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“AND NOW THE CHILD WILL ASK”: THE POST-MODERN THEOLOGY OF RAV SHAGAR

INTRODUCTION

On the twenty fifth of Sivan 5767 (June 11, 2007), the Dati Leumi world lost one of its most influential and beloved teachers of Torah and erudite *talmidei hakhamim*, Rav Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (R. Shagar). While less well-known outside of Israel, for more than thirty years R. Shagar blazed a new and original trail in Torah learning and Jewish thought. Every generation is graced with leaders who ensure that the eternal wisdom of Torah is relevant to that particular moment in history. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik responded to the challenge of the scientific revolution and modern philosophy by creating a halakhic based theology that spoke to American youth. R. Kook created a theology of redemption that both invigorated messianic religious Zionism and created a religious basis for the pastoral and social values of secular Zionism. R. Aharon Lichtenstein taught how to incorporate the values of humanism and natural morality into a Torah-centered worldview. In the contemporary iteration of this process, R. Shagar responded to the unspoken feelings of Israeli Dati Leumi youth by creating a theological framework for artistic creativity and different modes of spiritual experience that characterize this generation.

R. Shagar was born in Jerusalem to Shalom and Sophia Rosenberg, Holocaust survivors from Transylvania. Like many of the future leaders of the Dati Leumi world, he attended high school at Netiv Meir, and then studied at Yeshivat Hesder Kerem B’Yavneh. He fought and was seriously wounded in the Yom Kippur War, and after his recovery entered the Kollel of Yeshivat HaKotel and eventually served as a Ram there for ten years. After teaching in a number of Torah institutions, he founded Yeshivat Siach Yitzhak with his longtime friend and *havruta* R. Yair Dreyfuss,

where he remained as Rosh Yeshiva until his untimely death at the age of fifty seven.

Reading R. Shagar's works, one is overwhelmed by his depth of knowledge and the variety of sources that he uses to buttress his arguments. Besides a thorough grounding in all spheres of Torah learning, including Kabbalah and Hasidut, his familiarity with general secular knowledge is impressive. Also remarkable is his use of a wide variety of disciplines including philosophy, literary theory, linguistics, and sociology alongside standard Talmudic methodology to develop a train of thought.

R. Shagar's thought is punctuated by the constant asking of the difficult question that many people are afraid to ask. For example: Why is there so much resistance to the intensive study of Gemara among our youth? Why is it so difficult for young people to find their spouse? How can a person ever know the true will of God? Can a person really change in order to do teshuva?¹ In asking these questions, R. Shagar considered himself the representative of modern Dati Leumi youth struggling with these issues left untouched in many yeshivot and seminaries.

The world in which R. Shagar studied and taught has faced many traumas since the euphoria of the aftermath of the Six Day War. In Dati Leumi circles after the liberation of Jerusalem and Yehuda and Shomron in 1967 it was felt that we were on the cusp of the messianic age, but the events of the last twenty years have severely dampened this messianic fervor. For some thinkers, this change in perspective began after the tragedy of the Yom Kippur War. In the aftermath of these events a new theology was needed, and many leading thinkers of the Dati Leumi world such as R. Yehuda Amital and R. Zvi Tau struggled with the new realities and formulating the appropriate reaction to them.² The Oslo peace agreements, the assassination of Rabin, the second intifada, and the *hitnattekut* all severely tested the redemptive theology on which Dati Leumi youth were raised. In addition, internal Israeli developments such as political infighting, government corruption, and the worsening of the religious-secular relationship, not to mention the collapse of the Mizrahi movement, all

¹ The act of questioning is such a dominant element in the thought of R. Shagar that he writes that "the asking of questions on the night of Pesach is the cause and condition of redemption. Redemption can occur because man asks and thereby awakens from the state of exile. The question itself is what enables man to exit from despair." Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, *A Time of Freedom: Discourses for Pesah* [in Hebrew], (Efrat: The Institute for the Advancement of R. Shagar's Writings, 2010), 132. All translations, in notes and in the body of the text, are by the author.

² For an extensive discussion of their responses, see Motti Inbari, "When Prophecy Fails? The Theology of the Oslo Process—Rabbinical Responses to a Crisis of Faith," *Modern Judaism* 29, 303-325.

contributed to an increased sense of alienation among Dati Leumi youth. In response to these developments, there are those youth who have become more attracted to a Haredi way of life, (popularly identified as Hardal – a combination of Haredi and Dati Leumi) and others who have opted for a more bohemian, Bratslav-influenced lifestyle. Each of these responses represents a retreat from the modern world and active participation in modern Israeli society, both from an economic and cultural perspective. Others have chosen to fully embrace the secular world and have given birth to the terms “Datlash” (formerly religious) or *hozerim be-she’ela* (slang for the opposites of *hozerim be-teshuva*). Of course, most youth have remained faithful to the traditions of their parents and teachers, but many if not all of them have been exposed to these movements and the questions they raise. Following in the footsteps of their secular peers, many of these youth have begun to seek spiritual fulfillment in India and other Eastern countries. It is to these youth that R. Shagar primarily addresses himself.

POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism plays a dominant role in the thought of R. Shagar. Postmodernism is most readily understood by a contrast with Modernism. Modernism is generally thought to have begun with the European Enlightenment. The Enlightenment emphasizes reason and the knowable self, which is conscious, rational, and autonomous. The highest level of rational thought is pure science, which is capable of producing eternal truth. Reason is also able to distinguish the moral from the immoral, and human autonomy is exemplified by conforming to the ethical principles discovered through rational thought. In the words of Mary Klages, “modernity is fundamentally about order; about rationality and rationalization, creating order out of chaos.”³ According to Jean-François Lyotard, in order to create this order enlightened societies develop grand narratives which are stories a culture produces in order to justify its beliefs and cultural norms.⁴ Postmodernism is a critique of these “grand narratives,”

³ Klages, Mary. Available at www.colorado.edu/English/courses/Enfl2012Kalgess/pomo.html accessed March 24, 2010

⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) xxiv. For a survey of the Orthodox response (primarily from the Dati Leumi world) to Postmodernism, see Baruch Kahane, “Where the Wind Blows: Modern Religious Responses to Postmodernism: A Review and Commentary” [in Hebrew], *Akdamot* 20 (2008), 9-38.

and it prefers mini-narratives “that explain small practices, local events, rather than large-scale universal or global concepts. Postmodern ‘mini-narratives’ are always situational, provisional, contingent, and temporary, making no claim to universality, truth, reason, or stability.” Based heavily on deconstructionism, postmodern thought also sees language to be highly subjective, as texts have no inherent meanings, just interpretations foisted upon them by readers. McDowell and Hostetler define postmodernism as “a worldview characterized by the belief that truth doesn’t exist in any objective sense but is created rather than discovered.”⁵

The works of R. Soloveitchik, to which R. Shagar turns time and time again, are firmly rooted in the intellectual world of the European Enlightenment. In his monumental essay *Halakhic Man*, autonomy, reason, and order are recurrent themes. “When halakhic man approaches reality, he comes with his Torah, given to him from Sinai, in hand. He orients himself to the world by means of fixed statutes and firm principles. An entire corpus of precepts and laws guides him along the path leading to existence. Halakhic man, well furnished with rules, judgments, and fundamental principles, draws near the world with an a priori relation. His approach begins with an ideal creation and concludes with a real one. To whom may he be compared? To a mathematician who fashions an ideal world and then uses it for the purpose of establishing a relationship between it and the real world, as was explained above. The essence of the Halakha, which was received from God, consists in creating an ideal world and cognizing the relationship between that ideal world and our concrete environment in all its visible manifestations and underlying structures.”⁶

The dominant theme of *Al ha-Teshuva*,⁷ which is heavily indebted to the Rambam, is the principle of free choice and the ability of man to control his or her destiny. In the words of the Rav, “Judaism has always held that it lies within man’s power to renew himself, to be reborn and to redirect the course of his life. In this task, man must rely upon himself; no one can help him. He is his own creator and innovator. He is his own redeemer; he is own messiah who has come to redeem himself from the

⁵ Josh McDowell & Bob Hostetler, *The New Tolerance* (Carol Stream IL: Tyndale House, 1998), 208.

⁶ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, JPS, Philadelphia, 1983, 19-20. There are those who maintain that there are postmodern elements in R. Soloveitchik’s thought, most noticeably the pluralistic thrust in some of his latter writings. However, I do not think this is sufficient to classify him as a postmodern thinker.

⁷ Pinchas Peli, *On Repentance in the Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, (Jerusalem: Orot Publishing House, 1980).

darkness of his exile to the light of his personal redemption.”⁸ In contrast, Postmodernism is very skeptical about the ability of man to truly change and to create his or her own reality.

The fundamental question that R. Shagar’s addresses is how to be a religious person in a postmodern world that does not believe in objective truth. In particular, how does one respond when one’s Torah-based values collide with another person’s supposedly equally valid values? The traditional religious response is to deny the assumption of the question and to answer that the revelation at Sinai provided us with the objective truth as manifest in the Torah and Halakha. In fact, for many religious people, the answer is so obvious that the question does not even exist. However, R. Shagar, basing himself on the thought of R. Nahman, maintains that there is simply no answer to this question and the proper response is acquiescence and acceptance of the paradox. God’s refusal to answer Moshe on why R. Akiva had to suffer is where one learns the response of silence. The acceptance of the problem of theodicy serves as a paradigm for other inexplicable paradoxes which modern man faces. And it is in this acceptance where faith begins.⁹

The other modern Jewish thinker who addresses this dilemma is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, R. Jonathan Sacks. Writing from a completely different cultural milieu than R. Shagar, but addressing common postmodern dilemmas, he develops a theology which addresses some of these difficulties. He writes, “truth on earth is not, nor can it aspire to be, the whole truth. It is limited, not comprehensive; particular, not universal. When two propositions conflict it is not necessarily because one is true and the other false. It may be, and often is, that each represents a different perspective on reality... In heaven there is truth; on earth there are truths.”¹⁰ He develops the radical thesis that the reason the Jewish people were chosen was to teach the world this lesson. In his own words, “God, the creator of humanity, having made a covenant with all humanity, then turns to one people and commands it to be different in order to teach humanity the dignity of difference.”¹¹ How, then, do we relate to the other when our moral and religious values collide? “The

⁸ *On Repentance*, 198.

⁹ Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, *Broken Vessels* [Hebrew], (Efrat: Yeshivat Siach Yitzhak, 2004), 19. He expands on this approach in the context of an essay on the Holocaust, *Broken Vessels*, 125-140.

¹⁰ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, (London: Continuum Press, 2002), 64. For a slightly different formulation of these ideas see the new edition of the book Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd.; New Edition (23 Feb 2003).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

TRADITION

answer, I have already suggested, is conversation – not mere debate but the disciplined act of communicating (making my views intelligible to someone who does not share them) and listening (entering into the inner world of someone whose views are opposed to my own)... In a conversation, neither side loses and both are changed, because they now know what reality looks like from a different perspective... That is how public morality is constructed in a plural society.”¹²

Both R. Shagar and R. Sacks recognize the difficulties of religion in the postmodern world in which “no one creed has a monopoly on spiritual truth; no one civilization encompasses all the spiritual, ethical and artistic expressions of mankind.”¹³ To this paradox, R. Shagar responds with silence and R. Sacks with conversation. But in reality they are addressing two different audiences. R. Shagar is concerned with the fact “that we cannot prove our values and there is always an element of doubt”¹⁴ from the perspective of the individual, and to this he advocates silent acceptance. R. Sacks is concerned with the resolution of this dilemma from the public and societal perspective, and to this audience he recommends engagement and conversation.

TORAH LEARNING

Torah learning, especially Gemara study, plays a central role in the religious thought of R. Shagar. He often quotes the gemara in *Gittin* (60b) which states “the reason God created a covenant (*berit*) with Israel was for the sake of the oral law.” The nature of this *berit* between God and Israel is best described as a relationship between lovers, between husband and wife. This analogy works on many levels. The crux of a relationship is communication and the communication between God and Israel takes place through the learning of Torah, which is an expression of love.¹⁵

Besides his theological musings on the centrality of Torah learning, R. Shagar was one of the first thinkers to deal with the pressing problem of a lack of attachment to intensive Gemara learning among the Dati Leumi youth in Israel. According to R. Shagar, the root of the problem lies in the attempt of the Dati Leumi world to mimic the curriculum of the Haredi world in their schools. The student in the *yeshiva tikhonit* lives

¹² Ibid., 83.

¹³ Ibid., 62.

¹⁴ *Broken Vessels*, 19.

¹⁵ Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, *In his Torah He Meditates* [Hebrew], (Efrat: The Institute for the Advancement of Rav Shagar’s Writings, 2008), 26.

in a different, more complicated world than his Haredi counterpart. His world is highly influenced by the thought of R. Kook, which idealizes a return to the land, nature, and the pastoral life values which are nonexistent in the Haredi world. In addition, the influences of Hasidut, secular knowledge, and, in particular, Western culture all mandate a different style of learning in the Dati Leumi community. R. Shagar maintains that the classic Yeshiva style of learning, the Brisker methodology, is not suitable for the Dati Leumi world. The methodology which attempts to conceptualize all human experience into halakhic categories is suited for a yeshiva student with no outside influences but less suited to the students whose cultural influences come primarily from the non-Torah world. In addition, according to R. Shagar, the expectations of a Dati Leumi student in a Yeshivat Hesder is not only to master Talmudic sugyot but to use his learning as a basis for strengthening his faith, to answer his theological questions and to develop a Torah outlook on life in the modern world. This hypothetical student is highly disappointed when he begins to learn the first *sugya* in *Massekhet Kiddushin*, “A woman is acquired in three ways: through money, contract, and intercourse,” and the classic yeshiva discourse analyzes the nature of the transaction – ‘is it purely symbolic or connected to the value of the woman?’ and attempts to define the nature of the control the husband has over the woman in comparison with a slave or a field. According to R. Shagar, this discussion is not sufficient for the Dati Leumi student who has difficulty understanding how a woman can be “bought” and compared to a field. In addition, the most important questions, such as ‘How does the learning of *Massekhet Kiddushin* prepare me for my future role as a husband and father?’ are felt to be not relevant to the analytical Talmudic discourse.¹⁶

In the eyes of R. Soloveitchik, the Halakha represents an ideal world which the *lamdan* discovers through the use of his intellect. However, according to the postmodernists, heavily influenced by the thought of Wittgenstein, there is no ideal world and no exclusive meaning to a text. A text does not consist of one correct meaning waiting to be revealed through an intellectual analysis but of multiple meanings determined by the subjectivity of the reader. This obviously contrasts with the Briskers, who feel that the true meaning of the Torah can be revealed through the use of the intellect. According to R. Shagar, the Brisker methodology assumes that Halakha operates like the natural sciences, where objective truth can be determined and quantified. However, Postmodernists believe in multiple truths and multiple meanings.

¹⁶ *In his Torah He Meditates*, 13-24.

In response to these challenges, both practical and intellectual, to the primacy of Talmudic scholarship in the Dati Leumi world, R. Shagar offers a new direction. As opposed to the Hardal approach, which attempts to remove the secular from the world of its students, R. Shagar suggests a two-pronged approach: To recognize the legitimacy of the cultural world the student lives in while vehemently rejecting the negative aspects of post-modern culture. In order to do this a new path in Torah learning is needed.

The central focus of this new direction is to make the learning of Torah relevant again to the modern student. The Brisker methodology fails in this regard because it divorces the student from the reality in which he or she lives. The learning of *Massekhet Kiddushin*, with all its halakhic details, should be directed towards an understanding of what the nature of Jewish marriage is, and, similarly, the study of *Massekhet Niddah* should primarily be a discussion of the Jewish attitude towards sexuality. This attitude should also drive which *massekhtot* should be taught in high schools and Yeshivot Hesder. R. Shagar also argues for the introduction of an academic approach to learning Torah into the Dati Leumi world. He feels it is untenable for a high school student to be exposed to modern scientific methodology in secular studies but not in their religious studies. R. Shagar lists nineteen elements of his new approach to Gemara learning. Among them are

1. When the students starts learning a sugya, he or she should ask 'What am I looking for in this sugya, what interests me, and what bothers me about this passage?'
2. The rules of the game [of how to teach Talmud] should change and a discussion of the underlying values lurking beneath the surface of a sugya should be presented.
3. The historical development of the sugya and its influence on the different opinions should be addressed, accompanied by attention to textual variants and the use of relevant academic scholarship and techniques.
4. The student should analyze the sugya from a classic Brisker perspective but then attempt to translate this conceptual understanding into terms which are relevant to him or her.
5. Aggada and practical Halakha should be incorporated into the core Talmud curriculum.
6. "It is impossible to forget at the end of the discussion the question of 'What does this mean to me?'" One must not disconnect the Torah discussion from the concrete reality, both in terms of practical Halakha and the personal and social reality. This perspective gives a different light because there is relevance to our current life and our

future plans both in relation to society and our personal existence. The approach should be one of hearing the voice of God in order to prepare one for life.”¹⁷

In response to this critique of traditional Gemara learning, R. Lichtenstein responds sharply:

Unfortunately, however, today we hear from certain directions – sometimes even from within the Torah world – a provocation, which is not only educational-pedagogic, but ideological, substantial, value oriented, in the sense that the Sages said with regard to the definition of an *epikoros* (non-believer) “like those who say “of what value to us are the Rabbis?” (*Sanhedrin* 99b). In the question “what does it do for us?” “what does it give us?” The focal point is us. What value, what spirituality do we get from it. With regard to this provocation a learner of Torah must protest.

And I protest! If a person approaches his learning not from an egocentric but a theocentric viewpoint (placing God in the center), and does not notice all that is whispered in his ear “you should be under stress and hardship!”, if one is open to the word of God, he will also find the existential connection and all it entails.¹⁸

This dispute between R. Lichtenstein and R. Shagar on how to approach the learning of Torah might reflect a fundamental disagreement on the nature of the relationship between Israel and God. As discussed previously, R. Shagar viewed the relationship as akin to one between lovers, as expressed metaphorically in Shir ha-Shirim. A relationship between lovers is by its very nature consensual and has to be mutually satisfying in order to continue. The dominant theme in the thought of R. Lichtenstein is his

¹⁷ Ibid., 230-237. R. Shagar also advanced the thesis that women should develop their own distinctive voice and methodology in *limmud Torah*, a position that was criticized by some feminist Torah scholars (see Estie Barel, “On Patriarchy and Woman Voices” [in Hebrew] in *Akdamot* 20 (2008), 39-53). However, R. Shagar’s position should be seen in light of his critique of modern Talmudic learning in general in the Dati Leumi world. There are also those educators who, while not accepting R. Shagar’s enthusiasm for postmodernism, also believe that there should be changes made to the standard Dati Leumi or modern orthodox Talmudic curriculum. For example, see Yitzchak Blau, *Fresh Fruit & Vintage Wine: Ethics and Wisdom of the Aggada*, (Hoboken: Ktav, 2009), whose approach sees a need for more attention to the aggada in the yeshiva curriculum and others who want more attention paid to the ethical and moral lessons implicit in many Talmudic discussions.

¹⁸ “Shnayim Ohazim: Two [who are] Holding, (a debate between Rav Lichtenstein and Rav Shagar),” trans. Rachel Schloss, available at www.lookstein.org/articles/shnayim_ohazim.htm, accessed March 24, 2010.

view of man as a *metsuveh*. Man is called to service before God and the covenantal relationship is best expressed as the relationship between a King and his servants. In his own words:

Primarily, however, he encounters Him as a commander. Jewish sensibility is pervasively normative. The Jew is, first and foremost, a summoned being, charged with a mission, on the one hand, and directed by rules, on the other. The message addressed to him ranges from the comprehensive to the minute, but whatever its scope, it is normative in character... [This explains Rav Yohanan's contention "that the Holy One, blessed be He, established a covenant with Israel only due to the oral matters, as the verse states 'For on the basis of these words I have established a covenant with you and with Israel.'" The covenant is expressed through Torah *she-be'Al peh* because] these oral matters are essentially halakhic. Whereas the written text is an amalgam of the literary and the legislative, with narrative and normative sections interlaced, *Torah she-be'al peh*, whether as interpretation or as accretion, is overwhelmingly halakhic. And it is this component that Rav Yohanan defined as the basis of our covenantal relation to the *Ribbono Shel Olam*.¹⁹

For R. Lichtenstein, this is the reason that one should learn Gemara:

Its study constitutes an encounter with its magisterially commanding Giver even more than with the Creator of the cosmos... [This covenantal learning encounter is firstly predicated upon a deeply held faith in] the *Ribbono shel Olam* and in Torah as His word. Contact with Him and with it must be sought and appreciated as a critical desideratum. Second, there should be a measure of faith in oneself – in personal readiness and openness – to let the power of divine law instill, directly or osmotically, both knowledge and love.²⁰

R. Lichtenstein also provides an answer as to why, among some youths in Israeli Dati Leumi community, there is a reluctance to engage in serious Gemara study. "It is a weakness of this dual faith which lies at the heart of much of the malaise concerning intensive learning of the Halakha and Gemara."²¹

In R. Shagar's thought, the centrality of Torah *she-be'Al peh* is not due to its normative character but to the fact that it is the place where a Jew

¹⁹ Aharon Lichtenstein, "Why learn Gemara?," in *Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Learning* (Hoboken: Ktav, 2003), 3-4.

²⁰ Ibid., 8.

²¹ Ibid., 8.

meets God. God talks to man and man to God through the language of Gemara. The learning of Tanakh, at least in the traditional manner, separates man from God because of its inviolability, and Mahashava is a step removed from the intimate Talmudic conversation between Man and God.²²

Besides the theological difficulties with R. Shagar's new program for Talmud study in the Dati Leumi world, there are practical considerations as well. One can agree with R. Shagar on the importance of making Gemara relevant to the modern youth, but there are many sugyot, such as those in Kodashim and Taharot, where this is exceedingly difficult. And even in *massekhtot* in which it is easy to see the relevance, this might account for only a small portion of the *massekhet*. For example, discussing the nature of Jewish marriage and Jewish sexual values in the context of learning *Massekhet Kiddushin* is certainly valuable. But after this discussion starts the hard work of learning the technical details of *kiddushin*, which are based on dry concepts in contractual law. If we only learn and teach relevant sugyot, we are in danger of producing students with only limited knowledge and of losing Talmudic mastery to the Haredi world. In addition, much of the academic Talmudic scholarship that R. Shagar advocates introducing into the yeshiva curriculum is also very technical in nature and does not speak to most students.

TESHUVA

R. Shagar also devoted much of his intellectual efforts to understanding the nature of sin and repentance and its relevance to our times.

What does the concept of teshuva mean to a postmodern person living in a pluralistic world where there is no one truth and certainly not "the truth"? If there is no truth or if there are many truths and everything depends on context where is a person supposed to return to?... In a world of relative truth is there a place for repentance?²³

Those of us raised on the thought of R. Soloveitchik recognize the central motif of free choice in the process of teshuva. R. Shagar also develops this idea and agrees with R. Soloveitchik that it is the dominant theme of the Rambam's *Hilkhot Teshuva*. In his own words, "according to the Rambam the ability to change stems from human freedom... religious fervor is an

²² Interestingly, R. Shagar does suggest that the new methodology of Tanakh learning developed by R. Yoel Bin-Nun and others might allow for a direct conversation with God through the medium of the text.

²³ Shimon Gershon Rosenberg *My Soul Will Return: Charity or Freedom?* [in Hebrew], (Efrat: Yeshivat Siach Yitzhak, 2000), 40.

expression of human autonomy and therefore free will is not just a condition of teshuva but is its driving force and main component”²⁴

However, R. Shagar contrasts this view with his discussion of the teshuva in the thought of R. Tsadok ha-Cohen.²⁵

In contradistinction to the Rambam, who believes that the basis of teshuva is “that it is only dependent on me,” the Hasidic approach is the exact opposite. “There is nothing but God,” according to R. Tsadok, is the highest teshuva. Repentance from love does not necessarily mean taking responsibility for sin or leaving it, but rather understanding that sin is also the will of God... The question of the ba'al teshuva is not like that of the Rambam, “can I change my way of life,” but rather “can I accept the way I am?”²⁶

The theological basis for this approach is heavily influenced by an emphasis on determinism as opposed to free choice. In the words of R. Shagar, based on the thought of R. Tsadok and the Rebbe from Izbica, “in reality a person cannot change at all.” Teshuva is returning to who a person really is and in this construct even sin can be a fulfillment of the will of God if it is an expression of the true essence of the person. In a theology that seems consistent with the tenets of postmodernism, R. Shagar explains, based on R. Tsadok, that there are multiple levels of truth. There is the normative Law as expressed in the Torah, but from a kabbalistic perspective there exists the will of God which inheres in the soul of every Jew. If following one’s essence leads to sin, against one’s desire to do good, then this sin is classified a sin for the sake of heaven and will be turned into merits in the future. This idea can be liberating, as it does not require a person to change who they are but rather to develop who they are. In order to not be misunderstood, R. Shagar emphasizes that this challenge “is not simple at all, and may be impossible, because it requires a person to give up his personal perspective and his ego.”²⁷

²⁴ *My Soul Will Return*, 179. Developing two contrasting views of a phenomenon is a common methodology used by R. Shagar. For another example, see his explanations of the redemption from Egypt in *A Time of Freedom: Discourses for Pesach*, 71-77. This might be related to his enthusiasm for postmodern thought which recognizes no objective reality.

²⁵ For more on the thought of R. Tsadok, see Alan Brill, *Thinking God: The Mysticism of Rabbi Zadok HaKohen Of Lublin*, (Yeshiva University Press, Ktav, 2002).

²⁶ *My Soul Will Return*, 179. This idea is also found in R. Shagar’s understanding of human freedom: “Freedom is the return to one’s personal identity, to the natural inner core of the person and nation. As opposed to Sartre, who felt that a person has unlimited freedom in the creating of his identity, R. Kook taught that a person has an innate identity and he does not have the freedom to create or change it.” (*A Time of Freedom: Discourses for Pesach*, 165.)

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

ART AND MUSIC

R. Shagar also highly valued alternative methods, aside from the intellectual, of connecting to God. In his thought, once again highly influenced by R. Nahman, various other Hasidic masters, and R. Kook, art, poetry, and music enable one to reach a higher spiritual level than through the use of cognition alone. This sensitivity correlated with the flowering of creative artistic endeavors in the Dati Leumi world in the last twenty five years. Religious poets, artists, and musicians began to express their spirituality through the use of various mediums. Poetry journals, artistic exhibitions, musical innovations, and film festivals all found a home in the Dati Leumi world, and R. Shagar was one of the intellectual pioneers of this new movement. The artistic creativity that R. Shagar writes about does not primarily address nationalistic or universal concerns but is highly personal in nature and connected intimately with the Land of Israel. According to R. Shagar, heavily influenced by the thought of the Ba'al ha-Tanya and Wittgenstein, language does not exist separate from the object but, in fact, it creates the object. If there were no word for rock, then the rock would cease to exist. I see a rock because I am able to identify it. God's creating the world with "language" represents a unidirectional flow from heaven to earth which man cannot hope to imitate. How, then, does one communicate with God if language is irrational and absurd, in the words of Wittgenstein? The answer, according to R. Shagar, is that one must use alternative modes of expression. Poetry, art, and music are expressions of a person's inner core, which attempts to elevate heaven to earth. According to the Ba'al ha-Tanya, one should not speak on Shabbat but only sing, as singing is a higher level of holiness than Torah, which is trapped in language.²⁸

Imagination is perhaps the most important tool of an artist. Traditionally, religion has looked askance at imagination. According to R. Tsadok, the triumph of rationalism and the ascendancy of Talmud Torah represent

²⁸ There is a recurring trend of anti-rationalism that appears throughout the thought of R. Shagar. For example, he writes, "We realize that the true object of knowing is not knowing. The more clearly we can grasp our inability to truly understand God, the closer we get to actually understanding that which we can about the Divine. This un-knowing is no mere ignorance, however. We know that we do not know, and we know why. So we are quite knowledgeable about our not knowing." Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, *Chance and Providence: Discourses on the Inner Meaning of Purim*, (Efrat: Yeshivat Siach Yitzhak, 2004), 34. In another context he comments that "Hazal explained the verse "a person who dies in a tent" to mean the tent of Torah. The Maggid of Mezrich explains that this refers to the contradiction between the intellectual act of learning Torah and *devekut*. In order to learn Torah, a person has to die, in a sense, and sacrifice his independence and essence." *Broken Vessels*, 115.

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a degeneration of the spiritual status of the Jewish people. The loss of prophecy and the accompanying disappearance of the temptation of idolatry are another expression of this spiritual decay. R. Kook maintained that the loss of imagination is an expression of the disappearance of God's presence from the world. The reappearance of the imaginative spirit thus parallels the Jewish People's return to their natural homeland and represents a return of the holy presence to the world. According to R. Shagar, truth is not to be found through rational contemplation but only through the use of the imagination.²⁹ The purpose of art is not only to create beauty but to use it to find the truth. In this area R. Shagar follows in the footsteps of R. Nahman who maintains, "True faith is dependent on the power to imagine. Because what the intellect understands is not relevant to faith. True faith starts only when the intellect is not able to understand and then one needs faith. And when one cannot understand with one's intellect, one is only left with the ability to imagine."³⁰

From this perspective, one who is not able to imagine is also unable to believe. Philosophical inquiry does not lead to belief but, in fact, retards it. In a world filled with a multitude of contradictions and the inability to understand theodicy, miracles, and God's presence, one cannot believe through the use of the intellect but rather through one's imagination. For today's youth, bombarded with the message that all truth is relative, this approach can be very reassuring. R. Shagar goes further and claims "that imagination is not only an expression of belief but the potential that lies within it, because it is a spontaneous inspiration that comes upon a person for the outside it is itself belief."³¹ Imagination also has the potential to change the world by making a person realize what their true needs are.

INTIMACY

R. Shagar also wrote extensively on issues relating to relationships, sexuality, and marriage, which are of course of great concern to religious youth. Modern Western culture is inundated with images of romantic erotic love, which on the surface represent the antithesis of the Jewish attitude towards sexuality. R. Shagar asks "does the fact that according to Halakha the purpose of marriage is procreation and the education of children is at

²⁹ Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, *We Walk in Fervor* [in Hebrew], (Efrat: Yeshivat Siach Yitzhak, 2008) 247-248. Contrast this with the Rav's view of language as discussed in *The Emergence of Ethical Man*. (Hoboken: Ktav, 2005).

³⁰ Likkutei Moharan Tinyana 8,7.

³¹ *We Walk in Fervor*, 256.

the center of family life mean that there is no role for intimacy in the Jewish family? I think the opposite is true.”³² R. Shagar cites a postmodern theorist who maintains that the only way to have a powerful, personal, and fulfilling sexual relationship is not to look at your lover and forget the outside world, but to look outside together to a third point. The common mission of building a Jewish family is that “third point.”³³ Romantic love has a fatal flaw in its expectations that the lovers focus exclusively on each other, when in reality another person is really unknowable. Even the language of romantic love in the postmodern world is suspect. When a lover in a moment of passion exclaims, “I love you,” he or she is simply repeating what one has seen numerous times in a movie or read in a book. The lovers are actors in a play that everyone has seen before. The frequently asked question of whether lovers can also be friends seems strange to R. Shagar. Husband and wife are not to be viewed as facing each other but as standing together with a common destiny and this creates real intimacy. Intimacy based on romantic love is at its core ego gratification, while Jewish intimacy serves to create a partnership between the lovers. This partnership is expressed in their building together of Jewish home and in their observance of the laws of *taharat ha-mishpakha*. R. Shagar is very much taken with the Rav’s explanation of the laws of *nidda*, that their purpose is to redeem the sexual relationship through a common commitment to the delaying of gratification and a submission to God’s will. In this context R. Shagar quotes the Steipler Rav that “it is clear that Hazal’s understanding of love is not the natural love of woman [he means to exclude romantic love - Shagar] but to love her like a friend. Because she is his partner and they have common goals and they help each other.”³⁴ This idea is expressed beautifully in the *sheva berakhot* “who created joy and happiness, love and companionship, peace and friendship.”

Despite R. Shagar’s powerful defense of traditional Jewish values, there are some questions it does not solve. One of the most pressing problems in the Dati Leumi community is the phenomenon of late marriage. Increasing numbers of men and women who are committed to the values of a Jewish family are unable to find their mate. They are not infatuated with the ideals of romantic love but nevertheless find it extremely difficult to defer sexual relationships in the highly erotic modern environment.

³² Ibid., 278.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 56.

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CRITICISM

Two of R. Shagar's most severe critics have come from not from outside the Dati Leumi camp but from within, Rashei Yeshiva of Har Etzion, R. Yehuda Amital and R. Aharon Lichtenstein. They are concerned with different elements of his thought but their critiques have a common denominator. In the words of R. Amital:

Youth today seek "identification" with *mitzvot*, but not a "commitment" to them. Authority and obligation – two foundations without which it is difficult to imagine living in accordance with the Torah – have become irrelevant in these circles. Not only are these concepts not spoken about, but worse still – the very mention of these terms by someone else "turns off" these youth, since the "connection" they seek is personal, individual and experiential... After removing authority from their lexicon, what remains? What remains is "identification" or "connection." Those parts of the Torah and those *mitzvot* with which the individual can identify and which sit well with his personality, those to which his "I" can attach itself experientially – these become part of his "I", and this represents the sole basis for his mitzva-observant lifestyle... A world that revolts against commitment is in fact revolting against human nature, and I believe human nature will ultimately prevail, and this whole phenomenon – which is contrary to nature and contrary to humanity – will disappear in the not too distant future.³⁵

According to R. Amital, the root of Torah observance is not based on free will as expressed in the Jewish people's response of *na'aseh ve-nishma*, but in the midrashic interpretation that God picked up the mountain over the Jewish people and threatened them with death if they did not accept the Torah. Obligation through mitsvot is the core of the Jewish experience.

On this phenomenon R. Lichtenstein comments:

I'm afraid, however, that votaries of current spirituality often tend to erode the status of *yirah* (awe); and, together, with it, the status of the very essence of *yahadut*: *kabbalat ol malkhut shamayim* (the acceptance of the yoke of heaven) and *kabbalat ol mitzvot* (acceptance of the yoke of commandments). In Israel today, in certain circles much is heard of *hithabrut*, as linkage, but little of *hithayvut*, as obligation... Or to take a published example,

³⁵ Yehuda Amital, "Commitment vs. Connecting: The Current Crisis of Our Youth," available at www.vbm-torah.org/archive/sichot/shonot/rya-commitment.htm. This is one of a series of *sibot* that R. Amital delivered at the annual Yeshivat Har Etzion Hannukka *mesibba* in the late 90's dealing with the phenomenon.

what is one to make of the following affirmation by Rav Shagar, regarded as bearing affinity to current spiritual circles. “Belief in the *halakhah*, like belief in the Sages in this connection, does not necessarily derive from being sure that these sages were the wisest. Rather, its source is a kind of intimacy: Torah and Judaism – this is I! My choice of myself *is* the choice of Torah, of tradition. Not for nought did the Sages, in so many midrashim, express their love of Torah through the metaphor of conjugal life. This realization – which the sages term “the acceptance of the yoke of heaven” – affords the possibility of contact with the Infinite, in that it is absolute and primal.” And to think that this exercise in narcissism is equated with *kabbalat ol malkhut shamayim*!³⁶

CONCLUSIONS

R. Shagar’s voice remains a powerful one in the Dati Leumi world. His ideas have influenced many of the teachers of today’s youth and many yeshivot and ulpanot incorporate his educational philosophies. The fact that many Dati Leumi youth feel comfortable expressing their religiosity through music and the arts is a tribute to his vision. Whenever a visionary is no longer active, the question always arises as to the sustainability of his or her ideas. Certainly, the issues that R. Shagar confronts are here to stay and might even become more pressing in the years ahead. But one wonders where the future lies for R. Shagar’s program of *hasidut Erets Yisrael*; is this just a temporary phenomenon among searching youth or will it create viable sustainable Torah communities? For whatever reason, the Brisker methodology has flourished for over a hundred years creating generations of talmedi hakhamim with an intense commitment and love of Torah. It remains to be seen whether R. Shagar’s innovative ideas for the teaching and learning of Gemara will have a lasting impact and if they will stand the test of time by producing serious, knowledgeable, and committed scholars.

In the American Modern Orthodox community, R. Shagar’s issues seem much less pressing for now. American Modern Orthodox youth do not seem

³⁶ Aharon Lichtenstein, “Law and Spirituality: Defining the Terms,” in *Jewish Spirituality and Divine Law*, eds. Adam Mintz and Lawrence Schiffman, (Jersey City, Ktav, 2005), 31-32. In one of his last essays, written on the occasion of an evening in his honor, R. Shagar responded indirectly to his critics: “Two crowns were given to Israel when they exclaimed *na’ase ve-nishma* at Har Sinai... The crown of “*na’ase*,” or obedience, (as manifested in the midrashic statement that God lifted up the mountain over their heads) and the crown of “*nishma*” that desires human autonomy and mastery over knowledge.” *We Walk in Fervor*, 372. The essay ends starkly with the word “*hineni*.”

to have the same intense need to discover new avenues of spiritual expression. For the most part, American youth are not trekking in India or creating new artistic modes of religious experience. This probably has much to do with the different environments in which they were raised. Dati Leumi youth have suffered multiple collective traumas and live in a society always on the edge. In addition, there is no escaping Judaism in Israel, and the army experience looms before every boy. A prominent Rosh Yeshiva in an American Yeshiva in Israel has told me that the major issues facing many (but certainly not all) American youth are hedonism and materialism. This is not to say that there have not been significant changes in the Modern Orthodox community. The Hardal phenomenon discussed previously is certainly growing in America as many Modern Orthodox youth gravitate toward the Yeshiva world to find in their minds a more genuine and isolated religious experience. However, it remains to be seen if the integrative approach pioneered by R. Shagar will speak to American youth.

The current essay, [and the accompanying essay by R. Dreyfuss, – ed. note] is just a beginning to a serious discussion of the Torah of R. Shagar. In addition to the topics discussed above, R. Shagar deals deeply with such subjects as the crisis in Religious Zionism after the *bitnattekut*, the role of general culture from a Jewish perspective, and modern applications of Hassidic thought. All of these topics are ripe for further study. As much of his serious scholarship is in Hebrew, it is the hope of the author that efforts will be made to translate his works into English in order to make them accessible to the American reader.³⁷ When I first began to delve into the world of R. Shagar, I found myself recalling my first encounter with the works of R. Soloveitchik. I think the reason for this is that in both instances I was experiencing something new and original, produced by an extraordinary thinker. I hope other readers will share that experience and have the opportunity to learn, discuss and debate the works of this Torah scholar.

³⁷ Works by R. Shagar available in English are Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, *The Human and the Infinite: Discourses on the Meaning of Penitence* (Jerusalem: Toby Press, 2010) and Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, *Chance and Providence: Discourses on the Inner meaning of Purim*. (Efrat: Ohr Torah Stone, 2005). According to his students there are over 3000 pages of his thoughts not yet published. As my friend Dr. Yoel Finkelman pointed out to me, this raises the question of the quality of the future works to be published which did not undergo the final revisions of R. Shagar. After this paper was submitted, more works by R. Shagar have been published in Hebrew and there was a symposium focusing on *In his Torah He Meditates* in a recent issue of the Hebrew language journal *Netuim* 17, published by the Yaakov Herzog College. In addition, a movie focusing on the thought and personality of R. Shagar directed by one of his students, R. Mordechai Vardy, has recently been shown on Israeli television.