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Changes in the Understanding of Work in Religious Zionist Thought: Rabbi T.I. Thau as a Case Study

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Received: 10 June 2018; Accepted: 17 September 2018; Published: 20 September 2018



Abstract: In Jewish religious texts, Torah study is placed at the top of the hierarchy of values. This suggests that work as such is of no religious significance; work is rather a prerequisite for the real essentials of life. The Mizrahi religious Zionist movement, founded in 1902 by R. Yitzhak Yaakov Reines (1839–1915), introduced a markedly different view. The movement upheld a concept of work as a religious value, not only an existential need. Later religious Zionist thinkers developed a dialectical notion of the mutual integration of the Torah and labor; this eventually became the motto of the Bnei Akiva youth movement that they inspired. With time, the theological approach of R. Kook the Elder (ReAYaH) and of R. Kook the Younger (RTziYaH) became dominant in religious Zionism. R. Kook the Elder founded the yeshivah at Merkaz ha-rav in Jerusalem, which he also headed; his son eventually succeeded him. To date, the yeshivah has produced a great number of students and rabbis, who made the teaching of the two Rabbis Kook the legacy of the religious Zionist community as a whole. The aim of the present article is to trace the changes taking place in the religious Zionist attitude toward work as this is articulated in the thought of a student of the two Rabbis, Kook whom many regard as the continuator of their teaching today. This is Rabbi Tzvi Israel Thau (b. 1937), one of the most influential rabbinic figures associated with religious Zionism, President of Yeshivat har ha-mor and the spiritual leader of the Torah academies referred to as “yeshivot of the line [ha-kav]”.

Keywords: Rabbi Thau; religious Zionism; R. Avraham Yitzhak ha-Kohen Kook; R. Reines; R. Tzvi Yehudah HaKohen Kook; Yeshivat har ha-mor; work; labor

1. Background

Understanding the nature of work, especially physical labor, is a crucial issue in both Christian and Jewish theology. Both traditions consider it self-evident that people must work in order to make a living; however, the question remains, is work as such endowed with religious value? Or is work a *sine qua non*, a prerequisite for physical survival, but of no religious significance in itself?

The present article sets out to trace the way in which this issue became a springboard for novel departures and differences of opinion in religious Zionist theology in the 1900's, especially in Israel.

Jewish religious texts encompass a number of different approaches to the notion of work.¹ Some opinions confer upon work the status of a religious value, as in: “Great is skilled labor, for just as the Jewish People has been commanded concerning the Sabbath, so has it been commanded concerning labor, as it is said, ‘Six days shall you work and accomplish all your labor concerns’” (Exodus 20:8).² This suggests that there are parallel injunctions: Just as there is a Commandment to refrain from

¹ For work in Jewish texts, see (Noybert 2015). Note that “work”, “skilled labor”, “craft”, and “the way of the earth” are all terms referring to physical labor.

² Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, version B, 21.

work on the Sabbath, so is there a Commandment to work during the week. Some traditional Jewish authorities claimed that work is nothing more than a need for survival, so that no independent religious value can be associated with it. This is the view voiced in the Talmudic statement about every father's obligation to teach his son a profession: "Anyone who does not teach his son a craft teaches him [thereby] to be a robber." This is because "Having no craft and lacking [a means of earning his] bread, he will head for the crossroads, [whence] he will ambush and plunder simple folk."³

It was evident to Jewish traditional thinkers in pre-modern times that in itself, work has no religious significance of its own. Torah study stands at the top of the Jewish hierarchy of values: "Torah study is of equal stature to them all",⁴ meaning that, considered alone against all other Jewish values, the study of Torah carries the day.⁵ Hence the recommendation, "Limit your involvement in business and busy yourself with Torah."⁶ Torah is the principal focus; all other concerns are subordinate to it. Accordingly, this has been the approach most clearly discernible throughout Jewish history: An understanding of work as a prerequisite which must be met in order for the real essentials of life to be addressed. This approach became dominant among Halakhists to the near total exclusion of any other. Thus, R. Joseph Caro, a 16th-century giant among Halakhic arbitrators, ruled that one must work, the reason being that poverty is capable of leading to apostasy. *Nota bene*: Work is a must, but not a religious value in itself.⁷

The revival of Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel led to intensified concern with work and raising labor productivity. The principle of raising labor productivity, which had its beginnings in the European Enlightenment of the 1700's and left an essential mark on both European and Jewish thought of the 19th century, and also had a profound impact on the Hovevei Zion movement, including both regular members and ideologues and rabbinic leaders.⁸ Besides, from within the Jewish community, there had been criticism of the Halukkah⁹ [organized collection of funds on behalf of Jews living in the Land of Israel; translator's note], along with exhortation in favor of earning a livelihood by means of manual labor, primarily agriculture. Together, these things created new opportunities, with the Emancipation enabling the Jews to enter different sectors of the economy which had previously been inaccessible to them. The aim of increasing labor productivity led the First Aliyah to establish new settlements and foster the professions, developing new ways of earning a living for the individual.¹⁰ Concern with raising labor productivity, which was part of both European and Jewish discourse of the times, also left its mark on the Zionist movement and on religious Zionism.¹¹

Zionists who were also socialists, especially members of the Second and Third Aliyah (Bartal et al. 1997), saw work as essential for both individual and national Redemption. Their understanding of physical labor was deeply religious; it was even dubbed a "religion of labor." A. D. Gordon, a prominent thinker associated with the Second Aliyah, was a leading proponent of the ideas that formed the foundation for their thought.¹² As Gordon saw it, by means of work, primarily agriculture, both the individual and the people renew their bond with the origin of their existence and with life overall (Bergmann and Shochet 1952): "We can create the nation only when each one of us creates himself

³ Kiddushin 29b and Rashi's commentary ad loc.

⁴ Mishnah Peah 1:1.

⁵ The Mishnah enumerates a series of values, but work is not included among the items listed.

⁶ Mishnah, Ethics of the Fathers 4:10.

⁷ Shulchan 'Arukh, Orach Chaim 156:1.

⁸ For the Hovevei Zion, Jewish Emancipation and increasing productivity, see (Goldstein 2016).

⁹ See Levin (1975); for increasing labor productivity, agriculture, and work, see pp. 170–256.

¹⁰ The Hebrew word '*aliyah* [lit., *ascent*] is used as a term to refer to Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel. The wave of immigration known as the Second Aliyah took place in 1904–1914; the Third Aliyah is associated with the years 1919–1923. See (Ettinger and Bartal 2005). The idea of increasing labor productivity had a profound impact on the Second Aliyah, as well.

¹¹ "Zionism" is the term typically used to refer to the national movement emerging in Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1800s in support of reestablishing a sovereign Jewish political state in the Land of Israel; Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) was the movement's founder. See (Shimoni 1995).

¹² See (Schweid 1970; Ratzabi 2008).

anew by means of work and natural living.”¹³ Work would create the Jewish people anew after the nation had been isolated from the natural life mode and become accustomed to idleness during the years it spent in exile.¹⁴ National and individual rebirth along with Redemption would be the result of a return to manual labor: “The rebirth of the People . . . will not come about except by means of work.”¹⁵ It should be pointed out that when he invokes the age-old Jewish notion of Redemption, Gordon tends to present it in ways strikingly different from the traditional Jewish approach.¹⁶

Another expression of the symbiosis of body, land, and labor is discernible in the renowned dictum enunciated by Joseph Trumpeldor, a key figure in the Zionist movement which led to the birth of the Jewish state: “We must produce a generation which will have no interests, nor habits, whatsoever. Nothing but an iron ingot . . . I have no face, no psychology, no emotions. I don’t even have a name. I am the pure idea of service . . . I know only one imperative: to build!” (Jabotinsky 1947).

These proclamations called for a response from thinkers identifying with the Jewish religious perspective (Mashiach 2017). In 1902, the Mizrachi religious Zionist movement was founded by R. Yitzhak Yaakov Reines (1839–1915), one of the greatest Torah¹⁷ scholars of Lithuania.¹⁸ The movement upheld the notion of work as a religious value,¹⁹ not only an existential need.²⁰

Yet the distinctive ideas propounded by R. Reines are hard to come by among religious Zionists today. With time, the theological approach of R. Kook the Elder (ReAYaH)²¹ and of R. Kook the Younger (RTziYaH)²² became dominant in religious Zionism. R. Kook founded the yeshivah at Merkaz ha-rav in Jerusalem, which he headed; his son eventually succeeded him. Since the days of its founding, the yeshivah has produced a long list of students and rabbis who have made the teaching of the two Rabbis Kook the legacy of the religious Zionist community as a whole.

Keeping these preliminary notes in view, the present article sets out to trace the changes taking place in the religious Zionist attitude toward work as this is articulated in the thought of a student of the two Rabbis Kook, a thinker who is often seen as the continuator of the teaching of the two Rabbis Kook today. This is Rabbi Tzvi Israel Thau (b. 1937), one of the most influential rabbinic figures associated with religious Zionism,²³ President of Yeshivat har ha-mor and the spiritual leader of the Torah academies referred to as “yeshivot of the line [ha-kav].”²⁴

Religious Zionist thinkers developed a dialectical understanding of the integration of Torah with labor. The union of Torah observance and work eventually became the motto of the Bnei Akiva religious Zionist youth movement, whose anthem includes the words, “Our thoughts are in the depths of its Torah, our hands in the clods of its soil.” The change of direction heralded by R. Thau’s ideas can

¹³ Ibid., “A Little Reflection,” p. 128.

¹⁴ Ibid., “Work,” p. 194.

¹⁵ (Schweid 1983)

¹⁶ Cf. the interpretive insights proposed in Boaz Neuman, *The Pioneers’ Desire* (Tel Aviv, 2009) [Heb.].

¹⁷ “Torah” (lit., “teaching”) as a term is used to refer to the way of life and thought within the framework of the Jewish religious tradition and Halakhah (Jewish Law), which is based on Biblical texts and rabbinic writings. The term is used both as a noun and as an adjective. See (Neusner 2004).

¹⁸ On R. Reines, see (Bat-Yehudah 1985; Shapira 2002; Helinger 2005).

¹⁹ For a discussion of developments in Jewish traditional thought in response to the impact of the Protestant work ethic on contemporary capitalism in America, see (Mashiach 2018).

²⁰ On Rabbi Reines’ understanding of work, see (Mashiach 2018).

²¹ R. Avraham Yitzhak ha-Kohen Kook (ReAYaH, 1865–1935), a leading Jewish thinker of the modern period and author of numerous works on Torah subjects, founded the Chief Rabbinate in the Land of Israel, which he headed during 1921–35. See (Mirsky 2014).

²² R. Tzvi Yehudah HaKohen Kook (RTziYaH, 1891–1982), head of the yeshivah at Merkaz ha-rav in Jerusalem, was one of the most prominent religious Zionist leaders of the 20th century. See (Shtemler 2014).

²³ On R. Thau see (Schwartz 2001; Abramovitz 2006).

²⁴ The term “yeshivot of the line [ha-kav]” was coined to refer to those traditional Torah academies which follow R. Thau as their spiritual leader. 1997 saw a split in the yeshivah at Merkaz ha-rav in Jerusalem. R. Thau and many of the yeshivah’s students and rabbis seceded to found Yeshivat har ha-mor. The background for this was the establishment of a teachers’ seminary at the yeshivah, a step which R. Thau saw as tantamount to placing “a graven image in the sanctuary,” since setting up a seminary is an infringement upon the “purity of the sacred,” a principle he upholds as ruling out making utilitarian use of Torah study. For the controversy and the split, see (Abramovitz 2006, pp. 35–40).

best be appreciated if considered in light of the prioritization of dialectics in the thought of his two mentors: R. Kook the Elder and R. Kook the Younger.

Both Rabbis Kook were panentheists; in their understanding, the totality of the existent universe is revelation of the Divine. This means that worship of God should also be both spiritual and physical at once, the spiritual through the study of Torah and performing the Commandments and the physical through work and manual labor.

Both Rabbis Kook also refer to the Chasidic principle of “vodah be-gashmiyut” [serving God by means of the physical]. The underlying notion is that involvement (Kook 1985) in the material world is a way of worshipping God just as being involved in the world of the spirit is. Material labor takes on a religious significance similar to Torah study and prayer. “Work” as a term means the worship of God, but the idea of work also finds its realization in engaging with the physical world through productive labor.²⁵

This implies a clearly dialectical way of thinking for R. Kook the Elder. He argues that “in truth . . . spirituality does not rule out the material, nor does the material rule out the spiritual, but the two combine.”²⁶ He vehemently insists that:

... it is impossible for the salvation of Israel to sprout properly unless a fundamental, well-conditioned grafting of the two powers takes place, the sacred and the profane . . . they complete each other; only when combined do they fulfill their task in a perfect way.²⁷

R. Kook sought to restore the authentic crown of the Torah to its former glory, a condition of no divisions and no prioritizing of duplicity—the glory of the unity of spirit and matter and Torah and labor. He defined the study of Torah as “spiritual Torah” and work as “practical Torah,” proclaiming also that “My great aim is to join the spiritual Torah together with the practical. In days of old, days of the Prophets, the two Torahs were definitely joined in a complete manner of joining . . . and the times require it now that the vigor of this vision be restored.”²⁸

R. Kook the Younger—RTziYaH, R. Thau’s teacher and mentor—also embraced a dialectical mode of thinking. Writing that “‘Man is for travail born,’ for ‘the travail of Torah’ as well as for ‘the travail of labor,’”²⁹ he explains that overall as “crafts and types of physical labor multiply in the Land of Israel . . . life eternal [Torah study] and life temporal [work engaging with material objects] will be bound together in a mighty union.”³⁰ RTziYaH argued that not only is there no division, but an emphatic joining of the two in one must prevail, “a mighty union”. So, as per his approach, “does Israel return to health, health of body and health of soul, in the military and in the Torah academy, in agriculture and in learning.”³¹

As noted, R. Thau, an extremely influential figure among religious Zionists in the State of Israel today, steered away from this approach. To appreciate the shift in his understanding of work, we now turn to a number of instances where he deals with questions related to work in his writings.

2. The Value of Work

From a religious point of view, R. Thau sees work as a positive value; this has a number of reasons. In his words, “‘Man is for travail born,’³² to occupy himself with settlement of the world, building

²⁵ On pantheism, see: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pantheism/>; on panentheism, see: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/panentheism/>; On “worship by means of the physical” see (Koyfman 2009).

²⁶ R. Kook, *Essays by ReAYaH*, Bet El, Aviner, 1984 [Heb], pp. 234–36, “Unity and Duplicity.”

²⁷ Ibid., p. 257.

²⁸ R. Kook, *Eight Collections* [Heb.] I, Para. 834; see also Binyamin Ish Shalom, *R. Kook between Rationalism and Mysticism* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, Am Oved, 1990), p. 316.

²⁹ RTziYaH, *Talks by R. Tzvi Yehudah: Exodus* (Jerusalem, 5758) [Heb.], p. 386.

³⁰ Idem, *To the Pathways of Israel* (Bet El, 5762) [Heb.], Part I, p. 259.

³¹ Idem, *Talks by R. Tzvi Yehudah: Exodus*, p. 413.

³² Job 5:7.

it up and improving it.”³³ God created the universe in such a way that it requires perfecting and bettering; this is a project assigned to humanity. This means that a person who works in the world of matter fulfills his religious obligation by perfecting the physical universe and raising its level of sophistication.³⁴ True enough, this is not a statement about the Jewish People per se; rather, in this context the Jews are seen as part of the totality of humankind.

R. Thau sees labor as the bearer of yet another value—namely, diligent effort. He argues that the Jewish People has a universal purpose; it is therefore fitting that this people should be industrious, a quality which finds its expression—inter alia—in work. As he presents this, the Jewish People has “the trait of life,” which is “the love of labor and the love of toil . . . it is fitting for a nation with a supreme goal, such as the Israelite nation, to have the qualities of industriousness and love of hard work.”³⁵ These qualities will advance the nation in realizing its purpose, which also includes mending the material world [in accord with the Kabbalistic notion of *tikkun*, or mending the universe, through human action; translator’s note]; labor is the means for achieving this.

Clearly enough, from R. Thau’s point of view, work in general is a way to earn a living, and so a way to fulfill one’s duty to provide for one’s household. But when it comes to agriculture in particular (which we will discuss in more detail below), he writes: “Tilling the soil in the Land of Israel holds a higher value, a value of a self-contained kind: this is tilling the soil not for the purpose of earning a living, but so as to fulfill the Commandment of settling the Land, thus causing it to produce its sacred fruit.”³⁶ Work not only involves settling the planet Earth; it also enables the inhabiting of the Land of Israel. R. Thau bases his view on the words of Nachmanides, who writes that “we have been commanded to inherit the Land . . . not abandon it in the hands of other nations or leave it to grow desolate.”³⁷ This suggests that the conquest of the Land should be achieved by the sword and the spade together. The spade must wrest the land from desolateness. Making the desert bloom by means of work—primarily work in agriculture—is part of the Torah Commandment of taking possession and settling the Land of Israel.³⁸ Moreover, “the essence of settling the Land is in working its soil.”³⁹ This bears emphasizing: Working is at the center of observing the Commandment.

In his elaboration on this, R. Thau draws on the ideas of R. Moshe Sofer,⁴⁰ commonly referred to as the Chatam Sofer, who wrote: “The tilling of the soil is itself a Commandment, a part of the settling of the Land of Israel and of causing it to produce its sacred fruit.” He added that “it may even be that other crafts needed for the settlement of the world and making it fit for habitation, are all of Commandment status.”⁴¹ That is, the Chatam Sofer connects the professions in general and agriculture in particular with the Commandment of settling the Land of Israel or the one of peopling and inhabiting the world. The fruits of the Land of Israel are “sacred” because there is a Torah Commandment to cause the Land to produce them—and doing this is possible by means of work.

R. Thau takes the Chatam Sofer’s ideas further. He writes about Hebrew agriculture (Beginning during the early Zionist period, “Hebrew agriculture” refers to agricultural work engaged in specifically by Jews. *Translator’s note*.): “Not non-Jewish agriculture and not agriculture by foreign workers. This work is no different from putting on phylacteries; it is part of our serving God, part of our love for the Commandments, part of our love for the sacred.”⁴² Work, then, is part of worshipping God; it is a sacred Commandment.

³³ R. Thau, *To the Faith of Our Times* (Jerusalem, 5754) [Heb.] X, p. 78.

³⁴ A statement along the same lines is also to be found in the Sages; see *Genesis Rabbah* 11:6.

³⁵ R. Thau, p. 77.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

³⁷ Nachmanides, *The Book of the Commandments*, Forgetting the Positives 4.

³⁸ The idea is already present in the teaching of R. Tzvi Yehudah Kook (R. Tzvi Yehudah Kook 2005).

³⁹ R. Thau, *Bearing His Sheaves* (Jerusalem, 5768) [Heb.], p. 89; see also *ibid.*, p. 113, Addendum 5.

⁴⁰ 1762–1839, Hungary; an eminent rabbinic leader of the modern period, also known as the “father of Jewish Orthodoxy.” See (Kahana 2015).

⁴¹ Chatam Sofer, *New Insights on Tractate Sukkah* [Heb.] 36a.

⁴² R. Thau, *Bearing His Sheaves*, *ibid.*, and see also *ibid.*, p. 116, Addendum 6.

To follow up on this, R. Thau even urges his readers to go on to seek wealth. There is no capitalistic or hedonistic undercurrent here, but a notion of riches as means of realizing the special purpose of the Jewish People:

The Jewish People is summoned to a life of wealth and greatness, so that it may achieve its supreme destiny: to illumine the entire world with the light of Divine truth . . . how can one sustain a life complete and developed . . . unlike a poor and miserable people, for indeed ‘the wisdom of the miserable man is despised.’⁴³

Wealth means demonstrating that the integration of spirit with matter is possible; this is part of the universal message to the nations of the world. In addition, wealth will cause the nations of the world to pay attention to the actions and the ideas of the Jewish People, for the wealthy are listened to, while poverty misses the mark, since “the wisdom of the miserable man is despised and his words are not heeded.”⁴⁴

A striking understanding of the world of matter and the role of work in it comes to the fore in R. Thau’s discussion of R. Shimon bar Yochai and his flight to the cave.⁴⁵ Talmudic sources teach us that this began with a discussion among three rabbis: R. Yehudah, R. Yossi, and R. Shimon. All three expressed their views concerning the Roman Empire’s accomplishments in the material world: The Romans’ construction of bridges, markets, and baths. R. Yehudah praised Rome’s achievements, R. Yossi was silent, and R. Shimon bar Yochai was critical of Rome. As a consequence, R. Shimon had to flee and then hide for thirteen years in a cave. R. Thau offers an interpretation of R. Yehudah’s valorization of the Romans in the discussion. In R. Thau’s view, R. Yehudah’s goal was to prevent an erroneous Torah stance on the part of the Jewish People, which might suggest disparaging the material world and the appropriateness of work in it:

R. Yehudah staunchly defends the construction of Israelite life. He is committed to seeing to it that the nation should not lose its sanity and that it should not, for sheer revulsion from the evil perpetrated by state authorities, become accustomed to hating all things, recoiling from all this-worldly matters and the needs of natural life.

R. Thau goes on to say that “on this score precisely was R. Shimon bar Yochai reprimanded.” In fact, the view voiced by R. Shimon bar Yochai represents a notion of Torah which pits itself in opposition to perfecting the world through work:

When he emerged from the cave, he [R. Shimon bar Yochai] made light of all those improvements of the world which he saw about him: “They abandon life eternal and involve themselves in life temporal.” Whereupon did God put him back in the cave, “To destroy My world did you come forth?! Return you to your cave!”

After another twelve months in the cave, upon emerging for the second time, R. Shimon bar Yochai “did not make light of world building, but searched on his own for a way to mend, to enhance and to build further.”⁴⁶ That is, according to R. Thau, R. Shimon bar Yochai went through a process of re-education of sorts with regard to the way of life in accord with the Torah which he stood for. He had represented only a one-fold Torah, a spiritual one, while in actuality the Torah is spiritual and material at one and the same time. Understanding this when he left the cave for the second time, he entered the world and society once again, this time joining the process of work and of active doing, steeping himself in the effort to improve the material world.

R. Thau resorts to the notion of “practical Torah”⁴⁷ first introduced by R. Kook. This means work by contrast with the “spiritual Torah,” or Torah learning. He writes:

⁴³ Idem, *To the Faith of Our Times* X, p. 79.

⁴⁴ Ecclesiastes 9:16.

⁴⁵ Shabbat 33b.

⁴⁶ R. Thau, *To the Faith of Our Times* X, p. 55.

⁴⁷ R. Kook, *Eight Collections* [Heb.], Part I, para. 834.

Thereupon is the practical Torah appointed and this is its task, to build up Israelite life in health, in stability and according to a natural and upright order of proceeding. Individuals like R. Shimon bar Yochai and his son may flee into the cave, but woe is the nation that in its entirety flees and hides. In running away, it severs itself from the needs of real and natural life; it will defeat itself and cause itself harm greater than any decree or trouble from the without.⁴⁸

Work, then, is part of the Torah, which is “spiritual” and “practical.” R. Thau goes on to warn against severing the two Torahs from each other. In his view, criticism or recoiling from materiality can be appropriate only when the material is sundered from the spiritual:

R. Shimon bar Yochai’s great revulsion from all world mending is very dangerous . . . and though we are repelled by this-worldly concerns, yet is that not the case but when they are severed from the sacred and placed in opposition to it; but when the sacred is the heart and center of life, then do all bodily matters and the building up of the material also have great value.

When the two are bound together, “on the contrary, this is sanctification of the Great Name—to elevate the bodily in accord with the essence and the value of the soul, to raise the natural and to sanctify life.”⁴⁹

The complete Torah, in his view, connects between spirit and matter and between Torah and work. Lack of understanding of the complete Torah is what has brought about the kind of thinking which treats the Torah as only spiritual, hedging in and denigrating labor and the tangible. Such an approach is the result of a mistake:

When the Torah is not understood in all its truth, it is taken to be spirituality pitted against the real world and all its needs . . . while in truth there is no gulf between them, and the one can reinforce the other. The two need to combine to achieve the great purpose of the people, the purpose of “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” The special ability of the Israelite nation consists in its capacity to bring together the life of the body and the soul in actuality, uniting the national idea and the idea of the Godly.⁵⁰

Understood from this perspective, writes R. Thau, work in any profession takes on additional value by upholding the dignity of the Land of Israel. This finds its expression in the independence of Jewish labor, when the economy in Jewish society can grow without hinging upon employing non-Jews:

Studying the professions in the Land of Israel plays a doubly important role: first, in terms of the Commandment of settling the Land, for through the various professions will the Land be built up and developed, and second, in terms of the dignity of the Land, for then people will never say that not a single shoemaker or builder is to be found in all of the Land of Israel. Skilled workers will then not need to be brought in from distant lands.⁵¹

In sum: work is the “practical” Torah within the unified Torah complex of the Torah “in all its truth.” R. Thau stresses the union of Torah and labor; the one must be taken up as well as the other: nothing short of that “the one should reinforce the other.” In this way will the Jewish People attain its universal as well as its particular realization as “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” in the Land of Israel.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ R. Thau, *ibid.*, p. 60.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁵¹ R. Thau, *Bearing His Sheaves*, p. 91.

3. The Value of Hebrew Agricultural Work

R. Thau ascribes a special value to work in agriculture done by Jews in the Land of Israel. I have shown above that every type of work or craft is endowed with special value for a number of reasons, but agriculture surpasses them all. R. Thau published an entire book, titled *Bearing His Sheaves*, which he devoted to elaborating on “the value of agriculture in Israel.”

According to R. Thau, “agriculture in Israel is suffused with holiness throughout.”⁵² In general, the People of Israel is an agricultural nation, as the Hebrew Scriptures make abundantly clear. “When we read in the Torah about the lives of our forefathers, and when we learn about the order of fulfilling the Commandments in Israel, the People of Israel is conjured up before our eyes as a people that is largely agricultural.”⁵³ True enough, the occupation typically associated with the Jews during the years of exile was trade, but in R. Thau’s view, engaging in commerce was a result of the conditions that the Jews were subjected to in exile; this is not a natural part of the national Jewish character. “In our exile, when we were forced to become traders and sellers, we went on with our lives in an abnormal manner. We were in a state of illness as a nation, going against our agricultural disposition.”⁵⁴ From R. Thau’s point of view it is evident that the authentic Jewish character trait—that is, a propensity for agriculture—must be returned to.

As noted, according to R. Thau, the Jewish People has a universal purpose and assigned tasks which are bound up with yearned for deliverance. He argues that humanity has developed the world of technology and that it has also atrophied thereby, becoming enslaved by the growth of the technology it fosters:

The focus on developing and increasing the abilities of science and technology brings spiritual destruction with it, and abases the spirit of man. Humanity deludes itself into thinking that it is progressing and elevating itself, while in reality it is becoming more and more enslaved by the proliferation of wants and innovated ways to respond to them . . . to the point of being unable to do without them.⁵⁵

So does humanity continue to sink,

. . . the individual and society wallowing in their weakness, in jealousy, hatred and competition, pursuit of gain, pleasure and glory . . . so does moribund Western culture march on, in despair and hopelessness, toward degeneration, similar to Babylon and Rome at the end of their days.

It is at this point, in his view, that the Jewish People must play a crucial role in world history: “Who will give the world hope and teach it the way to mending; who will provide humanity with the knowledge of truth and teach it how to establish a viable national mode of living? This is the task of the Jewish People.” But how will the Jewish People do this? “By the power of the Torah, by the power of the return of Israel to its faith and to its Land, and by the powers concealed within the nation; by these great sources of light will the world entire be illumined . . . and from our power will the ends of the earth be lit up.”⁵⁶

In order to achieve this universal purpose, argues R. Thau, the people must return to its Jewish selfhood; he stresses that this will be brought about when the people once again becomes involved in agriculture. R. Thau was aware of the problematic aspects of requiring a return to agriculture rather than any other type of work:

⁵² Ibid., p. 13, based on a passage quoted from R. Kook, *Essays by ReAYaH*, p. 179.

⁵³ R. Thau, *ibid.*, p. 16.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 22.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 28.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

The destined purpose of the Jewish People as an agricultural nation is puzzling, since ordinarily, agricultural peoples are primitive and undeveloped, while nations which engage in industry and trade are the ones who have a developed and progressive culture . . . but in the life of the Israelite nation the opposite process is taking place: its talents and the qualities of its soul find their realization and come to completion specifically in the way of life which has tilling the soil as its central founding element.⁵⁷

Why should it be agriculture and no other type of activity that will actualize the special qualities with which Israel is endowed? He replies:

A nation engaged entirely in working the soil and having no commercial ties with other nations is engrossed in its own life, and does not encounter the ideas or opinions that are common in other societies and cultures . . . such a nation has no cultural fertilization or spiritual enrichment from human culture beyond its own specific locale.⁵⁸

But in the case of the Jewish People, as he sees it, isolation of this kind is a positive feature of life and even a must, because it will make it possible for the uniqueness of the Israelite character to come forth in a complete way.

There are infinite life treasures within us—treasure troves of Torah, of prophecy, of the Holy Spirit, of prophetic ethics and of the knowledge of God which is unique to us, and if we draw upon them and bring them to realization, as we have been commanded by the Torah and as the nature of our national soul inspires us to do, then will we rise to stand at the pinnacle of human culture . . . until they have the power to light up all the dark recesses of the world and to turn this entire world into a Garden of Eden.⁵⁹

It follows, according to R. Thau, that particularistic self-isolation, which finds its most complete expression in agricultural toil and a way of life without commerce (since commerce requires contacts and dealings with people and ideas from alien cultures) is what will bring about the perfect realization of the universal destined purpose of the Jewish People.

The Israelite nation does not need fertilization by other peoples in order to enhance the supreme value which is unique to it . . . The spirits of the nations are alien to the spirit of this people; they are not appropriate for its elevated status and its sanctity.

Hence R. Thau's conclusion:

The agricultural mode of life in particular, which establishes the Israelite nation in isolation and on its own, is the one fitting for it, insofar as it makes its cultural development possible from within its own inner stores and its supreme morality, rather than deriving it from the culture of other nations and their ways. Therefore, the main and central business of the nation is in working the soil and raising livestock, while trade and industry, which bind with the nations of the world, are secondary and additional to the principal element . . . ⁶⁰

To recapitulate: According to R. Thau, every kind of work is important, but agricultural work is the core and main component of the Jewish economy. Agriculture will cause the special abilities of Israel to proceed from potency to actuality, realizing them in a complete manner. Thus, by means of particularistic self-isolation, Israel will achieve the fulfillment of its universal purpose and the redemption of the world: "the return to agriculture and the Commandments of the Land as part of the process of Redemption." ⁶¹

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 42.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 43, based on the words of R. Kook, *The AYaH's Spring, Berachot II*, p. 411.

⁵⁹ R. Thau, *ibid.*, pp. 46–47.

⁶⁰ Ibid., and see also *ibid.*, p. 57.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 34.

4. Summary and Discussion

The passages we have cited show that R. Thau sees labor in general and agriculture in particular as values endowed with religious, Halakhic, and ideational significance far beyond the fact that work provides man with a livelihood. R. Thau sees work as a part of the human project of settling the globe—that is, of building up the world and making it increasingly complex, refined, and sophisticated. In his view, by working, one fulfills the Commandment of settling the Land of Israel. This Commandment is performed by wrenching the Land from the hands of the nations of the world and by tilling its soil, which rescues the Land from “desolateness.” R. Thau gives work precedence over warfare and military concerns; he writes that “the principal element of settling the Land is the tilling of its soil.”⁶² He also follows the Chatam Sofer, who wrote that “it may even be that other crafts needed for the settlement of the world and making it fit for habitation, are all of Commandment status” in the Land of Israel.⁶³ He went so far as to proclaim that laboring in the Land of Israel is just like “putting on phylacteries; it is part of our serving God, part of our love for the Commandments, part of our love for the sacred.”⁶⁴

The story of R. Shimon bar Yochai and the cave leads R. Thau to the conclusion that recoiling from the material world is a genuine possibility only when matter is disconnected from spirit, while when the two are united, “this is Sanctification of the Great Name.”⁶⁵ R. Thau resorts to R. Kook’s concept of a “practical Torah” to describe work, whereas theoretical, in-depth Torah study is the “spiritual Torah.” The two Torah’s together, “which are in truth not separate, and each one can strengthen the other”, are the complete Torah. This, according to R. Thau, is “the unique ability of the Israelite nation”,⁶⁶ to demonstrate to the nations of the world how a people can lead an integrated existence that incorporates spirit and matter, Torah and labor.

I have shown that agriculture plays a special role in the teaching of R. Thau, who sees the Western world as enslaved by materialism and technology. By contrast, when considered from his messianic perspective, every individuated moment of human existence becomes understandable as a part of the process of universal deliverance. Seen from this point of view, the Western world is sinking deeper and deeper in matter, growing ever more distant from the idea of Redemption. It is at this point that R. Thau turns to the Jewish People: “Who will give the world hope and teach it the way to mending; who will provide humanity with the knowledge of truth and teach it how to establish a viable national mode of living? This is the task of the Jewish People.” He sees the Jewish People as the herald of Redemption for the world. This annunciation will, from his point of view, come with the empowerment of the “special ability” of Israel. To achieve this, the Jewish People must live in seclusion from other cultures.

R. Thau sees agriculture as providing productive work, on the one hand, and as leading to isolation which empowers the special Jewish capacity for impacting the world, on the other: “From the power of the Torah, from the power of the return of Israel to its faith and to its Land, and from the special capacities concealed within the nation—from these great sources of light will the world entire be lit up.”⁶⁷ Work in general and agriculture in particular are part of the process of Redemption.⁶⁸

Having introduced R. Thau’s approach to work, we need to address the theology at the foundation of this mode of thinking. A continuator of the ideas of the two Rabbis Kook, R. Thau sees the present time as an age of Redemption. To his mind, the present generation must focus on the inner rebirth of the Jewish People.⁶⁹ This calls for an empowerment of particularity, which in turn requires that everything

⁶² Ibid., p. 89, and see also p. 113, Addendum 5.

⁶³ Chatam Sofer, *ibid.*

⁶⁴ R. Thau, *Bearing His Sheaves*, p. 113, and see also *ibid.*, p. 116, Addendum 6.

⁶⁵ R. Thau, *To the Faith of Our Times X*, p. 60.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁶⁷ R. Thau, *Bearing His Sheaves*, p. 28.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁶⁹ Schwartz, pp. 92–103.

be based on the “purity of the sacred.” Thus, will the Israelite “special ability” be empowered and so proceed unobstructed from the potential to the actual. The result of valorizing the “special ability” will have a direct impact on all of humanity, completing the process of Redemption which began and was identified back in the days of R. Kook the Elder.

Developing this further, R. Thau argues that the Jewish People is at present part of the process of Redemption which “sprouts little by little”, with “nothing more absolute than this.”⁷⁰ An urgent question that arises is, will Redemption be achieved through suffering? Whatever the true answer, “there is nobody who can prevent this.”⁷¹ Redemption visible to the eye is, according to R. Thau, only the tip of the iceberg, “the initial moment of Redemption,” whereas “as far as the soul is concerned—we are *in* Redemption.”⁷²

The process of Redemption has been considerably accelerated by the secular Zionist movement, the “men of action” and labor who worked “to raise the Jewish People and bring it forth out of exile.”⁷³ But political Zionism remained detached from the spirit of Israel and the Torah; it was a kind of “momentary excitement.” Albeit it has accomplished its task, yet “there is no force in secular national values to enable them to go on steering the forward movement of Israelite national revival”⁷⁴, since “the secular values of the nation cannot stand without the soul.”⁷⁵ The Jewish People need now return to itself and to its selfhood.

Salvation, according to R. Thau, consists primarily in “the salvation of the soul, the liberation from the external appraisal of ourselves, and the return to our true selfhood.”⁷⁶

Based on this evaluation of historical developments, R. Thau also sees his time as an age of crisis. He develops a “philosophy of crisis,” as Schwartz terms it.⁷⁷ The crisis is due to three causes, according to R. Thau. The first of these is: The peace agreements signed by the State of Israel with Egypt and Jordan and the various agreements with the Palestinians, which have led to Israel’s withdrawal from a number of areas in the Land of Israel, thus hampering the messianic process. The second cause consists of adverse events which had a severe impact on Israeli society, such as the murder of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, an attack that tarnished the image of religious Zionism and the Messianic idea which it heralds in a momentous and irreparable way. Finally, the third cause is post-Zionism, a phenomenon which is becoming more and more widespread in Israeli society today and which leads to the loss of values and ideology. The secular Israeli society evolves; as a result, it is hedonistic and complacent.⁷⁸

R. Thau advances the project of particularistic ingathering and “purity of the sacred” to overcome the predicament of crisis. This will actualize and fortify the “special ability” of Israel, and so accelerate the process of Redemption and make it evident to all.⁷⁹ As noted, this idea had a direct impact on his understanding of work overall, and on his view of the importance of agriculture in particular.⁸⁰

The idea of agricultural work in the Land of Israel conveys yet another principle upheld by R. Thau, namely, that the Land of Israel has a “power of sanctity within, to purify the world entire

⁷⁰ R. Thau, *To the Faith of Our Times I*, p. 12. The original source is in the Yerushalmi, Berakhot 1:1.

⁷¹ R. Thau, *And Your House and Your Kingdom Assured* (Mitzpeh Ramon, 5775) [Heb.], p.20. For more on Redemption in his teaching, see Abramovitz, pp. 1–40.

⁷² R. Thau, *To the Faith of Our Times I*, p. 148. See also p. 23.

⁷³ Idem, *And Your House and Your Kingdom Assured*, p. 26.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

⁷⁶ Idem, *To the Faith of Our Times I*, p. 121.

⁷⁷ Schwartz, pp. 83–92.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 120.

⁸⁰ In this connection, see (Fisher 2009). Fisher suggests that R. Thau perceives the State of Israel as ongoing Divine revelation and the unfolding of Israel’s history as a realization of the Divine will, according to which Redemption is to manifest itself gradually, taking advantage of natural, rather than of obviously miraculous means to progress. Understanding this involves revolutionizing people’s ways of thinking, appearances of gradual evolutionary change notwithstanding. “Purity of the sacred” and separation from the profane, as part of this process, will affect the entire world. See: R. Thau, *To the Faith of Our Times II*, p. 131.

of its foulness and scum.”⁸¹ Hence, as labor productivity rates in Israel advance, their growth and diversification will speed up the general yearned-for deliverance of the world, aided by the purifying power of the Land.⁸²

In studying R. Thau’s attitude toward work, we must also consider his attitude to the proponents of the work idea. We do not mean his approach to the Second Aliyah or the kibbutz movement, insofar as both of these are largely a thing of the past and have already been discussed by the two Rabbis Kook. Here we need instead to elaborate on two of R. Kook’s concepts: “the seed of man” and “the seed of beast.”⁸³

Abramovitz has argued⁸⁴ that R. Thau prefers opposition to synthesis and dualism to the dialectic of “inclusive unity,” by contrast with the mindset in many other religious Zionist thinkers.

This calls for elucidation. I have already shown that R. Kook espouses a dialectical way of thinking, arguing that “in truth . . . spirituality does not rule out materiality, nor does the material rule out the spiritual, but the two combine.”⁸⁵ We have also followed his insistent argument that “it is impossible for the salvation of Israel to sprout properly unless a fundamental, well-conditioned grafting of the two powers takes place, the sacred and the profane.”⁸⁶ He defines the study of Torah as “spiritual Torah”, and labor as “practical Torah”, proclaiming also that his “great aim is to join the spiritual Torah together with the practical. In days of old, days of the Prophets, the two Torahs were definitely joined in a complete manner of joining . . . and the times require it now that the vigor of this vision be restored.”⁸⁷

R. Kook the Younger—RTziYaH, R. Thau’s teacher and mentor—was also a proponent of a dialectical mode of thinking. He wrote, “the more crafts and types of physical work multiply in the Land of Israel . . . life eternal [Torah study] and life temporal [work engaging with tangible objects] will be bound together in a mighty union.”⁸⁸ RTziYaH thus argued that not only is there no division, but an emphatic joining of the two in one; “in a mighty union.”⁸⁹

R. Thau’s view is prominent in its opposition to this synthesizing approach, which is typical of religious Zionist thinkers. No more dialectic with synthesis, but dualism. As per R. Thau’s way of thinking, the Messianic age requires “greatness” and “complete manifestation” of all the divine powers. This is to be achieved by creating “perfect character types,” men of Torah—the “mighty of nobility”, “seed of man”—and men of labor, “the heroes of physicality”, “seed of beast”, such that the two complement each other.⁹⁰ But each one will also stand on its own, alone, as such. “The two central powers in the nation act perfectly separately, as in the words of the Sages, ‘the seed of man alone, and the seed of beast alone’⁹¹ . . . active in our lives are two parallel powers: the power of the sacred and the power of the profane.”⁹² Criticizing the dialectical approach characteristic of religious Zionism, he also writes:

The heroes of the “seed of beast” are crying out, without any clear or thought through utterance, to the “seed of man” to come and complete them . . . Completing the seed of beast requires a spiritual manifestation total and perfect. Not of the proponents of average views

⁸¹ Ibid. II, p. 96. See also Schwartz, *Land of Reality and the Imagination* (Tel Aviv, 5757) [Heb.], pp. 115–16.

⁸² Elsewhere he summons: “Know your land! Not in the sense of geography and defining flowers and insects, but knowing the land in its essence, its special ability, and its sanctity” (R. Thau, *To the Faith of Our Times* II, p. 80).

⁸³ Jeremiah 31:26. For “the seed of man and the seed of beast,” see also R. Thau, *ibid.*, p. 34; *ibid.* VIII, pp. 103–16.

⁸⁴ Abramovitz, pp. 206–26.

⁸⁵ R. Kook, *Essays by ReAYaH*, pp. 234–236, “Unity and Duplicity.”

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

⁸⁷ R. Kook, *Eight Collections* [Heb.] I, Para. 834; see also Binyamin Ish Shalom, *R. Kook between Rationalism and Mysticism* (Tel Aviv, 1990) [Heb.], p. 316.

⁸⁸ RTziYaH, *To the Pathways of Israel* (Bet El, 5762) [Heb.], Part I, p. 259.

⁸⁹ On RTziYaH’s understanding of labor, see ([Mashiach forthcoming](#)).

⁹⁰ R. Thau, *To the Faith of Our Times* I, p. 111.

⁹¹ Chulin 5b.

⁹² R. Thau, *Lessons in Notebook 41* (Jerusalem, 5771) [Heb.], p. 10.

aimed at compromise who want to resemble and imitate the heroes of the profane, adding to them the gem of Judaism, the Torah and the Commandments, will the mending and the mutual completion come. The heroes of the physical will not be built up except through the mightiest of the noble . . . for only complete, perfect characters act well upon each other.⁹³

According to R. Thau, working secular Zionism is the “seed of beast.” Its origin was in fact in the sacred, the founding element “upon which the great spirit may later rest,”⁹⁴ but today this cannot suffice. Ever since the 1990’s, thinks R. Thau, the secular Zionist undertaking has been constructed upon rotting and dilapidated foundations. Hence, in order to provide for a sturdy Jewish nationalism, and even for the Jewish State, anew, enclosure within the stronghold of the sacred is a must. This is because, as noted, the sacred will empower and bring forth the special ability of Israel from the potential into the actual, and do this in a complete way. In this way, born of particularity, will universal Redemption come. “Our need for nationalism and inhabiting the Land is for the purpose of elevating humanity as a whole.”⁹⁵ Labor, which makes it possible to fulfill the Commandments connected to settling the Land, is also part of the process. So will the “mighty of nobility” complete the “heroes of the physical”, who have always occupied and continue to occupy a lower rung in the hierarchy both in ancient and in modern times.⁹⁶

Labor, then, is an important part of accelerating Redemption and empowering the “special ability” of Israel. Moreover, according to R. Thau, labor aids God Himself in the process of Redemption, so that “it is possible and necessary to become integrated in the deeds of God . . . not only with the aid of Heaven . . . but with aid to Heaven.”⁹⁷

To sum up: R. Thau’s positive attitude to labor in general, and to agriculture in particular, is an outgrowth of the messianic theology upon which he bases his ideas. This involves enclosing the nation within the stronghold of the “sacred” in order to empower the “special ability” of Israel to bring about Redemption both particular and universal more speedily. All this holds even though R. Thau distinguishes between the men of Torah and the men of labor, arranging them as a hierarchy; all have a part to play in the messianic process and accelerating the way in which it unfolds.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank Elen Rochlin for the translation of this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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⁹³ R. Thau, *To the Faith of Our Times* X, p. 111.

⁹⁴ Ibid. VIII, p. 161.

⁹⁵ R. Thau, *The Banner* (Jerusalem, 2010) [Heb.], p. 71.

⁹⁶ (Thau 2006; Thau 2007; Thau 2010) that this is also the distinction between Yeshivat har ha-mor, which is men of Torah and “seed of man,” and the pre-military prep programs, or men of work, the “seed of beast.”

⁹⁷ R. Thau, *To the Faith of Our Times* II, p. 75.

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