

From Notebooks to Ballots: Mediation, Simplest Interpretations, and National-Religious Political Behavior

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Abstract

This essay examines the multi-layered process by which the private notebooks of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook were transformed into published volumes and subsequently into operational political categories within segments of Israel's national-religious public. It argues that a historically specific chain of mediation—first editorial, then pedagogical after 1967—produced a dominant interpretive habit that treats selected elements of Kook's thought as near-direct mandates for territorial maximalism and electoral purity. This habit has contributed measurably to patterns of vote fragmentation observed across successive Israeli election cycles, including 2026. The analysis distinguishes idealistic and structural-incentive accounts of the resulting behavior, evaluates the phenomenon against internal Orthodox criteria of political maturity (*da'at*) and unity (*achdut*), and notes convergent concerns within republican political theory regarding non-domination and the institutional conditions of collective self-government. While not the sole causal factor, the simplest interpretations of Kook's mediated corpus constitute a significant and historically traceable driver of national-religious electoral practice.

1. Textual Genealogy: Notebooks, Editors, and Published Volumes

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook (1865–1935) composed the bulk of his most consequential private writing in small notebooks spanning more than three decades. The cluster known as the *Shemonah Kevatzim*, written largely between 1904 and 1921 and including the years of the First World War spent in Switzerland and England, consists of short, dense, largely associative paragraphs. These entries move by sudden illumination, by the application of Kabbalistic categories to history and nature, and by the free play of insight. They characteristically hold thesis and antithesis without forced resolution and were never intended as finished treatises. The full notebooks were published only in 1999.

The volumes that appear on the shelf—principally *Orot* and the multi-volume *Orot HaKodesh*, issued by Mossad HaRav Kook—are later constructions drawn from those notebooks. Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook and Rabbi David Cohen (the Nazir) selected passages, rearranged them into topical or developmental sequences, and in places collaged material from different notebooks or adjusted wording so that the result would read as a more coherent body of thought. *Orot HaKodesh* in particular was shaped by the Nazir, under Kook's general direction during his lifetime and completed afterward, into a philosophical-kabbalistic architecture the raw entries do not themselves supply. Tzvi Yehuda, who edited more of the corpus than any other figure, rearranged sentences, expanded paragraphs, moderated formulations that might invite attack, and softened unguarded self-perceptions. Comparative scholarship documents both fidelity in spirit and substantive mediation. The published text is not a forgery; it is also not identical to the source. The shelf therefore displays a first mediation.

2. Academic and Traditional Perspectives on the Editorial Process

Academic literature treats the editorial process as a historical fact that shapes reception. Some scholars emphasize protective intent: moderation was designed to shield the author from the fierce criticism

already directed at him in his lifetime. Others observe that the mediation constructed a more systematic philosopher than the notebooks themselves display, and that post-1967 readers, guided especially by Tzvi Yehuda's leadership at Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav, read the published volumes as warrant for territorial maximalism. Traditional defenders of the editorial work argue that the Nazir and Tzvi Yehuda were the closest students, that Kook saw and accepted portions of the work, and that the published books successfully transmitted the essential vision of all-encompassing unity and the progressive absorption of exile's spiritualization into the holiness of the Land. Critics within and beyond the Religious Zionist world counter that the notebooks reveal a more exploratory and less politically determinate thinker, and that treating the published architecture as closed doctrine flattens the dialectical method the notebooks exemplify.

Both readings are present in the literature. Neither erases the other. The books remain the classic public expression that formed generations of students; the notebooks remain the primary record against which that expression can be measured. Collapse of the distance is the beginning of simplification.

3. Historical Transmission: From Mediated Text to Post-1967 Movement Ideology

The decisive political mediation occurred through Tzvi Yehuda and the circle around Merkaz HaRav. After 1967, his teaching and public interventions treated territorial acquisition and settlement not merely as desirable policy but as the concrete, non-negotiable continuation of his father's redemptive trajectory. Passages from *Orot* and related volumes on the Land, on the people, and on the refusal to accept partial sovereignty were presented, taught, and internalized as near-direct mandates. Students and alumni of this educational stream entered the settlement movement, the officer corps, and later the political parties that claimed the national-religious inheritance. The result was not the only possible reading of the sources, but it became the reading with the greatest institutional and activist force. The simplest interpretations are therefore not random or marginal; they are the product of a specific, highly influential transmission that privileged activist, territorial, and purity-oriented applications over the more dialectical, patient, or universalist strands that also exist in the notebooks and even in the published books.

4. From Movement Ideology to Electoral Practice: The Pattern of Vote-Splitting

Once the interpretive habit is in place—every compromise risks betrayal of the redemptive process, every intermediate political vessel is spiritually deficient—the logic of vote-splitting follows with internal consistency. A joint list that dilutes maximalist messaging becomes harder to justify. A small pure list that fails the threshold can still be defended as fidelity. Technical splits, new parties (Feiglin's successive vehicles, Winter's Amcha Yisrael, Noam's purity lists, Otzma Yehudit's independence), and repeated refusals of pragmatic merger are not only power plays; they are applications of the habit.

A decade-long pattern, identified in contemporary commentary and visible again in the October 2026 returns, shows national-religious and further-right lists burning right-wing votes and repeatedly leaving seats on the floor. Religious Zionism—Zehut and Otzma Yehudit ran separately rather than with the combined strength a joint list had previously achieved; smaller challengers failed to clear the 3.25 percent threshold; the right-wing bloc as a whole struggled for a stable majority amid Arab turnout gains and internal fragmentation. Public financing in Israel is a direct function of votes and seats. A pure list that clears the threshold or functions as a credible spoiler generates real money, real jobs, and real leverage. Ideological maximalism supplies both moral capital and institutional revenue.

Two readings of this behavior are compatible and mutually reinforcing. The idealistic reading holds that sincere actors are attempting to impose the full redemptive trajectory, as currently imagined from simplified readings of the published volumes, onto the concrete constraints of electoral thresholds and coalition arithmetic. The more cynical reading notes the structural incentive: the more uncompromising the brand, the clearer the differentiation, the more reliable the public allocation. Fantasy and rent-seeking reinforce each other without requiring conscious fraud in every case. The sectors and networks most deeply formed by the Merkaz HaRav / post-1967 reading have been the most consistent producers of purity-driven fragmentation. Other right-wing voters have shown greater willingness to consolidate behind larger vehicles when the alternative is wasted seats. The differential behavior tracks the differential intensity of the interpretive culture.

5. Theological Critique: *Da'at*, *Achdut*, and the Refusal to Force the End

Orthodox theology supplies internal criteria. The demand for *da'at*—political and practical maturity—is not a secular concession; it is a mitzvah. The structure of Deuteronomy 16, the repeated warnings against forcing the end (*dohakim et ha-ketz*), and the insistence that the people must not be split into competing purity camps when external threats remain existential all treat the capacity to distinguish intermediate vessels from final redemption as a religious responsibility. Kook's own notebooks, precisely because they refuse premature resolution, model a higher tolerance for contradiction than many of their simplest political applications display. *Achdut* is not the suppression of legitimate disagreement; it is the refusal to treat every disagreement as a reason to burn the common instruments of sovereignty. When simplified readings repeatedly prevent the formation of stable majorities on the very camp that claims those readings as inheritance, the result is not greater holiness. It is repeated exposure of the nation to paralysis and the erosion of practical capacity to act.

6. Republican Political Theory Resonance

Republican political theory converges on the same practical demand from a different vocabulary. Non-domination requires that no faction treat the body politic as raw material for its pure vision. Reciprocity rejects purity tests that systematically fragment the capacity for collective self-government. Checks and balances, electoral thresholds, and public financing formulas are not obstacles to be transcended; they are the concrete vessels through which any claim to sovereignty must move. A politics that treats them as spiritual failures has already abandoned the insistence that power be exercised under conditions that protect the people who carry the covenant, not merely the ideological self-image of any single list.

7. Limits, Counter-Arguments, and the Strength of the Causal Claim

The thesis does not claim exclusivity. Security failures, leadership charisma, anti-Netanyahu positioning, and pure rent-seeking all operate. Some national-religious voters and thinkers have long offered more complex readings that prioritize state capacity, broader coalitions, and patience with intermediate arrangements. Those voices have simply possessed less organizational and electoral force within the activist core. Acknowledging multiplicity strengthens rather than weakens the argument: the simplest interpretations have not been the only ones available, yet they have been disproportionately consequential for the political behavior that burns seats.

The distance from notebook to published volume to post-1967 teaching to 2026 ballot is therefore not incidental. It is the mechanism. Simplest interpretations of Kook are not the sole cause of national-religious political fragmentation, but they are a major, historically traceable, and still operative cause—one that continues to shape elite formation, activist incentives, and electoral outcomes more powerfully than is often admitted when the conversation stays at the level of tactics alone.

Conclusion

The trajectory from the *Shemonah Kevatzim* to the published *Orot* volumes to the post-1967 pedagogy of Merkaz HaRav and finally to the electoral lists of recent cycles constitutes a chain of successive mediations. Each stage is intelligible on its own terms—private spiritual diary, devoted editorial construction, activist pedagogical transmission, and concrete political application—yet the cumulative effect has been the conversion of a dialectical, unfinished corpus into a relatively closed set of operational mandates. Those mandates have, in turn, licensed and legitimated patterns of vote fragmentation whose costs are visible in seat arithmetic and in the repeated difficulty of assembling stable right-wing majorities.

The argument advanced here is neither that every national-religious voter is a direct exegete of Kook nor that ideology is the only relevant variable. It is that a particular interpretive culture, historically dominant in key educational and activist institutions, has supplied a durable vocabulary and set of justifications for purity-driven electoral behavior, and that this culture is itself the product of identifiable textual and pedagogical mediations. Orthodox criteria of *da'at* and *achdut*, together with republican concerns for non-domination and institutional reciprocity, supply independent grounds for questioning whether the simplest applications of the mediated corpus serve the long-term capacity of the people to exercise collective self-government.

Responsible engagement with the sources therefore requires maintaining, rather than collapsing, the distances between notebook, published volume, pedagogical reception, and contemporary ballot. Only by preserving those distances can the depth of the original writing be distinguished from the political uses to which it has been put, and only then can the question of political maturity be posed in terms internal both to the tradition and to the institutional requirements of a functioning democratic polity.

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