



Universalist Trends in Jewish Religious Thought: Some Russian Perspectives

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The author presents the views of four prominent Russian Jewish thinkers from the 19th and 20th centuries on the proper relation of Jews and Judaism to the surrounding culture.

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There is a widespread tendency to regard Jewish religious thought as totally isolationist and bereft of any universalist elements. Thus, for example, while primitive Christianity appealed to all nations while itself without national affiliation, Judaism was regarded as an exclusively Jewish property. This image, shared not only by Gentiles but also by many Jews, is incorrect.

In spite of the fact that Jewish religious thought has often borne an exclusivist character, it always contained within itself a strong universalist tendency as well. However, this trend was never seen by its proponents as demanding primitive missionary activity with the object of disseminating Judaism throughout the world. Unlike Christianity, this universalist trend within Judaism sought to find a proper place for other religions within the historical framework, without rejecting them as deliberate distortions of the unique truth. This completely contradicts the exclusive religious outlook which dominated Christianity. For Christianity, other religions must be unequivocally rejected in the course of human spiritual progress, the end of the historical process being interpreted by Christian theologians as involving the dissemination of Christianity throughout the world at the expense of other religious beliefs and systems.

However, there are hints in the New Testament itself that such a point of view might be wrong from the Christian point of view. In Chapter 11 of the Epistle to the Romans, one can see that the famous passage about the religious destiny of Israel could be interpreted in a totally different manner than the traditional theological approach: Judaism may be regarded as both necessary and providential – even in a provocative capacity – to serve as an historical counterpart, and even challenger, to Christianity, at least until the eschatological end, as was suggested by Paul. This providential meaning is not necessarily negative. There are other examples of this same approach, but in fact the main thrust of the approach of Christianity towards Judaism, Islam and other religions emphasizes their absolute mutual incompatibility.

The universalist trend I refer to here is not confined to Reform and Conservative Judaism, but may also be found among such traditionally accepted "Orthodox" thinkers as Judah Halevi,

Maimonides, R. Jacob Emden, R. Eliahu Benamozegh, and others. Their universalist approach has been discussed by many scholars, and there is no need to repeat their analysis.^[1] In this paper, I wish to present the evidence for the existence of such an approach within Russian Orthodox Judaism of the 19th and 20th centuries. An additional problem to be discussed here concerns the influence of life on Russian soil upon Jewish religious thinkers of the past 150 years.

I. Isaac Ber Levinsohn

If one arbitrarily defines Russian Jews in terms of time and space (which is in fact a very problematical thing, as Jews, regardless of their whereabouts, have always regarded themselves as part of *Kenesset Yisra'el*, the Jewish Collectivity), then we may say that the first Russian Jew to begin struggling for universalism without abandoning Orthodox Judaism was Isaac Ber Levinsohn (1788-1860), who is regarded as the founder of the Russian Jewish Haskalah (Enlightenment).^[2][Artikelansicht](#) It is well known that the Haskalah movement was founded by Moses Mendelssohn in Germany. Some scholars claim that Levinsohn in fact merely imitated Mendelssohn, bringing nothing new to Jewish thought in comparison with Mendelssohn or later Haskalah thinkers, such as Nahman Krochmal, who lived in Austria. Moreover, Levinsohn is generally considered a secular thinker, and held to blame for the wave of assimilation which followed the Haskalah.

All of this is incorrect, in my view. Levinsohn did not simply imitate Mendelssohn, but his approach rather emerged from the deepest needs of Russian Jewry, albeit relying upon the same Jewish sources as Mendelssohn. Had he imitated Mendelssohn, he would have turned towards Germany and German culture for his orientation, but he had another target – Russia. Compared with Mendelssohn, Levinsohn stayed within the framework of traditional Jewish thought. He was not a mystic, but a religious rationalist of the traditional stamp, one of the main features of whose religious thought was the theological foundation of the Gentile's historical mission.

In any event, Russian Jewry turned to him rather than to Mendelssohn as its spiritual guide. In 1828, Levinsohn published his first book, *Te'udah be-Yisrael*^[3][Artikelansicht](#) in which he defended several points which, while trivial to the contemporary reader, were seen as revolutionary by the traditional Jew of his day. Relying on the Orthodox Jewish tradition, Levinsohn argued the necessity of studying the language of the country in which one lived – stressing, by the way, the great expressive qualities of the Russian language.^[4][Artikelansicht](#) Another revolutionary claim of his was the appeal to study the wisdom of other nations,^[5][Artikelansicht](#) referring to the use of Greek philosophy in the Talmud.^[6][Artikelansicht](#) One also finds there the first reference in Jewish literature to a Russian book.^[7][Artikelansicht](#) Later, the famous Russian historian and author, Nikolai Karamzin, became the author whom he frequently cited.^[8][Artikelansicht](#)

In his next book, *Efes Damim* (which was translated into several languages, including an English translation sponsored by Sir Moses Montefiore), Levinsohn attacks the blood libel in general.^[9] This polemic is within the framework of a fictional dialogue between the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, "Abraham Maimon," and the Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church in Jerusalem, and was the first attempt in history to suggest a religious dialogue between Judaism and Russian Orthodox Christianity. Levinsohn states that, in principle, Christians must have a worse attitude to Jews than Jews have to Christians, because the origins of Christianity are associated with the Crucifixion, for which Jews as a group are held responsible,^[10] while the origins of the Jewish faith are in no way connected with any archaic religious confrontation with Christianity. Levinsohn claims that, according to Judaism, Christianity is not to be regarded as idolatry, as claimed by many enemies of the Jews, and as some Jews likewise tend to think^[11]. It is interesting to note that the dialogue with Russian Orthodoxy proposed here by Levinsohn was not only rejected, but aroused suspicion.

In order to realize the idea, verbalized in *Efes Damim*, of a dialogue between Judaism and

Christianity (more precisely, with Orthodoxy), in 1839 Levinsohn turned to Archimandrite Khristoforus, dean of the Kremenezh Orthodox Ecclesiastical Seminary, located in the town in which Levinsohn lived, in a letter written in Hebrew. Khristoforus' reply in Russian was quite curious: "You sent me your letter written in the holy, prophetic language. I adore this language but, unfortunately, I did not study it enough in my youth and can translate it only through the help of a dictionary, and then not very well."[\[12\]](#) Thus ended the would-be dialogue. Nevertheless, the Tsarist Minister Bludov ruled that *Efes Damim* might exercise a harmful influence on the Russian Orthodox clergy.[\[13\]](#)

In his final book, *Zerubavel*, written in Hebrew like his other books, Levinsohn proposed a new concept of relations between Jews and Gentiles, presupposing the harmonious coexistence between Judaism and Christianity.[\[14\]](#) Rabbinic Judaism already advanced the idea that the only religious duty incumbent upon the Gentile was the fulfillment of the so-called Seven Noachide Commandments, which were sufficient to establish his righteousness and his future salvation in Messianic times. This concept, while not central in Jewish religious thought, was nevertheless part and parcel of Talmudic thought and was a recurrent theme to which Orthodox Jews returned in periods of peace and prosperity, when they could afford to think through their relationships with the Gentiles.

One might see in a primitive interpretation of the Noachide commandments a certain arrogance towards the Gentiles, who apparently do not require any more sophisticated religious system than a simple system of prohibitions (as the Noachide commandments only indicate formally what one must not do). However, Levinsohn advanced a new interpretation of this concept – probably his most important contribution to Jewish religious thought – in which he claimed that these seven commandments already existed before the Revelation at Sinai. There were in fact more than seven commandments; these seven were only the main principles, upon which the many secondary commandments of Moses rely. These are all implicit, but not explicit, in the Noachide commandments.[\[15\]](#) The commandments received by Moses on Mount Sinai were simply an elaboration of these seven original commandments. Thus, a Gentile who fulfills the seven Noachide commandments is called a *hasid* and has a share in the World to Come. For this reason, according to Levinsohn, one may claim that a Christian fulfills the major part of Moses' commandments. In addition, the Torah contains certain commandments applicable only to the Jewish people, such as those concerning the Exodus and the related festivals and fast-days. As the Gentiles were not implicated in the sins committed by the Jews in the desert, they have no reason to fast for this. Thus, according to Levinsohn, Christians are "brothers of Israel" and have a share in the World to Come.

Moreover, from this point of view all of the worlds' religions and philosophical systems are built upon these seven commandments. For this reason, Moses studied the mysteries of Egyptian wisdom which flow from the Divine source. The same wisdom is contained in the teachings of Zoroaster and of Islam. For Levinsohn, both Greek and Roman wisdom also came from the Jews, via the extension of the seven Noachide commandments. Thus, Ptolemy, Socrates, Pythagoras and Aristotle were all nurtured by Jewish knowledge.[\[16\]](#)

Levinsohn is not responsible for the fact that the Haskalah turned out to be assimilationist. There was always a religious component in Haskalah thought, which later bore fruit. Through its best representatives, the Haskalah imperceptibly penetrated beyond the hermetically-sealed walls of the famous Lithuanian *yeshivot*. The penetration of Enlightenment into these strongholds of Jewish Orthodoxy made possible the absorption of the best achievements of the human spirit within Jewish religious thought, without the latter losing its authenticity.[\[17\]](#) Indeed, many interesting and fruitful spiritual currents emerged within the *yeshivot*, which were wrongly regarded as centers of obscurantism.

II. Rabbi Kook

Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), the first Chief Rabbi of the Land of Israel, who is regarded as a central figure in Jewish religious thought in Israel, came from the famous yeshivah of Volozhin. His teachings have been commented upon by many authors^[18] and here we shall only be concerned with his attitude towards the non-Jew. Rabbi Kook was by no means a radical on this question. Already in Volozhin, he belonged to a small circle of students who wished to absorb all of the worthwhile achievements of contemporary life and culture. Their aim in this was not cultural, but was based upon deep mystical ideas, which can only be understood within the framework of the Kabbalah. According to the Kabbalah, human redemption and the advent of the Messiah depend upon individual spiritual efforts, which mystically liberate divine sparks from their material envelope. These sparks are diffused throughout the material universe as a result of the cataclysm which occurred before the Creation. The absorption of ideas originating in the non-Jewish world is thus such a mystical liberation of omnipresent sparks.

Rabbi Kook did not consider ideas taken from the outside as equal to those of Torah; nevertheless, their acquisition was an important goal. He was sharply opposed to the position of those Jews who rejected other religions; genuine elements, he argued, are present in all religions. There were always people who searched for God and His ways. One must expose the common element in other religions, the extent of which depends upon their spiritual development, and not be afraid of the usual contempt and even hostility against that which is alien, which has its locus in human souls.

According to Rabbi Kook, the brotherly love of Esau and Jacob, of Israel and Isaac, will eventually overcome the animosity and hostility brought about by evil, transforming it into light and compassion. Rabbi Kook was always grieved by the isolationism which developed within the Jewish people. Jews have too often concentrated only upon themselves, forgetting that it is their mission to live within broader human society, bringing to it their own contribution while being enriched by it. He identifies two main sources of this Jewish isolationism: 1) the persistent persecution suffered by them; 2) the reaction to radical movements in spiritual and practical life. Believing that religious pluralism is a legitimate and permanent manifestation of the human spirit, he believed that different religions must not compete with one other for domination, but should cooperate. This opposes the commonly-accepted view that different religions must challenge one another. However, when it achieves its full maturity the human spirit tries to overcome conflicts and confrontations. Man must therefore recognize all manifestations of the spiritual life as parts of the integral organic whole. At the same time, this does not obliterate the distinctions among various levels of religious expression, between the more and less sacred, etc.; each one has its own place in life. Through this way, God tries to elevate man to himself.

Religions can serve one another as stimuli, as models for creative competition and mutual evaluation. In a fundamental way, each religion is part and parcel of a given national historical experience. Beliefs imposed upon another nation against its will thus remain alien to its life. In this idea, one may see a certain affinity to William James' religious outlook. However, as compared with James' religious-philosophical pragmatism, Rav Kook's religious philosophy is one of harmoniousness. According to him, the objective of Judaism is not to swallow or destroy other beliefs, but to perfect them and to stimulate them to a higher level of development in order to eliminate their dross until, eventually, they may join the root of Israel. This is particularly true of those religions which, according to Rabbi Kook, are partially based upon the light of the Torah – i.e., Christianity and Islam.

Rabbi Kook did not regard Christianity as a perfect religion. Indeed, he claims that it emerged in a period of acute crisis, at a moment when the leaders of the Jewish people strayed too far from Jewish ideals. He advanced the following unusual critique of Christianity. The founder of

Christianity, Kook says, was a "remarkably charismatic personality", but he established his spiritual influence without first training his disciples in the existing moral and cultural disciplines. When he instructed them to cultivate their spiritual life, they easily lost their Jewish characteristics and became alienated in deed and spirit from the source whence they had sprung.^[19] Furthermore, the spiritual essence of Christianity, Rabbi Kook says, sharply reduced its resistance to materialism, which attacked it with enormous power. While he rejects Christianity as the alternative to Judaism, Rabbi Kook regards it as part of organically developing human spiritual life. One can see how this point of view differs from the exclusivity of those Christian theologians who acknowledge no theological value in Judaism. Rabbi Kook left Russia in 1904, but he did not leave it empty-handed. While he did not express any specific view of Russia as such, his outlook was clearly effected by his experience of the life of this giant Christian country.

III. Shmuel Aleksandrov

Meanwhile, in the small Bielorrussian town of Bobruisk, there lived a most remarkable Jewish sage: Rabbi Shmuel Aleksandrov, who had been a close friend of Rabbi Kook in Volozhin, where they both studied. Unlike Kook, Aleksandrov never left Russia. During the severe religious persecutions of the 1920s and '30s in the USSR, Aleksandrov was a spiritual beacon to many rabbis; he was murdered by the Germans in 1941.^[20] Like Rabbi Kook, Aleksandrov was a Kabbalistic mystic and a devotee of Rabbi Judah Loeb, the MaHaRaL of Prague, of whom he was a twelfth-generation descendant.

As a profound scholar of both Talmud and Jewish religious thought generally, Aleksandrov avidly absorbed contemporary philosophy, including Russian religious philosophy. This in fact became an issue in his profound correspondence with Rabbi Kook.^[21] His favorite non-Jewish philosophers were Schelling and Vladimir Soloviev; he referred to the latter as "a sage" and "a righteous man."^[22]

Aleksandrov propounded a mystical theory of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, containing deep roots in the Kabbalah. There were two trees in the Garden of Eden: the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. The Tree of Life is an exclusively Jewish possession, i.e., Torah, while the Tree of Knowledge belongs to the Gentiles. Among its fruits are scientific-technical progress, philosophy, art, etc. Our historical proximity to Messianic times is manifested in the mystical exchange of the fruits of both trees. By giving to the world the fruits of the Tree of Life, Jews consecrate the Gentile world, while receiving from it vital knowledge and ideas.^[23]

All national differences will be abolished when the Messiah comes, according to Aleksandrov.^[24] He was particularly insistent on the claim that Judaism must take advantage of Christian religious philosophy during the period of atheism.^[25] After the Bolshevik Revolution, while serving as an accountant in a local bank, Aleksandrov corresponded profusely with other rabbis, strengthening their steadfastness under conditions of severe religious persecutions. In 1932, he managed to have published in Jerusalem an interesting correspondence with Rabbis Gutman and Krasilshchikov.^[26] His last article was published in the United States in 1939.^[27] He was one of the first writers living in Russia to privately circulate his hand-written manuscripts, as well as to arrange for their publication in the West, despite the obvious dangers inherent in such activity. Thus, Aleksandrov can be seen as a pioneer of the so-called samizdat system of publication in Soviet Russia.

IV. Abraham Hen

Rabbi Abraham Hen (1878-1958) belonged to the Habad movement. Originally the rabbi of Novozybkov, and then of Nezhin,^[28] he settled in Palestine in 1935, and at the end of his life was the rabbi of the prominent Jerusalem congregation, "Yeshurun." His only booklet, "Judaism and

Blood,"[29] in which he discussed Jewish-Gentile relationships in detail, was published during the Beiliss trial. He quotes the Midrash that, when the ministering angels wished to sing a song of praise to the Creator after the Jews safely crossed the Red Sea, God prohibited them from doing so, saying "the works of my hand are drowning in the sea and you wish to sing songs?"[30] Thus, the dying Egyptian soldiers who had attempted to prevent the Exodus, so rebelling against God's will, are seen as the object of Divine compassion. Rabbi Hen afterwards cites the words of the Midrash stating that the same gates of salvation are open to Gentiles as well as to Jews: "The Creator does not reject any creature. He accepts all. The gates are always open, and he who wishes to enter, will enter. As it is said: 'Open the gates that the righteous goy (Gentile) may enter' (Isa. 26:2). It does not say there: 'priests, Levites and Israelites,' but 'the righteous Gentile.'" [31]

According to Rabbi Hen, Judaism never erected barriers between members of different nations and religions. It was the first to eliminate all national, social and confessional barriers. In this connection, Judaism's primary merit was in the fact that it establishes this indifference not only legally, but by recognizing the absolute nature of his principle. Judaism, Rabbi Hen said, rejects the difference between good and evil men. There is only Evil, not evil people.[32] One might think that Rabbi Hen's booklet is an apologetic tract intended for Russian Gentiles. But if one examines his collection of essays in Hebrew, directed towards the religious Jewish reader,[33] one will discover some surprising things. Speaking about the value of human life, Hen quotes Dostoevsky, who once said that, had he been forced to make a choice between death and standing on a tiny jut of a rock at the edge of a deep abyss, in which every careless movement would cause him to fall into oblivion, he would nevertheless choose such a life without hesitation.[34]

It seems clear that, in his search for a colorful example illustrating the value of human life, Hen could have easily found many expressions among Jewish writers, without resorting to Dostoevsky, who was well-known for his anti-Semitic views. Evidently, he so deeply admired Dostoevsky's writing that he found it natural to use it in his own writing. Another example of this is found in another article, in which he unexpectedly discusses in a positive way Dostoevsky's idea that righteousness may be achieved through a sin committed because of brotherly love, as exemplified in *Crime and Punishment* by Sonia Marmeladova.[35] One might think that this idea is hardly compatible with Orthodox Judaism. It is well known that, during the struggle against Sabbatianism, the idea of sanctity achieved through sin was severely condemned.[36] Nevertheless, there are significant differences between a sin committed through brotherly love and that perceived as an obligatory way towards salvation, which it was necessary to commit anyway. Both Dostoevsky and Rabbi Hen had in mind an imposed sin rather than a voluntary one committed out of theological considerations. It would be a grave error to accuse Rabbi Hen of Sabbatianism, just as it would be an error to accuse Rabbi Aleksandrov of this sin, as was done recently[37] (By the way, the idea of the obligatory sin through which one achieves righteousness was advanced in Russian-Jewish thought by Ilya Ehrenburg,[38] who nearly embraced Catholicism in his writing during the Russian Civil War).

Rabbi Hen also deeply respected the Russian anarchist thinker Petr Kropotkin, whom he calls a "saint of the new world." [39] At the same time, he condemns the senseless assassination in 1917 by rebellious Bolshevik sailors of two Russian liberal ministers, Shingarev and Kokoshkin.[40]

One final example of the universalist cultural field of reference of Russian Religious Zionism was Rabbi Leib Yehudah Don-Yakhia, who only immigrated to Palestine in the 1930's. In his previous position, as rabbi of the town of Tchernigov, he was known as a Tolstoyan, fond of quoting Tolstoy in his synagogue sermons.[41]

To conclude: it would admittedly be an overstatement to claim that all contemporary Judaism shares the above-mentioned universalist tendency. Certainly, this is not the case. Nevertheless, this trend is legitimate from an Orthodox point of view. Judaism is pluralistic and everyone can find a trend within Judaism corresponding to his outlook and taste. It would be a grave mistake to think

of Judaism as a militant religious system excluding all contact with the outside world. While there are people who view Jewish-Gentile relations in terms of the mortal confrontation between Jacob and Esau, these trends nevertheless belong to the margins of Judaism.

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