

TRADITION

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SYMPOSIUM

JEWISH THOUGHT IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD: EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES AND GOALS

Introduction

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Symposium
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JEWISH THOUGHT IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD: EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES AND GOALS

GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Why study Jewish thought? Among the questions posed to the contributors to this symposium, this was the central question. What is the value of this entire enterprise?

My personal perspective is that the answer to this question revolves around two fundamental axes—meaning and complexity. These are the two essential values that lie at the heart of this discipline. These two concepts are central to an individual's living a purposeful life, as well as to our creating a thriving culture and society.

The pursuit of meaning is central to the discipline of Jewish thought. I chose to major in philosophy in college, instead of literature, because of the following realization. While literature dealt with big ideas, it also dealt with form as well as content, and therefore its study involved not only the pursuit of truths but also analysis of style and structure; in addition, with the concept of “art for art's sake,” and with the increasing popularity of deconstructionism, pursuit of objective meaning receded farther into the background. Philosophy, on the other hand (at least in the curriculum of the time), dedicated itself purely to the pursuit of the ideas themselves. In my philosophy classes, we were involved in the search for truth and meaning, as well as the attempt to cut to the core ideas upon which we build our values, our interpersonal interactions, our communities, and our culture.

This endeavor cannot be achieved without the second principle I mentioned, which serves as the tool enabling this discovery of truth and meaning through intellectual excavation and thoughtful sharpening of ideas, which is the ability to think complexly. Studying philosophy entails learning how to evaluate ideas, see nuance, and understand the interplay between opposing or dialectical truths. In addition, one learns either to hone the arguments and ideas on each side until the dialectical concepts can coexist without contradiction, or to hold seemingly contradictory values at the same time, recognizing the contribution of each, and maintaining the tension between them. These tools, the thinking skills that are

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developed through the study of Jewish thought, ultimately become a life-long gift.

These two values are foundational and necessary, now more than ever. We are living in a time when, it seems, the world is suffering from two major difficulties—lack of meaning and lack of awareness of complexity and of critical thinking. The world is drowning in the twin challenges of ever-increasing relativistic perspectives and of shallow and facile thinking. This has, among other things, contributed to a precipitous decline in the type of civil discourse that generates greater insight and understanding. Emphasizing both the profound significance of the pursuit of meaning, as well as the importance of the skill set of complex and nuanced thinking, would be a healthy step forward.

When discussing these issues with a good friend, she argued that the *shakla ve-tarya*, the give and take of traditional talmudic discourse, could hold the key to what is sorely lacking in the public arena in our time. The ability to apply a critical eye to each issue, question everything, and subsequently have the inner fortitude to come to a firmly held conclusion that is richer, more nuanced, and more accurate because it had been challenged by another perspective is what the talmudic tradition offers the world today. Through it a person is enabled to plant his or her flag firmly in a specific camp and yet at the same time to see validity in many perspectives.

Editing this symposium and thinking about the issues raised by the contributors has convinced me that this is perhaps even more true in the realm of Jewish thought. Study of Jewish thought provides us with these crucial cognitive skills and perspectives. In addition, its subject matter and the myriad and diverse questions it raises and seeks to answer engage us in the pursuit of truth and meaning. Ultimately, the field of Jewish thought is grounded in the most meaningful and important issue of all—what it means to be an *oved* or *ovedet Hashem*.

In order to gain a richer understanding of this discipline, symposium authors were asked the following questions:

1. Jewish thought is a term that is often used to encompass many inter-related, yet distinct, disciplines. These include academic Jewish philosophy and *Mahashevet Yisrael*, and, in addition, disciplines such as *musar*, *aggada*, mysticism, *hasidut*, and others. When teaching Jewish thought, what texts do you utilize, what areas of Jewish tradition do you draw from, and why? What role do sources from *Hazal*, medieval, or modern Jewish philosophy, or other religious or traditional sources play in your teaching?

2. In terms of your personal experience, why do you choose to be involved in this field? How does it speak to you personally, philosophically, religiously, and spiritually? What about your students? What are your educational goals when teaching this material? On what level do you attempt to engage your students—intellectual, personal, philosophical, spiritual? What have you found to be the most challenging aspect of this work? How and why have those challenges changed or evolved over your career as an educator?
3. In the field of Jewish thought, what do you see as the needs and challenges of the moment? Are there contemporary movements that you believe should affect the content or the approach to teaching Jewish thought today? What is the interplay between current trends, such as neo-*hasidut*, postmodern thought, or others, and Jewish thought? How have these movements affected the field? What should be the appropriate response to these emerging trends?

Some contributors addressed all the questions, while others related to only one or two points of interest. David Shatz provides thoughtful and valuable answers to the above questions, based on years of expert experience in the university classroom. Yitzchak Blau similarly provides a cogent perspective on the overall value of engaging in the study of this discipline.

Some contributions are deeply autobiographical, others more didactic. I found it striking, however, that all of the responses revolved in some way, around the two axes I identified above, meaning and complexity. The interplay between the various ideas developed in the essays is fascinating to observe.

For example, David Bashevkin presents an impassioned plea to view Jewish thought as a tool to find and create personal meaning in one's life and service of God, and to expand our perspective so that as much as possible of what we encounter in our religious study and our experience falls under that rubric. In contrast, Yoel Finkelman extols the value of developing the capacity to think critically and embrace complexity as the most important element in his experience of teaching Jewish thought. Yosef Bronstein's autobiographical description of how exposure to Jewish thought provided a gateway to meaning in his own life and how this has informed his teaching, combined with an allegiance to methodological complexity and rigor, provides a window into how the two axes interact in his teaching. Daniel Rynhold similarly provides an autobiographical perspective into how both meaning and complexity drew him to this field and to the values that he identifies and strives to uphold in his teaching. Another

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window is provided by Netanel Weiderblank's explication of how, what, and why he chooses to teach Jewish thought, with an emphasis on how the study of this discipline affects the spiritual and religious experience of his students.

Other contributors focused strongly on contemporary issues. Julie Goldstein explains how her teaching takes into account the worldview that today's students bring with them into the classroom, and how her approach is tailored to enabling her students to find meaning and connection within the current intellectual climate. Miriam Feldmann Kaye describes how a postmodern perspective can be incorporated into the classic discipline of Jewish thought.

With an eye on the Israeli educational scene, Cheryl Berman calls upon educators to do a better job, providing models of past thinkers who have used Jewish thought to meet the challenges of their time, and urging us to learn from them by meeting the unique needs of the present day. Dov Singer takes a completely different approach to the same issue, arguing for an overhaul of the whole enterprise of the study of Jewish thought, replacing it with an experiential approach which seems to be influenced by modern approaches such as neo-*hasidut*.

Now, more than ever, the serious study of Jewish thought, both for its content—the serious exploration of intellectual, ethical, religious, and spiritual values and ideas—and for the critical skills it engenders in us and our students, is invaluable. It is inspiring to see that so many contemporary teachers are considering these issues with thoughtfulness, dedication, and commitment.

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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, omnificance, 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 Zikbronot*, 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.

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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.

Omnisignificance & 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. Omnisignificance 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 omniscience 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 omniscience 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 Shmueli 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

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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 Omnisignificant 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.

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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.

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A CALL TO SCHOLARS, EDUCATORS, WRITERS, AND THINKERS

My son recently received a message from his yeshiva's alumni WhatsApp group calling for him to join a hotline for teens who have questions of faith that go unanswered by their Rabbis. The message explained that the Rabbis are providing cold technical answers to questions that demand depth and consideration. Clearly, as educators and parents, we are not doing our jobs.

I am a high school teacher in Israel, and I have encountered all kinds of students in various stages of faith and faith crisis. These faith crises among teens and young adults have become so widespread in Israeli society that new terminology has been coined in an attempt to capture various shades of doubt and the status of doubters within society. There is *dati-lite*, *dossi*, *mesorati-dati*, *mesorati lo dati*, and *hozzer be-she'ela*. As a teacher and a mother, it behooves me to consider the reasons behind this new reality.

It is an especially challenging time to be a teen. Multiple children in every classroom have learning disabilities, mental and neurological disorders are on the rise, and bullying has found a powerful ally in the internet. Divorce rates are up as are suicides in teens. The internet and social media have exposed our children to new realities and has left them asking questions about the relevance of Torah in their lives.

In addition, for many, religion has become superficial. By performing religious ceremonies without thought to their meaning or existential value we send our children messages about the triviality of Jewish law in our lives. The function of Jewish law is to help us translate the mundane aspects of our lives into holy transformative experiences. But instead of converting *hol* (mundane) into *kodesh* (holiness), we are turning *kodesh* into *hol*. Children are very sensitive to parental and societal attitudes, and their behavior has begun to reflect these messages.

In Israel, teens are beginning to challenge authority with diminished standards of Kashrut, *tzniut*, and Shabbat observance. It is common to

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either be a family or know a family, which has children who are no longer observant. A recent Israeli poll suggests that one out of seven children born to a religious Zionist family rejects religion.¹

I do not claim to have answers to the phenomena described above, but I would like to offer one possible source which can be mined for solutions: Jewish philosophy. Questions about God, our relationship with God, our roles in this world, science and Torah, and the value of Judaism in our lives have been discussed in depth by Jewish thinkers throughout the ages. Perhaps, as our children continue to reject the importance and applicability of Jewish law, Jewish philosophy can provide the depth and relevance they are seeking.

Historically, Jewish thinkers have responded to faith crises in their respective communities with philosophical treatises or books. Thinkers like Rambam and Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik significantly altered the spiritual milieu in which they lived through their philosophical writings. We can learn much from their efforts.

Rambam

Surprisingly, Rambam lived during times that are strikingly similar to our own in some ways. Science and philosophy were two of the greatest challenges to religion for Rambam's generation. Rambam describes the audience for whom he writes in his introduction to his philosophical magnum opus, *Moreh Nevukhim*. He describes a person for whom "the validity of our law has become established in his soul and has become actual in his belief." Such a man, while perfect in his practice of religion, once exposed to science and philosophy, may become confused by the apparent contradictions between science and Torah. Our own generation has been similarly challenged. The Big Bang, evolution, and determinism are some well-known examples of theories that seem to contradict Torah.

Rambam explains that a more profound explanation of Torah is required to resolve these contradictions. The Torah is written for the masses and, as such, contains metaphorical allusions to deeper truths. Once we understand those profound truths these contradictions will be resolved. The *Moreh Nevukhim* was written to provide this deeper understanding of the Torah for those who struggle.

The sufferers of crises of faith in Rambam's time asked the same questions we ask today. Can we prove that God exists? How can we explain the Torah's view of creation in light of science? Is there Divine Providence? And if so, how can we explain the evil and suffering that we have all

experienced? While many of Rambam's solutions were informed by his medieval background in science and philosophy, that does not mean we have nothing to learn from Rambam. One of the most important things we can learn from him is how to communicate.

Rambam was a brilliant communicator. At first glance, his works appear to be written by different authors. They are written in different languages, in different writing styles, and about different subject matters. The *Mishne Torah*, a halakhic work, was written in clear, accessible Hebrew. It is straightforward and easy to study. His letters are empathetic, eloquent, and sensitive. Rambam's Epistle to Yemen is credited with saving Yemenite Jewry, who faced the threat of conversion or death. (Rambam himself faced such a predicament.) His *Moreh Nevukhim*, a work of philosophy, is written in difficult, complicated Judeo-Arabic. It is a book laced with contradiction that was meant to confuse and frustrate readers whom Rambam considered unprepared for his work. Nobody knew how to manipulate language as well as Rambam. This is one key to great communication.

Rambam wrote his works with an important pedagogical principle in mind: *The audience determines the writing style*. When writing to a community in distress, he spoke with sympathy and assurance. When writing to the masses in order to provide clarity on what he perceived to be complicated and obscure issues, he wrote in straightforward Hebrew. And when writing to an elite group who were exposed to philosophy and had become confused, he wrote in riddles, so the masses would not comprehend his work and become confused as well. While most writers are fortunate if they master one style of writing, Rambam mastered them all.

Rambam provides us with the key to communicating with those suffering crises of faith: No one answer or one tone is suitable for everyone. It is important to know your audience before you leap into explanation. A teen asking questions who is suffering emotionally should be addressed differently from a young adult pursuing academic solutions to intellectual queries. A teenager is not the same as an adult, and emotional difficulties are not the same as intellectual torment. Discussions with faith-crisis sufferers need to be designed carefully and pointedly.

This is a critical lesson we can glean from Rambam's writings when addressing those suffering from crises of faith today. It is a lesson teachers, parents, and writers may comprehend intellectually, but too few put into practice. It is why my son's alumni WhatsApp group members cried out for help among their peers. Rambam served as a model for this pedagogical principle.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

When R. Soloveitchik reached America in 1932 he encountered a spiritual desert. He was surprised at the religious ignorance he met in Boston, which was to be his home, and would tell of the president of a synagogue who read through the financial section of the newspaper during the reading of Esther on Purim.² His influence on Boston and Yeshiva University was transformative. Ultimately, the Maimonides School he founded in Boston flourished under his care, and the *shiurim* and lectures he delivered drew hundreds of people at a time. Many of his *derashot* developed new concepts in the philosophy of halakha and continue to impact our understanding of Jewish law. It is no exaggeration to say that R. Soloveitchik altered the make-up of modern American Jewry with his revolutionary ideas.

In *The Lonely Man of Faith*, R. Soloveitchik addressed one of the most critical issues of his time: modernity and religion. He speaks of two different archetypes of man based on his interpretation of the two creation chapters, labeling them as Adam 1 and Adam 2, and applies these archetypes to the experience of modern man. Adam 1 seeks to control his environment and to acquire dignity with his utilitarian approach to the world. He builds hospitals, masters technology, and invents machinery. Adam 2, on the other hand, seeks control over himself. He is overcome by his sense of loneliness, and he yearns to form a relationship with God.

These two dialectical approaches to life are within each of us, creating complex inner tension. Neither of the two goals can be completely fulfilled. Man will always be striving. The modern world tends to portray religion as comforting and serene. For R. Soloveitchik, this is not at all the case. Religion is meant to be a depth experience and a difficult one at that. It is the ultimate oxymoron: Man must inhabit two different worlds at the same time.

R. Soloveitchik continues to draw such opposing paradigms in his other works: *The Man of Fate and the Man of Destiny*; *Cognitive Man, Homo Religiosus*, and *Halakhic Man*; *Majesty and Humility*. What makes R. Soloveitchik so unique is that he does not describe these dialectical states within man in order to seek solutions. His philosophy is existential, not rational. He proposes no syllogisms. He recounts his own personal experience of loneliness and creates a philosophy out of this experience.

This introduction of existentialism into Jewish thought was exactly what his generation required. For the bewildered generation of the Holocaust and the birth of the State of Israel, syllogisms were not enough. And for the children of the twentieth-century's budding scientific

revolution, the tension between modernity and religiosity became too stark to resolve. It was the generation of quantum mechanics and the invention of the atom bomb. The structure of DNA was discovered, and birth control pills were developed. As in our generation, with the invention of the internet and smart technology, the previously unthinkable became real. Rationalism was thrown into question as it could not address all realities of human existence, and the generation had to turn to their own profound experiences to connect them to God.

With his particular brand of philosophy, R. Soloveitchik offered his generation something unique: self-awareness. As opposed to finding answers outside of themselves, his archetypes of man challenged his generation to look inward and reconsider their pre-conceived notions of mankind and religion. According to R. Soloveitchik, religion is about struggle, paradox, and tension. It demands self-creation and personal striving towards God. This revolution in thought helped American Jews make sense of their faith.

Just as R. Soloveitchik offered his generation his own original brand of philosophy in order to respond to their needs, we need to develop our own approach that relates to the unique experiential character of our time. Our children are crying out for a reassessment of previous ideas, and it is our responsibility to provide it.

A Call to Scholars, Educators, Writers, and Thinkers

While many of the religious challenges during the time of Rambam and R. Soloveitchik are similar to ours, and we can learn lessons from their responses that can be applied to our own time, it is important to recognize the unique challenges faced by this generation. It is the job of scholars, thinkers, educators, and writers to address the questions of our time. As such, there are a multitude of new issues to be dealt with:

- *Coronavirus and other natural disasters* – With the suffering and fatality of the weakest of our society, coronavirus has sparked difficult religious questions. And while the questions themselves are not new, the related issues are unique to our generation. Man’s complex relationship with nature, society’s dealings with the elderly and the chronically ill, and Judaism’s interconnection with other nations of the world are some of the issues that should be brought up and dealt with in light of this world pandemic.
- *Women in halakha* – “Separate is inherently unequal” is a value that has been vigorously drilled into us. This principle is certainly true with regard to racial issues, and it has been applied by many to gender

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as well. As such, the Torah's views on women seem to conflict with Western societal values. This makes women's issues especially sensitive and even explosive. In a "Women of the Wall" society, how can we appreciate the Torah's perspective on women?

- *Issues of sexuality* – Western society celebrates difference. This is a value we teach to our preschoolers, and it is one to be respected. But once again, the Torah's view in respect to the LGBT community seems to conflict with societal values. I remember, as a philosophy major in Stern College, one professor gave us an assignment to explain the Torah's views on homosexuality. He did not want a legal explanation. He wanted us to try to understand the idea behind it. It was a difficult but important thought experiment that challenged us to temporarily step outside of the values with which we were raised. I remember struggling over the assignment. At the end, we wrote our essays, and came out with a much stronger understanding of the Torah's position, and a more nuanced appreciation of the Torah and the struggle of the gay community.
- *Technology and science* – Technology and science have presented this generation with a slew of questions related to faith. One such question is the issue of free will, which is the basis for all religious practice. If we do not act freely, how can God issue us commands and hold us accountable for our sins? Modern neuroscience has significantly challenged our notion of the way we think, feel, and choose. Some studies suggest that decisions are made by the brain before the person is even aware of the decision. While studies like these are debatable, they raise questions about our conscious self and its role in decision making. This conversation about free will should be properly analyzed and discussed openly.
- *"Dati lefi da'ati" (Religious according to my own opinions)* – This is a new category for teens and young adults in Israel. Those who do not want to reject the entire halakhic system pick and choose from among the *mitzvot*. They elect to keep the *mitzvot* that speak to them the most. Perhaps not meaning to do so (or perhaps meaning to do exactly that), this idea challenges the integrity of the entire halakhic system. The questions of the basis for halakha and the system's relevance to our times need to be explored and addressed.

It is important to emphasize that for the purposes outlined above, form is just as important as content. Many of the topics discussed earlier have in fact been analyzed and written about by scholars in journals, but it is also important to present them in an accessible and palatable form in order to reach younger audiences. A short, accessible, and interesting

book on women in halakha would be better suited for a high school class, or the nightstand of a young adult. Rambam's "Thirteen Principles," and R. Soloveitchik's "The Lonely Man of Faith," are perfect examples of this point. Each work is short, clear, and engaging. We live in the age of creative non-fiction, TED Talks, and Zoom, and recent events have shown us capable of utilizing these technologies; we would be remiss to ignore these new forums of education when we are not being threatened with a worldwide pandemic.

Finally, I do not mean to suggest that the issues outlined in this article are the only issues that need to be explored. There are others. But the list above is a sampling of some of this generation's most troubling questions. Clearly these questions need to be addressed by halakhists as well, but it is the philosophers who might make the biggest impact on the questioners.

¹ Noa Stern, "*Ve-Ehad Beli Kippa*," *Makor Rishon* (January 2, 2019).

² Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, "Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik: The Early Years," *TRADITION* 30:4 (1996), 193–209.

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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

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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,

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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

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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, *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 2:2.

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MULTIPLE TRUTHS AND THE TOWERS OF BABEL: DECONSTRUCTIONISM IN JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

What are the main intersections between Jewish thought and contemporary philosophy? Postmodern critique is often considered to have overturned several aspects of contemporary Jewish life, arguably posing one of the most acute demands of our times. It presents the task of squaring the circle of positing truth amidst a crisis of nihilistic relativism. Many Jewish thinkers present postmodern discourse as essentially a precursor to the breakdown of religious truth. Assumptions of being able to think, express oneself, and make claims in neutral terms, have come under critique by postmodern thought as the pre-eminence of contextuality is adopted. The notorious “metanarrative” has been torn asunder and, whether one agrees or not, multiple truth theory, even in relation to theology, triumphs.

Whilst “postmodernism” is a vast, changing set of ideas, for our purposes, it can be distilled to refer to a critique of the ideas of neutrality, objectivity, and knowledge, all of which have been thought to underlie religious belief.

However, postmodernism is far from a pure philosophical method—it spans various disciplines and is more identifiable as a “mood” of malaise, critique, and *ennui*. In speaking of Jewish thought, therefore, postmodernism also embodies a mood of rejection, opposition, and critique.

According to postmodernism as a theory, and also as a mood, a clear demand which is made of us is to query and dismantle previously held theoretical assumptions. In contemporary Jewish philosophy, this demand does not stop short of applying to religious belief and theology. In responding to this call, I will point to certain important concepts and their need for profound theological reconsiderations and reconfigurations.

Here, I would like to illustrate a response to this demand, bringing postmodernism and Jewish thought into conversation with one another,

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rather than through pure theoretical analysis. In this illustration, I engage in an analysis of the French-Jewish postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida's interpretation of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9). His writing offers a typically postmodern elucidation of the enigmatic and mysterious parable narrative of the Tower of Babel, from which an important understanding of the idea of deconstructionism can be gleaned.¹ Moreover, the subject of Babel signifies themes at the crux of this discussion itself: breakage, collapse, and renewal. The major themes of construction and subsequent destruction of the tower allow for a glimpse into Derrida's philosophy of deconstructionism. Through this I will explore the methodology of weaving together discourses of Jewish thought and postmodern discourse.²

Babel is often used as a model for understanding the existence of humanity—we witness a will to build and reach the heavens (either to reach God or to destroy God) by a united group of individuals. The tower is destroyed: and the people, once supposedly united in vision, are scattered upon the face of the earth.

The story is one whose relevance is different for each generation, and for diverse religions, mirroring the confusion sensed today with the multitude of truth claims, narratives and meanings. While this thinking is manifested in diverse interpretations of the story of Babel, in this context, it presents an example of one of the more creative elements of postmodern thinking—textual play and language games, with interpretative rules which are contextual and ever-changing. Accordingly, objective ways of understanding texts are destabilized, and thus singular meanings are “deconstructed.” This at once connects textual play to Jewish methods of interpretations, which are based on historical, contextual, and theological layers over the generations. Deconstructionism—destroying meaning—does not necessarily result in an absence of meaning, as some critics argue. It is coupled with a deeper aspect of deconstructionism which is the dissemination of new meanings, and this explanation is allegorized and highlighted in Derrida's reading on Babel:

This story recounts, among other things, the origin of the confusion of tongues, the irreducible multiplicity of idioms, the necessary and impossible task of translation.³

The multiplicity is created through the imminent divine-willed destruction of the Tower. Further, the architectural and actual construction of the structural edifice of Babel represent an order which must be deconstructed, an idea which forms of the focus of the text. The word *bavel*

itself is noted for its signification of confusion, and describes the location of an event founded upon misunderstanding, which is based on miscommunication between different languages. The interplay and puns in the Hebrew letters have long evoked exegetical enquiry. In our generation, R. Jonathan Sacks points to the

etymology for the word Babel, which literally meant “the gate of God.” The Torah relates it to the Hebrew root *b-l-l*, meaning “to confuse.” In the story, this refers to the confusion of languages that happens as a result of the hubris of the builders. But *b-l-l* also means “to mix, intermingle”...⁴

In some ways, these themes of confusion and language resemble ideas found in the rich and varied interpretations in Rabbinic literature which offer a multiplicity of ways of understanding the passage. The meaning of the text is offered multiple interpretations—historical, ethical, geographical, theological, and philological. Theologically-speaking, there is a quest to understand the nature of the divine will, and the meaning of human existence.⁵ This quest is expressed through the many questions and responses arising in different *midrashim* as to understanding the cause for the construction of the tower. What were the intentions of those building the tower? The prevalent idea of the nature of the builders as evil, engaging in a rebellion or war against God, has midrashic sources.⁶ This theme continues in talmudic and later rabbinic literature.⁷ There is often leadership said to be at the root of the rebellion—wherein the Babel generation claimed Nimrod as their leader.⁸

These interpretations then lead to philosophical challenges—one midrash describes the intention to build as a metaphysical aspiration, upon which the theme of rebellion rests.⁹ Why are these two ideas intertwined? Is it because divine agents descend to the sphere of humanity and announce “let us confound their language” and destroy communication between the builders to the extent of causing death and destruction?¹⁰ Is metaphysical aspiration always doomed to fail? Can the divine realm ever be understood? Is an effort to understand unwelcome by the heavenly spheres? Derrida, too, poses these questions, which I believe shed light on the way midrashic literature is understood, proposing an original approach to Jewish discourse around Babel. Derrida draws on the biblical words of “making a name for themselves” from a deconstructive perspective:

Does he punish them for having wanted to build as high as the heavens?
For having wanted to accede to the highest; up to the Most High? ...
Perhaps for that too, no doubt, but incontestably for having wanting thus

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to *make a name for themselves*, to give themselves the name, to construct for and by themselves their own name, to gather themselves there.... For the text of Genesis proceeds immediately, as if it were all a matter of the same design: raising a tower, constructing a city, making a name for oneself in a universal tongue.... Then he disseminates the Sem[itic name] and dissemination here is deconstruction.¹¹

Destruction is interwoven with the creation of a multiplicity of languages, and consequently with the difficulty of translation across those of foreign cultures, religions, and nations. The dispersal, or dissemination, is a clear result of the deconstruction of the tower, which resembles a monolithic desire for a “name” in the heavens, which is beyond the capabilities of humankind. This approach is reminiscent of the *midrashim* which explicate some of these themes, notably in *Bereishit Rabba*.¹²

It is possible that the construction itself was considered as sinful activity,¹³ however, there were opportunities for repentance throughout this process.¹⁴ For R. Sacks, the finale of the tale is critical in relating the ultimate message of the story:

In broad outlines, the moral of the story is clear. People gathered together to build a tower that would reach to heaven, but the proper place of man is on earth. They were guilty of hubris and they were punished by nemesis... after Babel the world is split into many languages, and that until the end of days there is no single universal language.¹⁵

The final destruction was aligned with a divine will, as part of a clear message, though one which receives new meanings in each generation. One such example is exemplified here by R. Sacks which draws on contemporary issues of multiple narrative theories, and philosophy of languages and religions, and wherein one of his main claims, one not dissimilar to an idea of Rav Shagar, is to feel “at home” in one’s own language.¹⁶ Teaching students of our generation in a university setting about concepts of chosenness, universalism, and particularity, involves a sincere engagement with the prominent critical theories of the day, such that, with considerable differences, it is fitting to discuss Derrida in relation to and in contrast with R. Sacks and R. Shagar. This is one such example, wherein theories of the existence of a particularized Jewish theology must be harnessed in the critical discourse of the 21st century. Deconstructionism as a method certainly has its shortcomings in Jewish exegesis.¹⁷ Nevertheless it is useful to teach it coupled with the creative element of dissemination with which it is accompanied. Babel is but one example of this, especially in the ways the conclusion of the Babel story can be considered.

The tale ends with the dispersal of peoples to all places in the world, where each now has its own language, and method of communication. Each nation will always experience communicative limitations; notably misunderstandings, and mistranslations. Pursuing the relevance of Babel for our age, one could go further and ask to what extent the challenges of cross-cultural understanding remain acutely relevant today? Or was the multi-national multi-linguistic existence of today the desired state of human relationships around the globe? And if so, what meaning might one ascribe to insurmountable conflict between the nations of the world? Had the ideal for humanity been absolute unity, why the multiplicity of languages and narratives? These questions surrounding the closure of the Babel story are not new, but they are now asked in a new way with a new intonation of urgency. They wrestle with the meaning of multiple truths which exist in the world: how can my religious belief be universally true?

The closure of the story is in fact an opening up of a brave new world. However sinful the Babel generation may have been, it is compared favorably to the generation of the Flood—of which none remained.

This theory can be developed even further from a philosophical perspective. Could an aspiration to engage in a metaphysical quest be recognized in its futile attempts to explain the mysteries of the world? After all, the Babel generation was engaged in an attempt to share the celestial spheres between humanity and God. Many of this generation did survive, and continued on to disparate lands. Further questioning this closure—one asks, what happened to the structural edifice of Babel? The plain meaning of the text does not describe an architectural collapse, but rather, hones in on the fate of humanity. Two *midrashim* teach that one third of the tower was burned, one third was swallowed up, and that one third still stands.¹⁸ The notion that one third still stands would call to question the applicability of a total deconstructionism. A remnant of deconstruction remains. Its very existence is dependent on the scattering of its builders.

This line of thinking is reflected in Derrida's accompanying parallel theory of deconstructionism, known as "dissemination."¹⁹ In dissemination, wherein the model of Babel is used, deconstructionism facilitates the creation and dispersion of messages and meanings. This can be seen in his essay on Babel, wherein the idea of stable unchanging meaning is undermined, due to human misunderstanding, and even due to a failure of humanity to create models of effective communication.

This idea calls for a recognition of creation and flourishing of new ideas in the wake a destruction. This is one idea of how breakage symbolizes new life. One idea destroyed is another one created through the

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existence and proliferation of multiple languages and cultures. In this sense, deconstructionism does not necessarily denote a destruction of truth. Rather, it lends credence to creative aspects of interpretation.

My proposition therefore, of which this study forms an example, is an invitation to be receptive towards deconstructive approaches in contemporary Jewish philosophy. Textual analysis and critique lie at the heart of postmodern discourse, and so scriptural interpretation offers a glimpse into postmodern theories. Through this examination I attempt to draw out one specific theory in postmodern discourse—deconstructionism—and I propose to continue to put forward the suggestion of possibilities for engaging in contemporary Jewish philosophy from perspectives of the 21st century.

¹ Jacques Derrida, “*Des Tours de Babel*” in Joseph F. Graham, ed. and trans., *Difference in Translation* (Cornell University Press, 1985), 165–207. The words “*Des Tours*” are left open to translation, as they can be translated in different ways: *des tours*—some turns—or as a single word: detours, deviations, departures, digressions from the past. The word *Des* also leaves open the gender of the *Tours* which would automatically be signaled in the French (similarly to Hebrew) in gendered nouns. Even in translations of this text, the words *Des Tours* are not translated, which itself illustrates both Derrida’s intentions, as well as the confusion of how it could be interpreted. This, in turn, mirrors the confusion created in Babel with the collapse of translatability across cultures. See also Lynne Long, ed., *Translation and Religion: Holy Untranslatable?* (Multicultural Matters, 2005).

² I have learned from the thinking of several scholars engaged in readings of Jewish philosophy through a deconstructive lens, see Miriam Feldmann Kaye, *Jewish Theology for a Postmodern Age* (Liverpool University Press, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2019), 26.

³ Derrida, “*Des Tours de Babel*,” 171.

⁴ Jonathan Sacks, “Babel, Then and Now,” *The Jewish Press* (October 23, 2014).

⁵ This is also palpable in interpretations of Babel in other religions, for example in Islamic literature, see Qur’an, Sura 2:96.

⁶ See for example *Mekhilta Mishpatim* 20, and *Bereishit Rabba* 38:7.

⁷ *Sanhedrin* 109a, also noted in Josephus 1, and *Pirkei de-Rabi Eliezer* 24.

⁸ *Pirkei de-Rabi Eliezer* 24. Links between Babel and Nimrod also appear in talmudic sources, e.g., *Avoda Zara* 53b, *Hullin* 89a.

⁹ *Bereishit Rabba* 38:8.

¹⁰ *Bereishit Rabba* 38:10.

¹¹ Derrida, “*Des Tours de Babel*,” 169–170.

¹² *Bereishit Rabba* 23:7.

¹³ *Bereishit Rabba* 38:6.

¹⁴ *Mekhilta* on *Beshalah* 5.

¹⁵ Jonathan Sacks, *Faith in the Future: The Ecology of Hope and the Restoration of Family, Community and Faith* (Mercer University Press, 1997), 79.

¹⁶ See in particular Rav Shagar (Rosenberg), *Be-Tzel ha-Emuna: Derashot u-Ma'amarim le-Hag Sukkot* [Hebrew], (Machon Kitvei Harav Shagar, 2011), 126–127.

¹⁷ I have expanded on Jewish philosophical critique of deconstructionism elsewhere. Here, I have deemed it sufficient to introduce the idea of dissemination as a parallel theory. See also internalized critique, e.g., Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion* (Routledge, 2002), 243; and J.H. Olthius, ed., *Religion With/Out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo* (Routledge, 2002), 161.

¹⁸ *Sanhedrin* 109a; *Bereishit Rabba* 38:4.

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (University of Chicago Press, 1983).

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JEWISH THOUGHT AS A SUBVERSIVE ACTIVITY

For the past twenty-five years, I have taught an Introduction to Jewish Thought curriculum to young women studying in Israeli seminaries following high school. The course has changed slightly over time, and I have modified it at need for the student bodies at different schools, but the curriculum is organized roughly chronologically, with a focus on medieval rationalism and non-rationalism, a (very brief) introduction to Kabbala, some discussion of *hasidut*, and a transition to modern Jewish philosophy. I teach material designed to challenge the students' assumptions, and I emphasize that there is no consensus about the key questions of Jewish thought and religious truth. Everything that matters is subject to deep dispute, and dispute cannot be "paskened" in the manner we determine the proper *berakha* on licorice. The range of theological possibilities within Judaism is vast, with numerous schools and *sefarim* opting for mutually exclusive positions at opposite ends of the theological spectrum.

The primary assumption of my pedagogy is trust in the students' seriousness and maturity. Students can handle difficult texts, can absorb vocabulary they are not familiar with, can ask good questions, and can think through the implications of answers to those questions. They can trace the religious and philosophical visions that vie for pride of place within the canon, and they can weigh the advantages and disadvantages of these options.

This translates into a kind of surface indifference, on my part, to how this knowledge and often new ways of thinking influence them religiously and spiritually. I am not actually indifferent to these issues, but to me they are second-order questions, with matters of the first order being how to understand the texts and their implications. Ultimately, this exposure is religiously valuable, but not because I have any direct desire to get them to believe any particular opinion nor because I know what the "Torah position" is on any given question.

I want my students to understand that Rambam, following the medieval rationalist mode, conceived of God as static, which is very, very different from what they were usually taught in their earlier education. Yet, in contrast, the dynamic Godhead of theurgic kabbala is equally foreign to the religious vision most of them absorbed in high school. I want them to understand that there is a price to pay for religious fideism and non-rationalism, as well as for not trying to bridge the gap between what Torah seems to teach and what reason and science describe. I want them to grapple with Mendelssohn's attempt to make sense of religious commitment in a free and liberal society, and I certainly want them to unlearn the nonsense that many were taught, such as the assertion that Mendelssohn was the father of the Reform movement. Rabbi Hirsch's almost pro-*galut* attitude—his conviction that political power is religiously and morally corrupting, and therefore political weakness has advantages—can help them question the jingoistic Zionism that they have sometimes heard. Yeshayahu Leibowitz's notion that we must perform *mitzvot* for the sole reason that they are commandments, with no expectation that they might be good for us or that we might benefit from them, should and often does anger them. When we deal with modern Jewish thought, the curriculum includes works by non-Orthodox writers, like Buber and Rosenzweig, because committed, observant Jews have significant things to learn from them, and in any case should have some familiarity with those outside the canon. I consider it a success when the students are upset or irritated by the texts we learn.

In all these cases, I challenge them to ask what they find convincing and non-convincing about each thinker or school. It is not enough to dismiss or reject new ideas that seem non-traditional to them, certainly not simply because those ideas are unfamiliar. None of the sources we study are stupid or silly, and it helps to understand why smart people would say unexpected and even shocking things.

Despite the value I place in a pedagogy of theological diversity, I do not want to exaggerate either the potential or the impact of this teaching. I teach Jewish thought because I enjoy it, no more but also no less. It is not the most important area of study, nor even necessarily a significant lynchpin in the development of religious commitment and identity. I regularly tell students that "Jewish philosophy is a lot of fun, as long as you don't take it too seriously." At the end of the day, people's religious commitments are largely dependent on narrative, relationships, experiences, and intuition. Intellectual coherence and philosophical precision, for the most part, play a small role, or at the very least are things that develop in light of already existent religious and moral intuitions about what a life well-lived ought to look like.

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With that, it is helpful, up to a point, to take our religious commitments out, hold them up to the light, knock on them, and see how well they hold up. Philosophical tools are one method of doing so. Complacency is one of the great dangers of the demographic successes of the Orthodox community, and philosophical rigor that identifies the vast diversity of Jewish truth, along with weaknesses and flaws in any religious position, can help counter that complacency.

The luxury to teach in this way stems in part from teaching post-high school students who already have strong religious commitments and who self-select to choose my particular class. I have no illusions that this could or should work for all students at every grade level. I am blessed to have been able to teach this material to such bright, talented, dedicated, and *frum* young women.

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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.”¹ In doing so, Berlin could have been referring to 21st 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.² 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

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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

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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.³ 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.⁴

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.⁵ 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.⁶

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.”⁷ 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.”⁸ 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.”⁹ 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.

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

² "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.

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

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

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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*.

⁷ *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:51.

⁸ 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.

⁹ Berlin, 2.

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MY PERSONAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHICAL ODYSSEY

In another life, I would likely now be working in a laboratory pursuing a research project in some branch of chemistry, which would have been a noble pursuit. Instead, I am pursuing what I hope is no less a noble alternative in the world of Jewish philosophy. I mention this because if you will bear with the story of how I came to do what I do, which I have often spoken about but never really committed to writing, it happens to be highly relevant to many of the questions on which this symposium on Jewish thought is based, in particular that of why the participants personally chose to be involved in this field.

I was educated and lived all my life in London, until moving to the Bernard Revel Graduate School in 2007 to take up a Jewish philosophy post. The British education system differs in many ways from the American system, though some elements may have changed in the past three decades, so this should not be assumed to describe the contemporary situation. (I do not wish to upset any old friends working in Jewish education in the UK.) Three of those differences are particularly pertinent here. First, one specialized very early in English high schools, such that one studied just three or four subjects during years 11 and 12. Everything else was dropped. At the end of those two years one took public examinations called A levels, and the grades gained determined which university offer one is able to accept. Second, rather than study for a four-year liberal arts degree, in general one applied for a three-year degree in a specific discipline—very occasionally a combination of two subjects—and studied that alone for those three years. Finally, the Jewish Studies education available in Jewish day schools in the UK in the 1980s was inferior to that in America, and that difference becomes monumental when compared to what my children have received here in recent years.

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All of this meant three things to me personally. First, I was good at science, so for my A levels I studied Chemistry, Maths, Further Maths—for I was (am?) a nerd—and Geography. If I say so myself, I did well. Second, I gained a place to study for a degree in Natural Sciences at university and thus was all set to go into the sciences. Third, and most significantly for our purposes, when it came to my Jewish studies, grades notwithstanding, I cannot claim to have been the model student. The primary reason for this was that I simply couldn't relate to much of the content with which I was being provided. This was not a case of religious doubt nor a crisis of faith. Nor was it a matter of any fundamental questioning of our sacred texts. This was rather a theological problem. I went to a school where the Jewish education was, on the whole, provided by teachers with a very different *hashkafa* from that of its students, such that I was being told things regarding the nature of God and His relationship to the world that I simply found impossible to accept. And to say that the idea of questioning these rigid doctrines was not welcomed would be a classic case of British understatement.

But then I went to Israel for a gap year, during which I studied at the now sadly defunct Yeshivat HaKibbutz HaDati. And there, once a week, a brilliant man named Avram Stein would give us a *shiur* on the *Kuzari*. I am not sure why that was the topic, since Avram Stein was a convinced Maimonidean who had little patience for the philosophical ideas of Yehuda Halevi. But that was precisely the point. Here for the first time, I was being presented with a sophisticated, thoroughly informed, and thought-out theology—that of Yehuda Halevi—only to be told that at almost every point of philosophical significance, he was opposed by a figure of similar if not greater religious stature, Moses Maimonides. Moreover, the views that were being put forward by Maimonides were views that, had I offered them up in high school, even sincerely and seriously, I imagine I would have been thrown out of the room even more often than—regrettably—I was.¹

I spoke to Avram Stein after one particular class and told him that Yehuda Halevi's approach with its quasi-mystical elements did not really strike a chord with me, but likewise, I found Maimonides' naturalism too austere and rationalistic (not, I'm sure, the actual language my eighteen-year-old self used at the time). Was there anything that fell between these two stools, I asked? I was told to read something by a figure called Rabbi Soloveitchik and found a copy of *The Lonely Man of Faith* in the *beit midrash*. As I sat there and read this short book—a short book that, even with a dictionary to hand, took me a very long time to read—I was utterly

entranced. Here was one of the greatest figures in contemporary Orthodoxy, with the whole of *Shas* at his fingertips, speaking a language steeped in the tradition, yet at the same time a master of philosophical wisdom and apparently as comfortable in that conceptual world (at least as far as I could tell at the time). More importantly for me then, here was a towering religious hero who seemed happy to admit that he did not sit comfortably with simplistic answers to difficult questions. Instead he recognized that “[t]he role of the man of faith, whose religious experience is fraught with inner conflicts and incongruities, who oscillates between ecstasy in God’s companionship and despair when he feels torn asunder by the heightened contrast between self-appreciation and abnegation, has been a difficult one since the time of Abraham and Moses... the Biblical knights of faith lived heroically with this very tragic and paradoxical experience.”²

On reading this book, I vividly remember asking myself for the first time what I was doing. I was about to embark on a degree in the sciences. Yet I wasn’t particularly passionate about the subject. I had simply done well in Chemistry and Maths in school, so it seemed like the obvious next step. This was my “two roads diverged” moment, as I asked myself: do I want to continue down the road towards becoming a scientist or do I want to be Avram Stein—to dedicate myself to the world of Jewish philosophy instead? And so, within two weeks of returning home, I asked if I could switch to a philosophy degree (Jewish philosophy was not a degree option at any British university), though always with the intention to specialize in Jewish philosophy once I had completed that first degree, an intention that was fulfilled through a doctoral thesis that focused largely on Rambam and R. Soloveitchik.

The point of these extended reminiscences—perhaps not what you were expecting from an academic philosopher—is that they serve to inform the responses that I here list to a number of the questions that motivated this symposium (about many of which I will admit to feeling quite passionate).

First, the views I had been taught in high school did not sit comfortably with me. What were comfortable platitudes for some, appeared to be attempts to avoid critical reflection to me. The study of philosophy has often been seen as marginal, even controversial or problematic in the history of Judaism. I fully understand why that might be. Yet for me, it was important because it showed that one could, in good faith, proffer theological views with real pedigree from within our tradition that differed radically from those that I had been led to believe were my only theological option. It allowed me the freedom of thought that I and many

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others were unable to forfeit. Indeed, according to Rambam, one must not forfeit one's commitment to reason, since one who does so brings "loss to himself and harm to his religion."³ You cannot, even must not, require a metaphorical lobotomy as an entry requirement to Jewish Orthodoxy.

The preceding point is all well and good, but if there were a single, true Jewish philosophical theology, I would simply have to swallow my philosophical pride. Quite sensibly and unsurprisingly this is not the case in Judaism, either empirically, as evidenced by the polar philosophies of, say, Maimonidean rationalism and Kabbalistic mysticism, or normatively. R. Jonathan Sacks speaks of this as aggadic pluralism, which is "rabbinic Judaism's domain of pluralism, the realm in which the truth of one side of the argument does not entail the falsity of the other."⁴ That Judaism maintains such philosophical pluralism is part of its genius, for you cannot choose what to believe if you simply do not believe it. As Hasdai Crescas notes, "will has no role in the matter of belief."⁵ Of course, one can be convinced by argument (though such argument, at least in the philosophical sense, had never been forthcoming in high school), but even then, you cannot simply decide to accept an argument that does not convince you. In the realm of practice matters are different both Judaically and philosophically. That we coalesce around a unified normative system, albeit one that allows for some level of variation, is definitive of Orthodoxy. But that is because, unlike belief, you *can* commit to a system of practice just because an authority tells you to, even if some of those practices may appear unusual or are not things that one would naturally do. To submit in one's behavior to an authority is perfectly possible. It is something we do all the time when we obey parking rules (*le-havdil*). It is not something we can do—or are required to do to the same extent—in the realm of belief. That is why Judaism's commitment to a relatively unified practice but to aggadic pluralism makes such good sense. It is at the very least not clear that there is any neutral standard that by dint of being rational one must accept and that will determine which of the (traditionally grounded) world views is correct (admittedly a contemporary take on these matters with which others may disagree). Note, this is not to deny that one of these theologies *could* be objectively correct. It is simply to deny that there is an Archimedean point such that one could demand that all rational humans agree in every detail on which it is.

Next, there is no question that one can offer ideas that have philosophical value regardless of whether you package them in the language of academic philosophy. People can have an instinctive genius for all

sorts of things without being able to articulate them in the technical language used by professionals in the discipline in question. The Beatles couldn't read music, but William Mann famously wrote of the aeolian cadence of one of their early songs in a 1963 *Times* of London review, and there are learned tomes nowadays that study their musical genius. Clearly, someone who is not philosophically trained can have important philosophical insights. Yet it remains the case that the sharp analytical tools of the academic discipline of philosophy will likely allow for a more precise and penetrating presentation of the idea that will allow one to better appreciate its strengths and weaknesses. Philosophers, for some reason, often get called out for being unnecessarily obscure, and in many instances, I fail to understand why. Of course, writers who are willfully obscure deserve criticism. But most specialisms have their own technical language to deal with things—just try reading your mortgage contract. That doesn't mean that we cannot understand how to buy a house, but it does mean that only a professional with technical expertise can ensure that all the complex details of the transaction have been taken care of.

Similarly, that might be why the Rav, for example, uses the language of philosophy to analyze certain aspects of the religious experience. Those experiences are not cut off to anyone, but the ability to articulate them clearly to oneself or others might be. That need not lessen the religious genius and insight of great rabbis who express themselves in non-philosophical terminology, any more than the fact that Paul McCartney could neither read nor write the sheet music for “Yesterday” lessens his musical genius. But it does, to my mind, mean that there is a distinction between Jewish philosophy and what we call *mahshava*. Much of our traditional literature contains material ripe for philosophical analysis. But that does not make it “Philosophy” in the sense in which the term is used to refer to a specific academic discipline. Thus, Jewish thought, to me, is a term that covers a far broader terrain than does Jewish philosophy, and it is the latter in which I specialize. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, as soon as I was exposed to the discipline of Jewish philosophy, I found that I simply could not accept the system of Yehuda Halevi. I found myself closer (though certainly not identical) in sensibility to the rationalists. So even then, it seems, philosophical argument was important to me. I was unable to accept mystical statements since they simply made no sense to me; philosophically articulated arguments did, and this “prejudice” was no doubt reinforced by my pursuit of a philosophy degree.⁶ There is enough variety,

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however, in Jewish philosophy to allow for people with entirely different religious sensibilities to not only coexist, but to unify, since we are anchored in a single practice.

Finally, does the study of Jewish philosophy matter? I believe that it does. Aggadic pluralism reflects the understanding that the very theology that would lead one person to give up on halakhic practice might be the very theology that motivates someone else to maintain it. As a result, I will admit to finding it deeply alarming when we censor theological views that are grounded in our tradition just because we may personally disagree with them. When asked what I find truly challenging about my study of Jewish philosophy, I can think of very little other than the ordinary hard work that it takes to master any discipline. It is the teaching of Jewish philosophy that can be challenging, even a source of dismay, when one encounters intolerance of non-mainstream theologies—often those of great *Rishonim*—that can at times express itself in disrespect, based in nothing but ignorance of our very own philosophical traditions. While there are of course views that are beyond the pale, the definition of “beyond the pale” cannot simply be “theology with which I disagree.” In part, the study of Jewish philosophy may help us to appreciate and respect the existence of traditional alternatives without feeling the need to silence or denigrate them, even when one passionately disagrees with them.

All of the above contribute to my belief in the importance of Jewish philosophy, though to differing degrees for different people. I have no interest in changing anyone’s theology. I do have an interest in showing them that there is more than one legitimate alternative. Indeed, for me, that is one of the most important things about teaching Jewish philosophy. I often make reference to a student of mine from around fifteen years ago in London who took my graduate course on the philosophy of Maimonides. This student was (and more importantly still is) a Chabad rabbi. We remained in touch and met for coffee one summer when I was visiting London, and he told me that while at an international Chabad gathering, he had mentioned to a fellow rabbi that he had been studying *The Guide of the Perplexed*, to which the response was that one could only study the *Guide* through the prism of Hasidic thought, or “*derekh hasidus*,” and that anyone who studied Maimonides in any other way “did not know what they were talking about.” My ex-student told me that he responded as follows: “I studied Maimonides with someone. He did not teach us Maimonides ‘*derekh hasidus*.’ But he knew what he was talking about.” I teach, in part, for comments such as these; it is for such results that I believe it is important to study Jewish philosophy.

¹ I will here avoid getting into the controversies concerning exoteric and esoteric readings of Maimonides' *Guide*. It is, to my mind, undeniable that without engaging that controversy at all, one can find explicit statements of views that are deeply naturalistic and depart from mainstream views in contemporary Orthodoxy.

² Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (Doubleday, 1992), 2.

³ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (University of Chicago Press, 1963), Introduction, 6.

⁴ Jonathan Sacks, *One People: Judaism, Modernity, and Jewish Unity* (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1993), 97. And note, he speaks of aggadic pluralism, not aggadic relativism. That there is more than one legitimate theology does not imply that *any* theology is acceptable.

⁵ Hasdai Crescas, *Light of the Lord (Or Hashem)*, trans. Roslyn Weiss (Oxford University Press, 2018), Book II, Part V, chap. V, 201.

⁶ While it is not always easy to put one's finger on the differences, there does seem to be a distinction between what we term philosophy and what we term mysticism, even if ultimately, the differences might simply be in what one is willing to accept as one's starting points, or how far back one feels the need to push the train of argumentation to get to them.

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TEACHING JEWISH PHILOSOPHY: MATERIALS, METHODS, AND MEANING

My appointment at Yeshiva University—and the majority of my teaching—is in general philosophy, and my teaching in *Jewish* philosophy is therefore limited. (My base is at Stern College for Women, where I usually teach Jewish Ethics and Rambam’s *Guide of the Perplexed*.) As a result, I have not had to confront the full array of quandaries and challenges related to syllabi and pedagogy that fulltime teachers of Jewish thought face. Moreover, the challenges of college teaching both resemble and differ from the challenges in other settings, whether pre-college, Israeli yeshiva, adult education, or scholar-in-residence. These caveats acknowledged, what follow are some principles that animate my teaching—and that I try to impart to classes implicitly or explicitly.

Source Materials

There are numerous conceptions of Jewish philosophy (or, if you will, Jewish thought—more on terminology later), and which readings a teacher assigns depends in large measure on which conception that teacher is utilizing. Is Jewish philosophy the history of a canon featuring Saadya, Bahya, Halevi, Maimonides, and others? Is it a philosophical explication of concepts and claims found in classic texts, such as Tanakh, Talmud, and Midrash? Is it an *assessment* of those concepts and claims? Is it the attempt to create new ideas that touch base with the old texts? Is it the quest to define the meaning of Jewish existence in the contemporary world, especially in light of the Holocaust and the rise of the State of Israel? Is it the study of contemporary thinkers? Or, finally, is it the application of Jewish philosophical (and not only legal) concepts to concrete social issues?

The answer is: all of the above. Not only are these conceptions not mutually exclusive, they can build on each other. Yet in a particular course and with a particular pedagogue they will not be addressed in

equal proportion—which of course profoundly impacts the choice of course materials.

In principle, though, I maintain that Jewish philosophy can be found *everywhere*: Tanakh, Talmud, Midrash, Halakha, Kabbala, *hasidut*, *musar*, homiletics, *piyyut*, stories, even art and music. It is not located only in those ancient, medieval, and modern works that are more or less universally regarded and labeled as philosophy. This broad view of course materials is already stated in the symposium question, but I want to underscore the importance and cogency of this approach, as it is hardly uncontested. Academic scholars sometimes deride Tanakh as primitive thought, and view *aggada* as mere homily or unsophisticated, scattershot theology. Often they contrast it unfavorably with Christianity’s robust and rigorously ordered philosophical tradition.

But happily, at a time when the word “narrative” has become ubiquitous in our culture, biblical and rabbinic narratives have become increasingly appreciated as a source of philosophical reflection. In fact, it has become commonplace for textbooks and courses even in *general* philosophy to include biography, fiction, cinema, and pop culture. In the case of biblical narratives, which I utilize in classes, widely-read books by Yoram Hazony, Leon Kass, R. Jonathan Sacks, and Avivah Zornberg—works that fuse literary and philosophical tools—show that the Bible speaks profoundly to matters like human nature, morality, free will, and God’s role in history.¹ *Hazal* likewise communicated philosophical ideas in part through stories, a point R. Yitzchak Blau, among others, has driven home.² And as the Rav’s thinking (for example) illustrates time after time, *aggada*—despite its aphoristic, fragmented nature—carries powerful and profound philosophical meaning. Likewise for *parshanut*; likewise for halakha.

TRADITION’s readers know all this—but it is good, I think, to appreciate the *significance* of what teachers of Jewish thought are doing when they teach biblical and rabbinic thought. Not only are they imparting ideas of immense value; they are inculcating a perception, an attitude, and in some respects a countercultural approach. Construing Jewish philosophy broadly as including texts that aren’t usually labeled as philosophy also has a pedagogic advantage: it makes Jewish thought resonant and meaningful even for students who are put off or disappointed by the abstract and often technical nature of medieval texts. Let’s face it: while Rambam had much to say to all generations, and we attempt to extract some of it in our teaching, *Moreh Nevukhim* traffics in arcane, outmoded and forbidding terms like Active Intellect and overflow.

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Consider next a related question: *Who* is a Jewish philosopher? Some professional philosophers have a lamentable tendency to regard only certain figures as “real” philosophers. They confer this certification only on those who utilize certain vocabularies and methods, and who cite certain literature. Others are labeled “mere” theologians, or “mere” *ba’alei mahshava*. While formal training obviously enhances philosophical reasoning, there is little value, in my view, in utterly rigidifying or absolutizing a distinction between “philosopher” and “*ba’al mahshava*.” The late Mark Steiner, an eminent philosopher of mathematics and science, showed that R. Yisrael Salanter’s thought provides solutions to hoary philosophical puzzles like weakness of will and the nature of humility, solutions that Steiner maintained are deeper than those of acknowledged philosophers.³ A similar example can be found in R. Eliyahu Dessler’s position that we all have only a *nekudat ha-behira*, a small area of free will, because upbringing and prior choices determine later behavior. This restrictive view matches that of a celebrated contemporary philosopher, Peter van Inwagen, and the earlier philosopher C. A. Campbell.⁴ Yet both R. Salanter and R. Dessler would have declined the mantle “philosopher” due to the term’s associations. Steiner shows that even halakhic analysis continually requires treating philosophical issues; so halakhists, too, are, to an appreciable degree, philosophers.

This doesn’t mean that any and all ideas about certain questions make for good philosophy. Far, far from it. After all, not everyone with a scientific opinion is a scientist, and not everyone with an opinion about history is a historian. The point is, rather, that a person without formal philosophical training is far more capable of developing a sound philosophical insight than someone without scientific or historical training is capable of developing a good theory in science or history. When students come to realize that they, too, can philosophize well even in their first course, it reduces the intimidation factor and gives them the confidence to put forth challenges and novel comments, even while they welcome a teacher’s prodding in order to clarify and sharpen their thinking. The Rav stressed the democratic quality of the *masora*, and I’d apply it to philosophy.

What about the areas of Kabbala and Jewish mysticism? *Hasidut* is now “trending,” with much attention given to Ba’al ha-Tanya, R. Mordechai Yosef Leiner, and R. Tzadok HaKohen. But, one might ask, isn’t Kabbala foreign to a philosophical mindset? No, I maintain, because Kabbala can serve three functions.

First, it focuses our attention on conflicting pulls and polarities, each with intuitive attraction. These polarities make for vibrant theological reflection, perplexity, and debate: God is transcendent vs. God is immanent; God controls everything vs. humans have free will; there

is a “stirring from above” and there is a “stirring from below” (that is, divine and human initiative)—among other contrasts.

It is not easy for empirically-oriented students to relate to the metaphysics of Kabbala. But—to make a second point—Kabbala has tremendous *symbolic* value, supplying powerful imagery. Symbols and metaphors are important because of their heuristic value as well as their psychological, behavioral, and social impact, dimensions of ideas students need to ponder. Thus, R. Norman Lamm *zt”l* (a lover of *hasidut* who even favored a hasidic model for *Torah u-Madda*) recruited R. Kook’s vision of unity as a counter to the fragmentation and atomization in modern society.⁵ Other pedagogically useful concepts in Kabbala include the revealed God and the hidden God (which characterize the outer-inner contrast in human personality as well), and divine contraction (*tzimtzum*). Some scientists use Kabbala as a metaphor to portray contemporary cosmology.⁶

Third, we must not underestimate the philosophical fiber of Kabbala. Some analytic philosophers, such as Jerome Gellman and Joshua Golding, have for decades extensively analyzed kabbalistic ideas and put them to use. Recently I heard a keynote lecture by an eminent non-Jewish analytic philosopher that led some in the audience to remark that he had unwittingly embraced *Tanya*. Tyron Goldschmidt, Samuel Lebens, and Aaron Segal, all Orthodox specialists in “secular” metaphysics, mobilize a *Tanya*-type metaphysics in some of their writings. The reasons that drive kabbalistic views, and Hasidic views in particular, are interesting and get us thinking—for example, the fascinating suggestion that belief in free will is a form of arrogance. Of course, unsettling strains in *hasidut*—especially antinomianism and relativism—need to be confronted both frankly and judiciously. (See also my discussion of relativism below.)

In short, it is appropriate to pay attention to philosophy that is not labeled as such. Plenty of people with no philosophical training have much that is useful to say about philosophical topics. Hence “your home should be open wide” (*Avot* 1:5)—to a wide array of texts and thinkers.

Integration

Another principle that determines my course materials is *Torah u-Madda*. We all know the stalwart support that R. Lamm, R. Aharon Lichtenstein *zt”l* and other thinkers repeatedly gave to the project of integrating Judaism and general culture. Although my teaching load is dominated by courses in general philosophy, I occasionally mention and sometimes assign Jewish materials in “general” courses. In the “*madda*” course Science

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and Religion, for example, we use Galileo's letters on Joshua's apparent stopping of the sun (a text that the Church insisted renders Galileo's heliocentric theory heresy) to explore the conflict between biblical literalism and science; but we also examine Rambam on figurative interpretation of Tanakh and *ma'amarei Hazal*. The majority of the syllabus is culled from general philosophy, but we use *The Lonely Man of Faith* to illustrate a particular model of relating science and religion. The Rav's writings on evil and on prayer are also excellent assets in philosophy of religion classes, among the best I know. Again, when we study competing conceptions of God's action in the world, we examine, among other perspectives, the worldview of R. Dessler. In Philosophy of Law we discuss the "great divide" in the field—positivism versus natural law theory (i.e., opposing views on whether law bears an essential connection to morality)—along with the related contemporary debate about "originalism" versus "evolving Constitution"; we then raise the question of whether the contemporary debate can be applied to halakha. Such mobilization of Jewish materials is not propelled by "affirmative action" or chauvinism. For in a *Torah u-madda* framework, Jewish thinkers genuinely cast light on the classic debates and not only vice-versa.

In sum, (a) giving broad scope to the term "philosophy"; (b) looking at the symbolic impact of certain views; (c) exhibiting the value of Jewish material for general philosophy and the reverse—these either shape my use of materials in courses or suggest how I would teach certain courses that are not in my current repertoire.

Studying vs. Doing

Despite a tremendous burgeoning of scholarship in history of philosophy in recent decades, to most academic philosophers it is more important to "do philosophy," to be able to put forth well-reasoned critical and constructive views on a topic, than to "study" philosophy, that is, to master the field's history.⁷ Philosophy courses in universities are predominantly about topics—"doing"—rather than figures or periods. In general, contemporary university education in the United States sees skills in reasoning and communication as more important in the humanities than information and erudition, leading to a loss of historical knowledge (a situation that concerns me).

While my interest in *mahshava* was triggered by hearing, as a teenager, the fabulous sermons of R. Norman Lamm, my primary graduate training was in analytic philosophy, a paradigm of "doing." It wasn't until 15–20 years into my career that I came to focus my scholarship on Jewish philosophy. As a result, I teach and write about Jewish thought by asking

the sorts of questions analytic philosophers ask, adopting certain methods and vocabulary, and relating Jewish questions and ideas to the general philosophical literature. This analytic approach to Jewish philosophy is becoming more prevalent as a cadre of young analytic philosophers have created many meaningful conversations between analytic philosophy and Jewish texts⁸—an enterprise in which they were preceded by authors like R. Yitzchak Blau and R. Shalom Carmy. No longer is Jewish philosophy simply a history; constructive Jewish thought (as it is commonly called) is very much in evidence.

Even so, the tension between studying and doing is difficult to resolve in teaching Jewish philosophy. In both general and Jewish philosophy courses, I want students to think critically about ideas, to assess and create arguments for and against them—in sum, to *do* philosophy. But in teaching Jewish philosophy to Jewish students, especially but not only in a religious setting, a teacher can't marginalize or even make secondary the tasks of interpreting authors (along with inculcating the textual and exegetical skills needed to do so) and of strengthening students' knowledge of figures, schools of thought, movements, periods, works, and genres. Hence a question rears its head: How much should we contextualize *mekorot* and thinkers historically? Should we follow academic scholars who bemoan the absence of historical perspective in, say, discussions of *Hazal* by analytic philosophers?⁹ How much of the Islamic context of Rambam's writing must we study to understand him? If students are to realize that *Hazal* and Jewish thinkers did not live in a vacuum—a core thesis of *Torah u-Madda*—they will need context, yet lavish attention to context impedes us from extracting timeless philosophical dimensions of a text. There is a dilemma here, one that requires beginning with a consciousness of the need for balance.

Evolving Challenges

R. Yehuda Amital *zt"l* distinguished between asking, "What does thinker X say?" and asking, "What does thinker X say *to us*?" In a similar vein, even though Rambam used an outmoded system of metaphysics, the Rav, in a graduate course on *Moreh Nevukhim*, extracted enduring messages from the *Moreh*—even portraying Rambam as a "*darshan*."¹⁰ Finding meaning is challenge number one.

R. Amital posed a second challenge when he noted that the "us" changes: it used to be that a new generation came along every forty years, he said, but now one comes along every five.¹¹ As generations move on,

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some issues become stale and some positions become old hat, so teachers and authors need to take ideas to the next level. Instead of “Can Torah be reconciled with evolution?” the issue today is “Can Torah be reconciled with neuroscience?” Instead of “Does the State of Israel have religious significance?,” a key question on the table is “How should Religious Zionism relate to the many facets of contemporary Israeli culture?”¹² Instead of “Does Judaism see validity in other religions?” the question being asked is “What insights can we gain from other religions, despite our position that their core beliefs are false?” Instead of, “What is the rationale for studying secular subjects?” we now have “Can popular culture be meaningfully integrated into an Orthodox life?” And while the question, “Should general morality affect *pesak halakha*?” has always been around, its focus has shifted to the areas of feminism and LGBTQ. In addition, challenges are raised today not just to individual *ikkarim*, but to the very notion of obligatory beliefs.

To take another type of example, one’s teaching of the philosophy of R. Soloveitchik *zt”l* must transcend the basic level of two decades ago, as the Rav’s works are by now better known. The challenge for someone of my generation is keeping up with where students are—gauging what they already know, understanding what they are asking, and grasping how they see the world.

At the same time, certain challenges have receded in my classes. (One person’s experiences, of course, are hardly grounds for generalizing.) I used to hear the question, “What do ‘we’ believe about religious question X?”—as if “we” are a monolith. But students now better understand that disagreement pervades and vitalizes *mahshava*, and that views they learned when they were very young often were and still are subjects of dispute. The tendency to appeal to Rambam or the Rav as a conversation-stopper with respect to philosophical issues, ignoring their *arguments* and those of their critics, is also less in evidence than in the past. I attribute this to, among other elements, the quality of pre-college teachers who teach “doing.”

Concerning recent developments in Jewish philosophy, I’ve already remarked on the rise of analytic Jewish philosophy and the recruitment of *hasidut*. The latter has been connected to postmodernism and relativism. As the case of R. Shagar’s disciples demonstrates, postmodernism has attracted Orthodox Jews who thirst for a reconciliation of Orthodoxy and modernity. These approaches are double-edged swords. On the one hand postmodernism validates all perspectives, and roundly rejects the requirement that perspectives be grounded in “universal” reasons—because, it is said, there is no such thing as universal reasons. Hence postmodernism offers religious commitment immunity from charges of irrationality or

a-rationality and makes room for faith. On the other hand, by validating all perspectives, the relativism that many think is inherent in postmodernism really validates none—everybody is right, and truth is a matter of going along with your community (or your personal subjectivity).

Setting aside the critical question of whether relativism is *religiously* satisfying or has support in our tradition (for example, in *hasidut*), relativism and views that seem to entail it, such as postmodernism, are *philosophically* problematic. For one thing, to be consistent, relativists should admit that relativism is true only relatively; it is one perspective, that's all, and *no better than* anti-relativism. In fact, since most societies (and most people in “our” society who don't stay up to date on philosophical movements) believe in absolute truth, it follows that most societies are right to resist relativism, even by relativism's own lights. Even a relativist's belief that “My society believes X” cannot (for a relativist) be put forth as an absolute, knowable truth. As for the appeal to community beliefs, most of us belong to multiple communities, some of which do not subscribe to our religious views.

Additionally, if relativism is right, a lot of other things that we think we know are in trouble—science, history, morality. Relativism can justify flat-earth theories, quack medicine, Holocaust denial, and neo-Nazism (at least if one's community holds these views). Notably, secular thinkers who espouse relativism frequently do not live its logical corollaries. Even self-proclaimed relativists may have fiercely held views about ethics, and they blast the notion of “alternative facts” when it comes to politics—not acknowledging that they have argued for precisely this concept in their writings and courses.¹³ And what about textbook objections to relativism—that ostensibly contradictory views do not truly conflict (since “X is true” means only “X is true *for my society*”); or that when a society changes (say, by reducing racism) it couldn't be said to have *progressed*, but only to have *changed* or been *replaced*. Admirably, R. Shagar (like Tamar Ross before him) grapples with some of these difficulties and disavows the extreme formulations at which they are directed, but solving the problems seems to me still an uphill endeavor.

Although I don't think my students should be relativists, I do want them to realize that there are different ways of looking at a philosophical question, that sometimes where one stands depends on a particular set of sensibilities, that other cultures have value for us, and that faith is justifiable without reasons.

Goals

As I see it, the role of philosophy in religious life—by which I mean within a life of religious commitment—is to deepen what you believe

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and what you practice. Philosophy helps produce a deeper and richer understanding. Add to this the fact that philosophy often stimulates (albeit not often enough) intellectual excitement and thereby religious excitement; and that, for those trained in Talmud, the dialectical *shakla ve-tarrya* and pondering of hypothetical cases is in itself highly enjoyable. Most important, though, working in Jewish thought connects a person to the *masora* and to God.

As to the goals of teaching: A professor of Jewish Studies created a stir many years ago when she argued that professors in the field should aim to inspire students to become more Jewish. Numerous academics insisted that shouldn't be their aim. But wherever one stands on that issue, I doubt that anyone would dispute that every teacher, be their subject math or political science or history or literature or physics, *should* hope to make his or her students love the subject. I want to produce in my students a passionate love of Jewish philosophy.

* * *

In *TRADITION* almost twenty years ago, I bemoaned the decline of *mahshava* in Modern Orthodox circles after the 1960s.¹⁴ The Modern Orthodox have decidedly returned to the field, especially with the emergence of exciting young thinkers who are carrying matters to the next level.

The discussion above depicts what I do; I am grateful to this symposium for helping me better realize that I do it.¹⁵

¹ See also Charlotte Katzoff, *Human Agency and Divine Will: The Book of Genesis* (Routledge, 2020), and Shira Weiss, *Ethical Ambiguity in the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

² Yitzchak Blau, *Fresh Fruit & Vintage Wine: The Ethics and Wisdom of the Aggada* (Ktav, 2009).

³ Mark Steiner, "Rabbi Israel Salanter as a Jewish Philosopher," *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 9 (2000), 42–57.

⁴ Peter van Inwagen "When Is the Will Free?," *Philosophical Perspectives* 3 (1989), 399–422; C. A. Campbell, "Is 'Freewill' A Pseudo-problem?," *Mind* 60 (October 1951), 441–465, esp. 459–465.

⁵ Norman Lamm, "The Unity Theme: Monism for Moderns," in his *Faith and Doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought*, 3rd expanded ed. (Ktav, 2006), 42–67.

⁶ See Joel Primack and Nancy Ellen Abrams, "Quantum Cosmology and Kabbalah," *Tikkun* 10:1 (January-February 1995), 66–73.

⁷ Note, however, that interpreting philosophers requires "doing" in the form of trying to reconstruct an author's argument. Moreover, perhaps the main force behind the burgeoning of history of philosophy in analytic circles is the conviction

that great historical figures have much to contribute to current “doing” debates— notwithstanding that those earlier philosophers functioned in a markedly different intellectual context.

⁸ See especially the many new essays collected in Samuel Lebens, Dani Rabinowitz, and Aaron Segal (eds.), *Jewish Philosophy in an Analytic Age* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁹ See the fascinating debate between the editors and Tzvi Novick, titled “Jewish Studies and Analytic Philosophy of Judaism,” in Lebens, Rabinowitz, and Segal (eds.), 325–335.

¹⁰ See *Maimonides: Between Philosophy and Halakha— Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s Lectures on the Guide of the Perplexed at the Bernard Revel Graduate School* (1950–51), based on the notes of Rabbi Gerald (Yaakov) Hominick, edited, annotated and with an introduction by Lawrence J. Kaplan (Urim, 2016), especially 75–77. The Revel school is part of Yeshiva University. No doubt many will be surprised that the Rav taught philosophy for a while as well as teaching Talmud.

¹¹ R. Amital taught that, in R. Reuven Ziegler’s paraphrase, “Every generation is granted a new understanding of the Torah, one that is appropriate to the generation and necessary to address its challenges.” See Ziegler, “‘Understand the Years of Each Generation’: A Eulogy for *Mori ve-Rabbi* Ha-Rav Yehuda Amital *zt”l*,” *TRADITION* 43:3 (2010), 88.

¹² The particular form of Religious Zionism that one adopts affects the answer to this question. See Yoel Finkelman, “On The Irrelevance of Religious-Zionism,” *TRADITION* 39:1 (2005), 21–44.

¹³ See also Timothy Williamson, “Morally Loaded Cases in Philosophy,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 93 (November 2019), 159–172.

¹⁴ David Shatz, “Remembering Marvin Fox: One Man’s Legacy to Jewish Thought,” *TRADITION* 36:1 (2002), 59–88.

¹⁵ I thank the symposium editor Mali Brofsky, along with David Berger, Yitzchak Blau, Meira Mintz, Daniel Rynhold, Jeffrey Saks, Aaron Segal, and Alex Sztuden, for their comments.

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“SERVICE OF GOD” AS A UNIQUE DISCIPLINE

“If then you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, to love the Lord your God to serve Him with all your heart and soul” (Deut. 11:13).

“The world stands upon three things: Torah, Divine service, and acts of lovingkindness” (*Avot* 1:2).

Some words of introduction: In the yeshiva high school system, and in many *yeshivot*, the courses that discuss the Creator of the world are often referred to as Jewish thought or *Emuna* (Faith). Yet, while it is certainly laudable that these institutions choose to explore and teach this most important subject, it is actually a mixed blessing. This field of study, which in essence deals with exploring and learning about the infinite God, is inherently different than any other academic undertaking. By definition, the Divine defies definition, and He is impossible to grasp. In the words of the *Zohar*’s *Petah Eliyahu*, “Man’s intellect cannot grasp Him at all.” Therefore, the attempt to explore this subject with the same tools that we use to study other philosophical disciplines may, God forbid, leave a person feeling detached and disconnected, rather than close and connected. This danger is inherent, since delving into the Divine necessarily prompts one to understand, in the words of the great Rabbis who have preceded us, that “the function of knowledge [of God] is that we should know that we do not know.”¹ To my mind, rather than exploring proofs for God’s existence, it is far more appropriate to explore ways to feel His presence. Instead of speaking *about* Him, we must learn to speak *to* Him.

The skills that we need for this subject matter are entirely different than the skill set used to solve math problems or to memorize different philosophical approaches. We need to use our spiritual intelligence, namely the intelligence that helps us perceive that which is hidden and awesome; the human intelligence that is sensitive to the notion that things have an inner essence and need to be deeply intuited; the intelligence that

helps a person use introspection to understand and perceive. Rabbi Nahman of Breslov dealt extensively with this issue, and wrote in one of his teachings: “Know that there is a light that is beyond the soul and the spirit and the emotions, and it is an infinite and blessed light. And even though the intellect cannot perceive it, people still pursue it.... By performing *mitzvot* in a state of genuine happiness, a person can achieve this... and this achievement is the purpose of everything, in the sense of knowing that we do not know.”² It seems that Rabbi Yehuda Halevi also addressed this inner introspection when he wrote: “The Creator, blessed be He... endowed the choicest of His creations with an inner eye that can perceive everything as it really is, in its unchanging existence.”³

The proposal presented below seeks to outline a path, a road that ascends to the house of God by accessing the most hidden, innermost places of man himself, encouraging him to engage, through inner quietening, within a calm atmosphere, the Divine essence within him, the side of him that knows how to connect to the Divine through prayer, listening, joy, and cleaving to God. This is an initial proposal, and its primary purpose is to engender the confidence and belief that our religious skills and abilities can be enhanced and improved. Following on the famous words of the Kotzker Rebbe, “Where is God? Wherever you let Him in,” we therefore seek to offer Him a small opening, “like the eye of a needle,” so that we can enter through it. We strive to follow in the footsteps of the psalmist: “Open for me the gates of righteousness, I will enter them and praise God” (Psalms 118:19).

The commandment to worship God with all of our hearts seems to be one of the most basic and central *mitzvot* in our relationship with God. And yet, astonishingly, most Jews today do not set aside time each day or have an organized strategy for engaging in worship of the heart. It seems that the Sages’ observation that people tend to be flippant towards the things that are most significant and basic in this world, is as true as it ever was, and that the “pillar of Divine service” is treated without proper seriousness.⁴ Ramhal noted in the introduction to *Mesilat Yesharim*: “To the extent that these ideas are well known and their truth obvious to all, so is man’s disregard for them, and forgetfulness is prevalent.... There are but few who devote thought and study to perfection of Divine service, to love, fear, communion, and all other aspects of saintliness.... It is not that they consider this knowledge unessential; if questioned each one will maintain that it is of paramount importance and that one who is not clearly versed in these matters cannot be deemed to be truly wise.”

It is important to emphasize that though many people devote time to studying *emuna*, Jewish thought, *musar*, and *aggada*, this is not the

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solution. “God wants the heart.” He seeks and demands our Divine service. And the gulf that separates “You shall know this today” and “You shall take to your heart” (Deut. 4:39) is immense.

“This is the gate of God, the righteous will enter through it” (Psalms 118:20)

I would like to propose the beginnings of a solution, an approach that can create a framework for restoring Divine service to its proper place as a central element of our religious experience and of our connection with God, in a manner which will enable us to construct a sanctuary within our hearts to His Glory.

What are the central components of this discipline of Divine service? Or, in the words of Rambam: “How can one come to love Him and fear Him?”⁵ I would like to suggest four different focal points that comprise the basis of this proposal. Each of these elements is important in its own right and can be greatly deepened and expanded, and yet, synthesizing these different focal points can open man and his heart to an ever-deepening relationship with the Source of All Life. As indicated, this approach does not seek to teach philosophical ideas and thoughts from the source of “the tree of knowledge”; rather, it is an attempt to cleave to “the tree of life.”

The first focal point is the initial and intimate meeting between man and himself—his body, his emotional world, his soul, and everything that derives from there. This meeting has the capacity to stimulate a person to become more present, and thereby to become more sensitive to, in the Rambam’s terminology, “the truth of existence”;⁶ to a deep realization of the presence of all that exists.

When one has learned to truly recognize the presence of his fellow human being, man can learn to communicate with those who exist beside him in a manner which is accurate and optimal. This comprises the second focal point. Connecting with his fellow, and cultivating this connection to form a group that is committed to ongoing growth, will enable the Divine presence to appear among those friends who are involved in authentic and open discourse.

The third focal point is connecting with God. Once a person has learned to approach his fellow, he will discover that this act also enables the possibility of approaching the One whose favor and countenance we continually seek. When the act of approaching God is predicated upon a capacity for dialogue that is attentive and receptive, it generates deep awareness on the part of the petitioner to God of His requests of him, elevates the entire relationship between him and God to a relationship

marked by genuine intimacy and dialogue, and makes God's presence more palpable in reality.

The fourth focal point is cleaving to God. The act of drawing close to the One God opens the possibility of cleaving to God, a reality where I and Thou are so deeply attached that the sense of separateness that divides us dissipates and fades away—in the spirit of “And they will become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). Everything is transformed into one; words, feelings, indeed all of existence. The gaps, the separateness, the limitations, the *tzimtzum*, and differentiation that enabled the Creation of the world—all of these things revert to their original source, before the creation of separate beings. These are the moments that R. Yehuda Halevi calls “the kernel of time that gives life to all.”⁷ This connection revitalizes the rest of our time, our behaviors, how we choose to behave, speak and interact, and our personalities.

The proposal presented here is a preliminary outline of a possible approach, as well as an invitation to engage in the process described.

“From my flesh I can see the Divine”—For I know

Rabbi Nahman opens his treatise with a quote from the book of Psalms: “For I know that the Lord is great, that our Lord is greater than all gods” (Psalms 135:5). King David here asserts ‘For I know’—he specifically states ‘I know,’ because the greatness of the Creator, blessed be He, cannot be articulated to another, and even within oneself it is impossible to articulate each day what sparkles and beckons to him on that particular day. One cannot express to himself on the morrow the shining and sparkling nature of the greatness of God that he perceived yesterday, and therefore he [King David] said: ‘For I know,’ specifically ‘I know,’ because it defies communication.”

Similarly, it is written in the *Zohar* (1:103), “Her husband is prominent in the gates”—“Each one in accordance with the estimation of his own heart.”⁸ It appears that a person can best encounter the Divine through the image of God that rests inside him, or in the words of the *Zohar* “in the estimation of his heart.” There are things that a person knows only from within himself, in a way that only he himself can understand and recognize. There is no way to explain what I experience when I stand beneath my fig tree in my garden. In that moment, even if my mouth were as full of song as the sea, I would hardly be able to commit to words the feelings and emotions that encapsulate everything that I truly am and experience in that moment. The fact that I am the child of Holocaust survivors is ever-present, as is the exhilaration that the promise of the prophets is being realized in our generation, as well as the

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distinct smell of the fruit blossoming on the budding tree, and the numerous prayers I have recited there, all the times I raised my hands towards the heavens together with the canopy of fig leaves above me, and on and on. What is important is that I cultivate inside myself the capacity to experience these things from within, that I can recognize this unique place where I experience this feeling of connection to God's creations, and I am aware of the one-time and unique nature of these feelings in this moment, and make a place for them in my life. The gap between the way that I first expressed the mysterious word "I" and the inner feelings that stir inside me today when I say that very same word with proper intent, when I proclaim "I gratefully thank you" (*modeh ani*) is like the gap between myself and the One to whom I turn, and thank, and reveal all this to. Through this experience, I recognize that I have not yet completed the journey of identifying and drawing close to all that lies within me.

The outline that lies before you is suitable for children and adults, women and men. Each one on their own path, according to their own place and level, on this path toward getting acquainted with that which lies within him and that he calls by the precious name of "I."

The strategy for developing this perspective includes the following steps:

- Learning how to create an open and calm space (both in time and in place).
- Learning skills for relaxation, introspection, and inner attentive meditation.
- Intensifying our attention and awareness of our inner experience.
- Being alert and open to the inner essence of things.
- Establishing trust and accepting things as they are and at the same time, making space for aspirations.
- Strengthening our awareness of our inner emotional world and learning how to regulate it.

The power of the group—"Those who revere the Lord spoke to one another"

"For each and every Jew has something precious, a *nekuda*, that his friend does not have."⁹ Once a man has learned to be with himself, and even to love this experience, it is time to reach beyond himself towards others. The act of reaching out and connecting to others creates the potential for the Divine presence to rest among them. Social interaction requires learning—exchanging the competition and jealousy that initially arose from our primal struggle for survival, for honesty, deep acceptance of the other, the resolute attempt to learn from another and

accept his unique *nekuda*, and the will to strengthen one another and help each other grow. When all of these things have been internalized and actualized, the group is transformed into a reservoir of healthy aspirations and social resilience, and becomes a never-ending resource. In this group, the skills that were acquired in the first stage of the process are strengthened, and the individual learns to interact faithfully and well with others.

A model for working in a group like this has developed in recent years in the Makor Chaim yeshiva high school in Kfar Etzion and in the Beit Midrash Lehithadshut. These groups operate across the country, with a wide and varied range of participants. The model ensures that those who participate do not limit themselves to a purely academic learning experience, but instead seek to engage in the type of dialogue that necessitates their entering into their inner worlds and into deep educational discourse, and engaging with the lessons and conclusions that derive from this learning. An analysis of the proposed structure¹⁰ for these groups demonstrates this “entering inside: Workgroups begin their analysis by learning traditional sources that have been shaped over many generations, by learning from the experiences of the great leaders and scholars who came before us, who themselves certainly lived what they taught. At the same time, learning must necessarily translate into hands-on and practical work, in order not to suffice with learning for its own sake or a solely intellectual experience.

The strategy for developing this perspective includes the following steps:

- Learning the proper way to speak to one’s fellow. This includes speaking about personal things, speaking from the heart, sharing truthfully, keeping secrets, listening deeply to others, reflecting back, and responding appropriately.
- “Reprove your fellow man” – Offering feedback and being fully present, rather than critiquing.
- “It’s all about camaraderie” – Creating a group that shares a common goal and its own inner language.
- “All of her ways are pleasant” – The work done in the group will impact the way that Torah is learned.
- “Occupy yourself with His Torah” – Torah study together in the group presents an opportunity for work on personal growth and growth as a group.

The centrality of dialogue, speech, supplication, and listening to God—“And God listened and heard”

“When those who revere the Lord spoke to one another, the Lord heard and noted it, and a scroll of remembrance was written at His behest

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concerning those who revere the Lord and esteem His name” (Malakhi 3:16). By establishing a link between God’s attentiveness (“The Lord heard and noted it”) and the unique conversation that transpires among “those who revere the Lord,” this verse demonstrates that such a group has the capacity to cause God to be uniquely and especially attentive to the conversation that takes place in the context of such a group. Thus, the requirement to pray with a *minyan* is now understood not as a peripheral condition, but as a manifestation of another level of experience—a community of people whose members are intrinsically connected to one another.

The two previous stages—man’s recognition of his own soul and his capacity to access it, and man’s honing of his ability to reach out, engage in conversation, and speak with the other allows them to welcome God to be present within their group. Public prayer services and the fact that prayer is formulated in the plural, demonstrate that prayer is not merely a self-centered opportunity to petition God for our personal needs. It is rather an additional stage in the process of man stepping out of his self-focused existence, which is dedicated to his own needs for survival, and instead his expressing his ability to communicate with “that which lies beyond,” that which is sacred, and “He Who was exalted in solitude from before creation, Who is praised, glorified and exalted from the days of old.”¹¹ It is an opportunity to relate and connect to the perspective of the Divine on our existence, and thereby see the wondrous glory of the Creator, and thank Him for all of the good that he bestows upon us, as well as to suggest and ask for improvement in areas where this is possible.

The strategy for developing and improving this area includes the following steps:

- “Know before Whom you stand” – Engaging in proper preparations for prayer, including one’s dress, body, and soul, with fear and love.
- Analysis of prayer – Comprehensive knowledge of all of prayers in the *siddur*, making prayer more familiar and accessible.
- “Go into the ark” – Connecting one’s thoughts to one’s speech, connecting to the words, become aquatinted with different styles and types of prayer.
- The movements of the soul during prayer – Improving the ability to give praise and thanks, learning what it means that one is weak, developing the ability to request, to plead, and to be needy.
- Prayer as listening to the word of God.
- Personal prayer – The ability to compose personal prayers for different situations that one encounters, strengthening our connection to God in alignment with the changing events in our lives.

Cleaving to God – “If, then, you faithfully keep all this instruction that I command you, loving the Lord your God, walking in all His ways, and cleave unto Him” (Deut. 11:22)

“Hence a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24)

“Revere the Lord your God, only Him shall you worship, to Him shall you cleave, and by His name shall you swear” (Deut. 10:20)

Although it seems that this quality of cleaving to God is an exalted and distant level, accessible only to a small number of unique individuals, I believe that it is correct to place it at the top of this pyramid, both in order to know what stands at the pinnacle of our aspirations, as well as to enable people like us to experience it, even if only partially and occasionally.

Cleaving to God means returning everything to its original source, when everything was in the original state of unity. At the moment of Creation, the heavens separated from the earth, the water separated from the land, and people separated from one another and from the rest of God’s creations. *Tzimtzum* both enabled this separation and also left us to perpetually pine and long for a return to the original state, to the source.

“The lower waters cry and say: We want to be before the King, the Holy One, blessed be He” (*Tikunnei Zohar, Tikkun 5 [19:2]*).

When man succeeds in behaving in such a way that enables his soul to occasionally break free from the “I,” the egotistic-shell that envelops it, and he learns to listen to it, to communicate with his fellows in a way that reflects soulful, inner attachment, and to speak with his Creator intimately and openly, it is possible that perhaps when he recites the *Shema* and declares that God is “One” he will be able to fully comprehend, beyond a shadow of doubt, that “there are none but Him” and that the individual who recites the *Shema*, those who surround him, as well as the sun, the moon, the stars, and all animate and inanimate objects—all of God’s creations are One. Even a brief moment of this awareness of ultimate unity reminds man of the absolute truth that all is one, that the individual is rooted in the whole, and that his sensitivity to the whole and his commitment to act on behalf of the community, derive from his awareness of the truth—his understanding of things as they really are.

The strategy for developing and improving this perspective includes the following steps:

- Introspection – Paying close attention to different organisms that exist in this world, such as the human body, or an anthill, a beehive,

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a flock of birds, etc. This close attention develops in one's soul the awareness of the structure of oneness of all being

- Participation – Participating in experiences where the awareness of oneness is strongly present, such as dancing at a wedding, *hitva'aduyot* (spiritual gatherings), communal prayer, communal singing that is directed towards developing a sense of unity, etc. While participating in these events, one should sharpen one's awareness and sense of being part of a larger whole during the experience itself.
- *Imitatio Dei* –“Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina, says: What is the meaning of that which is written: ‘After the Lord your God shall you walk’—is it actually possible for a person to follow the Divine Presence? But hasn’t it already been stated: ‘For the Lord your God is a devouring fire’? Rather, one should follow the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He. Just as He clothes the naked, you should clothe the naked. Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, visits the sick, you should visit the sick. Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, consoles mourners, you should console mourners. Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, buries the dead, you should bury the dead.”¹² Acting out of an awareness that one is imitating God, and negating one's own personal interests that may be at stake, overpowers the sense of personal separation and enables man to act from a sense of devotion to the group, to society, to *tikkun olam*, in total partnership with and in cleaving to God. These types of activities usually involve volunteering on behalf of others in society and those in need (volunteering in one of the many existing charitable organizations and even creating new charitable initiatives).
- Pleasure – “And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. I have learned from my teacher (the Ba'al Shem Tov)... the trait of *yesod* is that a person experiences greater pleasure in Divine service than in any other pleasure. We know that sexual pleasure is the greatest pleasure, and it represents the unification of male and female, and from physicality we can understand spiritual pleasure, when a person clings to the Oneness of the Holy One Blessed be He, who is the source of all pleasures” (*Ba'al Shem Tov*, commentary to the Torah, Genesis 8). One of the indicators of cleaving to God is pleasure. As described by the Ba'al Shem Tov, cleaving to God is the source of all pleasure, and therefore in every type of cleaving and returning of things to their original state, including the pleasure of “and they will become one flesh” pleasure will be present.

In conclusion, this proposal comprises a path, a proposed strategy for both a beginner and one who is more advanced, as each of these stages can be revisited again and again, as one can set aside time to communicate and to reconnect with that which one calls “I,” to meet again with the members of one’s group, and to accept upon oneself the commandment of “Loving your neighbor as yourself,” and thereby attaining the level of “Revere the Lord your God, only Him shall you worship, to Him shall you cling, and by His name shall you swear” (Deut. 10:20).

“You who cling to the Lord your God, are all alive today” (Deut. 4:4).

¹ Special thanks to Dr. Moshe Weinstock, my dear *havruta*, who helped me to commit these ideas to writing.

² *Behinot Olam*, 13:45.

³ *Likutei Moharan* I 20:4.

⁴ *Kuzari*, 4:3

⁵ “What is the meaning of ‘When vileness is exalted among the sons of men’? He said to him: These are matters of utmost importance, which people nonetheless treat with contempt” (*Berakhot* 6b).

⁶ *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 2:2.

⁷ *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 1:1

⁸ *Kuzari*, 3:2–5

⁹ This involves a play on the word “*sha’ar*,” which can mean both “gate” and “to estimate.”

¹⁰ *Likutei Moharan*, I:34.

¹¹ The proposed model to be used in the group setting can be viewed at the website of www.lifnim.co.il (direct link: shorturl.at/lnEFN).

¹² Shabbat morning prayer service.

¹³ *Sota* 14a.

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WHY AND HOW WE STUDY MAHSHAVA

A number of years ago I was asked to teach a two-semester course in *mahshava* to all first-year *semikha* students in the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS) of Yeshiva University. Until 2010, the curriculum for ordination at RIETS focused on Talmud and halakha, in addition to courses in practical rabbinics. The new curriculum I was asked to help develop and teach reflected a new recognition that rabbis need to study *mahshava* as well.¹

Why Study Mahshava?

A few weeks into the semester, one of the students asked me why we were learning *mahshava* in the first place, and I realized that I should have begun by introducing the rationale for the course. (In subsequent years I did exactly that.) When considering this question, I began to realize that the answer would very much affect both the content of the *shiur* as well as its methodology.

An important perspective regarding the reason to study *mahshava* emerges from a passage in *Avot de-Rabi Natan* (ch. 29). It states that someone who knows *aggada* but does not know halakha has not tasted wisdom, while someone who knows halakha but does not know *aggada* has not tasted fear of sin. Evidently, the goal of the study of *mahshava* (which I take as *aggada*, broadly defined), is to inspire fear of Heaven. The source continues with a metaphor: one who is familiar with *aggada* but not halakha is similar to an unarmed warrior; one who is familiar with halakha but not *aggada* is similar to an armed weakling; yet, one learned in both is like an armed warrior.

Aggada builds strength of character. It transforms a weakling into a warrior eager to engage. However, he remains unprepared—a soldier without a sword, lacking the tools to fight without halakha. Halakha, notes R. Avraham Yitzchok Bloch (*Shiurei Da'at*, p. 142), is precise, like a sharp sword; if *aggada* inspires spiritual strength, halakha informs a person of how to act—how and when to use this strength.

However, even if the primary goal of *aggada* is motivation, it does not merely relate inspiring tales or simplistic teachings. One cannot love or fear God if they do not know God. *Aggada* therefore aims to introduce us to our creator (*Sifre, Eikev* 49). It inspires us through its profound wisdom and insightful observations about God, Torah, and the world. It is rich, complex, and poetic. Like halakha, if it is to be correctly understood, it must be studied with rigor and sophistication.

Nevertheless, because the primary goal of studying *mahshava* is to instill fear of Heaven, it follows that certain areas of study are more relevant than others. Rambam makes this point when discussing the coming of the messiah: “One should not occupy himself at length with the *aggadot* and *midrashim* that deal with these and similar matters, nor should he consider them of prime importance, for they bring one to neither awe nor love [of God]” (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 12:2).

According to Rambam, emphasis should be placed on principles of faith and on matters that promote love and fear of God.² Indeed, for Rambam, the stakes are extremely high as he writes that the study of *yesodei ha-Torah* (the principles of the Torah) plays an important role in the fulfillment of five major *mitzvot* which require us to possess fundamental knowledge of God:³

1. *Anokhi*, “I am Hashem, your God who took you out of Egypt” (Exodus 20:2), which requires of us to know that He exists.
2. *Lo yihyeh*, “You shall have no other Gods before Me” (Exodus 20:3), which requires us to not consider the idea that there is another divinity besides God.
3. *Shema Yisrael*, “Hear, Israel, Hashem is our God, Hashem is one” (Deut. 6:4), which calls on us to know of His oneness and accept His *mitzvot* (see *Sefer ha-Mitzvot, Aseh* 1).
4. *Abavat Hashem*, “And you shall love Hashem, your God” (Deut. 6:5), the mitzva to love Him.
5. *Yirat Hashem*, “Fear Hashem, your God” (Deut. 6:13), the obligation to fear Him.

Thus, according to Rambam, studying *mahshava* (our word, not his) goes well beyond personal spiritual inspiration—it is a foundational religious obligation.

What to Study?

The Talmud informs us that a person is most likely to remember and be affected by what he or she learns if they study what they are interested in

or enjoy (*ma she-libo hafetz*). Accordingly, educators should teach material that stimulates their students.⁴ I have found that it is often easier to engage certain students through the study of *mahshava* than through the study of Talmud. Allowing *talmidim* to choose their area of study proves valuable and effective.

However, engagement cannot be the only criteria. Despite the fact that some audiences may be enamored by discussions concerning the messianic era, for example, as we saw in Rambam, emphasis must nevertheless be given to texts that promote love and fear of God. More precisely, one must also ensure that his or her students have a correct conception of the nature of God itself.

Remarkably, *mahshava* classes frequently discuss many interesting but secondary topics, while omitting what may be the most important topic of all—God. Indeed, Rambam (*Moreh Nevukhim* 1:35) stresses the importance of teaching even young children about the nature of God, according to their level of understanding. Moreover, as children grow up, their understanding of God must also mature. Sometimes, even as students develop a sophisticated understanding of the world around them, they maintain the same infantile perspective on God to which they were introduced as youngsters. If our students' conception of God is rooted in Uncle Moishy's song "Hashem is Here, Hashem is There," we ought not be surprised if they reject the God of their youth when they reach graduate school. Indeed, in an essay entitled "The Pangs of Cleansing," R. Kook notes that the source of atheism is often rooted in an immature understanding of God (*Orot*, p. 128). Or, as has often been quoted by contemporary religious thinkers, "The God whom you reject, I don't believe in either."

How should we teach about God? R. Moshe Isserles (Respona 7) writes that there are two primary avenues to do this, philosophy (i.e. attempting to understand God through the intellect as was done in classical Jewish philosophy) and Kabbala, and both are legitimate. As R. Kook in an essay entitled "*Le-Ahduto shel ha-Rambam*" notes, the Jewish people have accepted both of these approaches as the words of the Living God (*Ma'amarei ha-Ra'aya* Vol. 1). Accordingly, one may choose to study one or the other, though ideally one should pursue both, as this will give a person the most complete perspective possible.

How to Study?

Unfortunately, topics in *mahshava* are often addressed tangentially or in response to a student's particular questions. I believe that from an educational perspective, neither of these approaches is ideal.

My wife, an experienced high school Judaic studies teacher, told me that her students once asked her why they don't study important topics such as free will, the purpose of *mitzvot*, and reward and punishment. In response, she demonstrated that they had indeed addressed each of these issues extensively in the course of their study of *Sefer Devarim*. Moreover, she showed them that they even remembered what they had learned. Nevertheless, they still did not feel that they had studied these issues because they had not done so as stand-alone topics in a Jewish philosophy curriculum.

This highlighted for me the importance of teaching *mahshava* topically and systematically. Similarly, when rabbis address important theological issues tangentially, as part of a sermon, or even while studying a particular *sefer*, this diminishes how effectively these fundamental topics are processed. Instead, these matters should be studied and taught as distinct subjects. When we teach halakha, for example, we typically begin with Scripture and continue through talmudic sources, *Rishonim*, *Aharonim*, and contemporary authorities, concluding with practical applications and inspiration. Why don't we do the same with Jewish philosophy?

At other times, theological questions are indeed tackled directly, as a response to a question posed by a student. However, because of this context, our answers often sound apologetic. An advantage of studying an entire *sugya* is that this problem is solved because we are addressing the question holistically. For example, let's presume I am asked to discuss the Torah's view on evolution or the age of the universe. I should ask myself, of what larger *sugya* is this a part? Of course, there are many *sugyot* related to this issue, but one of the most significant is the question of which conditions justify deviation from the literal meaning of the text. Instead of immediately addressing the questions relating to evolution, we study the question of when the Torah should be understood literally, and when a non-literal interpretation is appropriate. *Rishonim* address this question extensively, and an analysis of their views enables us to address these contemporary questions in a non-apologetic and sophisticated manner. Of course, on occasion we have to answer questions immediately and succinctly. However, when our students appreciate the systematic structure of our curriculum, they will trust us when we say that we will return to a topic later and fully explore a particular challenge.

Studying in this way helps students and congregants address many of the heretical viewpoints to which they have been exposed. Many problematic ideas stem from superficial understanding. Often unsophisticated understanding leads people to greater errors, such as believing that the Torah contradicts morality or science. Likewise, superficial understanding

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of Talmud and *Rishonim* may lead people to believe that they contradict one of Rambam's principles of faith. However, careful analysis generally reveals this is not so. Likewise, shallow interpretation of *Humash* and Midrash may lead otherwise intelligent people to believe, for example, that Esau was an innocent victim duped by his sinister twin. Slow, careful, and methodical investigation, in my experience, helps people see the beauty, complexity, profundity, relevance, and truth of Torah.

Addressing Questions We Cannot Satisfactorily Answer

My comments in the previous section emerge from my own experience, which is primarily in adult education. For the most part, I have taught university and *semikha* students, as well as congregants in my synagogue or in scholar-in-residence programs. I am aware that the approaches I have described will not work for all audiences. This is especially true in a time when students seem to have shorter and shorter attention spans, demanding soundbites and tuning out information that seems long-winded or too complex. It may be that under certain circumstances the opposite approach is called for. Sometimes it is preferable to not introduce complexity if it will leave the student confused and unsatisfied. A simple approach, even if it is incomplete, is better than a sophisticated answer that invites rejection.

Rambam in his introduction to *Perek Helek* records a story that illustrates this point. There was once a great scholar, the *Tanna* Antigonus of Sokho, who taught a very important principle—one should not serve God merely to receive reward, but rather one should serve Him out of love (*Avot* 1:3). Among his pupils were two intelligent people who were troubled by this message. They felt that it only made sense to work hard if one can expect to achieve reward. Their names were Zadok and Boethus. They misunderstood their teacher. Of course, ultimately there will be reward, unimaginable in its greatness. However, ideally one should not be motivated by this promise of remuneration. Sadly, their misunderstanding led them to form deviant sects of Judaism that ultimately caused great harm.

In response to this event, Rambam suggests, *Avot* (1:11) teaches, “Scholars, be careful with your words lest you incur the penalty of exile.” Rambam writes that Antigonus attempted to teach the people an important lesson. One should seek the truth simply because it is true (see *Hilkhot Teshuva* Chapter 10). But this sophisticated and complex lesson was above the comprehension of some. They would have been better off serving God faithfully, even if they were motivated by the incentives of reward

and punishment. True, this is not ideal service, but it is far better than no service at all. Moreover, it does inspire growth, and eventually these people may have reached the goal of service of God out of love.

The Mishna informs us that a teacher who is not aware of his student's limitations is at fault. The educational message must be one the students can understand and that will promote growth in their service of God. While one can never falsify the Torah, when we present a message beyond the scope of our students' understanding, we stunt their growth and misguide them. Sophistication is not always the solution; in some cases, studying the *sugya* may leave a student confused, whereas a brief "elevator pitch" would have left them inspired.

Ra'avad (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 5:5) warns against raising questions we cannot adequately answer. *Sefer Hasidim* (1061) rules that one should omit a teaching if this omission is more beneficial than disclosure. Every time we raise an issue we must wonder, as did R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, might my teachings cause more harm than good? Perhaps omitting this topic would better serve my larger audience (even if it may leave one or two students frustrated)?⁵ Just as in halakha, where there are rulings which may not be publicized to the larger population (*halakha ve-ein morin kein* and *davar zeh assur le-omro bifnei am ha'aretz*), so too in matters of *mahshava* there may be topics that we are better off choosing not to address.

As a teacher, I am optimistic. Intuitively, I tend to feel that shedding light on a topic and openly discussing it always helps. But this is not always the case. However, generally speaking, hiding things is no longer possible. People end up hearing the "burning questions," one way or another. And "all the answers" are readily available online. Thus, openness is often the only option, and avoidance and omissions make educators appear as if they have something to hide.

What then do we do about questions when we believe that our answers will not satisfy our students? We must teach them to live with the questions. Nobody became a heretic from reading R. Akiva Eiger's *biddushim*, even though he leaves many questions unresolved. The same can be true with regard to philosophical questions. In the words of R. Aharon Lichtenstein: "What I received from all my mentors, at home or in yeshiva, was the key to confronting life, particularly modern life, in all its complexity: the recognition that it was not so necessary to have all the answers as to learn to live with the questions."⁶

It is easy to convey information. But that is not our primary task. More important than teaching Torah knowledge is bringing our students closer to God. Teaching *mahshava* can be a significant way to advance this goal. Remaining ever mindful of this goal helps determine the content

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and methodology of our teaching. Ultimately, however, we cannot do this work for our students. Success will depend upon their own hard striving and growth. What we can do is share our passion, show them how studying Torah in general, and *mahshava* in particular, has inspired us to seek closeness to our Creator, and pray that they too will see the beauty and truth of Torah.

¹ Interestingly, several decades earlier, R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik advocated for mandatory study of philosophy for rabbinical students. See Nathaniel Helfgot (ed.), *Community, Covenant and Commitment: Selected Letters and Communications* (Ktav Publishing House, 2005), 100–101.

² Likewise, R. Dessler (*Mikhtav me-Eliyahu*, vol 4, p. 353) writes that there is no purpose to studying *aggadot* if a person is left unaffected by their study.

³ *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 4:16.

⁴ *Avoda Zara* 19a.

⁵ Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters*, #19 (Feldheim, 1995), 333.

⁶ R. Aharon Lichtenstein, “The Source of Faith is Faith Itself” in *Jewish Action* 53:1 (Fall 1992) and reprinted most recently in *TRADITION* 47:4 (2014), 188–191.