

Dr. Julie Yanofsky Goldstein is the founder and Rosh HaMidrasha of Amudim, an advanced Torah studies program for women in Israel.

## *TRANSFORMING FOXES INTO HEDGEHOGS*

In his famous 1953 essay, Isaiah Berlin invokes the statement of the Greek poet, Archilochus, that “a fox knows many things, but a hedgehog knows one big thing.” Interpreting this distinction as a metaphor for different intellectual types, Berlin compares the fox to people who “entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal, their thought is scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects.”<sup>1</sup> In doing so, Berlin could have been referring to 21<sup>st</sup> century culture, in which people, presented with a surfeit of information, multiple truths, and endless paths to fulfillment, are inclined to dance across many models rather than commit to a single framework. Coming on the heels of postmodernism’s destabilization of the notion of a unitary truth or doctrine, the current age of social media and globalization has allowed for unprecedented encounters and exchange, offering sources of inspiration, creativity and shared experiences from and between all corners of the earth. One need not accept the ideological tenets of postmodern philosophy to recognize that there currently exists a postmodern condition that pervades the consciousness and has precipitated a new way of looking at and experiencing the world. The result has been the undermining or transformation of the ideas of “community,” “truth,” and “authority,” leaving many young people sensing disconnect from institutions that have long been the mainstay of traditional society, skeptical of “systems” and grand narratives, and experiencing a lack of role models fully in touch with their realities.<sup>2</sup> In short, there has been an erosion of a central locus from which to derive meaning.

Products of this centrifugal society, many young Modern Orthodox Jews enter a year of study in Israel with the mentality of the fox. Their thoughts are “scattered” in the sense that they value multiple systems of thought, view themselves as members of many communities and bearers of diverse identities, and obtain knowledge from an array of sources. They inhabit the postmodern condition. Because Torah is often taught in high schools as one subject among many and frequently aligned with the humanities as a more subjective, values-oriented field, they approach

it differently than they do mathematics and the sciences, which they view as impervious to the manipulations of social engineers and those in power. Torah is treated, at best, as their preferred system of values (for any number of reasons)—at mid-tier, with the same level of respect and openness as applied to other humanities disciplines. At worst, they view it with intense skepticism or contemptuousness, as the value-system prioritized by their families, teachers, and religious leaders in an effort to impose, shape, or control them. With the secular postmodern perspective of the fox as their point of departure, many Orthodox youth choose to devote a year or more to studying in yeshiva, a world that in many instances operates with the mode of thinking of the hedgehog in Berlin’s metaphor, focused on one overarching system of thought and belief. It is no surprise, then, that incoming students are sometimes described by administrators of gap-year *yeshivot* and *midrashot* as “having no idea what they are getting themselves into,” a description often confirmed in retrospect by students themselves.

The philosophy curriculum is a crucial component in supporting these Modern Orthodox teenagers as they attempt to reconcile their pluralistic inclinations and expectations with the ethos of the *beit midrash*, where they encounter a culture entirely geared toward an ultimate guiding principle and agenda—*Avodat Hashem*. Philosophy and philosophically inclined courses provide opportunity for students to seriously consider their Jewish identity and the role that Judaism will play in their lives. How that curriculum is shaped, whether or not it speaks to a generation seeking to answer the challenging questions of their time as they turn, for perhaps the first or the last time, with seriousness to Torah Judaism, may have serious ramifications for the level and sustainability of their commitment and the types of Jews they will become.

My approach to teaching philosophy during the year in Israel is rooted in an understanding and appreciation of the culture in which my students were raised, and aims to harness its strengths into a lifestyle that ultimately centers upon Torah. Acknowledging and overtly engaging with that culture, my approach is in line with the tradition of Jewish philosophy that utilizes contemporary language and tools of the day, as opposed to forms of *Mahshava* that appear not to take existing trends into account or only subtly incorporate them. My curriculum and method meet students where they are, taking a broad-reaching, fox-like approach in an attempt to uplift and eventually transform them into hedgehogs, that is, into people who ultimately alight upon Torah as their guiding principle.

This approach towards teaching Jewish thought may be characterized as academic. In contrast to many conventional “*Mahashevet Yisrael*”

classes, which may be inclined to accept philosophical speculation or values-driven narratives at face value, my philosophy classes utilize methods of analysis typical of the university setting, in which students are tasked to select, interpret, question, distill, and apply information—a critical sensibility which is also useful for the intelligent person conducting internet research. No content is off-limits; for example, a large portion of texts in my “Theories of God” class is drawn from the western philosophical corpora, primarily modern rationalism and empiricism and phenomenology and existentialism. Students are prompted, often through a dialectical style of pedagogy, to interpret and critique texts based not on their own socio-cultural assumptions and emotion-based sensibilities, but through various methods of reasoning. In an approach that students have come to identify as “meta,” we often move beyond the actual content of texts, reading them both within historical context and also with an eye on methodology. Motivated by a profound skepticism, we do not accept ideas or messages uncritically but are always assessing their epistemic verifiability and viability. These classes brim with analysis and debate in a way that mimics the contemporary world at large, swirling with content and “moving on many levels.”

Learning in this way moves students toward religion as an axis around which other ideas they encounter may revolve. The academic approach demonstrates to students that religious ideas may be subjected to the same rigorous scrutiny applied to other fields. From the historical perspective, students see that the conceptualization of religious ideas in any text from the Bible to Derrida is assessable in a clinical, non-subjective way. They may compare and contrast texts, ascertain how the ideas in them unfolded over time, examine authorial decisions and, starting from a point of objectivity and remove, ultimately engage with them. This step eventually invites them into a relationship with the text, be it Jewish or secular, that may be experienced and designated as “spiritual,” a detail discussed later in this essay. From a methodological perspective, students see that beliefs can be quantifiably scaled, and logical deduction can mitigate subjectivity. Keeping their pulse on the use of specific modes of reasoning, students may ascertain the “tightness” of each argument encountered and ultimately determine which arguments they value, and the justification and ramifications for placing value upon them. While one student may be drawn to the use of deductive reasoning in Descartes’ “levels of reality” principle to deduce the existence of God, another might find compelling the *Kuzari*’s prioritization of experience as the only source of true knowledge. In this instance, both Descartes and *Kuzari* serve religious ends, inasmuch as they both convince students of the scalability and thus

veracity of religious concepts. Ultimately, the students' overarching question changes from "how does one know X exists?" (fill in the blank with anything, including God, angels, alternate universes, aliens, the afterlife, trees, the Civil War, oneself) to "how epistemologically justified is one's belief in the existence of X?" This demonstrates to the students themselves and to others with whom they engage in conversations about religious beliefs, that a careful diagnostic weighing of premises and evidence has taken place. Engaging with religious texts and ideas in this manner leads students to take religion seriously, see it as sophisticated, complex, and rigorous, and helps place it in their minds as a major contender in the quest for a guiding system of thought.

The academic approach also orients their focus toward Judaism specifically, as it posits that everything within the infinite sea of information regularly encountered has validity and utility in the quest to understand Torah. As mentioned before, my presumption as an educator is that Jewish and secular texts, while not equally qualifying as Torah, maintain a level of utilitarian equivalence, as they are similarly harnessed to provide tools and conceptual frameworks with which to seriously consider religious ideas. As opposed to a standard *Mahashevet Yisrael* class that focuses on the classical Jewish canon, my classes use both in the service of Torah. When the availing of diverse sources and critical analysis occurs within the context of the year in Israel and the broader culture of the *beit midrash*, students are automatically presented with the opportunity to apply the conceptual frameworks derived from philosophy to classical Jewish texts. The result is that students become accustomed to the process of putting secular ideas in dialogue with Jewish ones, in an effort that leads to deepened *Avodat Hashem*. Their pursuit of an understanding of God's existence, for example, is in the same vein as R. Saadia Gaon, Maimonides, and Jewish philosophers throughout the ages, as opposed to the more clinical intellectualization that takes place within an epistemology of religion course at university.

Demonstrating the possibility of interface is a goal of several of my courses. A course on problems and methods in Torah study, as it introduces students to the use of literary analysis, psychology, philology, history, logic, critical theory, legal theory, political philosophy, and even personal experience, in service to the interpretation of biblical, talmudic, and halakhic texts, demonstrates that any idea or discipline can functionally lead to an enhanced understanding of Torah. Another course, entitled "Theories and Theorists," which examines the intersection between Judaism and the theories of major thinkers of the twentieth century who, by accident of nature, happen to be Jewish, reveals to students that

engagement with secular wisdom can result in the fulfillment of Torah study, if one makes a conscious and constant effort to distill and utilize it toward that goal. While not every great idea qualifies as Torah, all have the capacity to intersect with Torah ideas, and potential to explain, illuminate, and add dimension. That moment of intersection constitutes a moment of *Talmud Torah*. Simply because Jewish philosophers, such as Walter Benjamin and Emmanuel Levinas, seem predisposed and are wont to intersect secular and Jewish thought, we turn to them as readily available models of the endeavor, and study of their work has aroused and trained students to do the same. In fact, alumni have told me that they find themselves sitting in college classes making notes in the margins of primary sources or textbooks as they draw associations to Torah concepts. One student said she gained clarity on the concept of Redemption/Tikkun through the study of surrealism, which defines “liberation” as the release and expression of repressed collective material. Another student compared the notion of God’s perfection in Cartesian thought and the ontological argument of Alvin Plantinga to the representation of God in the Torah and rabbinic thought intermittently as king, lover, father, mother, judge and so on, to conclude that the Jewish God’s ontological being is not to be understood through a discussion of perfection (which could itself be seen as a human construct), but through the lenses of human experience.<sup>3</sup> What results is a two-way street. Trained to utilize secular concepts and categories to interpret Torah, students develop a mindset that prompts the inverse: when studying secular concepts, whether art, literature, or physics, if we have been successful in our work, students will find Torah everywhere. Compelled to make constant associations with Torah, students, wherever they are physically in the world, find themselves perpetually in the mindset of the *beit midrash*.

As the plethora of theories and ideas in the world writ large are made to attend to Torah purposes, the spiritual effects on the student are significant and, together these are what ultimately render the academic approach “*Mahashevet Yisrael*.” One major result of this type of learning is the development of a religious or pious personality, albeit an idiosyncratic one, distinctly related to the rationalistic aspect of the approach. While “rational” and “pious” seem to be clashing attributes—with the rational as a cold, formulaic effort toward an absolute, which can work against dogma to foment dissent, and the pious as personal, devout, dutiful, and submissive—it seems that the two come together in what may be designated “Rational Piety” in students who study Torah academically: “Rational” because it is based both in critical analysis and on the premise that the human mind, with hard work, is capable of accessing transcendental

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definitive truth, and “pious” because doing this work can bring about experiences of astonishing encounter with God, profound connection and affinity with God, humility in the face of the richness and enormity of the world of knowledge, and a constant existential awareness of Jewishness and of existence within a Jewish reality. While all educators know this will not occur automatically, it is our constant aspiration, and we must design effective pedagogies to serve this goal.

For some, discovering truths via this type of learning is a revelatory experience. Indeed, epiphany entails entry into a realm containing truth, be it the platonic “world of the forms” or the Maimonidean “palace of the king,” the latter being a divine domain. When students believe they have arrived at correct understanding, they sense that they have entered a transcendent place or state and achieved a degree of enlightenment, and are simultaneously awestruck and ennobled by the possibility that they have established a cognitive connection with the sublime, a feat that is necessarily not only informational but also transformational. Students are simply not the same people they were before the discovery. They are moved to God-consciousness, as Maimonides states:

The true worship of God is only possible when correct notions of Him have previously been conceived. When you have arrived by way of intellectual research at a knowledge of God and His works, then commence to devote yourselves to Him, try to approach Him and strengthen the intellect, which is the link that joins you to Him.<sup>4</sup>

Possibly more intimate, though, is the existential experience of relationship or attachment, as well as reciprocity, brought about by the academic-rational approach to learning. Ironically, the initial detachedness of rational analyses leads to a deep relationship with the Torah concept that analyses help to elucidate. Once students dealing with ideas outside of themselves know, through analysis, *what* they are dealing with, they can place themselves relationally vis-à-vis those texts and ideas, evaluating relevance, resonance, import, and meaning, all of which attaches them to the texts. This attachment may manifest in any number of ways, including desire to revisit or share the text, investigate related material, internalize the text, or apply it to behavior.<sup>5</sup> As Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik and others have explained in their “philosophies of dialogue,” relationship engenders immediate and dynamic reciprocity, so that attachment to text may be expressed through conversation with it, engaging with it as a Someone rather than a Something, so that the text is no longer objectified by the student but incorporated into her life.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly for some students, the sense of attachment is, as Maimonides describes it, accompanied by love, as “man’s love of God is identical with His knowledge of Him.”<sup>7</sup> What began as an engagement of the intellect leads to engagement of the heart.

*Mahashevet Yisrael*, as an analytical process open to all texts in service to the guiding principle that is Torah and aimed toward a close affinity to and relationship with God, is a humbling enterprise. As assumptions are questioned, convictions subjected to doubt, and scholars who have toiled for decades with texts both time-honored and obscure present their critical analyses and thought-out conclusions, students move from confident skepticism to deep appreciation. They come to see Torah as more beautifully complex than they previously thought, in a state of humility identified as “neediness” by Martha Nussbaum and anticipated centuries earlier by Maimonides when he explains that the person who comes to love God via contemplation will “immediately recoil in awe and fear, appreciating how he is a tiny, lowly, and dark creature, standing with his flimsy, limited, wisdom before He who is of perfect knowledge.”<sup>8</sup> Academic *Mahashevet Yisrael* takes a generation saturated with information and shows them what they do *not* know, which prompts them to investigate further. As one of my students put it, “The more I learn in this way, the more I realize how much more there is to know.”

The academic approach narrows the “great chasm” that, according to Isaiah Berlin, exists between “those, on one side, who relate everything to a single central vision, one system, less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel—a single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance—and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related to no moral or aesthetic principle.”<sup>9</sup> With the tools provided by the academic approach, students no longer compartmentalize by placing mathematics and science, humanities, and Torah in different categories, but interact and “become one” with a vast world of texts and ideas, a synthesis that not only makes the textual world dynamic and exciting but brings Torah concepts to the fore. Whereas before these concepts might have seemed too elusive to grasp and automatically dismissed as feel-good figments of the religious imagination, they are now assessable and therefore accessible. Students see Torah everywhere. It overtakes their consciousness. In what is perhaps a new definition of *Mahashevet Yisrael*, Jewish students use any text at their disposal to forge a uniquely Jewish perspective, to think about Jewish ideas, and see the world through them.

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 1, 2.

<sup>2</sup> "Millennials in Adulthood: Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends," Pew Research Center (Washington, D.C., March 2014); available at [www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood](http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood).

<sup>3</sup> See this argument in Yoram Hazony and Dru Johnson, eds., *The Question of God's Perfection* (Brill, 2019), 9–26.

<sup>4</sup> Maimonides, "The Parable of the Palace" in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, 3:51.

<sup>5</sup> On the responsibility to fulfill Torah commandments incurred by an encounter with that which is outside oneself (designated as "Otherwise than Being" or "God"), see for example Immanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 16–21.

<sup>6</sup> As depicted in Buber's *I and Thou*, esp. chap. 3, Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption*, and R. Soloveitchik's *Worship of the Heart*.

<sup>7</sup> *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:51.

<sup>8</sup> Martha Nussbaum, "Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance" in R. C. Solomon, ed., *Thinking About Feeling: Contemporary Philosophers on Emotions* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 183–199; *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah*, 2:2.

<sup>9</sup> Berlin, 2.