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BETWEEN MEANING AND RIGOR: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

To begin on a personal note, my formal credentials and professional trajectory do not align. While my formal educational training has primarily been in the books of the Talmud—both traditional *Beit Midrash* learning and academic talmudic studies—for the past seven years I have been blessed to teach Jewish philosophy at Yeshiva University and several other post-high school institutions. I would like to trace the origins of the gap between my formal education and the subjects that I teach, and to then use my story as a portal through which to discuss one possible motivation for and method of studying Jewish philosophy.

My story begins in a fashion familiar to a segment of the male members of the American Modern Orthodox community. Due to the combination of an obedient nature, and the nurture of growing up in a rabbinic home, I was a studious and earnest Torah learner from a young age. In my educational settings—Yeshiva University High School for Boys, Morasha Kollel, and a year at Yeshiva College—the Torah that I learned was mainly Gemara. I was privileged to study under great Torah scholars whose mastery of and passion for Gemara became my standard and my aspiration.

At age eighteen, when I left Yeshiva University to study in Israel, my plan was to immerse myself in Gemara study indefinitely and master the talmudic corpus. I distinctly remember one occasion when I and several other first-year students at Yeshivat Har Etzion were invited to the apartment of a Kollel member. To start a conversation, the host asked us what we were looking to get out of our year in yeshiva. My mental reaction was that the answer was obvious: the point of being in yeshiva was to learn and master Shas.

In yeshiva, however, my trajectory began to shift slightly. While the yeshiva's schedule prioritized Gemara, other genres of Torah study such as *Tanakh* and Jewish philosophy were very much in the atmosphere.

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Once again, I was privileged to be introduced to these topics by passionate, world-class experts. As I dabbled in these areas, I slowly found myself being drawn to the figure and writings of Rav Kook.

Looking back, I cannot say that I had particular, burning questions that Rav Kook's philosophy answered. Nor was I a spiritual seeker who sought to quench my thirst with Rav Kook's fiery poetic writing. Yet Rav Kook's teachings fascinated me. I was mesmerized by his intellectual sophistication, his usage (or non-usage) of sources, the scope of his vision, and the world of Jewish mysticism that was entirely new to me.

But, most of all, I was taken by how Rav Kook's holistic worldview created a meaningful framework for my life and my *avodat Hashem*. As a kabbalist, Rav Kook spilled much ink on abstruse issues such as cosmology, theosophy, and epistemology. But he made these issues deeply personal. In his writings, Rav Kook often drew direct lines between his complex conceptualizations of Kabbala and the mundane aspects of reality, using the former to contextualize and imbue meaning into the latter. When reading Rav Kook's personal notebooks, it is clear that he actively looked for ways to use his understanding of the spiritual realm to make sense of his personal life and of the historical moment in which he lived.

When reconstructing my nineteen-year-old self, I think it was this aspect of Rav Kook's teachings that most profoundly impacted my life. Before encountering Rav Kook, I do not think I would have had an articulate answer for why I was learning Gemara or even why I was committed to *mitzvot*. While I had a sense that these were important activities to which I wanted to be committed, if asked to justify my beliefs (which I do not think I ever was), my explanations would have been general and hazy. Similarly, while I loved reading novels, I never really thought more deeply about what attracted me to a good story.

Rav Kook changed my perspective on these daily activities by providing me with a new frame of reference through which to understand them. Slowly, my learning of Gemara changed from just something that good Jewish boys did, to an individualized devotional activity that spiritually connected me to God.¹ My reading of novels was not just pleasurable escapism, but an encounter with a unique manifestation of divinity that the author's soul brought into the world.² Similarly, the *mitzvot* I performed, my encounters with my roommates, the plants and trees I saw on the way to the Beit Midrash, the technology I used, and my physical presence in the Land of Israel took on new dimensions. I had a religious-spiritual language to articulate why each of these activities was important,

and how they all coalesced together to create a meaningful life of connection to God and to others.

During these yeshiva years, my engagement in Jewish philosophy was an important supplement to the main regimen of Talmud study. A few years down the line, however, Jewish philosophy became an absolutely essential lifeline. Beginning in college and continuing into graduate studies, I was exposed to ideologies, behaviors, and value systems that seemed to be viable alternatives to my own. Concurrently, after years of spending the majority of my day learning Gemara, its magic began to wane. For the first time, I found myself seriously questioning if spending my time studying about oxen and cows was the optimal use of a life. I noticed that parallel processes seemed to be occurring with several fellow members of the Gemara “team” in the Beit Midrash, who slowly grew disenchanted and then increasingly apathetic to Torah learning, and, in some cases, non-observant.

I firmly believe that what kept me personally strong and passionate about Torah study and religious life was the meaning that I gained from the world of Jewish philosophy. Instead of finding the Orthodox environment stifling and choking, the meaning imbued into this lifestyle by having an overarching worldview gave me moments where I truly felt that this lifestyle connected me to God. I felt “redeemed” in a Soloveitchikian sense of the term: “anchored in something stable and unchangeable.”³

Reflecting back on fifteen years of engagement with Jewish philosophy, I find that people are drawn to these studies for one of two broad reasons, both of which can be traced back to one foundational source. The Midrash states: “One who wants ‘*le-hakir*’ the One who spoke and created the world should study *aggada*.” What is the meaning of the verb – *le-hakir*? For some, the word can best be translated as “to know” or “to gain objective knowledge” about God and Jewish dogma.⁴ This group of people is on a quest for Truth. They want to understand God and His workings as much as is possible, and in order to answer the great perplexing questions of theology they turn to philosophical texts.

This mindset often leads to interest in the classic issues of Jewish philosophy, such as the contradiction between God’s foreknowledge and free will, how providence works, the nature of divine attributes, the role of angels, the nature of prophecy, or how the messianic world will look. These questions and many others are important to developing a truthful theology of Judaism, and are crucial areas of study if that is one’s goal.

For me, however, the search for Truth was less of a motivating factor. Rather, *le-hakir* can also be taken in the sense of recognition of,

familiarity with, or connection to God.⁵ For better or for worse, my engagement with Jewish philosophy was motivated by a desire to make sense of my own life and commitments, and to find meaning and connection to God within them.⁶ Therefore, I focused less on gaining an objective understanding of God and the cosmos, and more on issues that related to aspects of life in the current moment: what does a relationship with God look like in the modern world, how should one experience prayer, what is the role of a husband and father, what is the value of working for a living, of reading the news, of playing sports, and so on....

For this reason, my studies have remained largely focused on thinkers of the past century. The great medieval philosophers—Rambam, R. Yehuda Halevi, Ramban—are pillars of the Torah’s canon and one must have a working familiarity with them to understand subsequent writers. But due to the immense degree of change over the past 800 years, their issues, agendas, and interpretations often do not feel directly relevant for my life. In contrast, for me personally, I find that thinkers such as R. Kook, R. Soloveitchik, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, R. Sacks, and R. Shagar speak more directly to the role of Judaism in the life of a person in the modern world. It is these texts that have provided me with the meaningful framework discussed above.

When I began teaching Jewish philosophy in Yeshiva University’s IBC program, and later at Stern College for Women, I tried to channel this motivation of “meaning” into my courses. My classes largely focused on modern and contemporary figures, and, depending on the setting, foregrounded issues that I thought might be meaningful to my students.

But having “meaning” as a primary motivation does not entail a lack of rigor. One important methodological tool that was always present in my talmudic studies (both traditional and academic) was the attempt to identify a system underlying the chaotic jungle of texts and laws. My primary teachers, R. Michael Rosensweig and Prof. Yaakov Elman ז”ל, were masters at taking huge swaths of raw “data” and picking out the key themes that created the substructure of the topic at hand. In their lectures, numerous opinions and details were presented as derivatives of these key principles, creating a coherent system out of the tumultuous and disorderly texts.

I have tried to approach studying and teaching Jewish philosophy similarly. When I teach a course or present a series of lectures on a particular thinker, I emphasize that their corpus is not merely a series of brilliant but disconnected interpretations and thoughts, despite the fact that

this is the way their ideas are often presented. Rather, the truly great figures in Jewish philosophy create systems of thought, complete with governing principles and derivative applications of those key concepts. One can only understand the manner in which a thinker interprets a specific text or the way that he relates to a specific modern phenomenon if one is attuned to the broader principles of their thought system.

The result is that I spend the beginning of a semester or a series developing the major governing principles of the figure's thought. For example, I do not begin teaching Rav Kook with the topics of Zionism and secular Jews, or the Lubavitcher Rebbe with the institution of *shelihut*, despite the fact that these are the ideas with which they are most associated. Instead, using the writings of their students, academic literature, and my own understanding of their corpus, I begin teaching each figure by trying to identify the underlying principles that motivate their philosophy. For Rav Kook and the Lubavitcher Rebbe, for example, these include abstract, kabbalistic conceptions of God, His relationship to the world, and how this relates to the unfolding of history. Students have only rarely previously encountered these ideas and often initially find them to sound foreign or even irrelevant.

These thinkers, though, were not ivory tower philosophers, but communal leaders who brought their ideas down to a practical level. As the semester continues, we begin to develop how each thinker applied these abstract conceptualizations to the great and small issues of Judaism and of the Jewish people in the modern world. Slowly, abstruse interpretations of kabbalistic passages can be seen to directly impact how a Jew should spend his time, self-define, experience marriage, *mitzvot*, think about the Land of Israel and the Diaspora, and other relevant questions about life today.

In these classes, I do not try to convince students that the philosophical system under discussion is necessarily the ideal frame of reference for living their lives. Instead, at the beginning of the semester I present three different reasons for studying the thought system of a specific thinker. First, it is a fulfillment of Torah study. These texts are integral parts of the canon through which we engage that mitzvah—"It is Torah, and we need study it." Second, it helps us understand the perspectives of other Jews. If perhaps in the past we were mystified by the Religious Zionist community's connection to the Land, or Chabad's emphasis on outreach, then studying these sources will help us understand the basis of these communities' organizing principles. Finally, I tell the students that some of these

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ideas might resonate with them, and that they will be able to enrich their lives by integrating these perspectives into their own worldview.

If these are the course goals, then my job as a teacher is to accurately and objectively present holistic, sophisticated, and potentially meaningful systems of thought to my students (in the sense that they provide possible answers to many of key questions asked by modern Jews about their lives and the service of God). I emphasize *potentially*, as I cannot determine for them if the system of thought under discussion will actually be meaningful to them. I do not know if, for example, they will connect to God better through the joy and confidence of the Rebbe, the anxiety and inner torment of R. Soloveitchik, or an entirely different third approach. In addition, I feel that people as great as the Rebbe and R. Soloveitchik speak for themselves. It is not my role to determine which philosophy is most accurate or optimal.

Therefore, I see my role as presenting the information in a compelling and accurate fashion. At that point, it is the student's prerogative to accept or reject, to integrate or not, as she sees fit. Perhaps the best feedback I ever received was that a student at Stern College wrote to me at the end of a course on the philosophy of the Lubavitcher Rebbe that she was not sure if I completely believed everything I was teaching or if I thought that parts of it were absurd. I am more than willing to discuss my personal perspective on the ideas I am teaching, but only if asked by students and only after class.

In recent years, I have experimented with teaching texts comparatively. Instead of spending an entire semester developing the thought system of a single figure, I will choose a specific set of topics that I feel are objectively important and potentially meaningful to my students, and compare and contrast the approaches of two or three Torah authorities. For example, in a recent class called "HaRav, the Rav and the Rebbe" I explored how Rav Kook, Rav Soloveitchik and the Lubavitcher Rebbe relate to Zionism, secular culture, non-observant Jews, working for a living, and the ideal default emotional state. Similarly, in a class on modern topics in Jewish philosophy, we explored the issue of Jewish people's responsibility to the world at large from the perspectives of R. Matisyahu Salomon of Lakewood and R. Jonathan Sacks, among others. In a third class dedicated to the philosophy of halakha, I let R. Lichtenstein and R. Shagar debate if the primary metaphor for our relationship with God is that of a slave to his master or that of a spouse.

While organizing classes in this manner sacrifices a deeper understanding of a specific system, the comparative approach allows my

students to see how recent or current Jewish leaders of great stature use classical sources to provide a religious lens on the issues of their day. In some instances, there is much overlap between the various approaches, and the debates are more about source material, methodology, and application. However, in many cases, the approaches are incompatible and represent radically different worldviews.

It seems to me that there are two advantages of organizing classes in this manner. First, the comparative approach helps the students gain an appreciation of the breadth and diversity of Jewish philosophy. While anyone graduating an Orthodox day school is familiar with the phenomenon of debate in the world of halakha, many of my students seem less familiar or more uneasy with the parallel phenomenon in the world of Jewish philosophy. The fact that different Torah authorities can all begin with the same basic texts, all adhere to certain key tenets, and yet veer off in radically different directions philosophically is often a surprise for my students.

Studying comparatively sends the message that just as halakhic debate, within limits, is legitimate and celebrated, it is similarly legitimate for different authorities and communities to develop different lifestyles and value systems. My hope is that this engenders a sense of humility and openness to issues of ideology.

A second advantage of the comparative approach brings us back to “meaning” as an organizing principle for my own engagement and teaching of these subjects. In my personal experience, I am not drawn to every facet of each system of thought that I have studied. Despite my appreciation and even awe of my heroes of modern Jewish philosophy, there are parts of each one’s worldview that remain foreign to me. I doubt any one person (even perhaps the thinker himself) can feel totally comfortable in one single philosophical system.

Based on the above, I tell my students that perhaps the ideal way for the meaning-seeker to approach Jewish philosophy is to encounter multiple overlapping but distinct worldviews. This way, the student will be able to see different perspectives on the same topic and amalgamate an approach that she finds most resonate. As opposed to seeing Rav Kook or the Lubavitcher Rebbe as offering “The Truth,” these classes present them as part of a continuum of legitimate ideas that can be embraced based on individual predilection.

In addition to comparative classes affirming the individuality of each student, I also emphasize that at different points in one’s own life the gravitational pull of a certain idea may wax or wane. In my young

twenties, when I first encountered Rav Soloveitchik's conception of *tefilla* as a response to the anxiety inherent to the human condition, it did not speak to me. More recently, though, laden with the responsibilities of an adult and having experienced something of the vicissitudes of life, I have returned to the same essays and gained tremendously from them. Similarly, at the end of a successful day, I might be drawn to the lofty and optimistic language of Rav Kook. When facing struggle and failure, I might find solace in the Torah of Breslov. Being familiar with multiple religious languages can help enrich one's connection to God in all of the varied stages and moods of life.

I do not see the methodology and curriculum outlined above as sufficient for a full understanding of the corpus of Jewish thought. As noted, any serious student of Jewish philosophy must study the primary *Rishonim* and survey a wider breadth of recent thinkers than the ones mentioned above. However, for myself, and for at least many of my students, who might be representative of the broad Modern Orthodox community, focusing on key issues from recent or contemporary figures can be a portal towards a deeper connection to God and His Torah.

¹ *Orot ha-Torah* 2:1.

² *Pinkasei ha-Ra'aya* I, 110.

³ R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," *Tradition* 7:2 (1965), 24.

⁴ See, for example, R. Tzvi Hirsch Chajes, *Mavo ha-Talmud*, chapter 17.

⁵ See, for example, R. Tzadok HaKohen, *Peri Tzaddik, Vayikra-Rosh Hodesh Adar*, 1.

⁶ It is important to note, though, that the two senses of *le-hakir* can be intertwined in the sense that it is through objective knowledge of God that one can develop an emotional connection with Him. See, for example, Rambam, *Hilkhhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 2:2.