

FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION

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With this issue, TRADITION is pleased to reintroduce the feature From the Pages of TRADITION. Its editor, Shnayer Z. Leiman, serves as Professor of Jewish History and Literature at Brooklyn College and is an Associate Editor of TRADITION.

R. ABRAHAM ISAAC HA-KOHEN KOOK: LETTER ON *AHAVAT YISRAEL*

INTRODUCTION

On Friday evening, June 16, 1933, at approximately 10:30 p.m., Dr. Hayyim Arlosoroff was shot to death while strolling with his wife along a Tel Aviv beach on the Mediterranean seacoast. Mrs. Arlosoroff testified that two assailants had accosted them and had then disappeared into the darkness of the night. Arlosoroff, 34 years old at the time, was a rising star in the Labor Zionist movement and served as head of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency. He had just returned from Germany, where he had attempted to deal with Hitler in order to arrange for the mass emigration of Jews from Germany to Palestine. Arlosoroff was prepared to make it economically worthwhile for Germany to release its Jews and their property. In contrast, the Zionist Revisionists, led by Zev Jabotinsky, had called for a total boycott of Hitler's Germany by all Jews and by all humanitarians. Feelings ran sufficiently high on this issue that Arlosoroff's murder was interpreted almost immediately by the Labor Zionist party as a political assassination, planned and implemented by the Zionist Revisionists. However deep the tensions were between these Jewish factions before June 16, 1933, they were exacerbated, perhaps beyond repair, by the events that occurred that evening.

On the 18th of June, 1933, Abraham (Abrasha) Stavsky was arrested and charged with participating in the murder. Stavsky was a Zionist Revisionist, 27 years old, and otherwise unknown. In the following weeks also arrested was Zvi Rosenblatt, a Zionist Revisionist, age 22. Stavsky and Rosenblatt were charged with committing the murder. A third party, Abba Ahimeir, a leader of the Zionist Revisionists in Palestine, was arrested and charged with masterminding the murder. A lengthy trial ensued, and the British court concluded its proceedings almost a year after the murder, in June of 1934. Rosenblatt and Ahimeir were acquitted. Stavsky, despite his

protests of innocence, was found guilty and sentenced to hang. Stavsky appealed the conviction, and the case now came before the highest British Court of Appeals in Palestine. Three Justices heard the case and, in July of 1934, Stavsky's conviction was overturned by a unanimous decision of the Court of Appeals. In most accounts the story ends here, but as we shall see, much more needs to be said.¹

In 1982, Shabbetai Teveth, a noted writer and member of the editorial board of *Haaretz*, published a major work in Hebrew, *The Arlosoroff Murder*, which rekindled all the flames of hatred and false accusation that were characteristic of 1933. A spate of books and articles were written in response to Teveth, and ultimately the Israeli government, under Menahem Begin, set up a commission to investigate the Arlosoroff case. In June of 1985 the commission's findings were made public. In effect, the commission vindicated all those who were accused by the British Mandate courts in 1933 and 1934 of participating in the murder. Incredibly, neither Shabbetai Teveth nor the commission saw fit to relate in any detail the considerable role of R. Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen Kook in the Arlosoroff affair. What follows is an attempt, at least in part, to rectify this sin of omission.

Rav Kook, who was neither a Labor Zionist nor a Zionist Revisionist, befriended both camps and genuinely appreciated their respective contributions to the reclaiming of the land of Israel. Indeed, Arlosoroff himself came to visit Rav Kook on the day before Rosh ha-Shanah of the year he would be assassinated. Rav Kook informed Arlosoroff that he—Rav Kook—had known Arlosoroff's grandfather, Rabbi Eliezer Arlosoroff, who had served as Chief Rabbi of Romny in the Ukraine, and who had authored *Hagahot Eliezer*, a commentary on the laws of divorce. Rav Kook indicated that a copy of the volume was available in the library of his yeshiva.²

Like the rest of the Yishuv, Rav Kook was stunned when he learned about the murder, and he followed the developments of the case. During the arrests and trial Rav Kook took no public stance, despite the fact that almost everyone else in the Yishuv did. Indeed, in February of 1934, one of the three revisionists arrested—Abba Ahimeir—sent a rather nasty letter to Rav Kook. It read in part:³

If not for the fact that I am aware that you are a *gadol ba-Torah*, or even more precisely, that you are the *gadol ha-dor*, I would not bother to write to you. It is now 8 months that 3 Jews are the victims of a false accusation of murder. We are the Dreyfus and Beilis of our generation. But we are not in Paris or in Kiev; we are in Tel Aviv. *Why are you silent?* You, the leader of Israel, how will you look us in the face after we are acquitted? In the Beilis case Rabbi Jacob Mazeh, Chief Rabbi of Moscow, spoke out openly in defense of Beilis. Mazeh was not silent. *Will you, Rav Kook, remain silent?*

Despite the letter, Rav Kook remained silent. He ordered only that Psalms be recited on behalf of those arrested and on behalf of the judges, so that justice would prevail. On that fateful Friday, June 8, 1934, when Stavsky was found guilty and sentenced to hang, Rav Kook's silence came to an end. That very afternoon Rav Kook wrote the opening broadside of a campaign that would occupy all his energies for the next few months. The

broadside, in appropriate black border, was posted on billboards throughout Jerusalem, and was published widely in newspapers and periodicals throughout the Yishuv. It read in part:⁴

I the undersigned attest to the fact that innocent blood is about to be shed in Jerusalem. I can attest, on the basis of my inner conscience, that Abraham Stavsky is innocent of the murder charge. The absolute truth, known to me, rests with the one judge who voted for acquittal. Whoever has a divine spark within himself, Jew or non-Jew, must protest, and must do his utmost to rescue Stavsky, and must see to it that justice prevails.

Rav Kook sent telegrams to Jewish and non-Jewish political and religious authorities throughout the world. His telegram to Stephen Wise read: "Danger imminent. Do utmost to rescue innocent Stavsky!" To rabbinic colleagues and Jewish communal leaders throughout the world, he sent the following telegram (in Hebrew): "Stavsky too is innocent. Wage war with all your strength so that justice will prevail!" Among the many world leaders who received urgent messages from Rav Kook was the Archbishop of Canterbury!⁵

The response to Rav Kook's broadsides was less than pleasant. The Labor Zionist party denounced him as a turncoat and charlatan. Articles against Rav Kook appeared in the major dailies. *Davar*⁶ published an article against Rav Kook entitled (in Hebrew) *These Are Your Rabbis O Israel*, a play on words recalling the Golden Calf episode (Exodus 32:4). Rav Kook's letter, which we shall return to shortly, was written at this point in our story.

Rav Kook persisted in his efforts, and in effect he alerted the entire world to an injustice about to be perpetrated in Jerusalem. Interestingly, Stavsky, who had never met Rav Kook, was not an observant Jew. Yet he knew full well who his benefactor was. He addressed a letter to Rav Kook while in prison, awaiting the start of the appeal process. It read in part:⁷

I'm a plain Jew and I wonder: Why have I merited it that Rav Kook concerns himself so much with my fate? I ask only, Rav Kook, that you continue to remember me in your prayers. My suffering is made easier by the knowledge that none other than you, Rav Kook, looks after me and remembers me when praying to the Lord. May the Lord protect His people.

The appeal process was concluded on a Friday; it was *erev Shabbat* and *erev Tishah be-Av*, 1934. Stavsky was acquitted and a huge crowd carried him from the court house to Yeshivat Merkaz Harav, where he personally thanked Rav Kook for his efforts. A brief celebration ensued, after which—at Rav Kook's request—Stavsky went to the Wailing Wall in order to recite Psalms of thanksgiving to the Lord.⁸

When Zev Jabotinsky, who had carefully orchestrated Stavsky's defense from his quarters in Europe, learned of the acquittal, he immediately sent the following telegram to Rav Kook: "The Jewish nation, and its youth, will never forget the voice you raised, which revealed anew the strength of the Jewish tradition." In the periodical *Moment*, Jabotinsky published an article (in Hebrew) entitled "These Are The Ones That

Rescued,” where he publicly thanked Rav Kook for his major role in bringing about Stavsky’s acquittal.⁹ This would prove to be Rav Kook’s last venture in the public arena. He was suffering from cancer, and died a year later on September 1, 1935.

How could Rav Kook be so certain of Stavsky’s innocence? Was he simply responding to the excesses of the Labor Zionist movement, neutralizing their certainty of Stavsky’s guilt with his certainty of Stavsky’s innocence? In other words, given the highly charged atmosphere in Palestine of 1933, is it possible that Rav Kook sensed a blood libel, and did what had to be done in order to prevent an injustice? Some have suggested that Rav Kook naively believed that no Jew would murder a fellow Jew, hence his conviction that Stavsky was innocent.¹⁰ Aside from the absurdity of ascribing to Rav Kook a position that can be refuted by even a cursory reading of Scripture and rabbinic literature, not to mention the Jewish historical evidence through the ages, Rav Kook was in fact silent for almost a year after the murder was committed. If his only defense of Stavsky was that Jews do not murder Jews, Rav Kook should have protested from the start. One suspects that Rav Kook became privy to information shortly before or immediately after Stavsky was found guilty. Rav Kook could not reveal the source of his information, or its specific content, without endangering the career and even the life of the informant. The informant’s information sufficed to persuade Rav Kook that Arlosoroff had been murdered by others, and therefore Stavsky was innocent of the charges leveled against him.¹¹ This appears to be the most rational explanation of Rav Kook’s behavior during the Arlosoroff affair. Others suggest that Rav Kook was among the righteous to whom the Lord reveals His secrets. Rav Kook was a mystic who was informed that Stavsky had a still more important role to play in Jewish history (see below). When Rav Kook’s son and successor Rav Zvi Yehuda Kook was asked how he accounted for his father’s stance in the Arlosoroff affair, he responded by citing Psalm 25:14: “The secret of the Lord is for those who fear Him; to them He makes known His covenant.”¹² Whether it was Rav Kook the rational humanist or Rav Kook the Jewish mystic at work in our case, the reader will have to decide for him or her self.

From 1934 until his untimely death in 1948, Abraham Stavsky was responsible for the rescue of thousands of Jewish lives. The celebrated and controversial playwright and author, Ben Hecht, tells about a conversation he had in the 1940’s with Peter Bergson, a leader of the Irgun and a nephew of Rav Kook:¹³

[Peter Bergson:] “In 1938 the Irgun received secret information of the pact—to keep the Jews out of Palestine. It was then we began to smuggle Jews out of Europe. Abrasha Stavsky was in charge of the operation.”

“Who was Abrasha Stavky?” I asked, pleased by the name.

“The greatest human being I know,” Peter uttered a rare chuckle. “You will meet him sometime. He’s like a hero out of Conrad or Gogol. He’s the Taras Bulba of the Jews—six feet three inches tall, the best sailor on the Mediterranean, and he can throw five men out of a window in a fight. He’s afraid of nothing, also he can drink more than anybody I know.”

“What’s he doing now?” I asked.

“Saving Jews,” said Peter. “Do you remember the Free City of Danzig? Abrasha took fifteen hundred Jew out of it, piled them into some sort of a leaky boat and sailed it almost singlehanded to Tel Aviv. He’s been doing the same thing ever since then.”

In 1947, Stavsky was in New York, where he rented an office on Madison Avenue and founded the Three Star Line—a shipping company which served as a front for the Irgun. He went to Bayonne, New Jersey, where he purchased a retired U.S. transport ship from the United States Navy. Stavsky named it the *Altalena*—after Jabotinsky’s *nom de plume*. Indeed, this was the ill-fated Irgun ship laden with arms and ammunition, which set sail from Marseilles for Tel Aviv in June of 1948, and which was shelled and sunk by the Israeli army as it approached the Tel Aviv sea-coast.¹⁴

In June of 1948, 15 years to the month after Arlosoroff was shot to death, Abraham Stavsky was shot to death on the deck of the *Altalena*—just off the Tel Aviv seacoast at virtually the same place that Arlosoroff was shot to death. Like Arlosoroff, Stavsky was rushed to a Tel Aviv hospital where he died from his wounds. Stavsky’s role in Jewish history had run its course.

Having presented the historical background, we turn to Rav Kook’s letter. As indicated, the immediate setting of the letter was that point in time when Rav Kook published his broadside proclaiming Stavsky’s innocence. Despite the articles that appeared against him in the newspapers, Rav Kook was not deterred by his detractors. But it became obvious that the adulation that was once his was quickly evaporating. The man who had once united large segments of the Yishuv had now become a divisive force in the Jewish community. An open letter was addressed to Rav Kook by his most ardent supporters, warning him that his stance in the Arlosoroff affair was viewed by many as a political one: Rav Kook had aligned himself with the Zionist Revisionists against the workers of the land of Israel, i.e., the Histadrut and the Mapai party. The wrath of the worker was now turned against Rav Kook and against all that he stood for, namely the synthesis of Torah and Eretz Yisrael. In effect, Rav Kook was about to lose the efforts of a lifetime because of his stance in the Arlosoroff affair. Rav Kook responded to his admirers and critics in the *Letter to the Editor* that follows:¹⁵

TO THE EDITOR:

From the depths of my heart, pained by the tribulations of my people, I respond to your letter. I adduce heaven and earth as witness to my unqualified love—with all my heart and all my soul— of the Jewish nation as a whole, and of every Jew, regardless of his political affiliation. For I believe with perfect faith that every Jew is a unique limb, a part of that sacred and awesome body—known as *Keneset Yisrael*—the Community of Israel in its fullest sense.

Every act and every deed, whether mundane or spiritual, which either directly or indirectly prepares the way for the ingathering of the exiles and the return of Jewish youth to our land, is as dear to me as my own soul.

I believe and am certain that even by means of these warring political factions a permanent structure will be built, leading to the full redemption of the Jewish people by the Redeemer of Israel.

The truth alone in all its purity informs me and leads me to devote my energies to the rescue of the one consigned to death row. There were no grounds whatever for finding him guilty. I am absolutely certain, on the basis of my inner conscience, that the accused is innocent of the murder charge. Moreover, I am certain that no Jew participated in this murder. Heaven forbid that we stand idly by and not make every effort to prevent the shedding of even more innocent blood in our midst. That murder is committed less frequently among us than among other ethnic groups in Palestine, requires no proof. Everyday life here testifies that such is the case. But even aside from this fact, I know specifically regarding the Arlosoroff case that the accused is innocent of the charges. I trust that the truth will become evident to all, and that we will not have blood-guilt on our hands.

In every political party, and in every movement, there are matters I disagree with. This in no way impairs my boundless and flaming love for our holy nation and its various parts. I love all Jews equally, regardless of whether they revere or despise me. I love them all with a boundless love.

Such is my heart's response, dear friend, which I transmit to you respectfully and in love of truth.

Your loyal friend,
Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen Kook.

NOTES

1. In general, see S. Teveth, *Retsah Arlosoroff*, Jerusalem, 1982. Cf. the references cited by S. Kling, "Haim Arlozorov," in V. D. Sanua, ed., *Fields of Offerings* (Raphael Patai Festschrift), Cranbury, New Jersey, 1983, pp. 243-263.
2. S. Avidor, *Ha-Ish neged ha-Zerem*, Jerusalem, 1962, p. 269.
3. D. Tamar, "Ha-Rav Kook u-Parshat Arlosoroff," *Yediot Aharonot*, August 16, 1985, p. 21.
4. S. Avidor, pp. 273-274. Cf. H. Ben-Yeruham, *Ha-Alilah ha-Gedolah*, Tel Aviv, 1982, pp. 162-163 and p. 169. For yet another broadside signed by Rav Kook on behalf of Stavsky, see D. Tamar, "Maddua Lo Hatam Bialik al Keruz ha-Soferim," *Yediot Aharonot*, August 23, 1985, p. 22.
5. H. Ben Yeruham, p. 166 and notes.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 165, n. 191.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

8. S. Avidor, pp. 295–296.
9. H. Ben-Yeruham, pp. 183–184.
10. See the citation in S. Avidor, p. 280.
11. See D. Tamar, “Ha-Rav Kook u-Parshat Arlosoroff,” *Yediot Aharonot*, August 16, 1985, p. 21; and cf. H. Lifshitz, *Shivhei ha-Re’ayah*, Jerusalem, 1979, p. 283.
12. H. Lifshitz, *loc. cit.*
13. B. Hecht, *A Child of the Century*, New York, 1954, pp. 574–575. Hecht later met Stavsky in New York and asked him pointedly and unabashedly whether or not he had killed Arlosoroff. Stavsky categorically denied having killed Arlosoroff, or, for that matter, any other Jew (p. 621).
14. In general, see S. Nakdimon, *Altalena* (in Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1978. Cf. Y. Ben-Ami, *Years of Wrath, Days of Glory*, New York, 1982, pp. 449–522.
15. The letter first appeared in *Ha-Hed* 9 (1934), number 10, p. 4. It was reprinted in E. Aviner and D. Landau, eds., *Ma’amarei ha-Re’ayah*, Jerusalem, 1984, p. 523.