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UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO THE FANATICAL MINDSET: EDUCATIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES[1]

FRAMING THE INQUIRY AND DEFINING TERMS

From a secular standpoint, worship of a transcendent God who revealed His will to us, commands us, cares about us, and expects us to be loyal to our covenant with Him may seem fanatical. Indeed, the core assumption of a religious worldview, which is that there is a God who created the world, is aware of our mortal species, and expects us to obey and trust Him, is not entirely evidence based (which is true for many of our deepest commitments). However, dedication to a way of life privileged to be shaped by the wisdom of Torah does not diminish one's commitment to critical thinking and intellectual honesty. As an observant community whose identity is defined by loyalty to, love of, and reverence for God and Torah, we must on principle resist defining our faith-based worldview (which is informed by reason in important ways, and complemented by our commitment to morality) as intrinsically fanatical. In order to maintain confidence in the substantive difference between passionate faith and warped religious extremism, we need to assert that fanaticism is not simply an excess of a positive virtue (such as faith, religious passion, enthusiasm, etc.). Rather, fanaticism reflects a qualitatively

[1] I would like to dedicate this paper to the memory of Reichel Golda bat David Halevi ve-Esther Chava.

different sensibility and experience of one's religious motivation, belief, and practice. While the conscious beliefs and norms that a fanatic and non-fanatic individual or community would assent to may, when taken out of context, be or seem similar, the intellectual, emotional, and moral relationship to those beliefs and norms is radically and qualitatively different.

Viewing fanaticism as an overabundance of what we all should strive for, rather than as an immoral and potentially destructive mindset, is fundamentally wrong and mischaracterizing of what a morally grounded commitment to Torah entails. Such a mischaracterization also generates the risk of our community failing to respond forcefully and effectively to fanatical sensibilities. Furthermore, when considering our community's potential for fanatical behavior in comparison with other faith or ideological communities' fanatical potential, we need to be able to distinguish our self-understanding and norms on a substantive basis that is not simply grounded in stating "we are right and they are wrong." This paper will explore the nature of fanaticism in a psychologically informed manner, and will provide a prism through which to view and think about the observant community's motivations, core beliefs, and normative system. Finally, I will make a few psychologically informed educational suggestions that can, in my opinion, counter the fanatical potential within our leaders and students.

From a psychological and sociological standpoint, the hallmark of the fanatical mindset is a rigidly dogmatic unwillingness or inability to be genuinely reflective or questioning about one's deeply held ideology, motives, beliefs, values, and actions, relative to alternative possibilities, which are devalued.[2] Fanaticism can be expressed through the content of one's beliefs, a willingness to coerce others to comply with one's beliefs (hence, it is also a political ethos), a psychological profile of black and white thinking, an intense preoccupation with and self-sacrifice for a single value, a willingness to have ends justify all means, and a group psychological type of communal thinking that follows certain trends (cult-like followers, charismatic leadership, subjugation of individual judgment, etc...). John Hull has noted that "radical purism," non-hermeneutical thinking that denies the role of interpretation in understanding texts, and "idolatry of belief" are also features of the fanatical mindset.[3] All of these factors are

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[2] The definitions of rigidity, dogmatism, and reflectiveness, like all definitions, depend on interpretation and judgment, i.e. where one draws the line.

[3] John M. Hull, "The Education of the Religious Fanatic," in *Peace or Violence: The Ends of Religion and Education?*, ed. Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis and Mandy Robbins (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), 46-63.

relevant to the analysis and need to be thought through in terms of our own self-understanding and in terms of the educational implications of that understanding. The tendency to think that "anyone to the right of me is a fanatic and anyone to the left is insufficiently committed" or that "one man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist" leads to a misunderstanding as to the nature of fanaticism. Although some beliefs on a content level would reflect a transparently fanatical mindset, fanaticism is also fundamentally characterized by how one acquires, evaluates, relates to, and expresses one's beliefs, norms, and worldview.[4]

There are several tensions that come into focus when we discuss the nature of fanaticism from educational and psychological perspectives. The tension between faith and reason, autonomy and obedience, revelation and ethics, and the tension of competing faith claims are all important elements in our attempt to understand the nature of fanaticism. The psychological vulnerability that people and communities have to manipulation, indoctrination, group think, and simplistically justifying one's ideology are also an important part of the issue.[5] As Orthodox Jews and educators, an intellectually honest approach involves asking ourselves: What would we look like/think like/act like if we were to be fanatical? How do we understand and respond to unacceptable religious fanaticism within our community? In addition, how do we acknowledge challenging models of extremism and complex exceptions in our tradition, such as the behavior of Pinehas,[6] the law of *Kannaim Poge'in Bo*[7] and the commandment to destroy Amalek,[8] which also need to be understood and grappled with?

Educational Tensions

It is critical to frame the challenge facing our Orthodox community as we educate toward faith and passionate religious worship, while trying to

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[4] In discussing psychological or educational constructs, an important distinction is made between state and trait variables. State variables are viewed as elicited and dependent on context and situational and environmental cues, while trait variables are viewed as more intrinsic and internally based and triggered. For the purposes of this paper, the discussion will focus on fanaticism as an individual and communal state (although one that can become relatively permanent), rather than as a genetic trait to which some individuals or communities may be predisposed.

[5] I am not addressing psychiatric or psychological conditions that impact individuals clinically and that can also trigger fanatical tendencies as an expression of mental illness.

[6] Numbers 25:6-8.

[7] *Sanhedrin* 81b.

[8] Deuteronomy 25:17-19.

establish morally sound constraints and commitment to an integrated understanding of a Jewish worldview. I would like to selectively use comments that R. Aharon Lichtenstein of blessed memory shared in a public address following Prime Minister Rabin's assassination at the hands of a Hesder student, in which he brilliantly captures the phenomenological mindset of the fanatic and tries to address it:

> There are several points I would suggest as worthy of reflection. First: the self-confidence that arises from commitment and devotion to a world of values and eternal truths – whether in terms of Torat Yisrael or Eretz Yisrael – **sometimes has led to frightening levels of self-certainty and ultimately to arrogance**. This arrogance has sometimes led us to act without sufficient responsibility towards other people, and at times even without responsibility to other values. **"We are good, we have values, and they are worthless"** – this attitude has seeped deeper and deeper into our consciousness.
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> Secondly, at times we have promoted simplicity and shallowness. Pragmatically, this has a greater chance of success than teaching complexity and deliberation. A simple direct message, appealing to one emotion and calling "After me!" will have more followers than the injunction to think, consider, analyze and investigate. Uncomplicated directives excite more passion than a balanced and complex approach, which confronts questions of competing spiritual values and of competing national interests. **Because we wanted our youth to strive, to run up the altar, we not only promoted simplistic slogans, but also a simplistic lifestyle...** Third, *sometimes* we taught our students to belittle and suspect others. **One who doesn't agree with us is criminal, not merely mistaken...** The awesome, difficult question is – And now, what? Should we close the azarot, abandon our values? On my way back to Israel, I met Rav Eichler (a journalist from the Belz Chareidi newspaper). He asked me whether I do not think that what happened – and he is genuinely shocked – is a result of an educational system which teaches that there are things of more value than human life. I answered; we all believe that – it is in the Shulchan Arukh. *Yehareg ve-al ya'avor* (commandments which may not be transgressed even at the cost of one's life) means that there are values greater than human life. **The question is what is the balance, what are the halakhic, hashkafic and moral values which enable us to know when and how?** In this sense, we need not be ashamed, nor need we erase one letter of our Torah. We will not surrender to any city, nor abandon a single one of our values. Our values are eternal; nothing can be given up or erased. But in terms of balance and application, of seeing the

whole picture, of the development of the ability to think profoundly in order to know how to apply the Torah - here undoubtedly we must engage in a renewed and deeper examination. Priorities must be re-examined.[9]

R. Lichtenstein's plea for internalizing a balance of halakhic values that constrain acting immorally and fanatically is sound yet psychologically and educationally challenging. When we assert that our values are eternal, and promote the virtue of absolute submission to God's will as expressed in Halakha, we are psychologically and educationally potentially on the verge of allowing people using their good faith understanding (with the guidance of the authorities that they deem credible) to act contrary to legitimate societal and moral norms. R. Lichtenstein himself, a man whose writing and leadership were permeated by moral depth and sensitivity, in an article on the role of secular studies in a religious life, boldly states,

> Religion demands an axiological monopoly; *yihud Hashem* means simply that Religion alone has absolute and comprehensive value. Everything else, no matter how socially or intellectually desirable, has only relative and secondary importance. Its worth is derived solely from the extent to which it contributes, however remotely, to the fulfillment of the divine will. On this point there can be no compromise and should be no misunderstanding. A man's religion means everything or it means nothing.[10]

The passion and absolute commitment conveyed in this quotation make the danger of religious devotion potentially slipping into or being fueled by fanaticism obvious. There are educational moments where formulations such as the one just quoted can play a meaningful role. However, when presented lacking a context that conveys a sense of the substantive range of values that qualify and define our understanding of submitting to God's will, the potential for fanatical dynamics is clear.

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[9] Aharon Lichtenstein, "On the Murder of Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin, *z"l*," accessible at www.vbm-torah.org/archive/rall-rab.htm. Bolding is mine.

As I was editing this paper R. Lichtenstein passed away. As I thought about his passing I realized how his writing and his life were very much an inspiration for my confidence in the difference between deep commitment to God, Torah, and morality on the one hand, and fanaticism on the other. His life embodied the model I am trying to develop in this paper.

[10] Aharon Lichtenstein, A Consideration of Synthesis from a Torah Point of View," *The Commentator*, April 27, 1961, 5-6; reprinted in idem., *Leaves of Faith*, volume 1 (2003), pp. 89-90.

Halakha can cultivate what can seem like a fanatical sensibility. An impartial assessment of halakha (if there is such a thing) lends itself to rendering our values as at times legitimizing what citizens of the United States or Israel (as well as the U.S. Constitution from a legal standpoint), would probably deem fanatical and illegal behavior. For example, legislated intolerance in theory and practice is evidenced in halakhot relating to *mesit* (a person who tries to persuade another Jew to worship idols),[11] *ir ha-niddahat* (a city that has gone astray),[12] *moridin ve-lo ma'alin* (we intentionally do not rescue certain types of people),[13] and *apikores* (heretic). Also, our norms that would be applied were we entirely politically self-sufficient, "*ke-sheYadeynu tekeifa,*"[14] which would legitimize capital or corporal punishment depending on the legal details (at least in theory) for adultery, desecration of Shabbat, idol worship, homosexual relationships, etc..., challenge basic modern notions of civility and morality. A fair and even liberal reading of halakha has to acknowledge parameters beyond which beliefs, values, and actions that are deemed unacceptable, corrupting, subversive, and dangerous from a religious standpoint are responded to with social condemnation, and at times (at least in theory) physical force.

We can as an Orthodox community, somewhat apologetically if we choose to, emphasize that the radical positions often reflect only one point of view in rabbinic tradition, and dwell on the fact that some laws were rarely applied. We can also suggest that in some areas our culture has evolved in a positive direction, and that our interpretation of sources and employment of legal mechanisms should build on this progress regarding harsh consequences prescribed for violating certain prohibitions. However, even if those qualifiers are fair, the principles themselves are still legitimate and are viewed by us as God's word. We can also remind ourselves that our tradition of "these and these are the words of the living God"[15] (*elu va-elu divrei elokim hayyim*") allows for a certain pluralistic sensibility from Hazal's point of view. However even if that is true, there are still some very clearly defined ideological and behavioral lines that cannot be crossed (see Maimonides on "not straying after one's eyes and heart" in *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*,[16] which places meaningful and strict limits on intellectual

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[11] Deuteronomy 13:7-12.
[12] Deuteronomy 13:13-19.
[13] Maimonides, M.T., *Rotseah u-Shemirat ha-Nefesh* 4:10-12.
[14] Maimonides, M.T., *Avodah Zarah*, 10:6.
[15] *Eruvin* 13a.
[16] Maimonides, *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*, Negative Commandment #47.

inquiry as one medieval example of a powerful check on intellectual freedom). Clearly, R. Lichtenstein's notion of "a renewed and deeper examination" is called for, but by whom and how should that examination be conducted? Fanatics also think and construct intellectual and moral arguments, and texts can be used to justify dramatically different moral points of view. Also, the obvious difference between the risks of fanaticism in Israel and its politically charged climate and the risks of fanaticism in the United States are noteworthy educationally and at a social psychological level. However, intellectual and moral integrity demands a fundamentally thoughtful and sound educational approach in both environments.

Recognizing the Challenges and Contributions of Social Science to the Issue

The problem of how to balance different competing values, understand the morality of our norms, and ground our beliefs (all in an effort to counter our own potential fanaticism) is deepened when one understands the issues from a social psychological standpoint. There are several lines of research and reasoning that challenge our view of ourselves as *ma'aminim* (believers) whose faith and practice are rooted in conscious choice and sound and justified reasoning. Fanatical thinking is marked by an unjustified prima facie dismissive stance towards alternative beliefs and values, and challenges us to justify our beliefs and norms to ourselves with intellectual and moral integrity. Even if, as the eminent Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga has noted, our initial faith starting point is justifiably grounded in our own faith commitments, history, and practice, there is a still a need to think through substantively how we can confidently assert to ourselves the moral integrity and truth of our faith commitment in a confident yet non-fanatical manner.[17]

Common sense points to the likelihood of people internalizing the values they are raised with, rather than forming them from scratch like Abraham (who discovered his way of life based on philosophical curiosity, moral thinking, and ethical intuition as described by the Midrash, and famously by Maimonides[18]). Furthermore, in evaluating our moral intuitions, which we often understandably experience as objective and true, social psychology has demonstrated that altruistic and ethical behavior is

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[17] Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 16-93.

[18] Maimonides, M.T., *Avoda Zara* 1:3.

often triggered or inhibited by situational cues that we are not even conscious of, rather than by principled decisions. For example, people who are in a good mood are more likely to help a person in need. Isen and Levin conducted a study in a shopping mall where subjects either found or did not find a dime in a phone booth.[19] As the person emerged from the booth, a confederate walked by and dropped a sheaf of papers; Significantly more of those who found the dime helped pick up the papers, while only a small percentage of those who did not find the dime helped pick up the papers. That simple experiment (which can be supported by many other experiments that point to environmental cues impacting moral behavior in ways that people are not conscious of), conveys the complexity of trying to understand what motivates people's moral behavior and attitudes.

Recent theorizing about all emotions and "moral emotions" in particular, points to the intrinsic link between values and emotion.[20] The classic debate between those viewing emotions as cognitive interpretations of physiological arousal and those viewing emotions as representing experiences that are distinct "natural kinds" has moved towards a more integrated point of view.[21] That integrated perspective sees emotions as value-laden appraisals that are programmed (so to speak) to highlight and make salient certain aspects of one's environment. From that point of view, ideologies and the judgments they sustain reinforce powerful and biologically based emotions; while at the same time, those emotions reinforce values, judgments, and ideologies. For our purposes, the powerful link between feelings and values that lies at the heart of the modern work on emotion makes the ethics of using emotion to strengthen communal beliefs and moral norms especially noteworthy and challenging. A related and important issue is the well-documented capacity that people have for self-deception. Self-deception has been studied in depth by modern social

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[19] Alice Isen and Paula Levin, "Effect of Feeling Good on Helping: Cookies and Kindness," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 21:3 (Mar 1972), 384-388.

[20] Ronald De Sousa, "Emotion," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition); Robert Solomon, "The Philosophy of Emotions," in *Handbook of Emotions*, (New York: Guilford Press, 2008, 3rd edition); Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). J. Haidt, "The Moral Emotions," in *Handbook of Affective Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), R. J. Davidson, K. R. Scherer, & H. H. Goldsmith, 852-870.

[21] William James, "What is an Emotion?," *Mind*, 9:34 (1884). Robert Zajonc, "Feeling and Thinking: Closing the Debate over the Independence of Affect," in *Feeling and Thinking: The Role of Affect in Social Cognition*, ed. Joseph P. Forgas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 31–58.

scientists and in an earlier period by Bishop Butler.[22] To the extent that our most passionately held beliefs and values are tied up with our deepest emotional needs and motives, the importance of trying to be deeply honest with ourselves as individuals and as an Orthodox community is that much more compelling and necessary.

John Jost, a social and political psychologist at NYU, has studied how individuals are motivated to justify ideologies and systems to which they have committed.[23] He suggests two relevant classes of motivation: epistemic motives, which aim to reduce uncertainty and to establish order and structure, and existential motives, which aim to minimize threats and to foster the perception of a safe and reassuring environment. He also suggests a third relational motivation that drives ideological opinions. From this third perspective, ideology is linked to processes of social influence and motivation that aim to achieve and maintain "shared reality" with others. Experimental studies reveal that people defend the legitimacy of the societal status quo after they have been exposed to various manipulations of their beliefs, including exposure to passages highlighting crises of legitimacy or stability in society. Jost's thinking and research pointing to the psychological motivation to maintain ideological commitments does not necessarily imply that those commitments are not also rooted in intellectual and thoughtful conviction. What his work does point to is that ideological convictions and practices exist within an emotionally charged motivational context. That context influences one's ability to consider the legitimacy of those convictions and, in my opinion, their moral roots and implications, in a clear-headed and objective manner (to the extent that objectivity is possible).

Several modern important concepts and insights underscore the challenge of knowing that one's convictions are absolutely true. Reasoning fallacies and biases have been studied which call into question people's objectivity when justifying their beliefs and actions. For example, the "backfire effect" describes how people often strengthen their beliefs when

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[22] R. Trivers, *The Folly of Fools: The Logic of Deceit and Self-Deception in Human Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2011). J. Butler, "Upon Self-Deceit," in *The Works of Bishop Butler,* ed. D.E. White (Rochester: Rochester University Press, 2006).

[23] E.P. Hennes, C. Stern, and J.T. Jost, "Not all ideologies are created equal: Epistemic, existential, and relational needs predict system-justifying attitudes," *Social Cognition* 30 (2012), 669-688; I. Liviatan, and J.T. Jost "System justification theory: Motivated social cognition in the service of the status quo," *Social Cognition* 29 (2011), 231-237.

presented with disconfirming evidence.[24] "Confirmation bias" has been studied to explain how people favor information that supports their initial beliefs.[25] The "framing effect" has demonstrated how people's conclusions are substantially guided by how an issue is framed rather than by rational analysis and evidence.[26] Paul Ricoeur's "hermeneutic of suspicion," which explores the complex layers of motivation involved in knowing and believing,[27] Peter Berger's work on the sociology of knowledge and belief, and on the modern difficulty of establishing religious "plausibility structures" within a pluralistic culture,[28] and, in my opinion, an honest appreciation of historical forces and their impact on beliefs and values, all challenge our deeply held absolute conviction in the objectivity and moral soundness of our way of life. These ideas and insights challenge simplistic positions that assert that our faith is self-evident, our norms are prima facie moral, and that a lack of commitment to Orthodox belief and practice can be reduced to a desire for permissive behavior, psychological instability, or ignorance. Furthermore, from an educational standpoint, asserting without meaningful explanation the supremacy and truth of the Orthodox community's beliefs and the moral soundness of its norms, in light of all of the issues I have raised thus far, does not constitute a sound approach to skeptical or questioning adolescents or adults. People are aware of worldview alternatives, and are conscious of a need to distinguish their faith from other communities' faith- or non-faith-based commitments, on epistemological and moral grounds.

Educational Authenticity, Indoctrination, and Intellectual Integrity

When thinking about the challenges of educating towards commitment to God and Mitsvot in a passionate yet non-fanatical manner, I have noticed how religious educators often promote an experiential immersion that is meant to overcome intellectual reservations. "Taste and see that God is good" is used as a framework for advising experiential exposure as

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[24] B. Nyhan and J. Reifler, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions," *Political Behavior* 32:2 (June 2010), 303-330.

[25] Jane Risen, and Thomas Gilovich, ("Informal Logical Fallacies," in *Critical Thinking in Psychology*, ed. Robert Sternberg, Henry Roediger III, and Diane Halpern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007), 110-130.

[26] Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice," *Science, New Series*, 211:4481 (Jan. 30, 1981), 453-45.

[27] Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

[28] Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Norwell, MA: Anchor Press, 1979.)

a path towards religious conviction.[29] The logic seems to be that sometimes a certain type of self-deception or, minimally, suspension of questioning and skepticism at an initial stage is an important aspect of one's becoming observant and developing religious conviction. One can become confident in one's faith and relationship with God by acting like one has a relationship with God. That confidence then potentially opens one up to an authentic experience of God. I have no doubt that outreach educators and religious educators who use this strategy do not think that faith is grounded in self-deception, but rather that a certain type of self-manipulation is sometimes necessary to allow oneself to experience God and get past initial doubts and apprehensions that can be paralyzing. The problem is that from the perspective of a study of our community's relationship to fanaticism and a related construct, fundamentalism, there is a slippery slope when we suggest a relinquishing of critical thought in the interests of what seems like indoctrination. On one occasion, I listened to a Rosh Yeshiva compare one who had doubts in the realm of faith to someone who has a desire for *nevelot* and *tereifot* (prohibited foods). While from a halachic point of view, desire for a *heftsa of issur* (a prohibited object) and lack of faith and clear commitment are both problematic, the comparison dismissing questioning of fundamentals of faith ("*yesodei emuna*") as grounded in a bad conscience or warped psychology is at best misguided. While it may at times be true, and while we may, along with Aquinas and Rav Elchanan Wasserman (ob"m), view lack of faith partially as a function of a distorted and corrupted mind or culture, the educational problem with that line of reasoning is obvious.[30] That perspective is potentially dismissive of a need to meaningfully respond to authentic questions, doubts, or moral difficulties. We need to have moral and intellectual integrity as we maintain our faith in God and our commitment to Torah and mitsvot. Rabbi Hayyim Soloveitchik is often quoted as saying, "nebach an apikoris bleibt an apikores" (pathetically, a heretic who unfortunately may have no choice in the matter, is still a heretic) and in the same spirit I think that "nebach a frum fanatic bleibt a fanatic" (pathetically, a fanatic even if observant is still a fanatic).

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[29] Psalms 34:8.

[30] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Part One, Volume 1, Cosimo Inc. Question 2, Article 1, Reply to objection 1, page 12: "To know in a general and confused way that God exists is implanted in us by nature."

R. Elhanan Wasserman, *Kovets Maamarim*, ch. 1.

Individual and Group Variables

From a psychological point of view, fanaticism at an individual level needs to be distinguished from group level fanaticism, although the two levels can and do reinforce each other. At the individual level of analysis there is a long history starting with Hoffer's characterization of the "true believer," [31] Rokeach's study of dogmatic personalities, [32] Salzman's work on the obsessive personality type, and the absolutist thinking that flows from that personality structure,[33] Milgram's famous study of how people's ethical judgment is compromised by deferring to authority figures,[34] and recent profiles of terrorists' mindsets,[35] which all point to psychological indicators and facilitators of fanaticism.

At a group level the concerns and foci are different. Do we attribute cultural and political fanaticism in our community to a lack of moral and general education, poor socioeconomic status, distorted family values? Clearly, in terms of the likelihood of a society becoming fanatical those factors are relevant; but there have been and will continue to be fanatics from well-educated, middle class, and relatively stable families. Conversely, some individuals and communities have historically shown moral depth, commitment to intellectual rigor, and ethical sensitivity, even in unstable social circumstances. The social instability variables do not tell the entire story. How do educational practices impact on the likelihood of cultivating a fanatical sensibility? Do educators, parents, and communal leaders reward and reinforce doctrinal purity and delegitimize nonconformists in a manner that lacks integrity? If so, how specifically is dissatisfaction/disagreement expressed? Is there a tendency to dehumanize and reactively dismiss those whose visions of a moral life differ from the mainstream? Are we insufficiently sensitive to the impact within our community of manipulative charismatic leaders focused on indoctrination? When thinking about the education of youth, both the individual and group level of analysis are relevant. In a related and crucial vein, can people and/or communities choose to educate towards a particular kind

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[31] Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1951).

[32] M. Rokeach, "Toward the Scientific Evaluation of Social Attitudes and Ideologies," *Journal of Psychology*, 31 (1951), 97-104.

[33] Leon Saltzman, *Treatment of the Obsessive Personality* (New York: Jason Aronson, Inc.; Rev edition, 1977).

[34] S. Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1974).

[35] R. Borum, *Psychology of Terrorism* (Tampa: University of South Florida, 2004).

of passionate commitment which does not cross or morph into fanatical tendencies?

At the heart of the psychological and sociological analysis lies another core and fundamental question: Do people choose their religious identities at some point in their development or are they entirely or largely shaped/socialized by psychological, social, and cultural factors? This last question brings the issue of what is known as "moral luck"[36] into the discussion of how to evaluate religious beliefs and norms. Specifically, how can a community intellectually and morally ground its native ideological worldview when it is exposed to substantial philosophical and moral critiques and alternatives that its members would well have been socialized into but for a seeming accident of birth. That existential challenge needs to be faced with courage and with intellectual integrity. In a sense, some "epistemological luck" seems to impact on what one ends up believing.[37]

Exploring our Own Practices

When we turn these questions inward and look at our own community, the question is: are we, as loyal and committed servants of God, less susceptible to fanatical thinking and acting? A good-faith response has to acknowledge our own potential capacity to think primitively, act out of unbridled religious passion, and engage in warped or unethical behavior in the name of God. Ultimately, our own propensity for fanatical motivation, belief, and behavior needs to be judged based on an honest study of our own sociology. Do we support and at times educate towards simplistic or primitive perspectives on the nature of God, Torah, Halakha (Jewish Law), and human nature? Are we willing to confront fanatical thinking or behavior when we see it? Do we have an intellectually coherent approach to understanding why our willingness to die and kill on behalf of God (whether in idealized theory, or, tragically, in practice), is any less problematically fanatical than other religious or political sensibilities that we legitimately deem barbaric and immorally fanatical? We have to sincerely ask ourselves, how can we square our abhorrence of others' fanatical beliefs and actions with our own unconditional beliefs and normative positions?

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[36] Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers, 1973-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[37] There is a literature that explores this issue. One work on the topic is Duncan Pritchard, *Epistemic Luck* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Philosophical and Educational Proposals and Directions

I think that if we can distinguish between our beliefs and actions and other faiths' or ideologies' at times fanatical and destructive positions, we have to base that distinction on the specific religious/moral vision that is fundamental to our commitment to God, and on our unique methodology for grappling with and reaching moral and legal decisions. We also need to strengthen our commitment to process our decision-making and norms in a manner that integrates a profound understanding of ethics and a sophisticated understanding of the sociology and psychology of belief and practice into our unconditional faith commitment. Admittedly, the challenge of maintaining conviction in the truth and moral legitimacy of our most core beliefs and norms while at the same time being brutally honest with ourselves about what we as human beings are truly capable of knowing with confidence, is intimidating. However, as a community that knows that "God's seal is truth,"[38] we cannot avoid the responsibility of facing that existential challenge. If our entire faith is based on, as R. Lichtenstein phrased it, (when disagreeing with Yeshayahu Leibowitz's position), "quasi-fideistic voluntarism,"[39] and if all of our worship is submission-based and rooted solely in a *gezeirat ha-katuv* ("decree of the Divine text") sensibility (my phrase) without any legitimate role for principle-based moral thinking or concerns, then we are potentially no different from anyone else or any other community that rationalizes behavior as acting in God's name regardless of moral concerns. As a community that has suffered greatly at the hands of fanatics throughout our history (and that has a responsibility to learn from that history), we should be especially sensitive to the immorality of fanaticism and the tragic consequences that can flow from it. If we base our commitment to God and Torah, and our educational efforts to convey that commitment, on a profound understanding of Halakha and its commitment to ethics (and on an understanding of, for example, "*ki khol derakhav mishpat*"[40] ["All of God's ways are just"] and "*derekh Ad-nay la'asot tsedaka u-mishpat*"[41] [God's path is one of justice and righteousness"]), then we will be able to be unconditionally devoted but also grounded on a particular religious/

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[38] *Shabbat* 55a.
[39] Aharon Lichtenstein, "Does Jewish Tradition Recognize an Ethic Independent of Halakha?," in Marvin Fox (ed.), *Modern Jewish Ethics* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975), at 67.
[40] Deuteronomy 32:4.
[41] Genesis 18:19.

moral vision that emphasizes the centrality of morality to our understanding of Torah and to our worship of God.

R. Aharon Lichtenstein in his article "Being Frum and Being Good" asks and answers the question that lies at the heart of our discussion.

"At the heart of the problem of the relationship between *frumkeit* [devotion to God, -JZ] and goodness, or, if you will, between religion and morality, lies the question which Socrates poses to Euthyphro. In trying to define piety, Euthyphro explains that piety is that which the gods want us to do. Socrates then asks him whether the gods love piety because it is pious, or whether it is pious because they love it? We can reframe the question with God, *lehavdil*, in the singular…

If the issues, as I have said, have been subject to protracted controversy—one writer once described the answer as being the line which divides Eastern from Western religious thought—**I think that the Jewish position is absolutely unequivocal. We indeed hold that God's will, His Being, is moral and rational; that He does act, and will, in accordance with certain standards. By virtue of His very essence, certain things not only shall not but cannot be willed by Him. God and moral evil are simply and purely incompatible**. Habakkuk (1:13) describes God as, "You whose eyes are too pure to look upon evil, who cannot countenance wrongdoing." But why wait until Habakuk? The Torah itself states (Devarim 32:4): "A faithful God, never false, true and upright is He." Indeed, this position had already been assumed by Avraham. One of the seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonists, Benjamin Whichcote, pointed out **that when Avraham questioned God (in his pleading against the destruction of Sodom), "Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?", this implied that there is a standard of justice to which God, ki-veyakhol, can be held accountable (Bereishit 18:25). One can ask: Is God's plan regarding Sodom compatible with justice? This position is likewise implicit.**" [42]

From a psychological and moral point of view, some of our beliefs and normative positions will appear radical and potentially fanatical, even as they are not fanatical when seen from our own internal point of view; these beliefs need to be addressed meaningfully on an educational level. We can also, in the spirit of R. Lichtenstein's comments, emphasize our

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[42] Aharon Lichtenstein, "Being Frum and Being Good: On the Relationship between Religion and Morality," *By His Light* (2003), at 106-08; Bolding for emphasis is mine.

awareness of a divinely legitimized moral sense (conscience), highlight the inherent *tselem Elokim* (Divine image) of all human beings, and point to the moral vision that was part of the Jewish people's mission described in the Torah and fundamental to the reason that Abraham was chosen by God. Ultimately, even with the above stated qualifiers, we cannot hide from the fundamentally radical, (which is not the same as fanatical) educational implications of our way of looking at the world. That radicalness, which is part of an authentically religious point of view, should make our commitment to morality that much more critical.

I think that Rambam's formulation in Shemona Perakim is psychologically and morally trenchant, and relevant as a model to our thinking clearly about fanatical attitudes and behavior within our community:

> It often happens, however, that men err as regards these qualities, imagining that one of the extremes is good, and is a virtue. Sometimes, the extreme of the too much is considered noble, as when temerity is made a virtue, and those who recklessly risk their lives are hailed as heroes. Thus, when people see a man, reckless to the highest degree, who runs deliberately into danger, intentionally tempting death, and escaping only by mere chance, they laud such a one to the skies, and say that he is a hero. At other times, the opposite extreme, the too little, is greatly esteemed, and the coward is considered a man of forbearance; the idler, as being a person of a contented disposition; and he, who by the dullness of his nature is callous to every joy, is praised as a man of moderation, [that is, one who eschews sin]. In like manner, profuse liberality and extreme lavishness are erroneously extolled as excellent characteristics. This is, however, an absolutely mistaken view, for the really praiseworthy is the medium course of action to which everyone should strive to adhere, always weighing his conduct carefully, so that he may attain the proper mean."[43]

Rambam cautions us against mistaking natural tendencies for moral virtues. Meekness is not humility; rashness is not courage. I suggest further that dogmatism is not belief and fanaticism is not religious worship. Fanatical thinking speaks to gratifying a person's or a group's need for certainty and clarity (as well as other, broadly speaking, narcissistic motives) rather than to a true focus on worship of God. The entire fanatical mindset becomes an exercise in self-deception, self-absorption, and fantasy, as

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[43] *The Eight Chapters of Maimonides on Ethics*, translated by Joseph I. Gorfinkle (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912), chapter 4.

opposed to a response to God, and as opposed to a quest for the discovery of truth. While only God is *hoker lev u-bohen kelayot* (discerning of our ultimate motives), from a human point of view, primitive and simplistic thinking, distorted moral views, and morally destructive public positions in the name of God are not expressions of Torah and are ultimately desecrations of God's name. It is morally and intellectually problematic when the line between simplistic, naive, or tragically warped representations of Torah on the one hand and representations of Torah that authentically project the Torah's wisdom, moral integrity, and intolerance of superficial representations of truth on the other hand, is not effectively established.

In that spirit, specific educational responses can be separated into two approaches: a) content to be emphasized, and b) attitudes to be modeled and conveyed nonverbally and symbolically. At the content level, there are norms that need to be emphasized. For example:

1) We should have empathy for those with whom we strongly disagree, and confront honestly what we would be like had we been socialized in a different community; this mentality would be fostered by our community internalizing *al tadin et haverkha ad she-tagiya li-mekomo* (Do not judge your friend until you have stood in his place).[44]

2) *Makdim shalom le-khol adam afilu le-nokhri.* (Greet all people first, including non-Jews).[45] That basic norm would seem to encourage a basic civility and tolerant interpersonal ethos.

3) *Kiddush Hashem* (Sanctifying God's Name)[46] and *ahavehu al ha-beriyyot* (causing God to be beloved by humanity)[47] as a broad category of bringing people to love God through their admiration of the impeccable ethical behavior and intellectual integrity of Jews who observe the laws of the Torah.

4) Emulating Abraham as modeling "*kav ha-tsedek*" (the just path) as well as the true path.[48]

5) Relating to Torah as a system of great responsibility rather than as a tool for feeling superior.

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[44] *Avot* 2:5.
[45] *Berakhot* 17a.
[46] Maimonides, M.T., *Laws of Yesodei ha-Torah* 5:11.
[47] Maimonides, *Sefer ha-Mitsvot.*, Positive Commandment #3.
[48] Maimonides, M.T.. *Laws of Avoda Zara* 1:3.

Conversely, some attitudes and tendencies need to be criticized and confronted:

1) Oversimplification of Halakha and Jewish thought, which eliminates a sense of perspective and complexity when analyzing moral issues.
2) Intellectual gerrymandering (Walter Kaufmann's term[49]) that distorts or exploits Halakha to support and rationalize morally misguided belief or action.
3) Treating belief in a simplistic, "it is all self-evident" manner.
4) Tolerating presumptuous, racist, superstitious, or literal thinking, particularly when it supports the dehumanization of others, or, even more disturbingly, deems to represent God's point of view on an issue.

On a behavioral level, we need to:

1) Model respect for all people and sensitivity to the dignity of all human beings, even when we strongly take issue with a belief or behavior that legitimately offends our standards.
2) Demonstrate a respect for intellectual complexity and moral sensitivity to our students, and an expectation of intellectual depth, intellectual honesty, and moral thinking from our leaders. We should not romanticize "misplaced simplicity"[50] or what another writer has called "the triumph of reflex over reflection."[51]
3) Emphasize in educational settings that our role models (including parents) are ultimately responsible for demonstrating to children and students how to live a deeply religious and moral life. Texts as guides to living, without behavioral modeling and reinforcement, lend themselves to twisted and idiosyncratic interpretations of religious behavior and thought.

Intellectual Integrity and Humility as Virtues that Challenge the Fanatical Sensibility

In educational contexts that engage students with different degrees of commitment, who are often grappling with their faith, the temptation

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[49] Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959).

[50] B. Paskins, "Fanaticism in the Modern Era," in *Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age*,
Eds. M. Hughes, G. Johnson (London & New York: Frank Cass, 2005), 7.

[51] C. L. Nystrom, "Immediate Man: The Symbolic Environment of Fanaticism," *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, 59:2 (2002), 175-191.

to use simplistic, dogmatic, and highly emotional strategies for inculcating and eliciting religious commitment is understandable. If our educational system succeeds at cultivating a non-fanatical and inconsistently committed, detached religious community, we have obviously failed in our educational mission. In balancing the risks of extremism on the one hand and an enlightened lack of commitment on the other, we confront a painful reality. The challenge is for us to aspire to guide religious conviction and practice in a way that also recognizes multiple points of view and the dangers of self-righteous, absolute, and unjustifiably simplistic confidence in one's ideological convictions. In an educational context, whether at the primary school, high school, or post high school level, teachers or administrators who display or tolerate fanatical positions and attitudes need to be confronted. The goal is not to legislate political correctness, nor to cultivate tolerance for superficial or distorted projections of secular liberal values onto Yahadut. However, our educational institutions cannot and should not mistake radical fanaticism in content and spirit for deep *yirat Shamayim* (fear of God) and *ahavat ha-Torah* (love of Torah). The fact that Rabbis and teachers have—and are perceived as having—greater religious authority should place a greater pressure on them to be intellectually and morally responsible when making public policy pronouncements or even when articulating what the Torah's worldview or normative position is in a particular situation. Of course, strengthening our community's level of belief and commitment at every age level is a primary goal, and is a (if not the) central focus within *Torah she-biKetav* and *she-beAl peh*. However, at the point where thoughtful and intellectually meaningful questions and difficulties are dismissed and radical moral norms are not seen in context, we run a great risk of creating a community of immoral fanatics, or of alienating thoughtful and morally sensitive people within our community.

When considering how we educate students to think about their faith and commitment to Torah, I have often been struck by how Roshei Yeshiva, rabbis, and Jewish educators discuss *elu va-elu* ("these and these are the words of God") in the context of *mahashava* (Jewish thought), in contrast to the context of Halakha (Jewish law). Ramban, Rambam, Ramhal, and R. Kook, for example, are all thought about and viewed appropriately as legitimate models of grappling with and guiding us on the most basic issues of *hashkafa* (Jewish thought) and morality. However, the message that is often conveyed is that the student can or should choose whichever "*derekh*" or point of view fits his or her personality or

intuitions.[52] Students are taught that Halakha demands rigor, modesty in preference for one position over another position, and a recognition of how all positions need to be explored maximally. However, in the realm of opinions and beliefs, assuming a basic commitment to the thirteen *ikkarim* (Maimonides' principles of faith) or the most basic *yesodot ha-emuna* (fundamental beliefs), the message conveyed is that personal preferences are welcome. What seems to get lost is an important kind of humility, a quest for thinking through different possibilities, and intellectual integrity in the realm of ideology, philosophy, and belief. Ramban and Rambam, for example, present radically different ways of thinking about God, Divine providence, and the nature of Jewish chosenness. The idea that any student or teacher can decide with confidence which point of view is true is problematic. In the realm of halakha sloppy thinking is never tolerated, and, ironically, different practices can all be deemed Halakhic based on the Halakhic process and its methodologically based pluralism (and encouragement of legitimate "multiple truths"). In contrast, in the realm of *mahshava* even though competing points of view are often logically mutually exclusive on matters of great significance and each position logically implies that the other position is false, unacceptable, and a distortion of objective reality; a certain fuzzy "pick whatever *hashkafa* fits your intuitions" educational approach often exists. For example, in the modern context, the State of Israel cannot simultaneously be a test that the Satan is giving us to see how we will respond (which the Satmar Rebbe believed) and a blessing or miracle justifying the recitation of Hallel. One of those points of view has to be wrong. If we are committed to intellectual integrity, then our students must be taught to realize that fact, regardless of whether R. Kook and the Satmar Rebbe are both dancing together in the *Olam ha-Emet*.

The moral of the above analysis is that the ultimate antidote to dogmatic fanaticism is, and should be, cultivating intellectual rigor and humility,[53] and profound moral sensitivity within our community. I am not suggesting that authoritative pronouncements of an intellectual or rabbinic elite limit thinking through of legitimate alternatives in Jewish

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[52] The reliance on one's intuition or "gut" to discover philosophical or ideological truth is risk-laden. One needs to explore the motives underlying one's "gut feelings" and recognize that one's "instincts" may be clouded by wishful thinking, lack of self-awareness, the cultural pressures of one's environment, etc.

[53] Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology*, (Oxford University Press, 2007); L. Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). The link between virtue and knowledge has been developed in both of these works.

thought, and I am extremely skeptical about applying *pesak* (legal rulings) methodology that works in Halakhic decision making to resolve differences of opinion within the Orthodox spectrum in the realm of *emunot ve-de'ot* (beliefs and opinions).[54] I am also not suggesting that an individual cannot, after great deliberation and life experience, incline towards a particular worldview. Rather, I think that "*tsarikh iyyun*" (more study is necessary), "my thoughts are not your thoughts"[55] a statement that dramatically conveys our inability to understand God's thinking, and "we don't know" need to occupy a much greater place in our sensibility (even if an individual or religious institution [admittedly a strange phrase] inclines towards a particular version of an Orthodox worldview). The less we overreach in asserting beliefs that as limited human beings are beyond our capacity to know with absolute or confident certainty (even if admittedly from a traditional standpoint the authority of Jewish law mandates accepting a relatively sweeping worldview), the more we can assert with confidence and intellectual integrity the most basic and core truths that lie at the heart of our worship of God.[56] Specifically, we need to maintain our confidence educating towards faith in and commitment to God, and loyalty to the Torah which reveals God's moral will. However, some of our other convictions need to be expressed a bit more tentatively with an understanding that an honest search for truth is religiously meaningful and morally virtuous in and of itself. It is true that what constitutes a basic and core truth as opposed to an important but "less at the heart of our worship of God" idea needs to be carefully and sensitively thought

[54] See comment of R. Lichtenstein, *By His Light*, p. 157: "… in the realm of Jewish thought, matters frequently remain unresolved, since there exists no mechanism similar to the one of pesikah that guides practical halakha," cited in Marc B. Shapiro, "Is There a 'Pesak' for Jewish Thought?," in *Jewish Thought and Jewish Belief*, ed. Daniel Lasker, (Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University, 2012).

[55] Isaiah 55:6.

[56] An important qualifier: In a different although complementary spirit, I think the one area where intellectual flexibility and a committed yet appropriately pluralistic mindset is misguided is when we confront *akhzariyyut* or brutality either at the individual or communal level. "*kol ha-merahem al ha-akhzari sofo lihyot akhzari al ha-rahaman*" ("Anyone who has compassion instead of cruelty towards a brutal person, ends up generating brutality instead of compassion towards a compassionate person." See *Midrash Kohelet Zutah* 7,) is a value statement that allows us in words and actions to stand up for our own existence, core principles, and identity. We have to protect ourselves physically and existentially. Obviously, defining evil lies at the heart of the psychological, moral, and educational question with which we are dealing. The ultimate challenge when confronting and defining evil is to maintain our broad moral/religious point of view even when we are acting or educating towards acting in defense of our most core vision and norms.

through and formulated in light of halakhic, philosophical, and historical considerations. Equally importantly, the balancing of *hashkafic* (philosophical), Halakhic (Jewish law), and moral values that R. Lichtenstein called for in the aftermath of Prime Minister Rabin's assassination should be a major priority within our educational world. That "thinking through" and "balancing act" is a huge project that is worthy of our community's best minds and has not been fully embraced or formulated thus far.

Fundamentally, our core beliefs and norms are rooted in our historically based national covenant with God, our belief in and experience of God's revelation of Torah, and our commitment to the authority of the tradition that interprets Torah. The complex relationship between authority and epistemology is at the heart of how we relate to our worldview, and is not a simple matter. We need to develop a sound conceptualization of how to integrate our commitment to the quest for truth and credible knowledge with our obligation to internalize a worldview that encompasses beliefs and norms mandated by law. We also need to be thoughtful about what our tradition's beliefs, differing points of view, and norms mean, and how we can soundly and justifiably believe and "know" that which our tradition has the authority to mandate believing. From a psychological point of view, and, more importantly, from an ethical point of view, there is a difference between credible conviction and unenlightened and morally insensitive conviction. If the Torah expects us to inspire respect for the wisdom of our laws and way of life among the nations (and more importantly among our people),[57] it is obvious that our convictions, self-understanding, and public presentation need to be of the credible kind. That credibility is intrinsically linked to faith in God and commitment to Torah on the one hand, but also to deep humility, moral sensitivity, and intellectual depth on the other.[58]

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[57] Deuteronomy 4:7.