

THE LIFE AND THOUGHT OF RAV KOOK

1 - BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW

מדרשת רחל וחיה

A] RECOMMENDED READING ON THE LIFE OF RAV KOOK

- Rav Kook - Mystic in a time of Revolution. Yehuda Mirsky
- An Angel Among Men, Simcha Raz

B] FAMILY

- Born Sept 7 1865 in Griva, Russia (now Daugavpils, Latvia), a small town of 2,600.
- Near to Dvinsk, a large town of 23,000, half of whom were Jewish.
- Oldest of 8 children.
- Father's side: Mitnagdim. R' Shlomo Zalman Kook (b.1844) was a student of Volozhin Yeshiva. R' Shlomo Zalman's mother was the daughter of a early talmid of R' Chaim of Volozhin (main student of the Vilna Gaon). R' Shlomo Zalman's uncle was R' Mordechai Gimpel Jaffe - an early supporter of Aliyah (he himself went to live near Petach Tivka in 1888).
- Mother's side: Chasidim. Perel Zlota was the daughter of a Chabad Chasid who studied at Volozhin. When the 3rd Lubavitcher Rebbe (the 'Tzemach Tzedek') died, Perel Zlota received a button and some threads from his cloak, which she sowed into the kippa of young Avraham Yitzchak.
- Also strong in the Russia of the 1860s - Haskala. Secularized Jewish culture, adopting Western social critiques but rooted in Jewish tradition, language, medieval philosophy. Some Rabbis in the mid 1800's had received some secular education and engaged the Maskilim in debate in the journals of Haskala (eg *Ha-Melitz*). A split developed between traditionalists and more 'Maskilic' Rabbis who turned their attention more and more to solutions in Palestine (the *Chibat Zion* movement).

C] CHILDHOOD

- Strong Chabad early influences as small child.
- Iluy as a child - intense, emotional, imaginative, lyrical.
- Age 9-15 was sent to Dvinsk for a rabbinic apprenticeship with R' Reuven Levin.
- Age 15-17 studied in Ludza where he also spent time in a more Hassidic-orientated Beit Midrash and with a Maskilic cousin where he wrote verse and mixed with young intellectual thinkers of the Haskala world.
- Age 17-18 - studied for a year in Smorgon with a famous Litvish Rav.

D] BETROTHAL

- In 1884, aged 18, met with Rabbi Eliyahu David Rabbinowitz-Teomim (1842/3-1905), the 'Aderet'.
- Was betrothed to his eldest daughter Batsheva Alta.

The Aderet



E] VOLOZHIN

- The 'Mother of all Yeshivot' - an grand and beautiful Beit Midrash of 250 top talmidim from all over Europe.
- A eclectic bunch of intellectuals - mostly Mitnagdim, a few Chasidim, a few suspected Maskilim!



Etz Chaim, the Volozhin Yeshiva, Est. 1803. Closed by the Russians, 1892



The Yeshiva building today

Alumni of Volozhin include:-

- Rav Zelig Reuven Bengis (1864-1953) - Head of the Eida Charedis in Y-m
- Rav Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (the Netziv) (1816-1893)
- Rav Meir Bar-Ilan (1880-1949) - son of the Netziv, leading Mizrachi figure and Zionist Rabbi
- Hayyim Nahman Bialik (1874-1934)
- Rav Dovid Cohen (1887-1972) - the Nazir of Y-m
- Rav Baruch Halevi Epstein (the Torah Temimah) (1860-1941)
- Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinski (1863-1940)
- Rav Jacob Joseph (first and last Chief Rabbi of New York) (1840-1902)
- Rav Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935)
- Rav Baruch Ber Lebowitz (1870-1940)
- Rav Aryeh Levin (1885-1965)
- Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer (1870-1953)
- Rav Yitzchak Yaacov Reines (1839-1915) - founder of the Mizrachi movement
- Rav Zundel Salant (1786-1866) - teacher of Rav Yisrael Salanter
- Rav Shimon Shkop (1860-1940) - later Rosh Yeshivat Telz
- Rav Chaim Soloveitchik (1853-1918)
- Rav Elchonon Wasserman (1874-1941)

- Avraham Yitzchak Kook became a talmid of Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin - the Netziv.
- Studied 7am until midnight every day.
- Hard to categorize - unusually, he had a beard, yet spoke in Hebrew like a Maskil. Also studied Tanach.
- Received a semicha from R' Yechiel Michel Epstein - the Aruch HaShulchan and b-in-law of the Netziv.



The Aruch HaShulchan



The Netziv

F] MARRIAGE

- 1886 - married Batsheva Rabinowitz-Teomim and moved to Ponevezh to live with his in-laws.
- Studied with his f-in-law and also studied Kabbalah.
- Wrote articles, both for reactionary journals emphasizing the Netziv's traditionalism (he had been criticized for his Torah commentary which some felt was not sufficiently respectful of Chazal) and also for the Maskilic journals, emphasizing the Netziv's innovation and 'critical' scholarship .
- Finances were very hard - the whole family took it in turns to sleep on the 6 chairs and hard benches that they had.
- Encouraged by the Chafetz Chaim (a family friend) to look for a rabbinic position and found one in Zeimel.

G] ZEIMEL



- 1888 - moved to Zeimel to be the Rav.
- Founded and published his own Journal - *Ittur Sofrim* - filled with his own ideas on halachic development, prophecy.
- 1889 - Batsheva died of pneumonia leaving him with a baby daughter - Frayda-Chana; the journal was discontinued.
- 1890 - Rav Kook was encouraged to remarry and he married his wife's cousin, Raiza Rivka, subsequently having 3 more children - Zvi Yehuda, Esther Yael and Batya Miriam.
- Small town Rabbinate left him time to write, think and delve deeper into Kabbalah. He learnt with Rav Shlomo Elyashiv - the Leshem - leading Lithuanian Kabbalist of the time.
- 1891 - wrote (anonymously) a 36 page sefer on Tefillin and then left Zeimel for a 155 miles (incognito) tour around Lithuania preaching and teaching.
- Wrote *Midbar Shur* on the subject of perfection - *sheleimut*. Strongly influenced by the thinking of the Ramchal - R' Moshe Chaim Luzzato.

H] BOISK



- 1896 - moved to Boisk, near Riga, to be the Rav.
- 1897 - Rav Kook is caught up in the major debate about the role of Mussar - intense focus (at the expense of some Talmudic study) on moralistic texts and middot growth and extreme behavior to internalize moral lessons.
- Rav Kook wrote furiously in his *Pinkasim* - stream of consciousness notebooks of his thought, which were later consolidated the main publications of his work. They have recently been published in their original form.
- Developed work on *Ein Ayah* - commentary on the Aggadic portions of the Talmud.
- 1897 - Herzl launches the First Zionist Congress. Rav Kook's attention turns to the Zionist idea.
- 1901-1904 - Published a series of essays on the need for a Religious Zionism, concerned at the divorce of secular Zionism from spiritual roots. Jewish nationalism must be different to others - rooted in a Divine source.
- 1902 - Yoel Moshe Salomon (a printer and newspaper owner in the new part of Y-m) was asked to assist in the search for a new Rabbi for Jaffa. He approached the Aderet (by then a senior Rav in Y-m) to persuade his son-in-law to consider the job.
- Rav Kook accepted the job and Boisk for Jaffa in April 1904. He arrived in Eretz Yisrael on Fri May 13 1904.

I] JAFFA

Yishuv.

- 1904 - Jaffa is a modern town of around 35,000. 7000 were Jews, many non-religious.
- The 'Old Yishuv' in Y-m was lead by Rav Shmuel Salant (1816-1909).
- 1904 was the beginning of the 'Second Aliyah' - ultimately 20,000 Jews from Russia, mostly socialist, secular, nationalist (eg David Ben Gurion).
- Anti-religious - a mix of Haskalah, left-wing secularism and Russian nationalism.
- Saw themselves as "the last Jews or the first Hebrews" - a new type of Jew.
- July 1904 - Herzl dies. Rav Kook delivers a key hesped on the issue of Mashiach ben Yosef - the infrastructural underpinning of Mashiach ben David. "The Zionist vision has been revealed in our time, as the footsteps of Mashiach ben Yosef!"
- 1904 - first trip around the Moshavot. "Look! A Jewish cow!" "I could kiss every stone in this land - and even the mules on the way."
- 1904 - Ya'akov Moshe Charlap - a young talmid from Y-m - met Rav Kook on Shavuot and became a life-long talmid muvhak. Rav Charlap in 1909 became the Rav of the Sha'arei Chesed neighborhood in Y-m and remained a constant ally of Rav Kook in the Old



Eliezer Ben-Yehuda



Rav Shmuel Salant

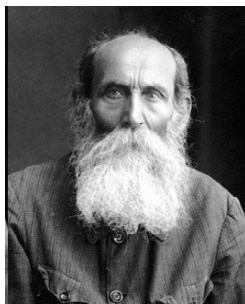


Rav Ya'akov Moshe Charlap

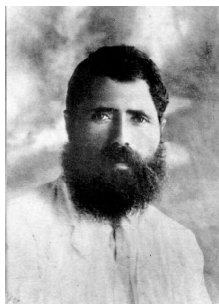
- 1905 - Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, in one of the debates on the 'Uganda Plan' exultantly proclaimed in the name of Zionism, 'All of us, all of us, have turned our backs on the past, that is our glory and splendor!'
- Rav Kook hit back with an open letter in Ben-Yehudah's paper. He felt that Zionism must not turn its back on the past. The Rabbis of the Old Yishuv were dismayed that Rav Kook had even engaged in debate with Ben-Yehuda and politely rebuked him as being unaware of quite how evil secular Zionism was.
- 1906 - published *Eder HaYakar* - named for the recently deceased Aderet - on the issue of modernity.

- Much of the religious opposition to modernity in Rav Kook's eyes was based on a too-narrow religious vision and a lack of appreciation of the value of the best of modern literature, philosophy and scholarship.
- 1906 - published *Ikvei HaTzon* - on the issue of the youth of the time and their rebellion against traditional Torah observance - stressing the noble spirited idealism of the youth. The rebellion is itself a sign of a thirst for deeper Jewish ideas, thought and reason.
- Rav Kook opposed greatly the new avowedly secular high school in Jaffa - Gymnasiyat Herzliya - yet accepted its contribution to Hebrew revival and national identity. He said that one should say two berachot on the school - 'who restores the widow's estate' and 'who will uproot idolatry from our land'.

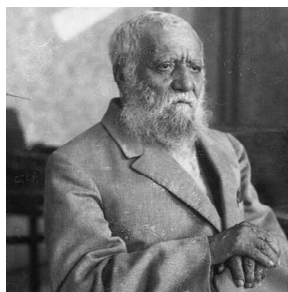
- He set up a moderate Orthodox school - Tachkemoni teaching secular subjects in a more traditional way. The Old Yishuv were disapproving.
- 1907 - Rav Kook announced plans for a new Yeshiva - combining traditional Torah study with philosophy, Kabbalah, literature, foreign language and secular studies. Eventually this became Mercaz HaRav.
- Engaged in a long written debate with some of the key secular intellectual and literary figures of the time: Aharon David Gordon, Yosef Chaim Brenner, Alexander Ziskind Rabinowitz (Azar) and Shai Agnon.



Aharon David Gordon



Yosef Chaim Brenner



Azar



Shai Agnon

- 1908 - 'הישן יתחדש והחדש יתקדש'
- 1909 - Tel Aviv founded - Rav Kook's authority (and problems) now extend over this new secular town.
- 1909 - The Sesame Oil Controversy. Rav Kook permitted sesame oil on Pesach. The Old Yishuv rabbis reacted strongly that sesame oil was kitniyot. A long and heated debate ensued in which neither side backed down.
- 1910 - The Shemitta Controversy. Rav Kook supported (in a qualified manner) the *Heter Mechira* and wrote *Shabbat Ha-Aretz* to set out his arguments. A very sharp debate ensued with the Old Yishuv and in particular R' Yaakov David Wilovsky. Rav Kook maintained his support of the New Yishuv - the generation which the Zohar calls 'good within and rotten without' and who are *chamoro shel Mashiach*.
- 1911 - The newspaper of *Mizrachi* ('Mercaz Ruchani - the 'official' religious wing of the Zionist enterprise) - edited by Rav Meir Bar-Ilan - published an article calling Arabs 'the enemy'. Rav Kook objected, saying that the damage of such an approach is 'incalculable' and that we should promote 'the paths of peace and brotherhood' with those Arabs who were open to that.
- 1913 - The big trip to the Moshavot - many secular - with the new leader of the Old Yishuv, Rav Yosef Chaim Zonnenfeld



- "At Poriyah ... the workers gathered around the fire for singing and dancing. Rav Kook, overcome with emotion, wrapped himself in a watchman's cloak and headdress, danced with them, and went for a horseback ride. On his return, he and some of the other rabbis continued dancing."¹
- Rav Kook continued feverishly writing his Pinkasim - notebooks - up to 1914, when he published part of one - *Arpilei Tohar*.
- Zvi Yehuda was teaching in Germany. In 1914 Rav Kook was invited to a conference in Frankfurt of the Agudat Yisrael (founded 1912). Rabbanit Kook was also not well and the doctors recommended a break.
- July 1914 - Rav Kook and the Rabbanit set sail for Europe. World War I breaks out days later on Aug 1 - 9 Av!

Rav Yosef Chaim Zonnenfeld

J] ST GALLEN

- The Kooks landed in Germany and found themselves stranded by the war and at risk of internment as Russian enemy aliens.
- Eventually made it to neutral Switzerland, supported by local philanthropist Abraham Kimche.
- Desperately tried to contact people in Eretz Yisrael and to get back. Stranded and thus able to write and think without the distractions of Rabbinic responsibilities - in 18 months he wrote as much as in the previous 4 years.
- Saw WW I as a terrible exile mirrored by his own. But he also saw it as the birthpangs of some redemption to come.
- 1915 - met with David Cohen, a young student who had learnt at Volozhin, then at a college in St Petersburg and finally at the University of Freiburg. A restless and fevered philosopher - twice arrested as a suspected revolutionary. Developed a life-long relationship with Rav Kook as a talmid muvhak and later editor and publisher of *Orot HaKodesh*.



Rav Dovid (HaNazir) Cohen

K] LONDON

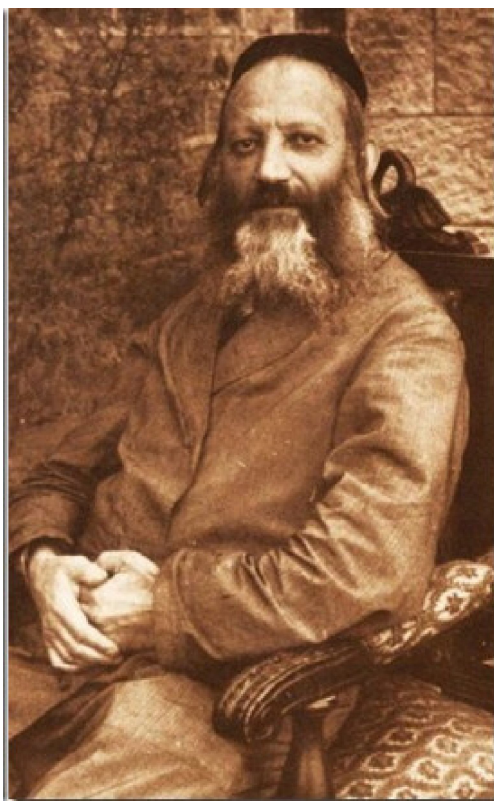
- 1916 - became the Rav of the Machzikei Hadath shul in London.
- Learned English and visited the National Gallery.
- November 2 1917 - the Balfour Declaration hit Rav Kook like a thunderbolt as the redemption arising out of the ashes of the massacre of WW I. "It's very hard these days to write in clear lines about the broad things happening before our eyes. The acts are so wondrous, to the points where the eye dims from looking and the ears from all the hearing and listening".
- December 1917 - founded 'Degel Yerushalyim' - a new Religious Zionist movement. Mizrachi (which Rav Kook had never been a part of and which he considered to be too passive in the Zionist movement) reacted very badly to the 'competition'. Ultimately, Degel Y-m did not succeed.
- April 1918 - Chaim Weizman went to Palestine to try and negotiate with the Y-m Rabbis who had divided into 3 clear camps - a minority pro-Zionist group lead by R' Charlap, a neutral group lead by R' Zvi Pesach Frank, and an anti-Zionist faction lead by R' Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld.
- Many saw the solution in Rav Kook and urged his return to Israel.

Chaim Weizman



Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank



L] JERUSALEM - 1919-1923

- November 1918 - WW I ends with an Allied victory. Britain and France occupy the entire Middle East.
- May 1919 - a conclave of 45 Rabbis in E.Y. unanimously invite Rav Kook to return. The zealots on Old Yishuv rabbinate tell him not to accept without their permission and without signing a ban on secular education. He refuses, but says he is returning as a private citizen.
- Arrives in Y-m on Fri Aug 28 1919 - 3 Elul.
- With the Ottoman dictators gone, Arab and Jewish rivalries welled up in competition for fulfillment of promises made to them during WW I.
- Sept 1919 - elections for the Yishuv. Old Yishuv threatened to boycott if women voted or stood for election. Mizrachi turned to Rav Kook assuming he would support women's suffrage. He did not! Rabbi Yehuda Leib Maimon (1875-1962), head of Mizrachi was desperately disappointed.
- Secular Left openly criticized Rav Kook as siding with the Old Yishuv.
- Secular Right (Ze'ev Jabotinsky) was equally critical.
- Old Yishuv were not interested in Rav Kook's support.



Ze'ev Jabotinsky

(older) R' Yehuda Leib Maimon



- October 1919 - Rav Kook's daughter (age 12), Esther Yael, fell from the roof of the house and died.
- Dec 1919 - Rav Kook accepts the new official position of Rabbi of Jerusalem.
- Mar 1920 - Rav Kook reiterates his opposition to women's voting. R' Maimon and Mizrachi announce: "on purely religious matters we will ask the rabbis, and on public affairs, the rabbis can ask us!" The women voted.
- April 1920 - San Remo conference - British Mandate established over Palestine.
- May 1920 - Rav Kook published *Orot* - selected essays of Rav Kook's thought, edited and adapted by R' Zvi Yehuda. Even though some of the most radical ideas had been 'toned down', the Old Yishuv rabbis reacted with dismay and outrage. *Orot* was banned by the Rabbis as "gross things, foreign to the entire Torah new forms of deviance that our rabbis and ancestors could not have imagined ... a sorcerer's book ... it is forbidden to study [let alone] rely on all his nonsense and dreams"².
- Feb 1921 - the British announced the creation of a Chief Rabbinate for the Jewish community of Palestine. Rav Kook was unanimously voted in. His authority was not recognized by the Old Yishuv rabbis who organized their own parallel body. Liberal and secular groups were also nervous of potential religious coercion.
- 1922 - Rav Kook pushed forward with plans for a new Yeshiva espousing a Religious Zionist curriculum, put together by the Rav HaNazir - R' David Cohen. The Nazir proposed a broad range of topics of a Torah and 'Jewish Studies' nature. This ultimate became the Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva (although the syllabus today is a little more conservative)³.
- 1922 - The Rav HaNazir started work on editing and arranging the notebooks of Rav Kook, ultimately published as *Orot HaKodesh*.
- 1922 - Foundation of HaPoel HaMizrachi - combination of Polish Chasidut and German Religious Zionism. Rav Kook supported them as "the perfect fulfillment of pious Judaism".
- 1923 - move into home next to Anna and Albert Ticho.



2. Mirsky, p168.

3. My son was at the Mercaz HaRav high-school, which DOES have a very broad range of Torah and secular studies.

M] JERUSALEM - 1924-1929

- 1924 - Rav Kook travels to America to fundraise. He visited Calvin Coolidge at the White House (pictured here in DC on April 15 1924) and presented him with a poem that he had written in Hebrew, which was read out in English in front of the President and Rav Kook.
- Made a strong connection with NY donor Harry Fischel (pictured below).



- April 1925 - Official opening of Hebrew University. Rav Kook gave a famous public address on the need for secular university learning to go hand-in-hand with yeshiva Torah study. Everyone was upset with him. The academics resented what they saw as a patronizing attitude towards their work as 'serving' Torah. The Old Yishuv were inflamed by his participation at the inauguration of what they saw as an anti-Torah institution.



- 1927 - On Shavuot, Rabbi Saul Lieberman went to Rav Kook's all-night lecture. Rav Kook took him under his wing in the hope that the young Lieberman - Talmud prodigy and academic genius studying Greek at Hebrew U - would help in his dream of synthesizing in some way Torah and academic Jewish studies. R' Lieberman went on to become a very important figure in America, associated with JTS.

R' Saul Lieberman



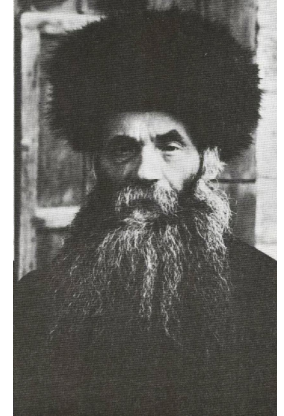
- Aug 1929 - Arab riots break out on Shabbat across the country - hundreds died (often horrifically) in Y-m, Tzfat and Chevron. Rav Kook centrally involved in the rescue efforts (his home filled with refugees) and the aftermath, which left the Yishuv shaken. The incident drew Rav Kook closer into the political issues of relations with the Arabs
- 1929 - His father died
- 1931 - His mother died - he was inconsolable

N] JERUSALEM - 1930-1935



- 1931 - on the eve of the 17th Zionist Congress, Rav Kook wrote a letter to the Congress encouraging them to support public Shabbat observance and also endorsing fund-raising for the Zionist movement
- The zealots in Y-m were outraged, although Rav Kook was strongly supported by Rav Issur Zalman Meltzer, who was a former fellow talmid in Volozhin and now sat on the Agudat Yisrael Rabbinical Council. "Let them, any of us, pray on Yom Kippur the way Rav Kook prays on an average weekday"

Rav Issur Zalman Meltzer



- Rav Kook is attacked vehemently in the *pashkevilim* - the posters on the walls of the Old Yishuv centers. The compared Rav Kook to 'oto haish', called him a 'defiler' and the very seat of the '*sitra achra*'. Some in the Old Yishuv leadership objected to the language, but could not reign in the crowds

- March 1932 - on erev Purim the Y-m branch of Agudat Yisrael youth held a mock trial in which Rav Kook was tried for heresy and then an effigy was mutilated as the youth danced and sang.
- Jan 1933 - Rav Kook sent a letter of greeting to the Maccabi sports association, wishing them luck and urging them not to play on

Shabbat. The *pashkevilim* went wild calling Rav Kook a heretic, hypocrite and a pig rummaging in the trash. Rav Kook never responded in kind but supported the organizations that undermined him and arranged favors for them. When asked how he can walk around alone at night without being concerned for *mazikim* which Chazal say endanger Talmidei Chachamim at night, he quipped that the '*mazikim*' of Y-m do not regard him a Talmid Chacham!

- Early 1930s - Rav Kook was not well with early stage cancer
- June 16 1933 - Chaim Arlosoroff - a brilliant young left-wing intellectual and head of of the Jewish Agency was shot and killed when walking with his wife on Tel Aviv beach. 3 young men from Jabotinsky's right-wing Revisionist movement were arrested by the British and charged, but they denied all involvement. The political battle between Right and Left became even more personal. Ben Gurion was convinced that the Revisionists were guilty. Jabotinsky denied it. The Yishuv tore itself apart - support for the Right dropped to under 15% (and stayed that way until Begin in the 1970s).
- Rav Kook remained silent but was approached by a passionate colleague - Religious Zionist Rabbi Natan Milikovsky - who's son Ben-Zion was with one of the accused elsewhere on the night of the murder.⁴
- April 1934 - Rav Kook added his signature to a letter in support of one of the accused - Avraham Stavsky. The Left were outraged and now saw Rav Kook as an ally of the Right
- July 1934 - an Arab confessed to the murders and the appeal court dismissed all charges against the boys.
- Youth from the secular Left wrote graffiti over Rav Kook's home. Rav Kook never managed to restore his relationship with the Left. The Arlosoroff affair left its mark on Israeli politics to this day⁵

Rav Kook and Rav Sonnenfeld



4. Ben-Zion Milikovsky later changed his name to Netanyahu . His son is Binyamin Netanyahu

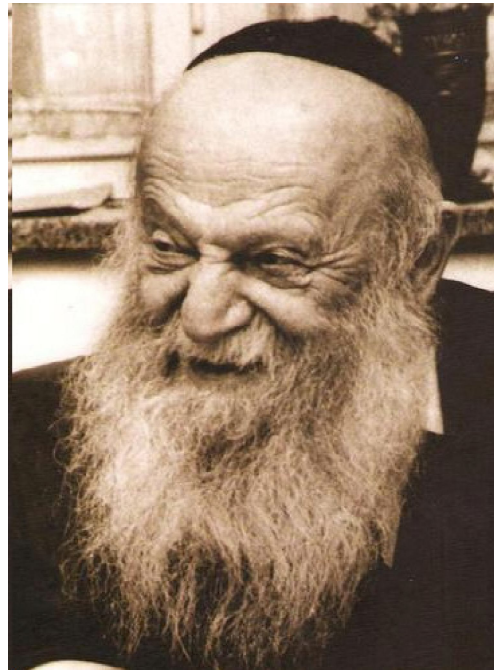
5. Stavsky eventually joined the Irgun and was killed on the Altalena under fire from the Haganah under the command of Yitzchak Rabin



- April 1935 - Rav Kook writes two important articles for the 800th anniversary of the birth of the Rambam
- Summer 1935 - his illness deepens and he is moved to Kiryat Moshe. Visitors come, including Rav Yosef Dov Ber Soloveitchik from Boston
- His last open letter was written to try and calm Left/Right clashes in Haifa
- 1 Elul - HaRav HaNazir brings him the title page of the new Orot HaKodesh
- 3 Elul, Sept 1 1935 - Rav Kook dies surrounded by Rabbis Charlap, Frank, Meltzer, Tyckoczinsky and Levine. His last sentence was 'Even now, my hope in God does not falter', then they all said Shema and he joined for the final word 'Echad'



HaRav HaNazir in the 1960's



Rav Zvi Yehuda Kook 1970's



Yeshivat Mercaz HaRav