
BOOK REVIEW

Mirsky, Yehudah. 2021. *Towards the Mystical Experience of Modernity: The Making of Rav Kook, 1865–1904*. Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press. xix + 392 pp. ISBN: 978-1618119551. US\$30.99 (pbk).

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Even for those unfamiliar with Rav Kook's writings, or only familiar with his later writings from the time he moved to Palestine in 1904, this book offers so much background information on what constituted the richness of pre-Zionist thinking in Eastern Europe, amongst other places of Jewish intellectual and religious activity, in Halakah, Kabbalah and Musar, that it is well worth reading. Perhaps, though, it will prove a hard slog for modern readers, especially those who are not Jewish or grew up Jewish without respect for its vast heritage of dialogue, debate and storytelling, along with legal and ethical discussion. What should stand out in such a perusal—or intense meditation—on Mirsky's text is how much interaction there has always been between Jewish, Christian and Muslim people and traditions, as well as in more modern centuries of secular and civic speculation and creativity. If non-Jewish authors have not always been aware of their counterparts among the rabbis and mystics of Jewish tradition, Jewish thinkers have often shaped—had to shape—their thought in such a way as to confront, adapt and at times adopt these other ideas and ways of debating and telling stories.

The biography of Kook begins with his childhood in Eastern Europe and his absorption and eventual mastering of the vast body of books and ideas prevalent in the second half of the nineteenth century. Within these sermons, commentaries and polemical pieces, Kook focuses on rabbinical and kabbalistic writings. In doing so, as Mirsky points out, Kook begins with the Litvak school of thought under the Vilna Gaon, then evaluates carefully the texts of the Vilna Gaon, and progresses towards two other movements. With a vast number of footnotes, sometimes taking up nine-tenths of the page, one of the important features of this book is to serve as a compendium of Jewish learning and history. Many key terms and the names of movements are explained assiduously, and the background and explanatory books and articles are named and evaluated. The modernist trends in Haskalah, the Hebrew Enlightenment led by Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) and, increasingly, by the turn of the century non-Judaic vernacular literature, as well as the new ideas generated by Zionism, are all covered. All the while, sometimes in the body of the text and sometimes in long excursions in the footnotes by Mirsky, the focus is on the preliminary attempts to realize what after 1904 will become Kook's unique ideas on how the land of Palestine will be the centre of a

Judaism that can front the rest of the modernist world. At the same time, however, Mirsky reveals his own growing understanding of the development of Rav Kook's attainment as a central contributor to Israeli thought.

A thirty-page bibliography further adds to Mirsky's instruction into nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ashkenazi learning. An acknowledgment section discusses the methods used by Mirsky to address the latest scholarship on Kook's political-mystical-ideological agenda. Thus, this book offers itself to two types of readership. The first are rabbis and theologians, for whom the references are known as preparations for modern Judaism, and the second are more general historians of Israeli politicians and historians of ideas, who are not generally well-known. It is warmly recommended.