

Communications

TO THE EDITOR:

In the Spring issue of Tradition, in his discussion of use of technology and the media, R. Yitzchak Blau writes, “R. Aviner’s SMS responsa represent another example of using modern media while losing your message.”

As one who has corresponded regularly with HaRav Shlomo Aviner *shlit”a* for the last 17 years, please permit me to express the opposite view.

In his Hebrew article in *Shu”t SMS* (Sifriyyat Hava) and the English translation in the recently published *Short and Sweet* (Ateret Yerushalayim), HaRav Aviner himself notes that he has written works of law and philosophy in various styles, just as there are classic works of Jewish law of varying lengths. “If someone is interested in a more extensive reply, I have four volumes of responsa and numerous other books they can consult. But many people want nothing more than a ‘yes or no’ answer... There are people in situations which do not permit asking questions at length. For example... a soldier cannot come to the Yeshiva whenever he wants. Similarly, when someone is on a trip and runs into an issue. And then there are those who do not have a personal relationship with a Rabbi, and need someone to ask.”

HaRav Aviner, in his books, email list, or www.ravaviner.com, is quite effective in getting his message across even in a few short sentences. Sometimes this is accomplished by stating the Halakhah (the published SMS responsa add sources). Other times, it is by concisely expressing important values such as love for all Jews and for the entire Land of Israel. And sometimes he tells his questioner that a question cannot properly be addressed via SMS and that they should call him. Publishing many of these responsa provides readers not only with concise information but also gives important highlights of the thinking of one of this generation’s leading Religious Zionist rabbis.

Despite his busy schedule as a Rosh ha-Yeshiva and Rav of Beit El (and all of the other things he does), that fact that R. Aviner is willing and able to take the time to answer hundreds of questions daily is a remarkable testament to his commitment and aptitude to serve Klal Yisrael. It is a message and inspiration to all of us.

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YITZCHAK BLAU RESPONDS:

R. Shmuel Jablon’s various defenses of R. Aviner’s internet responsa appear in italics and are followed by my comments.

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1) *Some situations do not permit lengthy discussions.*

No doubt, a soldier sending in a question from the front needs a yes or no answer rather than an extensive discourse. However, the question here is not about answering the soldier but about publishing that immediate response for posterity. These readers do not suffer from extreme time pressure or urgent need; they would benefit far more from a longer discussion.

2) *Some want nothing more than a yes or no answer.*

What people want does not always match what they need or what is good for them. Must we encourage laziness and impatience? Rabbis should challenge their congregants and students to forge a more intensive connection with Torah study that reflects the depth and profundity of Torah.

3) *Rav Aviner's taking time to answer hundreds of questions daily, despite his busy schedule, is a remarkable testament to his willingness to serve Klal Yisrael.*

R. Aviner certainly exhibits great commitment but dedication in and of itself does not guarantee the worth of an endeavor. Given the described schedule, R. Aviner could not possibly produce adequately researched and considered responses.

For example: Asked about a shirt with a biblical verse written upon it, R. Aviner answers: "It needs a double covering in the bathroom, a separate wash, and sometimes the water from the wash requires [placement in the] *genizah*" (*Olam Katan*, no. 184). A follow up question appears a few issues later. "What is the source for *genizah* of the water used to wash a shirt with a biblical verse?" R. Aviner responds: "I do not recall where I saw it. In any case, Rambam (*Hilkhos Sotah* 4:6) rules that the water may be discarded" (*Olam Katan* 188). Justifying an unusual ruling regarding *geniza* for water requires more than relying upon a nameless and unrecalled work.

A few more representative examples indicate how medium affects message regarding complex and subtle questions. "How do I achieve love of God? Study *Mesilat Yesharim* repeatedly." (*Shut SMS*, 12) Surely outlining the road to love of God requires multiple models and cannot be reduced to the study of a specific work. "Why do we learn Torah? It helps one's soul grow." (www.ravaviner.com, SMS no. 117) This answer is so brief as to be totally unhelpful. Unless the author explains how Torah study enhances one's soul, the response remains an empty platitude. To

his credit, R. Aviner repeatedly refuses to address the problem of theodicy within this medium.

On other occasions, the oversimplification crowds out potential opposing positions. “I work with a gentile. Is it permissible for me to sit and have a drink with them? No. We require a polite interaction but not one of friendship” (*Shut SMS*, 60) It is not obvious to me that Judaism frowns upon friendships with gentiles (note Rabbi’s relationship with Antoninus), and R. Aviner needs to do more than cite *Avoda Zara* 35b to prove his point.

“Is it permissible to study Torah from a Rabbi who reads Harry Potter? Isn’t his mind full of silliness? It is permissible because a person is judged according to the majority of his deeds” (*Shut SMS*, 101). The question and answer assume a negative assessment of reading Harry Potter but that assumption itself requires argument. J. K. Rowling’s work does not resemble the greatness of Shakespeare or Dostoevsky but it contains some decent dialogue, as well as a modicum of psychological insight, and it reflects ethical values. Why consider reading it such a negative activity?

Along similar lines, R. Aviner asserts that it is forbidden to wear red clothing, that couples should not walk their children down the aisle at Israeli weddings, and that women cannot study Gemara (www.ravaviner.com, nos. 147, 167, 124). In each of the above, he fails to mention opposing rabbinic views and does not relate to segments of the Orthodox world that think differently about these matters. Does a medium that destroys nuance and complexity and ignores argument add to the luster of Torah?

R. Aviner cites Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah* as a precursor to his efforts and as indicative of the need to give people answers without sources, rationales, and argumentation. The same Rambam offers five reasons why he does not teach philosophic truths to the masses with the third reason proving particularly instructive.

The preparatory studies are of long duration, and man, in his natural desire to reach the goal, finds them frequently too wearisome, and does not wish to be troubled by them... Suppose you awaken any person, even the most simple, as if from sleep, and you say to him, Do you not desire to know what the heavens are, what is their number and their form; what beings are contained in them; what the angels are; how the creation of the whole world took place; what is its purpose, and what is the relation of its various parts to each other; what is the nature of the soul... He would undoubtedly say “Yes,” and show a natural desire for

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the true knowledge of these things; but he will wish to satisfy that desire and to attain to that knowledge by listening to a few words from you. Ask him to interrupt his usual pursuits for a week, till he learn all this, he would not do it, and would be satisfied and contented with imaginary and misleading notions; he would refuse to believe that there is anything which requires preparatory studies and persevering research. (*Moreh Nevukhim* 1:34, tr. Friedlander)

Rambam understood very well that the most important questions in life demand more than a minute of our attention.

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