet*] because of the great light of the universal soul that enters into him." And *ibid.*, 7:148, 370: "The holy wisdom shines only in the land of Israel. Whatever is envisaged outside the land is naught but the product of the understanding and its branches. . . . By means of the deep vision to see

the land of Israel, some of the illumination from the splendor of the wisdom of the land of Israel glows, and it illumines the branching out of the understanding, which takes shape also outside the land.”

26. *Ibid.*, 2:289, 328.

27. *Ibid.*, 3:347, 459.

28. Kook, *Li-Nevukhei ha-Dor*, 195; *Shemonah Qevašim*, 7:28, 301.

29. Kook, *Li-Nevukhei ha-Dor*, 193. See *ibid.*, 197, where Kook states emphatically that Christians and Muslims derive their principles from the Torah. For an extended discussion of universalism and particularism in light of Kook’s pantheistic tendencies, see Kahan, “Divine Faith,” 89–93.

30. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 7:111, 351.

31. Kook, *Li-Nevukhei ha-Dor*, 198. In that context, Kook accepts that the leaders of other religions can merit the holy spirit consequent to their actions. In support of this view, he cites the dictum transmitted in the name of R. Meir in Babylonian Talmud, Bava Qama, 38a, that “even a gentile who is engaged in Torah is like the high priest.” Even so, a careful scrutiny of the whole passage indicates clearly that compared to Israel the non-Jews are accorded an inferior status.

32. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 6:257, 273. Compare *ibid.*, 7:138, 365.

33. Kook’s view resembles the opinion expressed by Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Liqqutei Amarim: Tanya* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2010), pt. 1, ch. 22, 28a: “the essence and the root of idolatry is that something is considered to be a thing in itself, separate from the holiness of God, but it is not denying God entirely.” The heresy (*kefirah*) connected with denying God’s “true unity” involves treating entities as ontologically distinct, since all things are nullified in their autonomy vis-à-vis the one true reality of the infinite. According to Shneur Zalman, this is the intent of the older rabbinic juxtaposition of idolatry and haughtiness. The passage in *Tanya* seems to be echoed in Kook, *Li-Nevukhei ha-Dor*, 72.

34. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 1:273, 87.

35. Abraham Isaac Kook, *Ein Ayah al Aggadot Ḥazal she-be-Ein Ya’aqov: Berakhot*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Makhon al shem ha-Rav Ševi Yehudah Quq, 2007), 53, sec. 18.

36. Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot ha-Emunah*, ed. Moshe Gurvitz (Jerusalem, 1985), 97.

37. Kook, *Li-Nevukhei ha-Dor*, 33–34, and consider the utopian hope for universal brotherhood passionately expressed on p. 72. Kook affirms the necessity to maintain multiple national identities but at the same time argues for the need to cultivate mutual love and cooperation, which is based on the assumption that all people will arrive at the knowledge of the one God. Nevertheless, the chosen people exclusively propagate this mutual knowledge. For a study that reflects the typical way this thorny topic has been broached by Jewish studies scholars, see Yoel Ben-Nun, “Nationalism, Humanity, and *Kenesset Yisrael*,” in *The World of Rav Kook*, 207–254.

38. Abraham Isaac Kook, *Midbar Shur* (Jerusalem: Makhon al shem ha-Rav Ševi Yehudah Quq, 1999), 264. For the rabbinic dictum, see Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 61a, and see the comments in Elliot R. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 42n107. On the privileging of the Jew as the bearer of human perfection, see Kook, *Midbar Shur*, 125–126, 240. Kook’s interpretation is close to that of the Maharal. See Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 116–120.

39. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 2:302, 332. The passage is mentioned and partially translated by Yehuda Mirsky, *Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 108, but he does not pay attention to the implicit chauvinism in Kook's utopian vision. In fact, he turns the matter on its head by arguing that it was precisely Kook's "appreciation for the spiritual diversity of nations that required him to maintain a belief in Israel's distinctiveness." Proverbially speaking, the cart has been placed before the horse: it is Kook's belief in Israel's distinctiveness that required him to acknowledge the spiritual diversity of the nations, a diversity that is dissolved in the eschatological recognition of the truth of the God of Israel. Compare Abraham Isaac Kook, *Arpelei Tohar* (Jerusalem: Makhon al shem ha-Rav Ševi Yehudah Quq, 1983), 62–63. In that passage, Kook observes that by explaining the Torah of Moses, the messiah will reveal in the world the vision of how all the nations and ethnicities suck the sap of their spiritual lives from the one elemental source of Israel. At the same time, he concedes that the content of that spiritual nourishment will be received differently by each nation in accord with its distinctive climatology.

40. For a different approach, see Mirsky, *Rav Kook*, 25–26, 106–109. I concur that Kook sought to strike a balance between Jewish particularism and universal ethics, but I am less sanguine that he succeeded. Mirsky does note that, for Kook, Israel is the one nation in the truest sense and it is thus ontologically different from all the other nations. Nevertheless, he attenuates this ethnocentrism by focusing on passages that would buttress the ideal of an "epistemological humility" that creates a space for an ethics predicated on leveling out the stark difference between Israel and the other nations. In my judgment, this is an apologetic reading that resolves an irresolvable contradiction in Kook. Along similar lines, see Benjamin Ish-Shalom, "Tolerance and Its Theoretical Basis in the Teaching of Rav Kook," in *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook*, 178–204, and Yoel Bin-Nun, "Nationalism," 207–254.

41. On the unsystematic character of Kook's thought, see Marvin Fox, "Rav Kook: Neither Philosopher nor Kabbalist," in *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook*, 78–80. For a more elaborate analysis of the question of system in Kook, see Shalom Rosenberg, "Introduction to the Thought of Rav Kook," in *The World of Rav Kook*, 16–127.

42. I have discussed this hermeneutic in many studies. For one of the more concise and accessible presentations, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Teaching Jewish Mysticism: Concealing the Concealment and Disclosure of Secrets," in *Teaching Mysticism*, ed. William B. Parsons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 103–117.

43. Job 28:11.

44. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 6:81, 214.

45. *Ibid.*, 5:237, 166.

46. Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 11–12, and see references to other scholars cited on p. 407n86.

47. *Paramārtha-satya* is the truth of the universal emptiness, codependence, and impermanence of all things that lies beneath empirical phenomena and is beyond verbal expression and conceptual discrimination, whereas *saṃvṛti-satya* relates to the ways that we routinely experience, classify, and describe sentient reality as a patchwork of reified and permanent substances. Many have written on this well-known doctrine. For some representative

examples, see Guy Newland, *The Two Truths in the Mādhyamika Philosophy of the Ge-luk-ba Order of Tibetan Buddhism* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1992), and *Appearance and Reality: The Two Truths in the Four Buddhist Tenet Systems* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1999); Dan Lusthaus, “The Two Truths (*Samvṛti-satya* and *Paramārtha-satya*) in Early Yogācāra,” *Journal of Buddhist Studies* 7 (2010): 101–152. Let me note, finally, that despite the affinity I have detected between Kook’s epistemology and the Buddhist doctrine of two truths, he was critical of the pagan aspect of Buddhism, especially related to its promotion of the idea of finding tranquility in “nothingness and absolute negation.” See the text cited in *When God Becomes History: Historical Essays of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook*, trans. Bezalel Naor (Spring Valley, NY: Orot, 2003), 116–117, and compare Jerome Gellman, “Judaism and Buddhism: A Jewish Approach to a Godless Religion,” in *Jewish Theology and World Religions*, ed. Alon Goshen-Gottstein and Eugene Korn (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012), 299–316.

48. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 8:191, 458. For a different translation of this passage and analysis, see Ish-Shalom, *Rav Avraham Itzhak HaCohen Kook*, 210–211. See also Mirsky, *Rav Kook*, 102–103. On the dialectic of speech and silence applied to the whole of existence, see *Shemonah Qevašim*, 8:230, 473–474.

49. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 1:252, 82.

50. *Ibid.*, 3:280, 442.

51. *Ibid.*, 3:252, 435.

52. *Ibid.*, 1:632, 173.

53. *Ibid.*, 1:775, 213.

54. *Ibid.*, 1:737, 203. I respectfully take issue with the assertion of Ish-Shalom, *Rav Avraham Itzhak HaCohen Kook*, 33, that Kook’s approach is not “radically phenomenological,” inasmuch as he “believed fully in the existence of absolute reality. But in his opinion, the exact image, the way of being of this reality is not at the moment given to scientific understanding and, unavoidably must be approached by means of conjecture and imagination.” I would counter that even for Kook this so-called “absolute reality” is not phenomenally accessible except through a disclosure of the divine, *hofa’ah ha-elohit* (*Shemonah Qevašim*, 4:44, 16), which is at the same time concealment, since the light of infinity can be revealed only through its occlusion. In this matter, which most scholars have called “acosmism” but what I have called “apophatic embodiment,” there is proximity between Kook and older Kabbalistic sources, and especially the cosmological orientation of Ḥabad. See note 7.

55. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 1:225, 75. Compare *ibid.*, 7:99, 344–346.

56. *Ibid.*, 5:175, 133–134.

57. *Ibid.*, 3:317, 451.

58. *Ibid.*, 1:391, 114.

59. *Ibid.*, 1:861, 237.

60. *Ibid.*, 1:393, 114–115.

61. *Ibid.*, 5:234, 183. For a recent examination of the Kabbalistic motif of *šimšum* in Kook’s writings, see Lilach Bar-Bettelheim, “The Concept of Zimzum in the Kabbalah of the Early Twentieth Century” [in Hebrew] (PhD diss., Ben Gurion University, 2012), 22–96.

62. On the relationship of the mystical and the social in Kook, see Cherlow, *The Tzaddiq*, 139–192. The author’s discussion of mysticism and ethics (145–149) suffers from an inability to interrogate the deontological implications of identifying Israel as the true human. See Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 17–128. The perspective of Kook is discussed there briefly on pp. 121–124.

63. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 1:631, 173.

64. *Ibid.*, 3:215, 426. Kook’s description of faith as the suprarational or metacognitive state bears a strong resemblance to the apophaticism of Ḥabad, which is, in turn, based on much older Kabbalistic sources. See Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 68–70.

65. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 3:220, 427.

66. *Ibid.*, 3:221, 427.

67. *Ibid.*, 1:64, 17.

68. Kook, *Orot ha-Qodesh*, 1:60, sec. 45.

69. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 1:556, 153.

70. *Ibid.*, 1:614, p. 168. Compare *ibid.*, 3:232, 430, and the analysis in Kahan, “Divine Faith,” 48–50.

71. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 2:179, 298. Compare Kook, *Arpelei Tohar*, 64.

72. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 7:11, 293.

73. *Ibid.*, 1:363, 107.

74. *Ibid.*, 2:97, 279.

75. *Ibid.*, 1:312, 96. On the breaking of the will through humility, see also *ibid.*, 1:191, 66–67. On the predisposition of the Jewish soul to be annihilated in the light of the supernal splendor, see Kook, *Midbar Shur*, 302.

76. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 3:214, 425.

77. The material here is a reworking of my discussion in Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 284–285.

78. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 8:259, 481. Sounding a similar note, in another passage, *ibid.*, 2:255, 316, Kook contrasts the “rational conjunction” (*ha-devequt ha-sikhilit*) with God, which is experienced as pure joy without any admixture of sadness or bitterness, and the imaginative faculty, which displays both elation and despair. However, the two are unified in one point, which is encoded in the name Shaddai—the first letter *shin* stands for the intellect (*sekhel*), the second letter *dalet* for the imagination (*dimyon*), and the third letter *yod* for the point (*nequddah*) that connects them. On the inconsistent views expressed by Kook with respect to the imagination vis-à-vis the intellect, see Kaplan, “Rav Kook,” 74n74; Ish-Shalom, *Rav Avraham Itzhak HaCohen Kook*, 32–34, 48–53, 57–58.

79. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 3:53, 380.

80. *Ibid.*, 3:222, 427.

81. For discussion of the suffering of the righteous from a different perspective, see Kook, *Orot ha-Qodesh*, 4:462–463. In that context, Kook writes of the “suffering of conjunction” (*ša’ar ha-devequt*), that is, the righteous man apprehends the light in the material things from which he seeks to be released. Alternatively, the righteous man feels pain when he considers that he has not totally overcome his physical desires even though he experiences no pleasure or rest in the world. The distress that the righteous man feels in his bodily

limbs is connected, in turn, to the suffering of the divine presence (*ša'ar ha-shekhinah*). On the suffering that the love of God causes the righteous, see *ibid.*, 395–396, and *Shemonah Qevašim*, 1:123–124.

82. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 2:182, 299. On the coincidence of opposites as it pertains to ritual observance and its transcendence in Kook, see Kahan, “Divine Faith,” 70–73.

83. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 1:321, 98–99. See Benjamin Ish-Shalom, “Religion, Repentance, and Personal Freedom,” in *The World of Rav Kook*, 373–419. For a recent discussion on shame, suffering, and sinfulness in Kook’s thought, analyzed particularly from a psychoanalytic viewpoint regarding the depressive anxiety that inflicts the righteous soul, see Jonathan Garb, “Shame as an Existential Emotion in Modern Kabbalah,” *Jewish Social Studies* 21 (2015): 108–110.

84. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 1:410, 118. See also *ibid.*, 1:639, 175. On the question of the implicit antinomian aspects of Kook’s thought, see Avinoam Rosenak, “Who’s Afraid of Rav Kook’s Hidden Treatises?” [in Hebrew] *Tarbiz* 69 (2000): 264–266; Jonathan Garb, “Prophecy, Halakhah, and Antinomianism According to the *Shemonah Qevašim* of R. Abraham Isaac Kook,” in *Shefa Tal*, 267–277.

85. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 212, and references to Scholem and Pachter cited in note 92, and see, more recently, Sandra Valabregue-Perry, *Concealed and Revealed: “Ein Sof” in Theosophic Kabbalah* [in Hebrew] (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2010), 78–83, and Lawrence Kaplan, “Faith, Rebellion, and Heresy in the Writings of Rabbi Azriel of Gerona,” in *Faith: Jewish Perspectives*, ed. Avi Sagi and Dov Schwartz (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 278–302. On faith and heresy in Kook, see also Kahan, “Divine Faith,” 27–28, 51–52, 79–80.

86. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 2:20, 284. I previously translated and discussed this passage in *Venturing Beyond*, 285. See also Naor, “Rav Kook,” 4–5, and Pachter, “The Kabbalistic Foundation,” 74–75.

87. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 1:107, 31.

88. *Ibid.*, 1:317, 97.

89. The gloss appears in the parallel to this passage in Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1993), 128, but it is curiously missing in the version in the *Shemonah Qevašim*.

90. *Shemonah Qevašim*, 1:317, 98.

91. The indebtedness to Maimonides for purifying the monotheism of Judaism of false representations based on a corporeal conception of the deity advanced by the imagination is explicitly acknowledged in Abraham Isaac Kook, *Ein Ayah al Aggadot Ḥazal she-be-Ein Ya’aqov: Berakhot*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Makhon al shem ha-Rav Ševi Yehudah Quq, 1995), 61, sec. 152. See also Abraham Isaac Kook, *Ma’amerei ha-Re’ayah* (Jerusalem, 1984), 106. This text and the one mentioned in note 93 are partially cited by Naor, “Rav Kook,” 3–4. An alternative approach to the atheism in Kook and Levinas is offered by Michael Fagenblat, *A Covenant of Creatures: Levinas’s Philosophy of Judaism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 142. Fagenblat argues that for Kook, the atheistic critique does not result in a permanent suspension of theology but it is rather a temporary purging of faith in order to raise it to a superior level of mystical knowledge, whereas, for Levinas, the metaphysical atheism is not a temporary denial but a “perennial religious imperative aimed at avoiding

the idolatry of all concepts of God,” which would include Kook’s own appeal to the “true light of godliness.” Levinas is thus compared to Yeshayahu Leibowitz, who radicalized Maimonidean negative theology in order to contest belief as such and not only false beliefs. My own reading of Kook narrows the gap somewhat, since I think he, too, advocated for a more permanent atheistic cleansing of theism, albeit one whose full realization is deferred to a messianic future. For discussion of the atheistic elements in Levinas, see Wolfson, *Giving beyond the Gift*, 139–140. On atheism in Kook’s mystical thinking, see Kahan, “Divine Faith,” 9–10.

92. Kook, *Orot*, 124–125. All translations of this essay are my own, but the reader can find a complete English translation in *Abraham Isaac Kook: The Lights of Penitence, the Moral Principles, Lights of Holiness, Essays, Letters, and Poems*, translation and introduction by Ben Zion Bokser, preface by Jacob Agus and Rivka Schatz (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 261–269.

93. Kook, *Orot*, 126.

94. Kook, *Li-Nevukhei ha-Dor*, 194. Compare *Shemonah Qevašim*, 7:103, 347; 7:117, 354.

95. Kook, *Ein Ayah al Aggadot Hazal she-be-Ein Ya’aqov: Berakhot*, vol. 2, 54, sec. 18.

96. Kook, *Orot*, 126–127.

97. Abraham Isaac Kook, *Iggerot ha-Re’ayah*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1985), #44, 48. The passage is cited by Rosenberg, “Introduction,” 46–47.

98. Wolfson, *Giving beyond the Gift*, xvi–xxii, 73–74, 263n21, 266–267n38.

99. Kook, *Iggerot ha-Re’ayah*, vol. 1, #44, 50. Needless to say, there are many passages where Kook adopts a decidedly critical view of atheism. See Rosenberg, “Introduction,” 98–107.

100. Kook, *Ma’amerei ha-Re’ayah*, 108. On this point, I take issue with the conclusion reached by Naor, “Rav Kook,” 5: “To say that God is beyond belief and disbelief, which is another way of saying, beyond existence and non-existence, is a far cry from Maimonides’ ‘absolute existence.’ Maimonides had preserved ‘existence’ as meaningful God-talk by ‘upping the ante’ from lower-case existence to upper-case Existence. Rav Kook has abdicated ‘existence’ altogether as a signifier for God.” At this point, Naor adds a comment in brackets to the effect that the difference between uppercase Existence and the positing of a reality that is beyond existence and nonexistence may be “purely semantic” and hence the philosophical and Kabbalistic traditions “dovetail neatly.” My own reading moves in this direction. See Wolfson, *Giving beyond the Gift*, 78, 171–174. Of course, I acknowledge that others have read the Kabbalistic view on *Ein Sof* as at odds with the philosophical position of Maimonides (see the material cited by Naor, “Rav Kook,” 9–10n18), but what seems beyond contention is the fact that Kook interpreted Maimonides through this prism. The necessary of existence is the technical term that marks the being that is beyond being and nonbeing, the existence that is beyond existence and nonexistence, the presence that is neither present nor nonpresent.

101. As Naor, “Rav Kook,” 4, notes, Zevi Yehudah Kook cited (*Orot*, 182) as a source for the passage in *Orot* (see note 93) a comment in the *Sod ha-Šimšum* that was included in the *Liqqutei ha-GRA* and published at the end of the *Be’ur ha-GRA le-Sifra di-Šeni’uta*, edited and with an introduction by Bezalel Naor (Jerusalem, 1998), 138, which emphasizes that it

is forbidden to designate *Ein Sof* as the “necessary of existence” (*hovat ha-meši’ut*) or to apply to it or to Keter the word *yesh*, which denotes the sense of being; indeed, one cannot contemplate *Ein Sof* at all or even to call it by that name. For earlier Kabbalistic texts that affirm a similar view, see reference in note 102.

102. Elliot R. Wolfson, “Nihilating Nonground and the Temporal Sway of Becoming,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 17 (2012): 31–45, esp. 36–39. I have taken the liberty to repeat some of my own language.

103. See the discussion of prayer and pantheism in Kook’s writings in Kahan, “Divine Faith,” 54–62.

104. Kook, *Li-Nevukhei ha-Dor*, 73.