

From the Pages of Tradition

RABBI ABRAHAM ISAAC HA-KOHEN KOOK: INVOCATION AT THE INAUGURATION OF THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem was formally inaugurated on April 1, 1925.¹ The ceremony, held in a large open air theater on Mount Scopus, was presided over by Chaim Weizmann, then President of the World Zionist Organization. Representatives from the governments of the United States, France, Italy, Germany, Poland, Austria, Greece, Belgium, and Holland graced the podium. Also present were distinguished scholars representing the world wide academic community. These included, among others, Professor William Foxwell Albright of Johns Hopkins University and Canon Herbert Danby of Oxford University. The countless Jewish dignitaries present included rabbis, poets, and philosophers. Among them were Chief Rabbi Joseph Herman Hertz of England, Hayyim Nahman Bialik, and Ahad Ha'am. Some six to seven thousand persons sat or stood in the audience, in order to witness the historic ceremony. After the procession of dignitaries to the podium, the proceedings opened with the rendering by choir and orchestra of Haydn's "The Heavens declare the Glory of God" and Sulzer's "From Zion Shall Go Forth The Law." This was followed by the invocation, delivered by none other than the late Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Ha-Kohen Kook (d. 1935).² His very presence was an act of courage; indeed, many of his rabbinic colleagues viewed his presence as an act of treachery. Even more courageous was the message he delivered that afternoon, which minced no words about his true feelings regarding the Hebrew University and its place in the life of a revitalized Jewish yishuv in the land of Israel.³ Rav Kook's sermon invocation was a masterful midrashic exposition of the biblical verses cited at its start, demonstrating their relevancy to the event being celebrated that day.⁴ Rav Kook's textured and flowery Hebrew, rich with biblical and rabbinic allusions, cannot possibly be translated properly into English; nonetheless, the translation that follows attempts to capture the essence of what he said.⁵

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The prophet of consolation prophesied (Isaiah 60:4-5): "Lift up your eyes and look about; they have all gathered and come to you. Your sons shall be brought from afar, your daughters like babes on shoulders. As you behold, you will glow. Your heart will fear and rejoice—for the wealth of the sea shall pass on to you; the riches of the nations shall come to you."

Today's great event, the opening of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem on Mount Scopus, in such glorious ceremony and splendorous festivity, amidst a gathering of tens of thousands of our sons and daughters from all parts of the land of Israel and from all the lands in the Diaspora, is—on a reduced scale—the living fulfillment of the holy vision of this prophecy. True, not all have gathered together, and the beginning of the ingathering of the exiles is on a small scale, yet this very ingathering is a sure sign that the set time has come, and that the gates of redemption are opening before us. Our hopes are strengthened that the great day is near when all the exiles will gather together and join us, the redeemed ones joyously going up to Zion.

We note in this first step today the fulfillment of the prophet's words: "As you behold." With our own eyes we behold the wonders of the Redeemer of Israel, who has performed this great deed on our behalf. He has raised up the glory of His people among the nations of the world. He has given us a portion in Judah, and girded us with strength and spirit so that we can begin to rebuild the life of our nation, as before, in the Holy Land. We also note the fulfillment of the prophet's words: "You will glow." The glowing joy on the faces of the thousands gathered here is an expression of gratitude and esteem to such distinguished guests as Lord Balfour,⁶ the representative of the great nation that issued the Declaration; His Excellency the High Commissioner, Sir Herbert Samuel;⁷ His Excellency Lord Allenby;⁸ and the distinguished rabbis and sages whose presence graces this festive gathering. Their presence causes the souls of all those gathered here, as well as the souls of tens of thousands of our brethren from afar who will hear about the great glory of our nation on this day, to glow.

But why "fear"? Why did the prophet preface the phrase "Your heart will rejoice" with the notion of fear? When, however, we look back in retrospect at past generations, and at the spiritual and intellectual movements that have influenced us, we readily understand that the notion of fear, in conjunction with rejoicing, is appropriate.

Two tendencies characterize Jewish spirituality. One tendency is internal and entirely sacred; it serves to deepen the spirit and to

strengthen the light of Torah within. Such has been the purpose of all Torah institutions from earliest times, especially the fortresses of Israel's soul—the yeshivot. This includes all the yeshivot that ever existed, presently exist, and will exist in order to glorify Torah in its fullest sense. This spiritual tendency is fully confident and assured. “Those who love Your Torah enjoy well-being; they encounter no adversity” (Psalm 119:165). Despite such confidence, Rabbi Nehunyah ben Haqanah, upon entering the house of study, used to pray that nothing go awry with his presentation and that it not lead to error.⁹

The second tendency characterizing Jewish spirituality served not only to deepen the sacredness of Torah within, but also as a means for the propagation and absorption of ideas. It served to propagate Jewish ideas and values from the private domain of Judaism into the public arena of the universe at large. For this purpose we have been established as a light unto the nations. It also served to absorb the general knowledge derived by the collective effort of all of humanity, by adapting the good and useful aspects of general knowledge to our storehouse of a purified way of living. Ultimately, this absorption too serves as a means of a moderated propagation to the world at large. Toward the attainment of this end, the Hebrew University can serve as a great and worthy instrument.

Here, dear friends, there is room for fear. From earliest times, we have experienced the transfer of the most sublime and holy concepts from the Jewish domain to the general arena. An example of propagation was the translation of the Torah into Greek. Two very different Jewish responses to this event emerged. In the land of Israel, Jews were frightened—their world darkened.¹⁰ In contrast, Greek Jewry rejoiced.¹¹ There were also instances of absorption. Various cultural influences, such as Greek culture and other foreign cultures that Jews confronted throughout their history, penetrated into our inner being. Here too, many Jewish circles responded to absorption with fear, while other Jews rejoiced.

When we look back on the previous generations, and reckon with hindsight, we realize that neither the fear nor the rejoicing was in vain. We gained in some areas and lost in others in our confrontation with foreign cultures. This much is clear: Regarding those circles that welcomed absorption and propagation joyously, with unmitigated optimism and with no trepidation, very few of their descendants remain with us today, participating in our difficult and holy task of rebuilding our land and resuscitating our people. For the vast majority of them have assimilated among the nations; they

found themselves caught up in the waves of the “wealth of the sea” and the “riches of the nations” that have come to us.

Only from those who resided securely in our innermost fortresses, in the tents of Torah, enmeshed in the sanctity of the law, did emerge the truly creative Jews—that great portion of our nation who are loyal to its flag—who work tirelessly to build our great edifice. Among these were many who propagated and absorbed. They exported and imported ideas and values on the spiritual highway that mediates between Israel and the nations. Their attitude, however, toward this undertaking was never one of rejoicing only. Fear accompanied their joy as they confronted the vision of the “wealth of the sea” belonging to the “riches of the nations.”

Quite rightly did the prophet say: “As you behold, you will glow. Your heart will fear and rejoice—for the wealth of the sea shall pass on to you; the riches of the nations shall come to you.”

But how does one overcome the fear? How do we assure the safety of the nation against the mighty stream engulfing it?

As a representative of the Jewish community, standing on this honored platform, I submit to you the reflections of many distinguished segments of the community of traditional Judaism. It must be understood that the Hebrew University by itself cannot fulfill all the educational requirements necessary for the success of our national life. We must realize that, first and foremost, it is the great Torah yeshivot, those that now exist and those to be constructed that are worthy of the name—including the Central Yeshivah which we are establishing in Jerusalem, which shall be a light onto Israel in all areas of Torah, whether halakhah, aggadah, Jewish action, or Jewish thought—that uphold the spirit of the nation and provide for its security. Moreover, the Hebrew University must maintain standards so that the name of Heaven, Israel, and the land of Israel are sanctified, and never desecrated, by it. This applies to administration, academic staff, and students alike. In particular, it is essential that academicians teaching Jewish studies, ranging from biblical study—the light of our life—to talmudic study, to Jewish history and thought, aside from their academic excellence, be personally loyal emotionally and intellectually to traditional Judaism. Only then will the fear we experience, together with the magnificent vision we behold this day, lead us to glow and rejoice in blessing.

These are our aspirations regarding the institution crowned today with the glory of Israel by the “wealth of the sea” and the “riches of the nations” that have come to us. May the prayer of Rabbi Nehunyah ben Haqanah be fulfilled in us: May my presenta-

tion not lead to error.

“Then my people shall dwell in peaceful homes, in secure dwellings, in untroubled places of rest” (Isaiah 32:18). May we witness the joy of our nation, the rebuilding of our Temple and our glory, to which the nations shall stream in order to receive Torah from Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem, Amen.

NOTES

1. For details regarding the inauguration ceremony of the Hebrew University, see *The Hebrew University Jerusalem: Inauguration April 1, 1925*, Jerusalem, 1925. For photographs of Rav Kook at the inauguration ceremony, see *ibid.*, English section, p. 34, and cf. Eli Schiller, ed., *First Photographs of Jerusalem: The Old City*, (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1980, p. 225.
2. According to Rabbi Isaac Hutner, late Rosh Yeshiva of Mesivta R. Chaim Berlin, Chaim Weizmann was able to prevail on Rav Kook to attend the inaugural ceremony of the Hebrew University by promising him that the critical study of the Hebrew Bible (à la Wellhausen) would not be included in its curriculum. The promise, much to Rav Kook's chagrin, was not honored. See Hayyim Lifshitz, *Shivhei ha-Ra'ayah*, Jerusalem, 1979, p. 198.
3. Despite his misgivings about the Hebrew University, Rav Kook advised Professor Abraham Adolf Fraenkel (d. 1965), a distinguished German mathematician and Orthodox Jew, to accept an appointment to the Hebrew University. Rav Kook explained that “whatever the drawbacks of the Hebrew University, we cannot ignore the obligation to do battle in order to assure a proper presence that will look after the interests of traditional Judaism and increase its influence. Such a goal can be realized only by the appointment of professors who are loyal to traditional Judaism.” See Rabbi Moshe Y. Zuriel, ed., *Otzerot ha-Ra'ayah*, Tel Aviv, 1993, vol. 4, p. 190. On Fraenkel, see Yitzhak Raphael, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Religious Zionism* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1971, vol. 4, columns 440-441.
4. After delivering the invocation, Rav Kook recited a poem which summarized the essence of his remarks. The poem is not translated here. For the original Hebrew text of Rav Kook's invocation and poem, see the volume cited above, note 1, Hebrew section, pp. 15-18; Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook, ed., *Divrei ha-Rav*, Jerusalem, 1925; Rabbi Abraham Isaac Ha-Kohen Kook, *Hazon ha-Geulah*. Jerusalem, 1941, p. 266; *Ma'amarei ha-Ra'ayah*, Jerusalem, 1984, pp. 306-308; Rabbi Moshe Y. Zuriel, ed., *Otzerot ha-Ra'ayah*, Tel Aviv, 1988, vol. 2, pp. 1116-1118; and Rabbi Moshe M. Alharar, *Likevodah shel Torah*, Jerusalem, 1988, pp. 90-95. Not all of the printed editions present the full text of Rav Kook's remarks.
5. Despite the clarity of expression of Rav Kook's presentation at the Hebrew University, his denigrators insisted on misconstruing his words and claimed

that he applied the biblical verse *For Torah shall come forth from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem* (Isaiah 2:3 and Micah 4:2) to the Hebrew University. This false claim, together with other false claims regarding the attitude of several of Rav Kook's rabbinic colleagues towards him, reappeared most recently in the periodical *Yated Ne'eman*. In fact, the biblical verse was not cited in the invocation itself, though it is paraphrased in its last paragraph. The biblical verse was cited at the end of the poem that followed the invocation. See the full text of the poem, as published in Rabbi Moshe M. Zuriel (cited above, note 4). In context, it is obvious that Rav Kook understood the verse as referring to Torah issuing forth from the yeshivot (and Torah scholars) and, ultimately, the Temple in Jerusalem, not from the Hebrew University. For an exposé of the *Yated Ne'eman* claims, see Rabbi Moshe M. Alharar, *Likevodah shel Torah*, Jerusalem, 1988.

Interestingly, the biblical verse in question was applied to the Hebrew University at the inauguration ceremony, but not by Rav Kook. See the closing remarks of Professor Abraham Buechler (d. 1939), then Principal of Jews' College in London, in *The Hebrew University Jerusalem: Inauguration April 1, 1925*. Jerusalem, 1925, Hebrew section, p. 104.

6. Arthur James, Earl of Balfour (1848-1930) was Foreign Secretary of the British government when he signed the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917. He delivered the opening address (after Rav Kook) at the inaugural ceremony of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1925.
7. Herbert Louis Samuel (1870-1963), born into a traditional Jewish family, was a British statesman and philosopher. He served as the first High Commissioner of Palestine (1920-1925).
8. Edmund Henry Hynman Allenby (1861-1936) was the British commander who defeated the Turks in Palestine in 1917-18. He served as commander of the British forces in Egypt and Palestine. He was present at the laying of the foundation stone of the Hebrew University in 1918, and spoke at its inaugural ceremony in 1925.
9. For this first century Tanna's prayer, see M. *Berakhot* 4:2; B. *Berakhot* 28b; and J. *Berakhot* 4:2 (7d).
10. See *Massekhet Soferim* 1:7, ed. M. Higger, New York, 1937, pp. 101-102 and notes.
11. See, e.g., Philo's account of the origin of the Greek translation of the Torah in his *On Moses* 2:25-44, cited by Moses Hadas, ed., *Aristeas to Pfilocrates (Letter of Aristeas)*, New York, 1951, pp. 22-25. Philo, writing in first century Alexandria, notes: "Therefore, even to the present day, there is held every year a feast and general assembly in the island of Pharos, whither not only Jews but multitudes of others cross the water, both to do honor to the place in which the light of that version first shone out, and also to thank God for the good gift so old yet ever young."