

Reform Rabbi Herbert Weiner's writings on religion in Israel in the 1950s and 1960s

DANA EVAN KAPLAN

TEMPLE BETH SHALOM, SUN CITY, USA

ABSTRACT As an important yet virtually ignored American Jewish thinker, Rabbi Herbert Weiner was the first post-World War II Reform theologian to embrace Jewish mysticism. Weiner's writings were deeply influenced by Zionist theoretical thought as well as his extensive and frequent sabbaticals in British Mandatory Palestine and later the State of Israel. Fascinated by both Kabbalah and Hasidism, Weiner was particularly influenced by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. This article looks at the impact of Weiner's temporary appointment as administrator of the Hebrew Union College campus in Jerusalem in the early 1960s and the difficulties that this created for him in his relationships with Israeli Orthodox mystics, including Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook. The article makes a contribution to the study of the intellectual relationships between American Reform and Israeli Orthodox rabbinic thinkers in the post-war period.

FOR AMERICAN JEWS and other Americans looking for insight into spiritual developments in the State of Israel in the 1960s and 1970s, the books of Reform Rabbi Herbert Weiner were highly influential.¹ He is best known for his two books *The Wild Goats of Ein Gedi: A Journal of Religious Encounters in the Holy Land* and *9½ Mystics: The Kabbala Today*.² In his lifetime he was known as an eccentric but well-loved mystical Reform rabbi, with all the inherent contradictions that description implied at the time. To the amazement of his contemporaries, he was well respected in the Reform movement while at the same time publicly declaring his fidelity to the

1. Rabbi Herbert Weiner's papers are at the American Jewish Archives (AJA) in Cincinnati, Ohio; the author would like to thank the entire staff of the AJA for their assistance. My appreciation to Dr Alinda Damsma, Assistant Editor of the *Journal of Jewish Studies*, as well as to the anonymous readers, whose helpful suggestions I have tried to respond to. The author would also like to thank Aaron Riedel for his expert editorial work on this article.

2. Herbert Weiner, *The Wild Goats of Ein Gedi: A Journal of Religious Encounters in the Holy Land* (New York: Doubleday, 1961); Weiner, *9½ Mystics: The Kabbala Today* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969).

Lubavitcher Rebbe.³ Beginning his writing career with magazine articles in the early 1950s, Weiner went on to become one of the few English-language sources for potential encounters with a wide variety of spiritually focused theologians, thinkers and mystics, most of whom were living and working in Israel. Unlike others who provided primarily objective accounts of religious development, Weiner was almost exclusively interested in building personal relationships with those whom he felt could help him intimately experience specific types of religious encounter.

Weiner's hope in his books and articles was not so much to convey facts or even to explain conceptual developments, but more to help the reader experience vicariously the varieties of religious living. Most of his models were drawn from the State of Israel, where he felt he could find more authentic religious experiences than what was available in the increasingly materialistic and rapidly suburbanizing American Jewish institutional environment. Decades before critics would attack what came to be seen as a vapid and spiritless environment in the United States, Weiner intuitively understood that truth – or, at least, emotional insight – could most productively be searched for in places that had not yet been overly influenced by the post-war culture of prosperity. Weiner was not simply a travel writer. Rather, he set out to use 'friendships, intimacies, [and] certain moments of life' in order to describe a series of encounters.⁴ Writing specifically about *Wild Goats*, Weiner stated that his hope was 'to engage the reader in a kind of journey to the Holy Land which was not only a trip abroad but, like the pilgrimage of old, a search for personal source-springs of spirit – and that involved, I thought, encounters with real people'.⁵

While Weiner is best remembered today as the American popularizer of Jewish mysticism, that mystical quest needs to be seen in the context of Weiner's deep interest in Zionism and the contemporary religious issues that the creation of the State of Israel unintentionally brought to the surface. Weiner felt that there were reservoirs of religious innovation that were most easily accessed by meeting with those who were both deeply knowledgeable about but also personally involved in novel spiritual activities, and most of these individuals were living in Israel at that time. While Weiner decided

3. Weiner's relationship with Chabad will be explored in a future article.

4. Weiner, *The Wild Goats of Ein*, p. iv.

5. *Ibid.*

not to emigrate to Israel upon his graduation from the Jewish Institute of Religion in 1946, he left the United States soon after and travelled to Israel by boat with a group of Zionist friends who were intending to settle there permanently. Although Weiner remained in Israel full time for only two years, ostensibly as a student of Jewish studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, he took advantage of that opportunity to make contact and form relationships with many of the most important – yet largely unknown to American readers – religious thinkers there at the time. Even after Weiner left Israel in 1948 to become the founding rabbi of Temple Israel in South Orange, New Jersey, he returned frequently and did his best to keep in contact with many of those he would later write about in his articles and books.

The narrative of *Wild Goats* focuses entirely on religious encounters in Israel, and his later book *9½ Mystics* is heavily indebted to Weiner's experiences in Israel as well. American readers sensed that there was something authentic in the Israeli religious environment that was inaccessible in the United States, and they saw Weiner as the first-person witness who could bring them a vivid portrait of what was going on over there. In an era before air travel became easily accessible, most Americans learned about what was happening abroad from correspondence such as those published by Weiner. His gift was his ability to write in such a way that the reader felt that they were participating in the interactions that the author was personally experiencing. As a reviewer of *Wild Goats* in *Commentary* magazine put it, it was like a 'field trip' through the religious landscape of Israel.⁶

Weiner's publications played a key role in helping Americans to understand the religious environment in the Land of Israel. While *9½ Mystics* focuses only on Jewish religious figures – and only mystical ones at that – *Wild Goats* devotes a considerable amount of space to Christians struggling to build and sustain vibrant communities in a land where Weiner could find little evidence of meaningful interfaith dialogue. He is even more disappointed when he is told by representatives of the Arab community in Israel that they are not terribly interested in religion. Weiner visited a mosque in Acre, where he watched the imam deliver the sermon in a 'monotonous tone' to

6. Ernest Stock, 'The Wild Goats of Ein Gedi by Herbert Weiner', book review, *Commentary*, February 1962, www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/ernest-stock/the-wild-goats-of-ein-gedi-by-herbert-weiner; accessed 5 December 2020.

the ‘dull-eyed, unresponsive faces’ of the few worshipers who were there.⁷ Perhaps because of the moribund, stagnant and indeed inflexible approach to religion dominant in the Israel of the 1950s and 1960s, little attention had been paid to it in reports written up to that time in English. Indeed, that same reviewer of *Wild Goats* in *Commentary* magazine wrote that religious life in Israel has been ‘the one aspect of Israel’s existence that has been buried under the avalanche of comment on its economics, politics, and sociology’.⁸

While his writings were entertaining readers an ocean away, Weiner himself was disappointed in not being able to find the dynamic new national religious identity that he was looking for. He had to report that those few who were experimenting with innovative approaches to religiosity were small, isolated and barely tolerated groups, similar to the wild goats of Ein Gedi, a tiny oasis in the middle of the Dead Sea desert region. But while Weiner found Israel to be ‘a troubled landscape’ from a religious innovation point of view, he succeeded in meeting and interacting with many of those who are today almost legendary figures, including David Ben Gurion, Gershom Scholem, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, Martin Buber, Yigael Yadin and others. He visited a couple of religious figures who were seen as extremists, completely beyond the pale – most notably Rabbi Amram Blau, the leader of the Neturei Karta, an ultra-Orthodox sect that completely rejected the legitimacy of the State of Israel. While Weiner was interested in religious ideas, he also interviewed self-defined secular Israelis, including the followers of A.D. Gordon, whose beliefs he labelled as the ‘religion of labour’. Weiner wanted to observe the ‘new Jew’ in the process of formation.⁹

At first glance, based on his religious background, Herbert Weiner would have seemed like an unlikely candidate to bring the world of Israeli religious encounters to the American reader. According to an interview conducted by Chabad in Jerusalem in May 2007, Weiner received no Jewish education whatsoever while he was growing up in Boston in the 1920s and 1930s. When it came time for his bar mitzvah, Weiner explained, ‘a very sweet uncle escorted me to the synagogue one Thursday morning and explained to me how to say a blessing before and after the Torah reading. And then I went home and played handball against the side of the house, as if nothing

7. Weiner, *The Wild Goats of Ein Gedi*, p. 25.

8. Stock, ‘The Wild Goats of Ein Gedi by Herbert Weiner’.

9. Weiner, *The Wild Goats of Ein Gedi*, pp. 185, 206.

had happened.’ Weiner concluded, ‘That remained the extent of my Jewish education until I went to college.’¹⁰

Weiner was not raised as a Reform Jew, did not attend a Reform temple growing up, and was never confirmed. Like many of his generation, he was raised more as an ethnic Jew rather than a religious one. Once they left home and started their own families, many American Jews retained a largely ethnic Jewish identity or lost interest in Jewish matters completely. Weiner, however, would go on to develop a strong need for both religious and spiritual growth when he studied at his state university, the University of Massachusetts, completing his bachelor’s degree in 1942. It was during this period that he became active in campus Jewish activities, attending Hillel as well as a regional secular Labor Zionist organization called Avuka. He told the interviewer that ‘As a result [of his involvement in Hillel and Avuka], I became interested in Torah observance and in moving to Israel to work the land.’¹¹

After completing his undergraduate degree, Weiner enrolled as a rabbinical student at the Jewish Institute of Religion (JIR) in New York City. The JIR had been founded by Rabbi Stephen S. Wise in 1922 as a pluralistic alternative to the Hebrew Union College (HUC) in Cincinnati. Weiner’s future writings display a strong desire to find Jewish authenticity – wherever it may be found, regardless of its source – a value that would have been instilled in him at JIR. Wise made his name as rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel in Portland, Oregon. During the Progressive Era he became well known for attacking social and political injustices. In 1906 Wise was offered the position as the rabbi of Temple Emanuel, then the most prestigious pulpit in America. However, the board expected to approve his sermons in advance, and Wise, insisting on a free pulpit, turned the position down.

Instead, in 1907, Wise established the Free Synagogue in New York City, which was committed to allowing the rabbi complete freedom of speech. He was a believer that the rabbi should have full autonomy to take political, social, economic, as well as religious positions as dictated by his conscience. Although Wise was a classical Reform Jew, he was also an early supporter

10. Herbert Weiner, ‘Nine and a Half Should Be Ten’, from ‘Here’s My Story’, *Jewish Educational Media*, 1 November 2014, http://jemedia.org/email/newsletter/My_Encounter/11-1-14.pdf; accessed 5 December 2020.

11. *Ibid.*

of Zionism, which was a minority position in the Reform movement at the time. These differences, combined with the fact that Wise felt the Reform movement needed a rabbinical school in NYC, led to him establishing the JIR in 1922. While the services at the new institute were classical Reform, Wise accepted students from all sorts of Jewish backgrounds – from more traditional to classical Reform – and encouraged them to take pulpits at Conservative and even Orthodox synagogues, as well as Reform temples. Even after the JIR merged with the HUC to form the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC–JIR) in 1950, the two schools retained distinctive and, one might almost say, divergent cultures.

Weiner learned about the JIR from Dr Henry Slonimsky, who delivered a talk at the University of Massachusetts during Weiner’s undergraduate years. According to an unsigned obituary written by his son-in-law Rabbi Tom Guthertz, Weiner was deeply influenced by this encounter with the then dean of JIR.¹² ‘Slonimsky’s passion and intellect motivated him [Weiner] to become involved in Jewish student life, deepened his own observance, and led to his enrolment in the rabbinical program.’¹³ Not only was Slonimsky the primary reason Weiner enrolled in the JIR; he also became Weiner’s principal influence during his years of rabbinical studies. As Rabbi Bruce Block, Weiner’s successor at Temple Israel, explained, ‘Even on his ventures into other Jewish byways he was always anchored to that rational system of thought he had learned from Slonimsky, even when the emotional and spiritual appeal of these byways was great.’¹⁴

While Slonimsky encouraged his students to engage with reason, he also encouraged them to look beyond the rational and logical. As *the New York Times* quoted Slonimsky in his obituary, ‘Teaching is not imparting information’, he declared. ‘Teaching is a spiritual thing, an emotional thing: it is a process of kindling human souls.’ Weiner was powerfully attracted to Slonimsky’s philosophy of Jewish education. Slonimsky defined the JIR as ‘a free school; free from dogmas, free from orthodoxy, free from reform, where teachers are free to teach what they think best and where students are not bound by any obligation to conform’.¹⁵

12. Tom Guthertz, interview with the author, 24 September 2018.

13. Obituary, *American Jewish Archives*, 2013.

14. Bruce Block, email to the author, 19 August 2018.

15. Obituary, ‘Dr. Henry Slonimsky, 86, Dead; Educator Also Active in Religion’, *New York*

This declaration of open inquiry was not made in a vacuum. After being forced to leave Johns Hopkins University because of his left-wing political views, Slonimsky had served as a professor of Jewish education and ethics at the HUC, starting in the spring of 1921. While he must have been grateful to have secured another academic position, he found their rigid commitment to classical Reform stifling. Shortly before accepting a position as professor of ethics and philosophy of religion at JIR in March 1924, Slonimsky told Stephen Wise, speaking about himself, that ‘I do not belong to their guild. I have no complaint to make, but I am not at home there. They suspect me. They dread me as a radical, and, above all, as a nationalist.’ Explaining the environment at HUC, he told Wise that ‘[n]o one is happy or doing his best at Cincinnati. There is no real freedom there. They are bigoted as a result of their dogmatism.’ Slonimsky argued, ‘They are not alive. You are. The Institute [JIR] is. One feels the breath of freedom within your Institute. I am ready to come to you if you still wish to have me.’¹⁶

Towards the end of rabbinical school, Weiner had to take a leave of absence in order to serve in the Merchant Marine in World War II. When the war was over he returned to the JIR to complete his degree. During his final year in rabbinical school, Weiner served as an Interim Rabbi at Temple B’rith Kodesh in Rochester, New York, which was under the leadership of Senior Rabbi Philip S. Bernstein.¹⁷ Bernstein was known outside of Rochester because he would become president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), chairman of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and author of *What the Jews Believe*.¹⁸ The temple needed interim rabbis for the war years, and a few years afterwards as well, because Bernstein was serving the country as a chaplain in Europe. Bernstein was executive director of the Committee on Army and Navy Religious Activities (CANRA) of the National Jewish Welfare Board from December 1942 to February 1946. He returned to the United States briefly and was then appointed as Advisor on

Times, 14 November 1970, www.nytimes.com/1970/11/14/archives/dr-henry-slonimsky-86-dead-educator-also-active-in-religion.html; accessed 5 December 2020.

16. Memo of meeting of Stephen S. Wise with Henry Slonimsky, 29 January 1924, JIR Records, Box 34, Folder 1, in Shirley Idelson, ‘Reorienting American Liberal Judaism for the Twentieth Century: Stephen S. Wise and the Early Years of the Jewish Institute of Religion’ (Ph.D. dissertation, Graduate Center, City University of New York, n.d.), pp. 206–7.

17. Peter W. Stein, email to the author, 4 October 2018.

18. Philip S. Bernstein, *What the Jews Believe* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1950). The book was an expansion of an article written for *Life* magazine, published 11 September 1950.

Jewish Affairs to the US Army commander in Germany from May 1946 to August 1947.¹⁹ Being selected to serve temporarily as rabbi in lieu of Bernstein was regarded as a prestigious appointment.

After graduating in 1946, Weiner was able to arrange to travel on the USNS *Marine Carp*, a Marine Adder-class transport vessel, to Palestine.²⁰ He travelled with a group of young American Zionists who were planning to join the then-developing Haganah, which at that time was preparing for a rapidly approaching war of independence. The group included Rabbi Jack Cohen, a Reconstructionist rabbi who later became the Hillel director at the Hebrew University, and Moshe Hellner. Hellner's daughter, Dr Melila Hellner-Eshed, professor of Jewish Mysticism in the Department of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, grew up knowing Weiner. 'I met him as a little girl and I knew him until he died.' Weiner met her father on the trip across the Atlantic and they became close lifelong friends. Both men were coming to study at the Hebrew University, using their tuition benefits from the G.I. Bill. Hellner-Eshed said, 'Herb realised that Jewish mysticism was such a fascinating thing that no one was looking at. I think he had a deep personal intuitive take on the things that interested him. He liked to mix it in.' She seemed certain that Weiner did not feel any cognitive dissonance from being a Reform rabbi interested in mysticism. 'I think that what was wonderful was the fact that it was a subject that was totally uninteresting to the Reform movement at that time didn't bother him at all. Because I don't think he was a very conformist kind of person. He wasn't doing "party line Reform Judaism" Judaism.'²¹

Hellner-Eshed explained Weiner's attraction to more ritually observant, if somewhat quirky, traditional forms of the Jewish religion. 'I think it's because of a keen curiosity about forms of Judaism that are more practice-oriented, more mythical, more imaginative, more mystical.' This was 'as opposed to [solely] thinking of Judaism as ethics, as *tikkun olam*'.²² Weiner became a rabbi at a time when the Reform movement was still dominated by classical Reform which stressed ethical universalism and minimized most forms of ritual. Perhaps in response to this, Weiner had a distaste for people

19. Peter W. Stein, email to the author, 5 October 2018.

20. Herbert Weiner, CCAR Deceased Members, www.ccarnet.org/member/deceased; accessed 5 December 2020.

21. Melila Hellner-Eshed, interview with the author, 3 October 2018.

22. Ibid.

who preferred to observe religion at a distance rather than to participate. He vividly recalled his own ‘Sabbaths in Meah She’arim synagogues watching tourists observing the exotic religious Jews at prayer’. This memory brings up an even earlier one for Weiner, ‘of a young Rabbinic student working in a Reform synagogue whose museum displayed a pair of phylacteries in a case, with a card saying “Do not touch!”’.²³

During this period of 1946–48, Weiner lived in Jerusalem, ostensibly a student of Jewish studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He not only attended lectures and studied whatever caught his fancy but he also showed support for the effort to create an independent Jewish state in Palestine. According to Gutherz, Weiner was a ‘member’ of the Haganah, inferring that he wasn’t actually an enlisted soldier but rather that he attempted to collect intelligence in the course of his daily activities. ‘They used him as they used many American students. His “tough” assignment was dating the secretaries of the British soldiers to see if they could get any information, which they would pass along to the Haganah.’²⁴ This was not as innocuous an activity as it might sound because there was an active effort on the part of various Jewish underground organizations to drive the British out of Palestine, violently if necessary. This culminated in the bombing of the King David Hotel, the British administrative headquarters for Palestine, by the Irgun on 22 July 1946, resulting in the deaths of 91 people. Despite the increasingly tense political environment in Jerusalem at the time, Weiner appears to have focused on his religious explorations.

Hellner-Eshed suggests that it was Weiner’s experiences in Jerusalem during this period that got him so interested in mysticism. ‘He was here [in Israel], he was interested in things that were happening. He understood that nobody was doing the work [of writing about mysticism for a popular audience]. He was studying kabbalah with [Gershom] Scholem. He wanted to see [what was] happening, really, on the ground, and that’s what got him going.’²⁵ Weiner started asking around to find out where the most interesting synagogues were in Jerusalem and throughout the country. Having graduated from JIR, he had enough of a background to make sense of a

23. Herbert Weiner, Preface, *9½ Mystics: The Kabbala Today* (new and expanded edn; New York: Collier Books, 1992), p. 364.

24. Tom Gutherz, interview with the author, 24 September 2018.

25. Melila Hellner-Eshed, interview with the author, 3 October 2018.

traditional Shabbat service and to converse intelligently with those in the various congregations. While many of his fellow students at the Hebrew University put their emphasis on their classroom studies, Weiner saw his classes as a launching pad for experiencing Judaism in the Holy Land.

The mystical personality in the Land of Israel that Weiner would have most wanted to meet had unfortunately passed away in 1935. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (Rav Kook), the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine and the founder of Yeshivat Mercaz HaRav (also known as Universal Yeshiva), was the most notable of the religious influences on Weiner in both *Wild Goats* and *9½ Mystics*. At the time of his first book, as seen in the light of what Weiner calls ‘today’s religious quarrels in the Holy Land’, Rav Kook’s figure was already beginning to assume ‘legendary proportions’.²⁶ According to his most recent biographer, Yehudah Mirsky, Rav Kook was ‘one of the most influential – and controversial – rabbis of the twentieth century. A visionary writer and outstanding rabbinic leader, Kook was a philosopher, mystic, poet, jurist, communal leader, and veritable saint.’²⁷ Mirsky praises Rav Kook as a ‘powerfully original thinker’ who ‘combined strict traditionalism and an embrace of modernity, Orthodoxy and tolerance, piety and audacity, scholasticism and ecstasy, and passionate nationalism with profound universalism’.²⁸

Weiner was in large part driven by a feeling that both he and Rav Kook were trying desperately to focus on the wonders of life but were nevertheless obsessed with the presence of evil. Weiner told his readers that ‘Kook’s orthodox faith had not been facilely achieved.’ Rav Kook’s approach to life was that ‘God’s in his heaven; all’s right with the world.’ However, Weiner suggests that Rav Kook ‘seemed to have known the argument that the kabbalists called “the other side”, even in his own life, always talking and writing about blissful joy but struggling often with a “sadness that burdens the soul”’.²⁹ The Land of Israel, according to Rav Kook, was the spatial centre of holiness in the world. It radiated holiness vertically to the Jews who lived upon the Land as well as horizontally to other portions and peoples of the earth. The spirit of the Land of Israel was entirely pure, while spirits every-

26. Weiner, *The Wild Goats of Ein Gedi*, p. 161.

27. Yehudah Mirsky, *Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2019), back cover.

28. Yale University Press publicity material for *ibid.*

29. Weiner, *9½ Mystics* (1969 edn), p. 265.

where else were mired in *kelipot* (husks) of impurity. It appears that Weiner thought that he had found a kindred spirit, a person likewise obsessed with the search for spirituality who fluctuated between two different realities.

In Weiner's earlier descriptions of Rav Kook, he portrays a scholar and thinker whose views were 'far more than an expression of tolerance. They were rooted in the very core of his paradoxical personality and in a philosophy of religion and life which today, more than 25 years after his death in 1935, is recognised as one of the profoundest and most original spiritual expressions.'³⁰ Weiner tells his readers in *Wild Goats* that there was a leader of the Old Yishuv (predominantly ultra-Orthodox Jews already living in the Land of Israel before the beginning of the Zionist movement) who believed that the modern Jewish resettlement of Israel 'was the beginning of the complete return envisioned by the prophets'. Like other Orthodox leaders in Israel at the time, '[h]e was well aware that many of the [H]alutzim – the Jewish pioneers who had come to Palestine in the early 1900s – had an attitude toward the Holy Laws of the Torah and toward pious Jewry which could only be described by the Hebrew word *chutzpah* – brazenness.'³¹ And, according to Weiner, Rav Kook 'sensed their reverence for labor of the hands, and their contempt for those who directed all their energies to prayer and sacred studies'. In spite of all of this, Weiner wrote that Rav Kook visited them and 'joined hands with them as they danced the hora'.³²

Rav Kook argued that the brazenness that the Orthodox observed among the secularists was that which the Talmud predicted would precede the coming of the Messiah. The Jewish people needed to become more 'animalized' in order to prepare for what may come. 'The vessels must be thickened before they can become proper receptacles for the highest and most intense illuminations.' This seeming justification for secular Labor Zionism shocked many in the Old Yishuv. The Orthodox critics of Rav Kook 'reminded him that Judaism made distinctions between the holy and the profane, and that he ought to distinguish between those who revered and those who were indifferent to the Holy Laws of traditional Judaism'. Rav Kook responded with a parable that in the Jerusalem temple all but the high priest could enter the holy of holies and only on Yom Kippur. But this was not the situation

30. Weiner, *The Wild Goats of Ein*, p. 160.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 159–60.

when the temple was being built. ‘Did not the ordinary carpenters and the hewers of stone also enter freely and contribute their offering to the total structure?’ Rav Kook argued that ‘[w]e are building today, and we have not yet completed our “holy of holies” ... all have a portion to offer in this building, and one no more right than another in bringing their offering.’³³

It was, of course, not possible to meet Rav Kook. ‘But it was still possible, I thought, to meet the real man, if not in person, at least through the eyes of his only son, Zvi Yehudah Kook, who teaches at the Universal Yeshiva which was founded by his illustrious father.’³⁴ The younger Kook is best known today for being the primary inspiration for the Gush Emunim movement – in English, ‘Bloc of the Faithful’ – which was committed to establishing Jewish settlements in the West Bank, due to its biblical roots as the Jewish holy land. Gush Emunim was in large part a response to the territory gained by Israel in the Six Day War in 1967. Although Weiner disagreed with the ideology of the movement, his relationship with Zvi Yehudah Kook dated back many years before these political developments. Weiner describes visiting the younger Kook for the first time when the Universal Yeshiva was still located on Rav Kook Street in the centre of downtown Jerusalem. Zvi Yehuda Kook ‘took my hand in warm greeting, and asked how he could help me’. Weiner told him that he was interested in learning more about Rav Kook, and the son ‘agreed readily to set aside some hours for discussion of his father’s teachings’. Taking Weiner by the arm, Kook walked with him into the corridor and out to the stairway. Still holding Weiner’s hand, Kook ‘inquired as to my first name and my work, and invited me to visit him the coming Sabbath at home’.³⁵

That Saturday afternoon, Weiner walked to the Vineyard of Abraham Quarter, an ultra-Orthodox neighbourhood near Geula in central Jerusalem. In addition to being interested in Rav Kook’s thinking on the mystical, he was also there to research the ‘present religious crisis in Israel’.³⁶ As he walked towards this Orthodox quarter, Weiner noticed a boy on a bicycle being glared at by six or seven younger ultra-Orthodox boys. A young ultra-Orthodox man noticed the confrontation and came over to warn the

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 162.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

boy on the bicycle to leave the area quickly, which after some hesitation the boy finally did. When Weiner turned the corner of Meah Shearim, he took a yarmulke out of his pocket and put it on his head so that he would not feel quite as alien. Suddenly, he heard the loud sounds of a motorcycle. Locals started shouting ‘Shabbos! Shabbos!’ and he watched as they began picking up rocks to throw at a couple riding on a motorcycle. Fortunately, the couple raced out of range before any stones could be thrown. Weiner tells his readers that these scenes were ‘an appropriate prelude to my meeting with Zvi Yehuda Kook, for it was to this problem – the religious schisms of Israel – that his father has dedicated most of his life and thought’.³⁷

When Weiner arrived at Kook’s rented room, the landlady let him in and informed Weiner that Kook had lived there by himself since his wife died many years earlier. When Kook returned, he took Weiner’s hand and greeted him warmly by his first name. Kook asked Weiner how they should begin to study his father’s thinking, suggesting that they could read together from Rav Kook’s writings. As Weiner began to ask a question, Kook interrupted him, placing his hand on Weiner’s hand and saying that, ‘if you will be more comfortable’, Weiner did not have to wear a head covering. ‘The invitation to remove my *yarmelke* seemed strange coming from an Orthodox rabbi, who not only wore a skull cap himself, but whose fringed undergarment peeked through his shirt in complete fulfillment of the biblical commandment, “And thou shall look upon them”.’ Weiner appeared surprised, so Kook explained, ‘I don’t want any *mechitza* – any artificial boundaries – between us. I want us to be really close, and I want you to feel natural, and it seems to me you are not really accustomed to wearing a *yarmelke*.’³⁸

Weiner was flustered by Kook’s request but also encouraged by his warmth, and he decided that rather than asking Kook his prepared questions about the state of religion in Israel, he would instead ask more personal ones. ‘What I wanted to know about his father was ... had he really succeeded in feeling in his own life that harmony and peace of soul and mind which he claimed could exist along with that “restlessness which arises from the never-ceasing expansion of the soul”?’³⁹ Weiner follows this up with several other intimate questions. Had Rav Kook reconciled the fleshly with the spiritual? How

37. Ibid., p. 164.

38. Ibid., p. 165.

39. Ibid.

had he handled the political conflicts that he must have been involved in as chief rabbi? ‘Were these not burdensome to a spirit which yearned for “boundless heights”?’ What about his personal life? Did his outside activities impoverish his family life? ‘I was somewhat abashed by the boldness of my own questions, and Zvi Yehuda Kook also seemed surprised by the turn of the interview, but his eyes retained their good humor.’⁴⁰

As Kook answered some of the questions, Weiner observed him glancing occasionally at a framed photo of his father. Weiner saw in the image that ‘there was a serene half-smile about Rav Kook’s lips, but the dark eyes seemed more sad than smiling.’ Rav Kook had written of the joy to be found in holiness, but he had also written of the ‘melancholy pressing on his heart, saddening and embittering his life without conscious explanation.’⁴¹ The elder Kook explained that this feeling was the result of the ‘struggle of the soul, caged in its physical bonds and reaching out for a life of freedom ... a life finer, clearer, and brighter ... yet failing to attain it ... and this struggle is the cause of the melancholy of the soul’. Weiner wanted to know whether Rav Kook had really succeeded in experiencing the ‘light of salvation pushing to reveal itself from behind the blackness’. This was the question whose answer Weiner was most interested in and hopefully awaited Kook’s response, confiding in his readers that ‘such matters only a very close friend – or a son – could reveal’. But Zvi Yehuda Kook was unable to provide an answer that satisfied Weiner. ‘Yes, there were conflicts. But he was always able to lift his soul above them.’ Weiner ‘must have looked a bit unhappy at his answer’, so Kook added, ‘but of course there were a few times that I can recall when he was provoked and did lose his composure ... but those were very few’.⁴²

When Weiner was about to leave Israel to return to New Jersey from one of his trips, he went over on his last morning to say goodbye to Zvi Yehuda Kook. Weiner knew that Rav Kook had believed that all Jews should return to the land of their historic birth, and he wanted to know if the son felt the same way. Kook responded that there is ‘a special connection between this land and Jews. They do fit each other. After all, this is the cradle. Here the

40. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

Jewish soul was created.’⁴³ He added that ‘even the light, the climate, the shape of the hills, particularly fit the soul of the Jew and bring the highest out of it.’ Weiner interjected to ask about the Jews in America and whether they also have a role in Jewish history. Kook agreed that they do, adding ‘But though you live in a wonderful and free country, isn’t there, Jewishly, a type of “slavery”? Not, of course, of the body, but a twisting of mind and spirit, no matter how slight.’ Nevertheless, Kook expressed approval for what Weiner was doing in the United States. ‘You certainly have important work there.’ Kook then asked Weiner to tell him about Weiner’s activities, and Weiner reports that ‘I tried to describe the work of a rabbi in the United States. He was particularly interested in the description of services in a liberal synagogue. He asked what prayers the Reform group omitted or changed, and nodded his head encouragingly as I answered.’⁴⁴

Despite the seemingly positive interaction, Kook apparently felt that Weiner was holding back and feeling worried about potentially offending the Israeli rabbi. ‘I see ... that you haven’t taken off your own *yarmelke*. I am afraid that I haven’t been able to remove entirely the *mehitza* – the boundary between us. I am really sorry.’ Weiner then ‘mumbled the Talmudic injunction’ concerning ‘respecting the sensitivity of others’, and Kook did not respond well to this comment. ‘For the first time I saw a flicker of irritation pass over his face.’ Kook then said to Weiner, ‘No, no, that is exactly what I do not want, for you to be something not natural to yourself out of deference to me. Why should we have to think that we must always stamp our image upon others?’⁴⁵ Weiner said goodbye and left Kook, having the impression that Kook is trying to build a warm and close relationship with the full person, and that Weiner should not hide any facet of his thinking or living from his friend. Later, Weiner would find out that this was a decidedly mistaken assumption.

In 1962, Dr Nelson Glueck, president of the HUC–JIR, asked Weiner to serve in an administrative role with his newly formed institute in Jerusalem, since he himself was headquartered in Cincinnati. Glueck, a famous archaeologist as well as a Reform rabbi, had been planning to establish a biblical archaeological campus comparable to the American Schools of Oriental

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 179–80.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

45. *Ibid.*

Research (ASOR – now called the Albright Institute), which Glueck had led over three different terms between 1932 and 1947. When the War of Independence began in 1948, virtually no one – including scholars – could get across the border to East Jerusalem where ASOR was located. This development coincided with Glueck’s feeling that there needed to be an institution for biblical archaeology in West Jerusalem, as well as a centre for Reform Jewish education. The Reform movement had long been interested in establishing a branch of the HUC–JIR in Jerusalem, but they knew there would be tremendous opposition from the Orthodox establishment. Glueck, however, believed that such a campus would have a positive impact on how Israelis perceived Reform Judaism. By beginning with an institute for biblical archeology, the Reform movement would be able to acquire land and begin building with a minimum of political problems.

According to his biographers, Glueck was able to combine two visions: one to build a centre for biblical archeology and the other to create a spiritual centre in Jerusalem for Reform Judaism. ‘It was the combination of these two visions ... that would guarantee the success of his program.’⁴⁶ According to Michael A. Meyer, the historian of the Reform movement, ‘Though Glueck knew the implications of establishing an HUC–JIR presence in Israel, and though he fought to retain the inclusion of a synagogue in the building plans, there is no doubt that he was primarily interested in the Jerusalem school as a base for archaeological work.’⁴⁷ Glueck had been spending considerable amounts of time in the Negev desert excavating, and his tales of biblical history had brought renown to HUC–JIR. Nevertheless, he had to convince the HUC–JIR Board of Governors that the building of a Jerusalem campus would be financially feasible and would benefit the Reform movement. This discussion took on a sense of urgency in the summer of 1953 when Glueck was offered a tract of land adjacent to the King David Hotel. Even then it was a prime piece of Jerusalem real estate, although it was virtually on the border separating Israel and Jordan.

While the Orthodox political parties in Israel had their concerns about biblical archeology, it was the Reform religious nature of the proposed

46. Jonathan M. Brown and Laurence Kutler, *Nelson Glueck: Biblical Archeologist and President of Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion* (Cincinnati OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 2006), p. 179.

47. Michael A Meyer, ‘A Centennial History’, in Samuel E Karff (ed.), *Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion at One Hundred Years* (Cincinnati OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 1976), p. 211.

institution that aroused their fervent opposition as early as March 1955. Eliahu Genichovski, from the Agudat Yisrael party, spoke in the Knesset about ‘the erection of a Reform synagogue ... which has symbolized over the last century and a half alienation and betrayal of Jewish values. I indignantly ask: Is it possible that the government of Israel is ready to betray Jewish history?’ That same month, Rabbi Yehuda Leib Maimon – the first minister of religious affairs and a member of the Mizrachi religious Zionist party – wrote to Glueck introducing himself. ‘I am a traditional Jew, I oppose Reform Judaism, and yet I have many friends who are Reform Jews, among them Dr Stephen S. Wise – who presented me with an honorary doctorate – and Dr Abba Hillel Silver.’ Then Maimon got to his point. ‘I have heard that the honorable professor Glueck is considering establishing a Reform temple in Israel.’ Maimon wrote, ‘I turn to you in my request made in the name of the Land of Israel and its unity, and in the name of all those who seek the brotherhood of unity in our land and our state, not to take this step.’ His position was deeply rooted, going so far as to quote scripture. “Do not touch my anointed” [Psalm 105:15 or I Chronicles 16:22] – let the Land of Israel remain in its perfect holiness and purity.’⁴⁸

The following year, the Jerusalem Municipal Council had to approve a building permit for Glueck’s institute. The Orthodox party representatives on this council protested and it took twelve meetings and the creation of a new political coalition for the permit to eventually be approved. Glueck wrote, ‘It is not our desire to act as missionaries in Israel, but it is our determination to realize for ourselves the right which is guaranteed for all people in Israel to preach and practice and pray to the God of our fathers in accordance with our own understanding.’⁴⁹ Glueck felt confident that eventually Reform Judaism would become recognized as a legitimate stream of Judaism by the State of Israel, and Reform rabbis would be authorized to perform all of the religious functions that were then restricted to Orthodox rabbis.

Glueck’s new campus would include a chapel that could seat 350–400 people, which would provide ‘our own type of liberal services in our own synagogue’ that would satiate the ‘real hunger of most of the people of Israel for an attractive form of Judaism, separated from State authority.’⁵⁰ Glueck’s

48. Brown and Kutler, *Nelson Glueck*, p. 182.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

50. Daniel Syme, ‘The Growth of the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion in

plan included not only a chapel and a library but classrooms, a workroom, a photographic laboratory, a small dormitory and two suites – one for an annual visiting professor and the other for a resident director. Following the model that Glueck was familiar with from the ASOR, he planned to appoint annual directorships. For the first academic year – which was 1963–4 – he chose Harvard professor Frank Moore Cross, a disciple of the renowned Johns Hopkins archeologist William F. Albright. For 1964–5, Glueck selected G. Ernest Wright, the director of the Harvard Semitic Museum, also a disciple of Albright. Glueck appointed a visiting director every year until 1968, when William G. Dever became the first permanent director.

Weiner took a leave of absence from his congregation beginning in the middle of 1962 in order to help Glueck with his budding institute. He was to be the first administrator of the Hebrew Union College Biblical and Archaeological School [HUC–BAS], later renamed the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology. Weiner was tasked with supervising the final stages of the construction of the campus as well as helping to facilitate the plans for the official opening of the programme, which would begin the following academic year. The plans for the original HUC–BAS building were designed by architect Heinz Rau. It was to be made out of white Galilee limestone at a projected cost of \$500,000. This ballooned to \$864,000 by the time construction was completed in early spring 1963.

Well before Weiner's arrival, the construction project had been plagued with difficulties that extended beyond the cost. Two members of the HUC–JIR Board of Governors discovered that the original contractor was not building according to the prescribed specifications, and was using inferior materials as well as unsound modes of construction.⁵¹ When the contractor was fired, he seized the property, erecting barbed wire at the entrances and placing it under guard. Rather than go to court and face a public-relations disaster, Glueck decided to pay off the contractor and hire a new firm to avoid any delays. Weiner arrived as the building was nearing completion. Despite now having a competent contractor, the project nevertheless seemed to drag on. In December 1962 Weiner wrote in his diary, 'A month has passed and the H.U.C. building is still not completed. I spend most of my time shouting

the United States and Abroad' (Rabbinic thesis, HUC–JIR, Cincinnati OH, 1972), p. 119.

51. Meyer, 'A Centennial History', p. 211.

at carpenters, fighting with the telephone company, engaging in protracted and maddening negotiations with various government agencies.’⁵²

Weiner also played an important role in organizing the convocation marking the official opening of the campus, which was held 27–31 March 1963. Most of the major Israeli political leaders spoke, including Prime Minister David Ben Gurion, former prime minister and chairman of the Jewish Agency Moshe Sharett, minister of education Abba Eban, foreign minister Golda Meir and mayor of Jerusalem Mordechai Ish-Shalom. President Yitzhak Ben-Zvi refused to attend but did invite the participants to a reception at the official president’s residence. HUC–JIR presented honorary degrees to Yigael Yadin and Carl William Blegen, both well-known archeologists. In addition, the HUC–JIR Board of Governors held a meeting in Jerusalem for the first time in its history, scheduled to allow them to also attend the convocation.

There were bureaucratic difficulties preparing for the convocation that Weiner had to resolve. For example, worship services were planned, and the institute needed approximately 200 American Reform prayer books for the guests. An Israeli Reform prayer book, which was to be edited by professor Jakob J. Petuchowski, had not been written yet, and even if it had been available it would have only been in Hebrew. The standard American Reform prayer book at the time was the Union Prayer Book, and that is what most of the guests would be expecting to use. Weiner set about trying to arrange to import these books, only to find that there were governmental obstacles everywhere he turned. He began by inquiring with customs, where he was told to go to the Ministry of Religion. ‘Facing me in the outer office was a man with a *yarmelke* and a beard, who ushered me into an inner office where what seemed an identical man with identical *yarmelke* and beard sat sipping a glass of tea.’ Continuing, he recounted, ‘When I explained my errand the pleasant sound of the sipping turned into a gurgle, followed by a profound silence.’ Weiner said nothing, realizing the man’s predicament. ‘How could a faithful Orthodox Jew and representative of the Ministry of Religion authorize the import of a heretical item like Reform prayer books?’⁵³

52. Herbert Weiner, ‘A Mission to Israel: A Diary from Herbert Weiner’s Stay in Israel’, *Commentary*, 1 August 1963, www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/a-mission-to-israel; accessed 5 December 2020.

53. *Ibid.*

In addition to handling the logistical problems involved with administering the needs of the campus, Weiner was also tasked with encouraging religious and educational programming. Meyer mentions in a footnote that ‘even before the structure was finished, Israelis seeking a nonorthodox religious expression of Judaism had used the building for seminars and services. They had been invited by Rabbi Herbert Weiner, who served as the school’s administrator for a few months before its formal opening.’⁵⁴ Weiner was a good candidate to reach out to various individuals and groups in Jerusalem who might have been interested in different types of activity that deviated from what could be found in local Orthodox synagogues but were not necessarily orientated specifically towards Reform Judaism. While his encouragement of religious activities would seem to be innocuous enough, even the slightest sign of Reform Jewish worship had the potential to generate opposition and even active hostility from segments of the city’s Orthodox communities.

Weiner, long obsessed with an unresolvable need to reconcile irreconcilable positions, was torn between his desire to remain friendly with his Orthodox teachers and his sense of responsibility to advance the cause of Reform Judaism in Israel. ‘The truth is that I am supposed to do “something” about the religious situation here. But what? Nobody has told me, and I myself don’t know.’⁵⁵ Weiner was probably expecting too much from himself. It seems unlikely that Glueck would have reasonably expected Weiner to resolve a conflictual situation that had been developing for many years. Indeed, the problem of acceptance that the new campus faced was built into the core political agreements that founding father David Ben Gurion had made with the Orthodox political parties shortly before and shortly after the creation of the State of Israel.

As early as July 1962 Weiner expressed in his diary a trepidation concerning the impact of the announcement that week that he was to become the first administrator of the HUC. ‘I’m about to be unmasked. It started last night at the house of Reb David Cohen, “the Nazarite” as he is called here, because of the vows he has taken to refrain from cutting his hair, drinking wine, or speaking on the Sabbath.’ Weiner was participating in a lesson that Reb Cohen (the Nazir) was teaching on Rav Kook’s *The Lights of Holiness* when a short, bald man pushed into the crowded dining room where they

54. Meyer, ‘A Centennial History’, p. 279 n. 6.

55. Weiner, ‘A Mission to Israel’.

were studying. The man started whispering to the Nazir while nodding in Weiner's direction. Weiner intimated that he knew that the man was telling the Nazir that the press were reporting that Weiner was to become the first administrator of the newly formed institution being built in Jerusalem. The Orthodox press had written that this brand new campus would be advocating for 'a brand of Judaism even more dangerous than Christianity'. Weiner wrote, 'I suppose I'll soon be frozen out of these sessions at Reb David's home and I'll miss them, for the Nazirite is the man who edited and arranged most of the books of Abraham Isaac Kuk [Kook], the first Chief Rabbi of Palestine.' He continued with a more pressing matter, greatly concerned about how Zvi Yehudah Kuk [Kook], the son of the former Chief Rabbi, would react. 'The next time I go there will somebody whisper to him, too, and say that a Reform Rabbi who studies with Zvi Yehudah Kuk [Kook] is for that reason even more dangerous?'⁵⁶

Weiner recorded in this same diary entry his naive hope that he could somehow stay out of the conflict that both sides – the Reform as well as the Orthodox – saw emerging as a consequence of the opening of the new Jerusalem campus. Weiner reported that an unnamed leader of the American Reform movement told him at the King David Hotel, 'I'm glad you've come. We must fight the Orthodox. We've got to break this combination of church and state.' Weiner wrote that he wanted nothing to do with such a thing, wondering if he should have told him 'then and there in the bustling hotel lobby that I haven't the slightest desire to fight the Orthodox? That usually I find more spiritual authenticity in a decrepit synagogue in the Meah Shearim quarter than in a dozen convocations of clean-smelling, well-dressed liberal Jews at the Fontainebleau in Miami?' Did they understand that 'establishing Liberal Judaism here has very little to do with the doctrine of the separation of church and state'? Despite this total lack of determination to lead an assault on the Orthodox hegemony, most of the Orthodox educators that he interacted with assumed that he had been sent to do exactly that. Weiner expressed frustration that '[e]xplanations and qualifications do no good. There is no point in my continued protests that the Hebrew Union College School for Bible and Archaeology [*sic*] has as its aim nothing more (at least so far)

56. *Ibid.*

than setting up a program for graduate studies.’ Exasperated, he wrote ‘No one, either in Israel or in the U.S., takes this claim at face value.’⁵⁷

The one person whose potential reaction Weiner was most concerned about was Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook. When the two men eventually reunited in person after Weiner’s arrival in Israel, Weiner neglected to even speak of his reason for returning. In his diary from October 1962, Weiner wrote, ‘Last night I took my family to meet Zvi Yehudah Kuk [Kook] in the small room where we had spent so many hours talking about his father’s ideas.’ It was difficult for Kook, who spoke little or no English, to communicate with Weiner’s family. ‘But something came through – the warmth and utter sincerity of this white-bearded rabbi with the twinkling brown eyes.’ Kook told Weiner’s family a story based on the biblical portion of the week, and Weiner did not want to risk ruining the moment. ‘[I]t didn’t seem the occasion to explain why I had come to Israel. But I must tell him soon, before somebody else does.’⁵⁸

In November 1962 Weiner finally told Kook, just after they finished a class on the *Kuzari* of Yehudah Halevi, ‘I began my confession hesitantly, first saying that I hoped we could still be friends after he had heard me out.’ Weiner knew that their entire relationship would change, ‘but I had been hoping that his father’s well-known love even for atheistic pioneers would extend to a Reform rabbi in Israel.’ Weiner wrote that, ‘As I talked, his face grew more and more serious. The school, I kept saying, was nothing more than a school, and I concluded lamely, “They could have sent somebody worse.” He did not appear convinced.’ While Kook said that the work of the Hebrew Union College would ‘require clarification’, the conversation did not seem to go too badly. Weiner reported that ‘Zvi Yehudah did seem to be relieved when I assured him I had no plans for forming an Israeli congregation, and we parted with the usual warm handshake.’⁵⁹

Two days later, one of the yeshiva students told him that Kook wanted to see him. ‘I came to his house the next evening with apprehension, and I was right. He had undoubtedly conferred with others in the interim, for he no longer patted my hand or sat close to me as we talked.’⁶⁰ Kook did not

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid.

sit with Weiner at all but instead paced as he spoke. Eventually the question at hand burst out: ‘was I trying to bring Reform Judaism to Israel?’ Weiner answered that the purpose of the new institute was primarily for biblical and archaeological studies, but Kook did not appear to believe him.⁶¹ Kook began reading selections from two letters that his father had written, both of them rejecting and renouncing non-Orthodox religious services. ‘Though I had never had any illusions about the elder Rabbi Kuk’s [Kook’s] feelings on such matters, I was taken aback by the violence of the language. This was an aspect of Kuk [Kook] that I had not come across before.’ Weiner reported that ‘His son must have sensed my shock, for he made an effort to explain.’ The reason why Kook could tolerate Weiner’s Reform rabbinate in New Jersey but not his administrative position in Jerusalem was because the first was in the Diaspora and the second was in the Land of Israel. Reform Judaism, Kook said, ‘has its place outside Israel, in the galut, but never here, in Jerusalem, at the Center’. His voice trembled at the thought as he continued. ‘It was a historic fact, moreover, that the Reform movement had been responsible for the assimilation of large Jewish communities in Europe.’ Weiner noted that he ‘had no opportunity to ask why, in that case, there was such religious indifference in Israel which, up until now, had never known Reform’. The dialogue was decidedly one-sided. ‘It was clear that Zvi Yehudah was not interested that evening in hearing my opinions.’⁶²

After Kook cooled down a bit, Weiner asked him what he thought of the controversy over the religious status of B’nai Israel – a group of Indian Jews. Zvi Yehuda blamed it all on certain political parties who were allegedly ‘making all the trouble’. This discussion made Weiner ‘feel that perhaps it is time I stopped apologizing for Liberal Judaism. I love and respect Rabbi Kuk [Kook], but I know in my heart that a literal application of rabbinic law is wrong in cases like this.’ Writing in his diary from August 1963, Weiner recorded that ‘[t]he Orthodox have no monopoly on integrity – though they tend to put the rest of us on the defensive – and their attitude toward groups like the B’nai Israel suggests that we Liberal Jews may have a real function in this country.’⁶³ Later, in *9½ Mystics* in 1969, Weiner seemed to sum up his connection to Rav Kook, as experienced through his relationship with

61. Weiner, *9½ Mystics* (1969 edn), p. 287.

62. Weiner, ‘A Mission to Israel’.

63. *Ibid.*

Kook's son. 'I had been able to walk together with his son all these years because I had agreed, at least in his presence, to play the game according to his rules [Zvi Yehuda's, based on his father's teachings]. But the courtesy was a one-way affair.'⁶⁴

Weiner began his search for dynamic developments in the religious life of the Jewish community of British Mandatory Palestine and then the newly created State of Israel. Perhaps inevitably, he found his path blocked by the religious status quo that the Israelis inherited from the Ottoman Empire and embraced as a way to create workable political solutions for both the Orthodox and the secular in the Land. Weiner found a number of areas of potential controversy to write about, as well as a variety of marginal if exotic religious groups – from Christian to Muslim, as well as Jewish. Many of these religious groups that he did visit and describe are interesting to read about, but they had no impact on the country's religious life as a whole. Seeming to sense this, Weiner became increasingly interested in Israeli mystics, and particularly Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook.

There is thus a certain logic to Weiner's shifting from the subject of his first book, *The Wild Goats of Ein Gedi*, which deals with religious encounters in the Holy Land, to his later book *9½ Mystics*, which describes Jewish mystics and not only what they believe but how they live. Weiner came to the realization that Israel was not going to be able to provide models of religious thought that would have been inspirational for American Jews. Orthodox Jewish mystics, on the other hand, despite their seemingly sectarian look and anti-modern way of life, engaged in experiential encounters that many American Jews – and particularly the younger generation – might indeed find to be enchanting. While Weiner never lost his interest in Zionism or his personal desire to live in the State of Israel, he found that what really interested his readers was descriptions of personal encounters with mystics who attempted to draw on their hidden wisdom to solve the many problems of contemporary life. What he was never able to accomplish was to find a way to fully engage the American Jewish reader in the religious life of the Land of Israel.

64. Weiner, *9½ Mystics* (1969 edn), p. 288.