By the grace of G-d, the holy city of Jaffa, may it be built and established, 19 Iyar, 5668.

My friend, your precious words and expression of sorrow saddened my heart and I was shocked and did not know what to answer. Afterward, I concluded that silence is not proper, especially since we should never despair of any child of Israel, and “Also when I sit in darkness, the L-rd will be a light to me.” (Micha 7:8) I will therefore reveal to you that were your children ideologically connected to the people of Israel, and were, for instance, members of Chovevei Zion, it would be easier to bring them back to the steadfast way of the L-rd, because there is an essential relation between Jewish national consciousness and the root of holiness that lies in faith and the fulfillment of Torah and mitzvot.

But even now that they have gone far astray, you should not despair of them completely... We find that the entire error of this generation is in what they do not know: that in order to arrive at the fine goals they desire, the children of Israel must honor the Torah and hold fast to the faith of the L-rd, the light and life of the entire world.

For this reason, it is my opinion that, to fallen ones such as these, one must behave in this way: explain to them that, at its foundation, their goal is truly desirable, but that they must not be “like a blind man in a garret”, following the leaders and ideas accepted by the masses. Every new idea is born with its deficiencies and impurities, and for this reason, they must be careful to purge these impurities. This process will be more successful if they try with all their might not to distance themselves from Judaism, so that the light of G-d will illuminate their souls, for then they will stand on their natural base, whole in their souls, with all their spiritual powers alive in them, and they will be able to assess their ways and not be excessively devoted to the new ideas of our time with all their impurity and waste.

In my humble opinion, their hearts will soften a bit with this approach, and if you are wise enough to relate to them with love and compassion, perhaps you will be able to raise them many levels... What does not have an immediate effect will work later...

Yes, my friend, we will see in these days the fulfillment of the prophecy, “and your voice will come softly out of the ground” (Isaiah 29:4). We must considerably soften our sacred emotions to speak with our children in the way they need, and along with this to believe with complete faith that the light of G-d rests on each and every Jew and that all regressions are nothing but great unintentional mistakes. For these children are in the category of one who errs in performing a mitzvah, thinking that such is their moral obligation...

Therefore, my friend, my advice to you is do not abandon your children, but bring them as close as possible, and in the end, they will certainly return. If they only begin to turn to good, their children will complete this process after them. G-d’s mercy is great, because He acts with lovingkindness in every generation...

Humbly yours,
Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen
A grief-stricken father turned to Rav Kook for advice. He was a rabbi and Torah scholar, yet his children had abandoned religious life. What should he do? How should he respond to this betrayal of his values and lifestyle? Should he cut off all ties from them and sit shiva over their lost souls? Should he argue with them and rebuke them?

In a series of letters, Rav Kook consoled the father and offered some practical suggestions.

1. Don’t reject them
   The first and most important principle is not to break off contact. Rav Kook was adamant that the father should not sever his connection with his children, despite their rejection of their religious upbringing. “I understand well your heartache and grief,” he wrote. “But if you think, like most Torah scholars do, that in our times it is fitting to reject those children who have left the path of Torah and faith due to the turbulent currents of the era – then I say, unequivocally, this is not the way that G-d desires.”

   We should never give up on a single Jewish soul. “A myrtle among the reeds is still a myrtle and is called a myrtle.” (Sanhedrin 44a).

2. Appreciate their motives
   Rav Kook’s second point was that we must accurately judge the new generation and appreciate their motives. In these turbulent times of social movements and uprisings, our sons and daughters who have abandoned Judaism should be viewed as acting under duress. “G-d forbid that we should judge them as having rebelled willfully.” They are motivated, not by selfish desires but by aspirations to repair societal inequalities and address political injustice. Their yearnings for justice and kindness are rooted in “the inner soul of Israel’s holiness hidden within their hearts.” They have been led astray, not because of hedonist passions, but because they seek integrity and goodness. If we don’t push them away but do our best to draw them back, they will be ready to return to Judaism.

3. Support them financially
   Practically speaking, Rav Kook advised the father “to assist them, as much as you are able, toward their livelihood and pressing needs.” It is not easy to financially support children who have rejected your way of life. But this will maintain your connection with them and “provide an opportunity to express words of mussar, chosen judiciously, in your letters. It is in the nature of words that come from the heart to have an impact, whether much or little.”

4. Encourage them to stay connected to their people
   Rav Kook further advised the father to remind his children of their Jewish heritage. Counsel them not to abandon their people due to false dreams that they will gain a secure place of honor and respect among the nations of the world. “They befriend you when it serves them, but in times of trouble, they will rejoice in your downfall.” If you successfully awaken a love of the Jewish people in their hearts, this will spark feelings of faith and holy aspirations. And it may eventually lead to complete teshuvah.

5. Their teshuvah will be motivated by the intellect, not emotions
   Rav Kook’s final observation: our children left Judaism due to mistakes of the intellect; they think that this way, they can do greater good in the world. Their return to Judaism will not be spurred by impassioned fire and brimstone speeches but by an intellectual recalculation. “We need not picture their return as repentance accompanied by a terrible anguish and the fear of utter collapse, like the common perception of ordinary teshuvah. Rather, it will be a simple reassessment, like a person who corrects a mistake in arithmetic after clarifying the numbers.”

To summarize:

1. Keep a connection with your children.
2. Recognize their positive qualities and good – if misguided – motives.
3. Continue to support them financially, as this concretizes your link to them.
4. Encourage them to stay connected to the Jewish people.
5. They will return to Judaism, not through emotional pleas and feelings of guilt, but when they reassess their educated decisions.


Rabbi Chanan Morrison is the author of several books on Rav Kook’s writings.