

A JOURNAL  
of Orthodox Jewish Thought

# TRADITION



**Special Tribute to  
Rabbi Shalom  
Carmy**

**Editor (2005-2019)**

***Divrei Shalom:*  
Collected Editor's Notes**

# TRADITION

A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought

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*DIVREI SHALOM:*  
COLLECTED EDITOR'S NOTES  
(2005-2019)

Avraham Wein  
*Guest Editor*



DEDICATED WITH DEEP RESPECT AND ADMIRATION  
IN TRIBUTE TO OUR  
TEACHER, MENTOR, COLLEAGUE, AND FRIEND

**RABBI SHALOM CARMY**

IN GRATITUDE FOR HIS INSPIRATION AND EDUCATION

IN RECOGNITION OF HIS FECUND PEN,  
PERSPICACIOUS MIND, TRENCHANT WRITING, AND  
THOUGHTFUL CREATIVITY

IN GRATEFUL APPRECIATION FOR HIS YEARS OF  
DEDICATION TO  
*TRADITION: A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX JEWISH*  
THOUGHT

AS

EDITOR (2005-2019)  
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Yitzchak Blau is the Associate Editor of *Tradition* and Rosh Yeshiva of *Yeshivat Orayta*.

## INTRODUCTION

**R**abbi Shalom Carmy has been one of the most articulate and insightful voices in our community for decades. However, not all readers find his prose easygoing because it requires work. In ways similar to his classroom technique, which for nearly a half-century has encouraged the best young minds of American Modern Orthodoxy to encounter ideas encouraging growth as “thinking religious individuals,” his writing can be challenging – yet “according to the effort is the reward.” Since some readers are discouraged by their first encounter with R. Carmy’s longer and more programmatic essays, the best introduction to his thought might be these shorter and more focused columns. I hope that my brief preface will help set the stage for such entry.

These essays initially appeared as editor’s columns in the RCA journal *Tradition* between Spring 2005 and Winter 2018. This is an appropriate time to thank R. Carmy for his many years of devoted service to the journal. He has served on the board and in various editorial capacities for more than four decades and, in addition to the columns appearing here, published more than twenty lengthier articles in *Tradition*. It is hard to think of others who made a comparable contribution to this journal.

The range of sources utilized by our author is remarkable. Of course, traditional rabbinic luminaries such as Rav Soloveitchik and Rav Kook make frequent appearances as do the great figures of Western culture such as Samuel Johnson and John Stuart Mill. However, R. Carmy’s erudition extends even further. Where else can one find Kojak’s debate with Freud about Oedipus (47:3), the use of sociologist Georg Simmel to understand a Bob Dylan song (49:4), and a story about a leper hospital listening to a baseball game on the radio (40:3), all in the quest for religious growth? Wisdom is a precious commodity and R. Carmy finds it where it exists.

A reader will find several moving eulogies and character portraits within. One column captures Rav Lichtenstein’s blend of obedience to and joy at fulfillment of the divine command (48:2-3). Another column studies the life of Rav Ovadia Yosef and tries to come to terms with his

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harsh public statements (46:4). One will also find a loving tribute to R. Carmy's mother (41:1) and an analysis of the impressive legacy of Menachem Begin (46:1).

The theme of religious responses to suffering appears many times. R. Carmy notes that one child dying of leukemia is a much more difficult religious question than conflicts between science and *Humash* (39:2). He also questions whether it is appropriate to see certain difficult aspects of the human condition in a humorous vein (45:3). In general, he moves us towards thinking more about our relationship with our Creator and less about the precise nature of divine accounting (40:4). One insightful essay asks whether a religious emphasis on suffering, perhaps more prevalent in the Christian tradition, leads to certain dangers of masochism, vengefulness, or passivity in the face of injustice (43:3).

The importance of the individual is another recurring theme. Analysis of Rav Soloveitchik's interpretation of Korah's rebellion reveals the need to combine halakhic objectivity with the subjective personality of the individual (49:1). Another column notes that the halakhic exemptions during a time of war make no sense from a utilitarian calculus unless one understands the worth of each individual person (39:4). In a short symposium about television, R. Carmy states that cultivating one's individual path in Torah leads to the joy and excitement that enables productive use of time (45:1).

Individuality goes together with the cultivation of religious inwardness. A study of an old speech by Rabbi Emanuel Rackman enables R. Carmy to show the need to balance law with a development of the ethical personality (44:3). A column on "legalistic man" highlights the problem of those who define their religious obligations in purely technical and legalistic terms (46:2). Perhaps the inwardness also connects to the idea that intimate feelings do not lend themselves to outward expression. R. Carmy wrote two columns about the advantages of an emotional reticence that is far moved from the exhibitionism of modern society (43:2, 44:1).

The endeavor of Talmud Torah makes several appearances. One essay calls for painstaking pursuit of the profundity of Torah instead of the search for novelty and entertainment, be they of a critical or pious variety (41:4). Another studies what we mean when refer to "the Bible as literature" and offers an important distinction between character and plot based works. It turns out that *Tanakh* incorporates both elements (47:3). A third essay clarifies the importance of tradition in our ongoing efforts to understand the Torah (43:1).

Finally, a few individual columns jump to our attention. He addresses the value of following sports and the potential effect of educators making cynical comments about being a sports fan (42:2). Another essay contrasts

*Yitzchak Blau*

those standing for genuine ideals with those primarily concerned with institutional loyalty (47:2). An important column discusses the rewards of an educational career despite the lack of financial benefits (42:1). The reader will also gain insight from an analysis of rabbis speaking about political matters (47:1) and from an essay discussing the value of the constructive endeavor even if one is only rebuilding what was torn down (39:3).

I would like to thank R. Mark Dratch and the Rabbinical Council of America for initiating this project, R. Effy Unterman for co-chairing the dinner, R. Jeffrey Saks for his comments on this preface, and Avraham Wein for doing all the dirty work with great dedication. I hope this volume will inspire many readers to discover and enjoy the world of Rabbi Carmy's wisdom.



## THE CONTINUUM OF TIME AND RESPONSIBILITY

Volume 39:1 Spring 2005

The most influential essay in the history of this journal was Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's "The Lonely Man of Faith." Here is what I wrote, in honor of the fortieth anniversary of its appearance for an Internet symposium at [www.atid.org](http://www.atid.org):

\* \* \*

Of most of the friends who changed my life I retain indelible first impressions. The same with books: my initial encounter with the Rav's *U-Vikkashtem mi-Sham* and *The Halakhic Mind* is as alive to me today as the first *shiurim* I heard from the Rav. I have no such image of first looking into *Lonely Man of Faith*. Perhaps that is because I did not so much read the essay as inhale it. I came to the Rav's later writings as a mature student, even an insider, familiar with the terrain, yet ready to be seized with a wild surmise, testing my anticipation of his thought against what he actually said. I studied *Halakhic Man*, probably soon after swallowing *Lonely Man of Faith*, seeking a framework for thought. But *Lonely Man of Faith* did not swim into my ken like a new and unexpected planet, as it did for many other readers. I opened the journal knowing what I wanted to find, and I found it.

I didn't need the Rav to tell me that Judaism affirmed the quest for dignity and worldly mastery: by then everyone took that for granted, with only the diehard theological liberals insisting on the canard that Orthodoxy was hostile to technology. It was equally evident that such mastery does not assure that existence is worthwhile. I didn't need the Rav to tell me that the individual, the in-depth personality, mattered: I had decided that on my own. I wanted the Rav to vindicate this truth to a community that seemed to have forgotten the individual and his loneliness in the iron collectivism of Zionist ideology or the stuffy conformism of bourgeois spirituality. I wanted the Rav to proclaim what was for me the obvious truth: that human culture, even a culture influenced by religion, is not the same thing as religion:

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Faith is experienced not as a product of some emergent evolutionary process, or as something that has been brought into existence by man's creative cultural gesture, but as something which was given to man when the latter was overpowered by God (105).

These dominant features of the Rav's worldview remain axiomatic to my own thinking and experience. Yet these are not the only salient themes of *Lonely Man of Faith*. Much space is devoted to the manner in which majestic man and the man of faith construct their respective communities. These ideas, alas, seemed hopelessly beyond me: "the community of the committed became, *ipso facto*, a community of friends—not of neighbors or acquaintances" (68). Friendship, in those days, I could aspire to, but a "community" of friendship, deriving from shared commitment, struck me as a metaphysical myth. Relations between individuals were real to me, as was, of course, the relationship to God. But the community, in the abstract, seemed too remote an entity to support real assent. Though I had no trouble embracing what others found appalling—namely, the Rav's brutal recognition of loneliness that is not assuaged by social belonging—his positive social vision of fulfillment within the covenantal community sounded like an impossible ideal, reminiscent of the rarefied standards of the Buberian I-Thou.

What was intangible and therefore inconceivable to my teen-aged self later became essential to my adult philosophy. My conversion to belief in the organic aspects of social existence in general, and *Keneset Yisrael* in particular, was intellectual before it corresponded to my experience. Surely the Rav's teaching, both in *Lonely Man of Faith* and in "The Community" (the first of the Rav's writings which I had the privilege of editing) played a role in this development. However, my theological maturation in this area, as in others, probably owed more to life than it did to books. And here I cannot forget how the Rav's life mirrored his writings. The more one observed him first hand, the more palpable was his full identification with the vocation of the *masora* community, dedicated to the transmission of Torah, a living link between the past and the future. It was evident in the public passion of the classroom and the lecture podium; it was revealed privately in the deliberate way he extracted every ounce of energy from his by then fragile body, and not least in his lack of preoccupation with the prerogatives due his stature and his status.

Gradually this identification came to resonate in my own life as well. Precisely because I now look back, as I could not in my youth, at a

life remarkably blessed with many valued friends and loyal colleagues, I nevertheless know that loneliness can accompany a variety of satisfying social relations. I am no longer sure of the Rav's dictum that confession provides relief for the agitated soul. For individual attachments, however intense, may fade with the passage of time. Death, distance, disappointments divide us; sometimes we outgrow others, often they outgrow us. In the fullness of our days, the abiding community, committed to the ongoing transmission of Torah, is as vivid as the faces that have meant so much to me as individuals.

When I return to *Lonely Man of Faith* today, I recognize myself as much in the passages that were once alien to me as in the words that inflamed me almost four decades ago:

The individual member of the covenantal faith community feels rooted in the past and related to the future. . . . He is not a hitchhiker suddenly invited to get into a swiftly traveling vehicle which emerged from nowhere and from which he will be dropped into the abyss of timelessness. . . . Covenantal man begins to find redemption from insecurity and to feel at home in the continuum of time and responsibility which is experienced by him in its endless totality (72).

Thus a great work, like a great teacher, is measured by its power to reward repeated study with new insight and to stretch the reader—you and me—beyond our initial intellectual and spiritual limitations.

\* \* \*

As a journal of Orthodox Jewish thought, *Tradition* represents the abiding community whom the Rav continues to address. It is in full awareness of the continuum of time and responsibility that I undertake the editorship. I am not alone. My living predecessors, Rabbis Norman Lamm, Emanuel Feldman, and Michael Shmidman, have been extravagant in their encouragement, like the RCA leadership, personified by our President Kenneth Auman and the Executive Vice President Basil Herring. My revered mentor Rabbi Walter Wurzbarger, of blessed memory, is constantly present in my thoughts. I enjoy the support of our long-serving Associate Editors, Hillel Goldberg, Shneur Leiman, Joel Wolowelsky, and Aaron Levine, whose appointment will enhance our prestige in the realm of halakha and Jewish law.

Even more important for the future of *Tradition* is the appearance

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of new names on the Board. If you do not yet know the work of Yitzchak Blau, Erica Brown, Mark Gottlieb, Yamin Levy, Yona Reiss, Jeffrey Saks, and Reuven Ziegler, you will have the opportunity to make their acquaintance, along with that of many erudite, creative, and committed younger thinkers waiting in the wings. Yaakov Elman and Avraham Walfish are no less part of the youth movement, to the extent that youth is measured by the ability to master new ideas and ask new questions. Several of the new editors live in Israel: we intend to continue Rabbi Shmidman's efforts to integrate Israeli contributors and topics in our pages. Yonatan Miller is invaluable in his role as Editorial Assistant. The *Tradition* website, under the guidance of Rabbi Yonatan Kaganoff, should promote timely interaction. As members of our editorial team, these men and women will determine our direction, not only through their own writing, but even more so by exercising their judgment and initiative.

Perhaps the greatest intellectual deficiency of our community, and not its least spiritual shortcoming, is the disconnection between the world in which we study Torah and engage in religious behavior, and the cultural and material world we inhabit. And all too often, our community suffers from the disconnection between our academic Jewish pursuits, in the yeshivot and the universities and the synagogues, and the human being who dreams and thinks and fears and sings and enjoys and suffers. We feel disappointment and malaise, acutely or vaguely, that our religion tends to be so parochial and impersonal. At *Tradition* we hope to expand our scope, reviewing, from a Torah perspective, and responding to developments of religious significance in the academic and cultural domains and to challenges arising from the public square. And we also hope to find room for the voice of the lonely individual and his or her tales of thinking and living, in solitude and in company.

With that end in mind, we will, from time to time, use these pages to talk to you informally about questions that should be at the forefront of our striving to become thinking religious individuals and participants in a joint religious and intellectual endeavor. This column is a first effort. I look forward to years of study and work together.

**“A RELIGION CHALLENGED BY SCIENCE”—AGAIN?  
A REFLECTION OCCASIONED BY  
A RECENT OCCURRENCE**

Volume 39:2 Summer 2005

**E**ven as a youngster who counted himself pre-med, and a rationalist to boot, I doubt that I ever thought the great debates on cosmology and natural history and religion more than entertaining sideshows. If the Torah were intended primarily as a textbook in these subjects, it should have been a lot more explicit and detailed regarding scientific data and theory. The real questions were elsewhere, I knew intuitively: as yet without the benefit of a philosophical education, I sensed that we are human beings summoned to interact with our Creator before we are scientists. If God revealed Himself to us, it would be to guide us in confronting the mysteries of the human soul and the strange vicissitudes of human history rather than to utter oracular pronouncements about natural science that would be deciphered millennia later, not without the benefits of cleverness and hindsight. It seemed to me that those who devoted inordinate time to potential conflicts between the Torah and specific scientific propositions were missing the point of religious life or trying to evade it.

As a young adult, with my present religious convictions more or less in place, I had the privilege of spending a few hours with an eminent physician-scientist, well known as a lay luminary of Orthodoxy. He had recently published on Darwinism and religion and similar subjects. No sooner had we been introduced than, as if reading my mind, he exclaimed: “Don’t think that I care much about this stuff. I lecture on it because I’m asked to; I publish because there’s a demand. For me, a real religious question is a child dying of leukemia.” I understood completely.

This does not mean that one’s experience of science—and its interaction with theology—is irrelevant to religious matters, or that it has no role to play in the quest for religious truth. We do seek God in the realm of science, sometimes without being fully aware that we are doing so. In our contemporary situation, we ought to ponder how the developments of modern science affect our quest for God in ways that are different from our conventional assumptions.

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Take one example: Most of us are familiar with R. Bahye Ibn Pakkuda's version of the argument from design. When you find ink distributed to form sentences, you can safely infer that this is not the result of an accidentally spilled inkwell, but rather the product of intelligent design. Many educators embrace this argument. Often, continuing the tradition associated, at its best, with 18<sup>th</sup> century thinkers like Archdeacon Paley, they illustrate the principle by pointing to cases where the parts of an organism are wonderfully adapted to its function.

Despite what you hear from the bastions of academia, such arguments are alive. Some scientists continue to regard the intricacies of the human eye and other wondrous phenomena as evidence of a directing intelligence. Recent philosophers have devoted attention to the so-called anthropic principle, which argues that natural evolution is unlikely to have produced creatures capable of uncovering the laws of nature. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the revolution in biological thinking originating with Darwin has enabled scientists to devise plausible naturalistic explanations of unusual biological facts. Philosophical naturalists firmly believe that they will eventually produce compelling explanations of all such phenomena. Insofar as the arguments revolve around the probability that a particular event could have happened according to one story or the other, conclusiveness is lacking. The straightforward briskness of the inkwell argument is not available to us.

None of this changes the fact that many religious people—and I include myself among them—experience wonder when we contemplate examples of adaptation, regardless of how they may be explained, and this apprehension of the wonders of creation enhances our awareness of God. Despite all the philosophy I have digested since then, my sense of wonder is as immediate today as it was almost half a century ago, when I heard my father *z"l* marvel at the fact that “this piece of flesh can see, and that piece of flesh can hear.” Indeed, it is precisely when I learn how various organs that seem perfectly intended for their present function may have evolved in a purely fortuitous manner, as with the panda's “thumb” about which Steven Jay Gould wrote his famous essay, that I am most fascinated and awestruck by the strange twists and turns of creation.

What does change, for those of us who have studied a little science, or have heard about it second hand, is that the road to God through the biological world and the knowledge of that world does not turn up at the end of a proof, as a clinching inference from a string of inferences and information. Instead, even when it emerges from study, it expresses an immediate sense of being overwhelmed by the grandeur of God.

In crucial respects, the experience to which I allude is more akin to an aesthetic apprehension than to the kind of metaphysical result that many of us expect. And while the customary argument for design carries a certain tranquility about it: all is harmonious and well-ordered—“God’s in His heaven, all’s right with the world”—I speak of an experience that is frequently disturbing and even frightening. We find God, not only in a neat teleological account, but also (perhaps especially) in phenomena that fascinate and frighten all at once. In the language of aesthetic theory, when we meet God in the overwhelming, non-teleological aspects of nature, we encounter the sublime rather than the beautiful, and I do not believe that the development of this contrast in the work of Burke and Kant, among others, in the same period when the harmonious conception of nature began to crack, is entirely coincidental. In existential terms, we are closer to the bedside of the child with leukemia than to the realm of late 18<sup>th</sup> century teleological theodicies parodied so effectively by Karl Barth.

From a Jewish perspective, of course, there is nothing particularly modern about all this. The special occasions for which the Mishna ordained *berakhot* do not pick out the purposeful displays of God’s creative power. If anything, while perfection of adaptation is an appropriate theme in the *asher yatsar* that follows the call of nature, it is often in the odd and frightening that the Halakha bids us bless Him: gales, thunder, fulgurations, comets, and the like; mountains, seas, deserts, and rivers; exceptionally beautiful people, but also those of abnormal appearance and anomalous form. Psalms celebrate the orderly governance of nature. Yet when God finally appeared to Job from the whirlwind, He exhibited His mastery of nature less in the purposeful arrangement of the cosmos than in His creation of bewildering natural processes and monstrous beings like Behemoth and Leviathan. I know that some people, despite having recited these blessings all their lives, will find the notion that we encounter God in these experiences puzzling. That is why thinking seriously about them is important.

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These are the types of discussions we should be having about science and our religious world. Notwithstanding which, the fact remains that many believers are still pitching their tents at the old battlegrounds, agonizing endlessly, and sometimes with real pain, over the acceptability

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of natural history and its incompatibility with a literal reading of Genesis. Many young people, unprepared for such challenges, feel intellectually helpless when interrogated by curious and sometimes hostile outsiders. Though I doubt that any compilation of localized *terutsim*, clever as they may be, can satisfy, without a grasp of the fundamental difference between the knowledge revealed by Torah and the knowledge discovered by science, the inquiry does not seem illegitimate. I surely don't think my *emuna* was harmed by the innocent teenaged hours spent reading about these controversies and attending lectures intended to resolve them.

Others are not as tolerant. As of this writing, there is much sympathy for a young *talmid hakham* who has suffered calumny because he published his attempts to relieve the intellectual tension many feel in connection with these matters. I cannot evaluate his efforts, which are, as noted, peripheral to my major interests. It is generally agreed, however, that his work is earnest and well intentioned, his approach steeped in piety and very much within the bounds of respected Jewish thought. Like most books in an imperfect world, they presumably could be improved upon: in most areas of Torah, such open debate is welcomed. Harmless, then, at worst; helpful, perhaps even inspiring and conducive to religious growth, at best.

I have not studied the comminations directed against the works of this teacher of Torah. Those I have perused fail to undermine my initial positive impression. The virulence of the denunciations, combined with the apparent thinness of the reasoning behind them, caused embarrassment, consternation, and genuine crisis among many who had previously been wont to ascribe authoritative centrality to the pronouncements of contemporary Torah sages, even as they inspired chortling among those "modern" Orthodox pleased to highlight their alienation from their more rigorous brethren to the right. In any event, the objections seemed so sweeping, so censorious of so much that we consider mainstream Orthodox thought, that I am led to believe that the true difficulty is not being stated openly.

The most charitable understanding of all this, from my limited perspective, is that those who were quick to condemn, and those who joined the chorus of condemnation reluctantly and unhappily, are motivated by the fervent desire to safeguard wholesome belief. Of course, it is obvious to almost all of you that ignoring or anathematizing standard science is neither a live option for us, nor is it an honest one. The crisis currently affecting many participants in the "yeshiva world" indicates the

risk of bad faith in adopting a policy of avoidance today. In this respect I stand with the “modernists.” Yet because I am convinced that preoccupation with such matters is theologically and religiously unhealthy, I can therefore understand, if not endorse, the intuition that avoidance is the best policy and that this end is best achieved, according to insider opinion, through a total, ruthless, and relentless embargo on all discussion, however innocuous.

Let me make it clear that when I criticize giving too much attention to the standard *sugyot* of conflict between science and religion, I do not mean to imply that such tensions or contradictions are impossible, or that correct theological belief is unimportant, or that it is good for us to compartmentalize our lives. Here is what *Maran ha-Rav* Joseph Soloveitchik *z”l* wrote (in a treatise on the philosophy of science!):

It would be absurd to maintain that the interference of organized religion with scientific advancement was prompted by political or practical motives alone. The conflict arose rather from the essential cognitive interests of a religion challenged by science. The controversy did not rage so much about single scientific propositions as it did about the entire world perspective which was incommensurable with the basic religious cognitive outlook. Religion could not (and will not) recognize the scientifically postulated universe as its own.

*(The Halakhic Mind 119)*

Even a cursory reader of this passage—and of the book from which it is taken—will grasp that the Rav is not interested in simple affirmations or negations on the part of religion towards science. It would take a great deal of intellectual labor to unpack the ramifications of his position—what he says, and what he studiously avoids saying. Those interested in his utilization of modern (mid-20<sup>th</sup> century) evolutionary biology can consult his posthumous *The Emergence of Ethical Man* (recently edited by Michael Berger). But he definitely lends no support to the notion that religious belief must passively conform itself to the scientific *weltanschauung*.

The “Modern Orthodox” community has its own problems with internecine politics, and little reason to gloat over the deficiencies of others. But the premature exclusion of legitimate discussion is not our besetting temptation. To the contrary, members of our community are more likely to fall into apathy regarding the distinctive cognitive commitments of Judaism. For believers firmly committed to Orthodoxy, the tragedy of unfounded accusations is not only the harm done to undeserving targets, but also the way such actions cheapen our theological convictions. Every

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time incendiary language is let loose irresponsibly, one hears the message that, as practiced by the world, imputations of heresy are not about life and death truth, but about something else. It is precisely because correct belief is essential to Judaism that we must combat the kind of careless condemnation that has lately come to the surface.

## DON'T STOP HOPING FOR REDEMPTION: RELIGIOUS OPTIMISM AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

Volume 39:3 Fall 2006

It was probably in late 1934, during the last winter of his life, that R. Abraham Isaac Kook delivered his introductory lecture on *Yevamot*; a set of notes was published decades later in the journal *Tehumin* (Volume 2). He asked why *Seder Nashim*, the talmudic order dealing with family law, begins, according to the standard view, with *Yevamot*, the laws of levirate marriage, rather than with *Kiddushin*, the tractate devoted to marriage. At first blush, the opposite would make more sense: marriage is the conventional family institution; *yibbum* occurs only when the marriage has ended tragically, through the husband's death, without an heir.

Underlying R. Kook's position is a thesis about what it means to build an abiding home. Paradoxically, R. Kook suggests that *yibbum* is a better model for Jewish reflection on the family, precisely because the extraordinary and tragic illuminates the normal. "The life of Torah is not ordinary life, but eternal," both in its spiritual and material dimensions. For that reason Torah life is manifest, not only under ideal circumstances, but also in situations of destruction, even when "the natural structure has broken down and the family is destroyed." Levirate marriage, in which the surviving brother rehabilitates the family disrupted by death, represents this principle in dramatic form. R. Kook quotes Ramban who says that the Kabbalists call it *ge'ulla* (redemption).

If the above is too mystical for you, try R. Kook's additional halakhic analogy. The thirty-nine categories of work forbidden on Shabbat (*melakha*) are defined as creative acts; purely destructive behavior does not count. Ripping a garment, for example, is work only when the goal is repair; demolishing a house is *melakha* when one wishes to erect a new construction on the site. But there is a suggestive disparity between the examples. Tearing clothing with the intention of sewing it up as before is not a creative act: the final product does not improve the original; hence

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Based on a shiur delivered at Yeshiva University on the occasion of R. Kook's 70<sup>th</sup> *yahrzeit*, 3 Elul 5765.

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it does not exhibit the necessary forethought (*melekhbet mahashevet*). Razing a building for the sake of future construction constitutes *melakha*, even when the new structure merely duplicates the old. The act of construction is valuable in itself, even when it does not produce a more valuable object.

There is something in R. Kook's insight that is at odds with popular modern attitudes. Our culture tends to assume, sometimes almost unthinkingly, that life is tolerable, and spiritually meaningful, only if it is getting better. The rapid pace of technological innovation and the attainment, by the middle classes, of luxuries unimagined by the wealthiest of our predecessors, fuel our expectation of unlimited progress in all areas. While I am grateful for these benefits—which make for a healthier and more convenient life and more efficient work—it is unclear to me how these advances make life more meaningful. In particular, I don't understand how *believing* in material progress, the hope for the better tomorrow, as distinct from utilizing and enjoying the tangible goods at my disposal, much enhances the value of existence. And I wonder what happens when those who have invested spiritually in the "American Dream," of an increasingly affluent future for themselves and their children, run into insurmountable obstacles.

Be that as it may, faith in progress remains an important ingredient in the outlook of modern people. Our political religion abounds in fervent expressions of faith in that faith. The most successful Democratic politician of recent vintage, President Clinton, chose as his campaign song "Don't stop thinking about tomorrow . . ." with its promise: "It will be better than before." His most popular predecessor from the other party—President Reagan—insisted, more soberly but no less dogmatically, that America's greatest days were ahead.

However, dogmatic claims for progress are not limited to the secular West. The conviction that a better tomorrow is in the offing, and that faith in its imminence is not only warranted but also essential for our religious welfare, have played a huge role in contemporary religious Zionism, and particularly the stream of religious-Zionism identified with R. Kook. Let there be no mistake: the theme of progress and its anticipation plays a central role in R. Kook's thinking. He writes, for example:

The grandeur of saintliness and its inner joy depend on its capacity to envision the future good . . . what has passed is like froth on water; all the evil and ugliness that shrivels the mind is merely transient. . . . Development . . . when it expands its content, is the source of all saint-

liness, righteousness, and sanctity, and bestows the divine pleasantness on every soul (*Orot ha-Kodesh*, II:4, section 24).

The current shorthand for the ideology that traces itself to these ideas is “Messianic Zionism.” Starting from biblical teaching about national and universal redemption, including the ingathering of exiles, restoration of Jewish self-government in the land of Israel, and so forth, subscribers to this position maintain that these prophecies are conclusively fulfilled in our own times, that their realization is irreversible, and that it is of utmost theological importance to get this matter right and to make it a primary religious preoccupation. In other words, not only is the Messianic vision unfolding before our eyes; it is also, to a very large degree, what gives meaning to our lives.

The alternative to this orientation is commonly referred to as “non-messianic Zionism.” If R. Kook is identified with the messianic trend, the other option is often associated with the name of R. Soloveitchik. At stake is not belief in ultimate redemption as depicted in Tanakh and codified by authorities like Rambam: we all accept this fundamental belief. Almost all of you hope that the process that led to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 is part of the flowering forth of the ultimate redemption. But the people dubbed messianic Zionists are more likely to express confidence that we are witnessing the culmination of history than their non-messianic counterparts. At a practical level, thoughtful people, no less than journalists in search of a concise formula, find a correspondence between these two ideological orientations and differing opinions about Israeli policy. Those linking themselves to R. Kook’s legacy are expected to oppose any territorial compromise in the land of Israel involving the diminution of Jewish sovereignty, while R. Soloveitchik held that security, not eschatology, is the crucial factor relative to any proposed compromise.

I won’t unpack in detail the many potential points of disagreement between these general outlooks. The issues are far too complicated and thinkers worthy of attention have not subscribed to simplistic formulas on these questions. Today I confine myself to the notion of inevitable progress as it affects some versions of so-called Zionist Messianism. Let me repeat that this is not merely a belief that things are getting better, but also the conviction that without belief in that progressive future, life is significantly less meaningful. Is this way of thinking good for us? Is it a way of thinking that we should cultivate for psychological or religious reasons? Or is it an attitude we are better off without?

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Most of us derive satisfaction from the thought that our efforts will make things better in a permanent way. Our children will be taller, brighter, religiously and morally more wholesome than we who educate them. Our own work, we hope, will help ourselves and others advance beyond where we stand today. When the going gets tough, we cling desperately to the comforting dream that things will soon be better, and that the improvement will last. We sing about tomorrow and imagine that the best is yet to come. If we are wrong much of the time, it is still right that our reach exceed our grasp: we ought to aim high and be of good cheer. And sometimes it turns out that we are right, or close to right, and our hope is richly rewarded.

What is true for individuals and families is also true for larger communities. The Jewish people's hope for the Messianic age periodically took the form of imminent anticipation. As we know the Rabbis had mixed feelings, to put it mildly, about eschatological calculations; yet many of our greatest figures engaged in such speculation, both as a legitimate intellectual pursuit and as a means of strengthening the shaky resolve of their generation.

The Zionist movement arose at a moment particularly propitious for belief in progress. Oppression on the one hand, and internal dissolution on the other hand, engendered the hope born of desperation that tomorrow must bring a transformation to reverse totally the intolerable pressures of today. Speculative reason chimed in: the rise of nationalism throughout Europe, social and economic changes, and the opportunities offered to Jews by political Emancipation, testified that history had already taken a radical new direction. Many Westerners embraced belief in progress as a source of existential meaning because they were looking for a substitute religion in place of their traditional creed. The increasing benefits promised by science, capitalism, Marxism, nationalism, or political liberalism offered the assurance that the universe conformed to human hopes without requiring mankind to worship a personal, transcendent God. Jews were as vulnerable to such dreams as Gentiles. Does the profane provenance of some elements in hard line Zionist faith in progress vitiate the ideology? Not necessarily, inasmuch as cogent arguments for Messianic imminence could, and were, developed out of traditional Jewish resources. At the same time, when we ask whether a preoccupation with realized eschatology is a healthy phenomenon or not, we cannot bracket the way such ideas arose and functioned in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Here the important question, I think, is how thoroughly our religious commitment and psychological stability become tied up with imminent Messianic hopes. R. Soloveitchik liked to tell about a Jew who cried to his grandfather, R. Hayyim Brisker, in World War I Warsaw, that all the carnage would be tolerable if only he could be sure it constituted *ikveta de-meshiha* (the turmoil foreshadowing apocalyptic redemption). R. Hayyim vigorously objected to the comfort of such a tradeoff, which would justify enormous human suffering in the name of subsequent good. The story illustrates R. Hayyim's strict views on the importance of preserving life as a halakhic obligation, and more broadly can be understood as a rejection of the idea that present evil is a negligible price to pay for future benefits. Yet it seems to me that the story also reflects another feature of the halakhic philosophy, namely the perception that the meaning of life inheres in the actions that engage us in the present, however difficult and even painful, rather than in the consequences, however blissful.

The American historian and social critic Christopher Lasch, in his book *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics*, contrasts the kind of hope, primarily secularized, that depends on faith in progress, with a more robust concept of hope. He writes: "Hope does not demand a belief in progress. It demands a belief in justice: a conviction that the wicked will suffer, that wrongs will be made right, that the underlying order of things is not flouted with impunity. Hope implies a deep-seated trust in life that appears absurd to those who lack it. . . ." Justice is primary for Lasch because his focus is on social evil rather than natural evil and the evil we bring upon ourselves. Yet in common with the religious attitude, Lasch's non-progressive optimism is not generated by scientific and pseudo-scientific calculations and prognostications; it is not dependent on the imagination of a better future. Such hope is indeed predicated on a "deep-seated trust that appears absurd to those who lack it."

For many of us the word "redemption" is inseparable from its public, political, and "progressive" connotations. In the passage we are discussing, however, R. Kook, echoing Ramban on Genesis 38, calls *yibbum* redemption. Thus he recovers the wide sense of redemption that includes the life of the individual and the arena of the family. More than that, however, he emphasizes that redemption is not always about progress and a new, better beginning. Sometimes, and paradigmatically so, redemption is about the restoration of what was destroyed: some-

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times redemption is the attempt to recreate the sober authenticity of the past (of course no recreation is ever the same as the original!) without the glittering assurance of the better future. Our religious commitment is not yet as wholesome as it ought to be until we learn to internalize this element in R. Kook's message along with the faith in progress and evolution that stokes the messianic flames. We must become capable of experiencing in the refurbishing of our everyday lives, as students of Torah and participants in a network of social and communal *gemilut hasadim*, the working out of our hope and our redemption.

The Rabbis observed that the book of Ruth was only written to demonstrate the reward for acts of loving-kindness. The climax of the book is an act of quasi-*yibbum*: Boaz is not Ruth's brother-in-law and other features of the situation deviate from the halakhic institution of the levirate. Yet the resemblance between Boaz's act of redemption and *yibbum* is unmistakable. In contemplating R. Kook's lecture, let us not forget that without undramatic acts of everyday social and religious rehabilitation, like Ruth's devotion to her mother-in-law and Boaz's concern for Ruth and her family, the Messiah cannot come.

## EPILOGUE: “THEY DIDN’T RETURN HOME”

Volume 39:4 Winter 2006

The centerfold of *Yediot Aharonot* for August 18, 2006 features photographs of 156 Israelis, soldiers and civilians, Jews and Arabs, men, women, and children, who were killed in the recent war. The headline reads: “They Didn’t Return Home.” Below, in smaller print: “Each one of them a world in himself, lives cut off in a moment. They left hundreds of weeping mothers, broken fathers, dozens of orphans and widows. Look in their eyes.”

The Torah says that a man who has built a house and not inaugurated it, or who has planted a vineyard and not enjoyed its fruit, or who has betrothed a wife and not consummated the marriage, is free from military service, “lest he die in battle and another” take his place (Deut 20:5ff). From a purely utilitarian viewpoint, this law can be improved upon: the killing of a married man with dependent children, or the owner of a flourishing vineyard, surely causes more harm to society than the death of one who has merely approached these milestones. In fact, Western nations provide exemptions from military service for such people; likewise, for families that have already lost sons in battle.

The Torah makes no such provision. Apparently this law in the Torah is concerned not primarily with the weeping mothers, broken fathers, orphans and widows, but with the unique destiny of each individual. Every death is sad. There is a sense that every life ends prematurely, be it the young person with all tomorrows before her or the mature individual who has raised a family and now looks forward to nurturing grandchildren. And yet there is something especially poignant about the person who dies not having had his or her chance at all, aborted dramatically and conspicuously on the verge of achievement, with no harvest of success and failure on their ledger. Quite apart from the effect on others, it is terribly wrong that a human being is sent to death in these circumstances.

That is why the Torah singles out for protection the individual who built a house but has not lived in it, who has betrothed a wife and not lived with her. The law may simply reflect the dismay we feel at such a

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tragedy (Rashi calls it *davar shel agmat nefesh*). Or, as Rashbam and Ibn Ezra maintain, its purpose is to preserve morale, since the soldier preoccupied with his private life, like the fearful individual mentioned later in the chapter, may fight without courage; and his death is liable to dishearten his comrades.

Even Rashbam and Ibn Ezra, according to whom the law does not express divine norm, but rather normal human perception, recognize how appalling it is when the soldier, poised to enter his home or his marriage, falls in war. We are appalled because we feel deeply that a human being who has worked to construct a life deserves fulfillment.

Communists and nationalists, agreeing with the utilitarian perspective, would deplore this law. The individual's fate is not tragic; he has value only as part of the larger collective. The loss of his or her inner world has no importance except as it affects the cause, and is not cause for regret or disillusion. The *Ribbono shel Olam* is not a Communist or a nationalist or any other kind of "ist." When we contemplate war, He directs our attention to the individual worlds of action and hope that war threatens to efface.

## II

Av turns to Elul. How are we to respond, who have not been killed, who probably do not know the dead personally, who have not suffered the pain and injury of the wounded, the physical fear, the destruction, the scorching heat, the lack of water and food? And how shall we respond to our American compatriots, victims of terror, or soldiers in the struggle to bring terror to bay? At the level of *gemilut hesed* (charity), our efforts go out to the living, the survivors, and our obligation is to make their lives easier. The dead are beyond our ability to help or harm, and if we look into their eyes, it is as a spur to do something for the living, for their comrades and families, and perhaps, if it is within our power, to spare others the same fate.

But an additional response is called for: "What are we? What is our life?" What do we intend to make of our lives? It is often alleged that modern people, even modern Orthodox people, do not cry on Yom Kippur because we are too secure, too arrogant in our worldly competence: we trust modern medicine to solve our physical ills and insurance to protect us from economic woes, and so we do not fear God.

Often it is said that modern people are too self-centered to respond

*Shalom Carmy*

to God. However, one great impediment to *yirat Shamayim* is not that we think too much of ourselves but that we care too little about our unique destinies as individuals standing before God. The eyes we meet in the 156 photographs of dead Israelis, Jews and Arabs, men, women, and children, heroes and bystanders, remind us not only that human life is fragile and not at all secure, but also that every human being is a world in himself, and that it is a terrible thing when our lives are denied their proper fulfillment. That includes us, as we stand before the *Ribbono shel Olam*'s throne of judgment and, repenting, try to set our lives in order.

## “HE LOVED PEOPLE”

Volume 40:1 Spring 2007

**A** playboy Senator of the 1950’s, once touted as Vice Presidential timber, now virtually forgotten, is talking about his more famous companion in dissipation. He fondly reminisces:

He loved people, not in the intimate sense, perhaps, but he loved their humanness. He loved conversation. The more personal and gossipy, the more he loved it. Whenever you had inside, salacious stuff, he wanted to hear it.

I showed this encomium to a few rabbis. You may be comforted to know that none of them would praise a congregant in these words because they do not consider such conduct admirable. Truth be told, however, many of us occasionally enjoy hearing dirt about others. We are not proud of it. Regarding such conversation as vicious, from time to time we feel impelled to analyze our attraction to salacious stuff. And because we also fear the effects of such talk, we speculate about its attraction to others. The reasons are endless. The intellectual desires to satisfy his, or her, curiosity about other people’s lives; the misanthrope quests for reasons to think ill of his neighbors; the politician needs to know, and exploit, their small and great weaknesses; and the weak person yearns (and who does not feel weak and inferior sometimes?) to find some ground for feeling superior. Then there is sheer boredom, and the necessity of making small talk in a variety of social situations that neither encourage serious discourse nor permit the vacuum of shared silence.

To all these sensible excuses for dirt-mongering and dirt-consumption the retired statesman adds a new motive. He says that his much-mourned friend’s appetite for salacious information was no more and no less than an expression of his love of people.

This is a high form of praise indeed. Loving people is a more ingratiating trait than malice, manipulation and inferiority, and it is a warmer, fuzzier notion than mere intellectual curiosity.

There are two things about this that arouse my curiosity. First, that bandying salacious stories about is a way to show love for people is not suggested as an apology for the eulogized person. It is not as if the dead

statesman were condemned for his behavior and his surviving colleague tried to make the best of the reprehensible facts by transforming an apparent vice into a virtue. To the contrary, he volunteers his recollection as if it were something to be proud about. Second, he expects his audience to sympathize and to share in the celebratory glow.

Is he wrong? Often, when invited to hear the complaints of the insulted and the injured, self-righteously and gracelessly recounted, we recoil in distaste. Disengaging as fast as we can from the entreating fingers plucking at our sleeve, we may even congratulate ourselves on avoiding *lashon ha-ra* (evil gossip). Yet, in the presence of a charming rogue, full of scandalous tales, do we not often feel as if we had been honored by inclusion in a delicious, convivial club? Is his company not all the more pleasurable because he is urbane and tranquil, free of the urgency of palpable resentment or the pressure to set wrong right? The anger of a person preoccupied with a wrong isn't sophisticated or relaxing, but the unencumbered enjoyment of scandal is cool.

Now in this case the lover of people is less admired for purveying salacious information than for hearing it. He is the ideal listener, the kind who makes you feel as if you were the cleverest person in the room, or in the world. He hangs on your words, throws his head back and roars at your wit; with every gesture and glance he leads you on: Do tell; do tell more. So pleased are you at his pleasure in your company that you fail to notice that you are revealing things you didn't really intend to, while he does not quite reciprocate in kind. It is like a friendly poker game where the liquor flows freely but your adversary, who seems to be matching you drink for drink, sips slowly, keeping his head and counting the cards, while you are losing yours. The man who loves people also loves to use the information he has gleaned to his advantage: what you offer him will likely bait other confidences; or else, when he needs to assert his control over you and yours, it can be brought up again to haunt you. In an obscure way you realize all this, and yet the man who loves people continues to enchant you.

It would be superfluous for me to remind you of what you know already, that Judaism does not endorse this man's style of loving people. You would call it preachy if I contrasted his love of people with the Torah's prescription for the man who loves life: "Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceitfully" (Psalm 34). One reason it is so difficult to preach about these ideals is that almost all of us fall short of them. Another is that there truly is a delicate balance between idle and malignant gossip, on the one hand, which we should

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abhor, and the desire for insight or the most minimal need to protect oneself, on the other hand. There are situations when failing to know enough about other people, their vices and their designs, is infinitely more dangerous to our spiritual health and to that of our community, than unjustified prying into others' affairs.

I have chosen to meditate on the man who loved people precisely because he values salacious stuff immediately and spontaneously, without feeling the need for the excuse that hearing it is *l'tsorekh* (that it fulfills some legitimate need). His indulgence in dirt is luxuriant and exuberant rather than furtively grudging. I don't know how prevalent this personality type is within our community: in the pure form I have found such individuals few and far between, though their extroversion may lend them disproportionate conspicuousness and power. In any event, the attractive public image of such people corrodes our own efforts to lead better lives. Observing the phenomenon in its unadulterated form may help us confront its more subtle and ambiguous manifestations.

Observing the man who loved people also offers a kind of therapy, in addition to insight. Rabbenu Yona of Gerona (*Shaare Teshuva* III:202) holds that the special severity of *lashon ha-ra* is connected with its repetitive nature. This is true whether the only reinforcement of the habit is inertia or whether it is, as in the case of the man who loved people, an essential ingredient of an individual's approach to life that cannot be abandoned without becoming a different kind of person with a different kind of lifestyle. Yet the political leader who loved people is different from the person who occasionally or regularly indulges in gossip or bad-mouthing, precisely because he exemplifies, not a series of actions, but a way of life. For the garden variety offender, overcoming the impulse to *rekhilut* and *lashon ha-ra* is a tale of many particular challenges in myriad situations: sometimes we succeed in responding properly; sometimes we succumb. *Lashon ha-ra*, from this perspective, is like overeating or laziness. Our victories, like our defeats, are incremental; they are rarely final. To the extent that "loving people" is part of one's self-image and *modus operandi*, it is much more a question of all or nothing.

It is easier to separate ourselves decisively from vice when we recognize in it a way of life that is inherently alien to everything we believe in. Thus turning away from the man who loved people is more like choosing to keep kosher. Once vigorously affirmed, the decision is likely to be secure—we are generally not tempted by each rasher of bacon or morsel of shellfish, because what we have rejected is being the kind of person for whom such delicacies are a live option. We can move on

to other day by day struggles that are harder to resolve conclusively, and as we engage them our solid achievements of self-control and self-creation provide a foundation upon which we can build.

The public relations branch of modern Orthodoxy often proclaims that we Orthodox Jews fit in very well with upper middle class American culture. Of course we have our restrictions about food and work schedule, all negotiable with a modicum of good will. The more politicized among us may fret about whether, in the light of our commitment to Torah, we can consistently subscribe to liberal positions on family life and so forth. The intellectuals are similarly concerned about the ability of our youth to withstand antagonism to belief in *Torah mi-Sinai* and our other cognitive commitments. Otherwise we do not feel threatened and we do not feel compelled to define our way of thinking and living in opposition to that of the surrounding upper middle class culture. Let me suggest that we will not constitute a dignified, self-respecting religious community until we comprehend, fully and explicitly, what distinguishes us from the man who loved people and the culture he represents.

## SHALL I REJOICE IN THE SECOND MONTH?

Volume 40:2 Summer 2007

**T**he fall of the Soviet Union coincided with his first *Yamim Nora'im* in the pulpit. My student wanted me to hear the gist of the sermon he was planning for Rosh Hashana. He intended to talk about our hope for the realization of the kingdom of God throughout the world. The collapse of Communism, he wanted to preach, was a sign of the imminent unfolding of universal redemption so prominent in our prayers for the day.

Were these events not all the more wonderful, I asked, given that almost all statesmen and academic experts had failed to anticipate the rapid change in Russia and throughout Eastern Europe? He was quick to agree. But in that case, I continued, what right have we to credit our optimistic evaluation of the emerging new world order? Will liberal capitalist Russia be more of a paradise than its predecessor? Will other threats replace the Communist menace? Is it not likely that our dreams and prophecies will prove as unreliable a guide to the future as the conventional wisdom, based on seemingly trustworthy data and assured theories?

My skepticism was more than an appeal to experience. I was also implying a theological outlook. We hope for the day when “all mankind will call Your Name” not because the empirical evidence points in that direction, certainly not because we are convinced that human nature has improved radically, but because God has promised it through His faithful prophets. Therefore it is neither prudent nor authentic to rest our Messianic faith on the vicissitudes of political and cultural prognostication.

The Yom Kippur War shook the overconfidence of the Israeli public, both the profane assurance that military preparedness would deter massive Arab aggression and the religious certitude that redemption was unfolding smoothly. In the aftermath of that war, R. Yehuda Amital wrote to defend the view that the founding of Israel could still be regarded in eschatological terms. He reminded his readers that all good things, including the land of Israel, are acquired through suffering, and that it was unreasonable to expect ultimate redemption to be any different. The fact that the war broke out against the background of the establishment of Israel as a state, and the involvement of the imperial powers, are indications of the Messianic struggle. Furthermore, he

argued, Israel was caught off-guard and almost overrun in the first days following the surprise attack on Yom Kippur, and this makes even clearer the exceptional nature of Israel's recovery and triumph.

Thirty years ago I dismissed these explanations, not because I found them specious—after all, I believed in the value of suffering, and the way Israel's wars became entangled in superpower politics fit the letter and the spirit of the Biblical prophecies, but because, as ad hoc theories proposed after the event, they seemed like special pleading. What knowledge could be gained from such reasoning?

Upon re-reading R. Amital's essay, however, I am not only impressed by the appropriateness of his biblical interpretation. I am struck by the opening sentence, so characteristic of R. Amital's indomitable common sense, which I had ignored then, but which seemed a belatedly discovered response to my youthful indifference: "A Jew, who believes that events touching on the life of the Jewish people are directed by divine Providence—it is natural for him (*tiv'i lo*) to ask about their meaning and significance."

Note the simple unapologetic word *tiv'i*. One could justify inquiry about the meaning and significance of the past solely on pure halakhic grounds: suffering entails an obligation to repent, and good fortune an obligation of gratitude. These obligations do not require speculation about the global purport of historical events; it is enough that we understand what God requires of us here and now. Yet R. Amital recognizes the natural human need to place our personal experience within a larger historical context. As creatures with a past, we reach out to comprehend our past; as creatures with a future, we anticipate what lies in store for us and for our posterity.

Most of us observe the anniversary of *Yom Yerushalayim*, the day in 1967 the Israeli army reunited the city of Jerusalem after nineteen years during which Jews had been barred from the Old City and the Western Wall. The recurring day, like *Yom ha-Atsma'ut*, the date on which the State of Israel declared its independence in 1948, is a perennial occasion to examine the meaning and significance of these events.

The enormous difference Israeli independence makes in our lives as Jews is as clear today as it was 59 years ago. Perhaps it is clearer today. For at the time one could not be certain the state would prove viable for long. Though not all the cherished hopes invested in the dream of renewed Jewish self-government in the land of Israel have come true—dreams of moral excellence, social harmony, the flourishing of culture, religious return, and the restoration of our ancient institutions—and

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the passage of generations and the pace of structural change make some of them ever more remote, the brute difference between having the state and not having it is undeniable.

The external forms of observing *Yom ha-Atzma'ut* have evolved. The secular politician-educators of the 1950's, with their penchant for ersatz ceremonialism and the fond belief that it was their destiny to transform the language and practices of Judaism into new national rituals suitable to their ideological certitudes, eagerly invented new *Haggadot*, complete with Seder plate, and half-heartedly crusaded for their adoption. Religious Zionists created their own rituals, and some viewed the recitation of *Hallel* with a *berakha* as a litmus test of political correctness rather than as a question of Halakha.

The people, for their part, turned their backs on top-down innovation, and fashioned for themselves a day more like Purim than like Pesah, a festival of barbecue and plastic hammers. Perhaps they knew, instinctively, that Israeli independence, to this point, is more about physical survival and material advancement, than it is about spiritual revolution and the creation of a "new Jewish man."

Unfortunately, *Yom Yerushalayim* is increasingly regarded as a parochial holiday of some Orthodox Zionists. For me, and probably for most of you, it was always inextricably linked, not just with the unification of the Old City of Jerusalem with its modern Jewish expansion, but with the salvation of 1967. Nasser's demand to close the Straits of Tiran, the bellicose act of a bully, threatened, if unanswered, to serve as a prelude to further acts of aggression, with no end in sight. At the conclusion of the war, Israel's territorial claustrophobia seemed resolved for the time being, and though stable peace in the region was still infinitely distant, it seemed easier to imagine. For others, more demanding and optimistic in their national-religious dreams, the hopes were higher, and had a distinctly eschatological accent. Over the years, the legacy of the war has become harder to define, for all of us. Yet, by continuing to mark both of these days in Iyyar, the Biblical "second month," we invite the question: what is this observance to you?

This year, as we commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the Six Day War, *Tradition* invited remarks from our founding editor, Rabbi Norman Lamm, who has been a leader of Orthodoxy and Religious Zionism in the United States from his student days, when Israel was not yet a state among the nations, until today. We value his retrospective wisdom and prospective guidance in thinking about the meaning and significance of these events.

## II

This year we are still asking questions about Israel's most recent war, which took place last summer. It was widely noted that this was the first of Israel's wars since 1948 in which a large portion of the civilian population was at the mercy of the enemy. To be sure, an exception could be made for the Gulf War, during which Iraq retaliated against the American-led coalition by firing SCUD missiles at Israeli cities. Back then, however, Israel chose not to respond, and the enemy was decisively defeated in any event by other military powers. This time Israel was ostensibly prepared; in fact it was Israel that chose to respond to localized aggression by mounting a full-scale offensive. Unlike all its other wars, this one was marked by a tragic and disproportionate number of enemy civilian deaths. This was due, not only to the terrorists' familiar propensity for concealing themselves among civilians, much as ordinary criminals shield themselves behind hostages, nor was it the product, God forbid, of unusual ferocity and inhumanity on the part of the Israeli forces. Ineffective, morally costly tactics, in this case, were comparable to the breakdowns of the supply system once ground troops were massed in Lebanon. They reflected overall military shortcomings. For unlike all its other wars, including the Yom Kippur War, when Israel was taken by surprise, this one did not end in triumph. Even Israeli arms are not invincible.

The immediate failure of the Israeli armed forces to achieve their legitimate goals does not endanger the security of the state. Unlike 1948, 1967 or 1973, there was no threat that Israel would be overrun. Unlike the situation in Great Britain during the terrible spring of 1940, it remained possible for those politicians so disposed to act as if nothing catastrophic had happened.

Nonetheless it is natural to wonder about the meaning and significance of such events. Specifically, for those who adhere to the halakhic outlook, it is necessary for us to ask how we are to respond to adversity.

Mostly we have heard variations on old political opinions and by now well-rehearsed religious convictions. Of course the fact that these views are well known does not mean that they are wrong. And indeed the evidence of recent events may sway individuals who rejected or dismissed these opinions in the past.

Yet I venture to say that few people have altered their convictions. They may have given up on old hopes without finding new reasons for hope. By now it seems that all the ideological options have been tried,

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as Rabin and Peres replaced Shamir, to be replaced, after the almost unimaginable trauma of Rabin's assassination, by Netanyahu, who was turned out by Barak, who in turn fell to Sharon, who turned on his own past and was succeeded by Olmert. Disillusionment is better than illusion, at least from an academic standpoint. But disillusionment, cynicism and despair are a mood, not a response.

Our current crop of politician-orators likes to quote Churchill. Meanwhile, new works on Lincoln constantly appear and find readers. Israel's present predicament is not quite as desperate as Churchill's. At the same time, of course, the Union had an option unavailable to Israel: the Union would have prospered even had the South seceded; the North prevailed, not out of necessity, but out of choice. In the long run Israel has no choice, if its citizens are to survive.

Nevertheless, I found myself thinking of Lincoln. Not only Lincoln the moral visionary, whose eloquence spans the intervening centuries, who injected religion into American public life as never has been done before or since, when he spoke to the American people about God's inscrutable will and terrifying justice. I thought of Lincoln the neophyte President, first failing to defuse an unprecedented crisis, then waging war painfully aware of his own lack of military experience. Nobody knew what would happen next, but reasonable people expected that the Union army, once brought into battle, would break the rebellion and restore order.

The long-awaited initiative came at Bull Run. The smoke and din could be observed from Washington. The battle could have gone either way. It was not until Monday, after several days fighting, that the defeated Union troops broke and fled—"a horrible march of twenty miles, returning to Washington baffled, humiliated, panic-struck" (to quote Walt Whitman's description in *Specimen Days*): "the dust, the grime and smoke, in layers, sweated in, followed by other layers again sweated in, absorbed by those excited souls—their clothes all saturated with the clay-powder filling the air—stirred up everywhere on the dry roads and trodden fields by the regiments, swarming artillery, &c.—all the men with coating of murk and sweat and rain." And Whitman asks: "Where are the vaunts, and the proud boasts with which you went forth? Where are your banners, and your bands of music, and your ropes to bring back your prisoners?"

Whitman provides a magnificent description of the scene in Washington—the beaten soldiers, "queer-looking objects, strange eyes and faces, drenched (the steady rain drizzles on all day) and fearfully worn,

hungry, haggard, blistered in the feet,” those citizens who offer them food and comfort, and the many voices of despair, counseling capitulation and abdication. And then Whitman begins a new chapter (omitted from the abridged versions) entitled: “The Stupor Passes—Something Else Begins.” Here is what he says about Lincoln:

The President, recovering himself, begins that very night—sternly, rapidly sets about the task of reorganizing his forces. . . . If there were nothing else of Abraham Lincoln for history to stamp him with, it is enough to send him with his wreath to the memory of all future time, that he endured that hour, that day, bitterer than gall . . . that it did not conquer him—that he unflinchingly stemmed it, and resolved to lift himself and the Union out of it.

Pundits, rabbis not excluded, are called upon to interpret the signs of the times. When Communism falls, when our projects prosper, they fuel uncritical speculative jubilation. In times of trouble we are equally tempted to find comfort in our own panaceas, free of the responsibilities of execution. All along we indulge in the enjoyable verbal pastime of extolling some leaders and (more often) denigrating those who displease us at the moment. It would be easy for a newly minted rabbi of today to inaugurate his sermonic career by lamenting that our current statesmen are so unlike the heroes of the past and so unequal to the tasks they were elected to do.

It is, of course, unfair to compare contemporary political leaders, working under a different bureaucratic system, with Lincoln, viewed with the benefit of hindsight and through the lens of a great poet who worshipped him. But the will to persevere in the face of the worst failures and misfortunes is still a cardinal virtue for our leaders and for the rest of us.

Hence, one unambiguous message of the 2006 war is that there are no easy or quick solutions, either diplomatic or military, that can guarantee the survival of the Jewish people in the land of Israel. Whether or not the portentous days of *Iyyar* remain forever in our calendars as days of joy may depend less on the firepower of our rhetoric or the ingenuity of our homiletic tricks than on our collective ability to live fruitfully under these conditions for the foreseeable future.

END OF A LEPER'S HOLIDAY:  
CARL HUBBELL COMES HOME

Volume 40:3 Fall 2007

As summer turned into fall in Eastern Europe, so they say, even the fish in the water trembled at the approach of divine judgment. In America, there was another cause for trembling: for second generation Jews, the fear of God vied with the excitement of consummated pennant races and the culminating World Series. Much bittersweet humor took as its subject the frequent coincidence of *Yamim Noraim* and the all-important games determining the baseball championship—the ensuing collision of religious duty with the civic obligation of the fan, with the latter, more often than not, coming out on top.

For Jews, the thrill was especially intense when both competing teams hailed from New York. For stretches this was a common, almost perennial occurrence. One such period occurred in the late 1930's. Our text for today is the 1937 Fall Classic, when the protagonists were the Yankees and the Giants. The Yankees came close to sweeping the Series. By winning game 4, the Giants deferred their execution to game 5. Game 4 is our subject. This contest is remembered, according to the Baseball Encyclopedia, as the great lefthander Carl Hubbell's last World Series appearance, and for Lou Gehrig's last Series home run. Hubbell was the winning pitcher in the 7-3 triumph, beneficiary of a 6-run second inning.

Each year the World Series captured the attention of Americans throughout the length and breadth of this great land. By 1937 millions of fans were glued to the radio, hanging on every play and every word. Before we turn to the big inning that determined the outcome of game 4, let us not forget the inhabitants of the Carville Louisiana hospital for lepers. Shunned by their neighbors, many had changed their names to protect their stigmatized families. Yet lepers, like other people, listened to their radios and cared passionately about baseball. Perhaps for them, more than for others, the World Series half a continent away was a high spot of the year. For a leper, you see, experienced the Fall Classic not as an afternoon's entertainment or as a ritual of Americanization. If you were a leper the World Series promised a temporary but delicious

respite from the physical and mental woes of leprosy. For the incarcerated and the outcast, spectator sports are not a negligible escape.

So, it's the second inning, with the Giants' already trailing by one run. The bottom of the order rallies, and, on Dick Bartell's single to center, Hubbell attempts to score from second. The young DiMaggio's throw is unexpectedly wide. Veteran plate umpire Bill Stewart calls Hubbell safe at home, with the Giants' fourth run. Now action comes to a halt as the Yankees insist vociferously that Hubbell had gone out of the basepaths to avoid Bill Dickey blocking the plate.

The genial play-by-play announcer had the agreeable job of bringing this tumultuous scene to verbal life. Describing the umpire's isolation, he heartily intoned: "The umpire is the leper of baseball: everyone despises him; nobody touches him." The jovial note was missed in Carville: radios silently switched off, not to be turned on again. What happened next didn't matter. Vacation from leprosy was over.

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Gratuitous denigration of others is often treated nowadays as a legitimate species of humor. Radio personalities who engage in such behavior are often regarded almost as if they were members of the intellectual and cultural elite. Correspondingly, we have a genre of moral preaching that specializes in ostentatiously condemning such offense. Had the radio announcer indeed spoken recklessly, with the snarling careless cruelty some people find amusing today, we might want him punished. Perhaps sentenced to sensitivity training, whisked off to Carville for ostentatious atonement, posing for photographs with the aggrieved lepers, perchance even hugging them would be a satisfying ritual of atonement. In this version of justice and reconciliation, all are relentlessly re-educated to the facts: that leprosy is not a particularly contagious disease, and that it is not identical with the Biblical condition so identified by the Greek translator of Leviticus. Political correctness would expunge the word leprosy from the dictionary, to be replaced by the neutral term "Hansen's disease." On second thought, the scenario is unlikely: Hansen's victims aren't a big voting bloc, have little disposable money and lack a PR machine. A leper, in this respect, is like an umpire: we all feel for him, but he has few advocates.

Just as well. The urge to punish would be misguided. Sportscasters are not shock jocks. To the contrary, they are, as a group, professionally

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highly solicitous of their audience. It is hard to imagine one, handling an august national event, not feeling mortified by the thought that a casual figure of speech could hurt the people he had been paid to entertain.

Seekers after religious knowledge are haunted by the Talmudic exegesis of Job 28:17: “It [Wisdom] cannot be valued in gold and glass”—these are words of Torah that are as difficult to acquire as gold and as easy to shatter as glass (*Hagiga* 15a). Our fellow human beings, too, are sometimes as fragile as glass. Sanctimonious verbal vigilantes burnish their reputations as would be arbiters of virtue by pouncing upon and denouncing the possibly hurtful language of those they monitor and admonish. Susan Sontag, in her essay *Illness as Metaphor*, showed the misleading effect of using cancer or tuberculosis as metaphors for the human condition. Such metaphoric language is thus, from their perspectives, both vicious and stupid.

Reality is not that simple. Metaphors falsify, but often they illuminate. *Pace* Sontag we cannot, and probably ought not, eradicate all such figurative language from our vocabulary. As for the language police, once you get to know them up close, their tartuffery is often worse than the disease they purport to remedy. The tragedy is that all our good will and all our precautions cannot prevent an occurrence like the one that ruined the 1937 World Series for the lepers of Carville.

Though we can't help these occasions of harm inflicted unintentionally and unawares, we regret them deeply. Despite the passage of decades, the passing of the announcer and the closing of the facility for Hansen's sufferers in Carville, the festive mood turned to pain on that long ago October afternoon can fill us, the faraway spectators, with a powerful sense of chagrin, even shame. Why dwell on bygone events that neither the perpetrators nor we can rectify, and for which nobody bears guilt?

The cynic whose voice we ignore at our peril proposes a self-serving reason: it is simply more convenient for us to feel sorrow for actions for which we are not responsible. We grieve vicariously like spectators in the theater. We weep for Dido, but not for our own sins. Nevertheless, I believe it is possible for contemplation of such events, fictional or real, to help us become better people, if that's what we want.

When we consider actions for which we clearly or obscurely have moral responsibility, our first instinct, in the face of accusation, is to look for justifications, excuses, or extenuating circumstances. The greater the responsibility, whether we have inflicted harm deliberately, in anger, or merely through negligence, the less inclined we are to assess objectively

the consequences of our actions. Instead, we minimize the pain, or concentrate on why the injured human being deserved or at least invited mistreatment. We dread having to confront those whom we have wronged. We have no idea how to seek their forgiveness sincerely. We defend ourselves, and sometimes, even when we are not directly involved, we defend others because we anticipate being in their position.

When we are not responsible, by contrast, nothing impedes our full consciousness of the humiliation or damage visited upon the victim. It is easier for us to place ourselves in his, or her, place, because we feel no impulse to put ourselves in the place of the offender.

The idea that moral insight is often best learned through “indirect communication” is not a new one. It is one motive for religious people to study literature and history. Kierkegaard, who claimed to have constructed his pseudonymous works on this principle, liked to cite II Samuel 12. There, the prophet Nathan chastises King David, not by accusing him directly of violating Bathsheba and Uriah, but rather by presenting the parable of the rich man who robs his poor neighbor of his only ewe. When David judges him harshly, Nathan holds up the mirror: “You are the man.” And David’s immediate response—“I have sinned”—made him a paradigm of repentance ever after.

The example of Nathan and David contrasts direct accusation with the communication that invites the sinner to judge himself. The parable moves the sinner from the defendant’s dock to the judge’s bench and back again. The story we have been discussing functions differently. It does not call upon us to pronounce a verdict on the radio announcer. Instead it forces us to experience the shock of the victim, the faces turned trustingly towards the baseball broadcast like a plant turning to the sun, and the enjoyment suddenly, rudely extinguished. It is a story that commands us to change the way we feel.

The Gemara tells us that one should ever arouse the good inclination against the evil inclination (*Berakhot* 5a). We live in a society that does not much encourage genuine moral sensitivity. Even the fish in the water no longer tremble with outrage, inured by now to shock. In the perpetual battle between good and evil we are told to be resourceful. Many weapons are at our disposal if we wish to deploy them. The anecdote we have considered, culled from the 70-year-old diary of a nurse, is one such implement.

## COPS AND ROBBERS

Volume 40:4 Winter 2007

**A** TV actress, portraying a blind teenaged girl who is the victim of violent crime, is asked who might harbor a grudge against her. She recalls a boy her age, a waiter at one of her favorite restaurants. Before the accident that cost her sight, she and her friends had enjoyed humiliating him by sopping his tip money in the grease of their plates. Reflecting on her behavior, she admits thinking that her affliction was God's punishment. The actress playing the FBI agent responds immediately and authoritatively: "God is not punishing you." The little skeptic inside me wonders: how does she know? Perhaps, on a station inaccessible to us, there is a drama called "FBI Philosopher," where the reasons and arguments for her position are exhibited and evaluated.

FBI personnel have no monopoly on detailed knowledge of God's ways with man. Many rabbis, some learned in conventional realms of Torah study, others whose expertise is confined to divine psychology, display similar confidence. Contrary to the FBI agent, they ply their trade, not by denying the operations of divine providence, but rather through a facility for tying specific disasters, forcefully and often colorfully, to the transgressions responsible for them. For those who seek them out these deliverances are regarded as spiritual treats and savored with relish. Those who don't care for them consider these displays the height of theological bad taste and insouciance, an embarrassment to believers and, we fear, an occasion of unholy delight to the impious. Rabbi Emanuel Feldman, our former Editor, recently articulated the widespread discomfort with this element in of popular religion ("Plunging Into Mighty Waters and Emerging with a Broken Shard: New Orleans and the Mind of God," *Tradition*, Spring 2007).

As with the FBI agent, so too with the divine providence expert—the dread epistemological dragon rears its head: How do these spiritual guides manage to know so much? How can they justify their extravagant assertions? There are defenses I hear not only from advocates of this approach but often from individuals who share Rabbi Feldman's and my intellectual and spiritual distaste for it, and who nevertheless want to do justice to the other side. One argument is that pointing to

specific sins is not a novelty of late 20<sup>th</sup> century pop theology. It does seem to have roots in Biblical prophecy, in various Talmudic statements and so forth. To be sure, it is not clear that the classical sources are engaged in exactly the same activity that we encounter today. Furthermore, it is a commonplace that when it comes to spiritual integrity we fall short of the ancients. All the same, if we wish to align ourselves with classical traditional Judaism, people who think like us cannot be oblivious to these sources.

Sometimes, however, the questioner concedes that it is disingenuous, it is presumptuous, and perhaps it is even blasphemous, for us to insist upon the ability to read God's mind, so that we can put a finger on a particular offense and ascribe to it our chastisement. And it is conceded that the critics of the divine providence experts have their own legitimate approach to the classical sources. Indeed one recognizes that most of the very greatest rabbinical authorities, men like R. Moshe Feinstein and R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, do not express their prowess in the arena of divine psychology. Yet because at least some practitioners of this fine art are substantial *talmidei hakhamim*, individuals of rabbinic stature, whose views we might take seriously in other areas of Torah, the questioner is wary of dismissing their claim to distinctive supernatural authority. Is it not possible that the psychologists of God conduct intercourse with mysterious and occult dimensions of the universe hidden from mere mortals?

One is then tempted to say that there is no wrong or right in this matter. There are only different "styles" of talking about divine justice, characteristic of different social groups within Orthodoxy. We cannot justify our adherence to one model rather than the other. Is our reluctance to embrace juicy hypotheses about sin and punishment due to a commendable modesty in walking with God? Does it reflect greater intellectual sophistication? Or is it merely a fastidious evasion of messages we refuse to hear because they are unpleasant and, more ominously, because they are unacceptable to the secular society we identify with? Are those religious teachers whose views we disdain in touch with important truths we have lost contact with? Are they more authentically Jewish and more genuinely pious, even though the modernists consider themselves more "enlightened"? And if so, how can one disregard them?

Let's set aside the sociology for the moment and get back to fundamentals. How are we to speak of the infinite God's intentions for us? How can we do so truthfully and in conformity with His will for us?

## II

In the beginning is the mitsva. As the Rambam formulated it in the first halakha of *Taanit*, suffering entails the obligation to repent, that is, to engage in self-examination and turn to God. As R. Soloveitchik explained, this does not imply anything about the *why* of suffering; we are not called upon to read God's mind. Instead we are commanded to consider our response to suffering; we must change our lives. Belief in providential suffering is rooted radically in the idea that God is speaking to us through suffering. And when God speaks, for halakhic Judaism, He is bidding us to do something, not dropping hints about His "psychological makeup," as it were.

Halakhically, then, there is one criterion by which talk about God's purposes in visiting afflictions upon human beings must be measured: is it conducive to *teshuva* (repentance)? Additional virtues may be nurtured through such reflection too. For example, a person whose affliction leads him, or her, to repent, may be grateful to God for the suffering, recognizing in it a great and unforgettable benefit. One may rejoice in the fruits of repentance, the meritorious actions, the renewal of life and so forth. In general, repentance is the seed of much spiritual and moral growth. But speculations detached from repentance miss the point and have no religious value.

This halakhic doctrine appears against the background of Jewish existence and philosophical insight. To begin with, it entails a relationship with a personal deity. The classical sources, even when they suggest correlations between human acts and divinely ordained consequences, do not present God's justice and His mercy as if they were no more than the inevitable products of some exceedingly complicated impersonal formula that only He is intelligent enough to apply. God cares for us, is vexed by our sins, and sorrows with us in our troubles. Returning to Him is restoring a personal relationship, not just correcting an error.

Divine wrath can no more be reduced to a mechanical formula than divine love, because wrath and love, justice and mercy, are part of the same enigmatic relationship. Although, or precisely because, we experience God as a Person, with all the mysteriousness and freedom that implies, it is unthinkable to identify a network of intentions and purposes in God as one could at least try to do for a human being, or to discover a set of algorithms that "explain" Him as one could explain the operations of a computer.

God's purposes are not simply elusive or hidden from our inspection, requiring extraordinary research methodologies and recondite tools. The entire idea of inspecting or inferring His "thoughts," attributing to Him a kind of "psychological space" in which complex psychological events occur and can be analyzed, takes us further from Him rather than bringing us closer: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways mine" (Isaiah 55). At the most fundamental level (sidestepping certain complications), God's thoughts are indistinguishable from His acts. At the most fundamental level, acts call for response, not primarily for explanation; our verbal rationalizations are valid only as they provide the framework for response. When we ensnare ourselves in abstruse reasoning about divine intentions, thus giving priority to explanation and interpretation over response, we do not fortify but attenuate the personal connection with God.

### III

My remarks so far have echoed Rabbi Feldman's conviction that in the illusion of simplistic explanations of God's intentions there survives a perennial discomfort with belief in "a concealed and invisible God." It is one thing to recognize in suffering a demand to examine our lives; it is another to devise rationalizations of God's purposes. The former leads directly to repentance; the latter often engenders more and more complicated efforts to salvage the hypothesis. As the expert in God's ways flounders about, the results are as absurd as Rabbi Feldman makes them out to be, both in logical form and in intellectual content.

This analysis, however, leaves out an important aspect of the comedy. Often the moral and religious conclusions to which the God-experts argue are unexceptionable on their moral and religious premises. If adultery or homosexual behavior or neglect of Torah study, or holding incorrect views on Israeli or American policy in the Middle East is an offense against God, and are therefore deserving of divine displeasure, then the epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases or earthquakes or political reverses are appropriate occasions to repent those transgressions (even when, viewed purely as punishment, the penalty seems disproportionate to the crime). In this regard there ought to be no dispute between people who consider these actions wrong and repent because they believe adversity prompts them to self-examination and people who believe that God purposefully afflicts them as punishment for these actions. What do the God-experts profit by formulating their preaching

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in the language of divine intention as opposed to the language of halakha and obligation?

Here it is worth noting that the discourse of the God-experts is distinctive not only in its conclusions but also in the kind of evidence advanced in favor of those conclusions. Typically their argumentation leans heavily on the drama of breathtaking coincidences, on inventive correlations between God's purposes and the calendar or the sequence of *parashiyot*, and marvelous *gimatriyot* and other numerical calculations. Rabbi Feldman wonders how contemporary spiritual guides can claim certitude not vouchsafed to the prophets. Not surprising: Jeremiah and Habakkuk lacked the computer programs to generate fresh *gimatriyot*. If the goal is merely repentance, this kind of activity is superfluous: recognition of sin, regret and resolve suffice. One undeniable advantage of "expert" discourse, which the philosophically or halakhically minded are liable to ignore, is the sheer entertainment value of these exercises.

What happens when our communal or personal calamities, regarded as divinely ordained afflictions, become the subject of clever *pshtelakh*? One possibility is that the aesthetic inventiveness displayed by the spiritual guide will help concentrate the mind of the afflicted on his, or her, relationship to God. An alternative is that the ingenious performance will have the contrary effect: the more exorbitant the rhetoric, the more easily the audience will be distracted from the work of repentance by the theater of reproof. Which impulse is more powerful, in any individual case, which nurtures a more authentic relationship between the God who judges and the individual or community that is judged, is an empirical question. Every reader can give his own answer.

In my own judgment, perhaps limited by my experience, the peril outweighs the benefit. If a physician, consulted in a seemingly grave situation, offered a diagnosis wrapped in witticisms, garnished with far-fetched plays and puns on Torah passages not directly germane to the subject, whose cleverness overshadows prognosis and prescription, it would be difficult to take his verdict seriously. What are we then to make of a preacher who treats in this way the horror of sinners in the hand of an angry God?

Yet it is not impossible that, under certain circumstances, these verbal pyrotechnics are preferable to the more modest gaze focused on repentance. Some religious leaders may regard these tactics as a necessary means to command the attention of their audience. Some may fear that the halakhic doctrine of suffering and repentance presents a less vivid, less palpable image of divine involvement in human affairs, with

the concomitant danger that rationalistic believers will achieve, not a relationship with the living God, but the FBI agent's comfortable assurance that God does not punish.

To aestheticize divine governance runs another risk. Often the exhibitions of pastoral brilliance are not dedicated to the chastisement of humble and appreciative audiences, but to settling accounts with those outside the circle of the preacher's admirers. We do not confess our sins, but profess the sins of individuals or groups we wish to inveigh against. What happens when the communal or personal calamities of other people, from whom we feel alienated, and with whom we acrimoniously disagree, become the subject of clever *pshetlakh*? If the doctor who turns his patients' illnesses into the stuff of public performance lacks seriousness, the would-be healer who does the same with the terrible misfortunes of his adversaries is not lacking in callousness. Perhaps he is justified: intensifying our disapproval of the wicked is more important than resolving to improve oneself. Perhaps such rigorous disapproval is the best way to turn to God. Nonetheless the question cannot be evaded: Does the inflammatory language of clever condemnation promote self-examination and repentance, or does it merely produce self-satisfaction and hardness of heart? In distancing ourselves from the situation of the sinner do we inadvertently distance ourselves from God? Again each one of you can look into your own heart and provide your own answer.

Auden wrote that there is a children's game called Cops and Robbers but no children's game called Saints and Sinners. In part that is because the individual or community that stands before God cannot glibly regard itself as totally innocent. We are all in distress and we must all turn to God in repentance. To deny this is to harden oneself against repentance. In part it is because treating the awfulness of sin and the awesomeness of sanctity as if they were elements in a crowd-pleasing rhetorical exercise threatens to make repentance impossible. In the end it is only repentance that can clarify for us the mystery of human suffering and the governance of God.

“SO SOON?”  
A NAHMANIDEAN MEDITATION ON DEATH

Volume 41:1 Spring 2008

In eternity this world will be Troy, I believe, and all that has passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets. Because I don't imagine any reality putting this one in the shade entirely, and I think piety forbids me to try.

(MARILYNNE ROBINSON, *Gilead*)

Late August for my mother, in the last decade of her life, was a time of sadness. Inevitably the day would arrive when I could no longer put off telling her that next week the university would have “meetings.” She understood that preliminary meetings were a euphemism for the inescapable advent of a new term, when I would not be as available to her as I had been during the all too short months of summer. By the last couple of years even the end of shorter breaks was hard. In my recollection of these scenes, I make the announcement standing over her—as if standing rather than sitting would make the news more casual and therefore less unwelcome. Invariably, she would look up at me and say: “Already? So soon?”

Last spring, as her strength dwindled, and her ability to function on her own became less predictable, the inexorable end of summer portended the dread awareness that this time my return to full-time teaching would require engaging full time care by strangers in my absence.

Her funeral took place on the Wednesday we read *Parashat Balak*—“May my death be the death of the righteous and my end like his.” Overcome by grief, I was at the same time overwhelmed and overawed by the circumstances of my mother's last weeks and months. She left this world in a manner so perfectly suited to the way she had conducted her life—her mind intact and giving until the last breath, still able, on the days she could totter around, of presiding proudly over her kitchen, in her own home, her last moments conscious and not solitary. Her final indelible cry—“Shulem, Shulem, Shulem,” uttered in a firm, serene tone of voice, as if she either required some particular assistance

or deemed it important to have my attention—echoed that day and for many days after, along with my helplessly hopeful response to silent eyes that saw only what mortals cannot: “What do you want? What do you want me to do?” This final exchange filled my ears like the concluding chord of an imposing musical composition.

As weeks passed and *sheloshim* approached, the dying call and the eyes that stared past this world were joined in memory by the plaintive question and the living gaze that asked “So soon?” Too soon would the *sheloshim* come to their appointed end. I would become merely one among many mourners living through the eleven months of Kaddish. My hair would be cut. Life would be one step closer to routine. Yet the phrase “so soon,” in my mother’s voice and gaze was not only a commentary on the process of *avelut* and the strange alchemy that transforms shock and desolation into commemoration and consolation. Literally, hearing it meant that with the passage of time my mother’s departure had become to me, in some inexplicable manner, premature.

When people die young, suddenly, unprepared, it seems natural to think of death as happening too soon. What did it mean to say “so soon” about the death of a woman almost 95 years of age, who had left her affairs in exemplary order, who, not knowing the exact date of her demise, had lived each week as if it were her last, and with that end in mind, had conducted memorable and meaningful conversations with all the people who mattered to her, whose last words were not “Nurse” but “Shulem, Shulem, Shulem?” However much she continues to be missed, would the right time to die have been months or years later, eyesight progressively diminished, hearing no better, even intellectually (unthinkably) to decline, unable to be of use to herself or to others, forsaken to the attentions of strangers? She had prayed not to be abandoned in her old age, and the prayer had been answered as well as anyone might hope for.

Precisely because my mother died so full of years and full of sanity, giving of herself though her body was entirely, irrevocably spent, she posed the paradox of death in its purest philosophical form. How is it that even the most fortunate death, approximating so closely what the dying person and those who cared for her and about her would wish for, is nevertheless a tragic, shattering event that casts a dark shadow over what follows?

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### II

When I rose from *shiva* to rejoin the world of the living, I was also returning to the world of Torah study. After the visitors had dispersed, a *talmid* stayed behind and led me by the hand, like a convalescent taking his first unsteady steps, back into the world where other people had claims on me, and back into the world of Talmud Torah. In the following weeks, others performed the same service for me. It was thus that on Shabbat *Parashat Re'eh*, in the room adjacent to the bedroom where my mother breathed her last, we sat down to discuss Nahmanides' (Ramban's) commentary on Deuteronomy 14:1-2: "You are children of God; do not cut yourselves (*lo titgodedu*) or make any baldness between your eyes for the dead. For you are a holy people unto God."

According to Ramban, the prohibition is connected with our belief in immortality. Because we are a holy people, we should not abandon our self-control in the face of death and mutilate ourselves, even when a person dies young. But if we are to take comfort in the hope for life after death, why then does the Torah allow and even encourage the gestures of mourning?

Ramban responds:

Scripture does not forbid weeping, for nature arouses weeping at the parting of lovers and their separation even in life.

It is possible to interpret this natural weeping as a purely physiological reaction to loss, not really different in kind from the tears caused by exposure to the juice of raw onions or acrid smoke. There are Stoic philosophers, who judge emotion irrational, and dismiss such immediate uncontrolled symptoms as "first motions," reflexes of no significance to the person exhibiting them or as a regrettable weakness to which flesh and blood is vulnerable. Elsewhere, however (in the preface to *Torat ha-Adam*), Ramban is scathingly critical of philosophers who harden their hearts and deny the reality of suffering, and he is correspondingly attuned to the halakhic norms that mandate appropriate grief at the termination of human life.

Hence the implication of Ramban's words is that weeping is an appropriate response, not an excessive one, to the human experience of separation. Even if death is not the end for us, our withdrawal from the world and from those we love is poignant, says Ramban, the way even temporary parting is painful and sadness inducing.

III

It is impossible to read this passage of Ramban without thinking of Samuel Johnson's reflection on the secret horror of endings in the last paper of his *Idler* series. Here are some of Johnson's famous lines:

There are few things not purely evil, of which we can say, without some emotion of uneasiness, this is the last. Those who never could agree together, shed tears when mutual discontent has determined them to final separation; of a place which has been frequently visited, though without pleasure, the last look is taken with heaviness of heart. . . .

This secret horror of the last is inseparable from a thinking being whose life is limited, and to whom death is dreadful. We always make a secret comparison between a part and the whole; the termination of any period of life reminds us that life itself has likewise its termination; when we have done any thing for the last time, we involuntarily reflect that a part of the days allotted us is past, and that as more is past there is less remaining.

At first glance, Johnson is reminiscent of Ramban because both explore the link between death and other endings. In truth, they are moving in opposite directions. For Johnson, as a profound psychologist, the sadness of endings is puzzling, especially when we were not very attached to the person or thing or activity that is coming to its end. The horror of death, by contrast, is self-evident. The last look inspires heaviness of heart because it puts us in mind of the ultimate finality of death. Ramban, as a theological moralist, inquires why the Torah condones mourning and its characteristic behavior, and replies that death is comparable to the parting of lovers, that engenders not only the involuntary feelings of sadness and distress that haunt Johnson, but also religiously meaningful behavior like weeping. His response implies that partings, even temporary ones, leave us with a sense of very real loss, one that even anticipated reunion cannot put entirely in the shade.

One reason, perhaps the primary one, that Johnson found death so horrifying, was the fear of what comes after—the prospect of being sent to hell and its punishments. So strong was this fear that he doubted the sincerity of those who denied feeling it. Absent this fear, our culture often associates traditional religion with the welcoming of death, when we pass on to a better place, liberated from the burdens of mortal existence. This, despite the fact that religious believers, even when they are not terrified by the fear of hell, seem to take death, mourning, and their

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attendant rituals, much more gravely than typical secularists do. Perhaps that is because, as a rule, they take life more seriously too. Perhaps it is because we revere our progenitors and invest enormous hope in our progeny, so that the loss of one soul is equivalent to the loss of an entire world. Biblical religion, in any event, unlike the popular optimistic image of religion, views death negatively: “In Sheol who confesses God?”

Those of you familiar with R. Soloveitchik’s *Halakhic Man* know how strenuously he stressed Halakha’s distaste for death. In the Rav’s version of Biblical doctrine, death brings to naught all human activity and thus renders meaningless the human vocation. Ramban’s attempt to balance our reliance on God who “wipes the tears from every face” and the sadness and grief that brings those tears to our eyes, is very much of a piece with this vision of the human condition.

Often we define valuable human activity as achievement and conquest, measured in worldly categories, or as the maximized fulfillment of ritual mitsvot. The 95 year-old woman who began her last day on earth by eating, complimenting the breakfast her son had cooked for her, and regretting that her condition prevented him from delivering a scheduled lecture knew, without ever having opened a Musar *sefer*, R. Dessler’s division of humanity into two groups, those who give and those who take. She grasped thoroughly R. Dessler’s insight that the givers continue to give, even when they take, and that the takers take even when they appear to be giving. And so she gave her son the pleasure of enjoying the nourishment he gave her and gave him a last opportunity to acknowledge the honor and privilege that had been his in trying to see to her needs.

In only a few hours the call “Shulem, Shulem, Shulem” would irretrievably close the century long epic in which our entire family had taken part and in which I had played an increasingly crucial subordinate role. There would be many times ahead for our family and friends when my mother would be missed, happy events that would have been enhanced by her enjoyment, trivial news or significant occurrences where her comments or advice would have been sought and appreciated, visitors (some *talmidim* in particular) who would feel acutely the emptiness where once a human being had existed magnificently.

There are typical experiences we replay in recollection. Then there are encounters that cannot be anticipated, often with people who remain unknown. Ten years ago, in the rehab facility where my mother, following hip surgery in her late ‘80s, was making the fateful transition from being an elderly woman with some health problems to being a

crippled old woman with the same problems, she was dedicated to her therapy and uninterested in the surroundings she strongly wanted to be temporary. A woman in the dining room hung her head to one side, and wept, and did not eat. I pretended not to notice and the next day steered my mother to a faraway table—she had her own troubles, which did not need to be reinforced by another's dejection. The third day my mother asked to be wheeled to that woman's table, and she, who rarely intruded or imposed herself on others, immediately laid down the law to the other. Did she not know that being on this floor meant that your doctors had determined that you could regain many of your skills and go home? Did she not appreciate the window of opportunity, measured in weeks, during which one could make progress? Did she not understand that this required a positive, forward-looking attitude?

And the anonymous woman listened and began to eat! Where is she now? Is she still alive? Was her benefit from my mother's sermon lasting? If this episode is vivid in my mind, because I was there, what of the innumerable human gestures that define each day in the company of strangers and friends and flesh and blood, and in the solitude we share only with God?

As Ramban taught, death is sad like parting. As he could have explained further, death is not like a single act of parting; it is more like innumerable partings, life withdrawing from every detail on every side.

Earlier I compared one strand in my experience of my mother's death to the final chord of a symphony. In retrospect it seems as if the whole long story, the life she made of her situation—from Polish childhood and escape from Europe, the murder of so many family members and the survival of others, through the decades of marriage and the longer period of widowhood, the many disappointments of life, the heroic years devoted to others, and the moments of achievement and satisfaction, her own and those of others, that sustained her pride and provided her pleasure—it is as if that epic history was meant to culminate in the weeks and months when, her soul composed for death, she lay in wait for its coming. It is as if, like the audience of a rare and astonishing musical masterpiece, one were to leap to one's feet, hoping for an encore, only to be brought roughly back to the hard realization that human life is a one-time affair. The protagonist has only one chance to get it right, and when the last chord resounds and a splendid success is assured, she has moved on swiftly without savoring her accomplishment, leaving the summing up to others.

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1912-2007. So soon. . . .

My mother, when the subject came up, claimed not to fear death, and her conduct did not betray her words. Neither did she care to dwell on the prospect of existence beyond the grave. If to Johnson, in his more doleful moods, death spells the threat of extinction and punishment, and if death, for Ramban, is a portal leading to eternal life, for my mother, death was one final task of giving to be endured and accomplished with dignity and gracefulness.

“May my death be the death of the righteous and my end like hers.”

# THE WORDS OF THE MASTER AND THE LIFE OF THE STUDENT

Volume 41:2 Summer 2008

**A**sage's complaints may tell you a lot about his hopes. In his much-quoted essay, "On the Study of Torah and the Redemption of the Generation's Soul," R. Soloveitchik laments the shortcomings of contemporary religious life. Eschewing panaceas, he assigns blame to three negative factors:

Much is due to the religious atmosphere, suffused with superficial utilitarianism. Much is caused by the inclination towards ceremonialism, which is at times vulgarization of religion. And much is brought about by the lack of serious capacity for introspection and examination of world and self.

From the Rav's displeasure at what was wrong, we can infer what he deemed right and needed: a piety dedicated to truth and not tarnished by utilitarian calculations, a commitment to Halakha free of extraneous ceremonial pomp and vulgarity, and a community of self-examination and self-criticism.

It may be instructive to view R. Walter Wurzburger in the light of the Rav's judgment of his generation.

The Rav satirized those who argued for religion on the grounds that it improved family life, aided the digestion, or enhanced Jewish ethnicity. In the introduction to his second book, *God is Proof Enough*, R. Wurzburger observed that the *Emet ve-yatsiv* benediction following the morning reading of *Shema* begins with the truth of God's word and only later passes on to commend it as "goodly and beautiful." He writes—and I chose these words as the motto for the necrology by which *Tradition* mourned his death:

We do not begin with extolling the beauty, goodness or utility of what we have proclaimed. Our first and foremost concern is its truth. All other considerations are secondary. We cannot place our faith in fictions, no matter how useful, appealing, or attractive they may be.

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In this vein, R. Wurzburger was bemused and saddened by a Modern Orthodoxy that measured the advance of Orthodoxy in America by the number of chocolates graced with Kosher certification, or that counted as a triumph for the integration of piety and Western culture the installation of a fax machine that could convey prayers to the Kotel.

Often, when we befriend people far from Orthodox belief or practice, whom we like or with whom we wish to ingratiate ourselves, we are tempted to lubricate the wheels of good feeling by saying things we do not mean. We dread the moment when such an individual puts us to the test by asking, innocently or slyly: “Rabbi, am I a good Jew?” R. Wurzburger was criticized, and even vilified, for being too tolerant—that is, for speaking to certain groups. He often represented Orthodoxy in meetings with Christians. On occasion he spoke at conferences of Conservative and Reform Jews. His job, as he saw it, was to speak for Torah, wherever this took him. In fact, his presentations to differing audiences, often prepared in consultation with the Rav, were models of concise, civilized and uncompromising communication of the word of God.

R. Wurzburger refused to be drawn into public argument about these activities. He did not believe that public argument settled anything. Nor did he care to score points with his Orthodox confreres by returning from these conferences armed with a robust supply of derisive anecdotes about his partners in dialogue. At the same time he was exceedingly careful not to say what they wanted to hear. It was his honesty and not only his intellectual acuity and civility that made him a trustworthy spokesman for Orthodoxy.

By way of illustration: Rabbi Wurzburger enjoyed a long friendship with the University of Toronto philosopher and liberal theologian Emil Fackenheim. It is natural that he would be invited to Fackenheim’s milestone birthday in Jerusalem, where he had retired. I came across R. Wurzburger’s congratulations among his computer files. His brief letter calls attention to one particular essay by the honoree on the religious implications of verificationism, a philosophical doctrine popular in the English-speaking world throughout the third quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. R. Wurzburger reported to Fackenheim that he had recommended this essay, with happy results, to a young woman troubled by doubts regarding the truth of religion. He trusted that knowing this would bring solace to the author. Rather than flatter the ailing octogenarian by celebrating his brilliant books on the history of German philosophy, or recognizing his very influential writings on Holocaust theology, as many of us might, he focused on a contribution that enhanced *yir’at Shamayim*.

R. Wurzbürger once told me that the only reason he majored in philosophy at Yeshiva College is that the classes fit his schedule. In his student years, he said, his life was filled with two preoccupations: the Rav—on the days he was in New York—and, the rest of the week, the struggle against the “grinding poverty” afflicting his refugee family that had escaped Germany at the last minute. The only reason he took a Ph.D. at Harvard, he said, was that the Rav instructed him to do so. One wonders how much these remarks can be put down to his famous self-deprecating humor. If the Rav hoped that studying philosophy would strengthen his prize pupil’s devotion to the primacy of religious truth, his guidance was richly rewarded.

## II

The Rav expressed dismay at ceremonialism in religion in the aforementioned essay. A few years before, in a Yiddish newspaper article about prayer (*Morgen Journal* 12/13/1954), he had listed three objectionable aspects of ceremonialism. First, ceremonialism emphasizes the external over inner meaning; second, ceremonialism extracts human beings from reality and inducts them into a realm of illusion; third, the ceremony must have a master of ceremonies at its center, relegating others to spectator status.

In a way it is easier, and more satisfying, to teach the quantifiable external elements in halakhic behavior than it is to evoke the inner feeling that ought to accompany prayer or the *yamim tovim*. Unable to understand how any Jew could fritter away even a moment of Yom Kippur in idle conversation, R. Wurzbürger insisted on inserting a *shiur* between Musaf and Minha. It is easier for a rabbi to measure the progress his congregation has made in terms of external practice. Surely R. Wurzbürger fought successfully to raise the height of the *mehitsa* in two of the congregations he served, and otherwise sought to improve the level of halakhic compliance. Yet this was not enough for him. Often quoting the Rav, he would say that halakha, in the narrow sense of the term, provides a ground floor for ethical growth, not a ceiling. The aspiration for a holy and wholesome life entails going beyond legalism, and requires the student be attached to those who have internalized Torah, and that he emulate them. It is telling that his most seminal contribution to Jewish thought is probably the idea of “covenantal imperative,” the core of which is the conviction that religious ethics are learned through contact with authentic teachers of Torah. This is why

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R. Wurzburger learned so much from the Rav, and learned it so faithfully. He never lost sight of inwardness.

Halakha, for R. Wurzburger, meant ethics. His family will tell you how fastidiously he shunned the pecuniary “extras” often regarded as natural byproducts of a rabbinical position. He spoke about ethics from the pulpit, at the risk of causing unease among some of his congregants who held, as he put it, that “rabbis should stick to Judaism.” It is not accidental that almost all of his philosophical publications focused on ethics and the meta-ethics of Halakha. His conception of religion was the opposite of ceremonialism because he drove his congregants to reflect on their real obligations in this world, instead of viewing the synagogue as an otherworldly spiritual refuge from those demands.

Like his mentor, R. Wurzburger regarded with distaste all pastoral tactics that lacked halakhic warrant and shone a spotlight on the dramatic performance of the officiating clergyman. Over fifty years in the rabbinate, he published one sermon, delivered at his first *Kol Nidre* in the pulpit. (The Rav made a jest about publishing sermons, and R. Wurzburger never repeated the experiment.) To the students who unearthed it, what stood out in this speech was the maturity of the thought and the precise elegance of the English—in the mouth of a speaker who had arrived on these shores only three years previously. More surprising in this sermon is R. Wurzburger’s utter avoidance of personal display. In 1942, a war was raging. Here was a man who had walked the streets of Berlin the morning after Kristallnacht, whose family had received visits from the Gestapo. How easy it would have been for the young rabbi to hold his flock spellbound with tales of his experience! For R. Wurzburger, however, this was not the theme of Yom Kippur, nor was it the purpose of the rabbinate. And so he spoke of contrition and sin, of wasted opportunity and ethical challenge, and of the promise and glory of repentance. As far as one could tell, he never lectured on his personal experiences in Nazi Germany and rarely reminisced about the past in private.

Of course, this strict curtailment of the personal, characteristic of R. Wurzburger’s practice as a spiritual leader, is not absolutely necessary in order to avoid the circus of ceremonialism. It can be argued that imprinting a personal quality on religious communication is sometimes valuable. Surely the Rav, despite his reservations about self-revelation, did not shy away from confessional statements in public. Yet the consistency with which R. Wurzburger avoided such tendencies in the pulpit testifies to his integrity.

III

The Rav observed that smugness is a besetting quality of the upper middle classes. Self-celebration is characteristic of our community. Our rabbis are paid to extol the virtues and echo the judgments of those who hire them. It is easier for academics than for pulpit rabbis to criticize the communities they serve.

In the late 1960's, upon his return to New York from Toronto, R. Wurzburger was critical of some aspects of American involvement in the Vietnam War. More than anything, he was suspicious of American policymakers' complacency and overconfidence in their ability to impose a solution to their liking. Like Ramban, he was concerned about the way even a justified war corrupts those who wage it. Many of his congregants resented him for disturbing them with these thoughts. Children accosted him in the street, telling him that their parents wondered why the rabbi did not support their president. In later years he was excoriated for suggesting that a peace based on territorial compromise in *Eretz Yisrael*, if only it were feasible, was preferable to perpetual warfare allied to maximalism.

R. Wurzburger understood that wise men and women of good will could disagree with him and that his own political preferences had not been handed down irrevocably at Sinai. On Vietnam he parted ways from the Rav, aligning himself with R. Ahron Soloveichik. Regarding the situation of Israel, he was loyal to the Rav's pronouncements on the permissibility of compromise. It is no secret that my views of American politics are more conservative than his, though I pride myself in being his student. His conclusions were not religiously authoritative to me, but his honesty in subjecting to moral and religious judgment positions vociferously held by the many and the mighty is an abiding inspiration.

Professors, I said a moment ago, have much leeway to criticize those in power. Neither academics nor rabbis relish being criticized. How one responds to attack is often a harder test of intellectual honesty than how one attacks others. A congregant, not particularly wealthy or pugnacious, but enamored for the moment with the political theology of Meir Kahane, once became so upset with R. Wurzburger's sermon that he stormed the pulpit. The rabbi's reaction was not to demand an abject apology to be followed by a suitable penalty, as was his right (and some would say, his duty). Instead, he invited the man to explain his objections at *seuda shelishit*.

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Philosophy, at its best, is about self-criticism. It is the ability to stand back and criticize one's own arguments and inferences that is the mark of the philosopher and the lover of wisdom, even more than the doctrines championed or the methods propounded. It is sometimes useful to ask of a philosopher what error, in the work of reasoning, he is most afraid of. For R. Wurzburger, it was the danger of an incautious inference that claims too much for an argument. Such fallacies are endemic to the professional literature and even more rife when one is writing for a relatively uncritical lay audience. Therefore we find so often in his writing phrases like "when I say X, I should not be taken to assert Y."

### IV

When he wrote "On the Study of Torah and the Redemption of the Generation's Soul," the Rav had been in the United States for almost three decades and had been teaching at Yeshiva University for almost twenty years. We look back at those years from the perspective of today, when the extensive careers of so many eminent *talmidim* testify to his impact. In 1960, the number was much smaller, and of these few had actually been in the field long enough to make a substantial record. One of the first and most prominent of these men was R. Walter Wurzburger. It is almost as if the Rav, in diagnosing the religious malaise that dispirited him, could see in R. Wurzburger a reason to hope for something more wholesome.

R. Wurzburger's working life extended another four decades. He would teach at Yeshiva for over thirty years and preside over *Tradition* for better than a quarter of a century. Lacking pretensions of grandeur or self-importance, he nurtured generations of rabbis and thinkers thirty, forty and in the end sixty years his junior. The unprecedented number and quality of the contributions to this memorial issue of *Tradition* is a commentary on the love and reverence with which he is regarded by his colleagues over the generations. We all owe a debt of gratitude to R. Reuven Bulka for his hard and patient work as guest editor.

Like his mentor, R. Wurzburger taught and worked as long as there was strength in his body. Six years before he passed away, he suffered a massive heart attack. He had published *Ethics of Responsibility: Pluralistic Approaches to Covenantal Ethics* and dozens of articles. Yet he continued to maintain a substantial teaching and speaking schedule and even published another book called *God is Proof Enough*. In his later years, hun-

dreds of students got to know him; the rest of us continued to learn from him. That he refused to retire, even when he could not walk from the parking lot to the classroom, defines his standard of vocation. He was fortunate that his family, and particularly his wife, Naomi, made it possible for him to end his career in the manner in which he was accustomed. In honoring him and perpetuating his legacy we also honor her. We hope that the work they did together will continue to comfort and inspire their sons and grandchildren for long to come.<sup>1</sup>

#### NOTES

1. My remarks here are based on three eulogies: the first, delivered for the *sheloshim* at Yeshiva University, was published as “Where the Tree Falls: Remembering Rabbi Walter Wurzburger” (*Jewish Action*, Spring 5763, 2003); the others were delivered for the first *yahrzeit*, one at Yeshiva University and the other at Congregation Shaarei Tefilla in Lawrence, NY.

## HOMER AND THE BIBLE

Volume 41:4 Winter 2008

Why is it, muses a close friend, that whenever he alludes to Hegel or some other icon of Western culture, at the weekly Talmud class he teaches at an Ivy League university, everyone's ears prick up? Well, I counter, if you cited the *Ketsot* in the middle of a class on Hegel, the same thing would happen.

Unexpected juxtapositions are often aesthetically pleasing. The pilpul industry that flourished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century frequently gloried in baroque constructions connecting halakhic and aggadic concepts that seemed to have no common denominator, offering the pleasures of “bringing her bread from afar” (a play on Proverbs 31:14). One standard sermonic formula in classical rabbinic literature (turn the pages of *Leviticus Rabba* for examples) was to begin with a verse, seemingly unrelated to the *Parasha*, the link with which becomes evident at the end.

Such innocent enjoyment is all to the good. When R. Kook, who combined extraordinary earnestness with undisguised appreciation for the beautiful, eulogized his father-in-law, a master, in his youth, of the elaborate *derasha* and the ornate *hadran* (delivered upon concluding the study of a Talmudic tractate), he gestured towards the history of halakhic pilpul up to its incarnation in his time, deeming it a delightful aesthetic belletristic discipline, attractive to its sophisticated audience “when it is performed capably.” Because the subject matter is holy and beloved, R. Kook continues, the pilpulistic production has a handsome moral effect: “to endear the Torah and those who study it.”

Currently popular methods of provoking interest or grabbing attention (the two are not the same) by introducing unexpected or extraneous references do not boast pilpul's hoary pedigree. Yet these methods too, properly employed, can “endear the Torah and those who study it.” At the same time, they are not exempt from the deficiencies of pilpul badly performed and inappropriately deployed.

Having praised pilpul, R. Kook cannot avoid adding the following caveat: “It is well known that while in practical matters one who has capability, whether great or small, his work causes benefit—by contrast

when it comes to creation of beauty, just as the truly great reaches the sublime in his work, and augments good taste, so in the absence of original greatness beauty becomes impoverished and charmless.”

Defining aesthetic excellence in a purely literary context is an almost impossible task. Examining the link between aesthetic enjoyment and religious study and devotion does require us to grade individual practitioners of the art of the unexpected in the service of the sacred, or to separate the truly great from the hacks. Torah education is served not only by creative and inspired artistry but also by disciplined craftsmanship well executed. But when Torah educators or individual students aim to excite ourselves, or others, by techniques that, by design or accident, distract or deflect us from the primary goal of Torah study and comprehension, are they advancing the cause of Torah? The study of Tanakh merits special attention because it is a crucial arena for the inculcation of *yir'at Shamayim* and because, in the absence of a traditional approach like the *derekh ha-limmud* well established in the yeshivot, it has been easier for novelty to catch on and become entrenched.

## II

To the naked eye, the closest thing to old style pilpul is modern pilpul. Even in relatively self-enclosed Haredi enclaves the contemporary attention span has shrunk, so much so that complicated homiletic structures, presupposing an audience steeped in the sources and happy to wait patiently on an art whose full gratifications are deferred to the climax of a long digressive development, are not in fashion. But the cute quick *wort*, the outlandish seeming midrash and the far-fetched *gematria*, when merrily harnessed to agreeable communal topics, have not lost the power to please. Likewise, speakers and audiences at home in halakhic discourse, who feel obligated to spend time studying Tanakh, but find themselves at sea in the unfamiliar world of Biblical prose and poetry, with its relentless entanglement in moral complexity and religious crisis, often find a welcome escape from the human condition by fastening upon some halakhic question to which the text may be made pertinent. Elsewhere I have relied upon, and lauded, distinguished representatives of this genre, and so it should be clear that I do not decry the effort to integrate halakhic categories and *peshat*, except to the extent that it renders us insensible and insensitive to the distinctive existential dimensions of Biblical study.

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In recent Haredi commentaries on Bible one meets an apparently newer trend—the method of eclectic quotation. Contrast this approach with the kind associated with our master teacher Dr. Nechama Leibovitz. Here the student of traditional exegesis might focus a *shiur* on the painstaking reading of one or a few major sources: Rashi and Ramban among the medievals, or Netsiv and Malbim among later authors. Or he or she might introduce a problem and examine it through the prism of a broad array of major interpreters. The goal is precise understanding of the commentators and the Biblical text itself and the appropriation of the ideas therein. Citation of out of the way sources, when it happens, is a prelude to analysis rather than an end in itself. Such study has proven capable of sustaining prolonged interest and providing intellectual and religious substance to many.

Analysis, alas, demands sustained attention and intensity. It might be more interesting, in the short run, if writers on Bible cited a more colorful palette of authors not that well known or that much studied. It would be more flattering to our appetite for novelty if instead of undertaking the labor of clarifying how a small number of *meforshim* struggled with the Biblical text, with the literal meaning of the verses, or with literary problems, or with the religious implications thereof, one were to trot out passages by authors not found in the average Jewish bookshelf, citing a phrase here, an interpretation there, almost at random, from volumes that before the current publication explosion, were examined only by scholars with access to specialized libraries. The reader of such a production would not learn how to learn, how to grapple with Tanakh or with the towering figures in our tradition who accompany our struggle to understand. In place of this the reader would graze on a veritable kaleidoscope of names flitting in and out of view. One would feel as if one had consumed a rich intellectual feast without in fact having exercised one's mind at all.

This style has become a feature of many devout commentaries. On reflection, though, the technique is not as original as it appears at first blush. In the Hertz Humash and the Soncino Bible, whose passing from popularity is much lamented by modernists, reverent references to various once celebrated Anglo-Saxon luminaries like Moulton and Cheyne, for the most part testifying to the Bible's beauty and wisdom, though contributing little substantial insight, grace the text. Where Hertz's appendices tackled the great intellectual religious challenges of the day and contain incisive formulations whose value has not been

eclipsed by the passage of time, these names are perhaps most familiar now to aging Jews who remember their appearance in Hertz's pages, where they still keep company with Rashi and Ibn Ezra and LXX and Gunkel. No doubt an early 20<sup>th</sup> century audience found reassurance in these testimonials; many probably felt they were getting significant intellectual nourishment as well. As do their self-consciously authentic Orthodox descendants a century later with their own eclectic fare.

## II

Hertz's eclecticism gave comfort to an immigrant generation that looked to the Gentile world for affirmation. Contemporary Orthodoxy, immigrating into its own imagined past, probably gains a similar validation (often called *hizzuk*) from its own brand of eclectic Torah commentary. Some 21<sup>st</sup> century Modern Orthodox seek their own niche in a hipper, post-modern spiritual culture.

One manifestation of this "new irreverence" is the proliferation of interpretations, presented in the lingo of pop psychology, purporting to take the *Avot* and other sanctified Biblical personalities down from their pedestal, and bring them down to earth. In Israel this is called *Tanakh be-govah einayim*. "Bible at eye level" sees the *Avot* as dysfunctional guys very much like the ones in our society. For people like me, precisely because we want psychological insight to animate our religious life and do not want to treat Biblical characters as "petrified statues of ossified *tsidkut*" (R. Lichtenstein's phrase), the results are disappointing. The tragedy is not only that they shrink the *Avot* to our size, but that, failing to recognize the shaping religious personalities of our tradition in their magnificence we lose the aspiration to live religiously passionate lives ourselves. We subject ourselves to the casual deterministic assumptions, clichéd depictions of emotion, typical of the therapeutic outlook at its dreariest, and adopt a philosophy that cannot grasp the dramatic, absolute, momentous solemnity of the moral-religious life.

Practitioners of the new irreverence claim that they are doing nothing that was not done by the classical commentators before them. With wearying repetitiveness they deploy Ramban's two statements critical of Abraham and Sarah, and R. Hirsch's critique of Isaac's failure to understand that his sons needed differentiated education. Had they wished for stronger backing for the "right" to identify deficiencies of the *Avot*, indeed other sources—a wealth of midrashic statements and analyses

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emanating from the circles of the *ba'alei musar*—would be available. However, these traditional resources are not truly supportive of the new irreverence. To the contrary, they hold the great Biblical personalities to the highest standards even while regarding them as larger than life spiritual figures whose stature and destinies are incomparable to ours. To judge Ramban and R. Hirsch's entire work, rather than a few gerrymandered passages, as precursors of the new irreverence, is laughable.

Much of the motivation for the new irreverence reflects the passive, unwitting acceptance of popular psychological constructs, and much of the energy impelling it comes from the conviction, often reinforced by religious traditionalists, that reverence for the human being as a religious being, and awe before the saintly persons portrayed in Tanakh, is incompatible with realistic psychological insight, so that judging the *Avot* by the standards of middle brow psychotherapy is the only way to redeem them from pious unreality. Yet I would submit that part of the desire *l'opater les fiddles*, to shock the devout, is nothing less than the feeling that in translating the word of God into the vocabulary and ethos of the social worker one is making it relevant and interesting to sophisticated contemporary people.

I can't help being reminded of an episode in the life of that earthy everyman of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Homer Simpson. Everyone Homer knows is offering an adult education course. Why not Homer? What can he lecture on? Marriage, he decides. So off he drives to the local college, proudly ordering an extra strong container of designer coffee to stay alert in class. Chalk in hand, he ventures some suitably bland remarks: predictable unresponsiveness quickly turns to visible disenchantment. Bewildered and hurt at the exodus from his room, a desperate Homer wins them back by sharing intimate details from his own marriage. Now he is king of the classroom, but only until his wife Marge learns that their private life has become public, and lays down the law. At the next class, Homer retreats to safe platitudes about marriage, and again, rather than flop he reverts to personal anecdotes.

Homer is lucky to have a forbearing wife and fortunate that his academic career lasted for only one episode. God, though long-suffering, seems often remote, and for the professional teacher or amateur talker the need for audience approval or at least attention is constant and urgent. When Shem and Japheth witnessed their father's distressing discomfiture, they dealt with it as circumspectly as they could. When callow would-be writers and teachers of Tanakh come upon an incident potentially to the detriment of our *Avot* and *Immahot*, they are tempted

to seize upon it as an opportunity to grab their listeners' attention, at least for a little while. If we learned from "The Simpsons" instead of embracing the *weltanschauung* of the talk show couch, perhaps we would be less pessimistic about the chances for *yir'at Shamayim* in our educational system.

### III

Lately we are informed that jazzing up the Modern Orthodox study of Bible requires a stronger brew. Minds unmoved by the intellectual encounter with the word of God, dulled by the study of Ramban and Abarbanel, even apathetic towards the minutia of philological cruxes, can only be brought to life, as if by magic, through exposure to the heresies of Biblical criticism. We are told that the very mention of the theories and terminology of the Documentary Hypothesis, for example, is enough to make jaded students prick up their ears, stop surfing the Internet, and hang on every word coming from their instructor's lips. Advocates of this new pedagogy are unclear as to whether heresy attracts merely because of the novelty factor, because public notoriety sets our agenda, or more ominously, due to the frisson of "drinking stolen waters" that enlivens dabbling in what is forbidden.

This is not the place to debate how much attention should be paid to Biblical criticism in the Orthodox study of Tanakh. My own position is not secret: Though the crucial insights of the great *aharonim* in the last two centuries—Malbim, R. David Zvi Hoffmann, R. Mordekhai Breuer *inter alia* can usually be communicated reasonably well without referring to presuppositions of the critics, that creative work will not be transparent to those unaware of that background. In learning together with, and writing for, university students, many of whom will become rabbis and educators and active participants in our creative discussion, I do not avoid these matters when they come up and when doing so can enhance understanding.

Yes, I have noticed that many students indeed "prick up their ears" the moment such subjects are mentioned. I don't mind the momentary spike in attention that goes with a change of pace. Yet when marginal pursuits become invested with heightened significance and interest, simply as a result of their novelty or shock value, this is a cause for suspicion rather than self-satisfaction. If anything, those in whom consideration of the most intimate and most fundamental elements of religious

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life induces giddiness, rather than sobriety, are the least qualified to take part in and influence these discussions.

An educational mission dependent on the fleeting morbid pleasures of debunking, relying on the desperate stimulation of reflexive skepticism cannot stand. It cannot “endear the Torah and those who study it.” Let us not deliberately, coldly, indifferently, cheapen the characters of the *Avot* or the integrity of the Torah as Homer Simpson, in his amiable, amusing and exasperating stupidity, risked his marriage.

## LET HIM WHO IS NOT A CAMEL AMONG YOU

Volume 42:1 Spring 2009

**T**hough the pages of the daily newspaper are rarely a wellspring of wisdom, questioning what is taken for granted in the newspapers is sometimes a gateway to insight. In the aftershock of the Madoff scandal, a prestigious newspaper investigated its impact on the Orthodox community of which he was not a member, though he graciously chose it as a special target of his scheme. One strand of self-examination prominent in the ensuing article accused the Orthodox community of worshipping people with big bucks. Another pointed the finger of guilt at Orthodoxy's failure to sufficiently elevate the status of academia. The reader is assured that the Madoff affair will "force a whole reassessment."

The promise of reassessment should have been music to all who oppose the worship of big bucks, especially those who strenuously encourage their students to devote their lives to education and the Rabbinate. By the logic of the article, the Madoff affair should not have prompted reassessment on our part. Rather it should have provided a moment of triumphant self-vindication.

Nonetheless, the logic of the article did force upon me, at least, a whole reassessment. Alas my thoughts didn't glide along the track laid out for me by the journalist and his informants. I doubt their conclusion. For the Madoff disaster was not the result of a deficiency in highly motivated and idealistic religious educators. The direct cause was an insufficient number of honest money managers. To the extent that too many teachers and rabbis cause harm through incompetence or lack of integrity, and assuming that we must have rabbis and educators, that is a strong reason for those able to do better to enter these professions, and a strong reason for the rest of us to encourage them. If the performance and ethical standards of physicians were unsatisfactory, and we cannot do without the care of doctors, there would be a similar urgent need to supply medicine with the best and the brightest.

If the only problem with big bucks is that some people lust unwholesomely for them, we can foreswear to have anything to do with big time

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moneymaking and moneymakers. As individuals we may perhaps opt for a life of “frugal comfort” as the most conducive to religious fidelity, ethical integrity and spiritual growth. Such reassessment of our standard of living and the balance between personal and family economic needs, and our spiritual goals and the material needs of others is long overdue. But that is for the individual. Institutions nowadays require money. If there is a way to dispense with money, I’d like to know about it. Even *Tradition* needs it. Every so often people write to us wondering why this journal can’t be made available for free; once we acquaint them with our budget and suggest how they could help defray it, we never hear from them again.

Thus the most plausible inference from the Madoff scandal would be that Orthodox Judaism needs more Orthodox money managers, philanthropists and tycoons, not fewer. The only reason not to draw that conclusion is that the goals to which money is a means, namely individuals and a community dedicated to the service of God, are more valuable and more urgent.

## II

Is it true that the Orthodox community, in particular the younger generation, worships people with big bucks to the point of moral corruption? Of course the word “worship” is used with a degree of hyperbole: nobody means that portraits of billionaire wheeler-dealers accompany the *sifrei Torah* as it proceeds from the Holy Ark, as was done during the cult of Franklin Roosevelt. Is it even true that a disproportionate percentage of our brightest students attempt to be like, to live like Madoff-league money people? Is it true that they dream of walking in their shoes as young people of my childhood fantasized about running in Mantle or Koufax’s sneakers?

At the risk of sounding naïve, the picture in the previous paragraph does not ring true, at least for most of the students I know. To be sure, I hear that panels involving Wall Street go-getters attract overflow crowds of young adults, somewhat like the sports heroes or political paladins of yesteryear, but notoriety is not admiration, and admiration is not esteem, and certainly not the resolution to emulate. As far as I can tell, *roshei yeshiva* and other devoted educators get all the respect and esteem they deserve, both to their face and behind their backs. It is their lives that are often revered as models for inspiration. No doubt our culture requires a reassessment of priorities, particularly as regards material possessions and

the spiritual necessity of dedicated service. It is not clear to me that this requires or even benefits from a radical elevation in status of rabbis, Torah educators or college professors. Torah educators and rabbis, by and large, are happy with their portion, able to live with their material lot and satisfied with the modicum of *kavod* that comes with their profession.

What is regrettable about our educational enterprise, it seems, is not that young adults are inspired by the wrong role models, but that inspiration seldom translates into emulation. Young people are positive about the value of a professional career conformed to the desire for religious fulfillment and ethical achievement, but all too often they become quietly resigned to the belief that such careers are for others and not for them.

The reasons for this failure are not all discreditable. Not everyone has the intellectual and social skills: adolescents can be difficult; so can adults. Geographical isolation may compound the loneliness characteristic of religious existence in a secular society. Those gifted in other areas may feel impelled, with mixed feelings, to dedicate their talents to these fields. Aspiration to *aliya* often induces young people to pursue careers marketable in Israel. In the university, the decades long climb to accreditation, approbation and tenure, relentlessly driving underground the religious and existential motivations that make college teaching a potentially worthwhile activity, deters some of the best minds and spirits from committing themselves to academia. As in any other demanding pursuit, even those who seem eminently qualified experience a measure of disappointment.

Of course, material conditions also play a role. This is less a matter of genuine privation than of young people who plan for family life and consider a certain kind of lifestyle compulsory: homes, vacations, state of the art cars and kitchens as obligatory status symbols. One comes to believe that it is undignified and humiliating for one's family, to make do with less. And so one opts for safe, respectable professions: law, medicine, accountancy and business, not because one idolizes the exciting life of the high financier and master of the market but, to the contrary, because these careers promise security. Being rich is thus not an end in itself but the only way to generate enough income to maintain a respectable *baal-batish* mode of existence.

To change this situation requires reassessment and revision of our beliefs about social and economic status. In the final analysis, those of us who are not daunted by the prevalent habits of thought are motivated by love that overcomes the spirit of petty calculation, and are sustained by an abiding joy that conquers melancholy and discouragement. Their long-term

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happiness has little to do with the distribution of honors in our community and upgrading the latter will not provide a substitute for the former.

### III

To be joyful, the Mishna teaches, is to be happy with one's portion. Despite well-known frustrations, that portion, for those who are fortunate enough to be able to devote their lives to propagating Torah and to other worthwhile vocations, is bounteous indeed. Where else, under ordinary circumstances, could one have equal opportunities for religious edification, spiritual deepening and intellectual growth while at the same time performing work of real value to others?

In a world and a community crippled by an absence of passion and lack of wholehearted love for the life one is leading, the rabbi and educator are uniquely situated to provide an example of joy in one's portion. It is therefore sad to eavesdrop on the inner monologue of those identified as religious professionals and intellectuals and hear a chorus of complaint about the failure of the community to offer them sufficient honor, in their opinions, as if the lives they lead and the opportunities given them are not reward enough.

When rabbis, educators and college professors ascribe the moral bankruptcy of our society to the fact that society places a lower value on us than we set on ourselves, those to whom they direct their reproof are entitled to suspect that the Orthodox intellectuals are concerned more with their own dreams and desires for worldly recognition than they are with addressing the needs of their fellow Jews, that they are confessing their inner weakness when they should be demonstrating their vitality.

The habitual tendency of the intellectual classes to expend surplus energy on deprecating successful business people, to blame them disproportionately for our ills, and to display contempt for the making of money, is a peculiar characteristic of Western secular cultural elites. If we exhibit the same attitude it is because we have learned from them. That nobody likes to be dependent on others seems like a good enough explanation for this. It is a greater puzzle of Western society, and American culture in particular, that the wealthy continue to supply substantial support to intellectuals, artists and cultural institutions that rarely pass up a chance to denigrate their pecuniary benefactors. One wonders why rich people feed the mouth that bites them: is it a triumphant scenario of Nietzschean resentment, with the academic sheep slyly imposing their values on the guilt-stricken commercial wolves, or is it perhaps the wolves humoring their Veblenian pet sheep? Neither alternative is appetizing to the authentic

religious educator, whose goal is neither to wheedle his way into a position of social superiority over others nor to be an object of their bemused indulgence. Perhaps some of them, exhibiting more breadth of mind than their cultured antagonists, recognize the value of culture and support it despite what they perceive as the resentment of its transmitters.

The founder of Christianity taught that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. This saying has sowed consternation among his more worldly exponents, who have tried to rescue it by textual emendation—as if passing a rope (*kamilon* in Greek) through the eye of a needle were less impossible than threading a camel (*kamelon*), or by identifying the Eye of the Needle as a narrow place through which the camel can pass only with difficulty.

Judaism proffers no equivalent barrier to the salvation of wealthy individuals. “If you have achieved much in Torah,” says R. Yohanan b. Zakkai a few years later: “do not be satisfied with yourself; for this is why you were created.” R. Bahye b. Asher glosses: “If you studied and taught others and trained many students, do not say . . . how much effort did I expend (*tarahti*) on behalf of God who commanded me to study Torah.” It is instructive that R. Bahye does not merely castigate the self-satisfied scholar for arrogance or haughtiness, in claiming merit for merely attempting to fulfill his divinely imposed task (as R. Yona interprets), but singles out as unworthy the feeling that Torah study is a burden—a *tirha*. Torah study is what we were created for. Yet it is impossible for us not to regard it as a privilege, a joy, a fulfillment, and it is wrong to feel or give the impression that it is a burden that calls for complaint and needs to be palliated with various communal honors and status symbols.

If the message is that we ought to beware of treating worldly attainments as an adequate alternative for moral and spiritual attainments, then the haughtiness of the mighty and the wealthy and the smugness of those who regard themselves as intellectually accomplished are equally judged. As King James’s scribes might paraphrase: “Let him who is not a camel among you cast the first stone.”

## YOU TAUGHT ME MUSAR AND THE PROFIT ON IT

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“**W**hat am I cheering for?” asked the eminent *talmid hakham* who happened to be a Mets fan on Opening Day of 1992: “Let’s say they didn’t do what they’re accused of doing,” he continued, alluding to charges against three important players that would probably have incurred censure even at an Ivy League university: “What they’ve admitted is shameful enough.”

When idolized athletes reveal their feet of clay, many Torah educators react, not in self-critical embarrassment, like my colleague the fan, but with a sense of exultation and triumph. For them, immoral behavior, vulgarity, dishonesty and avarice in the sports cathedrals is precisely the ammunition they want to demonstrate the worthlessness of sports as a physical activity and even more as the source of spectator enjoyment. Students whose inclination to waste precious time is not nipped in the bud by witticisms like “Football? Twenty two idiots running after a ball!” may yet take alarm at tales of fornication, domestic violence, boorishness, gambling and steroids. What are we to make of their argument and what are we to make of their invective?

Let’s run through the usual defenses made by the pro-sports crowd. Yes, sports promote physical fitness, coordination and vigor, and following the professionals adds zest to our own activities. To which your self-righteous health *lishmah* types retort that non-competitive calisthenics are better and more efficient medicine than standing around waiting for the ball to be hit to you, straining your arm in the unnatural motion of pitching, or ambling around a golf course. And can these meager benefits offset hundreds of hours on the couch watching other people engage in these activities, or the junk food consumed while doing so? Though debating the achievements of professional athletes and analyzing their statistics encourages many children to accelerate their mastery of arithmetic, tasting the waters of long division years before the age set by the educational establishment, in its didactic wisdom, for their initiation into its mysteries, this benefit too is limited and soon outgrown.

It is claimed that playing sports promotes teamwork and talking about sports solidifies social bonds. In particular, involvement in sports enables committed Orthodox Jews, a small minority in the United States, and a minority even in Israel, to converse with individuals less committed, who cannot navigate the sea of Talmud or comprehend the passion for God. It provides a neutral topic that lubricates social intercourse and often alleviates tension and conflict. Though some would aver that Orthodox confrontation with the world outside our four cubits should be marked by discomfort and palpable alienation, in reality we recognize that such an atmosphere is neither livable nor morally desirable. Politicians get mileage out of talking sports: When President Nixon visited a delegation of antiwar students gathered to protest before dawn at the Washington Monument, he earnestly, though a bit incongruously, praised the Syracuse University football team.

Not everyone is Nixon, of course. Many other subjects can serve for mixed conversation and pleasant interaction. Many Orthodox Jews, totally illiterate in sports, manage to find common language with others. Good will, good character and sensitive social skills are more important than the ability to make chitchat about inherently frivolous matters. People who have experienced sports, actively or passively, should put their experience to positive social use, but that is quite different from investing time and energy for the sake of eventual utility.

The most powerful of common apologia for the sports aficionado is also the simplest. Thus Samuel Johnson defended commerce. He said: "There are few ways in which a man can be more innocently employed than in getting money." The innocent exertion of the sportsman and the innocent recreation of the spectator are among those few ways. For the lonely and the preoccupied, there is nothing like the daily ballgame to ease the burden of the self or merely to provide an island of peace and recreation in a difficult world. In Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*, one of the things that left an abiding impression on several of my *talmidim* is her depiction of the widowed clergyman reading and thinking in the Iowa twilight against the relaxed background of the baseball broadcast. The aforementioned Richard Nixon, his presidency ruined, fortified his diminished *seder ha-yom* by scheduling a nightly pilgrimage to Yankee Stadium and other parks. Why even my mother, late in her long life, was grateful to have been introduced to the culture of baseball, so that she could enjoy the televised gracefulness of the athletes and the quiet dignity with which Joe Torre coped with his boss.

Naturally this approach cannot appeal to the hard core Musarnik. From his or her perspective, innocence is no excuse. What does not make me

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stronger spiritually is a waste of time and thus destructive. The ideal *ben Torah* is one for whom innocent activities have no place because he or she is totally taken up with the aspiration to excellence. The innocent pastime is the servant of mediocrity and the enemy of proper utilization of time.

At which the Johnsonian need do no more than to remind us that passing the time innocently is no easy thing. How much of the profound moral evil in this world, to say nothing of mere misery, is due to boredom and restlessness, masquerading as a quest for greatness and self-transcendence? Is there more, or is there less, gratuitous ill will and slander where harmless everyday pleasures are rejected for an insatiable craving to fill life with hollow, grandiose achievement and attention? The debate between these idealistic and realistic impulses is more crucial for our self-understanding and for the lives we lead than many of us think. Can we aspire to excellence without abandoning ourselves to self-deluded spiritual arrogance? Perhaps we will discuss these dilemmas some other time.

## II

For now I would like to consider the vehemence and contempt many of our preachers bestow upon the innocent, sometimes silly activities that give so many people enjoyment. Sports enthusiasts are not the only targets of such rhetoric: the same kind of invective is often deployed against other forms of amusement. I prefer to speak of what I know, and of activities I have enjoyed and continue to enjoy.

The previous paragraphs sketch the range of anti-sports argument. As we have seen the criticisms of playing and watching sports are not without merit. Whatever the positive goals to which involvement in sports culture can be applied—physical, social, or recreational, it is hard to make the argument that the sports culture ought to be an important part of our education and an essential leisure activity. It seems clear that investing huge quantities of time and attention to following sports, purchasing expensive paraphernalia and articles of clothing and footwear because they are marketed using the name and image of a famed and charismatic athlete, agonizing over the fortunes of favorite teams and players as if these were earthshaking events in our own lives, is foolish and invites satire. It would be amazing and incomprehensible if effective advocates of traditional Torah education foreswore humorous remarks about the foibles of youth culture.

I don't know how to measure the short-range effects of these discourses. Do they increase the amount of time spent in commendable activities, or dissuade young people from emulating the vices of notorious

athletes? Do they deter their audience from buying designer items? Do they lead their hearers to focus their prayers on health, growth in Torah, the peace and welfare of society as opposed to the success of one's team? Dissertations on the subject can, and probably have been produced at our graduate schools of education. Uninitiated in the guild, I surmise that pejorative remarks by Rabbis on the sports culture are neither more nor less effective than attacks on other features of modern secular culture.

What about the long-range consequences? Soon enough life exerts its gravitational force. The pressing needs of this world become ubiquitous—getting and spending money claims our time and attention. As we grow older, the imperatives of the next world cannot be evaded; they too demand our time and attention. Our trivial youthful pastimes cannot rival the unrelenting pursuit of self-interest or, for the religiously minded, the pursuit of life in the presence of God. With a brief glance at the box score and a snatch of conversation, with the sportscaster's voice softly accompanying our sober grown up activities, in the beautiful green summer diamonds or schoolyard basketball games we linger on in passing, the carefree loose-limbed ghosts of our youth return like a vanished dream. In our maturity we may still be glad to have been them, but their time has gone. In the long run, reality accomplishes what Musar generally does not.

What remains, for most of us who grew up loving sports, is the memory of our own modest athletic competence and the vision of true mastery by the elite. The athlete, however gifted, achieves this mastery only through years of incessant training, rehearsing the same set of physical moves and responses for thousands of hours until they become second nature, all the while anticipating the stage of actual performance when he, or she, must confront a new situation, similar but not quite the same as those encountered in practice or previous experience, and meet that challenge, under pressure, with skill and grace. Except for the requirement of grace under pressure, this description uncannily recalls the intellectual combination of constant learning, review and creativity without which one cannot become a serious *talmid hakham*. Nor is the element of pressure absent when we must bring our Torah education to bear in the immediacy of the personal encounter, often at moments of crisis.

What survives into adulthood, in a word, is gratefulness for what athletes, in their genuine or affected humility, call their "God-given talent," together with a heartfelt admiration for the persistence and discipline that translates rare gifts of strength and coordination into the magnificence of performance under competitive conditions. Perhaps because athletic excellence, like most manifestations of beauty, is neither necessary for temporal success nor essential to our moral and spiritual existence, and

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because the attainments of professionals are so incontrovertibly beyond our aspirations or capabilities, our admiration tends to be pure, uncontaminated by the envy or jealousy that so often poison our attitudes towards those superior to us in some department.

Surely one may live a religious life without any conception of athletic excellence. However, one cannot live a religious life without the habit of reverence and love for the exhibition of excellence. Life, where that natural admiration for what is innocently graceful and impressive is extinguished or undeveloped, becomes an impoverished, embittered, egotistic, self-interested affair. We grudge our fellow human beings their relative superiority to us, and we cannot whole-heartedly worship our Creator as the source and paradigm of all that is admirable and impressive in this world. In such a world, envy is no longer a vice; it may even be regarded as an expression of an egalitarian agenda. It is not shocking that those who cultivate such a world are tone deaf to the prayer of praise and gratitude. To the extent that we fail to nurture the sense of pleasure and thanksgiving for beauty and grace that are not self-centered and self-interested, we make ourselves cripples, religiously speaking.

What remains of the Musar? Sometimes it appears as if, for many adults, the high aspirations and mantras of their early Torah education vanish along with the other apparitions of childhood. All the talk from the front of the classroom about a life suffused by fear and love of God, the evenings of intense and vehement discourse in the Bet Midrash, the ideals lifted high in the air, belong to a different world than the one inhabited by the adult self.

What is still discernible in the adult sometimes is not the content of the Musar but the tone. You recognize the “yeshiva man,” not by his refined *middot* or by his perpetual consciousness of God, but by his cynical demeanor, a reflexive tendency to disparage and denigrate everything and everyone, not passing over the characteristic ideals of Torah, its leading personalities and the yeshiva culture itself. So familiar is this phenomenon to the yeshiva world that we have a distinctive, hard to translate term for it: *bittul*. To be *mevattel* a person or idea is not only to disparage him or her or it, or even to display a facile contempt. It is to mock out of habit, compulsively, formulaically, as if any other attitude were beneath the hard pretentious defensive dignity of the person who delivers himself of the derisive judgment. The cynicism of *bittul* is incompatible with genuine admiration or reverence for anything or anyone; it leaves no room for love of anything superior to oneself.

When educators sneer and jeer at the silliness, and worse, they perceive around them, they do not deliberately seek to propagate a culture

of *bittul*. Least of all do they imagine their astringency refashioned into an absolute outlook and turned sharply even against their own persons and their favorite doctrines. In their minds they are upholding good and deriding evil. If *leitsanut* (derision) is prohibited, yet *leitsanuta d'avoda zara* (derision of idolatry or of vice in general) is commendable. How can such justified invective lead to destructive outcomes?

R. Hutner devoted the first discourse of *Pabad Yitshak* on Purim to the ethos of *leitsanut*. His point is that *leitsanut*, by its very nature, is destructive. It expresses the desire to negate, to deny significance; it cheapens the world. In permissible *leitsanut*, the destructive element is secondary to the creative impulse; negation and denial of significance are in the service of affirmation. Value is enhanced.

R. Hutner's remarks force us to consider how we are to know when derision is secondary to a positive goal and thus useful in enhancing that goal and when derision and disparagement become primary and are to be shunned. It seems that one-sided denigration, in its failure to appreciate what is valuable and admirable in the object satirized, is liable to become an end in itself and thus is essentially destructive of meaning. As I hinted earlier, many in our Orthodox society resemble, and sometimes outdo secular society in their cynicism and constitutional inability to appreciate and revere. In our generation, if we are to nurture the fundamental religious impulses of praise and gratitude and sheer appreciation of innocent human achievement, we must be especially anxious to avoid feeding a culture of *bittul*.

When Caliban, the savage in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, who has become an emblem of the baleful effects of colonialism, turns against the veneer of civilization to which he has been subjected, he accuses his would be mentor, the magician Prospero: "You taught me language, and my profit on 't / Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language!" We who would benefit the younger generation with our wisdom and gestures, we who would instruct them about the society in which we are embedded, and lead them on the path to reverence and love for the good, should beware of cheering ourselves too uncritically, lest one day the message will be flung in our face: "You taught me Musar, and my profit on't / Is I know how to sneer!"<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The discussion benefited from conversations with Efrayim Unterman and Noah Cheses.

## THE TEACHER OF MORALITY AT HARWICH BEACH

Volume 42:3 Fall 2009

**Y**oung Sam Johnson once balked when his father asked him to attend to his bookstall. “Pride was the source of that refusal, and the remembrance of it was painful,” he later recalled. On the fiftieth anniversary of the offense Johnson returned to the Uttoxeter-market and stood for an hour bareheaded in the pouring rain. What do you, modern Orthodox reader, make of this scene of remorse and expiation? Does it fill you with condescending pity for the well-developed sense of guilt that drove him to it (if only he had a good therapist!)? Are you struck with awe at the strenuous operations of conscience? What would you think if he were a member of your community? How you respond says more about your attitude towards the *Ribbono shel Olam* than the nature of your head-gear or the garments you wear. Our understanding of *teshuva*, and our own path to God, is enriched by our knowledge of the struggles of other people and the awareness that we are not condemned to echo slavishly the spiritual patterns of our own day and society. The story of Samuel Johnson is one such opportunity to encounter someone whose differences from us, and similarities to us make him a source of profitable instruction.

We know the story because Samuel Johnson, three hundred years after his birth, remains a greater, larger and more enduring figure than any of his contemporaries. His life continues to exert enormous fascination over many unfamiliar with his writing. His triumph over a surplus of adversity is awesome enough in itself. The half-blind infant, scarred by scrofula, intellectually gifted but frustrated, stubborn and rebellious, grows into a man poorly suited to serve as a schoolmaster, the only profession available to a learned man lacking means, social prospects, or university education, grotesque or ridiculous to children due to his disfigurement, the effect of which is amplified by the odd gesticulations associated with Tourette’s syndrome. Seeking his fortune in London, by now married to a woman thirty years his senior, he learns first hand the hunger and homelessness of the down at the heels literary worker, chronicled in his *Life of*

*Savage*. After decades of incessant toil, calamities, difficulties, and melancholy, the almost single-handed production of his dictionary elevates him to eminence and prestige, and transforms the erstwhile beggar into the companion of the wealthy, the privileged and the cultural-political elite, but brings him neither psychological nor pecuniary security nor forgetfulness of his hard, humble origins and the enormous responsibility before God for the proper use of his unequalled gift.

The Johnson we meet in the day to day annals of Boswell's life indeed towers over his surroundings: his common sense, astonishing talk and erudition dominate conversation. Humorous or morose, genial or irritable, overbearing or charming, he is ever the formidable man. Johnson thus became the first celebrity whose everyday life and anecdotes were observed and reported in all their particulars. Boswell was merely the most assiduous and artful of his contemporary chroniclers. What makes Johnson such a winning subject and such a fascinating personality is precisely the combination of grandeur and vulnerability, the enormous intelligence, the boundless energy exhibited in his vigorous moods, together with his foibles and anxieties. Scholarship has uncovered the ways that Boswell edited his material to create a more attractive, less disturbing portrait of his hero. Yet even with this knowledge we feel confronted by a real breathing, struggling human being, the likes of which was unknown to previous writers of biography. That is why, though at this point new discoveries of fact are unlikely, Johnson continues to get new biographies.

There are aspects of Johnson that do not sit well with the modern temperament and which therefore should be of particular interest to readers of *Tradition*. It is the ethical and religious dimension of his life to which this essay seeks to direct your attention. He was not a perfect saint, though he aspired to live righteously: few of us are responsible for more acts of extraordinary kindness: how many would open their homes to a variety of wretches and misfits, alcoholic doctors, blind poets, emancipated slaves and, in old age, endeavor to keep the peace among them? He constantly berated himself for indolence—going to bed late and rising late and slovenly, even as he produced a staggering amount of work. In short, he was an imperfect but passionate religious individual who took guilt seriously and the threat of damnation.

## II

Johnson's own writing is less popular than his life. Were it not for the abiding interest in his biography, his books would perhaps be no more

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read today than those of other major 18<sup>th</sup> century authors, Addison and Steele, for example. Already in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Macaulay wrote: “The reputation of those writings, which he probably expected to be immortal, is every day fading; while those peculiarities of manner and that careless table-talk the memory of which, he probably thought, would die with him, are likely to be remembered as long as the English language is spoken in any quarter of the globe.” The reason he gave was that Johnson’s talk had vigor and immediate power, while his pen was overly portentous and Latinate. There is some truth to this. However, it seems that those readers who are devoted to Johnson’s moral essays or to his philosophical novel *Rasselas*, with notable exceptions, like the secular philosopher Robert Nozick, are those who tend to take his religion seriously too. Macaulay’s criticism of Johnson’s style is linked to his distaste for the man’s inelegant, unsophisticated devoutness.

Because Johnson is so much a moralist of common sense, he is more bent on reminding readers of what they already know than in announcing paradoxical discoveries, and his most original observations often seem uncontroversial once grasped. For those who continue to enjoy and admire his shrewd moralizing, the commonplace nature of his characteristic moral themes commands our attention due to the gravity of his prose and the balance of his judgment; his formal weightiness is redeemed by the accurate, knowing deployment of his huge vocabulary and encyclopedic learning.

One perennial subject of the would-be preacher of virtue is the futility of all our attempts to advise and admonish our fellow human beings. The failure of indisputable truth to affect change is often lamented by *ba'alei Musar*: we all recall the opening passages of Ramhal’s *Mesillat Yesharim*, the most influential Jewish ethical treatise of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. One of Johnson’s most penetrating reflections on the subject is found in his *Rambler* #87. It is fitting that we mark the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth by reviewing this essay, although summary and paraphrase do not do justice to its felicity. For his analysis of the relationship between the source of counsel and the intended recipient contains at least one striking and fundamental insight I have not discovered elsewhere. A summary will precede my own comments:

Johnson begins with the platitude that “few things are so liberally bestowed, or squandered with so little effect, as good advice.” Sometimes it is the person who needs correction who is blamed for resisting it; often the counselor is held responsible for missing the favorable moment, for communicating poorly, or for failing to disguise the bitter taste of the moral medicine.

Johnson then suggests that good advice usually has no effect because it is not specific enough: “A few general maxims, enforced with vehemence, and inculcated with importunity, but failing for want of particular reference and immediate application.” In part this is because the wisest of us know little of the person whose welfare we seek. We tend to be especially diligent to conceal our original motives, even when we know them ourselves, from “those whose superiority either of power or understanding may entitle them to inspect our lives.”

Those who give advice are often to blame for provoking resistance, because “detection of the follies or the faults of others” is an easy way to acquire a reputation for virtue and dignity. Naturally the targets of such reproof instinctively oppose it regardless of merit: “It is sufficient that another is growing great in his own eyes at our expense, and assumes authority over us without our permission; for many would contentedly suffer the consequences of their own mistakes, rather than the insolence of him who triumphs as their deliverer.”

Reflections in this vein lead Johnson to cite the view that “dead counselors are safest. The grave puts an end to flattery and artifice, and the information that we receive from books is pure from interest, fear, or ambition.” “We are not unwilling to believe that man wiser than ourselves, from whose abilities we may receive advantage, without any danger of rivalry or opposition, and who affords us the light of his experience, without hurting our eyes by flashes of insolence.”

By now you are close to the end of the two thousand-word essay and think you have grasped the point that books are better than living sources of reproof. But then you have missed the next turn of observation. Books don’t do the trick either:

[V]olumes may be perused, and perused with attention, to little effect... Of the numbers that pass their lives among books, very few read to be made wiser or better, apply any general reproof to themselves, or try their own manners by axioms of justice. They purpose either to consume those hours for which they can find no other amusement, or gain or preserve that respect which learning has always obtained; or to gratify their curiosity with knowledge, which, like treasures buried and forgotten, is of no use to others or themselves... A student may easily exhaust his life in comparing divines and moralists, without any regard to morality or religion; he may be learning not to live, but to reason...

Those who would deem this analysis trivial, or too ponderously stated, are welcome to examine the excerpts quoted and the original *Rambler*

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number and to determine whether these are indeed obvious ideas that go without saying, or if not, how easily they can be better said. Meanwhile let us consider the hinge around which the essay moves: Books are demonstrated to be better moralists than preachers, because they do not evoke opposition; yet dead authors, too, fail, because readers are not threatened by them, instead annexing them to their own morally indifferent purposes. Johnson's own resigned conclusion is that despite this discouraging diagnosis, there is value in continuing to make the effort to make virtue seen, loved and obeyed.

### III

The wisdom of which Johnson speaks is not derived or deduced from divine revelation: in the manner of 18<sup>th</sup> century moralizing it is neither religious nor secular in the contemporary sense of the terms. It thus has more in common with *Mishlei* or *Kobelet* than with either the Torah or the abstractions of modern meta-ethical theory or the kerygma of Christian scriptures. Within a Jewish framework we would distinguish between the kind of counsel that conveys direct duties imposed by God and the kind of guidance that appeals to self-understanding and self-interest. Johnson's comments would apply to both. Rightly or wrongly, we resist correction even when it speaks in the uncompromising voice of halakhic imperative: we may feel threatened by the superiority of the rabbi who proclaims it; we may feel unengaged with the book that demands it—for all the reasons unearthed and rehearsed by Johnson. Likewise, when the voice of truth speaks indirectly, by appealing to our conscience or desire for happiness, the same strategies of refusal and evasion and indifference are at our disposal.

Without dismissing Johnson's reasons for pessimism, a Jewish reader may note one important omission in his account. He has shown that verbal suasion by living preachers can be successfully resisted and that book learning too can be outflanked. He has said nothing about the synergy between living word and example and the written word. Even our study of literature, history and other elements of our cultural heritage potentially combines the intimate dialogue of living students and teachers, too lively to allow a merely academic relationship to the material, with the august authority of the text being studied, elevated, remote, and hence invulnerable to the defenses we erect against confrontational insight and truth. This experience should, if anything, be immeasurably intensified in the religious reading that is at the center of the life of Torah: the word of

God interacting with the community committed to the perpetuation and realization of His word.

How do we promote the integrated *mussar* of absent text and present teacher, harnessing the strengths of both, instead of being harmed by the weaknesses of each? One requirement is that the teacher of Torah (or the teacher of humanities for that matter) must avoid identifying the voice of the text with his or her own voice. It means clearing a space where the text can speak to the student without the teacher's hectic ventriloquism. It means lowering one's figurative voice and suppressing one's will to power and anxiety. This is hard to do, not only because we are incurably vain, as Johnson says, but also because often we care too much, we are too much invested in other people, to step back humbly and let God do His work. We think it all depends on our brilliance and if that fails, on our vehemence.

One way to counter this delusion is to confront the limitations of our power to influence others. Another is to humanize our relations with those we care about. By this I mean that we recognize that our relationship with those whose welfare we seek is ultimately and proximately rooted in love, and that like all human love this entails our need for individuals and/or for the community they comprise.

Such acknowledgement is risky. We are rightly wary of exchanging manipulative domination for emotional exploitation and dependency. Although R. Soloveitchik, for example, was passionately grateful for the way Torah study, and particularly the personal bonds formed through his teaching, sustained him through difficult times, lesser figures may feel diminished by the admission that we are as dependent on others and on the work we do with them as they depend on us. (On the basis of recent biographical accounts of her relations with students it is possible that here, as in other areas, Nechama will be remembered as a pioneer.)

"Be not hasty... to trust, or to admire, the teachers of morality: they discourse like angels, but they live like men," warns Johnson's mouth-piece in *Rasselas*, speaking of the failure of philosophy to assuage human grief. Samuel Johnson discoursed like a down to earth angel who slept in his clothes. He lived like a man who did not forget that he was not immune to the faults he defined with such eloquence and accuracy. One reason he remains exemplary is that he acknowledged his humanity more frankly than most sages or celebrities.

When Boswell went to France, Johnson accompanied him to Harwich. Their talk before parting included Johnson's famous "refutation" of Bishop Berkeley and his plea with Boswell to observe his religious duties. At last the moment of leave-taking arrived:

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My revered friend walked down with me to the beach, where we embraced and parted with tenderness, and engaged to correspond by letters. I said: "I hope, Sir, you will not forget me in my absence." Johnson: "Nay, Sir, it is more likely you should forget me, than I should forget you." As the vessel put out to sea, I kept my eyes on him for a considerable time, while he remained rolling his majestic frame in his usual manner; and at last I perceived him walk back into the town, and he disappeared.

In a strange way, Johnson ends up embodying both of the poles around which *Rambler* #87 revolves. A statue commemorates the spot where the old man stood in foul weather to atone for his youthful disobedience. A statue could stand on Harwich beach where he reminded us that those we love often forget us before we forget them. Macaulay, who conceded that Johnson was in his own age a classic, and to posterity a companion, sought to assess and to fix Johnson's rank within the constellation of English letters, a matter about which the great man cared not a little, though it caused him less anxiety than the destiny of his soul. My goal, in this short appreciation, is merely to assess his usefulness, how the man together with the writer can still help those who wish to advance in self-understanding, in ethical sensitivity, and in *yirat Shamayim*.

## “FEAR OF FLESH AND BLOOD”

Volume 42:4 Winter 2009

In 1988, the Yeshiva College *Commentator's* Purim issue allowed itself a couple of satirical shots at the Reverend Jesse Jackson, then mounting the first serious campaign by an Afro-American for the presidency of the United States. Two older colleagues at Yeshiva were outraged. Don't they know that “the birds in the sky will carry the word”? A paper—even a college paper—may be retrieved from the subway trash bin, where anyone can read it. How dare we offend the supporters of powerful and popular political figures?

If you asked me, the jokes were unexceptionably mild. My colleagues' fears were misplaced. Yet they spoke from experience. One had reached North America after World War II began. The other had spent part of his childhood in a Displaced Persons Camp after the war. They may have misjudged democratic culture. They did not misjudge anti-Semitism and its potential consequences.

Recently, Orthodox Jews have been held up to mass execration for acts far more heinous than poking fun at politicians. Let us not rehash the long and varied calendar of crimes and offenses. Pick up a newspaper or listen to the radio and you will have been inundated with a plethora of information about rabbis and laymen who have fouled their nest. Some weeks are worse than others and these have been increasing in frequency and severity. I am happy to leave the full reportage to others, especially as one hopes that between my writing and your reading some of the allegations will have been disproved or at least proved exaggerated. That, all extenuation aside, profound moral corruption has been brought to light and that considerable harm has been done to the cause of Judaism and to the reputation of Orthodox Jews is undeniable.

Declarations and attempts at analysis have been called forth at every new revelation of scandal. Diagnostic essays proliferate, some of which also serve the purpose of excuse and mitigation. Yes, we know that charitable institutions vital to our communities cost a great deal of money. We know that *yeshivot* especially need funding. We know that many modern Orthodox Jews are so attached to material comforts that these have

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become, for them, absolute necessities, and that those willing to do with less of them fear the scorn of those who are not.

We also know what the Talmud teaches that one who fails to teach his son an honest trade, it is as if he had trained him in robbery, so that those dismissive of such preparation, especially in a community where lower economic standards are socially unacceptable, are liable for the inevitable results. We have also heard a lot about the general “disconnect” in applying the laws we study in the Bet Midrash to everyday life. One Orthodox organization has declared the need for an enhanced study of the halakha obligating Jews to conform to civil law (*dina d'malkhuta dina*) in the expectation that detailed familiarity would breed respect and compliance among the faithful.

These insights and proposals all have their place. In our hearts, however, we all know that there is more to the accumulation of disgraceful episodes than the desperation of the needy and improvident for money or specific lacunae in halakhic knowledge about our obligations to the government. Underlying the series of offenses is an attitude of dismissal and disdain for others, Gentiles or Jews who are not part of one's in-group. This is evident from the casually contemptuous and unguarded epithets and sneers to which we have become so inured that they are no longer even noticed or hushed. Like the four-letter words that punctuate the dialect of certain subcultures, they have become part of the atmosphere. It is not simply contempt for the government or the tax system or any other American institution. It is contempt for human beings and gleeful pride at the opportunity to take advantage of them.

It may seem strange that individuals whom God has uniquely summoned to His service and glory, who are privileged to study His word and obey the commandments with which He has surrounded us, and who are able, in this country, to pursue unimpeded prosperity and the practice of their religious obligations and cultural interests, should be preoccupied to trumpet obsessively their putative superiority to their fellow citizens through verbal contempt and fraudulent activities. No doubt there are social and historical explanations and excuses and mitigations for this behavior. The confused, dangerous hash of secularist nationalism and ill-digested mysticism that passes for Jewish ideology in many circles has foreclosed more wholesome modes of thinking about the mystery of Jewish uniqueness. Here we must recognize how deeply seated these tendencies are among some individuals, how difficult it is for them to imagine alternative attitudes, and how inclined many of us are to tolerate their routine expression.

Let us not imagine that fine rabbinical eloquence and heartfelt pleading and noble religious sentiments will carry weight with people who do not much respect us or care for our message. The habit of contempt, honed on non-Jews, is easily deployed to resist words of Torah uncongenial to their hearers. We can quote R. Kook's dictum that it is a danger signal when any supposedly Torah morality diverges regularly from "natural morality," but these are tough customers who know not R. Kook, nor care about the intricacy of his ideas. We can cite any number of other sources, and they will be dismissed, belittled, shouted down, or the subject will be changed. There are explanations for this barrier. For now, again, it suffices that these are the facts, and that we are foolish to pretend otherwise.

We can write articles, shake our heads, organize symposia, and even schedule popular or abstruse *shiurim* on the relevant *halakhot*. The realities on the ground will not change until we neutralize the attitude of contempt and amorality.

## II

No doubt the most famous incident involving Reb Yaakov in Tzitevian—and one which he felt it a *mitzvah* to publicize—involved the local postmaster. Shortly after he assumed the position as *rav*, a Jew came to Reb Yaakov and told him that the postmaster has mistakenly given him change for a hundred-*lit* note instead of for the ten-*lit* note he had given him. Reb Yaakov advised the man to return the money. Several weeks later, Reb Yaakov was in the post office and this time the postmaster gave him more stamps than he had paid for. The smile of the postmaster's face as he handed Reb Yaakov his stamps alerted him that the postmaster was deliberately testing him to see whether the other Jew has been an honest fool or had been acting according to the dictates of the new *rav*. Reb Yaakov was delighted that he had been presented with such an opportunity for *Kiddush Hashem* (Sanctification of the Divine name) and instantly returned the extra stamps. Years later he learned from survivors that the postmaster had been one of the few locals who had been willing to hide Jews in his cellar, and he was convinced that such displays of honesty had been a major factor in that decision.

So we are told in the ArtScroll biography of R. Yaakov Kamenezky. That R. Yaakov may have delighted in the opportunity to return what didn't belong to him may hark back to the Yerushalmi's story about R. Shimon ben Shetah, who returned lost property to a Gentile, provoking the latter

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to bless the God of Shimon. Both R. Yaakov and R. Shimon knew very well that one could formulate a credible halakhic rationale to justify taking advantage of the non-Jew's bad luck: Finders are keepers—what rights have losers to demand that others make the effort to restore what they have lost? Nor is exploiting an error in calculation equivalent to theft. Many people, including many in our community, would instinctively adopt the postmaster's initial attitude and judge a person like R. Yaakov an honest fool. Some, like the postmaster, might be swayed by his example and come to see that, in the eyes of God, honest folly is the higher wisdom. A few might even be inspired to risk their lives, even more foolishly, it would appear, in time of terror in order to save the people of R. Yaakov and their own souls.

To those who do not delight in the opportunity for *Kiddush ha-Shem*, such anecdotes about *gedolim* and other exhortations seem quaint and unworldly. They cling to the lower wisdom of cleverness, craftiness, cynicism and contempt. It is their gloating at the opportunity to desecrate God's Name that is conserved on tape and gets the media attention. Perhaps the contemplation of Gentile wrath, the fear of flesh and blood, can accomplish what fear of God and the attractiveness of moral ideals cannot.

### III

It may seem strange, even paradoxical, that individuals constant in their denigration of Gentiles, who find nothing worthy of emulating among them except for their vices, give no evidence that they take anti-Jewish hostility seriously, as a reality rather than as a rhetorical reflex. They indulge in the rhetoric of hostility and fantasies of persecution even while encased in the greater fantasy of invulnerability. It is as if our Jewish cleverness and their Gentile fecklessness give us a renewable license for bad behavior. My refugee colleagues, with whom our discussion opened, like most of us, had mixed feelings about non-Jews, their culture and our relations with them. They had no illusions about our condition as a nation apart, whose destiny and fate separates us from them and exposes us to hostility, persecution, sometimes exclusion and sometimes death. One may appreciate the benefits of America without taking them for granted. One need not delight in *Kiddush ha-Shem* to recognize how foolish and self-destructive it is to provoke hatred and resentment.

You may feel that expecting the threat of anti-Semitism to rectify the sickness of our community is taking the low road, a little like scaring a

drunkard with tales of the DT's or pictures of a diseased liver. We should respect other people, we should respect the law of the land, because it is right; we should delight in the opportunity for *Kiddush ha-Shem*. In truth, however, almost everyone who leads a decent life and a life of religious passion has been preserved from sin not by high ideals alone but also, on occasion, by reinforcement through fear of the consequences. In this vein, R. Yohanan ben Zakkai wished that the fear of God be as vivid to his students as the fear of flesh and blood. In appealing to those segments of the community impervious to ordinary moral considerations and cool to the personal example of those who live by them, we cannot afford to be overly nice in confronting the likely results of obnoxious, offensive and criminal conduct. If (God forbid) the *Ribbono shel Olam* wills an *idan rit'ha* – an hour of wrath that sweeps all before it, guilty and the innocent, participant and bystander – that all the wealth and institutions tainted by shady practices be sunk and that every insult and gesture of arrogance we have heedlessly, irresponsibly, and contemptuously inflicted upon our host society shall be paid by acts of insult, humiliation and persecution directed against us, we will have no choice but to confess with Daniel in penitence: “Yours God, is the righteousness and ours is the shame of face.”

As a child, I witnessed the then novel phenomenon of young people, raised in more or less assimilated surroundings, who turned to a life of religious observance. I saw many older people, more or less faithful to Judaism and to Jewish life, puzzled that anyone would willingly revert to the ways of their ancestors out of intellectual conviction or spiritual quest. When they discovered some incident of Gentile hostility in the *ba'al teshuva's* past, it made more sense to them. “Ah,” they sighed: “It takes an anti-Semite to remind them they are Jews.” It would be catastrophic but not unprecedented if it took anti-Semitism to remind authentic Jews that there is a God.

**A PESHAT IN THE DARK:<sup>1</sup>**  
**REFLECTIONS ON THE AGE OF CARY GRANT**

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**T**he four word telegram asked a simple question: “How old Cary Grant?” The actor’s return telegram read: “Old Cary Grant fine how you?”

Fast forward two or three thousand years. Here is what scholars of the future will have to know to decipher the exchange:

- 1) Philologists will note:
  - (a) The interrogative word “how” had several meanings in the English of that time. Sometimes it referred to quantity: “How old are you?” asks for your age. Sometimes it referred to quality: “How are you?” wants to know how you are feeling.
  - (b) “Old” refers primarily to age, but sometimes is an adjective meaning “familiar,” usually in a friendly, informal connection.
- 2) Historians of technology will explain that telegrams were a form of rapid communication in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, somewhat like e-mail just a bit later. Payment was per word, so senders of telegrams omitted inessential words. The linguists can then chip in that English copula could often be omitted, saving money without loss of sense, but that ambiguities could result. Thus “How old Cary Grant” in a telegram could mean “How old is Cary Grant?” or “How is old Cary Grant?”
- 3) It is now the turn of the cultural historians, who have studied Grant’s films and the attendant publicity. They can explain—what may not at all be obvious to a posterity that may, like most societies of the past, revere the gray beard—that many people wished to be regarded as younger than they were, either out of vanity or for fear that they would be passed over for employment, and that this was particularly true of actors, and even more true of actors

<sup>1</sup> This phrase was suggested by Mr. Stephen Bernstein who heard a version of this essay at the Young Israel of West Hartford. My thanks to Rabbi Brahm Weinberg for arranging the lecture and communicating Mr. Bernstein’s name.

with the debonair, charming, light-hearted yet virile image that made Grant a star. For that reason, experts would hypothesize that Cary Grant wished to evade the direct question about his age. Cleverly exploiting the ambiguities of 20<sup>th</sup> century English and the conventions of the telegram, his response was a witticism so coruscating that it disarmed further efforts at interrogation.

If the joint forces of scholarship succeed in getting all this right, truth will have triumphed, and the successful knowledge workers will deserve their professional rewards. If they fail, because not enough relevant fragments survive, and academic ingenuity and hard won multidisciplinary skills fall short, this little nugget of 20<sup>th</sup> century wit will remain opaque. Or more or less plausible speculations will be offered and debated, and nobody will be the wiser if they are correct or not. The world will presumably survive its ignorance here, as we have survived ignorance of so much else.

## II

Without a living connection to the past, the investigator gropes in the dark: every grammatical form is a pitfall; every feature of the historical landscape is hopelessly obscure; all behavior seems meaningless. We can tolerate such gaps in our knowledge in many areas; we may live with uncertainty, and even thrive, in many areas of Torah study and practice. At the same time, without the bedrock of tradition that preserves a lexicon of individual words, essential metaphors, and specific idioms, a living language and a living culture cannot exist. Any attempt to create determinate meaning out of nothing, in the manner of the Karaites, is doomed to failure.

This is the moral of the story about Hillel and the man who wished to convert to Judaism on condition that he would accept only the Written Law but not the Oral Law. In the first lesson Hillel taught him the Hebrew alphabet; in the second he switched the letters. The potential convert was enraged until Hillel pointed out that knowledge of the alphabet is transmitted through oral tradition; reject the elements dependent on accepted law and interpretation, and you have nothing: to those cut off from the tradition the Written Law no more interprets itself than Cary Grant's joke. Fundamentally, this is not piety but common sense. Wittgenstein could not have put it more simply.

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The term for such determinate oral traditions of interpretation is *halakha le-Moshe mi-Sinai*, or more precisely *perush mekubbal*. For instance: We believe that the *ot* (sign) and the *totafot* and the *zikkaron* (memorial) mentioned in Exodus 13 and Deuteronomy 6 refer to sacred inscriptions placed on the arm and forehead. The punishment, *ayin tabat ayin*, literally meaning “an eye for an eye,” is interpreted as an idiom enjoining monetary compensation for bodily torts. The verse prohibiting the “seething of a kid in its mother’s milk” (Exodus 23; 34; Deuteronomy 14) is also taken idiomatically as forbidding all cooking of milk and meat. The phrase *mi-mohorat ha-shabbat*, the day after the “Sabbath,” in Leviticus 23, which could mean either the morrow of the festival (Passover) or the Sunday after Passover (as maintained by Sadducees and Karaites) means the former.

These familiar interpretations are universally held within traditional Judaism. Whether they can be demonstrated without recourse to rabbinic tradition has been the subject of vigorous debate over the centuries, beginning with Hazal, down through the classical commentaries, to present day academics and *talmidei hakhamim*. Sometimes the impetus to discussion has been the hope that argument would fortify the authority of the tradition, strengthen the faith of believers, and perhaps even convince the deviant. Increasingly, Orthodox thinkers have been interested in the significance of the fact that the Torah chose language that could be construed in more than one sense. Following hints in the classical commentators, we have sought to revivify the figures of speech, discovering new levels of *peshat* in the poetic image of “memorials between your eyes,” in the brutal literalness of *lex taliones* and in the suggestive imagery of kids and mothers, or in the ambiguity of a calendar that, in the absence of particular tradition, might reasonably be understood to set a festival on either of two different dates.

The insights that can be derived from such investigations are both fascinating intellectually and more than occasionally valuable for the serious study of *Tanakh* as the word of God. As a means to finally confirm or refute the traditions of *Torah she-be'al Peh*, the endless arguments are ultimately inconclusive and a “weariness of flesh.” Despite millennia of debate and polemic, enhanced for over a century by appeal to newly excavated extra-biblical data ranging from the Code of Hammurabi to the Epics of Ugarit, we arrive back where we started. My comments are not intended to dismiss the value of such inquiry; I engage in it myself. However, if you want to know what the verses of the Torah demand when they speak of *totafot* or torts or prohibited food or the dates of

festivals—and let us not forget that the Torah is not only an opportunity for antiquarian inquiry or even a canonical text for theological interrogation, but also, at the most rudimentary level, a collection of particular commandments—you cannot avoid reliance on authoritative tradition. The story of Cary Grant is merely a reminder of this elementary truth.

### III

For the last couple of years, talking about Biblical criticism has been a badge of sophistication in some corners of the Modern Orthodox world. Though many of those much preoccupied with the challenge have difficulty defining exactly what it is, it is most commonly, and accurately, identified with the Documentary Hypothesis.

John Barton, an intelligent exponent of Biblical criticism, recently explained, with customary elegance, what is at stake methodologically:

[I]n origin, source criticism is not a method but a hypothesis. And the way in which the hypothesis is tested is not scientific, but humanistic: its truth or falsity depends on whether the individual sources isolated by the hypothesis can be read with understanding. If they cannot, then the “solution” is no solution at all but leaves us back where we began, with incoherent texts. The characteristic way of trying to refute source criticism then consists precisely in seeking to show, on the one hand, that the Pentateuch is perfectly coherent as it stands or, on the other, that the hypothesized sources are not themselves internally coherent—or, of course, both. Nowhere in this process, as far as I can see, is any particular method involved. There is no set of procedures one can apply to the text that will yield the classic four-source hypothesis about the Pentateuch. It results from *noticing* certain things about the texts that others had overlooked or explained away too quickly. We may fully grant that now, when source criticism has been established for a couple of centuries, students can be preconditioned to see the inconsistencies that form the basis of the theory, even coerced into seeing them; and in this way source criticism can be turned into a kind of method that anyone can practice.

To the extent that we take seriously some of the things noticed by the critics that were previously overlooked, or in the case of the great Jewish exegetes, were noticed unsystematically, it is the task of contemporary Orthodox students to show how the Torah coheres in the light of our belief in *Torah mi-Sinai*. The goal of those engaged in this activity, calmly

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and persistently, in solitude and in our various *battei midrash*, is not primarily to refute the Documentary Hypothesis but rather to do justice to worthwhile questions within the larger framework of Torah study.

Some polemic against the Documentary Hypothesis concentrates on its intellectual and religious antecedents: The origins of the Hypothesis are tainted, so the results are poisoned too. Solomon Schechter's dictum that the Higher Criticism is the Higher Anti-Semitism, aimed at its 19<sup>th</sup> century incarnation, is the most famous. To a limited degree, such genealogical analysis is pertinent. What is trumpeted and what is shouted down often depends on prior beliefs and current fashions. Yet the justified diagnosis of Wellhausen and Company's Protestant odium towards the legal core of the Torah, or the oft-repeated allegations that his reconstruction of Biblical religion was Hegelian (ridiculous to anyone who knows either Wellhausen or Hegel), do not establish whether phenomena cited by the theory are indeed worthy of notice. For that reason, Orthodox thinkers, who are more interested in developing our own understanding of these phenomena than in debunking the biases of the regnant school, are relatively indifferent to such genealogies except insofar as the biases and their consequences continue to color later understanding.

One virtually invisible, and therefore uncriticized, axiom of academic Bible study is the assumption that *Torah she-be'al Peh* offers no privileged access to the meaning of *Torah she-b'ktav*. Conversely: there is confidence that approaches prescind from belief in the Oral Law, without a living connection to the linguistic, cultural and religious context of the Torah, may, without crippling disadvantage, reach "assured" results about its content and history, what it means and what it cannot mean. If ever there was a clear and unexamined manifestation of Luther's doctrine of *sola scriptura* (Bible reading unguided by tradition) here it is.

The importance of a down-to-earth acknowledgement that we must rely on the knowledge yielded by tradition is well known, if rarely articulated, by Orthodox scholars. Thus Barry Eichler, speaking of his experience teaching Bible and Assyriology at the University of Pennsylvania:

Especially in the field of Biblical studies, where our knowledge is dependent on the accident of the archaeologist's spade, one must be cognizant of the limits of our knowledge. Just because I don't have an answer for something now, doesn't mean that there is no answer, nor does that mean that there is a reason to doubt the *mesorah* that has been handed down to me.

As already noted, I am not opposed to the cultivation of *peshat*. Much of my teaching and study is devoted to unpacking the surplus meaning

that remains after *Torah she-be'al Peh* has finished its work. Like Rashbam, I wonder whether the Torah intends some figurative connotation to the verses concerned with *tefillin*. Like Rambam, Seforno, and others, I am interested in the Torah's use of the phrase "an eye for an eye." Like R. Breuer, I am willing to consider whether the possibility of interpreting "the day after the Sabbath" in more than one way points to anything significant. But sometimes the real life use of a phrase or a figure of speech is so clearly defined that seeking out alternative speculative meanings, whether more literal or more figurative or more ambiguous, is beside the point, and highlighting those alternatives, as if they were self-sufficient, detracts from the everyday primary meaning. One must be wary of placing too much weight on speculations dependent on the accident of the exegete's imaginative reconstruction, however incisive.

The capriciousness and undisciplined whimsy so rife in many popular discussions of Humash have had a ruinous effect on our capacity to distinguish truth from falsehood in Biblical study. Advocates of "*peshat* in the dark" techniques see themselves at the opposite end of the spectrum from the authors of *divrei Torah* based on strained coincidences, *gematriyot* and the like. Self-styled *pashtanim* may claim superiority by arguing that the questions they identify are legitimate rather than bogus. And the champions of *shalosh seuddot Torah* will retort that their own fanciful sallies at least do no harm, and do not undermine traditional beliefs. Yet both approaches, the pseudo-pious and the pseudo-academic, share a preference for undisciplined improvisation over solid but pedestrian textual study, and cultivate the glamour of transient originality where they should be searching for abiding insight.

That is why Ibn Ezra insisted that ignoring Rabbinic tradition ends up perverting the plain meaning of the text. That is why the Netsiv warned against promulgating *peshat* before taking possession of the oral tradition. Twenty years after his death, a mere half century after the celluloid achievements that made him one of the greatest icons of his age ("Everyone wants to be Cary Grant, even I want to be Cary Grant"), everyone has moved on; most of my students have never heard of the man. If we want our contributions to Torah and our religious and intellectual communities to stand, we should make sure to secure for ourselves, and for them, more abiding foundations.

## “HE THOUGHT SHE WAS DRUNK”

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**O**ne passage declares:

All I want is to follow the advice given by Elihu the son of Berachel of old who said, “I will speak that I may find relief;” for there is a redemptive quality for an agitated mind in the spoken word and a tormented soul finds peace in confessing. (*Lonely Man of Faith*)

Another, in the eulogy for R. Zeev Gold, confesses:

From youth I was taught to control my feelings and not to exhibit what took place in my emotional world. Father said: the holier the feeling and the more intimate, the more it requires concealment in the depths. The outer chambers, where the human being highlights what is happening within him, must be separated from his Holy of Holies (Exodus 26:33). And what is holier than the Holy of Holies of emotional life?

Among the antinomies in R. Soloveitchik’s thought this is not one that has evoked massive scholarship. The answer seems simple. For all that the Rav advertises his *Lonely Man* as the confession of an agitated soul, supposedly eschewing didactic ambition, eloquence and rhetorical balance, it is a lecture, not a personal confession. We learn nothing of the author’s biography and, beyond the dedication to his wife, by then already stricken with her fatal illness, we hear nothing of his private life. *Lonely Man* is rather an essay in theological anthropology, with constant attention to the estrangement that shadows the relationship of the man of faith, who values the secular realm of majestic man, and his conflict with an environment, that values only the majestic, even among those who take part in organized religious community and its culture. There may be agitation, even torment, in this confrontation, but little intimacy. If anything, there is a tone of lament about the failure of intimacy in modern utilitarian society.

On occasion, the Rav did speak, with brutal frankness, about private experiences, his wife’s death, his own encounter with cancer, and less

brutally, but equally astonishingly, about the experience of Torah study, of Shabbat and Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashana and the *Seder*. I do not recall that he ever claimed to be doing so to relieve his pain. To the contrary, I recall him observing that *gedolei Yisrael*, unlike Christian saints and mystics, avoided the confessional mode, but that in a culture where many people had no direct encounter with living religious existence, it was necessary to lift the veil between the outer chambers and the inner chambers. There was no other way to communicate the nature of religious life. And for all the power of the Rav's autobiographical presentation, his comments always served a clear religious-intellectual purpose: a more realistic understanding of suffering, the apprehension of death, the joy of communion with God, the wide range of *hovot ha-levavot* (duties of the heart). It was Torah, and had to be studied and taught.

There is a paradox here. The teacher who must incubate in the student a private, intimate experience and a sense of self that is rooted in a world of privacy and singularity, must, to some degree, make his, or her, existence transparent to the learner, without sacrificing the incommunicable dimension of that intimacy. He must lift the veil of privacy without tearing it and desecrating it. Occasionally the miracle of communication occurs, and the reduplication of the experience becomes possible.

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In the eulogy just cited, the Rav goes on to say:

If it is good for a man, and his heart is full of joy, let him reveal his feelings to God...thank Him and yearn for Him; but not exhibit them to others, lest an alien gaze desecrate this holy of holies. If, to the contrary, it is bad for man, and he is given over to distress, beneath the yoke of suffering and affliction, and finds himself abandoned and forlorn—let him confess before God, weep and entreat Him behind the curtain, but let no stranger approach the holy of Holies lest he desecrate through his indifference the sanctity of mute suffering oppressing him (Leviticus 16:17).

To most readers of these words, the recommendation therein is not only terrifyingly harsh; it is almost literally impossible. The secular culture we inhabit, and which, despite ceremonial denials, often inhabits us, has little esteem for shame or modesty. The mass media, hungry for sensation, under the aegis of popularized Freudianism, revel in ever more naked exposure of intimate scenes and parading of private feelings. We may discern God's presence alongside us, not only in happy gossipy coincidences

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and (for the hard headed) in perceptions of chastisement, but in His faithful companionship in the unspectacular everyday joys and sufferings that make up our real life. Yet largely lacking the sensitivity and often even the vocabulary with which to enlighten ourselves, our efforts at religious behavior are increasingly confined to public display. The religious education that comprises much of that behavior and regulates the rest has little patience for human inwardness, unless expressed in banal abstract clichés. To take the Rav seriously, and undertake to confide our deepest feelings to God instead of showing them in public and debasing them in the process, would require a radical reversal of our entire way of life.

Once in a while, we realize that something has gone wrong with our religious culture. We stray into the blogosphere and are dismayed by the “snarky,” shameless gossip casually purveyed to all comers. On subway or sidewalk we are flabbergasted to see individuals whose perpetual phone and text activity reveal them to be constitutionally intolerant of the least moment of solitude; as if, like Bishop Berkeley’s ideas, they would cease existing unless perceived by the social god. Or we are offended, and rightly embarrassed and pained, when members of our community discuss family trauma or sexual uncertainties in the open. At such moments we apprehend how forlorn we are to be bereft of the silent intimate companionship into which the Rav would initiate us. We are sorry to have veered from this path and we are sorry not to have offered a better example to others.

Yet there is more to our difficulty with the Rav’s austere instruction than a sad, stubborn refusal of authentic religious individualism. What, indeed, do we discuss with God when we are alone with Him? For many, perhaps most of us, the most intimate entreaties concern our ability to understand those we love, and to be understood by them. We are young, and we place before God our craving for the initiation and approval of our mentors, for the friendship of the peers whose common effort and support will, if we are fortunate, accompany us through life, for the spouse with whom we can build the happiness of family life, and the human environment that can facilitate all this. We mature, and we come before Him with our hopes and fears for children and *talmidim*, we cry out our desire and anxiety to provide pride and sustenance to those who nurtured us and to whom we owe eternal gratitude in turn. Aging, we plead with Him not to forsake us, to enable us to continue serving those we care about, and for them to sustain us without our becoming a burden upon them. If the world witnessed the emotion summoned from us by those nearest and dearest, in all its labyrinthine complexity, if the curtain of

intimacy were stripped away, we should be thought insane and extravagant, ridiculous and overbearing. And if we allowed the world to catch us out we would indeed be all those things. So, in the intimacy of prayer, this love that dare not confess its fierceness is offered up on the altar in the individual's holy of holies.

Surely "the heart knows its distress, and in its joy no stranger shares" (Proverbs 14:10). Others, who may not know our feelings in their full intimacy, are nevertheless very much implicated in our emotional lives. An individual may be forced by circumstance to hide all aspects of his inner life from others; he or she may survive or even flourish in such emotional anonymity. Nevertheless, the Mishna recommends that we invest strenuous effort in "acquiring a friend;" as *Avot de-Rabbi Natan A* (chapter 8) glosses, the friend is one with whom you can discuss all your concerns, from Torah study to private affairs. Romantic attitudes place human love and the desire for transparency above all other goals. Judaism respects the passion but rejects the absoluteness: the most authentic human comradeship is the one that knows itself secondary to the God-relationship and is happy to take that position.

Thus the challenge of making our own the Rav's fundamental insight about the sanctity of religious intimacy and human privacy is not just the demand that we overcome our culture's merciless pressure to exhibit and to exist in public. At a deeper level, it is also a demand that we learn to invest ourselves in other people and allow them to become invested in us without violating the ultimate sense of intimacy that a human being confesses only before God.

### III.

The classic paradigm for the intimacy of private prayer is *I Samuel* chapter 1: the prayer of Hannah in the sanctuary. R. Soloveitchik once explained why Hannah's prayer was answered that year and not previously. The reason is that on this visit to Shiloh, Elkana tried to comfort her, saying: "I am better to you than ten sons." It was then that Hannah knew how alone she was: even her loving husband did not understand her. This insight hammers home the message: we can only pray properly when we know the difference between our communion with God and our discourse with human beings, even with those who are close to us, let alone those with whom we have only a passing connection.

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What about the rest of the story? Hannah withdrew to the sanctuary and prayed. The high priest Eli observes her in the act. He thinks she is drunk and her presence thus desecrates the holy place. As responsibility dictates, he orders her to sober up. Hannah replies that she has not drunk alcohol but has come to pour out her heart before God. What many readers do not notice is that Hannah does not tell Eli the cause of her distress. Having misjudged her, he is obliged to make amends. So he expresses the hope (blessing, prayer) that God grant her petition. Abarbanel was convinced that Eli must have been familiar with her predicament, but there is no evidence for this in the text: on the contrary, both Hannah's language and Eli's response indicate that the content of her plea was not part of their conversation. Is she barren or is her child ill or dead? Is she destitute, a grieving widow or the victim of an abusive husband? Is she herself mortally ill? She goes her way not having informed the priest and he does not intrude upon her privacy.

Would such circumspection be the rule nowadays? Eli would perhaps have earned a degree in social work or clinical psychology and he would have approached the unhappy woman with brochures on alcoholism and anything else that could ail her. He would have insisted on a follow up appointment and referred her to helping professionals. (Alas, from what we know of Eli's children, they would have been only too happy to step in!) Such conduct would be prudent, and in many instances it would be wise. The Biblical Eli, however, leaves her to God, bestowing only his good will.

What is the immediate consequence? Hannah returns to her husband; she eats; her face is no longer downcast. Years later she will return to Shiloh, confront Eli with the outcome of her quest, and dedicate Samuel to the service of God.

Hannah is the hero of this story, but Eli too rises to the occasion. He cannot provide her with the response that she can only obtain from God. Yet, without intruding on her privacy, without interposing himself between her and God, he succeeds in offering her the recognition and the blessing without which she could not have returned to the festival table, her spirit transformed. The relationship between the individual and God is absolute and intimate. "The heart knows its distress, and in its joy no stranger shares;" yet the stranger is more than an indifferent bystander to the individual's struggles. Eli opened his heart to a distress he did not understand and did not demand to understand. Eventually his own life is enriched by the joy in which he participates, although he could not anticipate its fulfillment.

IV.

The restoration of intimacy and privacy to human existence thus requires two educational movements. The obvious one is to direct the individual's attention to God. This entails placing restraints on our self-exhibition, re-learning the fundamental rabbinic teaching that to be a Jew is to have a sense of shame and that the relationship with God and the intimate dimensions of our bonds to others, and our communion with ourselves, are debased when they are put on display. It entails casting a critical eye, and separating ourselves from the frivolous scornful sessions (*moshav letsim*) that in contemporary culture pass for entertainment. It entails making time for solitude in our daily lives and encouraging others to do the same. No less important, it means, as much as possible, emancipating our religious culture from the relentless scrutiny of social pressure and curiosity, even well-meaning curiosity.

The other, complementary movement is that we must learn not only to be alone with God, but also to be alone with one another. Dubious public displays of private matters result not only from the absence of God in our lives but also from the absence of genuinely intimate modes of personal intercourse among people. Freud purported to liberate us by bringing unacknowledged secrets to light in the confessional of the consulting room. Freudianism has been eclipsed but not its cultural influence ("no more a person now but a whole climate of opinion"). Part of its baleful legacy is making a virtue of incessant discussion about matters of which everyone is aware but that modest individuals see no need to belabor. Another is the conviction that intimate desires, inclinations, and impulses that are not acted out must at least be talked about interminably. The compulsion to talk, to stretch sexuality on the rack and make it confess (to borrow Foucault's characterization) does not promote spiritual freedom: quite the contrary.

As religious individuals and Torah educators, we cherish intimacy and modesty and discourage foul language and unseemly preoccupation with sexual matters. Outwardly we oppose the Freudian climate of opinion. Nonetheless, let me ask you: Are we seen to represent an alternative? At our best, we know the difference between modesty and reticence about the intimate realm, on the one hand, and evasion and the awkward stifling of embarrassing difficulties, on the other hand. We understand the difference between prying and caring, between intrusion and solicitude. We are circumspect and welcoming. We can listen, as Eli listened to Hannah; we can correct initial misimpressions, as Eli recuperated from his; and

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having listened, we can respond to each person according to their requirement of us.

Are we regularly seen to be at our best? We cannot take for granted our capacities of empathy and common sense—we must always be working on ourselves, refining, correcting. So long as our best is as much the exception as the rule, we must be constantly alert to the danger that many of the individuals who most need the example of religiously formed intimacy may be deterred from seeking it out, left to their own unformed emotional and spiritual devices.

**THE NIGHT BEFORE HANUKKA:  
KIERKEGAARD AND RABBI RACKMAN  
ON HUMAN SACRIFICE**

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No reader of Kierkegaard's *Training in Christianity* is likely to forget the scene where a child leafs through a series of heroic portraits and comes across that of the founder of Christianity. Why is he hanging from a tree? What did he do? The child is told only that this was the most loving person who ever existed, and this was his reward. The child's first reaction is to call on Heaven for revenge. As he gets older, the desire for punishment is replaced by the resolve to struggle for justice as his hero did. And as he grows older, he wishes to suffer as he did. Kierkegaard is careful not to ascribe the child's passion to explicit theological indoctrination. It is an almost natural response to the image of the suffering of goodness.

Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, who held numerous leadership positions in the Orthodox and academic communities, was also an influential and representative Modern Orthodox thinker. Shortly before his death in 2008, *A Modern Orthodox Life* was published, containing some of his sermons and occasional writings. Let me call to your attention a *Jewish Week* column from 1971, in which he questions the common American Jewish attitude towards Christmas. The problem facing his generation of parents that December, and for all I know still bothering some of us today, is the potential trauma experienced by Jewish children who feel left out of the seasonal merriness and cheer. The standard solution, which Rackman admits affected his own child-rearing practice, was to shower Jewish children with compensatory gifts. Thus the eight nights of Hanukka would outshine the Christmas tree's treasure. Here Rackman expresses misgivings about that strategy.

In Rabbi Rackman's account the spur to reassessment was a question raised with his congregation. He refers to the anguish of a member who wondered whether it is right to tell children about the Akeda: "Is it right to teach children about a God who wants Abraham to sacrifice his favorite son upon an altar to prove his devotion? What kind of a God is that? What kind of compassion does He have?"

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Rackman, in turn, wonders why this question did not trouble Jews before. “Why is it that in thousands of years of pondering the subject no one questioned the wisdom of narrating the story unto children?”

It occurred to me that the reason this question did not bother Jews of antiquity was that they saw nothing wrong in having children understand from their earliest childhood that to live Jewishly means to sacrifice; to live Jewishly means to be prepared to do without.

Rabbi Rackman is proposing two distinct theses. The theme of his article is the first. It can be summed up in the statement just cited: “to live Jewishly means to be prepared to do without.” Hence the culture of profuse Hanukka gifts to children is a misleading introduction to Judaism. It creates the delusion that Judaism does not require the readiness to do without.

The second thesis, subsidiary to the first, is more curious. It is that a child’s having accepted the readiness to do without in some way makes telling the story of the Akeda to the child less horrific, or at least that the child’s educators may reasonably think so.

Imagine the Jewish child, like Kierkegaard’s child, who is exposed to the image of Abraham and Isaac. Who is this old man and why is his knife upraised to slay his son? He is a righteous man who has followed God for many years, under trying circumstances. He is a man who exemplifies *hesed* (loving kindness). (Let us omit the particularly Jewish theological factor in the story—that this old man and his son inaugurate the career of God’s chosen people.) The command to kill his only son, the son of his old age, the son who would sustain the ideals that motivated his life—that is the culmination of his devotion! To be sure the story has a fortunate denouement—the old man is not compelled to carry out the divine command; the angel stays his hand. But for the three days between the command and its suspension, this was the destiny Abraham lived with and lived toward... Rabbi Rackman’s congregant was distraught at the thought of the child encountering all this severity, as the reader of Kierkegaard cannot help being shocked in contemplating what the Christian message must mean to the untutored thoughtful child.

Rabbi Rackman claims to take this challenge seriously, yet in the essay he chooses to change the subject rather than respond to it. Instead of discussing how the child might or should respond to the story, or how adults should introduce him, or her, to its import, Rackman explains why he thinks the question would not have arisen in an earlier, and presumably more wholesome, unspoiled and realistic age. What Rackman avoids

saying, but seems to imply, is that if only the child had learned at an early age that living Jewishly means being prepared to do without, the story of the Akeda would not be traumatic. It would not give rise to anything like the seismic repercussions Kierkegaard imputed to the child discovering the crucifixion. Rabbi Rackman is prudent not to say this explicitly because it is incredible. The sacrifice of deferred or renounced gratification is not commensurate with the potential human sacrifice of the Akeda, nor is it commensurate with the innumerable actual human sacrifices to which Jews, simply by refusing to give up their singular religious mission, have willingly submitted throughout their history.

Offhand, then, Rackman's appeal to the Akeda succeeds in highlighting the gulf between living Jewishly and the "eight nights of Hanukka" culture of profuse gift giving. But while Rackman opposes to that culture the necessity of sacrifice defined rather gently as "being prepared to do without," his reference to the Akeda unleashes a far more thorough call to sacrifice, one that threatens to tear loose all that is most essential to ordinary worldly existence. "And you shall love God, with all your heart, and with all your soul—even when He takes your soul."

The conflict between Rabbi Rackman's moderate rhetoric and its radical implications may be a logical weakness. I regard it, nevertheless, as a practical strength. To confront a materialistically oriented culture of gratification with the demand of absolute commitment would invite incomprehension and summary rejection. To such a culture it is possible to preach only a doctrine of sacrifice that is phrased unthreateningly as "doing without," without specifying exactly what is to be done without, and without betraying the fact that readiness to do without risks not merely the foregoing of things desired but the positive undertaking of acute and chronic suffering.

In the end, the doctrine of gentle sacrifice cannot articulate and motivate thorough commitment to God. If earlier generations, by contrast with our own, indeed had no reason to keep the Akeda from their children, it is not just because the children had learned about doing without, but rather that they had intuited, from a young age, that Jewish life, for all its hardship and suffering, is a life lived in the presence of God. The word *korban*, usually translated as "sacrifice," literally means "drawing close." The kind of sacrifice that expresses and forms a life of religious commitment cannot merely be a readiness to "do without." It is the offering up of the human being, through the *korbanot* offered in the Temple, through prayer, through devotion to the requirements of other human beings, through the endless toil of Torah study, and the readiness to suffer and

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die for His service. These are acts of drawing close to God because they are not merely gestures of renunciation or deferment but manifestations of reckless love and incomprehensibly joyful commitment. Every vision of religious commitment and sacrifice, however moderate and mundane, has the Akeda as its background. Its presence in Rabbi Rackman's piece is not accidental.

### II.

If Rabbi Rackman fails to emphasize the robust passionate element in sacrifice, the same cannot be said of Kierkegaard's endorsement of Christian suffering. There is nothing half-hearted or compromising here. Precisely for that reason each stage in Kierkegaard's vignette demonstrates the pitfalls of this orientation and leads us to reassess Rackman's paler, more indirect approach.

As we have seen, Kierkegaard's child, initiated into the contemplation of the crucifixion, graduates from a desire for revenge to a desire to fight for justice to a gospel of suffering. One is tempted to deploy Kierkegaard's own polemic against Hegel and say: the story in *Training* is a plausible one, but in a contingent world of human freedom, it is not an inevitable story. The development can also go in the opposite direction: an ideal pious commitment to religious suffering may deteriorate into a political ideology or even into a gospel of resentment and revenge.

Furthermore, Kierkegaard traces a move from social ethical activism—the desire to struggle for justice—towards a purely inactive religious suffering. Is this indeed an ideal development or is it merely making the best of a bad business? Without denying the possible religious value of suffering, is it really preferable over preventing further injustice? Or is it merely a consolation? Is it not important to hold fast to our desire to rectify injustice instead of being satisfied with our ability to give religious meaning to the ensuing suffering?

Even more important, Kierkegaard's account, like the New Testament's, isolates the suffering exemplified by the crucifixion and thus inflicted by human beings. Now it is true that the greatest evils of life are those done to us by other people. It is not for nothing that David prays to fall into the hands of a punishing God and not into the hands of human beings. In our reading of Jewish history the pain and suffering inflicted by the *goyim* is everpresent; perhaps these themes occupy too central a place in our self-identity. Yet we cannot gainsay the danger that such a focus encourages misanthropy and resentment and makes all the more likely the

reversal mentioned a moment ago, where pious suffering turns into the desire to take revenge of those who are to blame for our suffering. In the Akeda there is no human adversary. The full religious implications of absolute sacrifice are not mingled with the resentment almost inexorably associated with human evil.

Religion values suffering as a component of our relationship with God. There is a crucial distinction, however, between the suffering of love, suffering that is redeemed and given meaning when borne with dignity and a sense of purpose, on the one hand, and suffering that is perversely enjoyed, on the other hand. Reading Kierkegaard, or any of the great Christian theologians, one wonders whether Christianity, with its institutional and personal concentration on the image of the crucifixion, guards sufficiently against the threat of spiritual masochism masquerading as authentic, wholesome spiritual passion. One wonders whether the institutions and practices of Judaism do better.

### III.

Brutal realism about the place of suffering in human life and in religious existence is not confined to Kierkegaard and other robust Christian thinkers. It is, of course, integral to traditional Judaism. Among Jewish thinkers who spoke the language, and appreciated the profundities of Kierkegaard, Rabbi Soloveitchik, of course, stands out. No student of his work can be oblivious to his intense attention to human suffering, and to the imperative of absolute commitment as the necessary path to religious existence. And yet, to take just one point from our discussion of Kierkegaard, the Rav repeatedly and forcefully preaches the duty of struggling against evil, be it the natural evil of illness and destitution or the consequences of human wickedness. Such struggle is arguably the chief means by which suffering is invested with dignity and religious value. For all the Rav's stress on the inevitability of human defeat and on absolute commitment to divine commands that, from time to time, require that we sacrifice legitimate human goals and suffer the consequences, it is inconceivable that he would view the transition from social activism to religious quietism as a positive development.

Rabbi Rackman's discussion started out with the calendrical coincidence of Christmas and Hanukka. For nominal Jews and Christians, both holidays are celebrations of secular American values, of which conspicuous materialism is the least common denominator. Jewish parents, unable to dominate the public square numerically, and lacking the sentimentalist

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resources associated with the Nativity and with Santa Claus, can compete only in the monetary arena. This is the state of affairs that Rabbi Rackman finds disheartening and questionable. Our critique was that Rackman, in effect, does not go far enough, that he presents sacrifice as “doing without” instead of preaching sacrifice in all its robust and absolute passion. At the same time, we discerned many reasons to be wary of the kind of robust passionate doctrine of suffering inherent in Kierkegaard’s account.

How can we sustain the Jewish ethic of sacrifice, “And you shall love God, with all your heart, and with all your soul—even when He takes your soul,” while avoiding the pitfalls we have considered? A moment’s reflection on Hanukka may suggest the right frame of reference.

One theme of Hanukka is that Judaism requires the willingness to sacrifice one’s life rather than give up Jewish practice. The narrative of Hanukka contains stories of defiance and martyrdom. These stories are found in the apocryphal books, Maccabees II and IV, but they also enter rabbinic literature. Some of these exemplary stories, most notably that of Hannah and her seven sons, describe a joy in martyrdom unalloyed with expectation of worldly compensation. Most, however, celebrate a militant defiance that aims not at suffering but at triumph. The prayers and *halakhot* that mark Hanukka commemorate the eventual triumph of the Hasmonians against military odds and the rededication of the Temple service. The necessity of martyrdom and self-abandonment is assumed and extolled but it does not exhaust the meaning of the holiday. Just as the Akeda is best known from the Rosh Hashana lectionary, where it provides the background for the day dedicated to the kingship of God and His judgment of humanity, the poem of the ten martyrs is one strand in the Yom Kippur *Musaf* service, attached to the recital and reenactment of the *seder ha-yom*, the Temple worship ordained for that singular day.

A life anchored in normative Jewish practice, thought and experience is ever conscious of the ideals of *mesirut nefesh*, total commitment even unto suffering and death, but such a life is not obsessed with suffering and martyrdom. It is still possible for the practicing Jew to succumb to the temptation to make a cult of suffering: to relish one’s unredeemed suffering and miserableness for its own sake, to cultivate a destructive resentment of others with whom we associate our misery, and to treat unredeemed feelings of suffering as adequate or preferable alternatives to the vigorous action and dignified religious response that redeems suffering from its ugliness. Yet the individual who has internalized normative Jewish practice, thought, and experience will find it a little harder to surrender to these temptations.

Rabbi Rackman's initial judgment remains correct. The besetting vice of our community is not too much passion but too little, a spiritual vacuum that our religiously impoverished culture attempts to fill, transiently, with expenditures and toys. Our children and many of our adults have shunned the lesson that meaningful existence requires sacrifice, and hence have little conception of the absolute grandeur, the profound joy, the sheer closeness to God that are the mark of the sacrificial life. The corrective for a petty, passionless mode of existence is not to stand it on its head by embracing the gospel of suffering uncritically and exhaustively. For this one-sided embrace brings with it its own peculiar destructive vices. Rather than gaze upward at the vision of suffering, as Christians look upon the crucifix, it is our vocation to situate the ideal of human sacrifice within the thick experience of a halakhic life devoted to redeeming and ennobling our mundane ongoing existence, informing our steps always, filling our horizons only under exceptional circumstances.

On Hanukka, we light candles and recite *Hallel* to celebrate the triumphant renewal of Jewish living. The readiness for absolute sacrifice that makes Hanukka possible does not require a special festival and distinctive rituals. To the contrary, it flourishes in silence and intimacy, and accompanies us on all the indelible days and nights that precede the triumph of Hanukka.

**THE LITVAKS' BURIED TREASURE:  
FURTHER THOUGHTS ON THE DICTUM  
"THE HOLIER THE FEELING, THE MORE  
INTIMATE"**

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**T**his happened during World War I. My father had already emigrated. His family was still in Lithuania, where the German and Russian armies took turns occupying their village. Abandoning his home temporarily, my grandfather took the mistaken precaution of burying his meager library before leaving. Alas, the soft earth betrayed the Jew's treasures to the soldiers. As the Jew's treasures fell short of their expectations, their disappointment and rage was vented on the defenseless texts. A few years later, when my father's family was reunited in the United States, my grandfather several times began to tell this story. Whenever he came to the part where he returned home and discovered the desecrated *sefarim*, he lost his composure and never managed to recount what had been done to them.

Here is something I noticed as a child. Every Yom Kippur, during *musaf*, as the congregation recited the *piyyut* about the ten martyrs, when they reached the passage about R. Hanina ben Teradyon, who was wrapped in a Torah scroll and burned alive, my father's voice broke, and he burst into tears. For reasons I cannot fully explain I associated my father's breakdown, as he read about the long ago conjunction of physical torture and the desecration of the Torah, with the memory of his father's tale. I never inquired about the connection. It did not seem right. It did not even seem right to acknowledge that I had registered the emotional display. The scene, however, accompanies me until this day.

A couple of issues ago, in "He Thought She Was Drunk," I quoted R. Moshe Soloveichik's saying "the holier the feeling, the more intimate." To some this dictum encapsulates the quintessentially emotionless Litvak, despite the fact that one cannot keep one's feelings hidden unless he has strong feelings to begin with. The reason for this confusion may be that the privacy of intimate feelings signifies different things. Let's examine two such strands. Although they often reinforce one another, they should be carefully distinguished.

Concealing one's feelings can be a mark of self-control. Under the sway of emotion a person has difficulty conforming to the dictates of his or her judgment. Without self-control one is liable to act against one's duty or practical interest. Emotion literally means "being moved," and as such is the enemy of self-control and self-sufficiency. For that reason many classical philosophers and *ba'alei musar* emphasize self-restraint and concomitantly are suspicious of the power of emotion.

Control of one's emotional display, from this perspective, is less a virtue in itself than it is a means to self-discipline. The self-controlled individual, or the one without strong emotions to control, is more efficient, but not invariably more profound than the emotionally exposed person. A doctor who is overcome by his or her patients' pain may be less able to concentrate on the surgery at hand than the emotional automaton. For the politician or soldier, the proverbial stiff upper lip is a practical achievement. When a politician loses his composure in public, as did Menachem Begin when he sobbed in his broadcast after the sinking of the *Altalena* in June 1948, potential supporters are disheartened, not primarily because the reaction is shallow or unjustified but rather because control of one's public image suggests the ability to act responsibly under pressure.

Within a religious context, self-control enables one to perform demanding actions without stumbling or fumbling. As the famous anecdote about R. Moshe Soloveichik goes, the person blowing the *shofar* must get on with the job: he cannot afford to blow and bawl simultaneously. Those inclined to identify "Litvak religiosity" with cold punctilious performance of *mitsvot* are likely to find in R. Moshe's stress on the private nature of intimacy a confirmation of their view. Containment of emotion is important because the emotion itself is no more than an obstacle to performance. It would be better not to have the emotion and not to have to conceal it.

Indeed there are times when self-control is all that matters, the kind that enables a doctor to operate without hesitation, or the fidelity to Halakha that enables a *ben Torah* who has learned about a family loss on a Yom Tov to maintain his composure until after *havdala*, or the greatness of spirit that enables a young man to celebrate a friend's wedding a day after receiving a diagnosis of cancer, or to enter completely into the travails of a sick friend when one's own heart is overflowing with success. Even in such situations, we do not admire a person's indifference to his own fate but rather his or her ability to bracket that private joy or sorrow.

Of course R. Moshe's saying does not denigrate emotion. Quite the opposite: the feeling is precious; it is hidden precisely because it is too

intimate to be exhibited. Despite the enormous gap between the “stiff upper lip” self-control justification of privacy and the sanctification of intimacy, there is a dialectical relationship between the two themes. Self-control is not only required for effective moral agency; it is also necessary in order to incubate the deeper kind of emotional response. For emotion is more than a passive reaction to the external world. It is a reflection on what happens to us. As such it is a way of knowing and a way of responding.

“The shrewd (*arum*) man conceals knowledge, but the heart of fools declaims folly” (Proverbs 12:26). According to Rashi, this hiding of knowledge manifests self-restraint: “Even in his wisdom he is modest, how much more so regarding folly.” R. Moshe Kimhi’s interpretation (in the commentary attributed to Ibn Ezra) is unexpected: “The wise man hides his wisdom in order not to forget it.” Offhand, repetition reinforces memory; and the louder the better. Why does parading one’s wisdom in public lead to forgetfulness? I believe it is because the public rehearsal erodes the significance of thoughts and experiences. Broadcasting the thought makes it less real, not more real, remaking memory into recollection, and degrading recollection into empty verbiage.

Not every place in the human sanctuary is the Holy of Holies, where silence and intimacy reign. We ought to show our feelings of elation or dismay, gratitude or disappointment, when appropriate. Under ordinary circumstances, for example, we recognize and publicly appreciate those close to us without whose devotion we could not flourish; we ought to celebrate our family and friends, mentors and supporters. If the feeling is heartfelt, it should be expressed in a manner that is perceived to be heartfelt. At the same time, it should also be perceived that the public features do not represent the deepest layer of the relationship; behind the exterior areas of the *mikdash* lie the mysterious interior chambers, where the wise hide what is most valuable to them.

Detractors of emotion in the name of rationalism are not motivated by the desire to intensify their inner life, to hide wisdom in order to sustain its vitality. Instead, they artificially constrict both life and wisdom precisely by neglecting and disparaging this essential dimension of the human cognitive apparatus. Terrified of the power emotion can exert, they prefer a monochrome, crippled apprehension of the world, of other human beings, and of God.

Yet those who today speak in the name of emotional openness and feel no reticence about publicly indulging their emotions likewise reject the opportunity to forge a deeper understanding on the basis of their emotional experience, to hide wisdom in order to remember it. They do

not revere the inner chambers. They vent and exhibit their feelings instead of utilizing them as a gateway to the rich multicolored experience that is part of a morally creative and God-fearing existence. When we lose respect for a glib politician or effusive neighbor who easily and volubly produces his indignation or compassion, or who engages in ostentatious demonstrations of affection for his spouse and children and household pets, it is not because this person lacks self-control. If anything, we may be impressed by his shamelessness in the single-minded pursuit of ambition or self-image. The lack of reticence, however, testifies to a shallow personality, rich perhaps in manipulative skills, but destitute of inner resources.

What do you say about a situation where the reality of joy or sorrow is not concealed, where the individual is visibly laboring under the burden of powerful emotions, yet is reticent about the nature of his emotional experience? If all that matters is self-control, then when others are aware that something is affecting him it is a sign of weakness and deficiency. If it is the intimacy of the emotional experience that counts, then even though onlookers may be aware of the operation of some great cause of joy or sorrow, as long as they are not invited to lift the veil of privacy, as long as the world is not welcome to pry, the intimacy is preserved.

## II.

“He Thought She Was Drunk” alluded to Hannah’s inaudible prayer, from which the gemara derived the law that prayer should be private. If this is the case, it has been asked, why is Jewish prayer conducted in public, with the entire congregation chanting together? Doesn’t that imply that prayer is with people, rather than in solitude? Doesn’t this feature of our practice contradict the gemara’s dictum about privacy?

The simple halakhic answer that I have presented elsewhere is that prayer, as mandated in the Amida, in which petition is flanked by prefatory praise and concluding thanksgiving, is indeed a private matter. Hannah is the model for that prayer. Confession of sin, too, takes place between man and God. Crying out in pain (*tse’aka*), as we do during fasts, and when we recite *Selihot*, is a different kind of gesture. It is not an expression of our private relationship to God, our intimate dreams and joys and fears, but an expression of communal distress. The Rav observed: even an animal in pain cries out unreflectively. *Hallel*, by the same token, expresses a shared communal praise and thanksgiving. Both panic and praise express human creatureliness, which we share with others, even

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with non-human others. Hence, as Ramban states, these experiences are the appropriate subject for the community's lifted voice.<sup>1</sup>

In the light of our present discussion one can say more. There need be no secret about the fact that we are, like our fellow human beings, creatures of sorrow and joy. In crying out "Do not forsake us in old age," I am not expressing an esoteric, particular and hence intimate plea. I affirm my solidarity with my fellow human beings who share my vulnerability to the universal ravages of age. The *Hallel* I sing in public expresses shared emotions of gratitude and joy engendered by the festival. To hide these feelings as if they were an entirely private affair would rob them of their essential communal quality. They are not purely individual but rather inter-subjective experiences. Hence they are not cheapened or vulgarized but more fully realized when articulated together with the community.

Perhaps my neighbor discerns the intensity of my emotion in prayer or in other communal contexts. That is not always an invasion of the intimate realm because the fact of intense feeling is not a revelation of the intimate nature of that feeling. Fear of old age is universal; what exactly the fear means to me, how it constricts my horizon and calls into question my dreams—that is intimate. Success is a universal cause of rejoicing. What success means to an individual, what opportunities it opens up before us, what particular dreams it fulfills, belongs in the intimate Holy of Holies of the individual.

What about David, another asks: does he not pour out the most intimate secrets of his heart on the pages of Psalms, for all to see? The obvious reply is that David did not pour out his heart to other human beings but to God. When he prays about his sin with Bathsheba he says: "To You only did I sin" (51:6). According to one view, that of Saadia Gaon, this should not be taken as a denial of David's guilt towards Uriah but to underline that his confession is being heard by God alone. In any event, the publication of Psalms as part of the Bible is not David's doing.

But should we be reading Psalms as David's biography? Indeed it contains *mizmorim* whose superscriptions refer to specific crises in David's life (Psalm 3, when he fled Absalom; Psalm 34, when he was expelled by Abimelekh; many of the lesser known chapters in Book 2 of the Psalter, concerning his enemies). One may study these chapters as part of David's story; some work in this direction has value. Fifty years ago a

<sup>1</sup> See "Without Intelligence, Whence Prayer?" (*Tradition* 37:1, Spring 2003), pgs. 1-26 (*Jewish Spirituality and Divine Law*, ed. Lawrence Schiffman and Adam Mintz, Yeshiva University Press, 2005), and "Destiny, Freedom and the Logic of Petition" (*Tradition* 24:2, Winter 1989) 17-37, citing Ramban to Exodus 13:16.

Hebrew University Bible professor proposed that the Masoretic marker *paska b'emtsa' pasuk* in Samuel indicates the points where the biographical Psalms originally belonged.

What stands out, however, is not the links between these Psalms and David's life but, to the contrary, the generality of these connections. What survives in our Tanakh, as we have it, and even more so what has been adopted in the Siddur, is largely bleached of the transparently private elements unique to David. That is exactly as we should have expected.

### III.

What happened to my grandfather's books almost a century ago remains unknown. What caused my father to weep, when he read about R. Hanina ben Teradyon, is also unknown. What difference does this make? What would have been gained had my grandfather or his son, succumbing to patient pressure of therapist or urgent importunity of journalist or the imperious nagging of son and successor, pierced their choked, tearful veil of silence and exposed their secrets, instead of preserving them in the Holy of Holies and eventual oblivion? My mother, who was not a Litvak and loved to talk, though she knew the value of silence when she deemed it appropriate, who left her neck of Poland a decade after my father's family and was never reunited with the parents and close relatives who did not escape in time, might have observed, in her matter of fact way, that many things more valuable and irreplaceable than books have been destroyed, and that words alone cannot restore them or repair their desecration. Where is the wisdom in rehearsing one's feelings about evils that are, alas, not particularly unusual, that call out for publicity only because they have occurred to you or to those you know?

Let me pose the question in a more practical vein. If I learned what happened to those books, instead of just knowing that my grandfather could not bear to describe it, if I had extracted my father's train of associations during his prayer instead of just wondering about it, would I be a wiser or more God-fearing individual? Would my prayer be more passionate or accurate, would my ear for other people be more sensitive? Would I be better suited to serve as my forebears' successor in the service of God? Would I truly know them better, what their lives were really about, the man who gave me so much in my childhood, his father whom I never met? Or, to the contrary, did they wisely, prudently, and profoundly, bury their hard-earned wisdom where I would never forget it?

## THE HOUSE I LIVED IN: A TASTE OF GOOSEFLESH

Volume 44:2 Summer 2011

Dear Rabbi Greenberg:

**I**t was a pleasure traveling with you to the Sandy Brown wedding. I am writing to you about the conversation in the car. As you recall the Holtzmans disagreed with me. You were silent. I'm not even sure you were awake during that stretch. Perhaps you kept quiet because you took their side. Perhaps you agreed with me but chose not to intervene. I would like to know your private thoughts on the subject.

As you recall, our friends were speaking enthusiastically about converts to Judaism in our community. I don't question that there are *gerim* among their acquaintances who display the qualities they praise. In other words, they are decent people, sincerely committed to Judaism, no less observant of the *mitsvot* than most members of Orthodox shuls, probably above average in some regards. I simply said that they were not like us; they are not Jews like us. And everyone looked mildly shocked and politely but persistently disagreed.

I didn't mean to denigrate these converts. I didn't justify being unkind to them. I know the Torah numerous times warns against oppressing the *ger* verbally or in any other way. Even if the Torah didn't prohibit subjecting them to bad treatment such behavior would be wrong. The people who disagreed with me in the car know me for many years and they know I am not the kind of person who would deliberately hurt others. When I hear of such denigration and unkindness I am sickened.

*Va-yihad Yitro*—Jethro rejoiced about all the good that God had performed for Israel. And the Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 94b) points out that *va-yihad* is an unusual word for joy and that the word can also be interpreted to mean that he had gooseflesh—his skin became *biddudin biddudin*. Jethro did not fully rejoice in the triumph of Israel, because he was shaken by the demise of the Egyptians. This teaches that you should never denigrate Gentiles in the presence of a convert, even after ten generations, because they still identify with their roots. They may be fine, wonderful people, but they are simply not like us.

Take a sincere convert. This is a person who dislocates their life, who undertakes radically new commitments and breaks with old commitments, a person who risks destroying, or weakening, family bonds, all for the sake of their commitment to religious truth or their quest for religious meaning. How can you tell me that this person is a Jew just like us? Can we understand such a person? Beyond “Hello” and “How are you” what can we say to them?

Do I want my children to marry a person with such a different background, with whom we cannot carry on a conversation beyond casual pleasantries? Do you? I have nothing against such people; I admire them. But we don’t share their background. As I said in the car, I would have the same objection to my children marrying Sefardim.

Does that make me a racist? Holtzman’s son said I’m not a racist. In his opinion my attitude is due to having been brought up in America, which is a racist society, a society haunted by race, where race counts for too much. He said that it was my being American, rather than my being a Jew, that is accountable for my attitude. I appreciate that Holtzman’s son was trying to be polite but I don’t feel that I’m an American. I may have been educated in America, but I feel that I’m a Jew.

Holtzman’s son means well but if my attitudes make me a racist so be it.

I was never a member of your shul, Rabbi, but I respect you. I would like to know your thinking on the subject, precisely because you are a younger man attuned to the current outlook.

Respectfully yours,  
Kalman Abrams

## II

Dear Rabbi Carmy,

The note I am forwarding speaks for itself. The author is a member of the “other shul,” not mine, the one that has a *daf ha-yomi* and a higher percentage of “yeshivish” people. Having said that, you should not think ours is a community in conflict. As far as I can tell—and I hope I am not being naïve—we are large enough to have two shuls, but not yet self-sufficient enough to manufacture our own *mahloket* and ill feeling.

One other thing: I didn’t pay attention to everything that was said in the car, but the substance is accurate. Remarkably, this entire argument

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went on without voices being raised. I know you will find this hard to believe. Where we come from, such debates are tinged with a great deal of sarcasm or self-righteousness, and often deteriorate into shouting matches. Perhaps these people were restrained because they were stuck in a car together for an extended period. Perhaps they know each other for a long time, and have formed ironclad habits of courtesy and mutual respect.

In the light of the above, how would you respond to Kalman Abrams?

As ever,  
Tzvi Greenberg

### III

Dear Tzvi,

Kalman Abrams wants you to answer him one thing: “Rabbi, am I a racist?” It’s a treacherous question. The situation is like that of Sartre’s *Huis Clos*, in which the protagonists are trapped in a hell that is nothing more or less than their dependence on the judgment of other people about whether they are cowardly or courageous, attractive or unloved. Being given such “information” by an authoritative person has certain psychological benefits—the person so diagnosed knows exactly where he or she stands. Now our sources say much about the actions, beliefs and attitudes that define a *tsaddik* or *rasha*’, righteous or wicked, heretic or believer; they propose criteria for meriting the World to Come. Yet Hazal (*Kiddushin* 40b) instruct us to think of ourselves as perpetually balanced between righteousness and wickedness, so that our next action will propel us, and the world, decisively into one category or the other. Judaism knows very well that the psychological security in one’s status is a false security.

Well, Kalman Abrams does not ask you whether he is a *tsaddik* or a *rasha*’, a question on which he probably has clear views. Whether he is a “racist” has little to do with his fundamental opinion of himself: it is a social, not an existential question. In this respect, at least, he is not experiencing infernal Sartrean anguish, waiting for your verdict.

But what is a “racist?” Is it a person who holds that some biological traits belonging to groups of people are significant enough to affect their humanity in some crucial way? I see no evidence of this in his letter. If

genteel anti-Semitism was defined, early in the last century, as disliking Jews more than is really necessary, do Mr. Abrams' feelings towards *gerim* and Sefaradim qualify? No sign of dislike that I can discern. He seems to respect *gerim* no less than his friends; he just feels that they are different from "us," and he wants to distance himself from them because of his discomfort or difficulty in dealing with them.

I wonder if the term "racist," like other facile politically correct epithets, is really useful in analyzing or judging our attitudes towards people who are different from us. Are not the majority of conventionally religious people a bit ill at ease with individuals whose commitment to *Torah u-Mitsvot* is more thoroughgoing than their own? Do we not more than occasionally feel that it takes significant effort to carry on a conversation with a person whose intellectual or spiritual development is either more intense or more shallow than ours? Sometimes similar effort is required to break the ice with people at our own level whose background and interests differ from our own. When this happens we speak about the need for social skills or cultural breadth. Awkwardness, however, is not the same thing as dislike. And Mr. Abrams seems to admit the former, not the latter. Of course, it is telling that he does not say "I have difficulty with these people," implying that he and those like him are the challenged ones. Instead he posits "they are different," thus disclaiming responsibility for his uneasiness.

If I wanted to provoke Mr. Abrams I could confront him with the *Ya'arot Devash's* discussion of the Gemara about Jethro. R. Yonatan is puzzled that a sincere *ger* would identify strongly with wicked Gentiles despite the passage of generations. His explanation is that Judaism is often attractive in proportion to the corruption of non-Jewish culture. Jethro was dismayed to hear what happened to the Egyptians, it gave him the gooseflesh, because he wanted his own conversion to spring up from the truth of Judaism. He did not want his motivation to be clouded by negative associations with the religious culture he had left. This is a bracing message to all of us—revulsion from the evil around us is a valid, but far from ideal, motivation for embracing the good. On *peshat* grounds, Mr. Abrams would win: the Gemara's meaning is as he says. Yet the very fact that as influential a homilist as R. Yonatan Eyebeschütz felt the pressure to propose his novel interpretation testifies to his unhappiness with the psychological reality the Gemara reluctantly recognizes, and to his preference for a reading that yearns for the highest and purest motives for the service of God.

I feel sympathy for Mr. Abrams because I detect in his words a resentment of our tendency to assign to ourselves the best, most politically

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correct attitudes without fully examining what they mean and whether we are honest in claiming them. Despite the heavy shadow cast by the legacy of slavery, I doubt that our America is a particularly racist society, partly because I don't know exactly what that means. I do believe that human beings in our culture, like human beings in general, disguise unpleasant attitudes and the difficulty in altering them.

You probably don't recall the 1940's short film "The House I Live in," starring the then left-leaning Frank Sinatra. In the movie, the singer confronts a group of street urchins persecuting a "foreign" (obviously Jewish refugee) child. Sinatra vigorously berates the urchins for their un-American (because intolerant) behavior to the point of insinuating their disloyalty to the nation their older brothers were defending at that very moment. He finally croons them into submission with the title lyrics: "The house I live in... all races and religions, that's America to me." Even this gesture of piety required caution: America, even in the heady days of World War II when "Uncle Joe" Stalin was our ally, was not ready for the original words, referring to "the white folks and the black folks." Perhaps the film did convert a few urchins to the faith of brotherhood. Together with its innumerable successors, obligatory exercises in facile solidarity breed, among people like Mr. Abrams, incredulity that can often degenerate into cynicism and defiance.

I discovered Sinatra's piece of work as an adult. The house I actually lived in, as a toddler, was 715 St. Marks Ave in Brooklyn. The apartment building contained a courtyard that was accessible from Bergen Street on the north. An older cousin recalls that the walls were ideal for handball; I vaguely recall a sandbox among other paraphernalia suitable for small children at play. As "they" (African-American people) began to infiltrate the neighborhood on its northern borders, their children ventured into our courtyard. Other white parents instructed their children to shun the newcomers. My father, by contrast, explicitly directed me *not* to exclude them. If you had asked me why his attitude differed from that of these other parents, I would have replied without hesitation that it is because we were Orthodox. It seemed natural to me that we should refrain from exhibiting ill will towards people of different color for the same reason that we deviated from the norm by keeping kashrut and Shabbat consistently and absolutely: we conformed our will to God's.

You ask: what about all the Orthodox Jews who did not share your father's attitude, whose fear and hostility to people different than they is not appreciably less than that of the general population, and is even more intense because of everything else that separates them from the rest of society? Let

me confess that the impressions of religious life I took in as a child were disproportionately derived from what I saw at home. I am not a sociologist nor am I the son of a sociologist. What you mention was not unknown to me then, and rightly or wrongly I thought of such individuals or groups as the exceptions rather than the rule, or more particularly I ascribed such patterns to narrow horizons, lack of self-confidence and the legacy of persecution.

In my St. Marks Ave years I still lacked sufficient coordination to enjoy doing things with a ball, and, as you may imagine, I had virtually no interest in other components of the *vita otiosa* pursued by pre-schoolers of my era. So it is doubtful whether my amiable intentions came to much. Against the larger picture of neighborhood disintegration, as, within a few years, the place became uninhabitable to whites and a disappointment to the middle class blacks whose offspring I had briefly rubbed elbows with, small gestures of welcome are as negligible as minor gestures of hostility. What remains over fifty years later is the simple, perhaps childish conviction that the minor gestures of hostility and the attitudes that go with them are emotional luxuries or crutches that God-fearing individuals ought neither to desire nor to need.

Kalman Abrams wants you to tell him whether he's a racist or not. I don't think you can do him the service, despite the fact that he comes across as a pretty decent man. What do we want of Kalman Abrams and those like him? Do we want them to stifle their thoughts about *gerim*, about Sefaradim, about Gentiles? I see nothing undignified in the conversation reported, although, as with many provocative or potentially offensive topics, there is a time to discuss and a time to shelve discussion.

What is painful to me in Mr. Abrams' letter is not his apprehensions about people unlike members of his circle: if I take him at his word, as you urge me to, they reflect his own indirectly admitted awkwardness rather than contempt or dislike. It is rather the narrowness of his Jewish horizons. Rambam (*Hil. Deot* 6) states that the special commandment to love the *ger*, who has voluntarily joined God's people, is connected to the love of God, for God too has a special love relationship to the *ger*. One wonders whether Mr. Abrams' puzzlement about the *ger*, and indirectly his sense of distance from others who strike him as different, betrays a degree of coldness in his relationship with God.<sup>1</sup>

Like many of us, Mr. Abrams has trouble adjusting to legitimate religious or social practices to which he is not accustomed. He also finds alien

<sup>1</sup> On the full significance of Rambam's statement, R. Yitzchak Blau reminds me of R. Hutner's discussion in *Pahad Yitsbak*, *Pesah* #29.

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the entire idea of undertaking radically new commitments for the sake of religious truth. This too is understandable: even individuals who conduct their spiritual lives at a high level of intensity may be nervous about socializing with people like themselves. What makes me sad is that all this understandable apprehension yields to no corresponding feeling of joy in the *ger's* adventure but at most allows a cold, distant admiration for his achievement.

The *ger*, to Mr. Abrams, is an enigma but not a mystery, an occasion for puzzlement but not for self-transcendence. Based on what I see here, he can be made uncomfortable by unfamiliar phenomena, but he cannot be shocked into seeing them, or himself, in the new light they shed. Jethro's gooseflesh, for him, is Jethro's reaction to an unpleasant reminder. If he knew the *Ya'arot Devash*, it would leave him cold, not because it's not the simple meaning of the Gemara, but because the soul-shivering quest for purer motivation, and the corresponding trepidation at the possibility of falling short, does not excite him, does not imaginatively shake him out of his skin, it does not give him the gooseflesh.

There is an Orthodox Jew who dwells in timidity, tethered to what he knows; there is an Orthodox Jew whose life is punctuated by the joy and terror of the gooseflesh. When you have the chance, gently and unobtrusively give Mr. Abrams a taste of the gooseflesh, not right now, but somewhere down the line, when he least expects it and cannot defend himself against it. Get him excited and apprehensive at the realization that he, like the *gerim* who puzzle him, is a unique individual with one life to live in the presence of God, and what it means to make the small and large choices that mark us eternally as individuals. It will do him more good than another sermon about "racism." Since he is not a member of your congregation, you have little to lose. And he, and we, may relearn the mysterious lesson that there are emotional luxuries and crutches we can do without.

Do chara,  
*Shalom Carmy*

## “WHEN THE LAND IS SINFUL, HER OFFICERS ARE MANY” IS THERE ETHICS OUTSIDE OF POLITICS?

Volume 44:3 Fall 2011

Judaism is invariably denigrated as a religion of law rather than spirit. Whether the enemy is Christianity, especially in its evangelical Protestant form, with its almost exclusive focus on the transformation of the heart, or liberal Judaism, weary of the burden of obeying particular divine imperatives, preachers of halakhic Judaism must regularly explain why law is so essential.

On Shavuot 1953, Rabbi Emanuel Rackman's sermon addressed this theme. He answers:

“You cannot make men spiritual by preaching to them about high ideals and eternal values. How much brotherhood does the world now have after two thousand years of preaching about the brotherhood of man?” Rackman goes on to illustrate his thesis by reference to issues then agitating the liberal and Jewish communities: “When will Whites and Negroes even have the right to attend the same Christian church down south?” he asks: “When will they sit as brothers, even in pews, to listen to the Sermon on the Mount? Never, because preachers will have preached a million sermons on equality, but rather when Congress will have passed Civil Rights legislation, making any overt act of discrimination punishable by law.” Likewise Jews will be treated fairly only when legislation prohibits discrimination in college admissions or employment. And turning to the scourge of McCarthyism, which he had experienced himself, “scoundrels [will] stop their scurrilous attacks on innocent people, even in the highest legislature of the nation [only] after one law will have been passed making legislators responsible for their malicious attacks on innocent victims. One law would silence where everything else has failed.” Strong words supporting an appealing thesis!

Rabbi Rackman clinches his point about the role of law in Judaism with a brief allusion to the laws concerning the humane treatment of the *eved ivri*, the Jewish bondservant. It is because the Torah did not rely on beautiful ceremonies like the Seder to convey the message of freedom,

but set down very particular legal requirements about how to treat the *eved ivri* that the Talmud says that he who acquires such a slave in fact acquires a master. This demonstrates the superiority of legally based ethics over the appeal to sentiment and spirituality.

Even as Rabbi Rackman held forth in the late spring of 1953, newspaper readers would have known that two months earlier, in Chattanooga, Billy Graham had, with his own hands, pulled down the rope separating the races at his service. Of course, this action was newsworthy only because other preachers did not challenge segregation in the pews. Many churchmen supported the policy of separation on religious or political grounds; others lacked the courage to oppose it. Graham himself, despite his North Carolina roots, had been educated in the North. With an increasing international following, he was sensitive to criticism of American racial customs. Lastly, Tennessee is not the Deep South; Graham prudently did not make his move in Alabama or Mississippi. All the same, he was not compelled by law or local public opinion to integrate his crusade; quite the contrary, he was roundly attacked for deviating from the norm.

From segregation to killing: Why was lynching tolerated in the South? Not for lack of law on the books. Clear-cut laws against murder were not enforced; when murderers were charged, juries set them free. In part this could be remedied with additional legislation: for example, Federal enactments to trump local jurisdiction. Ultimately, however, such laws can be enacted, and then imposed, only when there is already a willingness to take them seriously.

No doubt Rabbi Rackman implicitly intended a fuller argument. In addition to the point he highlights—that sentiment alone, without law, is impotent, and that therefore justice requires passing just laws, he would also hold that only where law is respected, as it is in Judaism, it will be obeyed. Where law is denigrated as inferior to spirit, law will be ignored and disrespected and spirit will inevitably be violated as well. Spiritual exhortation may thus have its place, but only in conjunction with a robust culture of law.

The allusion to *eved ivri* takes us into deeper waters. Dostoevsky's narrator, in his autobiographical *Pictures from the House of the Dead*, writes:

The thought once occurred to me that if one wanted to crush and destroy a man entirely, to mete out to him the most terrible punishment, one at which the most fearsome murderer would tremble, shrinking from it in advance, all one would have to do would be to make him do work that was completely and utterly devoid of usefulness and meaning.

The Halakha has a name for this type of dehumanization – *avodat perekh*— and prohibits its infliction on a Jewish slave. To this ban the Torah (Leviticus 25:43) affixes the phrase “and you shall fear your God.” Rashi observes that one cannot determine whether a master is transgressing this commandment: can we be certain the assignment is really devoid of purpose? For that reason the Torah appeals to the all-knowing authority of God. Moreover, imposing such labor on a non-Jewish slave does not violate the commandment. Despite the moral objections to *avodat perekh*, the Halakha apparently does not wish to rule it out under all circumstances, although Rambam, in the peroration to his *Hilkhot Avadim*, exhorts Jews to treat their non-Jewish slaves generously and humanely, and condemns the master who ignores moral considerations and abuses his slave through *avodat perekh*. If we think of Judaism as the religion of law, and insist that moral exhortation to moral behavior is not enough, and adduce the laws of slavery in support of this contention, what are we to make of the fact that such an important law is unenforceable and is left to the conscience or moral judgment of the individual?

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Isaac Breuer, a staunch proponent of Judaism as law, confessed that, *pace* all apologetics, a society based upon Torah gave enormous power to men over women, to masters over slaves, and to Jews over Gentiles. Around the same time R. Kook, explaining some of the laws regarding slavery and relations between Jews and Gentiles, stressed the necessity and importance of wholly untrammelled freedom in religious ethics, to the utmost degree possible. In such a framework everything thus depends on the decency of those who exercise authority. If so, do we look to law, or rather to spiritual integrity, as the guarantor of ethical behavior? Why does Rabbi Rackman lean so heavily on one of the areas of Halakha that is most dependent on the human heart?

I would suggest that the argument for the superiority of legalistic religion over spiritual religion rests, not only on the enforceability of law but also on its specificity. The halakha of *avodat perekh* does not demand elevated sentiments. It points to specific actions and calls them transgression, in the case of *eved ivri*, or categorizes them as immoral, regarding the non-Jewish slave. The proverbial “bad man” of Holmes’s legal theory may ignore the strictures and scorn the exhortations, but cannot pretend his actions conform to his putative religion.

## II.

Breuer wrote about a legal system conformed to the divine law. Rabbi Rackman, with one eye on the American scene, looks forward to the day

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when *overt* discrimination is punishable by secular law. He adds the small word “overt,” because he knows that in all societies many forms of cruelty, like *avodat perekh*, are not overt. In the decades since the sermon we are discussing, enormous optimism about the power of law to create a just society has fueled campaigns to legislate and regulate objectionable practices that are not overt. A welter of regulations has burgeoned governing hiring, firing, “politically correct” behavior and speech in the workplace, in schools, even in family life. Such “outsourcing” of morality to the government is motivated, to some degree, by a desire to be rid of the responsibility that Breuer spoke of: if society runs well regardless of our virtue or lack of it, there is less pressure on the individual citizen to cultivate virtue and self-restraint. The stronger justification, however, is the hope that under good rules, citizens will no longer be hostage to the good will and self-restraint of the powerful. Advocates of this outlook who consume a diet of like-minded media are able to reinforce their views with many stories about outrageous inhumane behavior against which legal enforcement is the only effective remedy.

As to the kind of injustices listed in Rabbi Rackman’s sermon—overt racial segregation, discrimination in employment, slander—there is probably consensus that legal intervention is justified and desirable. But even here there are gray areas: How is one to determine when appearance, peculiarities of character, physical limitations and the like, affect the ability to perform a job? How much should an employer sacrifice, on egalitarian grounds, to accommodate employees whose performance is not optimal? When does criticism or simple dislike become bullying or oppression that justifies or requires coercive rectification? The more supporters of expansive intervention focus on trivial complaints, the kind that in earlier days were solved quietly or endured silently, the more conspicuous and officious the regulatory machinery, the greater the intrusion on areas of life that have traditionally been regarded as bastions of individual choice and private experience, the deeper the revulsion which these efforts meet. The opponents, who usually seek out sources of information and commentary more to their taste, reinforce their views with outrageous stories about excessive, obtuse, ridiculous and unnecessary intrusions on the private realm and the social domain.

Feelings run so high in current American political debate that one hesitates to cite anecdotes supporting either side for fear of inflaming the passions of one or confirming the prejudices of the other. For us, striving

to conform our thinking to that of divine revelation, it is necessary to recognize that both tendencies have legitimate theological pedigrees, the one seeking to expand the province of law in the service of justice and decency, the other insisting that individual moral growth and wholesome institutions require substantial areas of individual and communal discretion, free from legal sanctions and detailed regulation.

On the one hand, Judaism does not trust vague appeals to moral or religious sentiment but rather confronts the individual and the community with specific norms, although these commandments are not always enforceable legally. On the other hand, where absolute commandments are not spelled out in detail, we are challenged to meet our responsibilities and to advance morally without the benefits or drawbacks of meticulous legal regulation. The liberal trend in American culture, reflected in Rabbi Rackman's sermon, saw in the enactment of legal penalties the best, perhaps the only way to reverse entrenched social evils. The dialectical approach of R. Kook valued the ongoing struggle for spiritual integrity and consequently paid explicit attention to moral aspirations that are not dependent on punitive measures. Isaac Breuer, whose background may have inclined him to a more legalistic orientation, is nonetheless forced by particular *halakhot* to recognize how much justice depends on the conscientiousness of those who wield power and possess authority.

The tension between these differing conceptions of the relationship between law and morality may also reflect different ideas about historical progress. The Western liberal tends to believe in moral progress, so that the activism of more laws is identified fairly straightforwardly with the enactment of better laws, for which read fairer laws. Fairness is generally connected to some timeless universal standard at which reformers aim. Although R. Kook was a believer in progress, in a way that many of his admirers, including myself, occasionally find overly optimistic, his understanding of individuals and groups was dialectical. Progress, for him, represents the unfolding of a divine plan imperfectly grasped, or radically misunderstood by the human beings whose actions bring it about. One may appeal to an eternal divine perspective from which to judge where each generation or society stands, but given the mysteriousness of the divine plan and the complexity of human nature, it is often misleading to judge human societies in the past or the present by supposedly transparent universal criteria. Such thinkers may, like Hegel's owl, discern progress after the fact, while their liberal counterparts know what will count as progress, and are impatient to make it happen.

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### III.

In discussing the conflict between these ideals we have neglected the complications that come with the human factor. “When the land is sinful her officers are many” (Proverbs 28:2). Ibn Ezra was puzzled by the advice Jethro gave to Moses, proposing a judicial system ranging from “officers of a thousand” to “officers of tens,” with over 10% of the male population holding office. A huge bureaucracy is neither a blessing, nor does it attest the health of the society it serves. Though, as Abarbanel counters, the Biblical verse may condemn only an anarchic polity, as opposed to one firmly controlled by a stable hierarchy, Ibn Ezra is troubled by another difficulty. How many of the people possessed the integrity and courage and other virtues required of the judge? Ibn Ezra’s alternative interpretation yields a lower number. In his Shorter Commentary, disillusioned with that interpretation on philological grounds, he is compelled to conclude that the generation of the desert must have had a multitude of extraordinarily virtuous individuals.

A government of laws rather than human beings sounds like a guarantee of justice and decency until you realize that the laws are made, executed and interpreted by human beings. Moses, applying a divine law and retaining authority over the *davar ha-kashe* (the difficult matter) could perhaps organize a suitable group of judges. In our secular society, by contrast, it is politicians and judges produced by the political system who make and apply the laws, assisted by various advisors, lobbyists, pressure blocs and lawyers. Inescapably charged to create policy on matters of the gravest moral import, they wax eloquent about the “deeply held faith and values” that guide their agonized struggle to do the right thing. When their appeal to conscience and principles is sincere, and even when it is not, we would do well to inquire about the nature of those principles. Is it a good land that multiplies the opportunities for a host of politicians and political activists to define general moral standards and determine punishable offenses?

Those who believe that secular law, aiming at supposedly universal standards of fairness and welfare, should regulate a variety of practices that traditionally were left to the moral judgment or informal standards of local communities, individuals or families, should consider that the power to legislate is also the power to destroy. In hostile or ideologically partisan hands, law is less a protection against persecution and discrimination than it is a weapon by which to attain their coercive ends.

I have avoided controversial examples. *Tradition* readers, I trust, will not deem the defense of circumcision exorbitant. From the universalist

liberal perspective that favors expanded government oversight, it is abusive to deliberately inflict pain, however slight, on babies, without a corresponding benefit the value of which can be demonstrated to neutral observers. As of this writing, we do not know the fate of the referendum outlawing infant circumcision in San Francisco. Even if it passes, it is likely to be overruled on Freedom of Religion grounds or nullified by widespread civil disobedience. If the radical liberals and neo-pagans leading the campaign to criminalize the practice of Judaism have influence and legal firepower, so does our side. Yet the fact that such challenges, and others like them, must be formulated in the language of power politics and hardheaded legal strategy indicates how wrong and potentially dangerous it is to invest unlimited trust in legal institutions, without regard for the virtue, sensitivity and humility of those who control them.

Judaism, no doubt, will continue to be attacked as a religion of law, a religion of particular divine commands rather than general spiritual feelings and values, commands that sometimes conflict with influential feelings and values. Rabbi Rackman's 60-year-old defense, along with others, thus remains relevant, both for our own self-understanding and as a way of explaining our position to others capable of respecting the mystery of Jewish particularity. Today, however, experience and thought have also taught us that the cult of law, like any other human ideal, when separated from the fear and love of God, and obedience to His word, can easily become an idolatry of secular legal values.

# “I HEARD IT IN A WHISPER” R. SHMUEL B. NAHMAN ON THE ORIGIN OF LIGHT

Volume 44:4 Winter 2011

Man is in love and loves what vanishes, What more is there to say?

W. B. Yeats

**T**heir clothing was ripped in the front, the rabbis who sat on the bank of the Danak River, returning home from the funeral of their teacher, having their lunch. Was their meal a shared one, because they had chosen the spot, or solitary? In other words, should their *birkat ha-mazon* following the meal include the formal invitation that is recited only when three have broken bread together? R. Ada b. Ahava remarked, Rav has left us, and here we are, unable to decide a simple halakhic question. He turned his garment, so that the back now was the front, and rent it a second time, as the enormity of his loss dawned upon him with new force. (*Berakhot* 42b)

Who has not heard this text at funerals and other memorials? Some of us have preached it. Two lessons are predictably derived from the story. One is remorseful: we failed to appreciate properly the dead person. There is so much we could have learned from him or from her, and now it is too late. If only we had paid more attention, we could have gained so much that now is lost forever. The second is that it may not be too late to do for others what we failed to do for the object of our mourning. Let us not squander opportunities that remain. Regret and resolution: the two pillars of repentance. Properly cultivated, they indeed promote an enhanced awareness of the uniqueness of every human being, a greater sense of individual dignity and a more probing appreciation of what each person has to offer.

To what avail? Even as we heed the paradox of R. Ada b. Ahava, the irreversibility of the past exposes our regrets in their futility, and the next funeral proves resolve ephemeral. It is not a matter of indolence and bad faith, nor even the cumulative unfeasibility of doing justice to a multitude of individuals while pursuing our own lives. Nor is it even the kind of metaphysical regress familiar from *Tristram Shandy*, whereby any attempt at full narration perpetually falls behind itself. If all our moments were dedicated to salvaging the infinite uniqueness of our mentors and our fellows, if all our organs were transformed into ears and eyes intent on

retaining each valuable impression, no effort on our part can be adequate to the task. The inexhaustibility of the human being is part of what makes him mysterious. To know this is to recognize better what is meant when the human being is called the image of God.

Consider the following two scenarios: Reuven has taken R. Ada b. Ahava's lament to heart. He is intent on making the most of every opportunity to benefit from his contemporaries, to observe and collect every item so that, when the person is gone, the record he has compiled and the interviews he has conducted will fill the void and obviate, as much as is humanly possible, the absence that caused R. Ada b. Ahava to tear his clothing the second time. Reuven is clever and industrious. He is proud of his achievement. He is satisfied that he has learned the moral of the Gemara and has done his duty as well as it can be done. Shimon, by contrast, has not assembled a research portfolio on the deceased. When he thinks of R. Ada's response he is overwhelmed by the brute absurdity and wastefulness of death, R. Yohanan's dejection at the thought of "this magnificent beauty licking the dust," (*Berakhot* 5b) this beauty lost irretrievably, lost forever. Which one understands the deceased best? Reuven knows more about him; he is better positioned to produce a biography, to retell anecdotes, to answer FAQ's. If the deceased had an opinion on a halakhic or worldly question, Reuven knows it. Shimon cannot perform these services; he is not well informed. He has only one advantage over Reuven: Shimon knows what it means to be a unique, irreplaceable human being.

The artificial dichotomy I have drawn between Reuven's hard-working and self-satisfied curiosity and Shimon's emotionally deep but cognitively shallow meditation is deliberately extreme. Surely we honor the image of God not by composing odes to the power of death but by keeping alive and celebrating the memory of the dead in all its detailed particularity. The medical battle against mortality always ends in defeat, yet we do not spare resources and resourcefulness in laboring to avert the inevitable. Why should we be resigned to the victory of forgetfulness and nescience? Why is it essential for our Reuven to keep in mind Shimon's depressing preoccupation? Why think of the futility of the undertaking rather than concentrate wholly on our work of construction, striving, in however fragmentary, however fragile, a manner, to preserve the past in all its detailed particularity?

My answer, in a word, is that being aware of how little our work of recollecting can accomplish, against the infinite mysteriousness of who it is we seek to remember, not only affects our emotional life, as significant

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as this might be, but guides our practical endeavors too, in important ways. I hope these will become clear further on. Meanwhile, let us consider some of the factors, inherent in the human condition or to specific social circumstances, engendering especially intense resistance to what seems to be a plain fact: that much of what is most valuable in the legacy of each human being, even the best situated of us, is irremediably lost.

### II

As already noted, the conviction that each human being is unique and of infinite value entails that losing any significant part of his or her contribution is an unfathomable tragedy. This is true of our own mortality: none of us is easily reconciled to the notion that matters of great importance to us, experiences that have marked us, knowledge we have gained, will one day be consigned to oblivion, escaping even those closest to us, or misunderstood by them. Upon examination, it turns out that almost all of us do not fully reveal our inner lives to others. There are a multitude of explanations for our reticence, some more dignified and honorable than others. Nevertheless, and in spite of the evidence to the contrary, we like to think that we would like to reveal ourselves completely, at least to those we care about, and it troubles us that so much is likely to remain hidden, particularly what we consider the best in us. If the image of God is honored in the reticence of intimacy and in the preservation of our privacy, it is equally honored in the desire to communicate, the desire to be known.

At the moment R. Ada b. Ahava confronted the death of Rav, his perspective was not that of the person who has failed to reveal himself but that of the failed student. What broke his spirit was that Rav had absconded with so much left undone, so much left unsaid to his students. His desire was impossible and absurd. The thought of magnificence biting the dust, the skull that uttered wisdom now stopping a bung hole, its achievements and experiences consigned to oblivion, threatens our conviction that the human being is the image of God and bears infinite significance, so it seems to us. Yet the very absurdity of our quest deepens its significance. That a person whom we saw and conversed with and learned from for many years, a person with a public identity, seemingly open to our inspection, enjoyed and endured private experiences of which we have barely a glimmer, a life that others think they comprehend reasonably well, are only the superficial expression of what belongs in the "inner chambers" of the human personality and will forever remain secret, testifies

more than a hundred witnesses to the transcendence and mystery of the human being. The human world is not arranged as we would like it; it defeats our efforts to bring it under our intellectual and experiential control. Despairing of knowledge, we are brought to awe.

Thus we strive to reveal ourselves and to know others, while reality, refusing us success, reveals a deeper truth about the human condition. This dialectic is an inherent feature of human existence. What triggered R. Ada b. Ahava's reaction was Rav's unavailability to resolve a halakhic question. Eventually the information he needed was supplied by an anonymous Elijah figure: Rav was not indispensable. The tragedy, however, is not misplacement of propositional knowledge, or even the potential break in the transmission of Torah tradition. Every human being, says the Mishna, is a world, and the loss of that unique voice is the loss of an entire world (*Sanhedrin* 4:5). Nobody is indispensable. Everyone is irreplaceable.

Yet so accustomed are we to measure value and wisdom in quantitative terms that we are tempted to equate information with essential knowledge of another person, as if collecting every scrap of information, extracting every testimony, speculating exhaustively about every unknown or vague detail, would somehow overcome oblivion. This gives us one more motive to keep pushing for the full and exhaustive disclosure of fact. In the world of books, think of the voluminous biographies, running to thousands of pages, reproducing blow-by-blow accounts, virtual laundry lists, of their subjects' documented lives. Writers and old Zionist war-horses get more than their fair share of such mind-numbing recitations, perhaps because they leave behind so much paper. Tomes about creative writers are often comical in a boring sort of way: when it comes to the works of literature that justify their claim to attention, the door-stopping biographers can be relied on for jejune commentary. Assiduously piling up details and compiling hypotheses about what remains unrecorded is more liable to increase than to decrease our distance from the unique contribution of the individual.

Then we want to know everything about other people lest our ignorance brand us as naïve outsiders, unaware of what is really going on behind closed doors, who is doing it to whom, how it really is with the others against whom we compare ourselves and who define who we think we are and what we do. For the spirit of insecure curiosity, whatever it is that you don't know is the one piece of knowledge that you must have. The fascination of this curiosity should not be an occasion for pride. It represents the opposite of the passion to know and to be known we spoke of earlier. Yet we should not ignore the role it plays. On the one hand, the

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quest for such information and insight is a source of much cynicism and an excuse for much gossip and spiteful talk. On the other hand, naïve innocence often incubates the most dangerous kind of corruption; lack of shrewdness kills. This spur to our desire for full disclosure is too important to omit though it requires discussion on its own.

### III

How should the constant awareness of how much must be lost of each human life affect how we live? Insofar as the desire to know others and to make ourselves known affirms the value of human life, the inevitability of defeat should not deter us from trying our best to overcome it. Yet the knowledge that we cannot conserve or articulate everything of importance should teach us that the knowledge for which we quest is qualitative rather than quantitative. How we communicate is thus frequently more important, in this regard, than what is communicated.

What do I mean by this? “There is a time to be silent and a time to speak (Kohelet 3:7).” There are matters to communicate that we rightly do not want to leave unrevealed, and there are matters concerning others that we rightly cannot bear not to have revealed to us. Yet it happens that the time is not the right time, or the circumstances are unpropitious on our side or on the other person’s side. If the information to be conveyed is urgent, we determine to ignore these impediments and to say, or demand that the other person say, what needs to be said, disregarding considerations of intimacy and good taste. Imagine, let us say, a potentially fatal genetic disease. Discovering the family history—whether the person you think is your father is, in fact, your biological father, is literally a matter of life or death. If the opportunity to obtain the facts is liable to slip away, it is indeed “a time to speak,” and it is foolish to give it up in order to preserve the intimacy and mystery of the human personality.

The mistake, a consequence of the factors enumerated above, strongly abetted by the garrulousness fostered by the therapeutic culture, is to regard such urgency as the existential norm rather than the practical exception. To recognize the illusory and trivializing nature of this project will not reconcile us to the tragedy of mortality and loneliness, but will help us deal with the intellectual and emotional compulsion to seek out and divulge information, without regard for the cost to intimacy and dignity. We cannot, we ought not face the extinction of so much of value in ourselves and in others with equanimity, but perhaps we can better learn to endure it without impatience.

That knowledge is not worth having at any cost is, of course, the principle underlying the prohibition of idle gossip and *lashon ha-ra*. We all know how difficult, and yet how crucial it is to keep these laws. Nowadays, as noted, we are also aware of the harm that may ensue when stringency in this area suppresses knowledge that we should have. It is both motivationally and ethically pertinent to ask, regarding any kind of private information, whether we genuinely need it. Often the answer is no, and knowing this makes it easier to uphold our ideals.

#### IV

R. Shimon b. Yehotsadak, having heard that R. Shmuel b. Nahman was a great master of Aggada, asked him from where light was created. R. Shmuel whispered to him that God wrapped himself in light like a garment and radiated His majesty from one end of the world to the other. Why whisper, asked R. Shimon, observing that this image is an explicit verse in Psalm 104. To which R. Shmuel responded: "As I heard it in a whisper, so I told it to you in a whisper" (*Genesis Rabba* 3:4). What made R. Shmuel the master of Aggada when his interlocutor had all the information he needed to answer his own question? R. Shmuel was the master because he knew that it was to be transmitted in a whisper.

Presumably the mystery about the creation of light pertains to the danger of conceiving of God in corporeal terms. In our age this is not a great cause for concern; the Midrash need not be repeated in a whisper. If anything, we tend to conceive of God in overly abstract, impersonal a manner. Today, the great dividing line between secularism and Judaism runs through the concept of human dignity and what it means to exist as the image of God. If we are to make the religious way of living and thinking our own it is essential that we treat it as the intimate mystery that it is, with reverence and humility. Today we need the master of Aggada who can communicate *sotto voce* the secret of the human condition.

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## THE ONE THING THAT MONEY CAN'T BUY

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**T**wo score and a dozen hours after stepping outside the parental abode, the protagonist of the Beatles' "She's Leaving Home" is far away, "waiting to keep the appointment she made, meeting a man from the motor trade." The song continues:

She  
(What did we do that was wrong?)  
Is having  
(We didn't know it was wrong)  
Fun  
(Fun is the one thing that money can't buy).

The lines present three difficulties: What is the nature of her relationship with the man from the motor trade? The early hour (9 AM) and the identification of the man's occupation imply a job interview or a business transaction; if a tryst or elopement, his occupation does nothing to render him more attractive. Why in the world would working at a car lot, or buying a used car, or being involved with such a person, be fun?

The song implies that money cannot buy fun. Is this in fact true?

Furthermore, the claim that fun is the one thing that money can't buy contradicts another Beatles' song, where we are told that "money can't buy me love." Source critics would posit different writers for the

This issue's Editor's Column is devoted to a discussion of Rabbi Yitzchak Blau's Essay "Modern Orthodox Arguments Against Television" (*Tradition* 44:2).

two songs. Both songs, however, are traditionally ascribed to Paul, and it is foolish to eliminate textual problems by hypothesizing multiple authors. Economists committed to the doctrine that everything has a price would maintain there is nothing that cannot be assigned a dollar value. Hence both fun and love, as members of the null set, are identical. This, too, violates the plain sense of the text.

The correct understanding, in this writer's view, is that we have here, not two authors, but two voices. The statement "Fun is the one thing that money can't buy" belongs to the chorus representing the mother of the girl who has left home. It is her opinion, and is not endorsed by the song itself.<sup>1</sup> The primary voice in the song disagrees: it may hold that fun is not the *only* thing that money can't buy; or that fun can indeed be bought. Either approach removes the contradiction between "She's Leaving Home" and "Money Can't Buy Me Love."<sup>2</sup> Our second question—whether money can buy fun—depends on the two alternatives. Either way, however, the primary voice asserts that she is having fun, so we must still explain why keeping the appointment she made with the man from the motor trade is classified as "fun." More on this later.

## II

R. Yitzchak Blau's article against owning a television set (Summer 2011) has provoked much discussion. Most of R. Blau's arguments are cogent and do not require rehearsing: Most TV entertainment is trashy, inculcating and reinforcing loose moral standards, exhibitionism, loud insult and vulgarity masquerading as humor; this preponderance is increasing as the demoralization of secular society progresses. The intellectual and informational content of TV programs, being visual rather than verbal, and because it operates in sound bites, educates to shallow thinking

<sup>1</sup> In the original recordings, which should be consulted in interpreting the Beatles, the word *can't* sung by John is given a noticeably posh enunciation. Contrast to Paul's almost American pronunciation of the same word in "Can't Buy Me Love."

<sup>2</sup> One could also resolve the contradiction between the songs by suggesting that money can indeed buy love but that the speaker in "Money can't buy me love" (stressing the pronoun!) is incapable of doing so, either because he has been influenced by the conventional wisdom that money cannot buy love, or because he lacks sufficient money, or because he lacks true faith in the power of money to procure love ("I don't care too much for money").

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and manipulated reactions. Where TV watching is a regular part of one's schedule, these habits tend to crowd out more reflective modes of experience. Where it serves as a "plug-in drug," as the default leisure activity for adults, as the substitute baby sitter for children, it generates passivity.

At the same time, TV provides some entertainment that is innocent or even insightful. Fred Allen, a great radio comedian who failed on TV, in his memoir, *Treadmill to Oblivion*, lamented that it is a "medium" because rarely well done. TV's appeal to the visual may indeed make it less intellectual than its audio precursor. Sometimes, however, a picture is worth a thousand words. As with other cultural media, the user must critically assess its inherent strengths and weaknesses. Novels appeal to the emotions as dry metaphysics does not, and this may be a good or bad thing. The medical biographer Michael Bliss reminds us, apropos of William Osler, that sound bites predate the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Osler's aphoristic pronouncements and hands on demonstrations in the wards were an essential ingredient of his legendary teaching.<sup>3</sup> Radio may satisfy my appetite for classical music, but a non-professional who cared about art or nature would be hampered by the lack of access to television.

R. Blau correctly notes that television distorts political judgments by marginalizing the long historical perspective and highlighting the visual attractiveness of politicians. He ignores the fact that other modes of communication distort in different ways. The scandal sheets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were substantially more inflammatory than anything we get today and did not provide any opportunity of rebuttal. Could the obese Taft be elected today? My father, who saw Taft canvassing in the flesh, found him congenial, basking amiably in his campaign song "Smile, smile, smile," and boosted with the slogan "Everybody loves the fat man." Had voters known of his propensity to fall asleep during cabinet meetings it might not have been so good for him; on second thought, he won against Bryan.

Thus the worthlessness and harmfulness of most TV, like the worthlessness and harmfulness of most demotic contemporary culture, is not a compelling argument to refrain from it completely. Likewise, the potential usefulness of the TV is not a compelling argument to purchase the appliance for one's home. If R. Blau treats the TV like tobacco, an unhealthy product with no redeeming value under normal circumstances, I would compare it to alcohol, a boon to joy and conviviality for God and

<sup>3</sup> The same Osler, as a young man, was also much taken with John Ruskin's statement to the effect that no mind could resist for a year the dulling influence of the daily newspaper.

man when used moderately and appropriately, a cause of untold damage and pestilence when one abuses it and becomes dependent on it.

### III

For Woolf, TV or not TV is not the question. The title of his response is “Does Modern Orthodoxy not Believe in Fun?”<sup>4</sup> Conceding most of R. Blau’s characterization of TV, though disagreeing significantly about the amount that is well done and the quality of that, he complains that Modern Orthodox thinkers are too serious about making optimal use of time. (Who are these Modern Orthodox thinkers, as distinguished from merely Orthodox thinkers?)

He argues that play, according to the psychologists, is a necessary component of creativity, especially for children. He may mean that a rigidly scheduled life, a life without spontaneity, a life without fun, is perforce a life without creativity. He states that most people are not capable of the strenuous intellectual life that animates the elite thinkers of Modern Orthodoxy, centered on the study of Torah and nourished by active engagement in the life of the mind. These people require fun to fill their time and keep them sane.

R. Blau, for his part, proposes worthwhile, though non-intensive types of reading and alternative pastimes that are less passive and more oriented to social, face to face relationships. Presumably Woolf finds these forms of amusement, too, inadequate for the general. Why does he think so?

One reason that Woolf’s psychologists value free play is that it allows people to encounter new experiences and to explore new ways of dealing with the world, possibilities that would be neglected or avoided if we were always following our strictly determined script. Free play is also the arena in which the child learns to take independent initiatives. Spontaneous activity is thus a gateway toward discovering the astonishing world outside of us, and an occasion to develop the competence to live in and shape that world.

We wondered why meeting the man from the motor trade counts as “fun,” when the things that money can buy do not, in the opinion of the parental chorus. Our difficulty is compounded by the fact that money

<sup>4</sup> “Does Modern Orthodoxy Not Believe in Fun,” Avi Woolf, last modified Sept. 6, 2011. Available at <http://torahmusings.com/2011/09/does-modern-orthodoxy-not-believe-in-fun/>.

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does seem to buy the kind of things that Woolf, and the people he's talking about, call "fun," the things that divert us from the serious part of life. The simple answer, within the parameters of the song, and in real life as well, is that a controlled life, without independent initiative, without surprise, however well arranged in every respect, is a deficient life. In truth, it is not only lacking in fun, but also devoid of joy.

Not only the problematic "at risk" youngster, sullen and rejecting of the authority's instruction, wants to exercise independence and see things for himself or herself. To the contrary, the young person (or older person) who has no sense of adventure and initiative, who always conforms, is "at risk" for a life of spiritless mediocrity. "She's Leaving Home" is less about an adolescent rebelling against her parents than it is about a maternal attitude of possessiveness that makes leaving home surreptitiously a reasonable outcome. "How could she treat us so thoughtlessly? How could she do this to *me*?" the mother breaks down to her husband.

Unless interpreted sexually (perhaps even then), the meeting with the man from the motor trade is not inherently fun. Under other conditions it would be a drag. The point is that in keeping an appointment *she* made, the girl who left home is taking responsibility for her own initiative. That is the exhilaration that the song, taken literally, refers to as fun. And the poor parents, stuck in the possessiveness of the cash nexus, still don't get it.<sup>5</sup>

With this analysis of the Beatles under our belt, let me ask you: If education to initiative and independence and creativity is both inevitable and desirable, is it best prepared for through passive pursuits like watching a bellyful of TV each day, or by the kind of activities recommended by R. Blau? Is it best molded by repetitive exposure to insult humor and wise guy deprecation, or by habituation to other, more reflective and more decent models of human connections?

Let me ask further: Take young people, or adults, who have been brought up without regular exposure to TV and kindred mass media. Are these individuals more bored than their peers? Do they enjoy life less? Are they unfamiliar with joy and delight? Or have they, to the contrary, evolved more reliable and more wholesome ways of giving meaning to

<sup>5</sup> According to the Wikipedia article on "She's leaving home," McCartney later injected into the song a sexual interpretation. According to the Wikipedia article on "Money can't buy me love," he also came to interpret love as a synonym for fun. Under the force of considerations we have raised, he now concludes, that "money can't buy me love" is a false statement. Clearly Sir Paul's disagreement with his youthful work renders his later reading problematic, quite apart from the general vexed question of retrospective authorial intent.

their leisure and lending charm to the moment? Here I speak not only of the intellectually gifted. Even those who are merely “above average” are entitled to something better than the default culture of our society.

Some of R. Blau’s critics express fear that his approach would alienate “at risk” youngsters who would go “off the *derekh*” out of boredom by denying them all refuge outside *Beit Midrash* and library. True, the attitude of “one size fits all” plays some role in many defections from Orthodox belief and practice. Even more so, I suspect that the relentlessly overscheduled socializing typical of the Orthodox lifestyle, which corrodes privacy and discourages individuality, has a demoralizing effect on those who prefer to have more breathing room. In other words, we should have fewer hours devoted to prescribed activities rather than more.

Does the terror of boredom mean that we must surrender to the cultural norms of secular society? If we believe that popular entertainment is overall not good for the soul, we should not stifle our convictions in our desperation to retain affiliation. If the television set does not belong in one’s home—and I am not a partner to R. Blau’s sweeping proscription—we should respect our young people enough to tell them this, and to give them the opportunity to enjoy something better. Money, in the form of toys and diversions, does buy fun, whatever the mother in “She’s Leaving Home” might think after the fact (“We gave her everything money can buy”). What they cannot engender is genuine religious commitment or joy, as opposed to transitory conformity and a fragile simulacrum of family or communal togetherness. To think otherwise is to take one step down the winding road that leads us to the lady sobbing alone at the top of the stairs on that enigmatic Wednesday morning in the ‘60s of whose heartbreak Paul McCartney made such unforgettably enjoyable music.

#### IV

All the same, it is a terrible thing to fall victim to boredom. How did people cope before TV? How do serious Christians, who eschew it, keep from going off the *derekh*? Are they all high-powered intellectuals, engrossed in the small print of Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* or in probing the compatibility of the *extra Calvinisticum* with the doctrine of *Dominus Iesus*? Do they devote their time to sports and square dancing? Do they warble hymns incessantly, on earth as they will in heaven? Or do they play endless rounds of “Lutheran geography”?

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It would be remiss to leave the subject of boredom and squandered leisure without revisiting the radio episode of *Hancock's Half Hour* available under the title "Sunday Afternoon at Home." Television, in late 1950's Britain, is not yet the default option.<sup>6</sup> Amid heroic efforts to discern human faces in the wallpaper by squinting at it from the right angle, desultory attempts to extract interest from the newspaper and half-hearted essays in gossip, amid predictable grumblings about the heavy dinner, the thin offerings at the cinema and the late opening and early closing of the pubs, it emerges that a friend of the household has been hospitalized for some time and is dying for a visit. It's a fine idea, but seems too much trouble, and they put it off to next Sunday. By the end of the day, and the end of the half hour, they resolve never to waste a day as they have this Sunday.

Visiting the sick? Performing other good deeds and constructive activities? Perhaps that's how they pass the time, these mysterious individuals who may not be Modern Orthodox, and who are neither intellectuals nor characters in a situation comedy. Come to think of it, I know such people. To do these things well calls upon the creative spontaneity that Woolf associates with popular culture properly enjoyed. I would go further—a sense of fun, of the sort that money can't buy, is a distinct asset and a frequent byproduct of any occupation involving concern and love for other people, be it the life consecrated to teaching Torah or the rigorous practice of medicine (again think of William Osler!) or just keeping company and being a decent human being.

Again, I ask: How shall we organize our discretionary time so as to nurture, in ourselves and in others, lives of intellectual and practical excellence, of transcendent ethical and religious vitality, and of abiding joy?

*Shalom Carmy*

### *Avi Woolf Comments*

I would like to thank R. Carmy for the opportunity to participate in this discussion. I am humbled by the thought that a mere blog post has created enough attention to merit being invited to write on the pages of *Tradition*.

Let me start by saying that my post was meant to demonstrate that television is merely a tool of communication, nothing more. Television can certainly be misused, and R. Carmy's example of the parents who use TV as a surrogate, unsupervised babysitter is a perfect example of this.

<sup>6</sup> The authoritative Asa Briggs claims that TV ownership exploded only when Hancock's program migrated to the screen. A television episode of the *Half Hour* ("The Set that Failed") nicely satirizes the resulting rage for TV.

However, TV can be used for good – whether by watching documentary and history channels, or by learning to be a discerning viewer, choosing to focus on good programs and avoiding the vapid junk.

However, as I said in my post, television is merely the symptom. The cause is the almost total abandonment by Modern Orthodoxy of any kind of engagement with popular culture. Books and articles are constantly published and symposia held on the challenges of high intellectual culture, “Torah u-Madda,” and the like. Much less effort is spent on establishing a rational attitude of negotiation with ‘low-’ and ‘middle-brow’ culture.

The Haredi world is far ahead of the Modern Orthodox one in this respect. Haredim intuitively understood the importance of popular culture and leisure time. Rather than just ban everything, they created a ‘kosher’ alternative. Haredim are at the forefront of Orthodoxy in creating everything from children’s literature and art to popular music, all designed for a *frum* audience.<sup>7</sup>

Even the Modern Orthodox community’s Israeli counterpart – Religious Zionism - is surpassing its American counterpart by leaps and bounds. In addition to the religious art and poetry on display in specialized journals, Israel’s Religious Zionist community can boast prolific religious cartoonists such as Shay Charka<sup>8</sup> or the Armadil Journal<sup>9</sup> and a host of musicians. Modern Orthodoxy doesn’t have anything close to such richness as of yet.

Thus, Modern Orthodoxy is suffering from both sides. On the one hand, it has created no substantive religious alternative to Western popular culture. On the other hand, it has made no real attempt to carefully examine aspects of popular culture and decide what to endorse or at least tolerate and what to reject. So Modern Orthodox youth are faced with the option of either abstaining entirely from any popular culture, which they are unlikely to choose, or swallowing it wholesale with no guidelines or barriers to help them navigate it.

Both R. Carmy and R. Blau would likely respond that such engagement isn’t necessary and that there is a middle ground between high-level culture and television. R. Blau suggested a number of quality (serious) children’s books which are age-appropriate. R. Carmy shows that many

<sup>7</sup> A good source on this which recently came out is Yoel Finkelman’s, *Strictly Kosher Reading: Popular Literature and the Condition of Contemporary Orthodoxy*, (Academic Studies Press 2011).

<sup>8</sup> <http://shaycharka.blogspot.com/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.armadil.net/>

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serious Christians visited the sick and were ostensibly involved in many other good deeds before television consumed everything. If this is the case, then engagement isn't necessary.

However, I do not believe this is the case. Kids before television didn't just do good deeds – they played sports, read comic books and built forts. Before sci-fi channels and comic-cons, there was the science fiction of Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, and others. Before the soap operas and shows about high school, there were romance novels aplenty. My point is that the need for play has always existed and always will exist, the only difference throughout the years is the tools which were used to fill that need. Not everything has to be serious or mission-oriented.

Rather than debate the utility and benefit of this or that tool for entertainment in the abstract, Modern Orthodox rabbis, educators, and parents would do well to familiarize themselves with what's out there in popular culture. They should study it, understand it and, most of all, take it seriously. A careful examination of the tools (television, internet and so on) and the contents would provide educators with much better and more fine-tuned senses for the good and the bad in Western popular culture.

More importantly, they can speak the same language as their students and children and help them realize what is acceptable from our point-of-view, what is problematic, and what is out-of-bounds. They should also be able to properly articulate *why* program such-and-such or singer so-and-so is a good influence (or not), not just halakhically but as a matter of values. If successful, this will provide the next generation with a much better set of tools than just a high brick wall that says “*asur.*”

### *Yitzchak Blau Responds:*

People do need fun and play in their regular schedule and not every moment demands the utmost seriousness. I suggest we utilize the following guidelines when including lighter aspects into our lives. The playful activity should be neutral and not negative. If we decide that hunting for sport impacts harmfully on a human personality, we will relinquish any fun and relaxation it might provide. Secondly, we should encourage, to the degree possible, fun that overlaps with something of value by cultivating personalities that enjoy worthwhile activities. For example, we attempt to raise kids who enjoy *The Phantom Tollbooth* and *A Cricket in Times Square* just as much, and hopefully more, than *Captain Underpants*. Our adults could derive greater pleasure from *An Anthropologist on Mars* than from the latest John Grisham novel. People of all ages can enjoy communal

charity projects. If our children and adults never perceive higher quality endeavors as fun, this reflects educational failure.

Applying these criteria to television makes me think that we should eschew this medium. My original article argued that TV watching has negative impact and I will not rehash the arguments. I would prefer that our kids play sports, or even watch sports on television, over the standard TV programming fare. Avi Woolf writes that children used to play sports, read comic books, and build forts. If such activities beat TV watching, we should promote our children's engagement in them. Furthermore, let us encourage children to enjoy reading *The View from Saturday* or expressing themselves artistically. They can relax and have a good time while enriching themselves.

R. Shalom Carmy's insightful contribution argues that television resembles alcohol more than tobacco. To extend the metaphor, what if we find that irresponsible drinking is widespread in our community? Instead of using wine or beer positively, people become drunk frequently and some cannot imagine an enjoyable evening absent an alcoholic beverage. We might choose at that point to abstain from alcohol altogether. When evaluating our community's addiction to television watching and the quality of what it watches, I conclude that we have a drinking problem. Ask yeshiva high school students how many of them have watched the Kardashian sisters' reality show.

Woolf states that Modern Orthodoxy fails to produce popular culture or provide its members with the tools to evaluate popular culture. He contrasts this with the production of mass culture in the American Haredi and Israeli Religious Zionist worlds. This argument has merit. However, some usages of popular culture totally eviscerate our message. A recent Aish HaTorah Rosh ha-Shanah video consists of professional dancers dressed as yeshiva students break dancing in the old city. No viewer of this video will hear anything about divine judgment or the coronation of God. What possible value could this have? R. Aviner's SMS responsa represent another example of using modern media while losing your message. Should question such as "should women study Gemara" receive one word or one sentence answers? Utilizing popular media requires great care to insure that we still convey content of authentic worth.

Does it help when teachers "speak the same language as students?" I agree that teachers who convey that Orthodoxy invariably means secluded naiveté do us a disservice and that insightful evaluation and analysis depend on knowledge of the subject matter. On the other hand, some students look for a countercultural message. They respond positively to a fresh approach transcending the silliness they know very well pervades

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popular culture. Such students may grow more from the teacher firmly critical of television than from the educator who can cite chapter and verse from *The Simpsons*.

My original article probably was too sweepingly general and I appreciate an approach that argues for more selective usage of television rather than total removal. We could try to convince our students to think more critically about what they choose to watch. While I personally prefer a television-free home environment, reasonable people can disagree. At the very least, I hope that my contribution stimulated readers to think about the negative aspects of television watching and about strategies to alleviate the problems. Plenty of enriching and active fun exists. Let us enjoy the world without succumbing to sound bites, foolishness, and passivity.

# WHY HATS ARE WASTED ON THE YOUNG: AN ESSAY IN PRACTICAL THEODICY

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And when people say it is humiliating, they mean that it is comic.

(G. K. Chesterton)

**A**s a small child in the late 1950's, like everyone else, from the bald-headed president who beamed at the American people like a happy fetus, to my classmates, short and stocky, prancing in the vestibules and aisles of the shuls like little leprechauns, I wore a hat on suitable occasions. When I went to Israel the hat was discarded, an unmourned relic of formal pre-Zionist stiffness, from which we were now redeemed. By the time I returned to New York for college the '60s had struck. John Kennedy's hatless inauguration, we heard, had killed the hat business.

For cultural conservatives, the hat's rejection on that frigid, windy January morning in 1961 marked the beginning of the end of decency as we knew it. The drug culture and the sexual revolution, the disappearance of reserve and respect in social relations, the loss of inhibition in the hot pursuit of money and status, the reign of insolence and the shameless exhibition of shallow sentiment and carnal affairs, all seemed to happen along with, because of, the eclipse of the solemn, honorable headgear that topped and propped the old order.

To me at the time, the demise of the hat was not experienced as the dawn of self-indulgence. Quite the contrary: it marked progress from unheroic, stagnant pomposity to a new, strenuous, vigorous life impatient for achievement. Whether it was the young American "can do" president I read about in *Newsweek*, leading the best and the brightest, ready to bear any burden, or the young open-shirted Israeli society I encountered that had already accomplished so much, it was the hatless who brimmed with resolution and earnestness, it was they who occupied the high moral ground.

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Fifty winters pass and I find myself, hatless and tieless on a sparkling January morning, among the schoolchildren, high school honors students, an affable public intellectual whose writing they have been assigned, summoned by their teacher for Show and Tell. They are questioning me about the doctrine of divine providence. I am trying to explain why personal providence has little to do with miracles or astonishing coincidences and everything to do with the constant awareness of living in God's presence.

Midway through my response it occurs to me, as it sometimes occurs to philosophers, that my adolescent interlocutors are making a dubious assumption. Because Judaism teaches that whatever happens to us is part of our relationship with God, they have inferred that whatever happens to us is either reward or punishment, and that experiencing divine providence is therefore inexorably linked to keeping score of where we stand with God.

We are taught to beware a life totally devoid of suffering. The school of R. Ishmael taught that if forty days pass without suffering, one has received his reward in this world and has thus forfeited the prospect of future reward. What qualifies as suffering? Even if he expected a hot drink and received a cold drink, or vice versa; even if his shirt was inside out and required adjustment, even if he reached into his pocket for three coins and grasped only two (*Arakhin* 16b).

Measured by the displays of irritation they evoke, and sometimes, where there is someone to blame, even outbursts of anger, such frustrations should indeed count as bona fide suffering. What, however, if such trivial events do not cause us vexation and pain, but instead change some humdrum day to comedy? G. K. Chesterton maintained that it was amusing to run after one's hat, or to watch someone else running after their hat. Over a century ago, he longed for the day when fox-hunting, the barbaric pastime of the English upper classes, would give way to the humanitarian sport of hat-hunting:

There will be a meet of ladies and gentlemen on some high ground on a gusty morning. They will be told that the professional attendants have started a hat in such-and-such a thicket, or whatever be the technical term... The hunters would feel that they were not inflicting pain. Nay, they would feel that they were inflicting pleasure, rich, almost riotous pleasure, upon the people who were looking on.

When we stopped wearing hats we indeed lost a great opportunity for innocent merriment. Stalking the wild yarmulka on one's way to Yeshiva University's Belfer Hall of a blustery March morning does not quite

compare, even when clutching a sheaf of loose papers in one hand and a briefcase in the other, running late to an appointment. Alas, especially on rainy days when unpredictable anarchy of wind is tempered by soggy water, the yarmulke comes up short in the sheer aerodynamic buoyancy, the spirited resourcefulness, the indomitable feral instinct for freedom characteristic of the thoroughbred hat at bay. What fool would prefer the filth on the Internet, or even the heady invective attacking the filth on the Internet, when beckons the irresistible spectacle of respectable pillars of society, chasing rabbinical headgear in the outfield of a major league baseball stadium?

## II

Let not these imaginings tempt us from our solemn theological meditation. Do I diminish my share in the world to come because, contrary to earnest reason, instead of suffering I find it an interesting change of pace to get a cold drink instead of the hot one I ordered, or when the demure green pepper in the soup turns out to be a jalapeno? Is it shortsighted to fritter away in laughter this divinely provided, much needed chance to enhance my spiritual portfolio through a modicum of suffering?

According to the Malbim, something like this dilemma came up in the debate between Bildad the Shuhite and Job. Following in the footsteps of Maimonides and Gersonides, Malbim held that Bildad's first speech (chapter 8) was intended to console him with the theory that the sufferings of the righteous are a kind of spiritual investment leading to greater corresponding reward later on. Malbim reads Job's response in chapter 9 as a series of arguments against Bildad's philosophy. Job's lament (9:27-28) can be roughly translated: "If I say, let me forget my complaint, abandon my angry countenance and take comfort, I am afraid of all my sorrows, knowing that You will not find me clean." Malbim interprets his words as follows:

If [Bildad] says... that God will compensate him well according to the degree of his pain in proper measure... Job responds that Bildad is contradicting himself in advising him to forget his pain and fortify himself against the affliction and not to despair because they are for the best, because the benefit he will get is proportionate to the pain and aggravation that he suffers, and the degree of pain is set by God without surplus or deficiency, then if he overcomes his afflictions and does not feel the pain, his time of affliction will necessarily increase until it reaches the right measure.

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Neither Job nor his friends have a sense of humor. Given the extremity of his plight and their distinctive brand of earnestness, it is inconceivable to think of them adopting Chesterton's philosophy of hat-hunting. Any pretense to such an attitude would be an exercise in phony piety or (almost as bad) a show of forced cheerfulness. It might well breed or reflect an indifference to evil, an insouciance about suffering, and an unwillingness to confront reality, which Chesterton hated yet sometimes succumbed to. Surely it would be difficult for Job to set aside his pain and sense of grievance. His afflictions go far beyond the annoyance of scrambling after his hat or fumbling for change or eating a dish not seasoned to his taste. He has lost his possessions, his children, his health. To expect Job to make light of his pain, as his friends occasionally call upon him to do, is a form of verbal oppression (*ona'at devarim*).

Logically, however, the argument Malbim gives Job against Bildad does not depend on the triviality or intensity of the afflictions, or on the psychological outlook of the debaters. The argument confronts all of us. If feeling pain in the here and now yields dividends when it counts, then the more we can suffer the better. To take comfort, through philosophical reasoning, theological doctrine, or in any other way, is thus counter-productive. It is a sorry waste to treat affliction, even our own, as humorous.

What, then, can the afflicted person, or the put upon person, who persists in seeing the comical dimension of his or her predicament, say in justification? One response is that such an approach has one great religious-ethical virtue: it deflates one's self-importance. Frustration, even adversity, need not always be humiliating; yet it is always potentially humbling.

In the chapters on evil and Providence in the *Guide to the Perplexed*, Maimonides argued vigorously that the human species is not the purpose of the universe, let alone the individual man or woman. Nothing better translates this doctrine into a vibrant, living experience, and in a manner that enhances human existence and sustains human dignity rather than demeaning us, than the ability to laugh heartily at our finitude and ridiculousness.

God testified that Job was a righteous man, fearing God and turning from sin. Maimonides noted that Job is not called a wise man. He might have added that Job was not a humble man. However severe his tribulations, by his own testimony in the long speeches of self-justification, one of his greatest tribulations was the contrast between his self-conscious eminence before catastrophe struck, when his "feet were washed in butter" (29:6), when the young hid at his approach and the venerable stood up (29:8), and his reduced social standing afterwards, when, he imagines, his inferiors look down on him. Without in any way impugning Job's righteousness, it might have been better for him if, in times of prosperity,

he had forgotten his eminence when his authoritative discourse was interrupted by the need to reclaim a fugitive fedora, with the melted butter a bit slippery beneath his feet, or if one of those cowering youngsters had become a security guard at the bank and stopped him for ID, or if, just once, a snootful of snuff or a pinch of pollen had infiltrated his silver spice box at a public *havdala* ceremony. The gain, perhaps, would be worth giving up a few merit-points of suffering.

But there may be a more radical response, and this brings me back to my teenage honors students waiting for my words to drizzle like rain into their open mouths, as Job would phrase it (29:22-23). How am I to know whether battling to retrieve an escaped hat is a punishment or a good joke? There are events, like drought, that Halakha defines as disasters, for which fasting and similar behavior is enjoined; there are events, like the end of a drought, that engender an obligation of thanksgiving. Most events are neither, yet these are no less significant episodes in our life with God than the ones that are labeled good or bad. Their religious significance is determined by what we make of them. It is possible that when the enjoyment of running after one's hat presents itself, or when one notices bemusedly that the coins he has produced from his pocket are not the ones he intended, the religious individual doesn't care whether he is being punished or rewarded. Is it possible he or she simply isn't keeping score?

### III

The days when I was still a good boy who wore a hat on suitable occasions coincided with the heyday of "The Honeymooners" on Saturday evenings. I recall the time that Alice shamed Ralph into taking her ice skating, against his better judgment, because she wanted them to do together the things they had enjoyed together in their youth. Predictably enough, while fetching a tray of hot chocolate, Ralph slips on the ice, and his companions fail miserably in their efforts to raise him. By the next scene they have returned to the apartment. Ralph is steamed; he paces angrily, reliving the shame of a middle-aged fat guy who has fallen down, and after falling down is unable to get up, all because he has foolishly engaged in a young man's recreation. "What are you laughing at?" he snarls incredulously at the chuckling Norton, and then, as it dawns upon him that there is much to laugh about, he roars in recollection of the escapade.

Then Ralph waxes philosophical: getting old doesn't matter, he claims he has learned tonight, if you can recall the good times you had when you were young. Recalling an apocryphal adage attributed to Chesterton's

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secularist adversary and friend George Bernard Shaw, Ralph opines, the sad thing about youth is that it is wasted on the young. Now it is Alice's turn. She too has learned something tonight. She has learned that she doesn't mind getting old if she and Ralph get old together. The comedy having reached its terminus, no more jokes need to be made...

The prophets cried out to God in distress at the prosperity of the wicked and the desolation of their betters. Hazal come back again and again to the mystery of suffering that cannot be explained. The problem of evil, in its various philosophical formulations and guises, visited the greatest Jewish philosophers from the middle ages until this very day. The magnificent book of Job is entirely devoted to the pain, the confusion, the protest, of the righteous man who suffers incomprehensibly.

Back when I observed the social conventions and donned the hat, and for years after my emancipation, I thought that if only I mastered every twist and turn of the argument in Job, the heavens would be parted and I would be vouchsafed the true answer to the question about which Moses, in a unique moment of grace, asked for illumination and was refused. Since then I have taught the book of Job approximately thirty times, and many fine lines of human reality and philosophical drama of Job and his friends have yielded to my attentions and to those of my students. And yet there is more that is not contained in Job's pages of argument and complaint.

Ramban and other authorities did not regard Job as the Bible's ultimate word on the subject. Instead, they pointed to the culmination of Psalm 73: "I am always with You; You held my right hand... Even as my flesh and heart are consumed, the rock of my heart and my portion is God forever... As for me closeness of God is good." Perhaps getting old, with all its attendant troubles, will not be as terrifying or as terrible as one fears so long as one grows old in His presence.

There is no argument here, and no demonstration. There is only an experience and the confession that closeness of God is good. Would I have understood this as a child? I doubt it. Would I have accepted it as a solution to the problem of evil? Almost certainly not. If I see things differently today, it may be due to the Torah that I have learned, or the example of teachers and other admirable persons I have experienced, without any corresponding intellectual growth. I am inclined to think there has been a philosophical change as well, inasmuch as I have discovered that it is neither necessary nor desirable to keep score and to mark every event as either demerit or gold star. Perhaps I should have discovered this earlier, but the sad thing about humor is that it is often wasted on the young.

# THE LOST CHILDHOOD OF DOEG

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**T**he bright young people work hard all day and party hard at night. No small part of the fun involves those who are excluded from the parties and what is said about them, and the giddy enjoyment (*simha*) of the “ins” is much enhanced by the knowledge that those who are “out” know they are shunned and will soon enough hear rumors of the brilliance and cruelty of what is said about them behind their backs.

A voodoo effigy, representing a particularly despised individual, is produced. The host sticks pins in the doll and the shrieks of laughter of the bright people waft across the shimmering swimming pool around which they are partying so vigorously, exploding into the brightly lit evening, and eventually they will reach the oversized ears of the unhappy target. The delighted laughter of the bright people and the merriment at the torture of the voodoo doll are an aftertaste and a foretaste of the sometimes oblique and sometimes direct humiliation he must experience day after day in the presence of, at the hands of the hard-working bright people, who have the power to do this to him, and to the silent witness of neutral or sympathetic bystanders, whose silence only magnifies his helplessness.

Out of this loop, unable to say much even when called on because the information he needs to speak intelligently has passed him by, his voice is often reduced to an inaudible mumble; his only choice is a torturous self-effacement. Most of you will not be surprised to hear a description of the physical price: “his weight... was dropping off him because he wasn’t eating much; although he was ordering new suits, they were soon hanging loosely on his shoulders, his trousers... bagging around the shoes. It was registered in his face, which had become gaunt, haggard, so thin that the long lobes of his ears, the jut of his big nose, his heavy black eyebrows and the dark circles under his eyes—eyes sunk deep in his head now—were more prominent than ever, and the gauntness was accentuated by his expression, so gloomy, with the corners of his mouth pulled down and the jowls hanging down.” He spends a great deal of time hanging around in

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the proximity of those with power, in the hope that this will create the illusion that he is not invisible to them, and in the hope that the illusion can alter the reality for the better. Once, at a party to which he is invited, he attaches himself endlessly to the voodoo pin sticker, asking him again and again: “Why don’t you like me?”

Bullying has been in the news lately. So no doubt many of you want to know, “Where are their parents?” If you are skeptical about the ability or willingness of parents to straighten out their bright children who work hard all day, you ask “What about their teachers?” And if you despair of the educational system, ought not there be a law? But we are not slumming in the hallways of a dystopian suburban middle school. The bright young tormentors *are* the law: see the one sticking the pins in the doll—he’s Attorney General of the United States; his victim is the Vice President of the United States, whose campaigning put him in power, since otherwise his brother would probably not have been elected President.

It is not my purpose here to milk posthumous sympathy or pity for Lyndon Johnson. John Updike, the son of a high school teacher, once said that he could never hate LBJ the way the liberal intelligentsia did because Johnson reminded him of a substitute teacher stuck with a class of spoiled brats. I, too, admiring the outsized energy and ambition of his early presidential days and pondering the enormous benevolence of his program, have a soft spot for him, despite what I now know of the defects of the program and the vices of the man. By now we have learned, from the early volumes of Robert Caro’s massive *Years of Lyndon Johnson*, that his man could bully and humiliate with the best of them, a lot better than he could endure being on the receiving end. Read for yourself, if you have forgotten, or if you never studied them, the latest—*The Passage of Power*—which I have been quoting, where Caro, like a novelist, keeps recurring to these earlier scenes. The disliked college student who wormed his way into the administrative woodwork until his peers were forced to beg him for the jobs without which they could not stay in school; the Johnson who fawned and flattered the father figures whose help he needed on the way up, and who abused, ridiculed, and bullied those under his thumb; the Johnson who forced an aversive Robert Kennedy to shake his hand on numerous occasions when he could make him, was the last person with a right to whine or complain about bullying and humiliation.

Fifty years later, the hatred between Robert Kennedy and his brother’s successor, whose title he refused to acknowledge, and its consequences for the country and the world, grip the imagination and haunt the

average civil soul. At the very least, one must shake one's head and recall Plutarch's advice at the end of his "Precepts of Statecraft": "as a conflagration does not often begin in sacred or public places, but some lamp left neglected in a house or some burnt rubbish causes a great flame and works public destruction, so disorder in a State is not always kindled by contentions about public matters, but frequently differences arising from private affairs and offences pass thence into public life and throw the whole State into confusion."

## II

Over a century before Plutarch, Shema'aya, one of the leading rabbis of his generation, warned against becoming familiar to governmental powers (*ha-reshut*; *Avot* 1:10). Rambam comments on this phrase:

Being known to the regime in ancient times and being close to it made it hard to be safe from it in this world and destroys one's faith, as one cares for nothing, only for what brings him closer to them. You know about Doeg, even though the ruler whom he became close to was the one anointed by God and a prophet and was chosen by God.

Doeg is described as the "master of the shepherds of Saul." (I Sam. 21:8) It was he who reported to Saul David's friendly reception in Nob, the priestly city, when David, unknown to the priests, was fleeing Saul. Thus Doeg brings about and executes the massacre of the priests. He is one of the non-royals who are denied a share in the world to come, according to Mishna *Sanhedrin*. The rabbis expatiate on his enmity of David: it is Doeg who argues that David is ineligible to enter the congregation because of his descent from Ruth the Moabite.

It is common to pair Doeg with Ahitophel, another layman barred from the world to come who betrayed David. In the book of Samuel, Ahitophel is distinguished for his oracular wisdom. For reasons that are not made explicit in the Bible, Ahitophel joins the rebellion of Absalom against his father; when his strategic counsel is rejected, he hangs himself. It is possible that Ahitophel's animosity towards David has something to do with a family connection to Bathsheba, the woman whom David married after having taken advantage of her husband's absence on military duty and then bringing about his death. The Talmud also indicates that Ahitophel considered himself better suited to reign than David.

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The contrasts between Doeg and Ahitophel are as instructive as the similarities. Ahitophel is identified by his wisdom; Doeg by his link to Saul. To be sure, the rabbis make Doeg a scholar, who can cite chapter and verse for excluding David from the community. Yet we know very well that not all Torah scholars are the same: some are prominent for their erudition and penetration, some for other reasons. The rabbinic tradition ascribes reasonable motivations to Ahitophel's attack on David; no such attempt is made regarding Doeg.

David's own attitude towards the two, as interpreted by our rabbis and implicitly in the Biblical text, differs markedly. The superscription to Psalm 52 refers to Doeg's delation to Saul. Addressing his enemy directly, David alleges that he takes pride in evil deeds, and devises destruction with his razor-sharp tongue. God will likewise destroy Doeg. He then moves to the third person perspective of the righteous who will witness and fear and laugh at Doeg, saying "This is the man who did not put his trust in God but in his wealth." There is no indication in this chapter that David and Doeg ever enjoyed a personal relationship.

Psalm 55, according to the Midrash, is linked to Ahitophel. Where chapter 52 is addressed first to Doeg and David speaks to God only at the end, here the opening and most of the *mizmor* is a prayer to God. The speaker is alone and persecuted: "if only I had wings like a dove, I could fly away and be at rest." By the middle of the chapter it develops that his adversary is not an old personal enemy (v. 13). Turning to that person, he exclaims: "You were my peer, my guide, my familiar. We took sweet counsel together and walked in the house of God amid the throng." David feels betrayed by Ahitophel (if we follow the rabbis). He does not feel betrayed by Doeg, because he expected nothing of him. Upon learning of the massacre of the priests by Doeg, he acknowledges that when he saw Doeg he knew what he would do and thus must take responsibility for the outcome (I Samuel 22:38).

The rabbis explain why Ahitophel comes to despise David, but Doeg has no good reason to hate David. His behavior in Samuel can be explained as loyalty to Saul, both his initial report and killing the priests when Saul's other officials refuse his order. As noted, however, the Talmud regards Doeg as an inveterate opponent of David, as the one who sought to exclude him from the community because of his descent. But, unlike Ahitophel, Doeg is not really David's rival for preeminence. What made Doeg who he was?

Envy is one of the easiest vices to understand but one of the hardest to explain, precisely because there seems to be no benefit in it. Thus we often "explain" such a person by saying "that's just the way

he is.” Rambam’s comment on Doeg challenges that picture. If only Doeg had chosen a different path, if only he had kept his distance from the regime, his life would have been altogether different, for the better. As a child I thought of Doeg as the class tattletale, always happy to witness and communicate evidence of cheating to the authorities. Rambam made me ask about the lost childhood of Doeg that lay behind that original choice.

Rambam does not condemn becoming a politician, if that means working for the public good (*tsorkhei tsibbur*). The Mishna specifies “making oneself known to the authorities.” As Rambam interprets, this means cultivating their approval and patronage. Doeg attached himself to Saul and became dependent on his favor. Most likely, being chief shepherd made him prosperous, which would explain why Psalm 52 judges him a man overly reliant on his wealth and retrospectively posits that as the background to his verbal aggression. Hanging around power, hanging one’s welfare on the approval of the powerful, is what destroys faith in God and poisons human relations.

### III

Political life is often where the cult of power and its nasty dynamics play themselves out. Yet not all who choose to live that life are tarnished by the profession. Bullying, wanton cruelty, the cultivation and enjoyment of one’s colleagues’ suffering, are not at the center of Hubert Humphrey’s biography, though he was sometimes a victim. It is not the story of Harry Truman or Ronald Reagan or Henry Jackson, and the list can go on. Why the Kennedys and Lyndon Johnson practiced the art with such relentlessness and ruthlessness that they have become parables of hatred turned political is a large question for another time. For Johnson, perhaps, the roots lay in the sad story of a once respected father, whose diminished fortune made him an object of ridicule and contempt in society and a shame to his once adoring boy, who disavowed his poverty and determined to climb to the top. The Kennedy saga, too, is about a father, in this case a highly effective businessman who was an ethical monster and who stamped his brood with both his extraordinary ambition and his capacity to hate and to demean.

But let us descend from the American Olympus of Pennsylvania Avenue to our own fruited plain below. Educators and parents are preoccupied with the prevention and control of bullying. I’m sure we would all agree that the kind of behavior described at the beginning of

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our discussion should not be tolerated in our schools even if we are not sure how to stamp it out. Do we adopt the same standard for adults? Children learn from example; adolescents notice inconsistency. The effect of our sermons and penalties is diminished if grownups can get away with, and be admired for, the behavior we condemn in their sons and daughters.

Of course, you tell me, we are not always in a position to censure adults. They are harder to change. More importantly, we are often afraid of them. True enough. But then tell me: what about those we no longer have reason to fear, because we don't work for them or with them, because they are not our neighbors anymore, because they do not belong to us but to "the ages?" How do we teach and study and experience history, as decent people, as committed religious Jews?

The Kennedys and Lyndon Johnson are distinctive in the annals of American politics due to the intensity of their mutual hatred and the harm it caused. The early '60s, however, are even more distinctive for another reason. Whether the Kennedy administration, had the president not been murdered, would have compiled a great record of achievement we will never know. We do know the flavoring it conferred on our moral culture. We remember the crossroads of politics and culture that was known as "Camelot," an Eden that we, the intellectuals, the celebrities, the opinion-molders, and those whose opinion is molded, romanticize for its culture, for its brilliance, for its glory, above all for its style. What is it that we romanticize, and does it outweigh or is it even separate from its equally remarkable flavor of interpersonal ethics?

I have seen volumes of Robert Caro's Johnson biography in the libraries of yeshiva high schools. I do not know to what use, if any, they are put. Much has been said about the treatment of women by the Kennedy clan; there is little doubt where the Orthodox Jewish community stands on such matters, and I would not be surprised if educators have drawn admonitions about sexual behavior from their annals. I would like to think that our thinking about ethics outside the bedroom is likewise informed, and informed critically by that legacy. Why else should religious Jews read history or literature?

"It should not be forgot that once there was a spot for one bright shining moment that was known as Camelot." Once upon a time, stylish people considered the filthy habit of smoking cigarettes, when performed in the manner they found pleasing, a hallmark of sophistication. By the same token, it should not be forgot that the enchantment the

shining ethos of Camelot has exerted over much of our culture ever since can be portrayed, from a decent and God-fearing vantage point, as something singularly unappetizing. Where Torah reigns, and the fate of Doeg is remembered, the pomp of power, the buzz of sophistication, the cool appeal of human indifference and cruelty, and the desperate yearning for the approval of those adept at them, cannot escape judgment. This should be part of what makes us who we are.

## SAMUEL UNFAIR TO SAUL?

Volume 46:1 Spring 2013

### PRISONER #782783 BEFORE THE BAR OF HISTORY

**Y**ou are a newlywed man who has become the political prisoner of a totalitarian regime. You have been forced to sit upright in a chair for 60 consecutive hours, too close to the wall to stretch your legs, awakened by your guards whenever they notice you have fallen asleep. You have subsequently endured extended stretches in solitary. Your sentence of 8 years at hard labor in a harsh climate is no surprise. It would amount to a death sentence for almost anyone, and you are not physically strong. Under these conditions, you are unlikely to retain very accurate memories of your interrogation.

Fortunately for you, the political situation changes: though the rest of your family has been murdered, you are reunited with your wife; ten years later, you publish a memoir of your Siberian sojourn. The intervening years have not been easy. After prison you spent several years in the underground, hunted by the government, a price on your head, in danger of betrayal by your compatriots. Though you now live in the open, you are execrated by thousands of your own nation, the people for whom you had risked your life, and you battle to maintain your position against strong, dismissive figures in the small, insignificant opposition party you ostensibly head. Your primary purpose in writing is to improve your political fortunes. Given the seemingly unavoidable, wholly understandable vagaries of memory, the urgent need to present yourself as the hero of your story, who is indomitable under abuse and an unvanquished debater against the sophisms of your interrogators, most biographers would treat your document as a self-serving politician's production, rather than as a reliable report to history. What, after all, is the likelihood of anyone checking it against the NKVD's records?

Then the Soviet Union fell, and the archives, with a few minor discrepancies, confirmed File #782783's remembered version of events. Even in his exposed and defenseless state, the young man could insist upon, and endlessly argue, the biggest, and the smallest, points. The will to recall correctly under the most adverse circumstances, reflected in his memoir, bespeaks a remarkable mental toughness; resisting the impulse

to “re-imagine” these events with little fear of contradiction testifies to a deep streak of integrity. The history bears witness to the character of the historian. It is hard not to admire the man.

## II

One of the few books the prisoner reports carrying with him when arrested, although it is not on the list of volumes the NKVD confiscated from him and quickly destroyed, was a Hebrew Bible. Forty years after his arrest and thirty years after he wrote *White Nights*, Prime Minister Menachem Begin took time off, during the 1981 election campaign, to deliver a lecture on the Bible. His thesis was that king Saul had been treated badly by the prophet Samuel.

Here is the evidence of the Bible: Samuel’s sons did not walk in his footsteps; the people asked for a king. Samuel was unhappy. Repeatedly he warns the people of the abuses of power to which monarchy is susceptible. Yet, in the face of popular clamor and looming external threat, he anoints Saul. Samuel promises to meet the new king in seven days. Saul must wait for him to arrive and offer sacrifices and then he will tell him what to do next (I Samuel 10:7-8). Samuel is late; the people become restless; Saul, on his own, proceeds to offer sacrifice, and then the prophet arrives, telling him that because he disobeyed God’s command his reign will not be permanent (I Samuel 13:8-14). A similar scene recurs after the battle with Amalek (chapter 15): Saul and the people spare Agag and the animals of Amalek against the prophet’s instructions. God informs Samuel that He regrets appointing Saul, and Samuel cries out all night in prayerful agony.

Begin assumes that Samuel’s objections to kingship contradict the law of Deuteronomy 17 about establishing monarchy. In this, he may follow Rambam, who considered the Torah passage a *mitsva*, against some rabbinic views maintained in the Geonic literature and by later authors like Abarbanel, who regarded the laws of kingship as a concession to human frailty rather than an ideal. Even according to Rambam’s view, of course, the powers of monarchy can be abused and the role of the prophet is to warn against such consequences. For Begin, however, the Torah is pro-monarchy, and, if Samuel objects, it must be because he feels personally affronted.

Interestingly, some of Begin’s assumptions and conclusions parallel those of his predecessor as Prime Minister and amateur Bible scholar David Ben-Gurion. Ben-Gurion too assumes that Deuteronomy contradicts Samuel’s attitude toward kingship, which he explains by positing that Deuteronomy was written later. Both Israeli statesmen agree that Samuel was unhappy about

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relinquishing power and that, for this reason, he made things difficult for Saul and brought about his failure and rejection. In judging Samuel's actions as an expression of his psychology, they are both oblivious to the possibility that Samuel acts under divine command. They ignore the plain fact that, after Saul's failure to obey the commands concerning Amalek, it is God who directly communicates to Samuel that He has rejected the king.

Nonetheless there are characteristic differences between Ben-Gurion and Begin on this matter, as on others. Ben-Gurion states, in a matter of fact way, like one professional politician describing the ruthless tactics of a rival for power in the public arena, that Samuel, with his claim to divine authority, undermined Saul by imposing upon him difficult, detailed instructions and then pedantically holding him culpable for his inability to follow them to perfection. Begin, by contrast, is a 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal nationalist who recognizes spiritual and legal limits to executive power. He fought for judicial supremacy in opposition, and accepted judicial authority when in power. He experiences Samuel's religious authority as legitimate: for that reason, Samuel's turning away from Saul is a personal rejection. It is as if Samuel represented a governing ethos that cannot become reconciled to its replacement at the helm. It is as if Samuel were a father figure whom nothing that Saul does can satisfy.

Begin seems hurt by Samuel's lack of appreciation for Saul's success. For two reasons he deems Samuel's rejection particularly unfair: First, despite deviation from the prophet's instructions, the war had gone well; Saul was triumphant – he had gotten the job done. Secondly, as Saul points out in his defense, it was not his fault but that of the people, who were about to disperse (in chapter 13) and who took plunder (in chapter 15).

Is there any merit in the Ben-Gurion-Begin theory? Offhand it flies in the face of the simple import of the Biblical text, according to which it is not Samuel who rejected Saul but God. At the same time, without placing too much weight on the fact, it is intriguing that we do not hear God commanding Samuel to command Saul about their pre-battle rendezvous in Gilgal. It is possible that the command was the prophet's initiative: if that is the case, Saul is rebuked for violating God's word because one is obligated to obey the prophet, not because the specific command came from God. Malbim, among others, lists extenuating factors: the exigent military situation, the impatience of the people, the lateness of Samuel, that all conspired to put Saul's obedience under enormous pressure. Likewise, it is possible that the commandment to obliterate the property of Amalek (though not the temporary sparing of Agag), as part of the war, is Samuel's contribution (it is missing from Rambam's account of the halakhic duties mandated by the Torah): hence, had Samuel not issued these instructions, Saul would not have been liable for violating them.

Samuel may have been justified in demanding high standards of compliance as a way of testing the king's faithfulness to the supremacy of divine law (in chapter 13) or to instill the purity of religious motivation in the conduct of the war against Amalek. Yet, from this point of view, he might have refrained from adding these demands, and his decision to do so, according to this analysis, was a human one, not a direct divine imperative. Samuel correctly declares to Saul that God is not man to change His mind, yet, as Alex Ozar comments, the alacrity with which he does so preempts the possibility of repentance and reconciliation. Begin, I think, is correct to observe that Samuel's grief when God rejects Saul does not exclude his own partial responsibility for Saul's failure. But none of these proposed insights provides sufficient backing for the full implications of the Ben-Gurion-Begin approach, given the role played by divine command and judgment in the Bible.

It is impossible for anyone who values Menachem Begin's lifelong commitment to the Jewish people to read Prime Minister Begin's defense of Saul without a keen sense of its autobiographical aspects. I do not mean only the palpable cry of the wounded servant of his people who, despite everything, is still disparaged and forever shunned by the entitled elites—this, after achieving the peace treaty with Egypt! More painfully, the two excuses Begin offers on Saul's behalf—that the military goal had been accomplished and that he had been unable to control the people—fatefully foreshadow the Lebanon War of 1982. Here, as you will recall, the military operation was successful, but its benefits were undermined moral flaws that had not been part of his plan, as Ariel Sharon, with whom Begin had entrusted the Defense portfolio, pressed ahead, exceeded his instructions and left Begin to confront the consequences.

Historians like Yehiam Weitz have suggested that this willingness to allow unreliable subordinates to take the initiative, and the temptation to justify mishaps of execution through rhetorical, crowd-pleasing appeals to the grand strategies behind them, recapitulate a fatal pattern in Begin's public activities, which all his political talent and application, all the iron discipline and studiousness of a lifetime, did not eradicate. To be sure, by the end of his long premiership, Begin was physically exhausted, ill, and alone. All the same, his comments on Samuel and Saul may reveal more about their author than was intended. Sincerity and integrity do not exclude rationalization.

### III

The permanent impact of a statesman, perhaps even more than in other vocations, becomes clear, if at all, only in retrospect. How does Menachem

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Begin stand before the bar of history, as we approach his centennial this summer, twenty-two years after his death?

Some historians have rated Begin among the most skillful practitioners of the art of the summit in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, despite his lack of prior experience, a tribute to his intense convictions and his painstaking, lifelong preparation for an unlikely role on the international stage. The peace treaty with Egypt that resulted, and that paved the way for other peace accords, has held up against the bouleversements of history and remains in effect even after the fall of the Mubarak regime. Without this breakthrough it is difficult to imagine Israel's economic progress in the past thirty years. Although Israelis are far from secure, and their nation's borders have not been fixed, although the peace between Israel and her most important neighbors is cold and anxious, and constantly threatened by terrorism, the state of affairs that Begin inaugurated with his overture to Sadat is better, and more secure, than the alternative.

Religious Jews, concerned for our own place in Israeli society and for the unity and identity of the Jewish people in Israel, have special reason to be grateful to Menachem Begin. I do not mean only, or primarily, his well-known openhanded treatment of the religious sector in his coalitions. We often forget how much the pre-state Israeli right was infested by loathing for Judaism and Jewish values. Powerful voices, among them prominent members of the first Knesset on Begin's Herut ticket, objected even to his use of the word "Jewish" (*yehudi*), insisting upon the designation "Hebrew" (*ivri*) for the New Man that integral Zionism was in the process of creating. They clashed with Begin in the early years of the state, largely due to their antagonism to religion and to Jewishness, though other factors also generated animosity within the party. Begin purged them from the movement and it is his own friendliness to religious practice and support of Jewish identity that caused these Canaanite tendencies, for the most part, to migrate to the Israeli left.

The above does not imply that rightist Zionism is uniformly pro-religion, and surely not that Judaism is inevitably aligned with the nationalist, economic, or cultural views prevalent on the Israeli right. There is an ongoing danger of secularists selectively exploiting religious-sounding themes and the external trappings of religious observance in the service of their own ideological agenda. By downplaying the prophetic rebuke of power in favor of a theology of conquest, one may end up placing political might above moral right. Or a new religious-sounding ideology may dismiss God as superfluous and accidental to "biblical religion" and eliminate Him from the revised Biblical canon, thus craftily reasserting, with less confrontational rhetoric, the frank secularist and nationalist message

of the superseded Canaanites. But these threats are inherent in the entire enterprise of secular cultural Zionism, as far back as Ahad Haam. Overall, we are better for Begin's leadership of the right in this area.

Most impressively, Menachem Begin represents an abiding, heroic model of national brotherhood, what we call *ahavat Yisrael*. The story of the Altalena is familiar. In June 1948, during a ceasefire during Israel's war for independence, the Irgun, under Begin's command, was able to deliver a large shipment of arms. Whether the misunderstanding was honest or not, the Israeli government treated the unloading of the weapons on a Tel Aviv beach as a potential *putsch*; the army opened fire and the boat exploded. Had Begin not been dragged away, he too would have been killed. Elsewhere a civil war might have ensued, as it had, with less cause, in 1920's Ireland. It is Menachem Begin who gave the order not to fight against the constituted government of Israel. The Altalena affair pales in comparison to the hunting "seasons," a few years before, when the Hagana helped the British round up the right-wing dissidents with whom they had cooperated only a short while previously. It would have been quite understandable then if the Irgun had chosen to respond in kind to the prolonged persecution: the Jews, at that time, had no state, and the "Season" lasted weeks, not a brief afternoon. Here too Begin exhibited magnificent, restrained leadership under great provocation.

One of the Irgun's most famous exploits was the Acre prison break (May 4, 1947). As a child, I was taken to the site on a class trip. I did not find the visit itself uplifting: as far as I could tell, the building did not exude a patriotic aura simply because of what had happened there a generation before. What was memorable, because it was so puzzling, is that the building had been converted into an insane asylum, with only a small part set aside as a commemorative museum. Apparently the Ben-Gurion government was willing to go to great lengths to demean and undermine its adversaries by ensuring that the monument to their heroism was tucked away in a corner, with mental patients domiciled around it. Many protests were to be filed, many angry words exchanged, many years would pass, before this mockery was rectified. Our teacher, whose job that day was to inspire the elementary school children rather than to enlighten us, did not try to explain it. When I figured it out on my own I was filled with outrage and cynicism. This was the atmosphere in which Begin served as "His Majesty's loyal opposition" and taught his followers to bide their time and abide by election results.

Israeli political life to this day is volatile and conflict-ridden, up to and including the assassination of one of Begin's successors. At times, Begin's own language inflamed rather than restrained. Nonetheless, the example

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of his civility and public-mindedness remains a guiding light to the nation he helped found. It is fitting that Menachem Begin's version of these conflicts has been vindicated in the court of Israeli public opinion, so that he, who was so vilified for most of his life, is now arguably the most loved and admired of Israel's great 20<sup>th</sup> century leaders.

The ongoing legacy of a political leader is uncertain, even after his death. May that of Menachem Begin, who wanted so much to benefit his people, continue to be a blessing.

### Further Reading:

Menachem Begin, *White Nights: The Story of a Prisoner in Russia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979)

*Shemuel ve-Shaul: Ha-Navi ve-haMelekh* (Kiryat Sefer, 1986), ed. David Shemesh *et. al.*

David Ben-Gurion, *Iyyunim be-Tanakh* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1969).

Amir Goldstein, *Gevura ve-Hadara: The Executed and Israeli Memory* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak ben-Zvi, 2011).

Udi Lebel, *Ha-Derekh el ha-Panthe'on: Etsel, Lehi and the Limits of Israeli Memory* (Jerusalem: Sapir, 2007).

David Reynolds, *Summits: Six Meetings that Shaped the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

Yehiam Weitz, *Bein Ze'ev Jabotinsky le-Menahem Begin: Essays on the Revisionist Movement* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2012).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Dovi Nadel, who suggested that I might want to compare Begin's lecture with Ben-Gurion's essay.

## “IF YOU WANT TO KNOW THE LAW AND NOTHING ELSE”

Volume 46:2 Summer 2013

Once studied *Bava Kamma* with a learned and passionate attorney, and I recall how puzzled, dismayed, and even affronted he was by some of the laws we encountered. Take the idea of being exempt from penalty in human law but guilty in the law of God (*patur be-dinei adam ve-hayyav be-dinei Shamayim*; see *Bava Kamma* 55b). These cases involve indirect causation of damage: for example, breaking down a fence, through which the neighbor’s animal escapes, or hiring false witnesses, where the direct harm is brought about by the witness, not the person who paid them. Against the Halakha my friend invoked the authority of Oliver Wendell Holmes’ 1897 Harvard lecture “The Path of the Law.”<sup>1</sup> “If you want to know the law and nothing else,” writes the future Justice, “you must look at it as a bad man, who cares only for the material consequences which such knowledge enables him to predict, not as a good one, who finds his reasons for conduct, whether inside the law or outside of it, in the vaguer sanctions of conscience.” What normal, sophisticated late 20<sup>th</sup> century American would appeal to a heavenly penalty? Only human sanctions deter.

As a practical concern about the contemporary world, my *havruta* had a point. Our commercial society and our material culture require a high level of security to function properly. Naturally those whose property or person is harmed by the culpable actions of others expect to recuperate their losses from those who culpably caused them. Moreover, it is easier for modern law to trace the lines of indirect causation back to those responsible. All this may affect how Halakha would be applied in a modern society committed to its practice. For the framework of the Talmud itself, however, and the general religious perspective on which those laws are based, one should consider, to begin with, that according to some views, the victim is allowed to retain such compensation as he has extracted, although the court does not levy such compensation on his behalf. This possibility presumes the fact that Halakha tolerates self-help to a greater extent than contemporary culture allows, and that is a subject

<sup>1</sup> *Harvard Law Review* 10, 457-478, accessible at [http://constitution.org/lrev/owh/path\\_law.htm](http://constitution.org/lrev/owh/path_law.htm).

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for another time. Beyond this option, a religious society can and does exert enormous pressure on its members. The obligation to obey the laws of Heaven may precipitate formal or informal pressure to ensure that even Justice Holmes' bad man will agree to meet his halakhic obligations. Lastly, in a religious society, even the bad man, who cares only for the bottom line, trembles about the prospect of encountering God, and may feel compelled to behave accordingly. Even the "bad man" knows something that the pragmatic secularist, sneering at "the vaguer sanctions of conscience," has forgotten.

Holmes's concept of the "bad man" means that the promulgation and interpretation of law has nothing to do with morality. Moral traditionalists are mistaken when they assign to the law an educational or inspirational role, expressive of moral or religious ideals, aiming to mold ethical character. Law is no more and no less than a tool for society to promote its collective agenda by threatening to penalize those who do not conform: it is based on power, not justice. To illustrate: most of us would distinguish between routine traffic laws, regulating parking and the like, on the one hand, and criminal law, governing murder, theft, and the like. Criminal law reflects and encourages moral judgment; violation of civil ordinances does not stigmatize the penalized person as a criminal. For Holmes this distinction is specious. The only question is: what is the penalty and how does one avoid it.

Holmes, of course, disavowed the move from what he considered realistic legal analysis to cynical moral prescription, though his own jurisprudence more than occasionally displays a cynical side. Over a hundred years later, most human beings still do not reduce lawfulness to the mere calculation of self-interested advantage. They have not yet internalized the reflexes of his proverbial "bad man." That "yet," I submit to you, should sound an alarm. The script embedded in Holmes's essay is an insidious one, the gospel of self-interest is constantly reinforced by secular culture, and the "bad man's" vision readily becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Once an individual or a group begins to conceive of human existence in these terms, the perspective of the bad man is liable to extend to the encounter with religious law as well. We should not be shocked when nominally religious people conduct their relationship with God and His Law along the same businesslike lines.

When I warn against treating Halakha no differently than the secular legal system, with an eye only to predicting how it affects one's mundane interests, I am not referring to trends outside of mainstream Orthodox Halakha. Unlike some halakhic liberals whose positions we dismiss, for whom God predictably and almost automatically tracks the up to date

standards of the day and place, Holmes' Jewish bad man acknowledges that halakhic truth often blocks our desires. Precisely because Holmes' bad man knows that Halakha is robust enough to deny his wishes, he or she hires a lawyer or becomes one. The role of the lawyer, in Holmes's scheme, is to predict what his client can get away with. A competent lawyer can estimate accurately the constraints of legal or halakhic reality. The superior lawyer, through his or her erudition, eloquence, and other skills, hopes to move the boundaries of what the law will tolerate within those constraints.

The bottom line halakhic conclusions, for such a legalistic reading of the halakhic landscape, one that judges shrewdly what results are feasible and what, under the circumstances, is undoable, may be very close to those of the committed religious believer. As an ideal type, and in real life approximations, there is a "legalistic man," who, in some of his external superficial manifestations, passes for the "halakhic man" central to Judaism. In truth, however, he represents a strange imposture of the religious spirit. He is the flowering of a Holmesian philosophy that cares to know law and nothing else.

## II

Contrast, for example, the need for inwardness in Judaism with its status in the bad man's philosophy. Halakha cannot dispense with the requirements of external behavior, whether in social relations or in the service of God. At the same time, the religious life is devoted to many performances expressing ethical and emotional inwardness, what R. Bahya called "the duties of the heart." Think of prayer, love of God, fear of God, religious joy, and the observance of grief, think of the vast vocation of character building that comes under imitating God and cleaving unto Him, to say nothing of the ideals of *Torah li-shemah* and fulfillment of divine commandments for their own sake, which presuppose a persistent yearning to attain pure motivation. For this reason R. Soloveitchik stressed, in his *Halakhic Man*, that the ideal type represented by "halakhic man" includes within it *homo religiosus* as well. That is why the great minds honored in our religious tradition are distinguished by their sensitivity to others and by their intense passion for God.

Though legalistic man, in his Orthodox guise, cannot deny the evidence of the Halakha, what does inwardness mean to the person who cares only for the material consequences, the effects on money and status, which knowledge of the law enables him to predict? He can, no doubt,

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meticulously utter all the prescribed words of the prescribed prayer and mimic the gestures of joy and grief that are demanded of him. He may, more or less convincingly, impersonate the performances of humility, integrity, equanimity, respect for others, sympathy, submissiveness and so forth, as he finds them laid down in normative halakhic works.

Given his premises this is the best he is able to muster; and, when he is forced to defend himself, he may well point out that the religious individuals who make so much of our personal relationship to God and expend much effort on the duties of the heart also fall short of our professed ideals. The legalist is content to confine himself to the realm of external performance; he is happy to spare himself the unnecessary struggle and self-accusation that is the inevitable lot of the traditional religious believer. He dares us to condemn his insouciance and self-satisfaction. If he had to, he would challenge God, before the Throne of Judgment, to hold him responsible for neglecting to develop an inner life. And make no mistake: he expects to win his suit!

It is a principle of criminal law, adopted by Halakha as well, that there can be no punishment without prior warning—*ein oneshim ela im ken mazhirim* (Yoma 81a). Religious life, by contrast, like common sense morality, insists that we are responsible before God for commissions and omissions that are not spelled out beforehand in the law codes. Ramban, whose remarks on the imperative to sanctify oneself even within the range of what is permitted by statute (Leviticus 19:2), and the commandment to do the right beyond the letter of the law are fundamental to Jewish ethics (Deuteronomy 6:18), frequently comments, regarding morally reprehensible behavior described in the book of Genesis, that decent human beings reject such conduct, and there is therefore no need for a specific Torah injunction to prohibit them.

From the legalist viewpoint, Ramban's orientation is indigestible. Some years ago a brilliant scholar of Jewish law and history, a man with links to the Orthodox world, took Ramban to task. In this scholar's opinion, Ramban's doctrine that one may be depraved within the mandate of the law is an abandonment of the Jewish teaching that the Law is "the sole constitutive of humankind's relation with God." He blames Ramban's regrettable lapse on his being unconsciously in the grips of Christian ideology. Less colorful versions of this complaint against moral standards that are not derived directly from explicit law are not uncommon. These voices harmonize with those of people who, not having much use or pleasure in their inner life, are made unhappy by the idea of having to subject their lives to self-criticism without the aid of rigidly defined protocols of behavior, and the demand that they summon up resources of passion that are not externally

and precisely scripted. Thus the mediocre man, who cherishes his peace of mind and does not want it disrupted by anything except for the inescapable imposition of the law, takes on aspects of Holmes's bad man, for whom the meaning of law is exhausted by its impact on his status.

### III

Failure, the breakdown of the ideal, sometimes provides the crucial test of a way of life. Halakha often must come to terms with the limitations of social constraint, political conflict, and the like. Think of the ethics of war, think of the compromises needed to forestall war, or to coexist with others in a secular society; think even of keeping the peace within a family. Here goals and values sacred to us as religious Jews may be sacrificed or compromised for the sake of goals and values that are more important or more urgent. In these situations the religious Jew who respects inwardness experiences a tragic rational regret respecting the claim of the values and goals that have been overridden though not annulled. The religious Jew must keep these values and goals alive: they must not be lost merely because, at a practical level, they have not prevailed for the moment due to circumstances or collision with greater values. For the legalist who is not preoccupied with the inner life of the religiously committed individual, once the "correct" solution has been identified, there is no point tormenting oneself about what has been given up.

When failure takes the form of sin, Halakha prescribes confession, regret, resolve for the future, and regeneration. These are very different for religious individuals and for legalistic Holmesian agents. The former is shaken by the awareness of sin. He is haunted by the conviction of sin—"For my iniquities I know, and my sin is before me always." (Psalms 51:5) Where God is intimately present and His image is hallowed, repentance, the mysterious privilege that enables one to remedy offenses against others and overcome estrangement from God, is approached with a sense of holy dread and sacrificial submission: "The offerings of God, a broken spirit: the heart broken and abased, Oh God you will not despise." (Psalms 51:19) Needless to say, this most intimate encounter is painfully and gloriously a private one.

Holmes's bad man, by contrast, resorts to repentance as an uncomfortable but necessary measure when he cannot get his way otherwise. As the common criminal looks upon prison as an occupational hazard rather than a moral stigma, so his more upscale counterpart treats the rituals of apology and the theater of repentance as part of the cost of doing

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business. One swallows repentance as a sufferer from headache takes an analgesic, tapping his foot impatiently and fiddling with his Blackberry as he waits for the drug to work its magic, for the wave of perfunctory censure to recede and allow his career to resume its familiar trajectory. Apology is scripted; repentance is negotiated, with efficiency of effort and without wasted emotion. No wonder the spectacle of public repentance enacted by embarrassed politicians and other celebrities rings so hollow, so unsatisfying, and so predictable. How, as we progressively internalize the bad man's legalism, can we avoid having our own spiritual story follow suit?

### IV

They asked R. Yohanan b. Zakkai why the Torah exacts greater penalties of the *gannav* (the thief, who acts stealthily) than of the *gazlan* (the robber, who does not attempt to avoid observation)? Because the latter treated the Master (God) with the same degree of respect as the slave (man), defying both, while the former did not equate them: he evaded human detection and did not fear divine knowledge (*Bava Kamma* 79b).

Offhand, one cannot imagine a text more likely to evoke a snicker from Holmes's bad man and those who maintain that the law is primarily addressed to the transgressor. Does anyone really believe that the discrepancy between the penalties for one crime or the other, with its theological rationale, deters the bad man who looks at law only as it affects his worldly well-being? The obvious response, as we have seen, is that Judaism is not confined to the bad man's jaundiced perspective. The law is educational, a reminder to R. Yohanan and his disciples, if not to the thief himself, that inwardness and the God-relationship matter.

Paradoxically, however, the statement confirms one element in Holmes's thesis. If the Torah, according to R. Yohanan, must backhandedly "commend" the robber for being as oblivious to human society as he is to God, we may infer that many people, like Holmes's bad man, are impervious to divine strictures and alienation. It is not only contemporary culture that cares only for immediate tangible outcomes. In ancient times too, God's presence, His love, or His displeasure, seemed remote to many people much of the time.

There is an all-important difference between our ancient thief and our contemporary Holmesian. The thief does not have a theory about the relationship of Halakha and God. The thief does not speak *to* the community of the Beit Midrash or *for* that community. Unlike Holmes, the Harvard Law School professor on his way to the Supreme Court, his words do not

suggest the attitude of the elites. If interrogated, the thief is likely to accept conventional religious and moral judgments and to ascribe his crime to impulsiveness and short-sightedness and inconsistency, not to his proudly proclaimed philosophy of law and Halakha; at the moment of the theft, God is remote to him rather than absent or irrelevant. Our thief may or may not follow the Talmud's line of reasoning that his actions betray an implicit deviation from normative theological belief. For that reason, despite its all-too-human inconsistency, the thief's inner life, when he is not engaged in theft, is not always religiously inert. His experience of prayer, character formation, fear of God, the desire to atone and remedy various sins and failings, may not differ from that of average religious folk who never steal.

However that may be, the mentality of the thief, having survived two thousand years of Musar, is likely to remain with us, regardless of our attempts to reform individuals. We will have to continue living with it, and repenting our own temptation to display the same weakness. Of those who have succumbed to the legal philosophy of Holmes's bad man in its Jewish version, who have marginalized the elements of religious life and learning that do not attract them, who are impervious to the kind of moral or emotional awakening that cannot be contained within the narrow compass of the behavioral norms that do engage their compliance—they too are unlikely to change, I fear, though God, we believe, works in mysterious ways and no intellectual defenses are secure against Him.

What is within our power, as rabbis and committed religious Jews, is to be clear about the difference between the kind of legalism we have just discussed and commitment to Halakha as the path God has laid down for us to serve Him. Adherents of Holmesian legalism are capable of making significant contributions to the study of Jewish law and literature, just as they are capable of making good litigators; it is foolish to pretend otherwise. Who should be held up as models for religious or moral emulation is a different affair. If *avodat ha-Shem*, in its behavioral, ethical and experiential manifestations, is the core of our individual and communal existence, that should be expressed in how and what and whom we admire. To pretend otherwise is, I predict, to lay ourselves open to periodic embarrassment, shame, and disgrace. Worse than the external consequences, however, it is a betrayal of everything Orthodoxy should stand for.

# AMONG HIS PEOPLE HE DWELLED

Volume 46:4 Winter 2013

## R. OVADIA Z"l AT EYE LEVEL

**B**ecoming an individual does not sound like much of an accomplishment: what else is there to be? Notwithstanding which, in our society it seems almost impossible. Children are constantly told how special and unique they are, as if that were both an end in itself and an effortless given, and the result is drab conformity festooned with ribbons of eccentricity, as if just being different from others suffices to stamp your life as original and creative. The Torah world, by contrast, inculcates its uniform ideals for men and women, and endows its most revered figures with stereotypical, virtually interchangeable biographies of piety and erudition. Once in a very great while, a human being arises whose sheer originality and excellence forces everyone to recognize in him what genuine individuality means. In addition to the impact of their objective achievements, however formidable, such persons show all of us what a vital unique life can be.

Measured solely by his contribution to the halakhic corpus, R. Ovadia Yosef bestrode his century like a colossus. Among his scores of books, the two most notable series, the *Yabbia Omer* and the *Yehavreh Daat*, occupy the forefront of halakhic study and will continue to be highly influential in decision-making for the foreseeable future. Much has been said about the photographic memory and the insatiable appetite for halakhic literature that made his production possible. It is likely that this man knew more Torah, if Torah is defined by the quantity of published material, than anyone in history. Until Benny Lau's intellectual biography, less credit was given to his rare gift for lucid, fluent exposition and the organized judicial mindset that makes his writing eminently enjoyable and persuasive.

R. Ovadia was showered with acclaim for some of his "lenient" rulings. Surely, he was proud to wear the mantle of Beit Hillel, and frequently avowed that leniency, when it is justified, is a surer mark of greatness than pious timidity. His "broad shoulders," that is his capacity to reach and defend a lenient ruling, derived from encyclopedic knowledge and enormous self-confidence. Yet this is not the entire story. In *Yabbia Omer*, you are forced to recognize the voice of a *posek* who understands his milieu, a man

with his feet on the ground, ready to learn about the operation of a refrigerator and sure-handed in sizing up the situations affecting his interlocutor. Over the course of his long career as a decisor, there is an incessant and unmistakable sense of the great halakhic and religious responsibility that comes with the great intellectual talent and personal charisma.

All this is well known. President Shimon Peres, who knew R. Ovadia well as a political leader and rabbinic authority, said that regarding the greatest of men, there is no need to discuss details. Speaking for the people of Israel in its entirety, immediately following R. Ovadia's death, he was right. The shocking finality of death is a time for mourning, indebtedness and silence, not an opportunity for journalistic punditry. As titular leader of a deeply divided nation, he was prudent to avoid the details in eulogizing a titanic but divisive figure whose true stature and the magnitude of whose loss can be imagined only by some segments of the populace. We, who wish not only to celebrate R. Ovadia but also to learn from him, cannot pass over the details.

The problem, in a word, is that R. Ovadia frequently allowed himself strong language about people with whom he disagreed or of whom he disapproved. And we cannot make it go away. Even as I contemplate the grandeur of his life and its message for me, high school *rebbeim* report to me their students' confusion – and they are not alone: What are they to make of his harsh condemnations? How can we, as educators, place this great sage on a pedestal when we disapprove of, and discourage vigorously, emulating his verbal example? Young people dislike hypocrisy, even when they are not completely free of it themselves. And even if we do not owe them a response, what do we say to ourselves?

## II

I first heard R. Ovadia lecture in the early 1960's. Unlike the grown-ups, I was not particularly impressed by his erudition. As a child, I took it for granted that anyone qualified to teach knew what needed to be known: I reigned sovereign over my seventh grade geometry and history texts; the people on top must likewise have mastered their domain. I was, all the same, taken by the fluency of R. Ovadia's speech and the flourish of his style. Others seemed cowed by the challenge of reaching an ambitious practical conclusion; he accepted that responsibility without hesitation or misgiving. Where other rabbinical spokesmen insisted, as if they were reciting a party platform, that Halakha could address modern problems, R.

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Ovadia went ahead and did it. Where other speakers, secular as well as religious, always seemed to be functioning in an official capacity, whether pointing with pride or inveighing against error, R. Ovadia's words seemed to emanate directly from his head and from his heart. Rather than appearing to orate or lecture, he could effortlessly reel off a substantial judicial presentation and segue into an inspirational coda as if he were simply thinking out loud.

My teacher R. Moshe Levy *z"l*, born in Marseille, had come under R. Ovadia's wing in Cairo of the late 1940's. Moonlighting for *Kol Yisrael*, it is he who arranged R. Ovadia's Friday afternoon radio show, comprising oral responses to a wide range of halakhic inquiries. In R. Levy's home I discovered the first two volumes of *Yabbia Omer*. It is he who revealed to me that R. Ovadia taught publicly, for two hours, every weekday night. Thus, during my high school years, I found my way most evenings to the *shul* on the backstreet of Jerusalem's Bukharan quarter, where I witnessed, and learned from, this remarkable individual in his native habitat.

Of those who warmed themselves at the fireside of Torah, some were learned; most were not. Some, wearied by a long day of physical labor, dozed fitfully. Others fulfilled their commitment to learning by passing among the benches, bearing trays of scalding, heavily sugared tea or coffee, to refresh the congregation. R. Ovadia sat at the right hand corner of the front table. Upon receiving the hot syrupy brew, he invariably favored it with a bemused sidelong glance, as if inspecting it for bugs, recited the blessing, and got back to business.

The primary subject matter was *Orah Hayyim*: the laws pertaining to the seasons and their holidays, blessings before eating and the like. From time to time, R. Ovadia announced an oral examination and went around the room, tailoring his questions to the quality of the listener. The lecture itself was flawlessly organized, and as detailed as you could possibly desire. I recall particularly a series devoted to the laws of *Shemitta*, with a full-blown defense of the *hetter mekhira* that was virtually identical with his later publications.

R. Ovadia's teaching, with its focus on practical law, was, of course, poles apart from the analysis common in Lithuanian yeshivot. That much I realized from attending the public *shiurim* of Ashkenazic *gedolim*, for example, R. Zolty's weekly lecture at the Yeshurun Synagogue, and that much I gathered from the grown-ups who were puzzled by the time I spent with a Sefardic rabbi who, regardless of his stellar achievements, would do little or nothing to initiate me in the Talmudic methodology appropriate for an Ashkenazi youngster.

Just then I had more urgent preoccupations. Outsiders would call them “philosophical”; had I known the word, I would have called them “existential.” It would have been clear to any intelligent outsider that R. Ovadia could not help me with these questions either. I was troubled by many of the questions that come under the “problem of evil.” Even at that inchoate stage of my personal development, I could hardly have found R. Ovadia’s populist approach to reward and punishment, or his ethnocentric outlook, an adequate or satisfying guide to reality.<sup>1</sup>

Yet against one existential question that agitated me, at that time, R. Ovadia offered a palliative. A primary cause of my deep dissatisfaction with organized religion and its secular substitutes was the sense that all the great public ideals and ideologies were a compulsory game of self-seeking tinged with corruption, and that those who advocated them, whether sincere or conniving, were merely playing their assigned parts, as honored bystanders, helpless apologists, or captive talismans. With an adolescent’s sweeping unfairness I was led to the no doubt exaggerated conclusion that it was all about politics, not about truth. In this maze of façade and intrigue, R. Ovadia, dwelling among his people, literally meeting them at eye level, speaking his mind, seemed to be the noble exception, perhaps the redeeming exception.

The founding of Shas, a political party no less corrupt than its rivals, the helicopters descending from the sky at election rallies, the distribution of amulets and campaign promises, mundane and otherworldly, the king-making and unmaking maneuvers and the ugly compromises, were twenty, thirty, forty years in the future. At the time, I do not recall vehement, personal insults against foes, despite distant rumors about the animus aroused by his first book, which challenged some of the rulings of the revered *Ben Ish Hai*. Perhaps I was not as sensitive to language as I am today, perhaps politics and public affairs, as distinct from the battles of Torah, hardly ever intruded on the learning. In 1965, when asked how to

<sup>1</sup> Let me make it clear that personal providence, in the sense that individuals and groups are obligated to understand what happens to them, both the pleasant and the odious, in connection with their personal relationship with God, is fundamental to Judaism. This is different from promoting specific explanations or interpretations of the exact way God’s providence operates. See my remarks in *Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1999), and more recently in Shalom Carmy, “Yet My Soul Drew Back: Fear of God as Experience and Commandment in an Age of Anxiety,” *Tradition* 41:3 (2008), 1-30 and in *Yirat Shamayim: The Awe, Reverence, and Fear of God*, ed. Marc Stern (Jersey City: Ktav, 2008), 265-299, and Shalom Carmy, “Cops and Robbers,” *Tradition* 40:4 (2007), 1-6.

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vote for the Sixth Knesset and municipal elections, R. Ovadia unsurprisingly instructed his disciples to make religious issues paramount. He added that he was against purely ethnic parties.

By the time that changed I had long moved on. R. Ovadia's straightforward manner, his warmth, his palpable commitment to Halakha and its study, his 24-hour-a-day readiness to give of himself without reserve, provided me with a temporary existential haven. It is something that I, and anyone who has gained from me, must be grateful for. My permanent intellectual home would be with other mentors, and I learned from them that being forthright did not exclude being circumspect.

### III

There is a paradox here. It is not just that I am asserting, at one and the same time, that to me, a youngster disillusioned with the world, part of R. Ovadia's attraction, *as a religious personality*, was his transcendence of the politics and intrigue that vitiated his surroundings, while acknowledging that his subsequent performance in the public arena partook of the sleaziness and vulgarity of that world. I am insisting that his being of the people and for the people, uninhibited in his mode of speaking, the very feature most deplored today by the modern Orthodox with whom I associate, and who know his character mainly or only through the media, was inextricably bound up with my attraction to him.

President Peres, who suffered on occasion from R. Ovadia's tongue and owed him a great deal, not least his current position, claimed that the rabbi's harsh language was motivated by loving concern. The hypocrisy-detector in all of us dismisses this as one small gesture of diplomatic phony and collegial courtesy from an ageless, indefatigable master of the genre. What could Peres possibly have meant?

Cursing is an especially pungent form of verbal aggression; we can think of it as trash talking at its extreme. Taken literally, a curse is a tactical weapon of destruction. Balak hired Balaam to curse Israel, as one contracts with an assassin, expecting results. It is ridiculous to think of R. Ovadia as an expert practicing magician, unleashing commination as Madeleine Smith reputedly laced her paramour's cocoa with arsenic, thereafter retiring to await his death. One cannot imagine R. Ovadia officiating solemnly at a *pulsa de-nura* ritual, though I cannot vouch for his imitators.

In practice, cursing and otherwise invoking the name of God is a strategy of frustration and helplessness, a verbal substitute for direct action when that is disproportionate or impossible. The person who curses

is expressing his or her anger, frustration, and sense of hurt, or articulating such feelings on behalf of others. The message is that “we” are indifferent to our adversaries, and that we refuse to submit to them, that we defy them. (When people blaspheme God, summoning Him against Himself, as it were, a literal understanding is patently absurd; rather, the blasphemer is defying God.)

Did R. Ovadia change in the decades after he influenced me? The sage I encountered in the 1960’s had not had an easy life, beginning with the profound poverty of his childhood, through his Cairo rabbinate, when a lookalike had acid thrown in his face by hoodlums hired by those who opposed his *kashrut* standards; even in his early years he was fighting to achieve proper recognition for Sefardic traditions. For all that, the years I saw him in action were, in many respects, the golden period of his life: the days spent teaching and judging, the nights devoted to writing, and the leisurely evenings propagating God’s law in the old neighborhood. The frustrations and nastiness of political infighting, no matter what the ultimate goal, cannot fail to take their toll. If R. Ovadia’s soul did not become callous—and he never wavered in his commitment to those who needed him—his tongue lashed out against those who undermined Torah and, as he saw it, hardened themselves against true spiritual values and the physical welfare of his flock. He spoke to and for the people among whom he dwelled.

Rambam put little stock in the efficacy of cursing. Nonetheless, in explaining why the Torah prohibits cursing the deaf (*Sefer ha-Mitsvot, Lav* 317), he warned against the vindictiveness reflected in the practice, even when the object is not present. In his later years, when R. Ovadia could be overheard via satellite by the entire world, one could not confuse the absence of his targets from the room for deafness. For whatever reasons, this extraordinarily intelligent and sensitive individual chose to ignore the danger of offending the outside world and lowering their esteem for Judaism in order to offer comfort to the people among whom he dwelled.<sup>2</sup> Having said all this, I wonder if Shimon Peres grasps the semiotics of bellicose language: we, who are rightly alarmed when the image of Torah is debased and public discourse is coarsened, might gain perspective from the incurable political warhorse.

<sup>2</sup> I am not here addressing those who object to R. Ovadia’s utterances because they oppose his views or because they object to all expressions of rabbinical partisanship. I discuss this latter question in “A Pistol Shot in the Middle of a Concert— and a Shocking Statement of R. Kook,” *Tradition* 47:1 (2014), 1-7.

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### IV

One last point: In our circles of Ashkenazi *yeshivot*, it was common, until fairly recently, to employ the language of ethnic derogation to diminish R. Ovadia's stature. To disagree about the appropriate methodology of Talmud study and halakhic decision-making, to dispute the respective merits of approaches prevalent among different Jewish communities, is perfectly legitimate. In this area, R. Ovadia requires no sympathy; he gave as good, or better, than he got. I mean the unearned shoulder shrug of condescension, the casual hand gesture of dismissal, the uncritical assumption of superiority. I mean the tendency to reduce R. Ovadia's unparalleled gifts as an adjudicator to his prodigious memory alone, as if he were a fortunate freak of nature. I mean the slights he was subjected to, from the outset of his career until his old age, and the slights members of his family and circle experienced as students in Ashkenazi *yeshivot*.

Even R. Ovadia's populism, among those who deplore it, has been interpreted as a "Sefardi thing," as if the Haredi Ashkenazi elites were incapable of overheated, overripe, inflammatory rhetoric around election time and the rest of the year too, and as if other major Sefardi *gedolim* of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, like R. Benzion Uzziel and R. Hayyim David Halevi were not distinguished by the impeccable dignity of their utterances. Correspondingly, we miss the fact that R. Ovadia, unlike almost every other major rabbi of our times, was not born to rabbinic lineage but emerged from the people whom he never forgot, and with whom he enjoyed unique rapport.

Thus a Torah giant, the likes of which we see once in a couple of centuries, a man who should belong to *kelal Yisrael*, a man who now, in his death, is embraced by the wide community that thirsts for truth and light in God's law, a man increasingly known throughout that universe simply as *Maran*, our master, was made to feel that he belonged to only one segment of that world.

It is too late to rectify these failures of appreciation and gratitude. It is not too late to honor R. Ovadia's legacy by preventing such errors of injustice in the future. May *maran ha-Rav* Ovadia Yosef's wisdom and warmth continue to serve the people of Israel. May we learn judiciously and joyously from the example and inspiration of his life to become better Jews, better students of Torah, and better human beings.

# “A PISTOL SHOT IN THE MIDDLE OF A CONCERT”—AND A SHOCKING STATEMENT OF R. KOOK

Volume 47:1 Spring 2014

Should rabbis be political? Should they be involved in partisan political campaigns? Should they express themselves from the pulpit? Fifty years ago, before so many things changed, it was almost unthinkable for an American rabbi to endorse a candidate in public. It was considered bad taste or even an illegitimate encroachment on the secular; and though many Jews might have asked their *mara de-atra* who was best for the Jews or for Israel, I doubt that most would have been influenced by rabbinical positions on controversial social, economic, or international affairs.

The situation in Israel was different. There explicitly religious issues were prominent in public discourse. *Rabbanim* could not be expected to remain neutral regarding questions of Shabbat, *kashrut*, and the status of marriage and family law, among other subjects. Insofar as these questions were central to the platforms of particular parties, it was natural that rabbis would insist that voters give primary consideration to their positions on the place of religion in the state of Israel. None other than the Chief Rabbi Isaac Herzog, a sage not known for reckless protrusiveness, had brokered the formation of the United Religious List for the first Knesset elections.

To be sure, even in Israel leading rabbis and the rabbinate were not identified with clear-cut partisan positions on “secular” questions. There were exceptions that proved the rule. Rabbi Kook, to whom we will return later, notoriously jeopardized his standing when, at the end of his life, he spearheaded a campaign for the exoneration of the Revisionist Avraham Stavsky, who had been dubiously convicted in the Arlosorov murder case, and he was vilified by the Labor movement for his troubles. Rabbi Herzog, by condemning Jewish terrorism, courted the displeasure of some on the Zionist right. Generally, however, when Zionist rabbis wrote responsa on military and other public matters, during the first generation of the State, they justified the government, and thus propped national consensus. In Israel the consensus no longer exists, in part because

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of the greater influence of rabbis, and the communities that listen to them, in the public square, and in part because many have chosen to judge military and settlement policy as a subject for straightforward halakhic ruling, no different than the laws of Shabbat or *kashrut* or marriage. Rabbinic pronouncements on policy questions have therefore contributed to social divisiveness and are often deplored for that reason.

The appropriateness of religious neutrality is far from self-evident. After all, if Torah speaks to all areas of life, not only the parochial *kashrut* and Jewish culture issues, one would expect rabbis to proclaim the truth. And if certain candidates or parties are likely to promote or undermine the truth, why should rabbis refrain from saying so to all and sundry? Especially today, when the battleground between Judaism and all that is opposed to traditional religion runs through the fault lines dividing American social and political culture—the primacy of traditional family life, abortion, and euthanasia being much discussed examples—one might think it remiss for spiritual leaders to be silent. All the same, many take the received taboo against speaking out as a given, and disapprove its transgression.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century French writer Stendahl compared “politics in a work of literature” to “a pistol-shot in the middle of a concert, something loud and vulgar, and yet a thing to which it is not possible to refuse one’s attention.” Is politics in the pulpit any less disturbing? Is it vulgar? If so, is that a good enough reason to banish it? Or, to the contrary, must we speak truth, and command attention, against the conventions of silence and putative good taste?

## II

Why should a religious leader shun political controversy? One answer is fear. Even in a constitutional republic, as John Marshall knew two centuries ago, the power to tax is the power to destroy. The expansion of the modern state since his day has only amplified the enormity and range of governmental intervention. Mighty is Caesar. If you must speak truth in his hearing, be wise and indirect; do not provoke his animus. He tolerates you; your institutions are tax-exempt; he smiles at your jokes. Why try his patience? Good taste, from this vantage point, is the residue of prudence.

For many, the clergyman who tells you what and whom to support undermines the very axioms of self-government. We have inherited the beautiful myth of the democratic citizen, burning the midnight oil over political position papers, eagerly communing over them with one’s fellow citizens, pondering the qualities and convictions of each candidate, and

coming to the moment of decision in the Protestant solitude of the voting booth. To accept one's political truth ready-made, as it were, from the pulpit mocks the sacred ritual of individual deliberation, cheapens the political process, and degrades the individual citizen's choice. The term "priest-ridden" conjures an image of ignorant unwashed masses whose blind obedience to their imperious shepherds renders them unworthy of the free man's franchise. Something of this polemic is evident in Prime Minister Gladstone's exchange with Father Newman after papal infallibility was declared. In the United States it fueled attacks on the New York Catholic Al Smith, whose presidency, we were warned, in 1928, would allow the Pope to dictate via a subterranean transatlantic tunnel. Lingering anti-Catholic prejudice was not neutralized until the West Virginia primary of 1960, when a modest financial investment in strategically situated Protestant ministers helped bring about a Kennedy landslide—a blow for toleration, perhaps, but a warning of the corruption that occurs when religious functionaries are bribed for less noble ends.

Fear is also fear of offending and alienating our audience. Shared politics often lends cohesion to a community. Perhaps non-Orthodox rabbis and theologically liberal Christians speak so much about politics because they cannot preach religious belief or uncompromising everyday morality without seeming to disapprove of their congregants. Where support, or criticism, for a particular brand of Israeli or American patriotism is widespread, rabbis can sooth their listeners and enhance their own security, at small cost, by playing to their expectations.

Politics tends to get personal. To repudiate your candidate or cause, on religious grounds, or to endorse, on religious grounds, a politician or policy you loathe, is like an insult. Where general communal agreement is lacking, taking sides in politics, thereby arousing strong feelings and intense loyalties that reflect deep-seated, incorrigible convictions, can provoke profound discord among our congregants and students and estrange them from each other and from us. Even where nearly everyone marches in step, the individual outside the tent is liable to feel excluded and unwelcome.

You remind me that religion too tends to be personal; which is why nice people avoid discussing either religion or politics in company and often look askance at those who do. Indeed many rabbis feel obliged to watch their words and tiptoe carefully when speaking about Shabbat, interpersonal relations, even fundamental beliefs. Nonetheless, it is understood that an Orthodox rabbi or teacher is obligated professionally to uphold the tenets of his faith, and is presumed competent to preach Orthodoxy in a judicious and un-invasive manner.

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Fear is also the often justified fear that many rabbis are out of their depth commenting on international politics, economics, or social and cultural controversies. The voluble ecclesiastical equivalent of the pistol shot in the middle of a concert may be a sure but shortsighted means to arouse interest. In the long run, especially when such orations become predictable, the transient spike of attention threatens to overshadow the intellectual authority in Torah, in ethics, and in religion that are necessary for spiritual leadership. The pontificating rabbi with his political megaphone risks becoming one more shouting voice in a raucous public arena, and not the best informed one at that. Where he is taken seriously, the ostensible influence of his status makes laymen reluctant to question him; especially when the rabbi's intervention is ill-judged, as Josh Fitterman observes, it seems to close off the kind of compromise that is often necessary for political solutions.

Twenty five years ago, I wrote about the propriety of rabbis judging public issues in the name of Torah.<sup>1</sup> I thought then, and continue to think now, that religious authorities are entitled to do as they see fit, so long as they recognize the attendant dangers. I also explained, and commended, the doctrine of indirect communication. Kierkegaard showed that truths pertaining to inner transformation are not conveyed directly in the manner that one relays an item of information. The teacher's goal is to bring the learner to the truth by reduplicating the teacher's experience of the truth. Our most fundamental ethical-religious orientation, our ideas of God and our relationship to Him, fear, love, yearning and obedience, the meaning of our existence before Him and the nature of our love and concern for other people, require such subjective appropriation.

One reason that political beliefs are held with such deep-seated fervor is that these beliefs are often rightly or wrongly experienced as fundamental to one's entire worldview, perhaps to one's very identity. To challenge and seek to transform such convictions is not unlike the endeavor to educate and convert the individual to religious existence.

Occasionally, to be sure, the religious teacher must speak directly, even urgently, in favor or against a particular political position, just as one is compelled to declare the principles and details of halakhic practice. More characteristically, however, the religious teacher is not called upon to exhibit authoritative mastery of subjects like the intricacies of immigration

<sup>1</sup> See "Who Speaks for Torah—and How?," in Shubert Spero and Yitzchak Pessin, *Religious Zionism: After 40 Years of Statehood*, 1988; available online at [www.atid.org/resources/carmy/whospeaks.asp](http://www.atid.org/resources/carmy/whospeaks.asp). See also "Murderers, Nazis, Traitors, Wise Men and Noise," accessible at [www.atid.org/resources/carmy/murderers.asp](http://www.atid.org/resources/carmy/murderers.asp).

reform or health care or climate control. What justifies discussing such topics in a religious context is precisely the way in which political judgments reflect fundamental and often deep-seated ethical and religious orientations. It is important to lead the listener to appreciate how and why one's response matters religiously: to examine, for example, our attitudes towards the stranger and our concern for the integrity of national culture; the value of health and the proper limits of governmental intrusion as opposed to independent initiative; our desires for the immediate present and our commitment to future generations; and so on. As R. Soloveitchik used to say, the vocation of the religious teacher is to create the religiously informed "frame of reference" within which the individual does his or her own thinking.

At worst, then, we feel constrained to separate political discourse from rabbinical teaching for mundane reasons like fear of negative reactions or deficiencies in our competence. At best, limits on political speech may be part of a positive educational strategy, one that encourages respect for individual intellectual and religious-ethical maturity and the cultivation of inwardness.

### III

There is another strand in the popular discomfort regarding rabbis who take partisan positions that we have yet to reckon with. Were it not for the following passage of R. Kook I might have continued to dismiss this factor:

There is a saint who is good to all, so that even when judgment is aroused against the Gentiles his heart is pained within him. Sometimes he acts against his inner inclination out of love for Israel, so beleaguered by the oppression of the nations. Yet he must afterwards cleanse himself of the impure forces attached to the traits of anger and wrath. He then returns to his place, to elevate the horn of Israel in a form that is full of loving kindness and overflows with streams of loving kindness for the entire world, and liberates the entire world from judgment. "You [Abraham] loved to justify My creatures and hated to condemn them."<sup>2</sup>

The subject is opposition to evil. R. Kook is not here talking about righteous indignation concerning policy issues where the religious community

<sup>2</sup> *Meorot ha-Reiyah, Yerah ha-Etanim* (Makhon ha-Rav Tsevi Yehuda, 1998), ed. Ben Zion Shapira, 55. Quote from *Genesis Rabba* 49:7.

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has a stake or about the perennial conflicts about fundamental political and moral principles. Naturally he sees the urgency in vigorous opposition to hard-core oppressors of Israel. The surprise is R. Kook's statement that opposition even to Czarist minions or to the burgeoning anti-Semitic agitators of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries goes against his inner inclination. And then, appallingly, R. Kook avers that the saintly person must cleanse himself of the stigma of anger inseparable from his opposition. One can only imagine his judgment about the divisions between garden variety Reaganites and Clintonites, or run of the mill liberals and libertarians.

Does one need to react that passionate opposition to such wickedness is no vice? That, to the contrary, the absence of strong resentment in the face of evil is an abdication of moral and religious responsibility? R. Kook fully endorses the struggle against evil, and yet, with the idealism that is perhaps a practical defect and surely is his spiritual glory, he aspires to be purified of the spiritual aftertaste of the righteous indignation in the name of an undifferentiated all-encompassing impartial love.

Such desire as R. Kook expresses is a rare spiritual phenomenon. When adopted as a sentimental ideal by anyone but the spiritual elite for whom R. Kook speaks, it is a dangerous, pernicious ideal, because it dissolves hatred of evil in a warm bath of self-indulgent *ersatz* sanctity and quickly degenerates into tolerance of evil and indifference to evil. No wonder these lines were not published in R. Kook's lifetime. Nonetheless, the awareness that angry resentment, even when justified and morally necessary, is a spiritual diminution, strikes a deep chord within us.

When people object to religious figures advocating a political position, perhaps it is not only out of annoyance at the intrusion of God into their secular, God-free lives, or the perception that the clergyman is not fully up to the task, or even the conviction that one's own sensitivity and comprehension make such involvement unnecessary and meddlesome. Perhaps it is because the layman or laywoman, who is quite removed from the intense world of R. Kook's notebook, is not totally unmoved by his aspiration. Perhaps such individuals yearn for the presence of a spiritual personality who transcends human partisanship, who embodies all-embracing love, and they project that yearning onto the local clergyman.

Perhaps this impulse to imagine the man of God who is beyond human partisanship is even stronger for individuals whose own daily comportment lacks consuming spiritual vision or religious rigor, for whom the thought of spiritual completeness is transferred vicariously onto the improbable figure officiating in their local pulpit. One is tempted to dismiss such thinking as the reflex of the attenuated, secularized Christianity

in which we live, with its failure to come to grips with evil, its compulsive separation of religious ritual from real life, the mild, effete image of its clergy, its avoidance of God as a commanding and demanding presence. Yet we can hardly say this about R. Kook. Is it not possible that the drama in R. Kook's study leaves some faint imprint on the dreams of the many?

One significant reason that people want their house of worship non-political, as we noted, is their reluctance to confront religiously informed insights that challenge their own favored positions. Robust infusions of religious thinking, they fear, will disturb them. We now consider an additional reason: the partisan rabbi offends their idea of what a clergyman ought to represent. Offense is especially liable when candidates and particular policies, rather than general philosophical orientations, are endorsed or condemned because it is the advocacy of a "political platform," with its characteristic pointed vehemence and triumphant jubilation that is experienced as partisanship, as taking sides, thus violating their wish to see the rabbi as above such things.

Few of us are worthy of, or aspire to, the enormous, lofty servitude that R. Kook willingly bore. Few can fully comprehend the inner world of unconstrained love for humanity that enabled R. Kook to meditate on this universal love, and to feel "defilement" due to his righteous anger at the promulgators of unmitigated evil. In our time, one of increased polarization between the upholders of traditional religion and its ethical values and those who are indifferent or hostile, although we recognize our inadequacy in the light of R. Kook's standard, there are many reasons to call attention to our commitments, even when the comfort-seeking audience in the concert hall of Jewish ritual finds the noise disturbing and distasteful. Yet the very same estrangement makes it ever more important, for us and for those we address, that we speak in a way that is not attention-grabbing in a vulgar way and that enhances, rather than diminishes, the respect we bring to the human condition and the human being.

# ARE WE ALL SEMINARY MEN? AND THE FOLIAGE OF OLD VILNA

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A charismatic Conservative rabbi publishes a book on Jewish philosophy which Rabbi Louis Finkelstein, then in his heyday as Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, compares to Maimonides' *Guide*. Whereupon a prominent congregant defects to Orthodoxy, saying: I may not know much about Judaism, but I know my rabbi, with all due respect, is no Maimonides.

How could Finkelstein have been so casual, I ask my mentor Rabbi Walter Wurzburger, my source for the anecdote? His answer: Finkelstein's field was rabbinic scholarship, as he and his confreres defined it: in their minds, they were running a yeshiva. Indifferent to Jewish thought, he indulged a nonchalance not to be brooked in assessing scholarly editions of primary texts.

Finkelstein was hardly unaware of the divisions within Conservative Judaism on fundamental questions of belief but he didn't care much about them. He made this clear in a programmatic 1927 address. Regarding God, Torah, legal change, the people Israel, the country Palestine, and the importance of the Hebrew language, he averred, there are "wide differences of opinion as to the exact meaning of some of them, and the relative emphasis to be placed on each of them" but these were "slight in comparison with our basic agreement in essentials."

At that moment Finkelstein knew that the institution he would later head had, from time immemorial, excluded the Torah from its curriculum in order to avoid taking a position on *Torah mi-Sinai*. Even as he spoke, he knew that Mordechai Kaplan, one of the most powerful stars on his faculty, had definitively and authoritatively jettisoned traditional belief in God and all the doctrines it entailed.

Finkelstein allowed that even staunch movement loyalists might falter when told to believe that such deviations from tradition are insignificant. Faith, he explained, requires a visible symbol, and Finkelstein had one to offer: "Our unity is symbolized for us by the Seminary, that institution of which we are all either the natural or adopted children." Through shared affiliation to their Alma Mater, Conservative rabbis become "not only

comrades in arms, but also brothers.” “We are all of us ‘Seminary men,’” climaxes Finkelstein’s peroration.<sup>1</sup>

Our Modern Orthodox public square is agitated: On one side, it is fashionable to accuse theological or halakhic liberals of emulating Conservative Judaism. Leniency, it is feared, precipitates a slippery slide to Conservative Judaism. The other side responds that Conservative Judaism is no longer the denominational threat to Orthodoxy that it was fifty years ago, thus accommodation is a “switch in time” that will keep valuable resources under the “big tent” of the Modern Orthodox movement. Listening to these arguments, even when they are presented sincerely, gives the impression that the debate is largely about competitive denominational salesmanship. Is this one area where the old Conservative approach of ignoring theological substance in favor of practical advantage is accepted almost unconsciously?

Unconsciously, I say, because at first blush, the inclusiveness about Jewish belief that Finkelstein advocated, one that papers over ostensibly enormous divisions in theology, defies the conscious Orthodox mind. Unconsciously – because allegiance to an institution, to an edifice of wood and stone, cannot override bedrock commitment to God and to the integrity of the Torah. And yet, before you laugh away the classic JTS outlook, think about its genuine subconscious attraction.

On a day to day basis, we cannot live our lives, not even our religious lives, as isolated individuals (even assuming that one can separate the religious from the rest of existence). Willy nilly, we live in association. We constantly think along with others just as we work along with them. Our convictions are animated by the images and human realities we share with our fellows. Only under extraordinary pressures, and with difficulty, do we stand back from identification with our fellows, only under crisis do we confront, and sometimes embrace, the necessity, not only of thinking for ourselves, but of charting our path without the support and solidarity of the community we identify with. Rabbi Finkelstein was right: The vast majority of us, except when bitterly and radically estranged, recall our schooling and socialization fondly and formatively—be it one yeshiva, an accumulation of crucial encounters, a shul, or a place of work. We cherish the friendships forged in those years of awakening and discovery: the

<sup>1</sup> Louis Finkelstein, “The Things that Unite Us—an Address,” in Mordechai Waxman, *Tradition and Change: the Development of Conservative Judaism* (New York, 1958), 313-326. For the historical background, see Michael R. Cohen, *The Birth of Conservative Judaism: Solomon Schechter’s Disciples and the Creation of an American Religious Movement* (Columbia University Press, 2012), chapter 4.

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memory and example of our teachers; even the place itself, in all its physical particularity, possess an indelible charm.

Of the places we remember, some have changed “forever not for better.” Or it is we, or our cohorts, who have changed and who confess in our hearts, if not with our lips, that the habitations of our youth no longer know us nor we them. Few of us, even those who are not hopeless conformists, contemplate cheerfully the prospect of turning away from the institutional community that we have come to think of as our patrimony and to part ways with the fraternity that means so much to us every single day of our lives. These are the roots to which we are attached, the romance of youth, the great long-lived friendships, often blended into family connections; without which we are liable to wither like waterless plants. As rabbis and as educators, our ability to function reliably in our professional roles, and not incidentally the living it generates, depends on the predictability and familiarity of our social and institutional identities. Left entirely to our own isolated resources, we simply do not know how to proceed.

Complicit in a relentlessly other-directed culture that is rife with relativism, many find it unthinkable to withdraw to the wilderness, there to offer ourselves up to intense self-examination. We are taught to want truth enough to sacrifice social convenience on the altar of our religious doctrine, but our society and its exigencies induce us to desire comfort and continuity and security. Easier to cling uneasily or defiantly to our routine and to our institutional affiliations, like sleepwalkers, as if nothing has changed. It is tempting, then, to mistake the nurturing atmosphere of the institutional club for the truth that it must safeguard and the practice it must enhance and to cling to the former at the expense of the latter, or to dissimulate by hiding behind the mantra that, in the final analysis, we are all Seminary men, that institutional sticks and stones are sufficient to sustain the denominational brand name, and that brandishing the label is sufficient to justify one’s way of life.

How many years did John Henry Newman devote to seeking a viable way to preserve the Anglicanism he espoused at Oxford? Already in his forties when he perceived that his Anglican belief was “on its deathbed,” he withdrew from public activity until, after several more years of soul-searching, he found his harbor in the Roman Catholic Church. One may safely confess that few of our associates are as robust spiritually, rigorous intellectually and committed wholeheartedly to the search for truth as Newman. For all that, he was not indifferent to the attachments he left behind. Twenty years later, in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, he wrote:

## *Shalom Carmy*

I left Oxford for good on Monday, February 23, 1846. On the Saturday and Sunday before, I was in my house at Littlemore simply by myself... I slept on Sunday night at my dear friend's, Mr. Johnson's... Various friends came to see the last of me... and I called on Dr. Ogle, one of my very oldest friends, for he was my private tutor when I was an undergraduate. In him I took leave of my first college, Trinity, which was so dear to me, and which held on its foundation so many who have been kind to me both when I was a boy, and all through my Oxford life. Trinity had never been unkind to me. There used to be much snapdragon growing on the walls opposite my freshman's rooms there, and I had for years taken it as the emblem of my own perpetual residence even unto death in my University. On the morning of the 23rd I left the observatory. I have never seen Oxford since, excepting its spires, as they are seen from the railway.

## II

The image of snapdragon and the glimpse of Oxford from the train window make vivid the pain of Newman's voluntary separation from Oxford. The deeper moral tragedy, however, was not his protracted nostalgia for Oxford, but rather the curtailment of long-standing, profound friendships. In 1840's England, Newman's conversion effectively closed off his face to face contact with the Anglican world that nurtured him. What about us?

One model is provided by R. Samson Raphael Hirsch. When he came of age, the division between the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox had not yet become institutionalized; you could not infer a colleague's credo merely by checking his *semikha*. In fact, Hirsch was invited to the first conference of Reform rabbis: as he was attuned to modern culture, in the minds of the inclusive conveners it was not at all self-evident that he had nothing in common with their venture. At university R. Hirsch had befriended Abraham Geiger, later a fairly militant leader of Reform; in later life for many years he and Hirsch both officiated as adversaries in Frankfurt. The young Heinrich Graetz was so impressed by the publication of the *Nineteen Letters* that he sought out the author and lived in his home for three years, sharing R. Hirsch's table and his intellectual life, both his Torah study and general studies. When at last Graetz came to appreciate the tenacity of R. Hirsch's Orthodoxy he chose to depart, becoming an eminent historian and Bible critic at the Breslau Rabbinical Seminary.

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As far as we can tell, these intimate relationships left no imprint on their later collisions. From R. Hirsch's negative reactions to Geiger and from his extremely thorough attack on Graetz's theories about *Torah she-be'al peh*, one would not detect the sediment of early friendship, of shared intellectual adventure and personal kindness. If R. Hirsch continued to feel fellowship with these men, no memory of snapdragon at the University of Bonn or the ambitious young rabbi's house in Oldenberg captures and transmits that legacy.

As an alternative, consider the example of R. Yehiel Weinberg, last head of the Hildesheimer Seminary in Berlin. His student Samuel Atlas ended up a rabbinic authority and historian of Jewish philosophy at the Jewish Institute of Religion (the Reform seminary in New York). They continued cordial and frank correspondence on scholarly and other subjects throughout the post-war years when R. Weinberg lived in Montreux, Switzerland. The Hazon Ish likewise maintained friendly relations with the atheistic Yiddish writer Hayyim Grade, once a member of his household, as well as with as other renegades from Orthodoxy.

### III

A former student of mine deplors the fact that recent controversies about *Torah mi-Sinai* and other issues invariably focus on clarifications about the boundaries of Orthodoxy instead of taking us deeper into the service of God. He echoes my unhappiness about the reduction of theology to sociology and godliness to sales technique. But is he right to imply that asserting the bounds of Orthodoxy is irrelevant to our legitimate concerns?

The differing postures of R. Hirsch, on the one hand, and R. Yehiel Weinberg and the Hazon Ish on the other hand, probably reflect their distinctive personalities. Let us not, however, ignore situational factors. Surely it matters that these lives and friendships unfolded in the shadow of the Holocaust. At the same time, it is salient that neither R. Yehiel Weinberg nor Hazon Ish was forced to confront their former disciples face to face as colleagues. The former's relationship with his old student was epistolary; the latter's meetings with past intimates were episodic. In any event, neither Professor Atlas nor Grade deemed themselves apostles of some remediated version of Orthodoxy towards which they presumed to steer faithful Judaism and their contact with their erstwhile mentors a means towards gaining an advantage in that direction. They confronted their teachers as scholars, as creative writers, above all as human beings

who deserved to be taken seriously, not as competing purveyors of a religious consumer commodity, who aim to enlarge their niche. They did not feign obliviousness to the gulf between them and their past by humming a Hildesheimer anthem; nor did they behave as if nostalgia for the Lithuanian foliage of yesteryear rendered disagreement about fundamental beliefs and spiritual destiny trivial by comparison.

That honesty means a lot and that is why taking the Orthodox label in vain is not only misleading intellectually but also harmful to the maintenance of human intimacy. If Newman's parting from his Oxford friends is so touching, it is precisely because they understood the gravity and momentousness of his decision. When social or institutional solidarity and the warmth of shared memories are evoked glibly in order to circumvent unbridgeable differences of religious and practical orientation, and when religious and ethical convictions are treated as subsidiary to seeking communal or commercial benefit, not only is our spiritual life cheapened. Quibbling and squabbling over marketing rights to the coveted Orthodox brand name addles our discourse. When that happens, as at Babel, one can still engage in the small talk of the wedding table or exchange pleasant recollections at an alumni dinner, but religious language is no longer the vessel of religious meaning.

Where does this leave me? All I know is that, to the extent that I am faced by the challenge that faced these role models, I ardently wish to respond in the manner of R. Weinberg and the Hazon Ish. I am not sure how I would argue persuasively for my attitude, let alone how I would sway a person who disagrees with it. At least for me, it all goes back to being an individual, the intuition that human honesty is not insignificant, not least because the human relationships that require it and that, where honesty reigns, may survive disagreement and even division, are themselves not insignificant.

Yet the foregoing meditation brings home to me that such ongoing fellowship does not come at a discount. We are human beings before we are "seminary men," and our distinctive theological commitments to God ought to precede, and must override, old and new institutional affiliations. The dialogical fellowship of human beings transcends the perpetuation of institutions and organizations, as the quest for God and the service of God transcend the secular self-seeking of the market mentality. Such fellowship requires honesty and clarity on both sides. Hence the sobering thought: whether, if called upon, I can emulate R. Weinberg and the Hazon Ish does not depend entirely on me.

# IS SOPHOCLES LITERATURE? IS ANYTHING NOT? ON THE WAY TO RAMBAN

Volume 47:3 Fall 2014

Isn't that treating the Torah like literature? Here's the original question: Why, I am asked, when the Torah recounts the story of Phineas's intervention at Ba'al Peor, are the names of the transgressors omitted, and filled in only afterwards? I suggest that Phineas's intervention is spontaneous rather than reflective—as the Halakha states, had he consulted, he would not have been allowed to proceed (*Sanhedrin* 82a). The Torah's hurried narration, one that does not pause to identify the actors but only the acts, conveys the lack of deliberation in Phineas's act.

“But isn't that treating the Torah like literature?” Well, I say, the Torah is written with words and is written for human ears and eyes. Why should it not communicate effectively? Should the Torah be inferior, in its use of language, to other kinds of writing? As the question was a question and not a challenge, no further exchange was necessary.

Notice that this question has nothing in common with the usual complaints we hear about “Bible as Literature” reducing Biblical heroes to mere mortals or even detecting their supposed imperfections. It is a straightforward question about the legitimacy of taking literary style into account. So what's behind it? Why does it come up at all? Is there more to it than meets the eye?

Some may experience, even if they cannot avow, the nagging sense that literature is associated with literacy, and that being literate, in some obscure way, is not a good fit with authentic Jewishness. If God must use language rather than mathematical symbols, why can He not hover over the text, sentimental and *schmaltzy*, like an avuncular Hasidic rebbe, or descend upon us like a furious Mussarnik, or, if He must put on fancy airs, why not the magisterial and orotund formalities of a provincial master of ceremonies? Attributing literary quality to the *Ribbono shel Olam's* words, however vague our notion of what this means, as if He were comparable to a great author, as if He engaged in exacting craftsmanship, mining the

resources of language and rhetoric in order to communicate the kind of powerful yet subtle message that requires the harnessing of language and style, seems incompatible with our cultural expectations, the way some people feel that an African-American celebrity who speaks grammatical English is not sufficiently black.

The underlying problem is that the word “literature” can mean almost anything. If the Torah’s style was *heimish* or middle brow, that too would be a “literary” mode of presentation, albeit not of the “highest” order. We would then rightly inquire why that style is appropriate for the word of God, and that would bring us back to treating the Bible as literature.

When educated people talk about reading the Bible as literature, they usually attribute to certain passages, the ones that interest them, some of the characteristics of high quality literature, which, from any religious point of view except that of Jewish populism, is a good thing. But insisting on the adjective “literary” implies they are reading it *only* as an aesthetic object, as opposed to reading it as something else; they embrace literary form as a substitute for substance. When academics “do” “Bible as Literature,” it is often because they prefer to sidestep the historical content or theological claims of Tanakh. Some believe that teaching the Bible as literature avoids breaching the high wall of separation between religion and education, in order to salvage the book as a secular resource of Western culture. This should trouble us. The prevalence of such attitudes led the poet, in “Under Which Lyre,” to warn against fraternizing with “guys in advertising firms” and those “who read the Bible for its prose.”

If Tanakh uses words, we said, that makes it “literature.” What kind of literature? First and foremost religious literature, so that any reading subordinating religious content to aesthetic form goes against the grain. But even this is too general. The Bible contains passages of law, narrative, and poetry; it contains commandments, prophecy, and wisdom. Just as it would be foolish to impose one paradigm of “literature” on non-sacred works, it would be erroneous to apply one model of literary examination to the variety of Biblical texts.

Later we will look at Biblical narrative, particularly the characterization of Jacob in Genesis. And we will see that even narrative literature is too broad a term for what is happening in the Torah. First, with your permission, a detour through two 20<sup>th</sup> century approaches to Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and a parallel issue about modern novels. Appreciating the complexities of profane literature will prepare us for literary perspectives on the Torah.

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### II

In the 1970's, Aristotle ("Telly") Savalas starred as *Kojak*, and non-Jewish literature could still be found in public places frequented by Orthodox Jews. When he shared his *weltanschauung* with a popular magazine I could peruse the result at the local barbershop. Perhaps deeming his status as a Greek-American show business icon authorization to muse on the glory that was Greece, he devoted much of the interview to manhandling Sigmund Freud.

Freud, you may recall, held that small boys unconsciously desire to kill their fathers in order to possess the mother. In *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus's parents are alarmed by a prophecy that their son would kill his father and marry his mother, and abandon the infant, who is saved by a shepherd. Oedipus learns of the prophecy: believing the shepherd to be his father, he leaves home to avert his fate, only to run into and kill his real father and subsequently marry his real mother. In this tale Freud found an anticipation of his theory. The incensed Savalas, proud son of Hellas-Hollywood, savages the old Viennese psychiatrist with a breathtaking knockout punch: Evidently Freud hadn't bothered to read the entire play; if he had, he would have learned that the Greek heritage, far from accepting the universality of perverted desire, portrayed Oedipus as blinding himself in horror upon learning what he had done.

What is the dispute, the *nekuddat ha-mahloket*, between Savalas and Freud? Both regard Sophocles' play as "literature" and thus are ready to read it as "literature." The conflict is about what kind of literature it is and what conclusions to draw from this. Savalas treats *Oedipus Rex* as a drama of social realism. From his point of view, the literary truth is in the behavior of the characters, and Oedipus judges his transgressions, albeit unintended, with utmost revulsion. On this premise, one could go further than Savalas. The story of Oedipus, horrific as it is, is not tragic but ridiculous. It asks us to assume that Oedipus and his mother went to extraordinary lengths to stop the dreadful prophecy's fulfillment, yet they did not think twice before he married a woman old enough to be his mother, and nobody investigated the identity of the man, old enough to be Oedipus's father, whose life he took about the same time his new wife's first husband lost his.

Freud, for his part, is above such practical concerns because his eye is on the plot. Precisely because the story is odd and unsettling, one is intrigued, not by the dubious verisimilitude of the characters, but by the indubitable fascination of the story. He concludes, rightly or wrongly, that we are attracted by the plot because it touches on occult themes concealed

from our conscious life, glimpsed obscurely behind the theatrical veil. Greek drama, at least early Greek drama, may differ from much modern drama in that the Greeks presented archetypal truths, personified by almost allegorical characters, where their modern counterparts, from Shakespeare to Ibsen, concentrate on the unfolding of individual characters.

### III

One more essential point before we turn to Genesis. Our previous discussion should not be taken to set up a dichotomy, where a work is either psychologically realistic or archetypal. Serious writing often fulfills multiple goals. E. M. Forster, in his classic *Aspects of the Novel*, distinguishes between novelists driven by character and those driven by plot. The former create exciting characters and build stories around them: one thinks of Dickens or Dostoevsky. The latter formulate an interesting plot, and develop characters in line with the needs of the plot. Offhand it seems that the first kind of novelist cares about psychological reality, while the second is primarily a storyteller. Under that impression I was puzzled at Forster's citing Henry James as an example of the plot-driven novelist. James' fiction is known for excruciatingly intricate examination of the inner lives of his characters; external action is correspondingly sparse. Despite this, Forster's judgment is on the mark: James takes pains with the shape of the narrative; in the course of elaborating his story he explores endlessly the consciousness of his characters, but he does not allow them to undermine the structure he has chosen. I bring this to your attention to show that orientation to plot need not entail indifference to personality, nor does the importance of individual characters exclude emphasis on the narrative context in which the characters are embedded.

### IV

In our community, treating the Bible as literature often means remarking on the psychology of Biblical characters. Advocates of this approach are often accused of shrinking great Biblical personalities to everyday dimensions. The worry about diminishing the religious stature of the *avot* and *immahot* is legitimate. Elsewhere I have argued that this is less due to viewing these figures as human beings than to the debased pop psychology language employed and the cheapened, secularized conception of religious life it represents: "Casual deterministic assumptions, clichéd depictions of

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emotion, a philosophy that cannot grasp the dramatic, absolute, momentous solemnity of the moral-religious life.”<sup>1</sup> There is nothing religiously wrong with considering the humanity of Biblical figures, as long as we do so with appropriate reverence; if anything, appreciating the religious humanity of ideal figures may help our emancipation from the shallow understanding of the human condition inculcated by our culture.

Now let us confront a different objection to analyzing Biblical figures. This argument grants the religious legitimacy, even the salubrity, of the psychological approach but questions it on literary grounds, as *peshat*. The psychological approach to Biblical figures regards them as resembling characters in a particular kind of modern text, namely modern biography or fiction. In such literature, the center of attention is the individual and his or her relationships to others. We see them struggling against temptations and obstacles; we contemplate the trajectory of their lives. Genesis is not that kind of literature, because its stories are less about individuals than about God and about the destiny of Israel. On this reading the personalities and personal travails of the *avot* and *immahot* are peripheral.

Indeed, the reader of Genesis will encounter substantial divergence from the paradigm of the modern novel or biography, including ubiquitous divine intervention and frequent highlighting of divine promises. Ramban, no stranger to *peshat*, interprets some of the stories of the *avot* typologically, as a blueprint for later Jewish history, underscoring the inadequacy of reading them individualistically. Traditional Jewish interpretation often looks at the *avot* and *immahot* not only as immeasurably greater than us, an attitude that might limit or constrain our applying to them ordinary psychological categories, but as belonging to a different dimension, the significance of which does not pertain to their personal lives but to their function within the story of *kelal Yisrael* or even as virtually symbolic elements elevated to the stratosphere of theosophy. We are all familiar with the mystical identification of Abraham with the divine attribute of *Hesed*, Jacob with *Emet*, and so on. In effect, the lecturer who focuses on the text wholly as a source of realistic psychological insight is not only shrinking the *avot* to our size, but looking at the narrative through the wrong lens. He or she is reproducing, with respect to Tanakh, the approach exhibited by Telly Savalas’s polemic on Sophocles, stuck to a contemporary view of how a plot works. He is not simply reading the Bible as literature, but imposing on it the preoccupations of a particular kind of modern literature.

<sup>1</sup> See “Imitate the Ramban, not the Professors: An Interview with Asher Friedman” (*Hamevaser*, 2000); available at [www.atid.org/resources/carmy/imitate.asp](http://www.atid.org/resources/carmy/imitate.asp).

As a criticism of a popular trend in “Bible as Literature” education, this objection is accurate and needful. To skip over the prominent role of divine intervention, to overlook the extraordinary aspect of the relationship between the *avot* and *immahot* and God, to ignore the tight link between the patriarchal narrative and the divine promise to the people and land of Israel, risks a selective and misleading interpretation of Genesis. As an objection to literary reading of Tanakh, the criticism is vitiated by the faulty premise that there is a contradiction between the *plot*-oriented perspective, according to which the characters are subsidiary to the arc of the narrative, and the *character*-oriented perspective, which experiences the plot as the product of individual moral drama. As we have seen, both perspectives are present in creative works, albeit in differing combinations.

There is a fundamental reason to insist, not only on the legitimacy as *peshat* of the character-oriented perspective, but on its necessity. Think once more of Oedipus, and the vision of man he represents. The play is haunted by an awful prophecy. Oedipus and others endeavor to avert it, but to no avail. Fixity of character is emblematic of the outlook of Greek tragedy, and, to a large degree, of Greek culture in general. Plot is destiny; character is fate and cannot be escaped. It is not surprising that the literature of Greece, from Homer through the great tragedians, reflects the supremacy of plot over the free choice of the individual. For Judaism, by contrast, human choice is crucial; hence character is not static. Despite divine control of the story’s outcome and the symbolic role assigned to the *avot* that invite mystical deterministic readings, the capacity of characters to change *must* play a role in Biblical narrative.

## V

In order to secure his father’s blessings, our father Jacob, at his mother’s bidding, misleads him. Later he acts craftily towards his father-in-law Laban. Added to the moral problem, those guided by widely accepted mystical doctrine have another worry. “You have given truth (*emet*) to Jacob” (Micah 7:20) is taken to imply that Jacob’s inherent trait is truth, so that he and truth are welded together, so to speak, unchangeably. Even taking into account the efforts of our greatest commentators of the modern period, Malbim, Netsiv, R. Hirsch, and others, to justify or extenuate his actions, they hardly qualify as the quintessence of truthfulness.

Defenders of the identity of Jacob and truth have felt pressure to come up with creative and sometimes counterintuitive definitions of

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truth. We will not survey these attempts. It is most plausible to maintain that the Biblical word *emet*, in our connection, does not pertain to Jacob's truthfulness but to God's faithfulness and steadfastness towards Jacob. I am not sure why this idea, stated by Ramban (Genesis 32:11) is rarely cited by these writers.<sup>2</sup> But Ramban provided the basis for another approach:

[God] had always led [Jacob] on the path of truth but not particularly with this trait until his return to the land of his fathers; also because he had to conduct himself with Laban in a contorted manner that is not the way of truth. (Commentary to Genesis 48:15; cf. 46:1).

Biblical psychology, as noted, is a dynamic psychology. Abraham after his ordeals is not the man we first meet, nor is Moses. Ramban, a master Kabbalist, who fully appreciated the symbolic and figurative dimension of the patriarchs, is, all the same, equally sensitive to their psychological development.

When you experience a demanding work of art, you may assess a character in terms of his or her moral struggle, as an individual agent who is the origin of his actions, or in terms of the situation they are in and must navigate. These are complementary responses to the drama of human life. Ramban's double interpretation, in the passage just quoted, illustrates his awareness of this interpretive duality, and our study of literature helps us notice what he is doing. Ramban's first explanation of Jacob's evolution is that the virtue of truth became Jacob's distinguishing trait only after his long Aramean vale of soul-making. The second stresses circumstantial pressures that made the virtue of truthfulness unrealizable at early stages of his journey. Both presuppose that God's action as the architect of Biblical history and the exemplary standing granted to the *avot* in that history do not preclude the kind of respect and attention we owe real people in the real world.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See also R. Hutner, *Pahad Yitshak, Sukkot* 20:5.

<sup>3</sup> Much of this discussion was formulated in conversation with Yitzchak Fried and Charles Wollman, with an assist, on one point, from Aaron Perlow.

## “ALL FOR THE BEST”

# A MODERN ORTHODOX MAN WHO FELL AMONG HASIDIM AND THE URBACH-SANDERS DEBATE

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It was a dark and stormy Friday afternoon, his flight was hopelessly delayed. He missed his wife; he missed his children. Even when the pair of Hasidim accosted him, and averted the worst with their offer of Shabbat hospitality, he was not serene. By sundown he was physically refreshed but depleted in mood. He still missed his family; he wished he were home. In vain they reassured him, the stranded sojourner who had come their way, that everything comes from Above, that everything that happened to him was expressly designed by Providence for his particular benefit. Between the soup and the fish and the *kugels*, they plied him with the most exquisite scenarios their generous minds could contrive of how his apparent ill-fortune was all for the best. The more they tried the more skeptical and disconsolate he became, this modern Orthodox man who had fallen among Hasidim.

Here's his problem: When he tried to think of God arranging all the events in the world, he saw the baseball-capped manager of a gigantic network of train tracks, cigar in mouth, or a globe-shaping leader like Woodrow Wilson, prim, angular and bespectacled, kneeling, flanked by his aides, in a Versailles hotel, the maps unfurled on the floor, drawing through unsmiling Balkan crags and vast Arabian deserts the just borders of small faraway nations. As a modern man, which he very much wanted to be, he had been taught, and half-believed, that science had demonstrated once and for all that God does not intervene in the world like that. And if He did, then the tiniest intervention in one insignificant individual's destiny, like the tiniest adjustment of the railway schedule, like the proverbial flutter of the butterfly's wing, would inevitably shift the entire fate of the planet. It did not seem to this man that his importance warranted such attention. Thus was his politeness tested, and he nodded impatiently and incredulously at the devout nonsense that gratitude forbade him to call by that name.

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Had he, or they, been philosophers, then his belief in the unlimited power of scientific procedure to settle metaphysical questions might have been tempered by the knowledge that universal causation applies only to closed systems and that he could therefore accept divine intervention without abandoning faith in science. But these logical niceties were beside the point. The world as he knew it, as most of us know it, as Rambam and Ramban knew it, seems to run along fairly predictable tracks. If interventions occur that recalibrate everything, they are apparently rare. Why should the great engineer in the sky deflect the universe from its course for the sake of one individual?

By now this is a familiar story. The modern man goes on his way, as dubious as ever. He looks down on the Hasidim for their lack of sophistication, though not without envying something they have that he is missing. The Hasidim, for their part, had prepared on the eve of Shabbat (to rework a Talmudic adage), hence they had successfully fed their guest on Shabbat, and if they discerned his lack of enthusiasm for their theological fare, and grasped that merely adding some tangier anecdotal spice would not have precipitated a happier outcome, they are undismayed and continue to wish him the best, as he wishes them.

Can the story be told differently, so that it leads to a different continuation? Try this, for the sake of discussion: What if we kept God and bracketed His intervention, since it is the alteration of the putative “course of nature,” and not the presence of God, that seems to be the trouble?

## II

So try another version. On a dark and stormy Friday afternoon, your flight is delayed; no Hasidim are there to rescue you. You must sleep in the airport; eat from what is available in the airport; no fish, no hot chicken soup and *cholent* to warm your bowels, prayer without a *minyan* and without the Torah reading. Yet though you walk in this vast impersonal modern space that casts few shadows, redolent of fast food and resonant with bustling crowds of humanity in transit, though you must spend the 25 hours of Sabbath tasting the World to Come out of your suitcase, in this story you are not dejected. For in this scenario, unlike the man in the story, somebody is with you: as it happens, you have the good fortune to travel with a close friend or cherished family member. The presence of the other person does nothing to make your predicament easier—the *lehem mishne* is still dry and crumbly, the atmosphere around you remains anonymous and antiseptic, soulless and soiled—yet your cup

of Sabbath cheer, though made of flimsy paper and filled with grape juice, is not empty. For you are not alone.

Put yourself in a common situation: You find yourself lying in the emergency ward, uncertain and afraid, and then you lift your eyes and spy the figure of your son or daughter or spouse, or a close and committed friend in the cubicle, and your spirits rise. What difference does their entry make? Afterwards, when you recollect the episode, when you recount it to others, you may give the impression, it may even seem to you, as if your relief was due to something they did for you. You may fasten on their giving the medical history on your behalf that you were too exhausted or confused to recite, or more dramatically tell how their lifesaving vigilance summoned prompt attention urgently required. No doubt the practical potential benefit of their presence is considerable. In truth, however, the possible impact on the treatment and outcome of your illness is not the overriding element in your joy when the beloved person appears at your bedside. Even with absolute assurance that the hospital staff, well-meaning and competent, are ready and willing to minister to your every need, having “someone with you” reconfigures the space of the sickroom in a manner that is as unmistakable and definitive as it is incommunicable.

Many religious individuals have experienced divine intervention at crucial moments: they have sensed at the time, or afterwards, that God altered their destiny from what it would have been absent that response. Such individuals are inclined to speak about such experiences rarely or obliquely, if at all, the way one refers in whispers to intimate and private treasures. On an hour by hour basis, though here too reticence is the rule, it appears that divine providence, for most religious individuals, is less a palpable juggling of the natural order than the presence of God in the life of the worshiper. It is no accident that many *rishonim* believed that the ultimate answer to the question of divine justice is in Psalm 73: “As for me, closeness to God is good,” because God being with you is infinitely more important than His delivering your desires.

### III

Like many of you, my first exposure to the idea that everything God does is for the best and redounds to our benefit was the story about R. Akiva (*Berakhot* 60b) which I first came across, as a small child, in the Biblical Hebrew of Y. B. Levner’s *Kol Aggadot Yisrael* anthology. When he is refused hospitality in the village, R. Akiva, saying whatever God does is for the best, sleeps in the field: during the night his candle blows out, the

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rooster he brought to awaken him is eaten by a cat, his donkey is killed by a lion, and the village that shunned him is looted by brigands. Had the villagers taken R. Akiva in, or had his light been visible or his animals audible, he would have shared their fate. It was all for the best.

Even then it occurred to me that R. Akiva would have said “this too is for the best,” regardless, even if he had been robbed. Clearly he did not trust God because he had empirical evidence of God’s benefactions; he interpreted events as for the best because of his relationship with God. A few years later, I encountered the original story in the Gemara, turned the page and discovered the same R. Akiva, in the midst of unspeakable torture, exulting that he had been given the opportunity to fulfill the commandment to love God “with all your soul” to the extreme of offering up his life (*Berakhot* 61b). Nothing could be further from cock-eyed optimism or from the naively interpreted sensibility of the previous tale. Can it make more sense to a modern Jew than it made to the Roman onlooker, in the Yerushalmi parallel, for whom R. Akiva’s behavior is incomprehensibly impervious to the point of madness?

## IV

Professor Ephraim Urbach attributed to R. Akiva a revolutionary doctrine regarding reward and punishment. Urbach recognized that R. Akiva frequently explains suffering in conventional categories of punishment or expiation. Alongside these statements, however, he believes that R. Akiva also spoke of suffering as an expression of God’s love and that this marks a new departure in rabbinic theology. According to Urbach, the Hadrianic persecutions posed a new problem about divine justice: not merely the suffering of the righteous, but the fact that they were killed and tortured for their commitment to God led R. Akiva to posit a theology of suffering dissociated from the nexus of sin and punishment.<sup>1</sup> The Gemara’s account of his martyrdom is a powerful testimony to the experience Urbach seeks to highlight, though it neither confirms nor rebuts his proposal about its historical origin.

The Christian scholar E. P. Sanders criticized Urbach.<sup>2</sup> Given that R. Akiva never abandoned traditional approaches, he sees no reason to hold

<sup>1</sup> See his *Hazal* (English, *The Sages*) chapter 15, sections 2-3; also his “Ascesis and Suffering in Rabbinic Thought,” *Festschrift for Isaac Baer* (Jerusalem, 1961) 48-68, reprinted in Urbach, *Me-Olamam shel Hakhamim*.

<sup>2</sup> See his “R. Akiva’s View of Suffering,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 63:4 (Apr. 1973), 332-351.

that R. Akiva's attitude at his death excludes the theory that suffering is punishment for transgression. Suffering may purge sin, even while it fulfills the commandment of whole-hearted love for God. Furthermore, argues Sanders, the fact that R. Akiva's martyrdom expresses love for God does not entail that God inflicts or allows the suffering in order to show His love or in order to elicit the sufferer's love. Sanders' argument seems cogent: Urbach overstates the novelty of R. Akiva's view. I have always thought that behind the façade of academic scholarship Urbach sought to extract from R. Akiva an idea that would address the Holocaust generation of which he was a member.

Yet consider R. Akiva's discussion with R. Ishmael in *Gen. Rabba* 33:1, which Sanders adduces as support for his critique. On the verse "Your righteousness (*tsidkatekha*) is like the mountains of God, Your judgment the great abyss," R. Ishmael interprets the first clause as a reference to God championing the righteous while the second clause means His judgment of the wicked. R. Akiva, by contrast, denies that God shows leniency to the righteous; rather, *tsedaka* means that He deals with them strictly, punishing them in this world for their sins in order to reward them in the next. What matters for Sanders is that R. Akiva, far from abandoning conventional reward and punishment, applies the idea of punishment in a particularly rigorous manner.

Sanders may be correct about the purely forensic level of divine justice. If, however, you imagine the spiritual landscape of R. Akiva's interpretation, it is one where the tangible this-worldly distinction between saint and sinner has become invisible. God is present and intimately bound up with the sufferings of the righteous, although the presumed benefits, in "practical" terms, have been deferred to another world. R. Akiva does not so much dispute R. Ishmael's interpretation as he transcends it.<sup>3</sup> Whether R. Akiva's saying "all for the best" reflects his outlook or a late legend about R. Akiva (as Urbach and Sanders concur) is irrelevant, because the deeper message of "all for the best" is beyond the calculus of worldly benefit and loss. The folksy "optimism" of this tale and the routine "conventionality" of other statements attributed to R. Akiva all point to and lead up to the overwhelming reality of a love of God that is no longer preoccupied with reward and punishment, but is very much engaged with the intimate presence of God.

<sup>3</sup> Note that Ramban, in his *Shaar ha-Gemul* (in *Kitvei Ramban* II, 268), adopts R. Akiva's position without mentioning that of R. Ishmael from which it ostensibly diverges. A couple of pages later (274) Ramban carefully delineates the variety of Rabbinic views regarding suffering without sin and how much of the divine economy was revealed to Moses.

## TRADITION

### V

When the modern Orthodox man gets home, he will resume his everyday routine. He is unlikely to make the connection between the deep yearning he felt for his family and the believer's yearning for the presence of God. His thoughts about religion are liable instead to settle on the danger that his modern Orthodox children might become too religious, like the Hasidim he met at the airport, or he may fret about their going "off the *derekh*" and distancing themselves from the modern Orthodox lifestyle of their home. There will be moments when he regrets living without a close awareness of divine presence, in a state of spiritual solitariness, when he feels like a traveler stranded in the airport without his friend. At such times he will yearn for the fellowship he had never taken the trouble to cultivate.

As religious individuals we glimpse the truth expressed in the spiritual testimony of R. Akiva but we often repress it because our consciousness of God's presence is not manifest in the way we expect, or because our utilitarian conception of religion and why we ought to adhere to it, is scandalized by, and rebels against a passion for God that does not pay in the coin of worldly profit, and that all too often brings upon us suffering when we demand comfort. Or we are oblivious because our modern Jewish discourse is attached simultaneously to that of secular modernity and to an anecdotal fairy tale *frumkeit* detached from our day to day lives.

We glimpse the truth because we are surrounded by opportunities to encounter God, shining from the cracks and shadows of existence: in our regimen of prayer and in our study of Torah, in obedience to His commands and in concern for our neighbor, and in the moments when we reflect on who we are and where we are headed and the accounting we must give. We often lack the vocabulary with which to communicate to others, and sometimes to ourselves, the humility and majesty of our lives. We lack such language due to inattention, but also, and more profoundly because the inner life is intimate and incommunicable.

"He who has labored on the eve of Shabbat will eat on Shabbat," is literally true of the work required to make Shabbat a day of delight and rest. It is also, and more pervasively, a counsel for the spiritual life in general. Insofar as we are susceptible to the influence of our environment, it behooves us to fortify our critical self-awareness and be vigilant for our own spiritual progress and sustenance. For the sake of those, like the modern Orthodox man who fell among Hasidim, or his children, who have difficulty calling on the rich resources of divine presence, so

*Shalom Carmy*

powerful and yet so private, that accompany our lives, we must find the language of indirect communication that enables them to appropriate and reduplicate that experience without betraying and cheapening its awe and intimacy.

# THE EXALTED FELLOWSHIP OF THE HARNESS: THOUGHTS IN THE ABSENCE OF R. AHARON LICHTENSTEIN

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How would you render in English the virtue of *zerizut*? One English translation of *Mesillat Yesharim* offers “zeal.” To be sure, the *zariz* is a passionate individual, but zeal corresponds to Hebrew *kanna’ut*, not *zerizut*; zeal conveys the heat rather than the persistence characteristic of *zerizut*. “Quickness” may be better. Certainly, as the mussar *sefarim* record, the *zariz* does things energetically and doesn’t let the grass grow under his or her feet. But quickness is compatible with haste and when a person discharges their duty rapidly, in order to be finished, that is about as far from *zerizut* as you can get. Noah Gardenswartz says our revered teacher R. Aharon Lichtenstein ז”ל used “alacrity” for *zerizut*. A synonym for eagerness and agility, alacrity, by virtue of its Latinate derivation, carries a slightly elevated tone that gives it moral mass.

Unlike nouns that refer to physical objects, but like many significant moral terms, *zerizut* defies easy translation because it is embedded in a particular culture. Despite attempts to philosophize about the good life in abstract, universal categories, in a kind of a kind of ethical Esperanto, even ideas with universal implications presuppose a thick understanding of their cultural context. Approximate equivalents do not serve well; they produce an indistinct generic substitute for a rich, particular human reality. But abstract words like *zerizut* often originate in concrete nouns: tracing that derivation may be a useful strategy. The root *z-r-z* has a physical application in Rabbinic Hebrew. Mishna *Kelim* 22:3 mentions the *zerez* of an animal, apparently referring to the saddle belt or harness worn by a domestic animal.

*Zerizut* seems all spontaneity and fire and lightness. The image of an ox or donkey in harness, ploughing the earth, dutifully bound to the master’s appointed work, suggests the very opposite. If, however, the two

uses of *z-r-z* are linked, and our *zerizut* comes to us “trailing clouds of etymology,” that image helps bridge the gap between mere quickness, on the one hand, and purposeful obedience, on the other hand. The *zariz* is not the man or woman in a hurry, but in harness, vigorously and undividedly at one with the ordained task.

Sometimes intellectual recognition is unanticipated and comes with the force of an awakening; sometimes it crystallizes what was understood already but not put in words. Discovering the connection between the rare word in the Mishna and the ethical-religious ideal of *zerizut* confirmed and clarified what I had intuited before about *zerizut*, its meaning and beauty and inspiration. That is because I had studied with R. Lichtenstein, and had seen *zerizut* in motion. I thus knew in my heart that the elements of quickness, energy, joy, and total commitment to God mentioned in books that describe *zerizut*, like *Mesillat Yesharim*, are not disparate symptoms of spiritual achievement but part of a unified vision of human striving and fulfillment.

R. Lichtenstein’s gravestone reads *oved haShem* (servant of God). When an individual merits that accolade it is inadequate, nay comical, to praise him as a *zariz*. *Zerizut*, after all, belongs to one of the middle rungs of R. Pinhas ben Yair’s ladder of spiritual progress that provided structure to Ramhal’s treatise and to Maharal’s *Netivot Olam*, among other works, beyond which lie the highest levels of striving and attainment. R. Lichtenstein was more than the *midda* of *zerizut*, yet to me, from the recipient’s side (*mi-tsad ha-mekabbel*), so to speak, the idea of *zerizut* found its essential form in him and continues to lead me towards the ideal life he personified.

## II

When I came to Yeshiva University as a teenager, over 45 years ago, I could not have imagined that longevity or passage of time would one day make it my task to tell you what it meant to have been R. Lichtenstein’s student. I appreciated the sterling Talmudic education I was getting at his hands; I couldn’t help appreciating his unassuming but cumulatively overwhelming ethical demeanor. Yet all that was secondary. My urgent preoccupation was how to commit my life. It was not a foregone conclusion that I would arrive at the theological beliefs that have governed my adult years. One of the most pressing questions in my mind was whether traditional Judaism was capacious enough to accommodate all human wisdom. In R. Lichtenstein’s *shiur* I learned the answer to that question. One of my greatest fears was that concentration on intellectual brilliance

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and erudition led to narrowness, self-centeredness and smugness. From R. Lichtenstein's *shiur* I learned the truth: There is no more powerful motive for humility, for honesty, and excellence in *middot* than striving for excellence through *Torah lishmah*, while pursuing wisdom wherever it is found, when it is conjoined with and subservient to genuine *yirat Shamayim*. The Mishna says: "He whose fear of sin precedes his wisdom, his wisdom is sustained" (*Avot* 3:9). Day after day I saw this in *shiur*, I saw it in the liberal arts course R. Lichtenstein taught, and I saw it outside the classroom. Eventually it sank in.

Much has been said about R. Lichtenstein's relentless attention to the complexity of human affairs. Like the Rav, he understood that many human challenges, and precisely the most important ones, enact the clash of competing, even conflicting, values, all of which have legitimacy. As a practical matter, we can't avoid giving preference to one ideal over others; we are compelled to choose among people and causes that claim our allegiance. Nevertheless, if you are honest, you cannot deny or dismiss the spiritual reality of the "road not taken." You must continue to keep in mind, and respond to, reality in its full complexity. Undeniably this wholesome honesty had an enormous impact on the development of the intellectual convictions that led me to my present outlook.

At the same time, I also learned from R. Lichtenstein that painstaking analysis need not lead to evasion of decisive commitment. Like the Rav, he had the capacity to reveal the complexity of what seemed simple along with the incisiveness to cut through clouds of complicated reasoning and rationalization and lay bare the fundamental considerations. If you keep the right priorities steadily in mind—holding fast to the primacy of *avodat haShem* and *yirat Shamayim*—then some crucial life decisions become easier rather than harder.

I once confessed to R. Lichtenstein various doubts about my potential as a *mehannekh* (educator). Almost two hours later, after a thorough and fairly frank exploration of my strengths and potential limitations, he had induced me to set aside these hesitations. But then he saw fit to warn me about other obstacles to accomplishing my goals that could not be overcome through effort alone, that were beyond my control. I said: "Rebbi, how can I deal with this?" And he answered, simply and decisively: "Shalom, either you have *bittabon* (trust in God) or you don't!" Stated that way, late in one of the most fateful afternoons of my life, everything became simple, precisely because the decision before me had been placed in the right perspective. Before me was not the choice of a career trajectory but a life: R. Lichtenstein offered me not merely the shrewd professional advice

one expects from a mentor; he had invited me to follow him, as far as I could or would, into the exalted fellowship of the harness.

A few months later, in the summer of 1970, R. Lichtenstein was exploring his future in Israel. He delivered the opening lecture on conversion at the then prestigious conference on *Torah she-be'al Peh* sponsored by Mosad haRav Kook.<sup>1</sup> It was his opportunity to introduce himself publicly to the Israeli Torah world. Almost anyone else, especially a man planning to make a professional career for himself in that world, ready to give up a secure and respected position and uproot his family, would have played it safe and geared the presentation to the predilections of the audience. R. Lichtenstein did not choose that path. His thesis was not a welcome one. From the beginning, he separated an understanding of conversion rooted in Halakha from one grounded in nationalistic theology, knowing that his audience was not inclined to separate the two. He distinguished between the religious dimension of conversion, which reflects the passion of the individual, the “flight of the alone to the Alone” (a phrase he borrowed from Plotinus), on the one hand, and the national dimension, both of them essential for *gerut*, yet potentially in conflict with each other. He said this to a crowded hall unaccustomed to cultivating phenomenological distinctions in the realm of the spirit, almost constitutionally averse to seeing nationalism and religion as anything but two happy harmonious sides of the same national-religious coin, when the spiritual and practical danger in the facile equation of nationalism and *avodat Hashem* was largely unrecognized. To add scandal to puzzlement, the lecture was loaded with substantial references to Gentile authors. In retrospect R. Lichtenstein’s achievement as a teacher and role model in Israel seems foreordained. At the time, forty-five years ago, one could not have predicted with assurance that he would find his place in Israel. His resoluteness in putting forward the most provocative and potentially alienating aspect of his thinking, one that, in his opinion, was lacking from the Israeli scene, his willingness to plow the furrow his Master had assigned to him, even if that required him, then and often later, to plow uphill, against the current, reflects his straightforward faithfulness to his sacred mission, a faithfulness he sustained throughout his life, in great matters as in small.

<sup>1</sup> See *Torah she'b'al Peh* 13 for the published version of lecture, which contains response to immediate criticism; see the English translation, “On Conversion,” *Tradition* 23:2 (1988), 1-18.

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### III

Indeed, the test of the life lived in harness is not the dramatic moment of decision but sustaining commitment day after day, year after year. The *zariz* possesses an indomitable sense of responsibility, poised to perform one's duty with alacrity. This is true of our obligations towards family, friends, and other human beings; it is surely true of our infinite duty before the *Ribbono shel Olam*. As the Mussar literature notes, the *zariz* exhibits whole-hearted joy in wearing the harness. This joy is a welcome byproduct of commitment and a brake against the chronic frustrations and periodic weariness that beleaguer the day to day conduct of a human life.

It is hard to think of occasions on which R. Lichtenstein approached the performance of his duty with anything less than sober enthusiasm, without shortcuts and without evasion. And what an incomparably intense and varied set of duties he made his! Perhaps there were moments when he would have preferred to take off the harness and defer, for the sake of his convenience, some necessary task; if so, they were not the rule. Over the decades, one could perceive the growth—this man who already bestrode our world like a colossus— the crescent eagerness in his visage, the concentration and penetration of his gaze, as he advanced, persistently and palpably, step by step, from greatness to greatness, bringing his personality into line with his ideals. How can you see such a human being and not be attracted, and not want to share his way?

Earlier in my time at Yeshiva, groping my way to Orthodoxy, to *yirat Shamayim*, to religious truth, I thought I was opting for a sacrificial path: I had chosen duty over inclination, truth over happiness. R. Lichtenstein was dedicated to truth and he knew that spiritual growth is impossible without *yissurim* (suffering). Nonetheless he thought I drew the contrast between pure religious commitment and having a happy life more starkly than needed. Despite potential conflict, duty and inclination should ordinarily coincide. The predominant mood of *avodat haShem* ought to be an inexhaustible sense of joy and accomplishment. He did his best to convince me of this. Eventually he prevailed, not by power of argument, but through the example of his life.

About twenty years ago, I witnessed a private conversation between R. Lichtenstein and his rebbi, R. Ahron Soloveichik: “Then spoke the fearers of God one to the other... (Malachi 3:16).” I cannot describe the beauty, the joy that emanated from these two *gedolim*, one in the full magnificence of his powers, the other fighting inch by inch against the

diminution of his. I thought of Tennyson's line: "One equal temper of heroic hearts/Made weak by time and fate but strong in will." After a minute or two I looked away: the Mishna says that when two engage in words of Torah the Shekhina is between them (*Avot* 3:3); in any event it seemed improper for me to intrude further upon the intimacy of their glory. The sheer radiance of those moments will accompany me forever.

#### IV

*Rambler* 127 is a powerful exposition of the many ways in which the ambition for literary excellence comes to naught. The sad descriptions of human folly and failure, as so often with the great moralists, are faithful to the world as we know it. How does one avoid these pitfalls? Where is the mirror to reality that shows us the alternative?

Johnson concludes:

These errors all arise from an original mistake of the true motives of action. He that never extends his view beyond the praises or rewards of men will be dejected by neglect and envy, or infatuated by honors and applause. But the consideration that life is only deposited in his hands to be employed in obedience to a Master who will regard his endeavors, not his success, would have preserved him from trivial elations and discouragements, and enabled him to proceed with constancy and cheerfulness, neither enervated by commendation, nor intimidated by censure.

Of course this is easier said than done. We are deflected and distracted from unreserved devotion to our duty by the realistic fear that the most exhaustive labors inevitably fall short of attaining even a fraction of our hopes or we congratulate ourselves for trivial or non-existent triumphs. We accept with equanimity one-sided ways of thinking and feeling or we fancy that compromising Orthodox convictions and commitments will gain fleeting relief from our feelings of isolation, perhaps even a moment of applause. More than correct doctrine, as important as that might be, we require the mirror to life, the personal example of the individual for whom Johnson's ideal is a living reality, and we cannot value too highly the mentor who understands what we want in this world and can also tell us what we ought to want.

When asked why he gave *shiurim* on Jewish thought that were over most students' heads, Rav Lichtenstein responded, paraphrasing

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R. Yitzchak Hutner: the best teaching aims at where the student will be years later rather than at his present state.<sup>2</sup> Much of what he taught has been absorbed by me and many of my fellows, as he had hoped. We commemorate his mastery of Torah and his capacity to draw judiciously and elegantly on the Western intellectual tradition to enhance authentic and critical religious thinking. We dwell on his ethical greatness and the magnificence of his piety, how he prayed, how he listened to other human beings, how he attended to his father, how he never wasted a moment. We continue to be driven by the irrefutable charisma of the life rightly lived, the life lived in harness. In his absence, as in his lifetime, we continue to ask ourselves what he would think about the way we contend with our everyday challenges and what he would say about our struggle against torpor and faithlessness.

This man, who made every effort to avoid placing himself on a higher level than others, who showed the example of enjoying the best that a “normal” life can offer with unmitigated zest while pursuing without compromise or abatement the passionate service of his Creator, continues to beckon, from eternity to eternity.

May our fellowship of *talmidim*, with the inspiration of our now absent teacher, “with deliberate steps and slow” make our way through the world and together meet the challenges and opportunities of the future: “One equal temper of heroic hearts/To strive to seek to find and not to yield.”

May his memory be a blessing.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See *Pahad Yitzhak: Iggerot* # 155.

<sup>3</sup> These remarks overlap, at some points, with my eulogy at Yeshiva University ([http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/834779/Rabbi\\_Shalom\\_Carmy/Divrei\\_Hesped\\_for\\_Rav\\_Aharon\\_Lichtenstein\\_zt'l](http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/834779/Rabbi_Shalom_Carmy/Divrei_Hesped_for_Rav_Aharon_Lichtenstein_zt'l)) and published eulogies in *First Things* (<http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/04/the-mantle-of-elijah>) and *Jewish Action* (Shalom Carmy, “On Complexity and Clarity,” *Jewish Action* (Fall 2015), 38-41), as well as unpublished impromptu comments at Yeshiva University immediately after R. Lichtenstein’s *petira*.

# WHY ISRAEL'S SECURITY DEPENDS ON JEWISH DEMOCRACY<sup>1</sup>

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On June 22, 1948, on a Tel Aviv beach not far from the place he was murdered 47 years later, Yitzchak Rabin ordered his troops to open fire on the Altalena, the ship that bore a large quantity of ammunition, hundreds of fighters, and Irgun leader Menachem Begin. Readers of Rabin's memoir *Pinkas Sherut* will find no mention of the incident in his narrative of Israel's War of Independence. Only in Volume 2, when Rabin describes handing over the Prime Ministry to Begin, on June 21, 1977, does he offer his version of the events. Briefly put, Rabin believed that the Irgun was plotting to take power by force. "The condition for Jewish national survival [is] one central authority," he argues. Twenty-nine years later he is no longer certain that Begin planned a putsch. In any event, he disclaims involvement or animus respecting the subsequent acrimony that poisoned Israeli political life for decades. Begin came to power legitimately: "The voter, according to the rules of democracy, is allowed to make a mistake."

Rabin's view rests on two philosophical premises: 1) Jewish survival requires central legitimate authority; 2) Electoral democracy is necessary for undisputable authority. Later in his memoir, Rabin subjects Prime Minister Begin's diplomatic tactics to caustic criticism. He does not question his legitimacy. What matters is that Begin, too, is faithful to these two premises. That is sufficient for a shared political culture.

The first premise—one central authority—is entailed by our mentor Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's approach to Religious Zionism. As is

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to the Yeshiva University Israel Center for sponsoring, together with the Israeli Consulate, a day of study and reflection to commemorate Prime Minister Rabin's 20<sup>th</sup> *yahrzeit*. The published version of my remarks owes much to discussion with David Shatz, Ozer Glickman, Yosef Brander, and Judah Kerbel. Though responsibility for these comments is mine alone, I have made every effort to be faithful to the words and spirit of my great mentors R. Joseph Soloveitchik and R. Aharon Lichtenstein of blessed memory.

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well-known, the Rav contrasted the covenant of fate with the covenant of destiny. The former is common to all Jews. It aims at the material welfare of the Jewish people, of which survival is both an essential component and a necessary condition. The latter is defined by the divine imperative, whose fulfillment is distinctive to those who cleave unto God and His law.

The covenant of fate is a covenant of shared feeling. Remember the Rav's image of the conjoined twins: are they one person or two? To which he answers: pour boiling water on the head of one, then see what happens: if both howl in pain, they are one. The brotherhood of Israel cries out of shared feeling and shared concern. Therefore religious Jews and irreligious Jews can and should wholeheartedly unite in allegiance to the government devoted to Jewish physical survival and material welfare. On that basis the Rav regarded the negotiation of Israel's borders as a security question, governed by security considerations, analogous to a medical question of life and death, to be decided by experts in the field and in deference to the judgment of the sick person himself, rather than by rabbinic authorities.

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein – mentor to many of us – R. Soloveitchik's son-in-law and primary disciple, applied these principles to Israeli reality as he saw them from his position as head of the Yeshivat Har Etzion. The religious value of Jewish sovereignty throughout Eretz Yisrael, however important, cannot outweigh concern for physical survival. The need for legitimate central authority mandates governmental authority over the policy views of individual soldiers and thus curtails the exercise of conscientious objection on duty. R. Lichtenstein himself opposed the bombing of Beirut during the 1982 Lebanon War, but wrote his open letter to Prime Minister Begin only after he was dismissed from his army reserve service (*millu'im*). Twenty five years later, when many plausibly alleged that the Sharon government had blundered badly by undertaking the Gaza disengagement, he held that maintaining the legitimacy of the Israeli state precluded mutiny by members of the armed forces.

## II

All this is virtually axiomatic in my circles. But circumstances change and I must, therefore, point out a difficulty in applying these principles today. R. Soloveitchik spoke about the threat of immediate destruction. Despite constant conflict, despite recent events, no danger of immediate destruction exists today on the Palestinian front. Current choices will be confirmed or refuted only with the passage of time.

What determines responsible security policy today is no longer the short term verdict of battle; post-modern wars are not won on the battlefields but in the media. With outcomes distant and indirect, impossible to calculate, tacticians grope in long-range darkness. The tie-breakers that set policy do not express pure, unambiguous military calculations. Consequently, the hot water figuratively poured on the head of the Israeli Siamese twin in Hebron or in Tel Aviv is still uncomfortably hot but no longer agonizingly or life-threateningly scalding. In the Rav's scenario the covenant of fate takes precedence and hence dictates to the covenant of destiny. Today each group has its own vision of Israeli destiny and has the luxury of advocating the security policy likely to promote its realization. Neither militancy nor compromise put the survival of the state in clear-cut jeopardy. Why not decide based on the kind of the destiny that makes Israel worthwhile beyond mere survival?

R. Lichtenstein compared the evacuation of land for the sake of peace to the amputation of a limb to save a life. It is a terrible choice, but one that, if necessary, must be performed with sorrow and resolution. As we said: Nations cannot afford multiple centers of political authority. Statesmen, like physicians, are fallible, yet we have no choice but to defer to their collective judgment according to the rules of democracy. For a dilemma of survival his analogy is apt. Of course, one may insist that the decision to compromise is misguided and endangers Israel, that it is an act of national suicide, and that preventing it thus justifies delegitimizing the state and even killing its officials. But if this is true, it is by no means self-evident, insofar as there is no immediate, clear-cut threat to the state's existence. The decision to undermine the state represents a direct assault on its viability, while the consequences of allowing the state to pursue its erroneous course are not self-evident, except in the eyes of the individuals and groups exercising their private judgment. In any event, these considerations are mundane rather than religious in nature.

If we were faced by an immediate danger as once was the case, the approach just outlined would eliminate potential conflict between government authority and private conviction not only as a practical matter, but also, at the theoretical level, between halakhic ideals and possible security considerations. Conflict would arise only if retention of territory is held to be an inviolable religious principle. Once the Rav and R. Lichtenstein took that question off the table, those who follow their religious judgment would be in exactly the same position about security dilemmas as their secular brethren.

Yet as we have seen, security depends not only on force of arms but on public relations on the international stage and collective morale on the

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home front. Hence the security question cannot be separated from the sense of identity we experience and transmit to the world. Some Israelis think of themselves as Jews who must, under pressure, accommodate, to some extent, the fashions of the outside world. Others define themselves first and foremost as citizens of the liberal, secular West, with some place for Jewish identity. It seems to me that right wing Israelis, even—perhaps especially—those who are not thoroughly committed to Torah and mitsvot, experience the opposition between Jewishness and the rest of the world as a positive, invigorating aspect of Jewish identity, while those on the left are embarrassed, ashamed, outraged, and demoralized by the persistence of Jewish estrangement from the secular liberal community.

So our present situation cannot be compared to amputating a limb to save a life. It is more like a macabre dispute over which limb should be cut off, where one parent, who wants the child to be a concert pianist, would sacrifice a foot to preserve a finger, while the other wants the child to be a dancer, and would give an arm to save a toe. We can try to survive as hardy maximalists, at the cost of increased isolation, or to survive by bringing Israel closer to the family of cosmopolitan Esperanto culture. If those are the choices, I am afraid that R. Lichtenstein's analogy can no longer provide a clear-cut solution.

As long as the sharp divide about our attitude and relation to the Western world is prominent, Religious Zionists, whatever their nominal beliefs about security or other domestic issues, will find their "natural Jewish home" on the secular right because the right is at home with perpetuating Jewish separateness. In this area, the so-called left will always lack credibility; suspected of tailoring their policies to serve a cultural agenda in the guise of a futile and misguided attempt to obtain external acceptance.

For those educated as I am, who have internalized the kind of interaction between the study of Torah and critical appreciation of what Western culture offers at its best, and for most Israelis, whether fully committed to Torah u-Mitsvot or not, this tension need not present an either/or dilemma in the way most Israelis conduct their lives. Most want to be a people that dwells alone, yet one not isolated or excessively parochial. This middle road is viable to moderates on both sides of the Israeli political spectrum, the so-called *yamin shafuy* and *semol shafuy* (sane right and sane left). All the same, given that the gulf between religious and secular visions of Israel is, in a profound way, unbridgeable, and if, as I suggest, it impacts even on our shared search for physical security, the realization of such a practical middle ground requires personal investment on the part of those who have learned to live it.

Yitzhak Rabin had no particular contribution to make on the cultural and religious fronts. Nor was he especially gifted in appreciating the insights of those attentive to such matters whose outlook differed from his. Yet his wholehearted and painstaking concentration on security should have put him beyond the suspicion that he was motivated by an extraneous agenda. Branding him a traitor would have been ridiculous, had it not become obscene and murderous. But among contemporary Israeli leaders he was more the exception than the rule.

### III

When the bitter news came twenty years ago, and in the immediate aftermath, I was engulfed by a sense of horror and disgrace that we, as a people, had come to this.<sup>2</sup> To the extent that I imagined the future, I feared the end of Israeli democracy, because I anticipated an overwhelming wave of revulsion towards the sector that indulged the murderer; I expected a generation of unchallenged leftist hegemony. Since then, the right has solidified its Jewish majority. Under the shock of hard reality both right and left are disappointed, sobered, and perhaps hung over. Yet, not unencouraged by the indulgence of their fellow travelers, vocal and significant circles on the left still decline to accept the election verdict of 1977, and influential groups on the right continue to treat violence as an acceptable part of their political tool chest.

Since 1995 some well-meaning, desperate, or religiously uncomprehending leaders sought to promote a new Israeli identity transcending present ideological divisions and thus to ensure the superiority of the state. I doubt whether such uniformity is feasible or desirable even from a purely secular perspective. From a religious perspective, of course, to subsume our values and commitments under some supposedly higher, neutral secular ideal is out of the question. No human ideal, be it national or universalistic, be it socialist or liberal, can be elevated above the divine imperative. To do so is idolatry, and the destruction wreaked by such projects over the course of the twentieth century alone is a warning of what happens when secular ideals, even attractive ones, become absolutes.

I reject this way forward, not because I make light of the value of common “lower case” culture. Drawing on shared cultural values, history,

<sup>2</sup> For my reaction at that time, see “Murderers, Nazis, Traitors, Wise Men and Noise: Reflections on the Rabin Assassination,” *Yeshiva College Commentator* (November 1995). Available at [www.atid.org/resources/carmy/pdf/murderers.pdf](http://www.atid.org/resources/carmy/pdf/murderers.pdf).

literature, music, humor, even food and popular songs, brings people together. It often provides the social glue that makes otherwise unbearable disagreement tolerable, and the social lubrication that makes compromise possible, when it is justified. Shared culture, however, in the absence of shared spiritual destiny, is a palliative, a bandage on an open sore, necessary in the short run but no substitute for the work of fundamental cure.

This is not the place to discuss the article of faith, among religious liberals, that religion is a prime cause of violence so that a reformulation of national identity that neutralizes or etiolates religious commitment is automatically regarded as a step towards peace and civility.<sup>3</sup> The excesses and perversions of secular ideologies alluded to above count for nothing in the face of this mantra.

Regarding Israeli history in particular, the celebration of violence was a notable feature of the extreme pre-State Zionist right wing, as the quest for Jewish power became identified with the glorification of force and embraced the romance of the conspiratorial gunman or bomber. Acolytes of this cult were antagonistic to traditional religion and to traditional Judaism in particular. The eloquent Abba Ahimeir, for instance, self-declared fascist, an influential if marginal Revisionist writer, and a leading proponent of militant Jewish self-display at the Kotel, taught that the true Bible was not a religious book and that God is no more central to understanding the Hebrew Bible than the Greek gods for appreciating the *Iliad*; that is, until the pious “editors” (for which read “the Rabbis”) disgracefully distorted it into a theological text.<sup>4</sup> Though the secular Israeli right was painstakingly demilitarized, domesticated, and Judaized during the forty year reign of Menachem Begin, its remnants did not vanish. In the new climate they found in modern religious circles a potentially hospitable host. The cure to this infiltration is not downplaying religious commitment and making religion more subservient to nationalistic feeling, but strengthening the authority and autonomy of traditional religion.

For many Haredi spokesmen, by contrast, the assassination of Rabin was the inevitable outcome of Zionist championing of military might. Immediately after Rabin’s murder R. Lichtenstein was asked by a Haredi

<sup>3</sup> See Shalom Carmy, “Is Religion a Primary Cause of War? An Essay in Understanding and Self-Examination,” *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 11 (2002-03), 35-49.

<sup>4</sup> Abba Ahimeir, “‘Hellenism’ in Judea and ‘Jewishness’ in Hellas,” *Ha-Tsionut ha-Mahapkhavit*, (Tel Aviv: Ha-Va’ad le-Hotsa’at Kitvei Ahimeir, 1965), originally published 1932. Note that the editors removed strong language found in first publication.

journalist whether the murder of Rabin was not the result of an educational system that teaches there are things of more value than human life. R. Lichtenstein answered:

We all believe that there are values greater than human life... In this sense, we need not be ashamed, nor need we erase one letter of our Torah. We will not surrender nor abandon a single one of our values. Our values are eternal; nothing can be given up or erased. But in terms of balance and application, of seeing the whole picture, the ability to think profoundly in order to know how to apply the Torah – here undoubtedly we must engage in a renewed and deeper examination. Priorities must be re-examined.

#### IV

So far I have spoken to, and for, the disciples of the Rav and R. Lichtenstein, who believe that “seeing the whole picture” allows for consideration of territorial compromise for the sake of peace, who respect Rabin’s thorough responsiveness to the covenant of fate and mourn his murder and the loss it represented and yet cannot be oblivious to the covenant of destiny that separates us from those who do not recognize its singular claims and commands. What of the many Religious Zionists who question or reject our premises, who believe that territorial compromise is halakhically out of the question and/or patently disastrous, a greater danger than the supposed risk of destroying legitimate political authority? What can we say to them that would lessen the likelihood of further violence and the radical divisiveness that is both its occasion and consequence?

Our voices are unlikely to affect the extremists who place themselves above the law, the Yigal Amirs and Baruch Goldsteins and their lesser emulators. Nor will orchestrated interdiction by the “great rabbis” compel their obedience: the violent fringe is, by and large, theologically liberal, in Newman’s sense of the term, convinced of their private judgment, unwilling to bend the knee to institutional authority, spiritual or political. Yet the insouciance of these extremists is nurtured by the tacit support of fellow travelers whose silence is interpreted as acquiescence and whose expressions of sympathy are taken as encouragement. It is the perceived support of these people that buffers the extremists against the condemnation of the public. The duty of each one of us, not only of prominent “super-rabbis,” is to shrink that buffer.

Surely the murder of Rabin shocked many rabbis and communities into assessing their responsibility. At least in the short run, many tasted

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the calamitous fruits of unrestrained invective and one-sided priorities. But such lessons are liable to be transient and perfunctory when they do not become permanent convictions. Abiding change requires that one keep in mind admonishing voices internal to and presumably normative to militant religious Zionist discourse. R. Abraham Kook, for example, warned over a century ago of the ill-will, “specific to the Evil Inclination that does its destructive work under the banner of nationalism. Even though this hatred is ostensibly directed only towards a foreign people and does not touch the heritage of the [Jewish] people, with the passage of time it becomes an inner curse, internecine hatred increases and destroys all national welfare.”<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, all of us must recognize self-delusion as a radical human temptation that makes no exceptions for ideologies. “Progressives” and “leftists” preach a Judaism controlled by their own affinities to secular ways of thinking; the same is no less true of nationalist ideology. As we have seen, the attraction of violent self-expression for the radical Zionist right draws heavily on non-Jewish and anti-Jewish incubators. Of course, when Jews study and are influenced by Gentile ideas, that is not always a bad thing, unless one is a chauvinist and regards any such exposure as contamination. Each idea or cluster of ideas must be assessed critically as it is compatible or not with what God demands of us. When the same standards of criticism from a religious perspective are applied to all secular ideals, nationalist or liberal, it is just a bit harder for professedly religious people to identify their favored ism with the service of God.

Lastly, beware the ideologist’s tendency to ascribe all flawed behavior to faulty ideas. Israeli Jews endure enormous provocations, both acutely—as in the preceding weeks (I am writing in November 2015)—and chronically. Their frustration at the limited power of their government to assure personal security is understandable. This frustration may find temporary release for some in naïve fantasies of peace at any price, for others in fantasies of glory and redemption through the anarchy of blood and fire. We should not treat reactions to terrorism and fear of betrayal as if they were merely the playing out of theological and philosophical dialectic.

## V

For some, the upshot of my discussion is that rabbis have no competence to rule on Israeli security and therefore should keep out of these

<sup>5</sup> *Derekh ha-Tehiyya* (in *Maamarei ha-Reiyah*, Jerusalem 1983), 5.

controversies. My conclusion is the exact opposite. Precisely because there are no simple answers to these problems, precisely because there is no party line that guarantees political correctness, our need for guidance is all the greater. What we require is not merely a policy to support, a dotted line to sign on, but an attitude, a way of thinking and living that enables us to keep our priorities straight, to communicate them and, in varying circumstances, to live by their light. For that we need living models of intelligent, passionate and responsible Torah thinking.

The themes of our discussion are remote from the military and diplomatic challenges to which Yitzchak Rabin dedicated his years on earth and ultimately gave his life. Yet it is a task in keeping with the message of that life.

# THE SONS OF KORAH, WHO DID NOT DIE

Volume 49:1 Spring 2016

Early in the 1970's, R. Soloveitchik delivered several lectures on the book of Numbers, chapters 9 through 21. A few years later he began editing them as a unified presentation on the central sections of Numbers, eventually published by Toras haRav Foundation in *Vision and Leadership*. Some of the lectures are better known via second hand summary. Among these the most popular is on Korah. In giving that lecture the Rav acknowledged that, beyond his analysis of the Biblical text and rabbinic response to it, he was also addressing contemporary challenges to Torah authority. These ideological challenges have become even more bitter and fateful for our community over the past forty years and in the Rav's absence. The assertions on Torah authority have come to overshadow the substantive discourse that precedes it.

Torah study for its own sake needs no apology; periodic review of a great and formative teacher's ideas is always in order: as Hazal say, it often takes as long as forty years to absorb one's master's teaching. My revisiting of the Rav's exegesis is also motivated by the hope that working out the full implications of the Korah episode, beyond the Rav's exposition, is not without relevance for the communal dangers that troubled the Rav and that he strove to avert.

Let us begin with the Rav's own discussion of Korah's rebellion. We will then venture to explore the difference between Korah's position and that of Dathan and Aviram, and to examine carefully the way the Torah presents Moses' responses to these two styles of rebellion, both in terms of his theological stance and his personal reaction.

Following Ramban, R. Soloveitchik holds that Korah's ultimate aim was political power. To make headway he needed an ideology. Korah's argument, presented in the Torah, is the following: because all members of the congregation share the same holiness, Moses has no right to lead, to guide, to rule. The Rav says that Korah was half right. Indeed, within the community of Israel, each Jew's sanctity is equal. He explains: "This sanctity is not personal and intimate, but is a universal, community-rooted, and community-nourished holiness inherited from one's progenitors."

There is a second, individualistic resource of sanctity, one that “the individual detects in the inner recesses of his personality.” “If the community were the only source of sanctity,” says the Rav, “then the individual would be deprived of his creative role, his individual initiative, his originality and uniqueness. The outstanding person would not be able to develop into a great leader.” The implication regarding authority is clear. Although all share equally in the sanctity of Jewish peoplehood, all are not equally endowed in other respects.

The distinction between the egalitarian aspect of Jewish identity, whereby all Jews are equal in their fulfillment of behavioral commandments, and the individualistic aspect, which recognizes the unique, and therefore unequal, appropriation of religious existence, is familiar from the Rav’s major writings, such as *U-Vikkashtem Mi-Sham*. In Moses’ words to Korah: “Is it not sufficient that God has distinguished you from the congregation of Israel [to do the work of the Levites] that you seek also the priesthood?” Meaning, though the entire congregation is holy, different groups and individuals are assigned different roles.

The second half of the Rav’s discourse presents Korah’s second argument. He reminds us that this argument is not mentioned in the Bible, but supplied by rabbinic midrash. In one version of the story, Korah asked whether a garment entirely of the particular blue *tekhelet* thread is subject to the law of *tsitsit* which mandates placing *tekhelet* on each four-cornered garment. According to another, Korah asked whether a *mezuzah* must be affixed to the doorpost of a house filled with Torah scrolls. The point being, that where special status is ubiquitous, there is no need to reinforce the sanctity with a special marker. When Moses responds that this is not the law, Korah and his followers jeer.

These stories could be taken as a more dramatic enactment of the first argument. R. Soloveitchik, however, pays attention to the rhetorical arena of Korah’s midrashic argument—namely that of halakhic debate. What is at stake, on this reading, is not only the dialectic of equality and individualism, but the authority of religious law. Korah’s street theater aims at overturning autonomous halakhic jurisprudence, faithful to its own principles, in favor of a mode of thinking adapted to “common sense” religious sentiment.

The Rav goes on to justify distrust of sentiment as the basis of religious life on three grounds: “First, religious emotion—like any other emotion—is changeable, volatile, and transient.” Second, precisely because religious subjectivity is individualistic; each, in his or her own way, “experiences God, man, and the world in a unique way.” Lastly, there is an inevitable danger of mundane experiences, based on non-religious apprehensions belonging to aesthetics or ethics, being mistaken for experiences of God. Again,

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these arguments on behalf of the need for objectivity in determining religious obligations are characteristic of the Rav's thinking.

In this essay the Rav's argument for what we may call "rabbinic authority" thus draws on two strands of his thought: One is an individualistic insight recognizing that all are not equally endowed and that this makes a difference with respect to religious leadership. The second limits individualism by insisting on objective standards in order to safeguard against the dangers posed by unconstrained subjectivity.

Here we must note that these elements do not deny human subjectivity but preserve it and elevate it. To be sure, one cannot compare the woodchopper's mastery of Torah to that of Moses; in that respect, Moses attains a higher level of religious development, with all that this entails. Yet the woodchopper too has his or her own contribution to make; he too stands in relationship to God. Indeed, one of the reasons the Rav deems halakhic objectivity necessary is to make room for the variety of religious and human experience that would become anarchic without the objective framework. Commitment to God as expressed in the halakha often requires sacrifice of private judgment and cherished desires and dreams. Yet a religious outlook that omits the subjective life of the individual, his or her aspirations and experience, and treats them as negligible, is as much a deviation from the Rav's way of thinking as one that vests authority in the private and halakhically undisciplined judgment of each individual. When the individual standing before God disappears from view, the subservience demanded by the law is no longer experienced as the service of God but merely as submission to the collective.

## II

Let us return to the Biblical story. Korah presented an ideological challenge to Moses: "the entire congregation is holy." Korah did not directly deny Moses' mission, although undermining the Torah given through Moses is implicit in Korah's critique, when taken to its ultimate conclusion, and this is brought to the surface in the midrashic elaboration. If political power plays demand ideological rationale, sooner or later politics also requires disparagement and personal animus. Dathan and Aviram personalized their rebellion. Korah complained that Moses and Aaron elevated themselves (*titnasse'u*) above God's people, setting themselves up as a spiritual aristocracy. Dathan and Aviram accused Moses of taking Israel from Egypt, in their telling "a land flowing with milk and honey," to death in the desert, and seeking to establish a capricious tyranny over them (*histarer*); they allege that Moses is blinding and misleading the people.

Moses' reaction now is different from his response to Korah. Straight-away he had invited Korah to come forward with incense so that God would decide between them. He had followed up by arguing that Korah, as a Levite, already had been granted his distinctive role. Dathan and Aviram, by contrast, provoke Moses to extreme wrath. He asks God not to turn to their offering, and defends his personal conduct: "I have not borne away one donkey of theirs or done evil to any of them." Then he turns back to Korah with instructions about the test set for the morrow.

On the one hand, Korah is the leader of the rebellion; on the other hand, Dathan and Aviram are the ones who ignite Moses' anger, because their antagonism is driven less by ambition or ideology than by abusiveness towards the emissary of God. As the moment of crisis approaches, Moses still hopes to limit the adversarial confrontation to Korah: he pleads with God: "Shall one man sin and You are angry with the whole congregation?" And then Moses goes to Dathan and Aviram, who had refused to come to him, in a last effort to separate them from Korah. When this fails, he calls upon God to vindicate him by having the earth swallow them up.

Let me stress that Moses explicitly makes the fate of the rebels a test of his leadership: "If these die like all human beings... God did not send me." To deny Moses' unique agency in the giving of the Torah, in theological terms, is equivalent to rejection of the Torah. Thus Moses would be justified in requesting decisive action on the part of God. At the same time the narrative leaves open the possibility that he is impelled in part by the personal abuse hurled at him by Dathan and Aviram.

We tend to focus on Korah, and less on his partners in rebellion. The Torah presents Korah as the ringleader of the conspiracy. He is its ideological spokesman. Hazal (following Numbers 26:9 and 27:3) refer to the cabal as "Korah and his congregation." On son of Pelet disappears from the story, and Hazal explain that his wife persuaded him to withdraw for self-interested reasons. The two hundred and fifty men mentioned in the opening verse accompanied Korah and were consumed by fire. The Torah says nothing about their motives, though commentators like Netsiv ascribe to them idealistic motives. Interestingly, the sons of Korah did not die (Numbers 26:11). Dathan and Aviram, however, are highlighted in that passage, and elsewhere, as participants in Korah's rebellion. Remarkably, outside of Numbers they are the ones who are mentioned, while Korah is omitted. When Moses reviews the history of the wilderness years at the end of his life (Deuteronomy 11) only Dathan and Aviram are cited. Likewise Psalm 106:17-18 mentions Dathan and Aviram and leaves out Korah.

Many hold that since Korah is the major figure his absence must be explained. Thus Ramban in Deuteronomy 11 and R. Hirsch on Psalms

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suggest that Korah is omitted out of embarrassment because of his status as a Levite, and thus related to Moses, or out of respect for his descendants who were prominent Levites. Without gainsaying their observations, it is plausible to conclude that to Moses in retrospect, and to the Psalmist, Dathan and Aviram's opposition was more blasphemous and thus more worthy of remembrance. To borrow from Ramban himself, the distinguishing mark of this rebellion was the contempt displayed for Moses their teacher and the inevitable rejection of God's acts and revelation. R. Bahye ben Asher indeed draws the conclusion that Dathan and Aviram are remembered because they inflicted the greatest damage through the outspoken and vulgar manner of their antagonism for Moses and his mission. Such considerations impelled Maharal (Commentary to Aggada, *Sanhedrin* 110) to speak of Dathan and Aviram as essential embodiments of divisiveness. Though Korah was the leader of the immediate confrontation, and stands out in the memory of Hazal, who are remarkably ready to give his rebellion an eloquent voice, Moses himself, warning the next generation forty years later, and the Psalm that commemorates the crises of faith in the desert, identify Dathan and Aviram as the primary foes.

### III

So far I have attempted to present the straightforward meaning of the Biblical narrative, in the Rav's footsteps, albeit with a renewed emphasis on Dathan and Aviram. For centuries commentators have labored mightily to explain the sin of Moses at Mei Meriva: Abarbanel catalogued no fewer than 16 interpretations; the *Or ha-Hayyim* has 12. For his part R. Soloveitchik, in *Leadership and Vision*, offers a powerful analysis that sidesteps the difficulties attendant on the classical interpretations. Off-hand this enigmatic episode is not directly linked to Korah's rebellion 38 years before. R. Meir Simha of Dvinsk, in his *Meshekh Hokhma*, ties them together. Whether or not we adopt his exegetical view, it bears a crucial lesson in our present condition.

R. Meir Simha observes that Moses, unlike other prophets, scrupulously avoided invoking signs and wonders on his own. Until Korah, everything he does is transparently commanded by God. Then, however, Moses initiates the test without asking God to intervene. Ramban, in one of his approaches to the passage, suggests Moses is repeating a divine instruction not stated in the Torah. Even if one accepts this proposal, the fact that the prior command is not revealed to the reader implies that it was not evident to his contemporaries either. Once Moses summons divine

intervention in order to counteract Korah, according to R. Meir Simha's reading, he is open to the accusation that he is acting for his own honor. When the next crisis arrives, many years later, and the congregation complains that they lack water, the malcontents view Moses' failure to initiate divine action as evidence of inconsistency: he did not act for the people as he had when his own prestige was challenged. This is the failure to "sanctify God's Name" for which Moses forfeited his leadership.

#### IV

The more egalitarian a society is, in its own mind, the more desperately it requires religious and ethical excellence from those who must provide guidance. What is true of secular democratic culture is also true of the religious community: How many Jews, even those educated to religious affiliation and observance, go through their lives without once having encountered—genuinely encountered—a religious individual, meaning an individual whose life is centered on the service of God? Without such exemplars, our society settles for mediocrity and rapidly sinks into indifference. At best, spiritual leadership is discounted and unheeded. At worst, the clamor of Dathan and Aviram fills the air, denouncing all ascriptions of excellence and all claims to authority as bogus and self-serving.

Some of the flashpoints currently agitating the Orthodox community are examined by others in these pages. We all know how particular points of controversy are liable to ripen into irreparable schism, so that contending for particular halakhic views or public policy, however important, often fails to address fundamental divisions. When the Rav spoke forty years ago, he did not merely issue a halakhic decision; he strove to nurture the mentality necessary to appreciate true halakhic principles and the spirit needed to live them authentically.

Three thoughts in closing:

First, as we have seen, halakhic law presupposes an ethic of obedience. But it also presupposes an ethic of sacrifice. Sacrifice—*korban*—is a giving up to God, but it is also, even more so, a coming closer to God, a personal relationship. The objectivity of Halakha is not a substitute for religious subjectivity but its normative framework and this applies to every individual standing before God. R. Soloveitchik delivered his paper "Catharsis," which is his most direct exposition of the ethic of withdrawal, at MIT, not at Yeshiva. The woodchopper's relation with God is not the same as Moses'; that doesn't mean it can be treated as religiously immaterial. Where

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religious commitment entails withdrawing from much of what secular culture regards as permissible and even laudable—and we can all think of situations where this is increasingly the case--the sacrifice demanded of the average person may be greater and more profound than that required of the elite. When the average person is at a distance from the spiritual resources and the intellectual levers of halakhic life, the sacrifice is even more poignant. Hence our spiritual leaders, more than ever, must humbly bring to life the sense of God and what it means to be committed to His service.

Second, we learn from Dathan and Aviram that disparagement and contempt towards the bearers of the Torah tradition may often leave deeper and less remediable scars than intellectual heresy alone. This is a warning to those who engage in such incitement and to those who knowingly or inadvertently provoke it.

From here I come to a third lesson: The more desperately a society sinks into indifference and cynicism about its nominal religious and ethical standards, the more urgent that its spiritual guides strive for excellence. Confronted by a society in revolt, the rhetoric of Korah, amplified by the jeering of Dathan and Aviram and supplemented by other voices of discontent, Moses had no choice: he was justified in his anger, and he was justified in acting to quell the rebellion. Doing so, taught the *Meshekh Hokhma*, he also invited increased scrutiny of his motivation; He bound himself to an even more uncompromising standard of dedication to his flock, as they perceived it.

Orthodoxy today faces a crisis of authority for many reasons, some self-inflicted. As rabbis, as educators, even as parents, we may have no choice but to insist on the authority of Torah, even when that makes us vulnerable to the charge of self-aggrandizement. All the greater, then, is our responsibility to uphold our integrity in the face of an almost institutionalized ethos of suspicion. The task may seem impossible: even Moses, according to R. Meir Simha, paid a terrible price for falling short. Often it also seems futile—can we really presume to reverse, whether by force of words or personal example, widespread trends and increasingly entrenched habits of indifference and disaffection?

And yet, amid the frenzy unleashed by Korah, the stridency of Dathan and Aviram, and the mysterious deviation of the two hundred and fifty elders, we cannot be indifferent to the destiny of the sons of Korah, who did not die.

# “THE LIGHTS MUST NEVER GO OUT”: THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY FROM JOHN STUART MILL TO RAV KOOK

Volume 49:2 Summer 2016

In 1869 the sun of classical liberalism was nearing its meridian: A long and bloody war among the United States had demonstrated that a democratic nation could marshal the political and military will to withstand potent rebellion. Universal suffrage for men was fast becoming the norm in the most advanced countries. Yet John Stuart Mill, the leading philosopher of British liberalism, saw clouds on the horizon. Once the laboring classes, who have no property and therefore no stake in the system of private property, know their power, their combination, through force of numbers, would control the course of legislation and government. Would private property survive democracy? Should it?

Mill's chapters *On Socialism* explore this question from a utilitarian point of view and many elements of his approach have been reprised by political economists for the past century and a half. Needless to say, for workers barely subsisting at the border of starvation or severe deprivation the urgency of survival takes priority, even if it does not wholly extinguish the quest for dignity and meaning. The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the age of progress through organized labor in the United States and other industrial democracies. Yet even then, and certainly afterwards, class consciousness did not rigidly determine the outlook of the average worker. Why not?

To begin with, many purely economic goals were gradually satisfied without the need for radical, thoroughgoing reorganization of society. The example of socialist economies, where greater economic equality was ostensibly to be achieved through state intervention, was not encouraging. More importantly for our discussion, laborers did not choose to submerge their interests and their goals in their class consciousness because, just like other human beings, their identities were more complex and their goals in life not reducible to the calculus of wages and economic benefits.

Marxists, of course, denominate persistent loyalty to ideals other than economic self-interest as “false consciousness.” Such ideals are as grand as

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pride and hope for the destiny of one's nation, for which many are willing to risk their lives, or as modest as the thousand small courtesies and small everyday pleasures that make up civility. Then there is commitment to God and the desire to ensure the flourishing of the way of life we believe He ordained for us in our individual lives and in our communities. Where such ideals are alive, even those who are not materially wealthy and who are entitled to want more are rich enough in spirit not to be distracted from what is really important to them in the name of one-dimensional material progress. Only where such a way of life has been deadened and made meaningless do people fill the void by clinging to dreams of more money and more goodies and to the envy of groups who seem happier than they. Materialism is the opiate of the dispirited.

Materialism, in this connection, is not always the same as hedonism. We know people who value only material goods and money whose lives are not devoid of meaning despite the relative dearth of both. The adventurous, preferring the democratic exercise of liberty over the socialist promise of equality, hitch their lives to the hope of achieving these things themselves, even while recognizing that their chance at realizing the "American dream" is not assured and not even probable. Or one may toil unselfish and unrewarded expecting one's children to cross the figurative river Jordan and attain the materialistic Promised Land.

Furthermore, when materialism arouses genuine esteem, some gain a measure of consolation in the aura of others' material grandiosity. They relish "the lifestyles of the rich and famous" all the more as these magnetic paladins flout conventional morality and flaunt their crudeness, just as run of the mill scholars or athletes are inspired by the true Olympians. However laughable such vicarious enjoyment may seem to outsiders immune to its charms, in a free country this too is an option that serves to reconcile people to their lot. For them materialism, for what it's worth, bestows spiritual satisfaction disproportionate to the physical benefits it provides. So, for all these reasons, it would seem that the liberal economic system in the West is in better shape than Mill feared, mainly because the preponderance of its participants prefer it that way.

## II

But not only individuals seek meaning and purpose in life. Many, including no few eminent thinkers, value the nation and worry about the fate of national meaning in the absence of ideals that inspire and guide the nation. Will such a nation have the resolve to withstand threats to its

integrity and freedom? Will its members possess the vigor to put their commitment to the next generation above their personal ambition? Will they continue to exist as a nation?

Forty years after Mill's chapters, R. Kook, in his famous essay *Le-Mahalakh ha-Ide'ot be-Yisrael*, confronted this question in its general form. As the title—"The Unfolding of Ideals in Israel"-- indicates, R. Kook's focus is on the national and religious destiny of the Jewish people. The opening sections, from which I quote, are formulated in universalistic terms. R. Kook posits a duality: the "divine ideal" expressing the spirit of a nation, and the "national ideal" expressing its mundane identity. He envisions a situation where the two are not in harmony because the national ideal is no longer guided by the divine ideal. R. Kook believed that such dissonance had harmed the Jewish people during the First Temple period and he was most concerned it was happening in his own time. He insisted that no nation had survived without such an idea in the past, and he saw no reason to anticipate exceptions in the future. How does a secular society struggle for coherence in such a crisis?

One possible solution, R. Kook suggests, is to embrace materialism as the unifying glue that holds together an otherwise disordered society. "Materialism then offers itself as a remedy to a society smothering under the yoke of life without purpose, reason, and content," he writes. The stimulus of material benefit, he continues, "is mobilized to nourish the heart and mind, the life-centers of the individuals, in the effort to construct from these fragments some technical foundation for social and human life. But all in vain."

R. Kook thus proposes two theses: 1) Nations cannot survive without an ideal that gives them cohesion; 2) Materialism, taken as a social and national ideal, cannot satisfy the spirit. One may dispute R. Kook by rejecting either thesis. Perhaps, contrary to prior experience, nations may indeed flourish without the benefit of a shared spiritual identity. Or, one might argue that materialistic striving and enjoyment can supply that identity, that we can all gather round, and find unity, in valuing material goods. Note, also, that R. Kook may be right about the collective's inability to sustain itself on the materialistic diet even though individuals, in particular those who have little use to begin with for national frameworks of identity, happily discover in materialism a source of meaning and purpose. Conversely, one may hold that material striving suffices to maintain an adequate national spirit, at least for some national entities, but doubt its ability to give meaning to the lives of most or any individuals.

Our analysis so far echoes familiar debates in our culture. The religious side typically argues that neither the individual nor society can abide

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without the cement of the ideal, by which they usually mean a specifically religious ideal. Secularists, for their part, eschew such skepticism, believing fervently that such ideals are not necessary either for society or for the individual, or that their culture has produced or will, in the fullness of time, produce satisfactory substitutes or that national identity is obsolete at any rate and will be replaced with new structures of identity.

Meanwhile the world goes on, and each philosophy preaches mostly to the converted. Advocates of traditional religion or culture express fear that national purpose has been dangerously eroded; hence that Western society is speeding towards calamity, or that it is living on the diminishing spiritual capital of previous ages, which will sooner or later be depleted. So long as our physical safety, communal structures, our well-being and that of our families are not directly undermined, the complaint is pretty much an academic one. Opponents dismiss these fears as wrong-headed, misguided, or grossly exaggerated. Over a century has passed since R. Kook wagged his rabbinical finger, and the catastrophe he predicted is not evident to them. As the populace said of the prophet: "The days grow long, and every vision comes to nothing" (Ezekiel 12:22).

### III

What if our present social balance becomes unstable? Perhaps the non-material values we mentioned—national pride, public civility and private intimacy, religious commitment—are weakened, or perceived to have been weakened, to the point where the desire for material goods predominates over all other values. Perhaps human beings can never be entirely satisfied with the pure selfishness of merely material progress so that, in the absence of traditional ideals, it is eclipsed by preoccupation with his or her relative position vis-à-vis his neighbor, the desire to surpass or avoid being surpassed by one's peers. At this stage, strict enforcement of economic equality, even if it were possible, will no longer succeed in satisfying the individual or sustaining the public spirit in the face of invidious competitiveness because the latter cannot be measured by monetary standards or remedied by bureaucratic fiat.

What I mean is well expressed in Sinclair Lewis's 1935 dystopian novel, *It Can't Happen Here*. On the eve of an election that brings to the presidency the homegrown demagogue Buzz Windrip, a character says of Windrip's most aggressive partisans: "There never will be a time when there won't be a large proportion of people who feel poor no matter how

much they have, and envy their neighbors who know how to wear cheap clothes showily, and envy neighbors who can dance or make love or digest better.”

Optimistic materialism’s likely response is that this doomsday scenario cannot take place because good social engineering and unbounded technological advances underwrite endless material progress and that is sufficient to keep the overwhelming majority of the people contented. As Western society has thrived for the past hundred and fifty years, so will it thrive forever. The American dream is not only good to achieve; it is equally good to dream. We must keep the faith: “The lights must never go out, the music must always play;” the economy must always expand.

R. Kook taught that this system *cannot* prevail for long because there is no precedent for it in the past and because, in his religiously informed view, it goes against the spiritual elements in human nature. At a practical level, the question is not about a priori possibility but about everyday reality. Are we right to stake the future of our civilization on the conviction that R. Kook is wrong, or that the demoralization of the public square doesn’t matter very much, or that, if he is right in principle, the day of reckoning will be indefinitely deferred? Will the lights never go out? Will the economy always expand?

Imagine what would happen if the music stopped and the economy stopped expanding. I mean that the standard of living for the middle classes, already affluent beyond belief by comparison with the prosperity of our parents’ or even our own youth, remained exactly what is was. We would eat the same food, wear the same clothes, retain the same level of medical care, drive the same cars, utilize the same conveniences, entertain ourselves with the same gadgets and toys and, for those so inclined, continue to exploit the internet for our Torah study and our general edification, but the dream of more would be placed on hold for our lifetimes or for the foreseeable future. Do not concern yourself for the moment with the effect on the truly destitute, on their present misery and future expectations. Think only of those who do not go to bed hungry, whose material benefits make the most luxurious nabob of yesteryear look like an abject pauper. Are they—are we—ready to absorb such a check, not to our physical well-being, but to our sense of purpose in life?

And now for an even more unthinkable question: What if the economy does not remain where it is but actually regresses, so that we must give up benefits to which we have become quickly but addictively accustomed? This can occur for many plausible reasons: war, pestilence, long term change of global temperature, or other aspects of the environment—and

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if we suffer these calamities, it will not matter if they are man-made or natural, or how many of us signed well-meaning petitions against them.

I am not raising these alarms in order to propose particular methods of preventing them; nor am I competent in adjudicating the severity or probability of danger posed by these threats. My question is simple: If and when we face any of these crises, if our present economic security and our faith in its perpetuation become dubious and obsolete, is our democratic, materialistic society psychologically and socially prepared to endure them?

As rabbis, as educators, as simple Orthodox Jews, we already feel overtaken by innumerable, imminent challenges. Our first and urgent mission is to sustain, in a discouraging world, our singular spiritual commitment to the service of God, as individuals and as a community, with all the day by day responsibilities that entails. Whether or not we relish the task, we must safeguard the economic means to pursue those goals. Nobody else will do this for us. In the public arena we must counter hostility to traditional religion and to the well-being and security of the state of Israel. I am loath to add to my portfolios and to yours by asking what we have done and what we can do for the morale of our democratic society, though I suspect that its shaky underpinnings are not unconnected to the problems we struggle with constantly. Yet, if not we, who will look at our situation from an honest and wholesome perspective? And if not now, when?

# “AND IT HAPPENED IN THOSE MANY DAYS”

## A MIDSUMMER MEDITATION ON THE ABSENCE OF GOD

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**G**rief is singular. In her nineties, my mother, a woman with a shrewd sense of humor though she rarely laughed out loud, said that she watched “Schindler’s List” hoping to catch a glimpse of her mother and father in their last hours. Alas art, like philosophy, so careless of the single life. What mattered to her meant nothing to the film.

When I was the same age as my students, some of us thought that the Holocaust had transformed the world, not just for us, as Jews, but for everyone. Philosophy, ethics, what it meant to be human, could not remain the same.

I think about the Holocaust more today than I did then, more so in the midsummer evenings, when Tisha be-Av approaches and then the anniversaries of my grandparents’ murder. Nearly fifty years since, I have lived longer than the grandfather whose name I bear, whose physical resemblance to me was notable until the final, distraught photo for the visa that arrived too late. Local singular grief disappears with the passing of those who remember. And it seems to me now that the single lives have more to teach us than all the general messages dear to politicians and intellectuals. Let me try to explain.

### I

In politics the Holocaust message is summed up by the phrase “Never Again!” From a universal perspective it means that what the Holocaust represented cannot be allowed to occur again. If human nature does not change for the better, then political and legal mechanisms will make such horrors impossible: the United Nations succeeding where the League of Nations failed; human rights proclaimed and fear of oppression stamped out; “Genocide” defined as a new and uniquely heinous crime prosecuted by the cleverest international jurists; children indoctrinated in peace and brotherhood. And so on and so forth.

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Perhaps these hopes and plans are not completely fruitless. Yet it requires enormous reservoirs of self-delusion to believe that humanity has made significant and permanent strides towards their realization. Human nature stands in the way. The fine slogans become clichés hostage to the infectious demagogue. The sophisticated legal machinery is administered by bureaucrats who excel at finding reasons to pursue policies attractive to their social and intellectual cliques and avoid policies that are not. Sympathy for victims is converted rhetorically into the moral equivalent of a broken slot machine, performing on cue the elaborate rituals of compassion and righteous indignation to the taste of those adept at managing such things. The shadow of the Holocaust did not save mankind from itself for long.

To the parochial Jew, “Never Again!” means that we Jews cannot trust our survival to the vague humane impulses of the non-Jewish culture. The subordination of all values to national survival has not always promoted a life dedicated to the fear of Heaven, and the identification of survival with the most pugnacious attitude to the outside world has not always been prudent. All the same, the lesson of Jewish self-reliance has stood the test of time, precisely as liberal humanism has revealed its blind spots. Be thankful that for a few decades after World War II public anti-semitism became unfashionable. We needed the respite. The moratorium is over.

## II

Where was God during the Holocaust? Is the Holocaust consistent with traditional belief in the omnipotence and benevolence of God? The logical argumentation is endless. It was always evident to me that evil, on the vastest scale and in the most horrific depth, was not an invention of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore I doubted whether the Holocaust could be made to generate new and compelling demonstrations about the philosophical problem of evil that were unavailable before.<sup>1</sup> When the former Chief Rabbi Lau debated the staunchly secularist survivor Tommy Lapid on Israeli TV, the main question was the special relationship of the Jewish people to God in the light of the Holocaust; and here too there was no conclusion.

<sup>1</sup> I have discussed Jewish views of Providence and evil in *Jewish Approaches to the Experience of Suffering*, in particular “Tell Them I’ve Had a Good Enough Life” (also available in *Torah u-Madda Journal* 8).

The deeper mystery defies analysis and argument: what are we to make of our relationship with God and with the world where evil is ubiquitous? Two poles of orientation: let me call them rationalism and existentialism. The rationalist, for our purpose, approaches the relationship with God as one tackles a problem in mathematics. As in math there is an answer in the back of the book. The equations solved, one can move on to other things; if not, one looks forward to the time when what can be known will be known. Though the rationalist prefers an answer in hand to the uncertainty of ignorance, there is comfort in knowing that an answer waits “out there,” enough to sustain a sense of spiritual and psychological business as usual.

Rationalism about evil comes in several flavors. In its pious forms, the actual or potential answer in the back of the book is exhibited as an elaborate divinely ordained mechanism of reward and punishment or some vast teleological scheme in which individual events occupy their necessary place. In its more naturalistic guises, rationalism invests in a secularized system of reward and punishment or discerns purposefulness in the unfolding of some grand secular redemptive movement towards which individual lives are means. Or, at the most abstract level, one may believe that the world follows its natural course so that the reality of evil is attributed to the impersonal operation of natural physical law; this too is an explanation.

Pious rationalism risks overshadowing the personal encounter with God with the metaphysical gadgetry of theurgic speculation; in other words, religion becomes magic. With naturalistic rationalism the danger is that God may disappear completely.

The existentialist in this typology does not dismiss the factors that preoccupy the rationalist. Sin and repentance, the divinely ordained trajectory of history, even the operation of natural causation, are part—but not all—of our encounter with the Divine. The existentialist seeks the commanding, compelling presence of the sovereign, inscrutable God, comforting or terrifying as that might be, rather than the answer in the back of the book. Paradoxically, the presence of God is often more vivid not when we think of Him as accessible to our speculations but precisely when the mystery of God takes hold of us and doesn't let go, when we are seized by the sheer otherness of God.

When I thought about evil half a century ago it was the presence of God that I searched for. If the Holocaust did not alter radically the philosophical quantitative or qualitative problems of evil, yet it seemed to me that after the Holocaust, it was much harder to take any of the rationalistic theories as adequate or even stopgap accounts. R. Soloveitchik's doctrine, that it is futile to seek to understand the ways of God, and that we

should instead, in accordance with halakhic ideas, devote ourselves to the constructive work of repentance that God commands in response to evil, would have been true in any age, rooted as it was in the sources. After the Holocaust it seemed irresistible.

“In the historical realm,” writes the Rav in *Worship of the Heart*, “the numinous comes to expression when man suddenly becomes aware of the unreasonableness of historical occurrence.” Jeremiah confesses: “We sinned and rebelled; You did not forgive” (Lamentations 3:42). He complains “You have covered with a cloud, to prevent prayer from penetrating.” The Psalmist cries out: “Why o Lord do You stand afar; why do You hide in times of trouble?” (10:1). “But now You have rejected and humbled us; You no longer go out with our hosts” (44:9). In the Torah God Himself speaks of His anger at Israel (Leviticus 26) and of the hiding of His face (Deuteronomy 29 and 32).<sup>2</sup> These are only a few of the numerous Biblical expressions and responses to the overpowering experience of evil.

Often the note of despair is overcome in the same passage: In the language of Psalm 30: “A moment in His anger, life in His favor; weeping at nightfall, and rejoicing at morning.” But Tanakh does not attempt to cover up the crisis engendered by experience of evil and pain. Take Job who had craved confrontation with his Maker. When finally God addresses him He supplies no rationalistic explanation of Job’s afflictions. And then comes the outrageous happy ending—God doubles his possessions, as if this could possibly be a consolation for the children he lost.<sup>3</sup> Lamentations dispenses with the happy ending. The book trails off with an incomplete and wholly uncomfoting conditional sentence: “If You have rejected us, if You are angry with us exceedingly,” oblivious to the rabbinic dictum rule that one should not conclude with a message of doom.<sup>4</sup>

Even today, much pious discourse still seems mired in the magical manipulation of the Divine, even as the living sense of divine presence is etiolated among those who pride themselves in being “modern,” and persistent attempts to explain misfortune only exacerbate the implausibility of the competing rationalisms.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, for many of us the memory

<sup>2</sup> See my discussion in “Cold Fury, Hidden Face, the Jealousy of Israel: Two Kinds of Religious Estrangement in the Torah,” *Tradition* 43:4 (Winter 2010), 21-36.

<sup>3</sup> More can be said on this point. In fact, Ramban proposes that the children restored are the same as the ones he lost.

<sup>4</sup> See *Yerushlami Berakhot* 5:1 with standard commentators and Rabbenu Yonah *Berakhot* 22a-b (Rif pagination).

<sup>5</sup> See my “All for the Best: A Modern Orthodox Man Who Fell Among Hasidim and the Urbach-Sanders Debate,” *Tradition* 48:1 (2015).

of the Holocaust continues to provide an unforgettable provocation to theological and existential sobriety.

### III

The Rav illustrates the “absence of God” by citing Biblical verses. To apply this phrase to the Holocaust imports substantial presuppositions. Absence means someone is not present where presence is expected or hoped for. One who speaks of absence has a conception of the being that is absent.<sup>6</sup> We imply acquaintance with God when we say He turns His Face away, or is angry, or unforgiving, or deaf to our prayers. As noted above, the evocation of absence and alienation paradoxically affirms a presence, albeit a terrifying and estranged one. God’s absence can be experienced as a total vacancy or void only when we have stopped making affirmations about Him, or asking questions of Him, or crying out to Him. This absence cannot be described in positive human utterance. Do Job and Lamentations and the other Biblical sources reflect the world of the Holocaust?

Unlike the aforementioned texts, the first two chapters of Exodus are rarely studied as part of the problem of evil, precisely because the agency of God does not come up in the story of enslavement and suffering. God is so absent that His absence is not even noted. Nothing about the sins of Israel that might justify their hardships is mentioned; that the people were sinful in Egypt is recorded 800 years later (Ezekiel 20) but invisible to the plain reader of Exodus. Hazal and later commentators discern various causes of the enslavement, be it the mistakes of the Patriarchs or historical and teleological factors; not in Exodus. In Genesis 15 God informs Abraham, without offering a reason, that the enslavement will occur and that in the fullness of time it will come to an end. But Exodus begins the story with a clean slate, as it were—we hear nothing of these long ago prophecies and promises. The birth of Moses, which can be seen as the first harbinger of redemption, is anonymous, and his first venture among his brethren ends in defeat and flight. “In those many days,” we are told at the end of chapter 2, a verse quoted by the Haggada, the Israelites cry out from their travail but they do not pray to God.<sup>7</sup> Why? They have forgotten that God hearing them and responding is even a possibility.

<sup>6</sup> For a formal phenomenological discussion see Robert Sokolowski, *Presence and Absence: a Philosophical Investigation of Language and Being* (University of Indiana, 1978).

<sup>7</sup> See *Or ha-Hayyim*. This point was often made by R. Soloveitchik: see, for example, Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah,” *Tradition* 17:2 (1978), 55-72.

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It is presumptuous to think that all or even most of the religious Jews like my grandparents who were murdered or who survived the Holocaust would have interpreted their lives in light of the experience of divine abandonment derived from Exodus. Yet the mute suffering of Egypt in those many days may point to a strand in their consciousness.

I wonder whether this sense of divine absence may also help to highlight a feature of religious life today. Whether as a consequence of the Holocaust or other factors, much of our culture, including people associated with religious institutions and engaged in religious practices, have no evident connection to God, not even the experience of alienation, anger, and confusion articulated in Psalms and Lamentations and Job, *inter alia*.

### IV

Our reading of Exodus 1-2 has followed the plain meaning. *Peshat* is reading the text in its first force. The role of *Derash* is often to complement this reading by including a broader perspective. This is what the Gemara (*Sota 11b*) attempts to provide:

**A:** *She stood*—for it is written “God came and stood.” *His sister*—for it is written “Say to wisdom you are my sister.” *From afar*—for it is written “From afar God appeared to me.” (Jeremiah 31) *To know*—for it is written “For God is a God of knowledge” (I Samuel 2)

**B:** *What*—for it is written “What does the Lord your God ask of you?” *Would be done*—for it is written “Because the Lord your God will not do a thing [without disclosing His plan to His servants the prophets].” (Amos 3:8)

**C:** *To him [lo]*—for it is written “And he [Gideon] called it [lo] God of peace.” (Judges 6:24)

For this midrash not Miriam stands guard, anxious for the fate of the infant Moses, but God who watches from afar. What the Biblical text omits, namely the presence of God, however elusive, is filled in retrospectively by Hazal, who divert the words of the verse from their straightforward meaning in order to bring Him into the picture.

This approach explains the introduction of God in section **A** above. Section **B**, however, refers to Moses’ teaching on the fear and God and to Amos on the prophetic mission. The parallel text in *Exodus Rabba* omits these interpretations, as Maharal noted, because they do not contribute to the theological message. Why does the Talmud include them? Maharal

answers that the preservation of the infant Moses is wrapped up with his personality and distinctive vocation. Bringing God into the story thus requires allusion to the verse “What does the Lord your God ask of you,” which highlights Moses’ humility and the verse in Amos about the prophetic office.

One might generalize Maharal’s idea from the personality of Moses to the entire framework of redemption from Egypt. If, as we saw, the explicit text of Exodus 1-2 portrays God’s absence from the horizon of the Israelite slaves and the purpose of the aggada in *Sota* is to reintroduce His presence and plan, then section **B** reminds us that redemption requires a sense of meaning and purpose, a willingness to respond to the divine summons and the divine plan, what God demands of us and the plan in which He initiates His servants the prophets.

What about section **C**? Is there a lack of texts with the common word *lo* that the Talmud must seek out the verse referring to Gideon’s altar? The Talmud, I believe, is hinting at the previous scene in Judges, where Gideon, recalling the Exodus from Egypt, asks where God’s marvels are in his own day. Between the cracks of the reformulated story, Hazal acknowledge that the hour of forsakenness recurs, in different form, in later generations too and that our reenactment of the redemption from Egypt includes re-experiencing it as part of our national story. And this returns us to the permanent lesson we can learn from the generation of destruction.

Getting back to the verse cited by the Gemara: What does God ask of us in remembering that past? When I think of the generation of survivors, I am perpetually amazed not by what they endured but by what they constructed. And behind them stand those who educated them before they perished. Unlike Job they were not restored to their previous place and got nothing back double. Battered and broken by years of unimaginable hardship and loss, cast up on alien shores, more often than not wholly unprepared for their new society, ignorant even of the language of their new land, they summoned up, somehow, the fortitude to start their lives over. Rehabilitating the institutions of Orthodoxy brick by brick, contributing to the rise of Israel, or simply by not despairing of communal and individual life, they made a future for us.

Were their late achievements, even their new families, consolation for what went before? The happy ending of Job is unconvincing, and borders on the outrageous, because it belongs to philosophy and poetry. The precious legacy of the survivors and the world that built them transcends the categories of happiness and sorrow because it is real. What mattered to them means everything to us. May our generation and those that follow us preserve and enhance their work.

# OF PITY AND THE IMMIGRANT

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Late in his life, the father of the Jewish people, when the urgent need to buy a family burial plot forced him to resort to diplomacy, told the elders of Hebron that he was a *ger ve-toshav* (a stranger and an inhabitant) among them. For R. Soloveitchik this phrase defines the perennial situation of the Jew in the world, the experience of common responsibility shared with the rest of humanity together with that of a singular religious destiny. And when the Protestant theologian Stanley Hauerwas wanted to remind his readers that Christians too are not at home in secular culture he entitled one of his books *Resident Alien*.

Let's go back to the original scene, when the phrase was part of a negotiation with the local Hittites, not yet shorthand for a theological principle. Why was Abraham telling them he was a stranger and why then did he call himself an inhabitant? According to the Netsiv Abraham had to justify his request. They did not owe him the courtesy. He explains that he had not prepared a burial ground because he was a stranger. At the same time the word *toshav* indicated to the people of Hebron that he was committed to dwelling among them. The permanence of Abraham the *toshav*, according to Netsiv, is established through the fact that earlier in his life Abraham had lived in Hebron for twenty five years and now he planned to make his home there. Thus the combination *ger ve-toshav* contained both a plea for sympathy in need and an assurance of his ongoing relationship to Hebron based on past connection and future intention.

I once pointed out that Netsiv's analysis made Abraham's situation at this moment akin to that of an immigrant making his case to the established populace. He asks their cooperation because of his difficulties and he feels the need to demonstrate his belonging to the place where he has come. This observation was loudly interrupted and I was accused of making our forefather into a "Mexican wetback." It availed me nothing to argue that Abraham had not been smuggled over a supposed border but, quite to the contrary, presented explicit argumentation in support of his request, or that following Abraham's application he was addressed by the natives as an aristocrat (*Nesi Elokim*) among them.

It hardly need be said that as resident aliens we Jews are not helped by such undiplomatic language. But I don't want to complain now about an embarrassing outburst or lament the eagerness with which the

politically correct classes derive unholy delight from such utterances by Orthodox Jews. I want to understand better what is behind the vehemence of the gentleman's reaction. Is it about Jewish identity or American politics or is it the buried residue of some unarticulated trauma? Sometimes there is deeper truth in a passionate error than in a perfunctory truism. That deeper truth I seek.

Let's begin with the political resonance. As some latter-day Daniel come to judgment might ask of this dispute, which of us is the progressive here and which the conservative? The simple response is that the Netsiv and I can be identified with conservative thinking on present day immigration. How so?

Any argument about "open borders" is either a reason for restricting immigration or for allowing it. 'Why can't people live wherever they want to?' So asks the liberal. To which the response might be that the residents already in place have a right of free association, and are no more required to welcome new immigration to their country than they are obligated to domicile strangers in their homes. More strongly, one might insist on the importance of sustaining a particular culture, which would be violated if the solidarity of the inhabitants were diluted by an uncontrolled influx of individuals unable or unwilling to be part of that community. The liberal, in turn, may hold that economic egalitarianism mandates that natives have no right to stop individuals who wish to better their lots by joining the more prosperous. Or liberals who have little or no use for the particular culture upheld by conservatives would see no reason (quite the contrary!) for preserving it against those who by intention or accident are liable to bring about its destruction. The range of arguments on these primary matters is further complicated by secondary practical considerations. Typical conservatives, for example, acknowledge the benefit a culture accrues from its immigrant population and not a few liberal philosophers permit restrictions on open immigration because they fear that unregulated shifts of population will cause economic harm to the societies of origin of the immigrants or to the places they go to. For these reasons the philosophical and empirical subject of "open borders" has become enormously complicated.<sup>1</sup>

Our present discussion sidesteps crisis circumstances, unfortunately not exceptional in our times, that upset ordinary calculations. Unchecked entry of hostile immigrants could pose direct danger to the host country, as would be the case today if Israel allowed unsupervised Arab immigration

<sup>1</sup> For an overview with up to date bibliography, see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/immigration/>.

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or the threat of revolutionary violence in the West amidst the chaos that followed World War I. Decent conservatives, conversely, cannot fail to be profoundly moved by the humanitarian plight of refugees knocking on their doors, not to improve their economic wellbeing but to salvage their lives and their minimal human dignity. We Jews must remember the extermination of our people in Europe and appreciate the urgency that led conscientious American Jews to fight for their fellow Jews even at the cost of subverting American law. Libby Garland's recent *After They Closed the Gates: Jewish Illegal Immigration to the United States, 1921-1965* documents this period.

Abraham, who is an immigrant but not a desperate refugee, does not simply walk up and say: I'm in the market for real estate; you must give me this burial cave in Hebron. He does not presume that the natives are obliged to give him a positive answer. He expects to justify his need for special treatment and he assures the Hittites of his ties to the Hebron community. This places Abraham in the conservative camp.

Does that make my critic a liberal on immigration insofar as he does not see any need for Abraham to justify his desire to buy a field in Hebron? His reference to the "Mexican wetback" implies the opposite. He cannot abide the notion of Abraham as an immigrant like other immigrants. But why, when Abraham defines himself as a stranger? Apparently my critic made an instinctive distinction between being a stranger and being an immigrant.

## II

"I pity the poor immigrant," is the title and incipit of a Bob Dylan song. The song has much to say about the immigrant's unattractive qualities. The poor immigrant "uses all his power to do evil but in the end is always left so alone. That man who with his fingers cheats and who lies with every breath... passionately hates his life and likewise, fears his death... who tramples through the mud, who fills his mouth with laughing and who builds his town with blood." And there's a lot more of the same.

Unmitigated hostility towards the immigrant sounds incredible in the mouth of a troubadour adored by the left and does not fit well with the rest of the album *John Wesley Harding*, in which it was recorded, in the mid-60's, when American immigration law was liberalized without vocal opposition. If academics studied Dylan as they have their way with the Bible we would be authoritatively taught to attribute it to Deutero-Dylan – a racist, reactionary, fill-in-the epithet, living in the anti-immigrant

21<sup>st</sup> century, who adopted the master's style to convey a perverted message. More reverential approaches have yielded allegorical interpretations of the song; like most allegorists they seem to express the outlook of the interpreter more than anything else. Though I am stymied by the many obscure allusions, I would contend that the plain meaning of Dylan's scripture is never completely disposable. By which I mean that something in our common way of thinking does not like the immigrant, does not respect him but pities him, and that Dylan taps into that sentiment and confronts us with it.

Could Dylan have written an equally effective song called "I Pity the Poor Stranger" or "I Pity the Poor Foreigner"? Why not? From a statistical point of view, a person who is a stranger is no less likely than the immigrant to cheat with his fingers and lie with every breath, to passionately hate his life and build his town with blood. In fact, many people are suspicious of strangers and warn their children against associating with them. It is less common to hear of children admonished to watch out for immigrants. Fear of the foreigner rates a precise English term—xenophobia. If the Greco-Latin word for fear of immigrants has made it into the psychiatric textbooks or the lexicons of abuse employed by enlightened folk to express their condemnation of those who fail to meet their standards of refinement and tolerance, I have yet to hear of it. Technically, the immigrant would seem to be no more than one type of stranger or foreigner. What makes him different, more contemptible and hence more pitiable? Again, why would people proud to think of our patriarch Abraham as a stranger gag at thinking of him as an immigrant?

Over a century ago, the pioneering sociologist Georg Simmel, in his famous essay "The Stranger," defined the stranger, as distinguished from a foreign visitor or tourist, as the person who is here today and here tomorrow. The immigrant, let me suggest, is one who is here today and will be here tomorrow if allowed to stay. The stranger is not by definition dependent on us: he may be planning to leave tomorrow. Hence there is even an element of coolness to the stranger in Simmel's social phenomenology. The immigrant, by contrast, always has a look of haunted supplication about him. We imagine him, shoulders always sloped; his eyes entreating; in need of our forbearance. His hat is perpetually in his hand; and when his free hand reaches out, it is to grasp at our lapel or at our money, or at the opportunity he spies. Whether or not you accept this insight as a valid interpretation of Dylan, according to which the song's hostility towards the immigrant is a projection of our contempt rather than an objective characterization of the immigrant, I propose it as an analysis of the unease which the immigrant, or the imagination of the

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immigrant, often provokes. It is a distaste that is better described as pity than as hatred. We can live with being hated; we may sometimes even glory in being hated; we cannot tolerate being pitied. We can accept Abraham's status as a stranger or an alien; we can even celebrate his noble distance from the populace around him. We are unbearably pained to think of him as a potential object of pity.

### III

It is not only Abraham who was an immigrant or sojourner in the land. His descendants went down to Egypt, where they were sojourners and eventually slaves. The great political philosopher Michael Walzer, in his *Exodus and Revolution*, observed that no other nation but the Jews preserved and was inspired by the memory of having been born into freedom from the bowels of alien oppression. The many laws in the Torah calling upon us to consider the plight of the stranger or the disadvantaged among us because we remember our history in Egypt testify, in Walzer's opinion, to a singular willingness to confront and be inspired by the humiliations of the national past.

Some years ago I modified Walzer's thesis. Based on the evidence of the Torah it was not at all natural for Israel to remember and to be shaped by the Egyptian bondage. What we have in the Torah is not the natural excellence of the Jewish people shining out from its period of bondage but rather the result of a long educational transformation initiated by the patient and stern deity who chose Israel for His portion and made His home with Israel in the wilderness. That is why, to take one salient claim from my paper, the explanation "for you were a slave in the land of Egypt," which motivates many commandments in Deuteronomy, does not appear in the earlier books of the Torah. Instead, in Exodus 22-23, where Egypt is invoked as a motive for obeying the law, it is always the fact that the Jews were sojourners (*gerim*) in Egypt, never that they were slaves. For the Jew who has just emerged from bondage, and who has not yet acquired a philosophy of freedom, the memory of slavery is too humiliating to be the source of positive inspiration.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See S. Carmy, "We Were Slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt: Literary-Theological Notes on Slavery and Empathy" (*Hebraic Political Studies* 4:4, Fall 2009), accessible at <https://cardozo.yu.edu/sites/default/files/Shalom%20Carmy%2C%20We%20Were%20Slaves%20in%20Egypt%20Literary-Theological%20Notes%20on%20Slavery%20and%20Empathy.pdf>. My article traces the theme throughout the Torah. To that discussion add *Hizkuni*, Deuteronomy 5:15.

We Jews have the difficult though not impossible task of identifying with our history as slaves. It may be equally difficult to identify with our history as immigrants, in the sense we have discussed here. To relive the experience of the aristocratic Abraham, or of our immediate ancestors, lacking the rights that would enable us to live as we should, forced to earn the good will of the natives with no assurance that our overtures will be accepted, can be deeply humiliating. Jewish interpreters, beginning with the pseudepigraphic Jubilees and including Ramban and R. Yona of Gerona, counted Abraham's encounter with the Hittites as the final one of the ten ordeals by which he was tested. Though they stress the contrast between the divine promise of the land and the effort needed to acquire the burial cave, we should not dismiss the humbling gestures integral to the negotiation.

As we noted above there are many policy considerations that may justify limitations on unregulated immigration. Regardless, it seems callous to withhold simple human sympathy from those who have endured and continue to endure the immigrant experience. My critic's angry outburst about "Mexican wetbacks" seems gratuitously out of line and invites harsh recrimination precisely because extending such sympathy seems so easy. The sheer painlessness of saying the expected word of fellow feeling is one reason that comfortable *bien-pensant* folk nowadays are so quick to judge outsiders for casual politically incorrect remarks and shake their heads in righteous condemnation.

Yet, when I think of my critic's impolite, unguarded outcry, there is a moral reality in his rude, raw, artless but instinctively appalled resistance to my invoking the word "immigrant" with reference to our patriarch Abraham. The horror he exhibits at the thought demonstrates eloquently that he understands viscerally, in a way that those who look down on him often do not, what it means in the real world to suffer the diminution, the hostility, prejudice and pity of being an immigrant. Paradoxically, it is he and his outrage, and not the routine obligatory mantras of neutral "telescopic" benevolence (to borrow a phrase from Charles Dickens), that pushed me to explore more carefully how we feel about the stranger and "the immigrant" and why.

# “IT CAN SINK SO LOW AND NO LOWER”: ON FANATICISM AND DOGMA

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Calling your adversary a fanatic is often more emotionally satisfying than it is intellectually useful. When you say fanatic, you usually mean extremist but calling him an extremist isn't enough. What makes him an extremist is being extreme compared to you, the moderate. Your target shoots back: forget about extreme: I'm right and you're wrong. Barry Goldwater said that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice, meaning that so-called moderates were insufficiently devoted to liberty. The imputation of fanaticism packs more rhetorical power than the accusation of extremism. Calling someone a fanatic strips them of the defense of rightness without extra effort. Once you fix that mad glint in his eye and that imperviously angry or cheerful mask of enthusiasm on his countenance, you've discredited him or her irremediably. That is why neither Goldwater nor anyone else could get away with saying that fanaticism in a good cause is no vice. Unlike extremism, fanaticism is always a vice.

A great deal of energy in the Orthodox community is expended defending ourselves against accusations of fanaticism or out of eagerness to deploy the epithet against those whom we perceive as less moderate than we. Often we are given the impression, or give others the impression, that serious, uncompromising dedication to intellectual principles or norms is indistinguishable from fanaticism, and that lukewarm commitment bordering on indifference is preferable. It is worth diverting a small proportion of our energy to defining more carefully what we mean and what we ought to mean by fanaticism. The results of such an inquiry may be unexpected.

A better concept of fanaticism must take it beyond extremism. That is why I like Santayana's celebrated definition: "Fanaticism consists in redoubling your effort when you have forgotten your aim." I like it because, instead of equating fanaticism with what its opponents consider immoderate, it identifies an internal absurdity in the target's outlook. An extremist is accused of disproportionate zeal for a cause. The fanatic is guilty of inconsistency. Your fanatic is allowed to justify his actions in line with his own aim, not yours, but he cannot. If he is not hopelessly rigid,

the putative fanatic may end up pleading guilty to your charge and changing his ways.

For example: a leader quick to undertake major military action to enhance his nation's security is untroubled when branded an extremist by the dovish opposition. From his perspective, they are wrong and he is right: extreme measures to assure survival are no vice. Now if you charge that his policies endanger the security he seeks because they have become an end in themselves and he has forgotten the original goal, in other words, that he fits Santayana's definition and is a fanatic, the epithet may yet bring him up short so that he recalls his original aim and revises his position accordingly. Or the relentless pursuit of health may impel a person to extraordinary lengths in avoiding certain foods. Call him an extremist because a slightly better chance for physical well-being is not worth the sacrifices and preoccupation and he will boast it as a virtue; warn him that he risks nutritional deficiencies, and he may yet see reason and make health rather than dietary rigidity his guiding light.

Of course, Santayana's definition loses effectiveness as a persuasive logical tactic if the target cannot recover the goal or the anti-fanatic is blind to his opponent's motives and reacts only to the redoubled effort. The examples we looked at are easy because the original goals (security, health) were transparent and the only argument was about the fanatic undermining his true goal. As we shall see, goals worth living and dying for are usually not simple, neither at their inception nor with the passage of time.

Those who fail to study Santayana are condemned to repeat him out of context. The fanatics Santayana had in mind when he coined the aphorism were one of his least favorite nations. Here is the full passage:

The after-effects of Hebraism are here contrary to its foundations; for the Jews loved the world so much that they brought themselves, in order to win and enjoy it, to an intense concentration of purpose; but this effort and purpose, which had of course been mythically sanctioned, not only failed of its object, but grew far too absolute and sublime to think its object could ever have been earthly; and the supernatural machinery which was to have secured prosperity, while that still enticed, now had to furnish some worthier object for the passion it had artificially fostered. Fanaticism consists in redoubling your effort when you have forgotten your aim.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, 13.

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In other words, Judaism is fanatical, the Harvard savant alleges, because its original aim was the worldly success of the nation, a coherent, reasonable goal, if not a particularly noble one. When the Jews mistook their commitment to God as the goal rather than as a means toward worldliness they became fanatical. Forgetting the aim and redoubling the effort—that's Santayana's definition.

Liking Santayana's definition of fanaticism does not mean that one must subscribe to this application. Perhaps the service of God is a worthier goal than national prosperity, and forsaking exclusive devotion to the latter for absolute commitment to the former is not forgetting one's aim but discovering one's true vocation, just as the mature student outgrows childish attachment to external motives and comes to value learning as its own reward. Whether Judaism is fanaticism or not is inseparable from one's first principles. Santayana's are different from mine.

To determine the pristine goal that the fanatic's redoubled efforts betrays is difficult not only with respect to long-lived religions like Judaism. You can't always be sure about individuals. Take the eminent Santayana himself writing to a younger (Jewish-born!) colleague in the 1930's:

I love order in the sense of organized, harmonious, consecrated living: and for this reason I sympathize with the Soviets and the Fascists and the Catholics, but not at all with the liberals. I should sympathize with the Nazi's too, if their system were, even in theory, founded on reality...<sup>2</sup>

Among the intellectual superstars of his age, Santayana was far from alone in his attraction to the great European dictators of the era, though his taste, as evinced by this passage, was more eclectic than most. Is he fanatical? By one element in his definition, no, since he does not seem prepared to make any effort to realize his dream, let alone a redoubled effort. The other element depends on his fundamental aims: if the great goal is organized, harmonious living, as he avers, then the violence entailed by militant political productions blatantly vitiates the vision; if, as one may suspect on the basis of other features of his thought, Santayana had a soft spot for the charismatic psychopaths because they appealed to his appreciation of beautiful, dramatic ritual, then a more impassioned commitment to any or all of them would merely extend the philosophy to its logical conclusion.

Before looking at our own contemporary situation, let's try another definition of the fanatic. The *OED* quotes the Victorian man of letters

<sup>2</sup> *The Letters of George Santayana, Volume 5, 1933-1936*, ed. Holzberger and Saatkamp (MIT Press, 2003) 195, written June 8, 1934.

Charles Kingsley who speaks of “[t]he man of one idea, who works at nothing but that... sacrifices everything to that; the fanatic in short.” Kingsley’s fanatic is a specific kind of extremist: he is not defined by how far he goes, but by how narrowly. To know whether a man or woman is a Kingsleyan fanatic, you don’t have to delve into their past and present goals or to judge his effort excessive. It is enough to know that his devotion to the idea that drives him is exclusive and one-sided.

Does Kingsley here intend condemnation? The continuation of his statement is surprisingly positive: “By fanatics, whether military, commercial or religious, and not by ‘liberal-minded men’ at all, has the world’s work been done in all ages.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, its rhetorical force derives from contrast with the conventionally negative connotations of fanaticism. Yes, he implies, we must recognize the achievement of the “man of one idea” without wanting to be like him or live with him. This dual evaluation of the fanatic deserves more attention.

## II

So are we Orthodox Jews fanatics? If the goal to which we dedicate our efforts is the persistence and well-being of the Jewish people then Orthodoxy is to be judged by that standard. Many of our fellow Jews maintain fervently that our insistence on halakhic observance and adherence to normative belief substitutes one means to that end for the end itself. Having misplaced the true goal and intensified its efforts, Orthodoxy, by Santayana’s definition, deserves the label of fanaticism.

Much contemporary debate, accepting Santayana’s assessment of Judaism, follows these lines. Opponents of Orthodoxy wish to play down the importance of observance and abnegate the role of belief in order to promote the “big tent” that will assure numerical success and social, economic, and political welfare. For them Orthodox practice and affirmation are useful as one kind of Jewish engagement in the varied smorgasbord of Jewish identity building. The Orthodox contribution may be recognized as superior insofar as Orthodox affiliation is associated with many other safeguards of Jewish identity such as kashrut, Shabbat observance, supporting Israel, endogamy, and Jewish literacy. Regarded as obligatory,

<sup>3</sup> *Sir Walter Raleigh and His Time*, 115. <https://books.google.com/books?id=GsgwAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA115&lpq=PA115&dq=charles+kingsley+%22man+of+one+idea%22&source=bl&ots=p1hojUQcyM&sig=AfbYsV99SvCa6rOmPAaOgFU1hSM&hl=en&csa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiTxbfnrOrRAhXpzIMKHRzmD9MQ6AEIJTAB#v=onepage&q=charles%20kingsley%20%22man%20of%20one%20idea%22&f=false>.

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however, Orthodoxy threatens to exclude or marginalize members of the Jewish community. The Orthodox counter that diluting the rigorous standards upheld by Orthodoxy is a short-sighted strategy for survival and soon results in diminished identity. Orthodoxy is thus justified even from the perspective of the ideology that defines the goal of Judaism as communal flourishing and survival.

Both Orthodoxy and social Judaism set down a unitary overriding goal: for the former, the service of God; for the latter, the advancement of the people. Neither, by Santayana's definition, is fanatical provided it is truly faithful to its foundational principle. As we just noted, Orthodoxy may have instrumental value even from the viewpoint of its opponents. Yet, in addition to its absolute claims, Orthodoxy is seriously flawed in the eyes of its detractors for another reason. To be Jewish as Orthodoxy teaches is complicated and it entails the willingness to sacrifice. These factors discourage the average modern person from affiliating and thus hamper survival and "Jewish continuity."

By contrast, the social Jew is proud of the positive affiliations he finds attractive and meaningful. These may include halakhic observance, synagogue membership, prayer, study, and Zionism; it also includes bagels and lox, folk dancing, Yiddish phrases, being opinionated and argumentative, left wing politics and (sometimes) right wing politics. Some of these endeavors are strenuous: they may require significant investment of time and energy or the risk of unpopularity and ostracism; some are light. All are valuable Jewishly for the same reason--the more Jewish things one does, the greater the adhesion to the Jewish people.

Orthodoxy, though, demands commitment to practices, some of them time-consuming and inconvenient, regardless of their appeal to the individual, and to normative beliefs not all of which are the ones we would have chosen on our own. The point here is that Orthodoxy, by definition, is not about expressing one's self; rather it imposes on the individual a truth that is not his or hers. Orthodoxy may serve as a site of self-expression but always of a self that is committed to conforming itself to an ideal that is not yet oneself.

The social Jew is confident that his brand of identity building is free of fanaticism in any sense of the term. His threshold of entry is low, so it doesn't undercut the goal of including as many members as possible. And it seems immune to extremism: binging on Shalom Aleichem or *Seinfeld* or even Phillip Roth are victimless crimes. Few pleasures are more inoffensive in the long or short run than eating herring and indulging in cholent. And so on.

Sometimes it is forgotten that these harmless hobbies rarely bring about robust Jewish identification sufficient to withstand countervailing influences. That can only be accomplished via the more strident types of identification, the ones that can rival the consuming passions of religion and particularly those that give satisfaction only when the public arena is commandeered on their behalf, when ideals are outwardly projected and their advocates seek to impose their will and judgment on others. As we see every day both in Israel and the United States, the energy thus unleashed is divisive and typically leads to hatred and contempt for those who do not fall in line.

Earlier we said that Santayana's idea of the proper goal of ancient Judaism is not Orthodoxy's and hence his imputation of fanaticism to the Jews is debatable. But the fundamental philosophical divergence may run deeper. The religious goal of serving God is indeed unitary; the unity, however, derives not from the self-defined and self-chosen welfare of the people but from the divine object of our worship and from the expression of His will in the Torah. As such, living an Orthodox life is too complicated an affair to be formulated in terms of a simple goal. The Social Jew can, and often does, attempt to dispense with God in order to worship at the shrine of ethnicity. The traditional Jew cannot emancipate himself from Jewish peoplehood in favor of solitary piety. The militant Zionist may disdain universal moral imperatives and the cosmopolitan may express "Jewishness" through obliviousness to Jewish particularity. Orthodoxy cannot pick and choose in this manner. Absolute devotion to God and Torah entails multiple and irreplaceable finite commitments.

The way of Orthodoxy is therefore one of complex and not always harmonious gestures. One is reminded of Chesterton's image of the tightrope walker who teeters back and forth, now appearing to fall one way, now in the opposite direction like a reeling drunkard, while in fact it is these exorbitant-looking gesticulations that enable him to maintain his balance and to follow the straight and narrow line. It is the principle of dogma, the embracing of a systematic outlook independent of one's own inclinations, however legitimate in themselves, and the consequent foregoing of selective private judgment that is the hallmark of (lower case) orthodoxy and provides the indispensable framework for this demanding balancing act.

You will tell me that the dogmatic principle as I describe it is not a conspicuous feature of the Orthodox lifestyle. Often discussion of dogma and ritual aims at a narrow hairsplitting about optimal formulations and performances as if punctiliousness alone could substitute for balance and

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comprehensiveness. Often Orthodoxy becomes a specialized manifestation of social Judaism, lobbying vociferously for one particular subset of Orthodox practice or ideology, concentrating pugnaciously on elements that are neglected or rejected by the non-Orthodox, or ingratiatingly harping on the elements the non-Orthodox approve. Then the Orthodox Jew redoubles his or her commitment to some component value in Orthodoxy such as devotion to the Jewish people and its defense, love of the land of Israel, meticulous observance of certain *mitsvot*, dedication to Torah study or (even among the Orthodox!) cheerleading for non-Jewish or even anti-Jewish ingredients imported from European ideology or American politics that are found attractive by some outspoken members of our social group. But whatever the special talents and inclinations that make the vocation of each Orthodox Jew unique, and in spite of the individual foibles that tempt us to narrowness and self-satisfaction, Orthodoxy, by upholding the painstaking but exhilarating tightrope walk of dogma as a normative and dogmatic system, counteracts Kingsley's description of the fanatic as the man or woman of one idea.

### III

Fifty years after Professor Santayana of Harvard identified Judaism with fanaticism, a young scholar at Harvard studied the desiccation of early 18<sup>th</sup> century Anglican religion and blamed it on the sincere but misguided attempts of late 17<sup>th</sup> century thinkers to play down the importance of dogma and ritual. After the civil strife of the 1640's and 1650's they hoped that avoiding potentially divisive religious rigor would inhibit what they called "enthusiasm" and we would call emotional fanaticism. They envisioned "Anglican continuity," a unified, peaceful, and orderly Christian society.

On this tendency R. Aharon Lichtenstein commented in the resulting dissertation:

Dogma, ritual, intellection—whatever one may think of them—at least set an objective floor for religion; it can sink so low and no lower.

Telling this story of religious decline, it is unimaginable that the future religious authority was oblivious to its ominous implications for the future of Judaism in general and Orthodoxy in particular. How far can religion sink and in what direction? Sixty years ago and no less so today the danger was abandonment of fervor, a religion reduced to being one

of the appurtenances of middle class society, where the most upscale members lack conviction and set the tone for those who would emulate them. Dogma and normative ritual could then sustain the bare minimum that would keep religious authenticity alive under discouraging circumstances.

Our present discussion adds another layer. Dogma and normative ritual are not only the line of last defense against the etiolation of religious life. They are also the line of first defense against Judaism sinking, not only to the tepid indifference that R. Lichtenstein discerned in the Anglican establishment of three hundred years ago, but at the very same time to one-sidedness and to the very fanaticism and imbalance occasioned by the overthrow of dogmatic principles and normative action in the name of subjective preference disdainful of the objective floor of dogma. This is a danger within the nominally Orthodox community and an even greater danger among those distant from the orthodox way of thinking.

# WHAT IS THE OPPOSITE OF WEAKNESS?

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He seeks not the greatness found in sacrificial action but the convenience one discovers in a comfortable, serene state of mind.

(Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Lonely Man of Faith*)

**W**hat is Rome to Jerusalem? What have rabbis in common with Roman Catholic priests? Rabbis are family men; priests are sworn to celibacy. Priests are garbed in supernatural power; they hold the keys to the kingdom, hearing confession and forgiving sins, performing the mysterious miracle of the Eucharist. Rabbis are, literally, teachers. As servants of the community and resources for halakhic rulings they engage in exactly the same activities of Torah study and human kindness that they promote among their flock. All the same, rabbis and priests share a sociological niche as professional symbols of religion; they are often perceived similarly by the laity and often see themselves as likewise set apart.

Two of the great English Roman Catholic writers in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century created fictional priests reflecting their spiritual concerns. First Father Brown, G.K. Chesterton's answer to Sherlock Holmes. Brown, as his name suggests, is outwardly unimpressive. He solves his crimes through a mixture of keen reasoned observation and profound understanding of human beings. Always, he says, he can enter the mind of the criminal tempted to commit the crime, and this insight puts him on the right track. Save for the expertise in human corruption provided by his endless hours in the confessional box, Father Brown's success has nothing to do with his vocation, and everything to do with the good sense characteristic of his outlook.

In Chesterton's day, as in our own, modern-minded people tended to disdain traditional religion in favor of "spirituality," especially of the oriental variety. In "The Red Moon of Meru" Lady Mounteagle admits she had once been prejudiced against "brown people" until she discovered their "wonderful spiritual powers." To which Father Brown ripostes: "Frankly, I don't care for spiritual powers much myself. I've got much more sympathy with spiritual weaknesses."

Father Brown here contrasts spiritual powers, of the sort that attract Lady Mounteagle, with spiritual weaknesses. He bluntly rebuffs her attraction to the external impressiveness through which the typical spiritual guru cultivates his superiority over his audience. At the same time he insinuates

a positive message: proper attainment of holiness characteristically requires the struggle with the manifold weaknesses of the spirit. Often fascination with the occult is an escape from that everyday struggle. In the story his interest in human weakness may have been rewarded by the prosaic repentance of a thief.

Graham Greene's famous priest is as different from Father Brown as the two authors are from each other. Chesterton is cheerful; Greene is morose; Chesterton's imagination is uproariously comic; Greene's is tormented. The Mexican priest in Greene's masterpiece *The Power and the Glory* remains nameless. Rather than solve crimes in the comfortable manner of an English amateur detective he is himself an outlaw, hunted by the revolutionary Socialist government in the 1930's bent on extirpating the faith he continues to propagate. During the long years of persecution, he has sought comfort in drink and, distracted, has fathered a daughter. He cannot forget that the police, bent on his capture, take hostages, and kill them, wherever they suspect he has been sheltered. The priest sees himself as failure and a disgrace, unworthy of the sacrifice he has occasioned. Yet his fitful attempts at escape come to nothing. Each time he is summoned to administer last rites, he turns back sourly, captive to his vocation.

The serene wisdom of Father Brown and the haunted shadow of the whisky priest both belong to a world infinitely distant from the shabby stories of abuse that have inflicted such harm on the Catholic Church and, to a lesser degree, caused immense pain and consternation in our own community. To explain why, let me cite George Weigl, a prominent Catholic public intellectual who had access to confidential documents in the aftermath of the pedophilia scandals 15 years ago. Discussing one of the most prolific offenders, who had been assigned numerous courses of therapy and then recycled to a new and unsuspecting parish, Weigl comments:

It was also striking that the 1995 "spiritual assessment" of John Geoghan by St. Luke's Institute did not probe the man's beliefs, even at the elementary level: Did Geoghan believe in God? Did he believe that God can make his will known to us? Did he accept the creeds of the Church and the Church's teaching on sexual ethics? Did he believe in sin? In punishment for sin?... What is even more striking, however, is the seeming assumption by the priest-interviewer... that these questions of belief have absolutely nothing to do with the "spiritual assessment" of a clerical sexual predator. Here was the triumph of the therapeutic at its most disturbing.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> George Weigl, *The Courage to be Catholic: Crisis, Reform and the Future of the Church* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 103ff.

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There is no doubt about how either Father Brown or the whisky priest would have answered questions about their beliefs. What makes Greene's priest a religious character rather than a fictionalized case history is the fact that he understands exactly what it means to be a human being created in the image of God with an immortal soul to save or forfeit and what it means to have consecrated one's life to the priestly vocation. In a word, their lives are lived in the full awareness that God's demands on us are absolute and non-negotiable.

Weigl goes on to imply a link between the laxity of the church hierarchy and its failure to insist resolutely on the primacy of church teaching over a mechanical therapeutic mercifulness. The accuracy of his allegations is an internal Catholic matter that need not detain us. Historians of Protestantism, noting the sexual shenanigans involving notable charismatic evangelical figures in cycles of scandal and recovery, might likewise point a finger at their mild-mannered undemanding conception of God. One could go back to the root of liberal Protestantism in 19<sup>th</sup> century Brooklyn, with the famed minister Henry Ward Beecher, celebrated for emancipating American religion from the strict authoritarian God of his father, and even more notorious for carrying on with other men's wives.<sup>2</sup>

One might downplay the importance of religious commitment regarding these questions by arguing that human nature is the same in every place and time and that deviant psychology does not differentiate among religious affiliations. Halakha and common sense regulate the opportunities for sexual transgression precisely because our desires so often defy our mastery. The current scandals are rooted as much, if not more, in fantasies of power than in carnal lust. The abusiveness rife where dominant individuals or cliques within an institution become a law unto themselves, and victims are unable to fight back or even protest, is nothing new, nor is it a phenomenon particularly tied to organized religion. Yet, despite these points, it seems incredible to hold that the presence or absence of bedrock religious faith is irrelevant to behavior and even more so that it is irrelevant to the way the religious community reacts to grievously deviant behavior. Nor is it plausible that those inclined to such behavior are not affected by the general moral and doctrinal atmosphere.

<sup>2</sup> See Richard Wightman Fox, *Trials of Intimacy: Love and Loss in the Beecher-Tilton Scandal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) and Debby Applegate, *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher* (New York: Three Leaves Press, 2006).

II

It goes without saying that there are Jewish counterparts to Weigl's questions and that God makes categorical and non-negotiable demands of Orthodox clergy and laity alike. When abusive behavior was hushed up by those in charge the common explanation was that the guilty individual is "doing wonderful work," meaning that he is personally magnetic and attracts those under his influence to identification with what is popularly called the "Orthodox life style," or that we have a manpower shortage. To ask about belief and depth of commitment to God's absolute demands after the fact, when the offending individual's actions have already spoken, is indeed practically irrelevant. How individuals have reached that point should not be ignored, especially if we care about fostering health rather than merely quarantining spiritual disease. We enter religious life and adopt it as a profession for a variety of motives. We may have wished to identify with the Jewish people and foster Jewish identity or to help Jews and humanity. We may have desired a way of life that allows us to learn and teach. We may have been influenced by family traditions and expectations. Or we fell into a way of life without thinking about it much. In the end, as time and suffering and joy do their work, our lives invariably outstrip or fall short of our initial motivations, to the extent we understand them. Yet regardless of our initial motives, we know that it requires discipline and sacrifice and struggle, although we can hardly anticipate the exact form temptation will take and what will be required of us to withstand it.

What is the opposite of weakness? Father Brown implies that the opposite of the charismatic deployment of "spiritual powers" is attention to spiritual weaknesses. The title of Greene's novel contrasts power, as exercised by the police lieutenant, with the ambiguous glory of the flawed but faithful priest. The opposite of power may be weakness. But the opposite of weakness is not power. The opposite of weakness is strength and strength means steadfastness; it means keeping faith.

The difference between our struggles today and the world of Greene's priest is that our culture no longer takes as a given the absolute non-negotiable character of the divine command. As in previous times, many successfully lead sheltered lives, relatively free of temptation. Others, however, are put to the test. Rabbis and religious teachers are especially vulnerable in contemporary society, if only because we are more keenly aware of the gap between nominal adherence to Orthodox standards, where it still exists, and the conviction of divine command and divine mission. As R. Soloveitchik recognized in the middle of the last century, our

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audience “seeks not the greatness found in sacrificial action but the convenience one discovers in a comfortable, serene state of mind.” The blank stare of indifference, the smile of condescension, even the stupidity of an intended compliment that betrays utter miscomprehension, make us wonder what we are doing and to what purpose. In such circumstances one is liable to feel belittled and estranged, summoned to heroism or driven to despair.

Where commitment is steadfast the individual can withstand failure and indifference and keep true to his mission. Where it is not, religious functionaries are exposed to the same temptations that plague other modern men and women. Moreover, because their profession sets them apart from the rest of society, they may imagine compensating for disappointment and futility, bitterly, almost vengefully, by relying on an aptitude for power and domination over others, or by overvaluing such gifts in colleagues. Or they may want to numb the pain of isolation by reaching out for the transient pleasures of the flesh and the illusion of contact, with the vague fancy that God is distant and indifferent.

For as long as we can remember the social environment has been inhospitable to “men of faith” without breaking their integrity and self-discipline. In the past these men, particularly those in the rabbinate, may not have enjoyed great success in recruiting congregants: often they lacked the language and education; always the social odds were against them. For the most part they enjoyed such encouragement as their families could provide and their colleagues were reachable by post. Like Father Brown, these men did not thrive through the deployment of “spiritual powers.” Unlike Father Brown, they constructed lonely citadels of strength and steadfastness not in fiction but in real life, contending not against fictional evil but with all too painful indifference.

I have spoken of faithfulness in terms of unshakable adherence to doctrines and convictions. Let me make it clear that this is not a matter of being able to produce the correct answers to the kind of questions Weigl asks, as if knowing the “approved” positions and repeating them upon demand conferred immunity to faithlessness in practice. No segment of our community is free of guilt, neither the liberals who openly make light of rigorous obligations of belief and behavior, nor those who uphold the most punctilious standards in theory, even while quietly regarding gross violations in their circles as “negotiable” offenses. It is the seriousness of belief and principles that is at risk, rather than merely their precise content.

To forestall misunderstanding, let me also iterate that my intention is not to offer a theory about the causes of rabbinic irresponsibility and abuse. My remarks here are about our spiritual condition rather than

about causes. To borrow an old philosophical example: fire results when a match is lit, but there will be no fire unless there is oxygen to support the flame: the match is the cause; the oxygen is a condition. Abusive attitudes and behavior and subsequent cover-ups vary with the individual. My concern here is with the religious-moral state of our community and what we ought to do to sustain our steadfastness and integrity.

When I consider what I and my generation needs in order to be strong and steadfast in our commitment to the *Ribbono shel Olam* I am ever inspired by the written record of vigorous study left behind by some of the lonely American *Rabbanim* mentioned above. Last Elul, for example, I studied the newly printed *Moadei Tsevi* by R. Tsvi Hirsh Grodzinski, a rabbi with the best Lithuanian training who served the Jews of Omaha, Nebraska from 1891 to 1948 (57 years!). One section of his book is a practical responsum on the halakhic validity of *hazarat ha-shatz* of Rosh ha-Shana *musaf* when the cantor does not trouble himself to recite the passages assigned to the choir. Side by side with this no doubt dispiriting query is a trenchant analysis of the *sugya* dealing with the institution of *hazarat ha-shatz*. Although his day to day experience as an American rabbi was frustrating, R. Grodzinski's intelligence and calm persistent strength of character speak from his writings. To think of how such men lived is a prophylactic against faithlessness and self-indulgence and a reminder of what we are here for.

The highest level of friendship, as Rambam stated in his commentary to *Avot*, following Aristotle, is that of individuals who share a sublime goal, where one helps the other. If we want to restore the integrity of our religious community, it is important that we seek friends, and become friends, whose entire conduct is a mutual reminder of the existence of absolute and non-negotiable divine demands. If we create such a community, we will not be isolated when we pose to ourselves Weigl's questions about fundamental conviction and commitment.

The whiskey priest is not so fortunate. He yearns for the sacrament of confession and absolution, even at the hands of Padre José, a weak man who has been forced to marry, and is exhibited as an object of mockery and humiliation. Even such a coward is a priest, and even he might help his fellow priest confront his sins and achieve contrition. But Padre José is afraid to come, even when the police lieutenant promises he will not be punished. The whiskey priest spends his last night alone.

He caught sight of his own shadow on the cell wall: it had a look of surprise and grotesque unimportance. What a fool he had been to think that he was strong enough to stay when others fled. What an impossible

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fellow I am, he thought, and how useless. I have done nothing for anybody. I might just as well have never lived. His parents were dead—soon he wouldn't even be a memory—perhaps after all he wasn't really Hell-worthy. Tears poured down his face; he was not at the moment afraid of damnation—even the fear of pain was in the background. He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all. It seemed to him at that moment that it would have been quite easy to have been a saint. It would only have needed a little self-restraint and a little courage. He felt like someone who has missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place. He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted—to be a saint.

It would be good for us as individuals and good for the people we serve if we kept R. Grodzinski's example of dignity, integrity, and lonely persistence before our eyes as a guide and inspiration and source of strength. It would be good if Greene's novel about the whisky priest and his hard-earned deathbed insight helped us to keep the model of religious steadfastness in mind before we become enmeshed in temptation and despair.

# “THESE PEOPLE”: OR, A *MALKHUT SHEL HESED*, IF YOU CAN KEEP IT

Volume 50:3 Fall 2017

Dear Shmuel,

Suppose your chicken is stolen in a neighborhood where the thieves are mostly observant Jews and it turns up slaughtered. The presumption is that the thief observed the laws of kashrut. Suppose an observant Jew, a merchant, is suspected of selling non-kosher products to his Jewish customers. The presumption is that you may eat in his home—his private standards are acceptable even though he doesn’t mind misleading the public. Dishonesty is compatible with satisfactory ritual performance.<sup>1</sup>

I was younger than you when a prominent rabbi sought to defend what is today called Modern Orthodoxy against the allure of its Haredi rivals. He adduced one or both of these halakhot. Ritual scrupulousness, the presumed forte of the competition, does not guarantee honesty in business. Hence, he implied: “they” have their sphere of excellence and “we” have ours; no reason to feel inferior. Someone asked and did not expect an answer: Do you mean that one should trust the honesty of Jews who are less punctilious in their ritual practice just as we rely unquestioningly on the kashrut of the rigorously observant? The point is that when monetary greed outweighs moral teaching, it is not due to overemphasis on ritual, but because pecuniary advantage exercises a conscience-numbing power that is qualitatively different from the temptation to laxity in other areas, a fascination that does not discriminate between degrees of devoutness.

You are rightly perturbed about the recurring scandals associated with rigorously Orthodox circles, involving fraudulent exploitation of government handouts. You ask me to join in the widespread expressions of outrage. I will not do so today, as I already discharged my anger in these pages a few years ago.<sup>2</sup> I stand by what I wrote then and will quote only one passage:

<sup>1</sup> *Yoreh De'ah* 1:4 and 119:2.

<sup>2</sup> Shalom Carmy, “Fear of Flesh and Blood,” *Tradition* 42:4 (2009), 1-5.

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If (God forbid) the *Ribbono shel Olam* wills an *idan rit'ba* – an hour of wrath that sweeps all before it, guilty and the innocent, participant and bystander – that all the wealth and institutions tainted by shady practices be sunk and that every insult and gesture of arrogance we have heedlessly, irresponsibly, and contemptuously inflicted upon our host society shall be paid by acts of insult, humiliation and persecution directed against us, we will have no choice but to confess with Daniel in penitence: “Yours God, is the righteousness and ours is the shame of face.”

I hope that fulfills the obligation to protest.

You refer to the chorus of condemnation by “modern” Orthodox spokesmen against the so-called ultra-Orthodox communities for their failure to prevent such behavior. Much of it has been featured in the non-Jewish and non-Orthodox press, where it is least likely to be received by its intended targets as loving correction. These attacks have been accompanied by diagnosis of what is wrong with the offending groups. Many of the criticisms are not without merit. If they don’t have much of a salutary impact on those criticized, they may yet provide material for self-examination on the part of those making the criticisms. Rather than rehash what I have already published, in the spirit of *keshot atsmekha* (examine yourself first and then others) I wonder what we can learn together. I am particularly anxious to discuss with you our responsibilities as Americans at a time of profound crisis.

R. Yehuda said: “Whoever does not teach his son a craft it as if he taught him robbery? (*Kiddushin* 29a).” Advocates of advanced secular education point to this dictum as a badge of their superiority over those who neglect professional training. If only they had the option of earning an honest day’s living they might feel less tempted to cope by finagling.

Does lack of secular training fully explain the prevalence of fraudulent practices? The same week the arrests of the Lakewood defendants hit the media the *Wall Street Journal* reported a massive crackdown on medical fraud. For generations, going back to the establishment of Medicaid and Medicare, we have all known of doctors lining their pockets through phony insurance claims. The virtuosos among them billed the government for hours of work that are physically impossible. Some have gone further, augmenting their prodigious fictional output with abominably real and absolutely unnecessary operations inflicted on defenseless nursing home patients. I doubt that Orthodox Judaism was overrepresented in their ranks, but Orthodox shul members were not absent either.

Explain their behavior as you will, but don't put it down to lack of academic credentials.

Several times the Talmud cites the adage, "It is not the mouse that stole but the hole that stole." Each time, however, the penalty is assigned to the one who benefits from the transgression (the mouse, so to speak), not the one who created the opportunity for dishonesty (the figurative hole). Nevertheless, incursions of mice are best deterred by paying attention to the holes. Legislators and bureaucrats have the impossible task of enacting abuse-proof regulations and enforcing them. All of us have some responsibility for exemplifying and influencing cultural attitudes to labor and work.

The failure of many "rigorous" Orthodox to supply their physical needs through their own efforts is linked to two phenomena: abstention from the work force in the name of full time Torah learning and large family size. Devotion to study is, of course, a primary value for religious Jews and is especially urgent insofar as we constitute a small island in a pervasively secular society. Having children is also integral to religious Judaism and is especially urgent for our survival in the wake of the Holocaust and the enormous pressures to abandon religious belief and practice. One reason they dismiss our criticisms is that they detect in us, not a commitment to achieve the same goals without taking ethical shortcuts, or even a willingness to do less for these goals for the sake of other great spiritual and mundane goals, but insufficient respect for the ideals they are pursuing through Torah institutions and large families.

Worthy goals do not, of course, justify fraudulent means. Yet before we congratulate the non-rigorous Orthodox for their law-abidingness we may ask whether our work ethic is rooted in a genuine sense of what is valuable religiously and morally. Do we encourage our young people to enter the rabbinate or education at a significant cost to their material status? In choosing secular professions, do we give priority to those that contribute significantly to human dignity and welfare? On the job, do we scrupulously adhere to an honest day's work for an honest day's pay? In accumulating the academic degrees and resume items that we present to get the job, do we demand of ourselves and of our children the standards of honesty to which we nominally subscribe? If the answer to any of these questions is no, we may still take credit for not breaking the law but not with quite the same sense of righteousness and diagnostic privilege.

The most recent scandals have coincided with a yet another rancorous conflict over an Eruv. These controversies raise an additional

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question about the place of Orthodox Jews, particularly Hasidim, in America. Opponents of *eruvim* are intent on using zoning ordinances and other regulations to keep Orthodox Jews out of their neighborhoods. Some no doubt are anti-Semites or haters of religion. I recall an articulate caller to an NPR show about Kashrut who was incensed by, and impervious to explanation of, the presence in her grocery store of products bearing rabbinical certification, thus imposing religion on Americans like her and that if “these people” wanted rabbis blessing their food they should have their own stores. But there is no reason to question the sincerity of many homeowners who complain about the effect of Orthodox influx on the tax base, when a high percentage of the Jews in question earn little and draw disproportionately on the taxes paid by others and who fear the impact on property values or on local funding priorities once the Orthodox become the majority. Here there is no explicit imputation that the Jews are doing something immoral or illegal. The problem is that their presence harms the community socially and economically.

Should Jews be tolerated only when they adapt themselves to the mores and expectations of the dominant culture? It’s an old question. In his *Jerusalem*, Moses Mendelssohn, as you know, said that Jews possess inherent civil rights, against other Enlightenment thinkers who made Jewish emancipation contingent on the social improvement of our people. A century later Netsiv ascribed to Jew hatred the discrimination between wealthy, tolerance-worthy Jews and impoverished, undeserving ones: “They could not deny what is well known, that the important men called Israel benefit the polity but the masses (*ba-kahal*) they will lick up all that is around us as an ox licks the grass of the field, uselessly.”<sup>3</sup> Philip Roth’s short story “Eli the Fanatic” imagines the horror and eventual madness of an assimilated lawyer and his community when a refugee rabbi moves his yeshiva into their neck of suburbia.<sup>4</sup>

Let others ponder the morality and decide the legality of restricted housing in the United States. My concern is what moral obligation, as neighbors and fellow citizens, Jews owe to other Americans. Surely we would not want others moving into, perhaps taking over, our neighborhoods, if that caused us social or economic difficulties. How far shall we

<sup>3</sup> *Ha’amek Davar* to Numbers 22.

<sup>4</sup> Julian Levinson, “‘Eli the Fanatic’ and the Nitra Yeshiva Controversy of 1948,” *American Jewish History* 101:1 (January 2017), 57-79, studied the incident behind the story. In fact, it was Gentiles, not spooked Jews, who objected to the yeshiva.

go to avoid behaving towards our neighbors in a manner that would be odious to us? Recently, in these pages, I alluded to Netsiv's comment about how Abraham attempted to assure the people of Hebron, prior to buying a burial plot, of his ongoing commitment to the town.<sup>5</sup> In Roth's story, one *frum* Jew, clad in his Old Country garb, is enough to strike panic in the hearts of the inhabitants. In 1947 would we have urged him to dress differently, at least when shopping? Under similar circumstances today, would I stop wearing a *kippa* in public? Would I shave my beard to avoid offending my neighbors? Or, if these examples are too intimate, is it a good idea to arrange internal Jewish policing that would dissuade low income Jews from moving in where they are not wanted? Might we propose that when Jews do move in, they should forswear fighting for *errivin* until they can count on sufficient good will among the natives? I do not offer solutions; I only submit we must think about these questions before pontificating on them.

Some critics have assigned the blame to Halakha. Once upon a time, according to their narrative, Jews had reason to view the government as hostile and were thus justified in undermining the law. Those days are over, but the "ultra-Orthodox" continue to rely on these superannuated laws and thus justify tax evasion, gaming the welfare system, and otherwise grabbing as much as they can. The only solution is to update the law to conform to the views of the critics.

Some of the learned critics, though mighty few in their audience, know full well that the Halakha does not support their contentions. The prohibition of *ona'a* (taking advantage or cheating) specifically applies to non-Jews as well as Jews. Directly to the point, the well-known principle *dina de-malkhuta dina* (the law of the land is law) explicitly commands compliance with all non-discriminatory government law. These rulings have been proclaimed by authoritative Haredi rabbis in recent years and are reiterated in the popular Orthodox press. All the same, these laws, and the authorities who repeat them, are not always obeyed. One reason, as we have already noted, is that greed makes people more lax about monetary matters than they are about ritual obligations. Another factor that has been widely noted by students of American society in general is that people who would not steal from individuals feel no compunction about cheating the government because it is faceless, so to speak, and one does not envisage a victim who is being harmed, and so much tax money is wasted anyhow (though we disagree about the nature of the waste). Hence, the perennial excuse: Everyone does it.

<sup>5</sup> Shalom Carmy, "Of Pity and the Immigrant," *Tradition* 49:4 (2016), 1-6.

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None of these explanations of fraud is distinctive to rigorous Orthodoxy. True, as I stated in the article quoted, there is a tendency to regard American standards with disdain, even contempt. This tendency is probably tied to the historical hostility experienced by Jews dealing with European societies and rulers. Halakhic authorities have time and again referred to America as a *malkhut shel hesed* (a regime of kindness), but to limited avail. Cynicism about the government and its laws is rooted in cultural experience, not in religious norms. I am not sure it is that much different from the distaste for scrupulous tax compliance and resentment of other governmental intrusions common to the American scene. If rigorously Orthodox offenders are more flagrant about it, it is precisely because they sense that they are only taking to extremes liberties and schemes already winked at among the general populace.

When they attempt to pin the blame on Halakha I suspect the critics are not only wasting their breath but even undermining their case. To be sure, there is no comparison between the situation of religious Jews under liberal democracy and under the autocracies, monarchic or communist or nationalist, that we were subject to in Eastern Europe or the Middle East. At the same time, it is politically and psychologically risky to make compliance with *dina de-malkhuta* dependent on the quality of the government. Our political leaders and their agendas rarely enjoy broad and deep support from the citizens who voted them in, let alone their opponents and those too indifferent or disgusted to respond. Civility, of the kind that could maintain order and encourage solidarity in spite of fundamental conflict, has declined even more rapidly on the part of leaders and activists alike. These challenges keep many intelligent thinking citizens awake at night and are of special concern to our small group whose allegiance to Judaism sets us apart from our compatriots of the left and right. Laws can be repealed; more often they are nullified in practice. Without stable authority, without reasonable confidence that executives, legislators, judges, and bureaucrats respect the laws and customs of the country enough to keep at bay the centripetal forces of militant identity politics, America is not guaranteed to remain a *malkhut shel hesed*.

Under these circumstances the push to downplay strict adherence to *dina de-malkhuta* as an old-fashioned motive for obeying American law in favor of arguments relying directly on the benevolence and fairness of government regulations and officials will hardly sway those who currently ignore the dictates of Halakha in this area. One is, in effect, replacing the authority of Halakha with what sounds very much like the counsels of naivete.

Earlier I asked what we should do, with respect to our social-economic activities, to contribute to general society and what we might do to accommodate our fellow citizens and neighbors. If you want criticisms of the so-called ultra-Orthodox from me, let me again refer to my previous writing. I am now more anxious about our future in this country and what we can do to help sustain it. Precisely because man-made laws and constitutions are no stronger than the moral convictions and the social bonds of the human beings governed by them we cannot be heedless and irresponsible in their maintenance. For millennia Jews sought the welfare of the city in which we dwelled, “for in its peace you will have peace (Jeremiah 29).” For centuries we prayed for the government because “without its fear men would swallow each other live (*Avot* 3).” We did not distinguish between the Czar and the constitutional monarch, between Democrats and Republicans. One way we can try to reverse the cynicism about law and authority that threatens to undermine religious freedom, equality before the law, even our physical safety is through an uncompromising commitment to *dina de-malkhuta* as a religious imperative that is maintained resolutely not because of the perfection of our system but despite its imperfections. It is said that when Benjamin Franklin was asked whether the Constitutional Convention had wrought a republic or a monarchy, he replied: “A republic, if you can keep it.” At this difficult moment for American culture and its political institutions, I would like to think that our efforts can help keep the republic a *malkhut shel hesed*.

# IS CONTEMPORARY ORTHODOX JUDAISM RACIST? SOME INFORMAL REMARKS

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Dear Rabbi Stone,

**T**rying to define “racism” will only engender an endless debate. For purposes of this discussion let’s categorize racism as the adoption of egregiously wrong moral, metaphysical, and/or factual opinions, attitudes, and behavior towards other ethnic groups.

Some hold that the fundamental belief in the singular relationship between God and the Jewish people (*behirat Yisrael*) is racist. Some would go further and allege that maintaining significant separation between Jews and Gentiles is itself racist. On this view, Judaism is self-evidently racist and there is nothing more to say.

If these fundamental Jewish tenets are not inherently racist, are other propositions allied to fundamental Jewish doctrine in fact racist? Are these auxiliary beliefs necessary in order to maintain the essential doctrine? In other words, does *behirat Yisrael* presuppose racist views?

Does the notion that God elected the Jews, of all the nations of the earth, to be His people, presuppose that Jews bear some distinguishing characteristic that makes them superior to all others? Rationalists and mystics (who have more in common than you would think) answer: Jews must be superior, of course. What else would justify the divine preference? But this does not follow logically. The election of Israel is a mystery—God’s ways are not our ways. For all that theologians may attempt to understand God’s ways in terms that make sense to us—usually by analogy to personal relations—His choice of Israel, like His choice to create a world to begin with, is rooted in His sovereign will and need not supervene on any natural or supernatural property. Such choice does not imply lack of divine concern and love towards other nations. As Michael Wyschogrod noted, a father or mother often has a favorite among their children with whom they share a particular intimacy. Of the distinguished child much is expected and with responsibility come both glory and suffering but this does not negate or diminish their love for their other children. Modern liberals may object and insist that all human relationships must reflect total impartiality so that any deviation from strict quasi-bureaucratic impersonality is a moral flaw and offense against the letter of justice.

Wyschogrod would respond that this view is bad philosophical anthropology and belief in the particular connection between God and the Jewish people in truth validates, rather than negates, the claim to distinctiveness of other peoples as well. Personal relationships are unique inherently.

The Torah (Bible and rabbinic literature) ascribes merit to our father Abraham and we rightly assume that his virtue has some connection to the covenant God makes with him and his progeny. For that reason readers are puzzled that God's initial summons to Abram (Genesis 12) contains no mention of his righteousness. Even if we did not have rabbinic traditions about his integrity and self-sacrifice prior to God's revelation to him, we would surely have expected the Torah to preface that initial revelation by recounting mighty actions which earned him special divine attention. At the very least one would anticipate the kind of introduction we get to Noah (Genesis 6), which attests to his righteousness as a man of integrity (*tamim*) who walked with God. This introduction is omitted for the father of our people because, as Maharal noted, the special covenant between God and Israel is a mystery, rooted in the divine will. Testimonials to Abram's worthiness would diminish the unfathomableness of God's choice. God's call is abrupt. Only several chapters later, when God commands Abraham to circumcise, does the Torah allude to this description of Noah, as God demands of Abram to "walk before me and become *tamim*" (Genesis 17).

Nonetheless, it is natural that Jewish thinkers have attempted to complement the laconic voluntarist account of Genesis by linking Abraham's status to his attributes. Human love combines reason and passion, elements of ascription (love because the beloved has certain attractive qualities) and elements of bestowal (love because the lover chooses to invest the beloved with value). God's love is an expression of His will but it is not arbitrarily bestowed. For Rambam, for example, the devotion of Abraham grounds God's covenant with Israel, a covenant that that came close to being forfeited during Israel's idolatrous period of Egyptian bondage. By contrast the Kuzari and certain mystical trends in Judaism speak of some supernatural metaphysical essence that is transmitted in a quasi-genetic manner. The essentialist formulations are not without value. The mystery of the divine will transcends simple human concepts and these approaches avoid a one-sided emphasis on the idea of merit presented by Rambam and others. It is also understandable that such attempts to make the divine will accessible to human reason are likely to import scientific ideas as explanatory categories. These analogies become dangerous when they lead to one-dimensional identification of Jewish distinctiveness with reified categories, especially those borrowed from physical-biological theories of their time.

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All this requires much further study and analysis. However the racism you asked me about is not about the relation of Israel to humanity as a whole but about judgments regarding particular subgroups within humanity. I have briefly alluded to Jewish views of *behirat Yisrael* only because they may have an impact on these more particular ethnic attitudes. If one's idea of Jewish singularity is primarily theological, relating to God's plan for the world, without adding non-theological principles, or mentioning them only in passing, it implies nothing about the inherent character of different ethnic groups. *Behirat Yisrael* would then be, in yeshiva parlance, a *gezerat ha-katuv*. If one rationalizes Jewish uniqueness along Maimonidean lines the concrete history of the Jewish people's relationship with God takes on great significance—what has God demanded of us and how have we responded? Again this would entail no biological or metaphysical conclusions about other nations. If, however, the difference between Jews and non-Jews is not about the unique historical relationship between God and Israel centrally expressed by the covenants of Genesis and Sinai, but derives from another set of ethnic qualities, natural or supernatural, then one may reasonably hypothesize additional distinctions among various national groupings.

As we all know, such distinctions have been common in Western scientific, humanistic, and popular culture. In the nineteenth century, two psychologists (who were brothers-in-law) Hermann Steinthal and Moritz Lazarus, who played active roles in German Reform Judaism, established *Völkerpsychologie* (the psychology of nations) as an academic discipline. Down to the present day, books are written containing breezy generalizations about sunny Italians and morose Scandinavians, mixing speculations about biological nature with social and geographical factors. We are all familiar with the kind of joke that associates Germans with beer, Frenchmen with wine, Englishmen with gin and tonic, and Jews with diabetes.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes the speaker is earnest and chauvinistic and the humor appears only in retrospect: historians of hay fever smile at the influential Victorian physician Sir Andrew Clark's *havdala*-like glorification of the malady that supposedly chooses “the man before the woman, the educated before the ignorant, the gentle before the rude, the courtier before the clown... and out of every climate that it visits it chooses for its subjects the Anglo-Saxon, or at least the English-speaking, race.”

As a rule these productions are benign and occasionally they are insightful. Other times they are toxic. I need not rehearse for you the

<sup>1</sup> For the unfamiliar see <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booker-prize/8063053/Booker-Prize-Its-a-funny-old-thing-Jewish-humour-....html>

history of race science and how it was employed to establish the superiority and inferiority of ethnic groups and to justify eugenics, restrictive immigration laws, and ultimately extermination. These theories were prevalent among social scientists, natural scientists, and the intellectually enlightened political leaders who took their cues from them. They were discredited morally by Nazism and eventually lost scientific credibility as well. From a scientific point of view we cannot take it for granted that all such theories are humbug; we cannot rule out *a priori* the existence of significant practical differences among groups that are discoverable by genetic science, though it is unlikely that these will turn out to correlate closely with such superficial characteristics as skin pigmentation. However that may be, the religious doctrine of universal human dignity transcends scientific investigations: from a religious perspective we are not allowed to assign decisive moral significance to potential empirical differences.

You refer to texts that generalize about the endowments of various groups and countries. *Kiddushin* 49b, for example, speaks of ten measures of strength that descended to the world, of which the Persians took nine; ten measures of lice, of which Media took nine and so forth. These rabbinic statements reflect the opinions of certain Talmudic rabbis about the peoples and places of their time. I wrote above about their popularity in the modern world that such broad statements sometimes convey true impressions as long as they are not reified. As also noted earlier the tendency to interpret *behirat Yisrael* as a matter of non-theological natural or supernatural qualities also increases the impulse to interpret other global statements about groups in terms of rigid ontological categories. Such an orientation, by magnifying putative differences among human beings, threatens to weaken the central universal teachings of Judaism about the unity and dignity of the human race.

Many Jews who define Jewishness in terms of ethnic pride rather than special responsibility to God enjoy magnifying Jewish superiority or conspicuousness in a wide range of mundane pursuits. The Jews are the captains of capital and the prophets of socialism; they are the great humorists and entertainers, at least before other ethnic groups superseded them and likewise they are disproportionately represented at the highest levels of art and science and so forth. None of this has much bearing on Judaism as the service of God.

## II

In America today, and for those to whom you teach Judaism, racism is not about scientific or pseudo-scientific theories of human variation. We

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cannot escape African slavery and its seemingly endless aftermath. This is not the place to revisit that bitter history. Following a bloody Civil War precipitated by the institution of racial slavery, after another century marked by blatant discrimination and indignity and then over half a century of struggle to undo the evil that was done, America is still severely plagued by the aftereffects. We may disagree as to why all the solutions and schemes advanced to relegate this intractable curse to the past have not fully succeeded. Yet we cannot deny the simple truth stated by Justice Thurgood Marshall, dissenting in the *Bakke* case, even if we doubt his practical conclusions about affirmative action: “The experience of Negroes in America has been different in kind, not just in degree, from that of other ethnic groups.” This is why the RCA Proclamation on Racism (October 30, 2015) moves from statements about the universal dignity of the human race and the Jewish legacy of sympathy for the persecuted to recognition that “the centuries-old American problem of white racism against African Americans continues to be a disgraceful, explosive contemporary reality, with both overt and insidious manifestations.”<sup>2</sup>

A senior rabbi, to whom many of us are indebted, once told me how he explained this to his congregation. He wove a yarn about an American GI, midway through basic training, who brought his shoe to the local shoemaker for fixing and was told to come back in a week. The weeks went by and each time he was put off with the same promise. He shipped out without the mended shoe. Decades later, just happening to be back in the same town, he couldn’t pass up the opportunity to check on the fate of his shoe. The shoemaker looked at the shelf and said: “Please come back next week.” The moral: justice deferred indefinitely is justice denied.

### III

The rabbi added that his speech was not well received because his *shul* was situated in a “changing neighborhood.” He meant a neighborhood where blacks were moving in and whites were moving out as fast as they could. Less euphemistically it meant that Jews who lacked the mobility or the money to escape lived in constant fear of violent crime whenever they ventured out by day; by night they were confined behind double or triple locks that too often failed to ensure their safety. These were the elderly and the low income Jews. In my youth, families worried about evacuating

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.rabbis.org/news/article.cfm?id=105832>

their aging relatives before it was too late. I have written in these pages of my childhood at 715 Saint Marks Avenue in Brooklyn.<sup>3</sup> Only a few years later, by the '60s and early '70s, one visited the family still there with trepidation—more than once a bottle whizzed past the visitor's ear and shattered on the pavement, accompanied by the hurler's hearty advice that Jews get off his turf. One of my aunts was forced to flee three times in twenty years. My mother bore the marks of several beatings.

Can you imagine such experiences not engendering resentment and bitterness among the victims and those who absorbed indirectly what they suffered? Such memories, of course, do not justify racism. There was no black conspiracy to expel the Jews. If the eventual outcome was a kind of "ethnic cleansing" of the Jewish population, no small blame rests with real estate companies knowing that the Jews, especially the traditional Jews, could not fight "blockbusting," unlike other whites who would forcefully resist integration. As the situation worsened, well-meaning politically correct politicians hesitated to give the police a free hand. Not all the Jews fled: the Lubavitcher rebbe instructed his followers to hold the line in Crown Heights, only a short walk from my Bed-Stuy; Yeshiva University chose not to leave Washington Heights; various Jewish self-defense organizations, including Meir Kahane's JDL, were established to protect Jews as the police could not. Surely the evolving political consciousness of traditional Jews reflects an awareness of these factors. All the same, the language of broken bones, though eloquent, is not nuanced. The old abandoned Jews of whom I speak, quite a few of them refugees of European persecution, felt their oppression in its most proximate and visible form. The American scene was rife with prejudice which, once confirmed by experience, was not easily set aside. They did not have the knack of protesting attractively by chanting and shimmying in the approved manner. But in their helplessness, under their breaths, they knew how to curse...

When you ask about Orthodox Judaism and racism, speaking in your role as an educator of young Jews, at the root of your vexation are these insidious muttered imprecations amplified around dinner tables, in classrooms and shuls, often regurgitated by people who have suppressed or never knew the pain and betrayal whence they may have originated. Modern Orthodox identity, for many of your students, is more about these scenes of socialization than it is about religiously formed convictions and theological propositions. That socialization supposedly enables our young people to uphold the reality of a transcendent God, whose commands override human preferences, devotion to the singular destiny of a people

<sup>3</sup> "The House I Lived in: A Taste of Gooseflesh" *Tradition* 44:2 (2011), 1-7.

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separate from the nations of the world, and a way of life sharply at odds with secular values, and to resist the powerful attractions and pressures of that world. When our socialization indulges and even encourages racist utterances, the Orthodox community finds itself in the wrong on a clear-cut moral question, the one question that, in the eyes of liberal secular culture, takes precedence over all other moral questions.

If our only challenge is to state Jewish belief clearly then the RCA declaration cited above is adequate to the task. For many years my response has been to adhere firmly to the principles outlined above, which echo those of our *rebbeim*. That is enough for me but I am no longer sure it's enough for our community. The problem is that the hypercritical society to which our students are attuned judges not by what Judaism preaches but by what the community tolerates. Those who perform racist language within our community may be too sunk in bitterness to care how many young people they alienate from Judaism; some may be too enveloped in their shared social world to notice. You and I must pick up the pieces.

Many of my students, not least those who are most outraged by racist speech, know nothing of the violence that dislocated and tortured the low income Jews of New York, Boston, and other cities. There are reasons we speak so little of it. I have always opposed Jewish preoccupation with persecution, precisely because it promotes excessive bitterness and distracts from the service of God. Playing on old grudges is morally and religiously dangerous. Perhaps I regret we were not militant in speaking up for the victims. Some of us, perhaps, prefer to dim the lights on this episode because we are afraid for our children who aspire to find their place in the higher echelons of American society, where political correctness is the rule. If made aware of the complex history of good and evil, we fear, it will be harder for them to fit in.

And so I am torn. On the one hand those who accept the opening section of this essay must continue to marginalize interpretations of *behirat Yisrael* that bring Judaism into agreement with racial ideology. We must continue to stress the centrality of universal human dignity in Jewish teaching. We cannot avoid facing the shadow of slavery and the failure to overcome its legacy in American life. We cannot excuse the tolerance of racist language in some segments of Orthodoxy that has hurt our position in the world, vitiated our own *yirat Shamayim* and driven young people away from religious faithfulness. On the other hand, amnesia about the difficult historical context is neither possible nor healthy. The failure of our American Orthodox community to have that conversation may be more harmful, in many ways, than the consequences we might fear.





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