

Joseph Agassi / On the open grave of Hillel Kook (Peter Bergson)

I leave the matter of Hillel Kook the individual to his relative and others who were close to him. Although we were friends for decades, the focus of our friendship was his thought. Therefore, I will speak only of his life work.

Even of that, I cannot elaborate. He joined the Irgun National Military Organization as a youth, joined its headquarters as a teenager, and went abroad on a mission at the age of 22, from which he returned a decade later, after his chief political activity was over. I cannot describe all that now. I will sum it up briefly. His life work had two great achievements and two heartbreaking failures. The struggle to rescue the Jews of Europe during the Holocaust and the Declaration of Israel's Independence were both his achievements and his failures.

His activity for the rescue of the Jews of Europe was most impressive. Its achievement, however, was too scant. And for many different reasons. The one among these that is important for us today is the sabotage — of the Jewish organizations in the United States of America and of the Zionist organizations both there and here. The disagreement he had with them was simple. They demanded that the rescue of Jews be conditioned on shipping them to Palestine. The Committees to Save the Jews of Europe that Hillel Kook had founded made no conditions. Today we should demand of the national leadership and of the Zionist leadership to stop spreading lies on the matter and open a thorough public discussion on a very important question. How was it possible that Jewish leaders and Jewish leaderships could display such an indifference to the fate of the Jews of Europe? Accusations are of no importance. Nor are self-recriminations. The question is important because we must do all we

can to prevent a repetition of the tragic error. For, there is no denial today that a tragic error did occur. It is not enough to say, Never again. The question must be addressed in all seriousness. In Israel today the public displays the disposition to evade painful questions. This is a costly error. For all of us.

Hillel Kook's activities for Israel's independence were also a very impressive success and a failure as well. It is repeatedly reported that our independence was granted to us by the departure of the British mandatory government and by the decision of the United Nations Organization in November 1947. This is untrue. Independence is never granted. It is taken. It is no accident that the Palestinians still have no independence to this very day — despite their having shared with us these conditions. Moreover, the United Nations Organization soon withdrew its decision. Consequently, members of Ben-Gurion's inner circle demanded that he should postpone the declaration of Independence. I do not know how much Hillel Kook has influenced Ben-Gurion since he denied that they ever discussed this matter — despite the documentation to the contrary. But it is obvious that he was influenced by the announcement of the Irgun National Military Organization, that if he would not declare independence, they would. Their attitude on this was definitely influenced by Hillel Kook. He had tried repeatedly to convince the headquarter of the Irgun National Military Organization to establish a Hebrew Government in Exile. Towards the zero hour, they gathered courage and made history.

In the last Zionist Congress before Independence, in December 1946, in Basel, discussion on independence was taken to be a long-term project. Weizmann said in his opening speech, there will be a

Jewish state, and if my children will not live to see it, my grandchildren will. The Congress denounced the Hebrew Committee for National Liberation. It is time to discuss this condemnation and to make the Knesset and the Israeli government and the Zionist leadership to rescind it.

The painful failure is more important to attend to. Israel's independence was declared, but not in the name of the Jewish people that dwell in Zion, not in the name of the Hebrew nation, not in the name of the Israeli nation. Hillel Kook dreamt of the Hebrew Republic of Palestine. This idea was rejected. He soon altered his position and suggested that Israel should show readiness to give up East Palestine in exchange for peace with her neighbors. These made his erstwhile comrades call him a traitor. They called him a traitor. They then called western Palestine the Greater Israel. Their followers now express their expansionist tendencies by taking over Orient House—at least for a few months. Yesterday the President of Egypt issued an appeal to the Israeli people. With no reference to the contents of his appeal, we can see that he missed his target. No one in Israel speaks or listens in the name of the Israeli people. No one here recognizes this people. Indeed, the translation on TV for the expression “the Israeli people” is “the State of Israel”. (The press, I understand, did not report the event at all.) A basic democratic quality is the responsibility of the national leadership to its electorate. All Israeli leaders declare self-righteously that they are responsible for the whole of the Jewish people no matter where they happen to dwell. These are not able to elect the Israeli government. Hence they can also not dismiss it even when it displays outrageous irresponsibility, even when it displays no political plan for

action beyond requesting of foreign governments to blame the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian leaders and to put pressure on them. We heard repeatedly that our current problems cannot be solved by military means, that only a political solution may be possible. This detail is now forgotten — because of despair.

Hillel Kook said repeatedly that Israel's leadership stole from the Israeli people their nationality. The French Jew is both French and Jewish. The American Jew is both American and Jewish. Only Israeli Jews are not Israelis. Of course, Israel is a Jewish state the way France is a Catholic state. And why can an Israeli not declare, as Hillel Kook did repeatedly, I am 100% a Jew and 100% an Israeli? Why not? Because if this were admitted, than it would also be admitted that Israel has also nationals who are 100% Israeli but not Jewish at all, but Muslim or Christian or Druse, or whatever else they may be. Israeli Jews find this unacceptable. And on the ground that Israel must be the state of all Jews no matter where they live. And this on the ground that we must avoid the repetition of the shameful abandonment of the Jews of Europe during the Holocaust. And so Israelis find the right to religious discrimination in the Holocaust and in the irresponsibility of their leadership then.

Religious discrimination has made Israel bi-national de facto. As long as she maintains a national minority, said Hillel Kook, she will not be viable. Most regrettably, recent events prove him right. The national minority in Israel has the peculiar status. Its members have the right to elect and to be elected, but not to bear arms. This amounts to the idea that weapons speak louder than laws, that soldiers are mightier than legislators. This is an intolerable insult to the laws,

and it introduces violence into all areas of life here. In Israel there is a clear preference for contempt for the law, since the settlers violate the law of the land. They imitate the heroic settlers in the period of the British Mandate. In that period the British government had betrayed its Mandate. Today the Israeli premiere praises the lawbreakers and thus belittles the law and the government that rules by the law and himself as its head.

Hillel Kook demanded all his life that we establish an Israeli Republic that will be a normal nation-state in the western liberal democratic pattern so that its government could initiate practical political solutions to the difficult problems of the day that no Israeli leader claims to have a plan for its solutions. Hillel Kook changed his positions repeatedly in the light of changing circumstances and in accord with the principle that a responsible government should display one-sided political initiative. He was amazingly free of dogma. The fact that he stuck to the idea of nationalism has no basis in any dogma. It rests on two facts. First the sense of duty that he had towards the people who dwell in Zion. The second is the absence, to date, of any form of government that is preferable to the western-style liberal democratic nation-state. This form is far from perfect. He was convince that a day will come and nations will disappear, so he wrote, and the unity of all humanity will prevail. But he added to this that if we will not fulfill our national purposes, then we will have no descendents to witness that great day. It is a matter of life and death.

We take leave of Hillel Kook with the promise not to forget his message. It is a matter of life and death.

Herzlia,