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OUT OF A YOKE'S CROOKED TIMBER, FAITH MIGHT YET BE RECLAIMED

Professor Haym Soloveitchik's "Rupture and Reconstruction" concludes by poetically summarizing its core lament: "Having lost the touch of His presence, they seek now solace in the pressure of His yoke" (103). This tactile image evokes a similar metaphor, used to describe faith. The author's father, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, spoke personally in the pages of *TRADITION*, "The laws of Shabbat, for instance were passed on to me by my father; they are part of *musar avikha*. The Shabbat as a living entity, as a queen, was revealed to me by my mother; it is part of *torat imekha*... I learnt from her [my mother] the most important things in life—to feel the presence of the Almighty and the gentle pressure of His hand resting on my frail shoulder."¹ "Rupture and Reconstruction" argues that text-culture lacks an aspect of faith – the pressure of God's hand—that was present amidst mimetic communities of the past; and, in mourning this lost divine touch, the article cannot but tempt its readers to ask, "How might this, the touch of God's presence, be restored?"

It is not the historian's task to answer such a question. The historian describes what is and what was. The historian tells us a story by which we might understand what we are by knowing what we were. No essay more effectively achieves the historian's ideals for our Orthodox Jewish community than "Rupture and Reconstruction." It depicts a religious tradition in transition, asserting that contemporary Orthodox Jewish practice has undergone a profound change during the author's lifetime. Where observance of Jewish law was once transmitted organically through family tradition as much as by rabbinic texts, it has now become disconnected from lived-practice and is instead derived primarily from the written word.

The "Rupture and Reconstruction" story hints to an interesting possibility: A new synthetic, yet legitimate, mimetic culture might emerge. Although the article does not commit to such a possibility, the title does. "Reconstruction" is a word filled with connotation. It is the word used in American history for the long and fraught process of reconciling North

TRADITION

and South after the Civil War. It evokes the words of Jeremiah (1:10)—“To root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to construct, and to plant.” Even as Jeremiah foresees an imminent exile, he sets the stage for national rebirth. In explaining the extent of the Orthodox community’s rupture, Soloveitchik invites us to imagine it reconstructed.

Perhaps, a new mimesis is taking place as stable (admittedly text culture) communities regenerate upon new soil. Mothers might once again create a lived experience through which their children learn osmotically how to be a Jew.² With a significant degree of peace and prosperity in most places where Jews now live, an organic Jewish culture is emerging. Yet, the author’s lament is not simply for a medium by which Judaism passes from generation to generation. He mourns a specific type of faith. Stable Jewish families may not be enough to recreate that lost divine touch.

Scholarship on modern secularism since the publication of “Rupture and Reconstruction” mirrors the essay’s contention that faith’s character has changed. However, it evokes a larger reality that extends far beyond Judaism. In his seminal work, “A Secular Age,” Charles Taylor presents a dire picture of modern faith, considering the character of intellectual and social secularizing transformations over the last five hundred years. In doing so, Taylor presents a new understanding of secularity, not in terms of the falling away of belief in God or the receding of religion from the public square. Taylor emphasizes, instead, the transition from a society in which it was virtually impossible to challenge belief in God to one in which belief is one of multiple, contested options. He opposes what he calls “subtraction accounts,” which explain the rise of secularism in terms of the assertion of innate aspects of the human character. He argues instead for the need to pay careful attention to changing conditions of belief and the construction of new images for the relationship between self and society. Taylor charts the transition from an enchanted world, in which God and spiritual forces pervaded a person’s environment and directly influenced its structuring and self-definition, to the disenchanting world of individual minds and bounded selves. For Taylor, the process of disenchantment can be seen as an impoverishing loss of sensibility (not the shedding of irrational feelings).³

The enchanted world that Taylor describes parallels the Yom Kippur prayers of Soloveitchik’s youth:

What had been instilled in these people in their earliest childhood, and which they never quite shook off was that every person was judged on Yom Kippur, and, as the sun was setting, the final decision was being rendered (in the words of the famous prayer) “who for life, who for

death, / who for tranquility, who for unrest.” These people did not cry from religiosity but from self-interest, from an instinctive fear for their lives. What was absent [among the next generation] was that primal fear of Divine judgment, simple and direct (99).

Regeneration of mimetic processes will not reconstruct this “primal fear.” Soloveitchik observes that “the perception of God as a daily natural force is no longer present to a significant degree in any sector of modern Jewry, even the most religious.... Individual Providence, though passionately believed as a theological principle, is no longer experienced as a simple reality” (102). This “perception of God as a daily natural force” is lost in the ruins, not simply of the Holocaust, but of the blinding energy of the Enlightenment and the secular headwinds that blow against modern faith.

Soloveitchik sensed some of what Taylor later argued about the bounded self. Taylor juxtaposes what he terms the buffered-self with the pre-modern porous-self. The porous-self interacts seamlessly with its surrounding culture and environment (without self-consciousness). By contrast, the buffered-self experiences a more fragile, often evanescent faith, subject to doubt. Taylor views the poetic exertions of the Romantics as attempts to recapture this earlier innocent faith. However, Taylor argues, Wordsworth and Rilke failed in these efforts, because they drew on an ontology that was highly undetermined. One simply cannot force back into existence the experience of individual providence as a simple reality.

In describing the choices demanded of those who sought to convert text knowledge into action, Soloveitchik uses the metaphor of a performance artist to paint an ontology similar to that which Taylor described of the Romantics:

For most, both the natives of the emergent text culture and its naturalized citizens alike, the vision of perfect accord between precept and practice beckons to a brave new world. And, as ideas are dynamic and consequential, that vision beckons also to an expanding world of unprecedented consistency. The eager agenda of the religious community has, understandably, now become the translation of the ever increasing knowledge of the Divine norm into the practice of Divine service... This gives rise to a performative spirituality, not unlike the arts, with all its unabating tension... Performance demands choice, insistent and continuous. Whatever the decisions, their implementation is then beset by the haunting disparity between vision and realization, reach and grasp (73).⁴

TRADITION

Both Taylor and Soloveitchik are right to note the evolving character of faith. However, they fail to acknowledge sufficiently that such evolution has always and will always take place. Religious transmission requires a certain nostalgia for the greater faith of earlier generations. The Talmud expresses this idea of generational decline, “If the early generations are characterized as sons of angels, we are the sons of men; and if the early generations are characterized as the sons of men, we are akin to donkeys” (*Shabbat* 112b). Despite this decline, we find containers for God’s presence in every generation. The story of “Rupture and Reconstruction” is not a new one. The destruction of the First Temple precipitated the innovative reconstructions by the Men of the Great Assembly. The Second Temple’s destruction forced R. Yehuda ha-Nasi to reconstruct through the writing of the Mishna. Hasidic doctrines are likewise reconstructions in response to generational ruptures.⁵

What can be done today to address faith’s rupture? How might we allow God’s touch to rest upon frail shoulders?

Taylor predicts a future for faith, “Our age is very far from settling into a comfortable unbelief.” He explains the cause for this discomfort, “The secular age is schizophrenic, or better, deeply cross-pressured” (727). These pressures come from the failure to live exclusively within an immanent frame. Something in us looks for more in life. Taylor writes, “The whole culture experiences cross pressures, between the draw of the narratives of closed immanence on one side, and the sense of their inadequacy on the other” (595). Taylor diagnoses the limitation of the secular age. He describes secular belief as a shutting out, “The door is barred against further discovery” (769). He envisions that in the secular “waste land... young people will begin again to explore beyond the boundaries” (770).

Taylor’s prophecy has not yet come true. If anything, polls tell us that trends point even further against faith’s favor.⁶

In both a Jewish and general context, Soloveitchik’s depiction of text-culture presents a path forward. The surprising success of Orthodoxy during the last half-century might teach the world something regarding faith. While bemoaning the loss of simple faith, text-based Judaism has achieved remarkable success. The yoke, as it were, continues to pull the plow of Jewish continuity. The 2013 Pew Study of Jewish Americans tells a story of Orthodox Jewry ascendant, with large families and a growing rate of retention. This is particularly impressive in light of declining rates of affiliation among most other Jewish and non-Jewish religious groups.

Soloveitchik describes how text culture plays an essential role in that success:

In contemporary society, Jewish identity is not inevitable. It is not a matter of course, but of choice: a conscious preference of the enclave over the host society. For such a choice to be made, a sense of particularity and belonging must be instilled by education (93).

While requiring education, lasting commitment to a particular identity requires something more. As in all areas of life, a person gets out what they put in. Halakha (and the text culture that surrounds it) provides real demands in a society that offers few such opportunities for personal sacrifice. Such demands allow the individual to “put in.” Nassim Nicholas Taleb argues that religion is manifested not by belief but by the investment and commitment a person or community is prepared to risk for it.⁷ Yet, if true religion is commitment, true faith might yet sprout forth from commitment’s sweat-drenched fields.

“Make for me a sanctuary and I [God] will dwell among you” (Exodus 25:8). If the people build a structure, God might deign to dwell within it. This structure can be a literal building. This structure can be a way of life. This structure can be mimetic; the structure can be text-based. The structure has taken many forms in the long history of our people, but it has always taken a form through which the divine touch might be experienced.

Faith requires a frame, or yoke, upon which it can grow. Sacrifice, prayer, text-study, and Shabbat observance are ritual frames that allow a person to devote oneself to God. Once established, those frames can become receptacles for an individual and a community’s experience of the divine.

The Tabernacle and the sacrificial order establish templates for all future efforts to feel God’s touch. This is true not just because animal sacrifice was the first formal form of divine service. The Tabernacle is particularly useful as a religious frame, because it was so fraught. A series of *midrashim* depict the tension upon the Tabernacle’s inauguration. Rashi constructs from them a story about Moshe and Aaron, struggling to connect ritual action to divine presence. The people could not lift the boards that composed the Tabernacle. The people were critical after the first seven days of the consecration process. Aaron did not want to serve. After Aaron did serve, he blamed himself for the temporary failure to achieve the experience of God’s presence.⁸

The abiding tension in these stories is the possibility of building a Tabernacle and yet not experiencing God’s touch. The religious seeker must appreciate that in any relationship, both parties must be willing to connect. Human efforts to experience God are no different. We require God’s grace if we are to merit a divine touch.

TRADITION

Rabbi Yehuda Amital was fond of the idiomatic Hebrew expression, *en patentim*—there are no automatic shortcuts—within the religious endeavor. No steps can be taken to guarantee righteousness. No magic formulas might be spoken to bring forth the divine presence. We ultimately answer to God. God does not answer to us.

Still, certain scaffolding is the necessary, if not sufficient, condition for religious connection. These structures can be sacrifices, prayer, Torah study, or other concrete efforts, but they must each in their own way call forward human effort. We must give of ourselves in a meaningful way if we are to be the receptacles for divine favor. In this respect too, there are no magical short cuts.

Because of the necessity of meaningful human effort, the dichotomy between text culture and mimetic culture in tracing the divine touch must be questioned. Moments of transcendence can take place anywhere, so long as the scaffolding of sincere religious striving is well staged. In my life, experiences of God's touch have often taken place around, if not in, the bet midrash. While the intellectual scrapes and scars of fighting the battle of Torah have often precluded such feelings, it is in moments walking to and from places of Torah text study that I have on occasion been graced with momentary sparks of special awareness. Late evenings walking between the bet midrash and my dorm room at Yeshivat Har Etzion and time spent in an empty field during an afternoon break at Morasha Kollel have afforded me cherished touches of the divine.

In an environment of intense spiritual striving, our efforts to experience the divine might be rewarded in evanescent moments of returned love. If we carry our yokes in earnest, we too might feel God's hand upon our frail shoulder.

¹ Joseph Soloveitchik, "A Tribute to the Rebbetzin of Talne," *Tradition* 17:2 (1978), 76–77.

² In analyzing text culture, the essay itself embodies that culture. The essay is a text, and a great text at that. In evoking a lost mimetic tradition, it questions the authenticity of a lived religious reality; it too is part of an ongoing textual re-evaluation. In exposing the synthetic character of a community's sanitized "history," it exposes the seams in what was a seamless self-narrative.

³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007). While disputing Taylor's theory of secularization, Peter L. Berger acknowledges that a loss of religious certainty has taken hold as a result of "Religious Pluralism." The necessity of "deciding upon faith" parallels Soloveitchik's argument about the loss of mimesis. By contrast, Berger sees this positively, "It is better for social conditions to encourage us

to decide upon faith than for us to live amid circumstances that “give” us faith, making our religious identity akin to our hair color or our particular allergies rather than a fully personal quality that arises from our free assent” (*First Things*, April 2016).

⁴ By way of contrast, the Jewish community has faced modernity as a minority in both Christian and secular cultures. Therefore, when Taylor sees the modern person alone in his buffered self apart from nature and society, Soloveitchik sees a religious community, which sees separation as essential to its survival. The text culture endeavors to counteract influences emerging from a threatening non-Jewish environment. Adherence to law becomes a spiritual method for differentiation that was simpler in a more segregated past (81). This underscores a key difference regarding the meaning of the word “secular.” Secular is often used by Jews to refer to that which exists outside the community, as a synonym for “non-Jewish.” The word “secular” can also describe the “non-enchanted” to which Taylor devotes his book.

⁵ As one well-known hasidic story of generational loss concludes, “When Israel of Rizhyn needed intervention from heaven, he sat in his chair with his head in his hands and said, ‘*Ribono Shel Olam*, Master of the Universe, I no longer know how to light the fire, nor how to say the prayer, I can’t even find our way to that place, but I can tell the story and that must enough.’ And it was.” Elie Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest* (Schocken, 1966), prologue.

⁶ “The number of Americans who do not identify with any religion continues to grow at a rapid pace. One-fifth of the US public—and a third of adults under 30—are religiously unaffiliated today, the highest percentages ever in Pew Research Center polling. [From 2007-2012], the unaffiliated increased from just over 15% to just under 20% of all US adults. Their ranks now include more than 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics (nearly 6% of the US public), as well as nearly 33 million people who say they have no particular religious affiliation (14%)”; “‘Nones’ on the Rise,” *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life* (October 9, 2012), www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise

⁷ Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Skin in the Game: Hidden Asymmetries in Daily Life* (Random House, 2018), 207.

⁸ See the *midrashim* cited by Rashi to Exodus 39:33, Leviticus 9:7 and 9:23.