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## R. KOOK'S PUBLIC POSITION ON WOMEN VOTING

*Editor's Note:* The following was translated by Shalom Carmy from Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun's monograph *Ha-Makor ha-Kaful: Inspiration and Authority in R. Kook's Thought*.<sup>1</sup> The facts about R. Kook's position on female suffrage are well-known. What is new here is the suggestion that R. Kook's views had a significant long-range impact on Zionist culture. If he is right, there may be lessons for our generation. -SC

**T**he debate about women's suffrage put R. Abraham Isaac Kook's vision to a fundamental political test, right at the inception of the Jewish National Home in Mandatory Palestine, with the establishment of national institutions and the first elections to Knesset Israel (in 1920).

Regarding the establishment of the Chief Rabbinate R. Kook was very successful at first. As regards women's suffrage, however, his ideological-political conception did not withstand the test of reality from the outset. The dual model of leadership and authority that he sought to construct was unable to stand.

We must examine R. Kook's position from his own principled perspective, not from the point of view of others. Precisely because he understood the sources of liberalism and its aims, he well understood that equality for women is more than the right to elect and be elected, but a change in the entire nature of society. He envisioned the significant undermining of the institution of the family, as has occurred since then in the entire Western world. During World War I, R. Kook lived for two years in Switzerland, where women did not yet have the right to vote (until 1971!). This demonstrated to R. Kook that one can have a modern

<sup>1</sup> Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uhad, 2014.

society, and a modern functional state, without this innovation, which he perceived as dangerous.

R. Kook truly thought that total equality of the sexes was not only a halakhic problem,<sup>2</sup> but even more so a historical, social, and moral mistake that would undermine the close partnership of the traditional family.<sup>3</sup> This breakdown would have severe repercussions for family and society, for morality, and for religious community. Many of us feel discomfort encountering an astringent anti-liberal position such as negating women's suffrage; nonetheless, the breakdown of the family in our time enables us to understand R. Kook's view.

All the same, it was clear even then that the right to vote for women was a critical issue for the nationalists, and also for the liberals and the socialists, including liberals who were Orthodox Jews. It was clear that this was an essential of their humanistic faith (not unlike the transgressions for which the Halakha upholds even at the cost of life). It was clear that persuasion was unlikely. Therefore R. Kook proposed, at the first stage and as a concession and compromise, a bicameral elected assembly: the first, representing the secular or "general" public, that insists on the right of women to vote and be elected; the second, representing the religious populace, faithful to the idea of the traditional family. The first would contain women; the second would not. However, all major decisions involving the nation as a whole and its representation to the outside world would be adopted by the two chambers. Aggudat Yisrael made the same proposal.

The pillars of the Jewish polity rejected this idea as a danger to national unity. At that point R. Kook retreated and agreed to an arrangement involving separate polling stations: there would be Haredi sites where only men would vote and each ballot would be counted twice and ordinary stations for the wider public. This was adopted by the leadership, and so

<sup>2</sup> At that time there were *posekim* who allowed women to vote, in particular R. Ben-Zion Uzziel. See *Mishpetei Uzziel, Hoshen Mishpat* 6. The responsum was written at that time but not published.

<sup>3</sup> See *Shemona Kevatsim* 1:514; 6:421. R. Kook anticipated the day when the world would admit to this distortion and men and women would return to their natural roles, aiming at a harmonic equilibrium and mutual complementarity rather than to equality, which is in conflict with the nature of body and soul. In a passage from the "big Jerusalem notebook" (partially published in *Pinkesei ha-Reiyah II*, [Jerusalem: Mekhon Ha-RTsY"Y, 2010], at section 41, with lacunae, as is the case with other passages, R. Kook writes that the woman is higher than the man inasmuch as he was created from earth, while she was created from man, and he deems the switching of their roles a disaster for humanity.

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were conducted the elections of summer 1920.<sup>4</sup> This arrangement enabled Haredi women to abstain from voting while still being counted. This arrangement did not last long.

R. Kook apparently failed to take into account two major effects of this debate in the non-Haredi public: not only did people like Zeev Jabotinsky and other national and liberal leaders distance themselves from R. Kook and his influence.<sup>5</sup> The same was true of the Mizrahi leadership and many Mizrahi advocates, with the Jerusalem community and most of the more traditional Orthodox by and large supporting R. Kook.<sup>6</sup> In many European communities, like Vilna, women already were voting.<sup>7</sup> R. Yehuda Leib Fishman (later Maimon) and “Rabbi Binyamin” (Radler), who were close to R. Kook, could not follow his public position on this subject. R. Fishman expressed himself sharply: “On matters of religious law, we will ask the rabbis; on matters of the marketplace, they should ask us.”<sup>8</sup>

In any case, the frail compromise of separate stations could not satisfy Jerusalem Haredim. As was their wont they boycotted the elections. About 40% of Jerusalem voters did not take part. R. Kook’s call to vote in spite of everything had limited impact.

Something else happened. It seems that many among the general population—independent farmers, Sefardim and oriental Jews, and many Mizrahi supporters—became convinced that the Haredim together with R. Kook sought to impose on them Haredi norms, and therefore voted for the socialist parties. These parties more than doubled their numbers compared to the elections for the labor union,<sup>9</sup> and they maintained their hegemony in the Yishuv and in the State of Israel, from 1920 until 1977.

<sup>4</sup> See M. Friedman, *Hevra va-Dat* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitshak Ben-Zvi, 1977), chapters 6-7 and A. Morgenstern, *Ha-Rabbanut haRashit* (Jerusalem: Shorashim, 1973), 119-131.

<sup>5</sup> See Friedman, 148 n. 4.

<sup>6</sup> R. Uzziel attempted, in vain, to bring together moderate rabbis to support women voting, against R. Kook, and to oppose the boycott of the elections by the Haredim. See Morgenstern, 52-53.

<sup>7</sup> Friedman 150 n. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Friedman, 166; see also 151 n. 14, quoting Fishman’s letter to the Women’s Zionist Organization in England: “The Mizrahi in the land of Israel subscribes to the value of female participation in our national renaissance and in no way opposes giving Jewish women the vote, neither on principle nor out of religious considerations.”

<sup>9</sup> The labor parties received 111 representatives, 70 for Ahdut ha-Avoda and 41 for Ha-Poel ha-Tsair. One factor in their success is that representatives could be selected for small settlements with no more than 80 inhabitants, a policy unsuccessfully contested by Mizrahi. Note the labor lists received about 8,000 votes, while in the elections to the labor union (Histadrut) they got only 3,188. Clearly many non-labor centrists

It is they who molded the leadership of the Yishuv and its institutions until today. The Mizrahi in particular absorbed a severe loss, receiving only 9 representatives, and remained a weak political factor, due to the split in its ranks.<sup>10</sup> The Haredim who had voted and elected 51 representatives later proposed a referendum on women's suffrage, but the rabbis objected on the grounds that matters of Torah principle cannot be determined in this manner, and the possibility of an organized Haredi bloc dissipated.<sup>11</sup>

A leader of Agudat Yisrael commented bitterly after the founding of the State: "Then, at the outset, the secularists were the minority and we were the majority. Because of women's suffrage the rabbis decided to withdraw. Now we are the minority. They took control of all the positions of power. Our women vote. We sit with women in the Knesset and in the state institutions. And we remained a minority."<sup>12</sup>

Thus women's suffrage handed the socialist parties the power which they never gave up. The religious and the Haredim who were the majority did not attain significant political power. The Chief Rabbinate remained defenseless in the face of a socialist, secularist, radical hegemony.<sup>13</sup>

R. Kook, whom the "new" Yishuv had expected to provide halakhic legitimization for the rights of women to participate in public affairs, lost much of his influence with the public, and even with Mizrahi supporters. The moderate Haredim of Jerusalem, who supported him, and whose strength had brought him to the rabbinate of Jerusalem, with broad consensus, and to the Chief Rabbinate, could not withstand the pressure of Agudat Yisrael, and were swept into secessionism from Knesset Israel (the elected body of the Yishuv). R. Kook remained isolated in advocating joining the Yishuv's organization, in spite of its problematic constitution, not a few of whose articles opposed the Torah and the spirit of Judaism as he saw it.<sup>14</sup>

shifted to these parties, viewing them as a creative force for Zionism, settlement, and modern values, and out of fear of Haredi domination.

<sup>10</sup> Morgenstern 54, 122-126, 154.

<sup>11</sup> Friedman, 178-184.

<sup>12</sup> R. Yitzhak Meir Levine, Aguda signatory on Israel's declaration of independence, quoted to me by R. Shilo Refael.

<sup>13</sup> R. Kook's shock at the victory of the labor parties is clearly attested in his letter to the newspaper *Doar ha-Yom*, Tishre 14, 5781.

<sup>14</sup> Morgenstern, 164-165, 203-204.