**The Experience of Prophecy in the Mystical Diaries of Rabbi David Kohen, Ha-Nazir**

Yehuda Bitty

“My soul’s delight is prophetic revelation” – *Ha-Rav Ha-Nazir* from his journal (Megilat Setarim C-1, 5).

**Introduction**

Rabbi David Kohen (1887–1972), known as *Ha-Nazir*, the Nazirite, is the author of a book entitled *Qol ha-Nevu’ah* (The Voice of Prophecy). His original thought combines philosophy and Kabala, reason and experience, knowledge and creativity. Very few studies have been written on the thought of *Ha-Nazir* in general, and on *Qol ha-Nevu’ah* in particular. Dov Schwartz was one of the few scholars who examined R. Cohen's thought, as an outstanding disciple of R. Abraham Isaac ha-Cohen Kook, very involved in the publication of his Master's writings[[1]](#footnote-1). Recently, an interesting initiative tried to propose a comprehensive discussion, however, of the entire book and its different sections**,** which are intimately bound up with the Nazir's spiritual and personal development[[2]](#footnote-2). Indeed, he was also interested in questions of prophecy as a possible experience in the present, and many descriptions recounted in these personal diaries reveal the portrait of a mystic in search of an encounter with the beyond.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This study intends to continue this course: to explore the man himself, from his writings, especially through the descriptions of his mystical experiences that appear in his personal journal entitled *Megilat Setarim.*[[4]](#footnote-4) The methodology presented here is based on careful textual reading: an analysis of the phenomenon through a post-experiential written account, a product of consciousness, based on the presumption that there is a connection between the mystical experience and mystical text, despite the difference between the two.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The fact that *Ha-Rav Ha-Nazir* aspired to prophesy need not surprise us. On the contrary, this is characteristic of Jewish mysticism as Rachel Elior has noted: "The normative Jewish tradition is based on the assumption that divine revelation in public ceased at a certain moment in Second Temple history… the mystical tradition is based on the opposite assumption, that divine revelation never ceased; it continues throughout history and is disclosed to people who possess unique qualities."[[6]](#footnote-6)

**The longing for prophecy: a feeling of predestination**

The expectation, anticipation, and longing for a prophetic experience is a central focus of *HaRav HaNazir’s* diaries. This expectation was an integral part of his day to day life. It guided his spiritual journey and he directed his best efforts and all his energy towards becoming worthy of realizing this experience in some manner: "I prepare, anticipate, and long for "a transcendent revelation” (*Megillat Setarim*, I:60).

In line with the biblical stories in which prophecy is thrust upon the prophet, *HaRav HaNazir* feels that the quest for prophecy is an internal longing over which he has no control. He is called to it and must submit:

Again, the voice within me calls out, to go, to find solitude, and to anticipate a prophetic revelation, and the voice is strong and powerful, deep deep inside. At last the supernal soul within me is waking up, it cannot find rest, I have no rest (*Megillat Setarim*, C-1, 90 [8]).[[7]](#footnote-7)

The inner voice acts on the person, transforms him into a messenger and reveals his mission:

Finally, this longing of my heart is not in vain. On (the holidays of) *Shemini-Atzeret* and *Simchat Torah* in particular, I became aware that the euphoria of the spirit of prophecy was drawing near and knocking on my door (*Megillat Setarim*, C-1, 20).

The image of the prophet bringing the word of God to the gates of the city appeared before his eyes:

I feel, my spirit stirs within me, to announce and to make me self-aware, that I will be called to wander among the people of Israel, to proclaim to them the word of God and His will, by the breath of his mouth… at the time that the spirit of his angel will reveal to me, before our holy sanctuary, may it be soon in our days, amen, so may it be His will (*Megillat Setarim*, C-1, 87).

He lived with complete confidence in his mission and anticipated his promised future:

I sense and feel that the day will come, that the hour will arrive and my spirit will be stirred, my heart will be lifted to the path of God and I will be anointed with the holy oil of prophecy (*Megillat Setarim,* C-1, 72).

In one sense *Ha-Rav Ha-Nazir* diverged from the scriptural prophetic mode. The biblical prophet initially refuses to accept his mission because he feels unworthy. *Ha-Rav Ha-Nazir* did not second guess his destiny. From his youth, he sensed his own uniqueness and grand ambitions always accompanied him.[[8]](#footnote-8) At this point in his life, these feelings are growing clearer and freeing themselves from personal ambition: While he still sees himself as unique, he does not seek to be the only one: “The quest for greatness, through melancholy, abstinence and asceticism is truly the need of the generation” (*Megillat Setarim,* C-1, 38). Continuing he writes:

Perhaps God will have mercy and I will not be the only one, but merely the first around whom an elite will gather. They will bear the holy weight of true revelation as in the times of the prophets and our days will be renewed as of old.

Nevertheless, *Ha-Rav Ha-Nazir* remained a singular and lonely figure. No cadre of students seeking inspiration from his teaching, personality, and prophetic mission gathered around him. In the history of mystical composition, fraternities of this sort beginning with “Those who Descend to the Chariot” in ancient times, through the fellowship of the Zohar in the middle ages, and ending with the circle associated with Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzotto, left their mark in the kabalistic literature. The members of these societies were typically part of the intellectual elite, and they strove to establish an alternative reality to the social order and prevailing conventional priorities of their day. They were led by a charismatic leader with a sense of prophetic mission that added new layers of meaning to the preexisting tradition.[[9]](#footnote-9) Though *Ha-Rav Ha-Nazir* did indeed have a sense of prophetic mission, he was not in the mold of the charismatic leader, “gifted with a mystic certainty that introduced an alternative understanding of the world, or proposed a vision or perspective that would impel him to recruit a cadre of disciples to follow his teachings and assist him in the fulfillment of his vision of overturning the present order and the creation of a new reality.”[[10]](#footnote-10) The mission of *Ha-Rav Ha-Nazir* was different. While he brought a new message, it was not at war with the established religious social order. Unlike other charismatic leaders, he did not seek to change the norms and behaviors of his community but rather his main work was in the area of spiritual creativity and uncovering what he called the Hebrew auditory logic[[11]](#footnote-11).

*Nezirut[[12]](#footnote-12)* and Prophecy

The quest for prophecy and the sense of destiny drove Rabbi David Cohen to accept upon himself a nazarite vow in the spirit of the words of the prophet Amos, “and I will raise up prophets from your sons and nazarites from your young men” (Amos 2:11). The classical commentators to the Bible also saw parallels between the prophet and the nazirite, basing themselves on the following Talmudic exposition concerning the nazarite:[[13]](#footnote-13)

Since (the nazarite) took a vow of abstinence he is called “holy.” Moreover, scripture weighs him as a prophet, as it says: “and I will raise up prophets from your sons and nazarites from your young men” (Sifrei Zuta, Naso, 6,8, H.S. Horowitz edition Jerusalem 5736 pg. 242).

This parallel is interesting: It associates the physical behavior of the nazarite with the elevated level of the prophet. However, these two figures are fundamentally different: The nazarite chooses to live an ascetic life and his status is dependent upon his decision and actions. The prophet on the other hand, is called by God even against his will and has a societal mission. Nonetheless, scripture likens the two and appreciates the nazarite who must take care at every moment to maintain his purity. They both are “holy to the Lord.” The Rabbi who became a nazarite writes:

To give myself completely over to God, to render myself ownerless completely sanctified to God. And in truth I will be a nazarite of God (*Megillah Setarim*  C-1, 57).

This declaration in the summer of 1922 indicates a meaningful stage in the self-perception of *Ha-Rav Ha-Nazir*. In fact, he had begun to practice asceticism and even to appear outwardly as a nazarite several years before. He already became a vegetarian and refused to eat meat in 1913 when he left Russia to study at university in Germany. Later when he arrived at the University of Basel during the First World War, he began to grow his hair out as can be seen in pictures from this period. However, this behavior did not have any overtones of *nezirut* and certainly no prophetic significance.[[14]](#footnote-14) The turning point came a few years later after he immigrated to Israel in the footsteps of his great mentor, Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaCohen Kook. In early 1922 when standing in prayer at the Western Wall, *Ha-Rav Ha-Nazir* heard a voice from behind him saying, “you are a nazarite of God” (*Megillat Setarim,* C-1, 4). What exactly happened? Was this a heavenly voice or words spoken by one of those offering prayers beside him? Did this declaration speak of *nezirut* as an internal state of being or a mere outer appearance? Whatever the case may be, this incident brings together for the first time his appearance and behavior with the idea of *nezirut*. A few months later, on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the connection between his self perception, *nezirut,* and his quest for prophecy were already clear.

I am a nazarite, yes I am a nazarite, a stage on the way to becoming a prophet. Thirsty, aching, anticipating and praying for drops of dew from heaven, for a revelation of God’s wisdom, his mercy, his truth… I need purification, a spark, more purity, more strength (*Megillat Setarim*, C-1, 82).

The Night of Spirit and Ascent

The quest for prophecy – or the pursuit of *deveikut* (clinging to the divine) – require great effort.

The thirst for him, the all encompassing never-ending search and quest of intense longing, in prayer, in supplication, this is the path and perhaps the destination as well, upon which the vitality of the soul grows, like the vitality of the eternal one (*Megillat Setarim*, 2, 10).[[15]](#footnote-15)

But sometimes the effort does not produce results:

I long and pine with all my might for knowledge of God and the revelation of his holy spirit, which is so necessary for the generation of the dawn of redemption. I remain awake into the night and prayerfully recite the holy songs of David but get no closer to my aspiration. I read over the books of the Kabbalah but it is a dry uninspired study (*Megillat Setarim*, C-1, 9).

1. Dov Schwartz, *Religious Zionism between Logic and Messianism* (Tel-Aviv, 1999) [Hebrew], especially pp. 198-233. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Yehuda Bitty, *The Philosopher-Kabbalist* (Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: HaKibbutz, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dov Schwartz,“Demuto VeKavei Ishiyuto shel Mistikan (Portrait of a Mystic),” *Tarbitz* Vol. 61 (5752), pp. 127-158. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There are five notebooks that *Ha-Rav Ha-Nazir* copied at a later stage from various personal writings. The notebooks are held by the *Nezer David* archive in Jerusalem. I thank the staff of the archive that allowed me access to the notebooks in their entirety. Only a few excerpts from the journal have been published with omissions. Harel Cohen, ed., *The Nazir's Wisdom* (Heb) (Jerusalem, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For the contextual approach about mysticism experience and mysticism language, see: Steven T. Katz, "Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning" in: Steven T. Katz (ed.), Mysticism and Language, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Pres: 1972, p. 3-41; William P. Alston "Literal and Nonliteral in Reports of Mystical Experience in Mysticism and Language, Steven T. Katz (ed.), New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972, pp. 80–102; Steven T. Katz,

   "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism" in Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York, 1978), pp. 26-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rachel Elior, Jewish Mysticism – the Infinite Expression of Freedom, Oxford – Portland, Oregon 2007, p. 24-25. Since Gershom Sholem's pioneering remarks on the subject (Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (New York,1961), pp. 7-14), much has been written about the connection between the biblical experience of prophecy and late Jewish mysticism. Recently, see Daniel Reiser, Imagery Techniques in Modern Jewish Mysticism, (Boston, Berlin: De Gruyer), 2018, p. 67-82 (Two Models of Prophecy) and specially p. 78-79: (Biblical Prophecy thought the Prism of Prophetic Kabbalah). For a general approach to mysticism, see: Steven T. Katz, ‘‘The Conservative Character of Mysticism,’’ in Mysticism and Religious Tradition (Oxford, 1983), pp. 4–6; and see also his introduction to Comparative Mysticism: An Anthology of Original Sources, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York, 2013), pp. 5–22. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Elsewhere he writes, “Thought I am not worthy, the voice of the Lord calls from within me and gives me no rest” (*Megillat Setarim,* C-1). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Several places in his writings suggest this. For example, in a letter written to his uncle Rabbi Avraham HaCohen in 1909 (when he was only 22!) he writes, “my future has always seemed to me to be a great one. As a scion of an elite and esteemed family, my veins run with vital red blood that demands an outstanding life of great deeds. When I was a child wrapped in the tallit of my grandfather, the great righteous master may his memory be for a blessing, when he stood on the podium to bless the people, already then, the thought that I need to stand before the people and to instruct them and to teach them took root (Nezer David Archives, Papers, 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See for example: Rachel Elior, Hasidic Thought – Mystical Origins and Kabbalistic Foundations, Tel-Aviv 2000, p. 45-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Rachel Elior, "Jacob Frank's Divrei ha'Adon" in: Rachel Elior (ed.). Dream and its Interpretation, Jerusalem: 2001, p. 471. See also: L. Festinger. H.W. Ricken & S. Schachter, When Prophecy Fails, Mineapolis 1956, p. 175, D. Burns, Charisma and religious Leadership: in Historical Analysis in: Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 17 (1978), pp. 1-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This is the main claim of Dov Schwartz in the first part of his book Religious Zionism between Logic and Messianism, (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1999) [Hebrew], especially pp. 53-62. Even if uncovering the Hebrew auditory logic seeks to arouse the longing for the prophetic spirit and for even higher spiritual levels, the pace slow and incremental and does not seek an abrupt transformation nor the undoing of the present situation. See also: Yehuda Bitty, The Philosopher-Kabbalist, (Hebrew), Tel-Aviv: HaKibbutz Ha’meuhad Publications, (2017), p. 146-149, 218-219, 238-239, 263-264. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The Hebrew word *nezirut* is a noun that indicates the institution of being a Nazarite. As monarchy is to a king, so too *nezirut* is to a Nazarite. Since there is no good English equivalent, the term *nezirut* will be used here in its transliterated from from Hebrew. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See for example the Commentaries of Nachmanides and Bahya ben Asher to Numbers 6:1-21 and in an even more explicit form in the words of Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin in his *Emek Davar* to Numbers 6:8, “On should know that there are two purposes to the nazarite vow. One is in order to sanctify oneself in order to obtain the holy spirit as the prophet formulated it ‘and I will raise up prophets from your sons and nazarites from your young men’ – here we see that it (prophecy and nazarite vows) is one matter, concerning which scripture wrote, ‘to vow to God’ – which means to be dedicated to the transcendent.” See also the words of Maimonides at the end of the Laws of Nazarite Vows, “One who vows to God [a nazarite vow through sanctity, this is praiseworthy and upon this scripture said, ‘the vow of his God is upon his head, he is holy to the Lord’ and scripture likened him to a prophet as it says, ‘and I will raise up prophets from your sons and nazarites from your young men’” (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Book of Wonder, Laws of Nazarite Vows, Chapter 10:15). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. His vegetarianism began for financial reasons (See *Megillat Setarim*, 1, 35) and only later developed in to a world view that was presented in his essay, “A Vision of Vegetarianism and Peace from a Torah Perspective” (Jerusalem 5721). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See also *Megillat Setarim*, C-1, 54: "I am devoured by the fire of thirst, the great conflagration for the word of God, that it reveal itself out loud with the ear of wisdom and inner understanding. I am hungry all day long and this hunger which weakens my physical strength is insignificant compared to my hunger to know the truth of God’s word. The two are inseparable. The longing to discover the word of God is so great, and burns so powerfully that it completely exhausts me." [↑](#footnote-ref-15)