

Old Vision in a New Perspective: Marc B. Shapiro. *Renewing the Old, Sanctifying the New: The Unique Vision of Rav Kook*. Liverpool University Press, 2025. 228 pages, GBP 24.95 , ISBN 9781802077339

Dov Schwartz
Bar-Ilan University
dov.schwartz@biu.ac.il

A book dealing with the philosophy of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (hereinafter “the Ra’ayah”) as a whole presents a considerable challenge for the author. Certainly, the Ra’ayah’s ideas are endless, and the texts written by him, published frequently, are numerous. The experiential writing of the Ra’ayah (which I call “visionary”) is open to many interpretations. Today, articles are being published summarizing the research on the Ra’ayah. Given such a statement, there is always something new to contribute in understanding specific issues and shedding light on certain texts. But a work on his philosophy as a whole? Not only do we have a series of such works, but everyone (including the writer of these lines) repeatedly lists, like a peddler, the various interpretations of the Ra’ayah’s philosophy—traditional, philosophical, and Kabbalistic—and in recent years, even halachic ones. Additionally, the period prior to his aliyah (immigration to Israel) in 1904 has also been studied. Shapiro’s book presents a series of ideas found in the Ra’ayah’s writings in a fluent and clear language.

A

As mentioned, there is no unambiguous criterion for the different interpretations of the Ra’ayah’s thought. After all, we are dealing with an ideological analysis of writing, much of which is phrased under inspiration, and such analysis is not subject to definitive proof. The different researchers who have dealt with the interpretation of the Ra’ayah’s writings have tried to provide at least likely evidence for the truth of their analysis, but ultimate proof is elusive. I will give a few examples of attempts to present a theory of the Ra’ayah’s philosophy, which seemingly relies on evidence. I will refer directly to Shapiro’s book:

1. **Statistics.** One can examine the frequency of certain terms in the Ra’ayah’s writings and infer his areas of interest. The book before us presents various aspects of his philosophy without even addressing the term that perhaps appears most frequently in the eight volumes in terms of numbers, which is “life.” And to be honest, an article with a similar scope to the current book, dealing only with the Ra’ayah’s philosophy of life (“Power and Life: Vitalist Philosophy and National Revival in the Thought of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook,” *Religious Zionism* XIII) is about to be published.

Is this definitive proof of the vitalist interpretation as the key to understanding the Ra'ayah's philosophy? As the author of the article, I can explicitly testify that it is not. The fact is that prior to his aliyah, this term was not prominent in the Ra'ayah's writings.

2. **First-hand testimony.** Another example brought in Shapiro's book is the Ra'ayah's famous testimony that all his ideas were carved from a holy source. What more do we need than the author's testimony? However, even without the well-known anecdote regarding Agnon and Kurzweil on the question of the sources of the great writer (I heard it in the version where Kurzweil wrote that Agnon was influenced by a certain philosopher, and Agnon replied that he had never read a word of this philosopher's work. Kurzweil responded, "Who asked you?"), an author cannot dismiss the influence of the intellectual climate. The Ra'ayah himself mentioned the philosophers who carried the ideas, both Jewish and non-Jewish, in a few paragraphs he wrote. In the case of vitalism, it is Bergson. The Ra'ayah even testified that his mission was to spread the secrets of the Kabbalah in a language understood by his generation. Is this the key to his entire philosophy? Perhaps. However, this statement does not exclude other meanings.
3. **Intellectual environment.** One can infer the philosophy of a thinker from the social and intellectual climate surrounding him. The Ra'ayah maintained an ongoing dialogue with students and friends. Their intellectual testimony teaches us about ideas present in the Ra'ayah's environment, where he was a revered figure. These student-friends created a mosaic in which each person adopted certain aspects of the Ra'ayah's teachings. Again, the extent of the connection of the students is a matter of dispute, and I will not enter this issue, which I have dealt with extensively. Shapiro's book, like its predecessors, did not address this argument.
4. **Experience and writing.** The Ra'ayah had a certain type of experience that allows one to offer a fitting interpretation of the result of that experience, namely the text. Based on the "visionary" experiential writing of the Ra'ayah and his perfect writing style—nearly free of deletions—I have argued in the past that the paragraphs in his "Eight Volumes" at least contain multiple layers of meaning (contemporary, philosophical, and Kabbalistic). In other words, each paragraph in "Eight Volumes," for example, can be read in a full and "closed" reading. It can be read as directed at the events of the generation, and its interpretation would be political and public. It can also be read as containing a theoretical and philosophical message, and it can be read as containing a Kabbalistic message. As stated, each of these readings is self-contained. This is "religious genius."¹ Certainly, like the other claims, this is a claim that, by its very nature, is difficult to refute, even though it is based on evidence. How so? One should connect the fourth claim with the second to understand how open the interpretation of the Ra'ayah is. The Ra'ayah opens the sixth volume of *Shemonah Kevatzim* with the following words:

¹ Dov Schwartz, *The Religious Genius in Rabbi Kook's Thought: National "Saint"?* (Academic Studies Press, 2014).

I cannot limit myself to one issue, one matter, one level, and one style. Rather, I must draw from all styles, all matters, all levels, all things. And when I see one path that is good in my eyes, and I wish to follow it alone, I later see how other paths demand their role. I need to draw and drink from wells, from wells of living water (Genesis 26:19; Song of Songs 4:15), from the Torah that is within my soul, from the particular letter assigned to me, through which all the letters of the Torah come to me via this channel, and all the world and its affairs relate to me through this content, with sincerity of heart, with a proper spirit, with a crushed soul, with holy strength and joy. I need to receive all the streams of enlightenment, even though they come to me in a scattered manner, their end will be unity. Only to lift our eyes to the source of unity, to the source of life, to cleave to the supreme thought, to the holiness of the Torah and its root, to the light of life in the joy of our celebration, to the rock of our salvation, to the straight path of good virtues, of building and rectification, of the splendor of the world, of the happiness of life, of the holiness of existence, of the depth of reality—unto its glory, its majesty, its radiance, and the splendor of all worlds; to the Creator of all souls, the Master of all deeds, the glorification of the Living One of all worlds; to the source of all songs, to the transcendent beauty that has no comparison, to the source of all truths, to the highest of all goodness, to the cleaving of holiness, to the foundation of all life, to the wellspring of all knowledge, to the source of truth, to the light of the root of all that is most holy, to the head of all beginnings and all ultimate purposes.²

Here, the Ra'ayah clearly describes an experience in which he encompasses various styles and content. He cannot limit himself to a particular content even if he desires to. Inspiration causes him, even if he thinks he is formulating one message on one level of meaning, in the end, different meanings find their way into the text of unity. He speaks in this passage not only of ideas but also of their formulation, and for this, he draws on the idea of letters, whose connection to other dimensions of existence, such as the psychological dimension, is emphasized in Hasidic thought. Even in the revealing writing, which directly addresses the personality of the writer, the Ra'ayah could not avoid multiple meanings. He uses explicit Kabbalistic terms alongside terminology describing personality (“wells of living water,” “channel” as Malchut and Yesod, respectively, etc.). Thus, he expresses not only the psychological dimension but also the divine abundance flowing from level to level. The processes occur simultaneously. At the same time, the passage takes on an aesthetic meaning when the Kabbalistic “Tiferet” (beauty) is reflected in beauty.

Therefore, one can argue different claims about a particular philosophy, and in this case, the Ra'ayah's philosophy, and each claim enriches the perspective without necessarily refuting another. This assumption is further strengthened by the fact that the Ra'ayah's writing is abundant, lacking systematics, and incidental. The safe criterion for

² Abraham Isaac Kook, *Shemona Kevatzim* 6, 1 (Jerusalem, 1999, vol. 3, p. 3); my translation.

contributing to the understanding of the Ra'ayah's philosophy is innovation. There are at least two avenues of innovation:

1. A new claim about the content of the text, i.e., presenting an unconventional interpretation.
2. A new aspect relating to the environment of the text (historical and social) and the community of its readers.

B

When we are confronted with a work of research on the Ra'ayah's philosophy, we need to examine: Are there arguments here that have not been articulated in prior research? And even if we answer negatively, we still need to examine whether the writer's perspective brings new meaning to content that has already appeared before.

Looking at the chapters of Shapiro's book shows that a series of ideas have already been extensively studied in the research on the Ra'ayah:

1. Where is Rav Kook's Soul?
2. Is Halakhah Always Essential?
3. The Need for Broad Jewish Philosophical Knowledge and the Dangers of a Limited Curriculum.
4. Torah, History, and Science.
5. The Problem of Heresy.
6. Natural Morality, the Jewish Masses, and Halakhah.
7. Study of Kabbalah; Other Religions.
8. Halakhic Change; Secular Knowledge.
9. Animal Sacrifices, Vegetarianism, and the Messianic King.

It remains to be clarified where the soul of the author of this monograph lies and what is the novelty in his work. I believe the answer is provided in the introduction to the book. Shapiro's perspective is that of Modern Orthodoxy. We are presented with a new aspect of the Ra'ayah's thought. He explicitly asks what contribution Rav Kook's philosophy made to Modern Orthodoxy and its ideology. The book contains several clarifications of the background to the Ra'ayah's ideas. For example, a discussion of the issue of "according to the majority." Shapiro believes that the Ra'ayah's statement that some righteous individuals do not need to observe the commandments should be understood differently than Maimonides' argument that the system of commandments is adapted to the majority and not to all.³ Additionally, he presents a lengthy discussion on the allegorical interpretation of biblical texts. Shapiro's starting point was the Ra'ayah's

³ Even if Shapiro's claim is correct, namely, that Rav Kook expressed a different meaning than Maimonides, there is no doubt that the Maimonidean model was the foundation upon which Rav Kook built his argument. He was well acquainted with the words of the Great Eagle and then offered a different interpretation or understanding.

approach to evolution, and he showed that the path the great thinker took allowed for the possibility of interpreting sources allegorically, even taking into account the biological theory. To this, Shapiro connected a long discussion on medieval allegorical interpretation, bringing a series of rationalists such as Moses Narboni and Shem Tov ben Joseph ibn Shem Tov, whose thought had already been extensively discussed in research. However, the new perspective Shapiro offered is its significance for Modern Orthodoxy. I am not sure whether he carefully distinguished the term from Religious Zionism. Nevertheless, I would claim that Shapiro's unique perspective is Modern Orthodoxy.

Ido Pachter argued in an article dedicated to comparing Modern Orthodoxy (mainly in the United States) with Religious Zionism that the former tends more toward individualism and does not adopt the Religious Zionist rejection of the diaspora.⁴ Herein lies a problem: The Ra'ayah "lived" the rejection of the diaspora. He didn't only write about it, but after his aliyah to the Land of Israel, he felt intellectual suffocation in the diaspora. After World War I, he was not willing to remain abroad to continue dealing with "Degel Yerushalayim," the movement he founded, which in his view would replace Zionism. Unlike fervent Zionists who could not live in the Land and needed the European atmosphere and manners, like Jacob Klatzkin, the Ra'ayah could not stay abroad. Therefore, the Ra'ayah's philosophy is a challenge to Modern Orthodoxy, and this is where Shapiro's book truly fits in. In this book, Shapiro gathers the ideas that laid the foundation for openness in the Ra'ayah's thinking. For example, the "softened" view of halakhah allows for life in North America, which contains diverse ethnic groups. Millions of Jews live in areas without abundant religious services like those in coastal cities. The emphasis on the theological residue also allows for a balanced understanding of halakhah, thereby justifying existence in the atmosphere of Modern Orthodoxy.

The climate of inclusion, which characterizes Modern Orthodoxy, also indirectly clarifies the necessity for Shapiro's use of rabbinical works with a hagiographical tint. This assertion mainly applies to what is called "Torah research," as nurtured in the past by Mossad Harav Kook, i.e., an alternative research method to academic centers, which respects its subjects and believes in their sanctity.⁵ The Ra'ayah's image shapes the ethos and education of Religious Zionism, and he has undergone a process of sanctification within this public. Although the Ra'ayah himself was not willing to be identified with the "Mizrachi" movement, he became its most important source of inspiration in the Land of Israel. Shapiro endeavored to bring the Ra'ayah closer to the image of Rabbi Soloveitchik, although, in my opinion, the two great thinkers would not have understood each other. A meaningful dialogue could not have taken place between ideas based on entirely different terminologies (the two met in 1935). However, from the perspective of the Modern Orthodox researcher, both figures rely on the principle of inclusion. Incidentally, Yonah

⁴ Ido Pachter, "Between Modern Orthodoxy and Religious Zionism," [in Hebrew,] *Religious Zionism* 13 (2020): 115–151.

⁵ The roots of such research were explored by Asaf Yedidya in his book *Bikoret Mevukeret* (Mosad Bialik, Jerusalem, 2013).

Ben Sasson already attempted to compare these two thinkers in depth.⁶ I cannot, within this framework, go into the detailed arguments as to why, in my opinion, there is no common basis for comparing Rabbi Soloveitchik with the Ra'ayah. In any case, Shapiro's reliance on articles written by the Ra'ayah's admirers and disciples is an important layer in the Modern Orthodox interpretation of the Ra'ayah's thought.

As mentioned, the book includes a series of clarifications of the Ra'ayah's ideas. However, its great significance lies in the fact that, for the first time, we have a complete record of Modern Orthodoxy systematically reading the Ra'ayah's writings. This is not a collection of articles on the Ra'ayah's thought, nor a comparative study of him and other thinkers, which have already appeared in English. Shapiro's work is a monograph entirely dedicated to the Ra'ayah, interpreting his philosophy with a tendency towards openness and a "softened" view of halakhic authority. More than contributing to understanding the Ra'ayah, this book makes an important contribution to recognizing Modern Orthodoxy and, indirectly, justifying it.

⁶ Yonah Ben Sasson, "The Philosophies of Ra'ayah Kook and Rav J. D. Soloveitchik (The Methodologies' Foundations)," In *In His Light: Studies in the Thought of Rav Kook and Its Educational Methods* (World Zionist Organization Jerusalem, 1986), 353–510.