

From the Pages of Tradition **DWARFS ON THE SHOULDERS** **OF GIANTS**

Is the study of Torah progressing or regressing? Whatever one's intuitive response may be to such a question, a definitive answer is surely elusive. Methodologically, at least, it would first be necessary to define what we mean by "study of Torah," "progression," and "regression." It would then be necessary to settle on an appropriate time-frame. Torah study, for example, may be progressing or regressing in the second half of the twentieth century when compared to its first half. The question may be confined to a specific segment of the Jewish community (e.g., the Lithuanian style yeshivot gedolot or the yeshivot hesder), to a particular geographic area, or to the Jewish community at large. Crucial to the investigation will be the means used to measure progression or regression—assuming such measurement is possible.

No less interesting than the question itself are the larger theological issues it raises. Is Torah study supposed to be progressing or regressing? After all, a profound sense of regression seems to pervade traditional Judaism.¹ The Torah in all its glory was revealed at Sinai. It's been downhill ever since, or so—at least—some would argue. Moses was greater than any of the prophets who followed him; the Tannaim were greater than the Amoraim; and the Aharonim pale in significance to the Rishonim. Regression, rather than progression, is a theme writ large particularly in talmudic—and later rabbinic—literature. Typical passages read:

1. R. Yohanan stated: The minds [literally; hearts] of the earlier generations were as wide as the entrance to the Ulam, whereas the minds of the later generations were merely as wide as the entrance to the Hekhal. And our minds are only as wide as the eye of a needle!²

2. R. Yohanan stated: The fingernail of the earlier generations is better than the belly of the later generations.³

3. R. Zera said in the name of Raba bar Zimona: If the earlier authorities were angels, we are mortals. If the earlier authorities were mortals, we are asses—and not extraordinary asses like those of R. Hanina b. Dosa and R. Pinehas b. Yair, but rather, ordinary asses.⁴

Scripture too seems to support generational regression. Kohelet 7:10 reads: Don't say, "How has it happened that former times were better than these?" For it is not wise of you to ask that question. Rashi, for whom generational regression was self-evident, wondered aloud why Kohelet thought it was not wise to proclaim a truth that the Talmud takes for granted. Rashi explains:

For it is not wise of you to ask that question: For the [earlier] generations were better and more righteous than the later generations, therefore the former times were better than these. Indeed, it is not possible for the later generations to be like the earlier generations.⁵

Apparently, for Rashi, generational regression was a fact of life to be recorded, bemoaned.

Despite the persistence of the regression theme, many Torah authorities were puzzled by clear signs of progression, especially with regard to Torah study. It did not go unnoticed that numerous talmudic passages seemed to support generational progression.⁶ Moreover, could anyone claim in all seriousness that Maimonides' Code was a "regression" when compared to the gaonic codes that preceded it?⁷ Was the Gaon of Vilna less pious and learned than the generation that preceded him?⁸ Some rabbinic authorities have suggested that a distinction between piety and intellect may best account for all the evidence, piety being characterized by regression and intellect by progression. But precisely because piety and intellect are inextricably bound up together in Jewish teaching, it remained necessary to explain how progression in Torah study was possible despite moral regression.

The two passages presented here in translation were among the first to confront the issue of how progress in Torah study was possible despite a theology of generational regression. The first passage is drawn from the responsa of R. Isaiah di Trani (circa 1200-1260), an Italian halakhist who wrote extensive commentaries on the Talmud.⁹ He was the first Torah authority (and Jew) to cite the aphorism of "dwarfs on the shoulders of giants," and openly acknowledged his literary debt to contemporary non-Jewish philosophers.¹⁰ The aphorism was introduced into mediaeval thought by Bernard of Chartres (d. 1126), a Christian philosopher and theologian.¹¹ From a Jewish perspective, the aphorism was particularly ingenious and apt, for it paid tribute simultaneously to progression and regression, thus supporting as it were all the talmudic sources. On the one hand, the earlier generations are depicted as giants and the later generations as dwarfs—a clear case of regression. On the other hand, the dwarfs see farther than the giants—clearly evidence for progression. The focus of the first passage is on the cumulative effect of knowledge. The second passage is drawn from the writings of R. Isaac de Leon (circa 1540), rabbi in Ancona, Italy.¹² He too cited the aphorism (which we have omitted from the excerpt translated here). What is new and significant in this passage is its focus on specialization.¹³

RABBI ISAIAH DI TRANI

First, I wish to respond to your claim that it was improper for me to argue against the great Rabbi Isaac [b. Samuel of Dampierre (d. circa 1185)], Heaven forbid that I should do such a thing! It never entered my mind that I was arguing against him. I am but a *single flea* [I Samuel 24:15], i.e., an ignoramus—so Targum Jonathan renders the phrase—in comparison to his students, how much more so when I am compared to him! But it is my practice to dismiss all opinions that appear to me to be mistaken. Should Joshua the son of Nun endorse a mistaken position, I would reject it out of hand. I do not hesitate to express my opinion, regarding such matters, in accordance with the modicum of intelligence allotted to me. I fulfill the verse: *I will speak Your testimonies in the presence of kings, without being ashamed* [Psalm 119:46]. Heaven is witness, however, that even when I felt that my opinion was more persuasive than the opinions of the authorities who preceded me, I was never arrogant, claiming: *My wisdom has served me well* [Kohelet 2:9]. Instead, I applied to myself the parable of the philosophers. For I heard the following from the philoso-

phers. The wisest of the philosophers was asked: "We admit that our predecessors were wiser than we. At the same time, we criticize their comments, often rejecting them and claiming that the truth rests with us. How is this possible?" The wise philosopher responded: "Who sees farther, a dwarf or a giant? Surely a giant, for his eyes are situated at a higher level than those of a dwarf. But if the dwarf is placed on the shoulders of the giant, who sees farther? Surely the dwarf, for now the eyes of the dwarf are situated at a higher level than those of the giant. So too, we are dwarfs astride the shoulders of giants. We master their wisdom and move beyond it. Due to their wisdom we grow wise and are able to say all that we say, but not because we are greater than they."

Furthermore, we wish to state that we have confined all our arguments against opinions expressed by the rabbis who preceded us, to those instances where they themselves disagreed, the one permitting, the other prohibiting. Now how shall we resolve such a dispute? Can mountains and hills be weighed on scales? Can we decide that one rabbi was greater than the other, and then discount the opinion of the lesser rabbi? We have no choice but to examine their opinions—all their words are the words of the living God—and then decide which one accords best with all the evidence and merits becoming authoritative. Such was the practice of the sages of the Mishna and Talmud. The later authorities never hesitated to discuss, render judgments concerning, and even reject, the opinions of the earlier authorities. The Amoraim, for example, did not hesitate to declare that the halakha was not in accordance with a particular Mishna. Wisdom is greater than the wise. None of the wise is free of error. Perfect wisdom rests only with the Lord.

RABBI ISAAC DE LEON

To those who would express amazement at my readiness to disagree with the earlier authorities, I cite the words of the wise physician, Rabbi Solomon Almoli [d. circa 1542], from his small treatise *Me'assef le-Khol ha-Mahanot*: "It is possible for the later authorities to know and comprehend more than the earlier authorities on two accounts. First, on account of specialization. It is possible for a later authority to specialize in one topic, focusing all of his effort and talent on its study, with the result that his comprehension of the topic will supersede that of the earlier authorities. Second, on account of the cumulative effect of knowledge. We later authorities, by expending a modicum of effort, comprehend more in less time than the earlier authorities. For in their day, the various branches of knowledge were still in their infancy, largely unknown, and required much effort of the part of the investigator in order to discover the basic principles of knowledge. We, however, are the beneficiaries of their research. All their discoveries and proofs are laid out before us like a set table. The light of their wisdom provides us with light and serves as our eyes, as explained in the citation from R. Isaiah di Trani in R. Zedekiah b. Abraham's [13th century] *Shibbolei ha-Leqet*.¹⁴

NOTES

1. See the remarks attributed to the Hafez Hayyim (by R. Elhanan Wasserman) in R. Moshe M. Yoskor, *he-Hafez Hayyim*, Tel Aviv, 1958, vol. 1, p. 18. Cf. the references cited below in notes 5 and 10.

- For some contemporary ramifications of a regressive view of Judaism, see the excellent discussion (entitled: "The Degeneration of the Generations") in R. Norman Lamm, *Torah Umadda*, Northvale, 1990, pp. 86-109.
2. B. *Eruvin* 53a. According to M. Middot 3:7, the entrance to the outer chamber (*Ulam*) of the inner sanctum of the Temple was 20 cubits wide, whereas the entrance to the inner chamber (*Hekhal*) of the inner sanctum was 10 cubits wide. Cf. M. *Middot* 4:1.
 3. B. *Yoma* 9b.
 4. B. *Shabbat* 112b. For the "extraordinary asses" of R. Hanina b. Dosa and R. Pinehas b. Yair, see *Avot d'Rabbi Natan*, chapter 8, end (ed. S. Schechter, p. 38) and b. *Hullin* 7a.
 5. Rashi at b. *Rosh ha-Shanah* 25 b. Cf. the similar but even more striking formulation in the commentary on *Kohelet* ascribed to R. Samuel b. Meir (d. circa 1174), in A. Jellinek, ed., *Commentary zu Kohelet und dem Hohen Liede von R. Samuel b. Meir* (Hebrew), Leipzig, 1855, pp. 18-19, and in S. Japhet and R.B. Salters, *The Commentary of R. Samuel ben Meir on Qoheleth*, Jerusalem, 1985, pp. 154-157. In the Japhet-Salters edition, the passage is rendered incorrectly. It should read: "For you ought to understand of your own accord, from your own observation, that every day the world continues to deteriorate" [and not: ". . . the world follows its regular course"]. Cf. M. *Sotah* 3:5 for the correct text and sense of the original Hebrew of the passage.
- For a radically different interpretation of *Kohelet* 7:10, made possible in part by the aphorism cited in the passage translated here, see R. David Hazzan, *Kohelet ben David*, Salonika, 1748, p. 64d.
6. See, e.g., M. *Eduyot* 1:5; b. *Hullin* 6b-7a; and b. *Berakhot* 20a. See the discussion of the *Berakhot* passage in R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Divrei Hashkafah*, Jerusalem, 1992, pp. 224-226.
 7. One recalls the encomium over Maimonides by R. Jedaiah Bedersi (d. circa 1340) at the end of his *Behinat Olam*, ed. Sulzbach, 1744, p. 36a: "In the final analysis, I believe in everything that the great teacher Maimonides believed in. He was the last of the *Geonim* in time and the first in importance. Indeed, he had no peer among all the Jewish sages who lived from the closing of the Talmud on."
 8. See R. Eliyahu M. Bloch, *Ruah Eliyahu*, n.p., 1988, vol. 1, p. 85, bottom, and the discussion in R. Bezalel Landau, *ha-Gaon he-Hasid mi-Vilna*, Jerusalem, 1978, p. 388.
- For a view (ascribed to the Hatam Sofer) that the 18th century was unique and without equal in previous Jewish history (excluding only the Mosaic period) with regard to knowledge of Torah, see R. Yekutiel Y. Greenwald, *Bet Yehonatan*, Maramarossighet, 1908, p. 26.
9. R. Abraham Y. Wertheimer, ed., *Teshuvot ha-Ryd*, Jerusalem, 1967, responsum 62, columns 301-303. An abridged Hebrew version of the portion of the responsum translated here was published by S. Schechter, "Notes on Hebrew Manuscripts in the University Library at Cambridge," *Jewish Quarterly Review* (old series) 4(1892), pp. 94-95. The full Hebrew text of the portion translated here was first published by S.K. Mirsky, "R. Isaiah of Trani and the Author of the *Shibbolei ha-Leqet*," (Hebrew) *Talpiot* 9 (1964), n. 1-2, pp. 51-52.
 10. Other Jewish scholars who cited the aphorism include: R. Zedekiah b. Abraham (13th century), *Shibbolei ha-Leqet*, ed. S.K. Mirsky, New York, 1966, pp. 107-108; R. Judah Hayyat (d. circa 1510) in his commentary on the anonymous *Ma'arekhet Elohut*, Mantua, 1588, p. 3a; R. Judah Bulat (d. circa 1540) in a responsum included in *Tummat Yesharim*, Venice, 1622, responsum 34, p. 24d; R. Solomon Almoli (d. circa 1542), *Me'asef le-khol ha-Mahanot*, Constantinople, 1531, p. 23b; R. Isaac de Leon (circa 1540)—see the second passage translated here, and note 12; R. Azariah dei Rossi (d. circa 1578), *Me'or Enayim*, Mantua, 1574, p. 72b [= ed. D. Cassel, Vilna, 1866, p. 196]; R. David Gans (d. 1613), *Zemah David*, ed. M. Breuer, Jerusalem, 1983, p. 6; R. Abraham Azulai (d. circa 1643), *Hesed le-Avraham*, Vilna, 1877, pp. V-VI (see also his unpublished commentary to the Mishnah, comment to M. *Eduyot* 1:5, cited in Dov Zlotnick, "The Commentary of Rabbi

Abraham Azulai to the Mishnah," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 40 (1973), pp. 163-167; now available in *Ahavah beTa'anugim*, Jerusalem 1986, p. 200); R. Yom Tov Lipmann Heller (d. 1654), in his letter of approbation to R. Joseph Isaac ha-Levi's *Giv'at ha-Moreh*, Prague 1612; R. Abraham Yakhini (d. 1682), in his letter of approbation to R. Zevi Tuchfuehrer's *Nahalat Zevi*, Venice, 1660; R. Samuel b. David Moses ha-Levi (d. 1681), *Nahalat Shiv'ah*, Fuerth, 1692, vol. 2 responsum 78, p. 41d; R. Jacob b. Ezekiel, *Shem Ya'akov*, Frankfort on the Oder, 1716, introduction; R. Jehiel Mikhel of Clogau (d. circa 1735), *Nezer ha-Kodesh*, Jessnitz, 1719, introduction; R. David Hazzan (18th century), *Kohelet ben David*, Salonika, 1748, p. 64d; R. Jonathan Eibeschuetz (d. 1764), *Ya'arot Devash*, Karlsruhe, 1782, vol. 2, p. 46a (ed. Makhon Yerushalayim, Jerusalem, 1984, vol. 2, p. 125a); R. Pinehas Elijah Hurwitz (d. 1821), *Sefer ha-Berit*, Bruenn, 1797, introduction; R. Jacob Lorbeerbaum (d. 1832), *Havvat Da'at*, Lemberg, 1799, introduction; R. Jacob Samson Shabbetai Sinigaglia (d. 1840), *Shabbat shel Mi*, Leghorn, 1807, ad b. *Shabbat* 55a; R. Mendel Lefin (d. 1826), *Heshbon ha-Nefesh*, Lemberg, 1812, paragraph 143 [ed. Jerusalem, 1988, p. 113]; R. Itzig Teneles Handel, *Ner Mizvah*, Vienna, 1878, introduction; R. Jehiel Mikhel Hibner, *She'elot u-Teshuvot Hadar*, Przemyśl, 1898, in "quntres hod ve'hadar" at the end of the volume; R. Zadok ha-Kohen Rabinowitz (d. 1900), Resisei Laylah, *Lublin*, 1903, p. 14 (cf. his *Peri Zaddik*, Lublin, 1934, vol. 5, p. 39); R. Abraham Yellin, *Orekh Appayim*, Piotrkow, 1909, introduction, paragraph 14 (ed. Jerusalem, 1992, p. 27); R. Noah Kaplan, *Treasures of Knowledge*, Brooklyn, 1955, p. 9; and R. Menahem M. Schneerson, as cited in Jerome R. Mintz, *Hasidic People: A Place in the New World*, Cambridge, MA, 1992, pp. 350-351.

While hardly exhaustive, the above list—at least for the moment—is probably the most extensive listing of Jewish references to the aphorism ever to appear in print. Doubtless, the aphorism will continue to be cited in Jewish literature of the future. In any event, the compilation of the list was made possible only because I am a dwarf standing on the shoulders of giants. Aside from Zlotnick's study (mentioned above), see Tuvia Preschel, "Zutot," *Hadoar* 53 (1973-4), p. 425; *idem*, "Zutot," *Hadoar* 55 (1975), p. 136; *idem*, "Shtei He'arot," *Sinai* 78 (1975-6), p. 288; Dov Zlotnick, "Regarding the Source of the Dwarf-Giant Aphorism and its Aftermath," (Hebrew) *Sinai* 77 (1975), pp. 184-189; Yaakov Elbaum, "Regarding the Source of the Dwarf-Giant Aphorism and its Aftermath," (Hebrew) *Sinai* 77 (1975), p. 287; and Hillel Levine, "Dwarfs on the Shoulders of Giants: A Case Study in the Impact of Modernization on the Social Epistemology of Judaism," *Journal of Social Studies* 40 (1978), pp. 63-72.

In several of these studies, Professors H.Z. Dimitrovsky and S. Eidelberg are credited for bringing Jewish references to the aphorism to the attention of the authors of the studies. I am indebted to Rabbi Eliezer Katzman for calling my attention to the citations of the aphorism by Rabbis Sinigaglia and Kaplan.

11. See George Sarton, "Standing on the Shoulders of Giants," *Isis* 24 (1935), pp. 107-109, and Robert K. Merton's magisterial (and entertaining) study: *On the Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean Postscript*, New York, 1965.
12. Introduction to *Megillat Esther*, Venice, 1592. A commentary on Maimonides' *Sefer ha-Mizvot*, it is included in the standard editions of *Sefer ha-Mizvot* with commentaries. In the Jerusalem 1965 edition, the passage translated here appears on p. 5.
13. As indicated in the second passage, the focus on specialization (in the context of a discussion of progression and regression) was the contribution of R. Solomon Almoli. We translated de Leon's citation from Almoli, rather than the original text of Almoli, simply because of the accessibility of the former and the inaccessibility of the latter.
14. What follows is an abridged version of the R. Isaiah di Trani passage translated above.