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Jewish Thought: A Process, Not a Text

I am deeply uncomfortable with the term "Jewish thought." Its sibling, "*mahshava*" and its more formal uncle, "*Mahashevet Yisrael*," make me feel no better. Allow me to ignore altogether their uneducated cousin "*hashkafa*," a term so vacuous it barely deserves our attention. There are several reasons I do not like these terms.

First of all, they divorce these texts from the larger body of Jewish literature from which they arise. Cordoning off ideas with philosophical import was not practiced by the Talmud, nor by Maimonides in his *Mishne Torah*, and the idea of doing so was explicitly lamented by Rabbi Shmuel Eidels, known as Maharsha, in the introduction to his talmudic commentary.[1] "I regret my initial decision to divide up my commentary into two separate works," he writes, "namely, one on *aggada* and one on halakha." Classifications and specialization, while often necessary and commonly accepted in academic circles, strips the flavor and richness away from Jewish ideas. Jewish thought divorced from halakhic and, more broadly, talmudic discourse, can feel like caging a wild animal. A tiger in a zoo may be majestic, but it is clearly not in its natural habitat. The context in which ideas emerge, Jewish or otherwise, is part of what nourishes their significance. Philosophical ideas cannot be taken out of context. Whether it is a consideration of the broader talmudic context, the larger work in which they appear, or the historical framework—context matters.

Secondly, the isolation of such texts from their natural habitat within the larger corpus of Jewish texts often leads to their being ignored altogether or diminishing their value. Sadly, the term "*mahshava*," or the descriptor "*ba'al mahshava*," can sometimes be a passive-aggressive placeholder for the more common term "*am ha'aretz*." These subjects are considered less consequential than the traditional study of halakha or the "*lomdus*" of Talmud study. This perception is compounded by the comparative lack of high quality English works on Jewish thought. With some notable exceptions, the translation of the theological and

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philosophical aspects of Judaism into English has been wanting—leaving many with the impression that this area of Torah is of lesser quality.[2] As the former editor of *Tradition*, Rabbi Emanuel Feldman, once wrote within these pages, "A world-view which is inadequately articulated not only fails to communicate, but repels those whom it would reach." Sadly, this area of Torah has not been adequately communicated, and therefore many have been repelled.

Lastly, the genre suffers from a sense of ambiguity with regard to its purpose. In Rabbi Aharon Lopianky's introduction to his work *Time Pieces* he addresses this point:

> *Machshavah. Kabbalah.* Philosophy. Mussar. *Derash. Hashkafah.* Chassidus. Well, what exactly is it? An esteemed friend, who reads critically, once put the question into much sharper focus. Upon evaluating an essay of mine, he commented, "It's nice, but will anyone daven a better Minchah because of it?"[3]

I have mixed feelings about using the quality of a *mincha* as the litmus test for Torah's utility. The question itself reveals the lesser value imported to such works. Would the questioner in this story, I wonder, ask a similar question of *lomdus* or halakha? The immediacy of practical applicability is obvious in halakhic study, and sometimes leads to an over reliance on utilitarian value. Still, the question is a good one. Leaving aside the actual commandment to study Torah, these other areas of Torah study provide clearer purpose of outcome. The purpose of halakha is practice. The purpose of *lomdus* is, arguably, conceptual clarity. What then is the purpose of the study of Jewish thought?

My introduction to the serious study of what has become known as *mahshava* was deeply personal, and my relationship to the subject has remained that way. Three teachers converged in my life during a period where my anxiety, sense of doubt, and lack of belief in myself were acute. I was in my mid-twenties and felt adrift. Dating was tortuous, a career path was elusive, and my inner religious life was in disarray. Ever since I was a teenager, I was accustomed to hearing that God would never send a test I couldn't pass, and so there I was, imagining my life with a big red-inked grade of F. Then, while teetering on the brink of nihilistic resignation, through three teachers, I encountered Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin (1823-1900).

There are three areas where I believe Rav Tzadok serves as an instructive archetype for the value and importance of the study of Jewish thought: experiential resonance, omnisignificance, and consilience. Each of these areas was modeled for me through a different teacher.

Experiential Resonance & Rav Moshe Weinberger

The first thinker who introduced me to Rav Tzadok was Rav Moshe Weinberger. To be clear, I have never considered myself his formal student. I have never davened in his shul, and I have heard him speak in person less than a handful of times.[4] Still, he is my Rebbe. Allow me to explain why with an anecdote he once shared about Rav Tzadok. Someone once asked Rav Tzadok of Lublin and his friend and mentor Rav Leible Eiger why their style of Torah was so different. They both studied with the same Rebbe—Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izhbitz—so why do their written works differ so drastically? Rav Tzadok explained that he wrote down *what* was said, while Reb Leible wrote down *how* he said it. There is something about the voice of R. Weinberger that conveys all of the anxieties, doubts, and concerns of his listeners. His voice trembles, it sings, it becomes vulnerable. I don't remember much of what R. Weinberger said—I remember *how* he said it.

Through the works of Rav Tzadok, Rav Weinberger introduced me to a world of Jewish ideas that reflected my own personal and all too human experience. It did not have the sober detachment of halakha, the analytic poise of *lomdus*, or the pedantic attitude of *mussar*. To call it *hasidut* would also be inaccurate, as it often related to Jewish ideas which pre-dated the Hasidic movement by centuries. The characteristic that distinguished Rav Tzadok's Torah was how clearly wedded it was to his experiential life and inner experience. This, I believe, is an important characteristic of Rav Tzadok's approach to Jewish thought.

In his work *Sefer Zikhronot*, Rav Tzadok spends a considerable amount of time defining *Torat Nistar*, mystical knowledge, as well as explaining the history of its development. He writes as follows:

> And that which they call "Hidden Torah" and "Concealed Ideas"' (see *Hagiga* 13a)—it is not because they must be hidden or concealed. Otherwise it would have been unnecessary for the sages to explicitly instruct that they be hidden. Clearly, from their name alone we would not have understood the obligation to conceal them.
>
> Rather, we see, their identification as hidden and concealed is not due to the obligation to hide them—it is their very nature that they are hidden and concealed. Each person must experience them and grasp them.

> From here we learn that all of the written works throughout the latter generations to explain kabbala in a readily understandable way do not fall within the category of the concealed matters of the world.[5]

Individual experiential resonance, in this formulation, is not a byproduct of mystical ideas—it is their purpose. No wonder that Rav Tzadok dedicated an entire work to analyzing his dreams. Personal experience became fused with Torah itself.[6] The study of Jewish thought is valuable when the reader uncovers not only *what* was said in the text, but *how* it was said, that is, when it resonates with his own personal experience.

Omnisignficance & Dr. Yaakov Elman

After studying for several years in Ner Israel, I decided to enroll in Yeshiva University. A switch such as this was uncommon, and my reason for doing so was unique. I wanted to study the works of Rav Tzadok with Dr. Yaakov Elman, of blessed memory. Dr. Elman, who then occupied the Herbert S. and Naomi Denenberg Chair in Talmudic Studies at Yeshiva University, began his academic career studying the works of Rav Tzadok. I believe this animated his entire life and career, and one can trace Dr. Elman's career and personal evolution through the works of Rav Tzadok. He began as a fairly traditional yeshiva student, writing English essays on the holidays that incorporated Rav Tzadok's ideas.[7] He once joked that a first draft he wrote had referred to Rav Tzadok's *wide* array of influence, "from Rav Gedalya Schorr to Rav Hutner." As he evolved, so did his relationship to Rav Tzadok. He wrote about Rav Tzadok's approach to the development of halakha, which subsequently led him to the writings of Rabbi Samuel Glasner, a great-grandson of Hatam Sofer, who formulated an iconoclastic approach to the development of the Oral Law.[8] Eventually, he dedicated an entire essay to Rav Tzadok's theory of parallelism in the development of the Oral law and general philosophy.[9] "Each surge of general human creativity," Dr. Elman explained the theory based on Rav Tzadok, "corresponds to a similar one in Jewish history." The correspondence of the development of secular wisdom and Jewish ideas, as articulated by Rav Tzadok, led him to study the Zoroastrian influences on the Talmud's development. This final destination is where Dr. Elman achieved his academic renown, but it is not what I wanted to study with him. In his cramped office, one on one, we studied the works of Rav Tzadok. He appreciated my yeshiva training and together we returned to that first love from his yeshiva years.

The term at the center of Dr. Elman's interest in Rav Tzadok was "omnisignificance," a phrase coined by Professor James Kugel. Omnisignificance, according to Kugel, is "the basic assumption underlying all of rabbinic exegesis that the slightest details of the biblical text have a meaning that is both comprehensible and significant."[10] Nothing in the biblical text, explains Kugel, "ought to be explained as the product of chance, or, for that matter, as an emphatic or rhetorical form, or anything similar, nor ought its reasons to be assigned to the realm of Divine unknowables." Rav Tzadok, as Elman explained in several different essays, was involved in the overall pursuit of finding omnisignificance in Torah texts.[11] He asks questions that others would have ignored or dismissed. Why does this passage of Talmud appear in this particular tractate? Why are certain central prohibitions absent from the text of the Bible? Why does the Torah use the temporal term, "until this very day"? Underlying much of Rav Tzadok's approach is the insistence that the context and history of the Torah's development is intentional and deliberate. Omnisignficance attempts to find meaning in the diverse pieces of a larger picture.

Those who knew Dr. Elman well know that he did not have an easy life. His career trajectory was far from typical. He was a meteorologist, a cab driver, a bookstore manager, an editor, and finally a university professor.[12] It was no secret that he grappled with the arc of his professional and personal narrative. While he never said this explicitly, I suspect much of the reason he was drawn to Rav Tzadok was the hope of applying his approach to text to the course of his life. As Rav Tzadok searched for omnisignificance within talmudic and midrashic texts, Dr. Elman looked for it within himself and in the pattern of his life. In a recommendation letter he wrote on my behalf for one of my many failed attempts at qualifying for a Wexner Fellowship, he explained that he admired my willingness to shift from the yeshiva to a university. "I can testify to the costs of that move," he wrote. His nomadic career and identity propelled him to search for a meaning in the details of his life, in the hope that they would come together in an overarching narrative that would make everything cohere. I do not know that he ever fully found or embraced such a narrative, but I am certain he was always searching for one. In that sense, he was truly Omnisignificant Man.

Searching for omnisignificance, whether in text or in life, is a hallmark of Rav Tzadok's work and of Dr. Elman's story. But they were not alone in this endeavor. Many thinkers before Rav Tzadok and after Dr. Elman had a similar orientation. At its core, this emphasis is about transforming Jewish thought from a collection of texts and opinions into a process, a way of thinking, and into a worldview. It begins with a commitment to

the belief that deliberate meaning can be found even in seemingly arbitrary events and ideas. Perhaps it is a stray talmudic digression or, as it was for Dr. Elman, a period that is professionally peripatetic, but omnisignificance insists that even in such texts, and in moments in which one feels adrift—meaning can be discovered that eventually contributes to a picture with larger significance.

Consilience & Dr. Ari Bergmann

In the 1998 book *Consilience* by Edward O. Wilson, the author proposes a fairly simple but extremely ambitious idea: unifying all branches of knowledge. Whether the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, or math, Wilson is interested in integrating each disparate discipline into a cohesive whole. While omnisignificance focuses on the intentionality of each individual part, consilience seeks an interdisciplinary unity. As Wilson explains, consilience is "literally a jumping together" of knowledge by the linking of facts and fact-based theory across disciplines to create a common groundwork of explanation."[13] Throughout the book, Wilson imagines a world where art, science, humanities, and religion are in dialogue with one another. Nearly twenty years ago, I was introduced to such conversations. Dr. Ari Bergmann developed an approach, grounded in Rav Tzadok, that seeks consilience between the worlds of *lomdus*, halakha, *mahshava*, philology, academic Jewish studies, history, and economics.

I grew up in Lawrence, NY, a few blocks away from Reb Ari, as I call him. He has been teaching a *shiur* each Shabbat for over two decades. The structure of the shiur is breathtaking—beginning with traditional *lomdus*, frequently detouring into Jewish history, and almost always closing in the world of mysticism. His grasp of any of these disciplines could have been a career in itself. Instead he initially chose finance as his vocation. After studying in traditional *yeshivot*, Reb Ari was introduced to the world of Rav Tzadok, through the teaching of his rebbe, Rav Moshe Shapiro, of blessed memory, a pioneer of the style and approach to *mahshava* in the yeshiva world.[14] Only years later did he complete a doctorate in Talmud at Columbia University and begin formal university instruction. It has never been lost on me that Rav Tzadok brought two of my teachers to the academic study of Talmud. Listening to Reb Ari is to participate in the consilience of Torah. His methodology integrates halakha, classical *lomdus*, history, and philology in the pursuit of interdisciplinary consilience

Consilience reverberates throughout the pages of Rav Tzadok. Halakhic texts are in conversation with theology, rationalist ideas are ascribed mystical significance, and history becomes a medium for the unfolding of the

divine idea. Rav Tzadok abhors reductionist explanations; instead he seeks universal underlying conceptual ideas. Rav Tzadok seeks consilience.

After Ari finishes shiur, there is usually a group of attendees surrounding him and peppering him with questions, as his son Shmuely tries to steer him home. Much of my approach to Jewish thought was developed on meandering walks back to his house. On one such walk, Ari was discussing the question of the Beit Yosef regarding Hanukka candles—if the miracle was that one day's worth of oil lasted eight days, should the holiday not commemorate a miracle for only seven days? There are hundreds of answers proposed to this question. "But I don't want a hundred answers to one question," Ari explained, "I want one answer to a hundred questions." Jewish thought, in the world of consilience, is not about presenting a hundred approaches to one question—it is developing conceptual ideas that resolve a hundred questions using the full array of Torah sources, in all their complexity, that are available to us.

Jewish Thought Without Boundaries

So, what of *mincha*? As the skeptic asked—will Jewish thought help us *daven* a better *mincha*? I submit that whatever label you stamp on it, the world of *mahshava* will not only help you daven a better *mincha*, it will help connect that *mincha* to the rest of your day, and help you better understand and appreciate *mincha* even on those days when you do not want to daven at all.

The ultimate benefit, however, is that it will help you ask better questions about your overall Torah study. Often when parsing through a topic in Torah, it is easy to get stuck collecting opinions, without constructing a theory that leads to an appreciation of the larger context or to its broader significance to other areas. To a degree, this is necessary. Study of practical halakhic topics demands a focus on immediate applicability that can obscure the relationship of the halakhic detail to a broader world view. At the end of the day, you need answers to questions such as if you can add water to your cholent.

However, questions of Jewish thought point in the other direction. Without immediate utilitarian function, one focuses more easily on the process rather than a specific outcome. This is true in other areas of Torah learning as well, which is why I noted at the outset that curtailing the boundaries of Jewish thought to a specific set of texts is a mistake. One can study any text within the Jewish canon—whether Talmud, Rambam, or *Shulhan Arukh*—and if studied with a focus on uncovering meaning and connection to a larger worldview, it can rightfully be described as

studying Jewish thought. It is also possible that one can study a work commonly associated with Jewish thought, such as Maharal, *Shenei Luhot ha-Brit*, or Rav Tzadok, and, without an appreciation for the underlying process, a larger worldview may never emerge.

Returning to the values we mentioned earlier, an omnisignificant orientation seeks meaning even within the seemingly arbitrary or temporal elements of a text. For instance, why does this particular teaching appear here? Why does this tractate start in this way? Why is this personality associated with this teaching? To be sure, it was not only Rav Tzadok who asked such questions—they can be found in the *Rishonim* as well—Rav Tzadok merely expanded the scope of such questions.[15] Consilience expands upon omnisignificance and builds deliberate connections between disparate disciplines. How are the fundamental values of Yom Kippur, for instance, reflected in the laws, stories, and history associated with the day? Is the historiography of mysticism connected to the nature of mysticism itself? Can the academic study of Talmud shed light on the theological significance of Talmud? What can the scientific nature of time tell us about the Jewish concept of *zeman*?

Studying Jewish thought—with a focus on this unifying process, rather than on learning a specified body of texts—is an antidote for the drawbacks engendered by the push toward immediate practical application. Jewish thought, then, is not a text—it is an orientation. Experiential resonance, the search for omnisignificance, and a search for consilience can transform a focus on the formal study of texts about Jewish thought into a life filled with moments of meaning, that ultimately become a more thoughtful life, and a more meaningful Judaism.

A renaissance is afoot in the world. The boundaries of Jewish thought and expression continue to expand, and the medium through which our ideas are expressed continues to evolve. Jewish thought is becoming less confined to a specific set of texts and is becoming more of a way of relating to and integrating our larger experiences. The music of Ishai Ribo is a moving example. His music is a type of midrashic song. Listening to his lyrics, which weave together personal experience, his own interpretation, and mystical undertones, it is hard to deny that his music should be considered part of the canon of Jewish thought. His lyrics, unlike other contemporary Jewish musicians, are not specific texts from the Jewish canon. He is not merely sharing Jewish texts, he is developing an interpretive worldview. And along with his songs, and many other recent contributors to this field, the boundaries of Jewish thought continue to expand and advance.[16] What remains constant, however, is the true focus of *mahshava*. It is not what is on the page; it is what is within us.

[1] For more on the lament of Rabbi Eidels, see my "The Forgotten Talmud: On Teaching Aggadah in High Schools," *Jewish Action* (Fall 2015), 60–61.

[2] Allow me to highlight some of the notable exceptions. The works *The Jewish Self* and *The Choice to Be* by R. Jeremy Kagen may be some of the finest presentations of Jewish thought in English to a popular audience. I have long admired and poorly imitated the writing style of Rabbi Louis Jacobs, particularly his treatments of Hasidic thought. The works of my dear friends R. Netanel Wiederblank, Ora Wiskind, and Joey Rosenfeld, while all quite different, have heartened my faith in the future of English works in this area. It is also worth mentioning *Judaism Reclaimed: Philosophy and Theology in the Torah* by Shmuel Phillips.

[3] Rabbi Aaron Lopiansky, *Time Pieces: Reflections on the Jewish Year* (Machon Aliot Eliyahu, 2014), 21.

[4] See my earlier article on Rav Tzadok, "Ideas in Three Dimensions," *Mishpacha Magazine* (September 4, 2019 in which I describe my introduction to Rav Tzadok when I was a high school senior. The speaker was Rav Moshe Weinberger. Several years later, while studying in Baltimore, I found myself calling in to his pre-Yom Kippur lecture. When I talk about the power and experiential resonance conveyed to me by Rav Weinberger's voice, I am thinking of that experience in our yeshiva dorms.

[5] Rav Tzadok of Lublin, *Sefer Zikhronot* (Machon Har Bracha, 2003), 290.

[6] For more on the role of personal experience in the works of Rav Tzadok see *Tzidkat ha-Tzaddik* #53, #231, as well as *Pri Tzaddik*, Ki Tisa, #7, and *Divrei Halomot* #23.

[7] His first presentation of R. Tzadok's ideas in English were in these pages. See Dr. Elman's "R. Zadok Hakohen on the History of Halacha," *Tradition* 21:4 (1985), 1-26. For more of his early work on Rav Tzadok, see "Reb Zadok Hakohen of Lublin on Prophecy in the Halakhic Process," *Jewish Law Association Studies* 1 (1985), 1–16; and also "Sefiras Haomer: The Link between Teshuva and Torah," *Jewish Observer* (April 1988). In a curious twist of fate, this very issue of *Jewish Observer* contained a rather heated exchange against Rabbi Norman Lamm, the person who helped introduce Dr. Elman to the academic world.

[8] See Dr. Elman's "R. Zadok Hakohen on the History of Halakha," *Tradition* 21:4 (1985), 1–26.

[9] "The History of Gentile Wisdom According to R. Zadok ha-Kohen of Lublin," *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* 3:1 (1993), 153–187.

[10] James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (Yale University Press, 1981), 103–104.

[11] See his "Progressive Derash and Retrogressive Peshat: Nonhalakhic Considerations in Talmud Torah," in Shalom Carmy, ed., *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah: Contributions and Limitations* (Jason Aronson, 1996), 227–287; "The Rebirth of Omnisignificanct Biblical Exegesis in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *Jewish Studies Internet Journal* 2 (2003), 199–249.

[12] For more on his life see the tribute by Shai Secunda, "Perpetual Motion," *Jewish Review of Books* (August 21, 2018). See also his posthumously published memoir of sorts, "*A Mentsch Trakht, Un Got Lakht*: A Scholar's Tale," in *Essays for a Jewish Lifetime: Burton D. Morris Jubilee Volume*, eds. Menachem Butler and Marian E. Frankston (Hakirah Press, forthcoming).

[13] Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (First Vintage Books, 1999), 8.

[14] A careful examination of the approach and influence of R. Moshe Shapiro is an important part of the contemporary story of the study of *mahshava*. It is beyond the scope of this piece, but it is an area that I hope receives scholarly attention.

[15] There are countless examples of *Rishonim* asking such questions. For a consideration of Rav Tzadok's contribution, see Sarah Friedland "Neighbors Under One Roof: Two Fundamental Homiletical Frameworks in the Writings of Rav Tzadok of Lublin" [Hebrew], *Akdamut* 8 (*Kislev* 5760), 25–43.

[16] Allow me to present some more of the most exciting developments in this world. Mystical poetry, similar to that of Rav Kook, is being created by Dr. Hillel Broder and Yehoshua November. Younger scholars such as Zohar Atkins and Ben Greenfield are approaching Biblical stories with a neo-midrashic curiosity similar to the works of Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg. Finally, the translation of mysticism—both in language and application—by Reb Joey Rosenfeld has begun a revolution of sorts in the way Jewish thought is presented and explained.