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THE POWER AND POETRY OF PROPHECY: EMPHASIZING MAHASHEVET YISRAEL IN OUR CURRICULUM

Rav Avraham Yitzhak Kook famously depicts the sage and the prophet as two kinds of thinkers. The sage specializes in measured and detailed practical planning, and the prophet, a poetic visionary, portrays the beauties of utopia and the ugliness of corruption. Religious and moral success depends upon harnessing both qualities. For R. Kook, the communal loss of prophecy means more than the fact that God no longer grants humans direct communication. It means that we have lost some of the necessary balance between the two traits, and now practice a Judaism strong on details but weak in poetic vision. This explains why some contemporary secularists reject the Jewish tradition (*Orot*, 120–121).

Similarly, R. Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg writes of the necessity of integrating halakha and *aggada*. Halakha reflects constancy and stability; it is a strong wall protecting our communal values. *Aggada* conveys dynamism and excitement; it is the fire fueling our religious aspirations. Any authentic Jewish approach must include elements of both (*Lifrakim*, 333–335).

These two presentations help explain my interest in Jewish thought. On the one hand, the most unique feature of Orthodox Judaism may be the scope and intensity of its commitment to the fine points of religious law. On the other hand, that very intensity can obscure the values, ideals, and insights animating the halakha. It can generate a sense of a withered tradition lacking dynamism and inspiration. R. Kook's idea that we have lost the proper balance resonates with me. Gemara and halakha dominate *yeshivot* for sages, whereas schools for prophets must incorporate significant components of *Tanakh* and Jewish thought. *Yeshivot* that teach Gemara three *sedarim* a day prioritize the sage to the exclusion of the prophetic impulse. The dominance of the Brisker method, which specializes in relating to halakhic concepts as abstract, formal categories, often exacerbates the problem. Beyond the realm of educational institutions,

we can identify examples of our vision getting lost in the details when communities appear more concerned about whether or not to recite *ve-yatzmah purkanei* than with solving the *aguna* crisis.

Readjusting the curriculum mandates more than simply including *shiurim* in *Mahashevet Yisrael*. In theory, every Torah subject has a Jewish thought component. Can an instructor teach the *Akeida* without asking what the purpose of a *nisayon* is or teach the book of Samuel without discussing whether or not monarchy is a Jewish ideal? Thus, to some degree, *Tanakh* study demands a *mahshava* component. Although it is arguably easier to give a Gemara shiur without addressing philosophical questions, such questions can, and should, easily make an appearance. Someone teaching *Sanhedrin* might compare trial by a jury of peers with trial by a professional judiciary or contrast a court system with lawyers to one without. Furthermore, serious study of aggadic passages, something I vigorously champion, moves theological and moral components to the front and center of talmudic literature. A Halakha teacher discussing women's exemption from time-bound positive commandments might address the status of voluntary performance in our tradition and how it compares to obligatory compliance.

It should be clear from the preceding paragraph that I cast the net of relevant *mahshava* sources quite widely. There is no need to restrict such study to works traditionally categorized as Jewish thought. Ramban's analysis of *kedoshim tihyu*, Ritva's interpretation of *eilu ve-eilu*, and the *aggadot* about R. Shimon bar Yohai in the cave or about the place of heavenly proofs in halakhic debate are *mahshava* classics. This conversation should also include works of *musar* and *hasidut*, as well as the best of non-Jewish literature. Wisdom is rare and precious and we should treasure it wherever it can be found. Max Scheler helps us understand repentance, C.S. Lewis explains the advantages of praying with a fixed text, and the closing lines of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* are worth a dozen *musar shmuezen*:

For the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.

That being said, I would still emphasize the classic volumes of Jewish thought, as I believe in trusting the canon of works a tradition considers significant. No genuine student of English literature can afford to ignore Shakespeare. For Jewish thought, this would mean a focus on classics

such as *The Guide for the Perplexed*, *Kuzari*, *Halakhic Man*, and *Orot ha-Kodesh*. Admittedly, I am setting quite a high bar, since many teachers will not be knowledgeable in all these fields, or have mastery of all the most influential works of Jewish thought. In addition, personal preference and predilection plays an important role in shaping a curriculum; teachers must teach material they love. Nonetheless, a good *mahshava shiur* ideally includes a wide range of source material while offering some insight into the most well-known works of Jewish philosophy.

I hasten to add that the expanded curriculum must not abandon Talmud study altogether. Ours is a law-based religion and the authentic encounter with the reality of lived Jewish life requires exposure to halakhic texts. Furthermore, expounding on Jewish thought while ignorant of halakha should be viewed as philosophizing without the data and facts. What would it mean to discuss a Torah philosophy of punishment without knowing the details of *Sanhedrin* and *Makkot*? Only such informed study enables an educated conversation about themes such as retribution, deterrence, and rehabilitation in Jewish criminal law. A people's ideals and values find manifestation in the details of their legal codes.

A critic of my desire for more Jewish Thought *shiurim* may contend that it is much safer to avoid troubling or difficult conundrums and that we have better odds of our students staying observant if we do not raise theological questions. The first thing that should be noted in response is that some students will have such questions whether we raise them or not. Someone who learns about the Holocaust will likely think about questions of theodicy even if he or she never attended a class on the problem of evil. Moreover, a teacher should feel that intellectual honesty demands making certain observations. Pretending that we have easy answers to all the questions about religion in general or Judaism in particular may not prove possible to a teacher committed to sincerity and candor. Should I lie to my students and tell them that I am not troubled by talmudic opinions that permit theft from gentiles? Most importantly, not discussing questions or raising challenges leads to a shallow conception of Judaism. Someone who does not think deeply about providence might conclude that all human suffering is punishment for transgression, a potentially cruel and erroneous position. Not encountering the ideas of groups outside of Orthodox Judaism can lead to simplistic portrayals of such groups ("secular Jews have no values" or "they are an empty wagon"). It is not an accident that Orthodox cultures most devoted to shielding their constituents from hard questions exhibit a worldview that utilizes *Da'as Torah* and other methods to deny the variety of theological

positions in the history of Jewish thought and reduce Biblical characters to black and white personalities devoid of the complexity of human emotions and moral ambiguity. If we must distort and diminish the Torah as an insurance policy to guarantee ongoing *frumkeit*, I do not find the tradeoff worthwhile.

Beyond these three arguments, it is a mistake to identify Jewish thought solely with confronting challenges. Shalom Carmy notes that we should not let our *Tanakh* study turn into a series of responses to critics. Such a course might begin with the documentary hypothesis, move on to the relationship between the biblical account of creation and evolutionary theory, then proceed to reconciling archeological finds with the exodus and the conquest of Canaan, etc. We would then have educated our students to view *Tanakh* as a series of problems to navigate, and reduce the teacher's task to perpetually extinguishing philosophical fires.¹ In contrast, the best argument for the unity and sanctity of *Tanakh* is to read it as a unified whole and discover the moral grandeur, psychological insight, and aesthetic beauty within. Along the way, we should also respond to challenges, but that cannot dominate our classroom. The best defense is a good offense. The same idea applies to Jewish thought. Not every *shiur* needs to be about justifying belief or combating determinism; many should just reveal the profundity and guidance provided by our leading thinkers. R. Kook's *Middot ha-Ra'aya*, R. Hutner's *Pahad Yitzhak*, R. Tzadok's *Tzidkat ha-Tzaddik*, and R. Yisrael Lipschitz's *Tiferet Yisrael* commentary on *Avot* all exemplify deep insight even if they do not directly confront challenges to our faith.

But what of the intellectual and cultural challenges of the moment, and the most effective ways to address them? Are medieval or even early modern works relevant to the conundrums of the twenty-first century? Here, we should differentiate between three categories. Some aspects of the medieval worldview, such as the Aristotelian notion of intelligent spheres or the four humors of the body, no longer carry any weight, and it does not pay to grant them extended attention. At the other extreme, discussions of ethical theory or *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* remain just as relevant today as they were a thousand years ago. For example, virtue ethics themes in Rambam have received renewed attention in the past half-century due to the return of Aristotelian ethical theory exemplified in the work of Elizabeth Anscombe, Alasdair MacIntyre, and others. Rambam and *Sefer ha-Hinukh* debating whether the purpose of *ma'aser sheni* is to encourage sharing or for the sake of education remains pertinent almost a millennium later.

TRADITION

A middle category includes ideas requiring some translation or application to the contemporary situation. *Rishonim* may not have encountered the modern ethical challenge of people with a homosexual orientation, but they did address other tensions between ethical intuitions and halakha, and their work could serve as a model for our efforts.² Medieval arguments for religion also need translation. We are much less convinced today than humanity was in earlier times about the ability of human reasoning to definitively prove anything. If so, what happens to medieval proofs for the existence of God or for the authenticity of the Oral Law? One option is to shift the arguments from definitive proofs to logical support for a thesis. Support for theism would then depend on a number of cumulative arguments without any single proof. Another option recasts these arguments as experiential more than mathematically logical proofs. As Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik writes:

The trouble with all rational demonstrations of the existence of God with which the history of philosophy abounds, consists in their being exactly what they were meant to be by those who formulated them: abstract logical demonstrations divorced from the living primal experiences in which these demonstrations are rooted.³

Sometimes, the clash between older texts and modern norms helps us think critically about modernity. Though I appreciate the outlook of more liberal iterations of Judaism, I am often tempted to ask them regarding which issues—even one example!—they have sided with our tradition over the pundits of Cambridge, Berkeley, and Yale. If they cannot successfully provide an answer, one can legitimately question both their attachment to our tradition and how deeply and objectively they are thinking about issues. Modernity brings many blessings to our community. Feminism leads to greater religious and educational opportunities for half of our population. Liberal discourse generates greater concern and sympathy for minorities and the handicapped. Science allows humanity to live longer and in much more favorable conditions. That being said, there are other sides to the equation. Scientism can lead to a worldview that fails to appreciate anything that cannot be quantified or tested in a laboratory including love, friendship, sanctity, and the transcendent. Some forms of feminism downplay the significance of raising a family while others portray the domestic domain as a constant stream of power struggles between the sexes. Some types of liberalism are remarkably close-minded towards their conservative counterparts, with the unreasonable demonization of the Jewish State standing as a major black mark against many

liberal circles. The communitarian critique of contemporary liberalism should also hit home. For thinkers such as John Rawls, the only pertinent categories seem to be individuals and nations. This ignores the great worth of more localized attachments such as the family, the community, houses of worship, and various other groups. No doubt with regard to these examples some Western thinkers make the same points. I am merely noting how a clash in sensibilities can also be an argument for our tradition and not just a critique of it.

One final example of this last idea helps bring the point home. An American today studying the Jewish criminal justice system will likely be struck by the absence of prison as a punishment. In consequence, he or she may think of halakha as impractical at protecting society or see lashes as a barbaric form of jurisprudence. However, an alternative reaction relies on the contrast to critique the massive incarceration in the United States; no society in history has placed so many of its citizens behind bars. Life in jail often entails constant fear of rape or other forms of assault. Little protection exists against potential sadistic impulses of wardens and guards. For the most part, prison fails at rehabilitation and actually creates more hardened criminals. Placing low-level drug dealers behind bars does nothing to make society safer. Many innocent people accept plea bargain deals involving smaller amounts of jail time to avoid potentially longer sentences. Finally, jail costs society incredible sums of money, funds that could be used to benefit communities in far more productive ways. To be sure, I am content with the jailing of murderers and rapists but the institution as a whole requires massive overhaul. Taking our tradition seriously aids us in realizing the potentially barbaric nature of mass incarceration.

Some communal trends indicate positive movement in the direction of more Jewish thought. Many Israeli *yeshivot* and *mekhinot* have much more varied curricula than Volozhin or Slobodka did. Due to the Jewish Studies requirements (something unfortunately reduced in recent years), Yeshiva University students also encounter *Tanakh* and other rooms in the mansion of Torah. Women's learning institutions, free from the historical assumptions of European *yeshivot*, never felt the need to study Gemara all day. The growing popularity of neo-*hasidut* also indicates a search for wisdom that inspires and animates the heart. We are closer to R. Kook's vision than we were a century ago. Without minimizing the crucial importance of the sage and his attention to detail, we encourage the return of the vision and beauty of the prophet.

TRADITION

¹ Shalom Carmy, “A Room with a View, but a Room of Our Own,” *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah* (Jason Aronson, 1987), 8, 26.

² See my “*Emunot VeDeot*: The Contemporary Relevance of Rav Saadia Gaon’s Thought,” *Books of the People*, ed. Stuart W. Halpern (Maggid Books, 2017), 1–18.

³ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (Maggid Books & OU Press, 2011), 37, fn. 1.