In the middle of 1909, as the Sabbatical (Shemitta) year of 5670 approached, a controversy flared up over the way the settlements should observe the laws of Shemitta. In keeping with their decision from previous Shemitta years, a number of Ashkenazi rabbis in Jerusalem prohibited Jewish farmers from working the Land, no matter what the consequences might be. They even threatened the settlements of Judea and the Galilee with a severe boycott on all grains, fruits, and wine produced during the Sabbatical year. The major force behind this side of the dispute was the Ridbaz (R. Ya’akov David ben Ze’ev Willowsky). Renowned for his commentary on the Yerushalmi (the Jerusalem Talmud), the Ridbaz was a great Torah scholar who had settled in Safed in 5665 (1905).

The Rabbi of Jaffa, however, firmly opposed this viewpoint. Fearful that strict adherence to the laws of Shemitta would bring a financial holocaust upon the settlements, Rav Kook decided to rely on a halachic loophole known as the heter mehirah (permission by sale). Basically, using this heter, an arrangement is made in which Jewish farmland is sold to non-Jews for the duration of the Shemitta year. This allows Jews to continue working the Land since the laws of Shemitta did not apply to gentile-owned soil. The Rav even published a specific book entitled Shabbat HaAretz to explain his position.

Among the many proposed solutions to the Shemitta problem, there was talk of a joint venture between the Ridbaz and Rav Kook. Together they would travel to Paris to try and convince Baron de Rothschild to help offset the losses...
the settlements would incur during the Shemitta year. This plan, however, never came to fruition.

The Ridbaz and a number of rabbis in Jerusalem refused to yield an inch. Nonetheless, the Rav stood his ground and the settlers began forming ranks behind him, following his instructions on how to act during the Shemitta year. Thus this whole ordeal actually fortified the Rav’s status as the highest spiritual authority of the New Yishuv. At the same time, his relations with the rabbis and leaders of the Old Yishuv did not suffer at all. Despite their sharp differences of opinion on the heter mechira issue, the Rav and the Ridbaz retained a strong feeling of love and respect for each other.

That very same year (5669), in the midst of the Shemitta debate, certain individuals disputed the Rav’s rabbinic authority in Jaffa. One man even called himself “the Rav of Jaffa,” established his own facilities for ritual slaughter (shechitah), and attempted to usurp Rav Kook’s authority.

The rabbis of Jerusalem, headed by Rabbi Shmuel Salant and Rabbi Chayim Berlin, came out “with great zeal to defend the honor of the brilliant, great, righteous, and renowned rabbi, our master, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook” (to cite their own words). In the declaration they issued, these gedolim expressed utter shock at this act of insolence, cautioning the residents of Jaffa and the settlements not to be party to this evil act of encroachment. Rather, they should all stand behind their mentor, Rav Kook.

The Ridbaz added his own, scathing remarks to this warning:

“In addition to what is written here, I proclaim to you: When the brilliant scholars – the mighty ones of Eretz Yisrael – heard about the despicable offense that was committed in your holy city, they were incensed. At first, they did not believe their ears, for who would think that a fly with no wings would contend with the great eagle, whose fame has spread throughout the world. People from the furthest reaches of the earth seek him out, to be enlightened by his Torah, righteousness, and wisdom... Therefore, when I arrived here in the Holy City [Jerusalem] and informed [the rabbis] that the story was true, they decided to issue this great warning. But this is only the beginning. And if you fail to heed this [warning]... [We must] arouse all of Israel – in the Holy Land and abroad, dwellers and wayfarers, and all of Jewry’s wise men – to do whatever they can to banish this scoffer, so that iniquity will leave the Jewish people. For this is no private matter; rather, one that affects the entirety of Israel...”

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