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SHARING TORAH WITH THE WORLD: THE JEWISH PEOPLE'S RESPONSIBILITY TO NON-JEWS

I. Being a Light to the Nations: The Vision and the Complexity

An inextricable part of the prophetic vision for civilization's progress is building connections among all nations. This includes spreading Torah to the many nations that make up humanity:

In the end of days, the Mount of God's House will stand firm above the mountain and tower above the hills; and all the nations will gaze on it with joy. Many peoples will go and say: "Come, let us go up to the Mount of the Lord, to the House of the God of Jacob, that He may instruct us in His ways, and that we may walk in His paths." For Torah will come out of Zion and the word of God from Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:2–3).¹

Torah does not go forth by itself from Zion, nor the word of God from Jerusalem. The Jewish people play a crucial role in spreading Torah, because, as we see elsewhere in Isaiah, the Jewish people are destined to be "a light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6). This certainly can refer to exemplary ethical behavior, but I believe, as Radak writes, that this includes spreading Torah: "And the light is the Torah that will go forth from Zion."² Radak's interpretation meshes well with other biblical instances of light referring to Torah: "For the mitzva is a lamp, and the Torah is light" (Proverbs 6:23), as well as with the vision of the prophets Micah and Isaiah that the nations will seek Torah in Zion.

¹ See the parallel prophecy in Micah 4:2.

² Radak's tying the expression "light to the nations" to the Torah accords with the continuation of the second chapter in Isaiah: "House of Jacob! Let us walk by the light of the Lord" (Isaiah 2:5).

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The founders of the State of Israel were profoundly aware of this role of the Jewish people. Israel's Declaration of Independence declares in the name of the entire nation:

The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here . . . they created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.

Part of the justification and motivation to establish the State of Israel was to fulfill the Jewish vision, expressed by many generations of prophets, to be a “light to the nations,” a vision that also inspired the first Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion.³ One of the reasons for choosing the Menorah as the symbol of the State of Israel also relates to this vision.⁴

The essence of Zionism is to take an active role as partners in fulfilling the prophets' vision. This partnership is not limited to the physical return to Zion—to making the wilderness bloom and establishing a state—but also includes actively fulfilling the vision of the Jewish people's universal impact.

Yet, when we begin to analyze this vision more closely, the picture becomes more complex. Surprisingly, we find statements in the Talmud forbidding a non-Jew to study Torah or a Jew to teach Torah to a non-Jew. I aim here to deepen and clarify our understanding of the role of the Jewish people in spreading Torah to the nations, in keeping with the prophetic vision, by looking closely at the meaning of the Talmudic prohibition against a non-Jew studying Torah.⁵

Torah Study for Non-Jews: Three Foundational Principles

In order to reconcile the tension between the prophetic vision and the Talmudic and halakhic discussion that followed it, we must adhere to three foundational principles:

The first principle addresses the presumptions inherent in the very language with which we approach this discussion. In the prior generation, many discussed the issue of non-Jews studying Torah using language that highlighted the prohibition, rather than the prophetic vision and the

³ “History did not pamper us with power, wealth, large lands, or great numbers. But history gave us a rare moral and intellectual quality that confers on us the privilege and the responsibility of being a light to the nations.” David Ben-Gurion, *Yehud ve-Ye'ud: Devarim al Bit'hon Yisrael* [Hebrew], (Ministry of Defense Publications, 1980), 35.

⁴ See Alec Mishory, *Secularizing the Sacred: Aspects of Israeli Visual Culture* (Brill, 2019), chapter 7; and on the Menorah as the state symbol, see Steven Fine, *The Menorah: From the Bible to Modern Israel* (Harvard University Press, 2016), 134–162.

⁵ Thank you to my colleagues in the Beit Midrash for Judaism and Humanity: Rabbi Sarel Rosenblatt, Gita Hazani-Melchior, and Dr. Assaf Malach. These thoughts were developed in the course of joint study.

Jewish people's mission. Even those who found ways to be lenient regarding this issue were motivated by liberalism and equality, rather than the mission of the Jewish people. However, the presumption for this discussion should be the opposite: The Jewish people have a spiritual responsibility, a mission to teach Torah to non-Jews. This understanding arises not only from the words of the prophets, but throughout the Bible, and even, as we will see later, from tannaitic teachings. Admittedly, in the generation of the *amora'im* we witness a prohibition against non-Jews studying Torah—a prohibition that we must clarify and penetrate—but we must start from the idea that “Torah goes forth from Zion.” If non-Jews are prohibited to study Torah, to where can the word of God go forth from Jerusalem?

Changing our starting point means recognizing that interpreting this prohibition broadly is more than a stringency; it impairs the Jewish people's ability to fulfill our mission. In other words, the question is what is the “rule” and what is the “exception to the rule.” If the rule is the prohibition, as it appears in the Gemara, we might look for exceptions to the rule, cases in which it is nevertheless permitted to teach Torah to non-Jews. But if the rule is the opposite, that the Jewish people are called upon and obligated to be a light to the nations and to disseminate Torah to non-Jews, we need only seek the proper manner to do so and identify the particular situations in which we limit this teaching.

The second principle is to place this issue in our current historical context. Different historical circumstances fundamentally impacted the Jewish people's ability and responsibility to disseminate Torah to non-Jews. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook explained that in the Diaspora the Jewish people focus on themselves and their own survival, whereas following their redemption the Jewish people can also attend to the nations and fulfill the vision of being “a light to the world”:

In the Diaspora, which is likened to the evening, the focus of our actions is ourselves But in the time of redemption, when the light of Israel is raised, the time will come for enacting [the words in the blessing before] the morning Shema, *ahava rabba* (a great love), when all the nations will say that the light of Israel will become “the light of the world.”⁶

⁶ *Ein Ayah Berakhot* 2a. See also later: “In the exodus from Egypt, the Jewish people merited their own freedom, which represented their own completeness, but only in Messianic days will they merit the universal completeness of humanity.” In the future, “because it is impossible to continue the universal *tikkun* (repair) without the Torah and *mitzvot* of the Jewish people, the central purpose of most actions will be for all of humanity” (ibid., 12b).

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Rav Kook's argument implies that the process of redemption requires a change in the way we study Torah and understand its place in the world. He writes that a similar change has occurred with regard to Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism, which had been reserved for a limited few; they are now shared with all of the Jewish people, as they are understood to be necessary in contending with the challenges of this generation.⁷ So too, I suggest, our modern circumstances demand a parallel change with regard to sharing Torah with the nations.

Our contemporary situation is different for an additional reason: The process of globalization generates multicultural encounters, mutual influences, and inspiration, along with new opportunities and possibilities. I believe that the opening of opportunities to realize a destiny and mission obligate the Jewish people to clarify their role within humanity.

The third principle concerns the nature of the prohibition. Is this a universal, fundamental prohibition, or one that applies only in a certain context? Many *Rishonim* interpreted this as dependent on context, which seems to accord with the straightforward understanding of the relevant passages. But even if we accept the opinions of those *Rishonim* who interpret the prohibition as a fundamental one, we must analyze what exactly is the nature of the prohibition and its scope. If we continue the comparison with spreading Jewish mysticism more broadly and publicly, then perhaps the prohibition at its core relates to ensuring an appropriate and constructive way of bringing Torah from being wholly internal, within the Jewish people, to being external, to a public space.

Early Sources for Being a Light to the Nations

This vision, in which the nations are blessed with Torah going forth from Zion and the word of God from Jerusalem, does not relate solely to the future. Rather, it is foundational to the very origins of the Jewish people. The lives of the patriarchs were directed toward all of humanity: starting from Abraham, whose life was based on the promise, "Abraham will become a great and populous nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him" (Genesis 18:18); through Isaac, to whom God said: "All the nations of the earth will bless themselves through your descendants" (Genesis 26:4); and to Jacob, who was blessed: "All the families of the earth will bless themselves through you and your descendants" (Genesis 28:14).

God's choosing Abraham is connected to His desire that Abraham's children follow him in walking in His ways and pursuing justice and

⁷ *Shemona Kevatzim* 2:2.

righteousness: “For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of God by doing what is just and right (*tzedaka u-mishpat*)” (Genesis 18:19). The choice of Abraham, “for I have singled him out,” is linked to his and his descendants’ role, “to keep the way of God by doing what is just and right.” Isaiah’s vision of the end of days describes a concrete fulfillment of Abraham’s ancient calling. In his vision, as we saw, the nations say, “that He may instruct us in His ways, and that we may walk in His paths.’ For Torah will come out of Zion and the word of God from Jerusalem.” As in Genesis, “the way of God,” which the nations come to learn in the House of God, is connected to *mishpat*, as we see in the following verse: “He will judge (*shafat*) among the nations and arbitrate for the many peoples.” In many ways, Abraham is the father of humanity even more than Adam or Noah, because he transmitted a way of living that became a compass for many nations and peoples, who walk in his path and see themselves as his children.⁸

The first words that God speaks to the people of Israel when they arrive at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah relate to their destiny: Be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). The mission of the Jewish people among the nations is parallel to the role of the priests among the Jewish people. The priest’s role is to be an emissary, to serve the wider circle that comes to seek Torah from him.⁹ The previous verse in Exodus, which describes Israel as “My treasured possession among all the peoples,” alludes to the entire Jewish people being singled out as Abraham had been chosen for a unique destiny. Seforno explains:

“You will be to Me a kingdom of priests” — thus you will be a treasured possession among them all, because you will be a kingdom of priests, understanding and teaching all of humanity to call in the name of God, and to serve Him together, just as the Jewish people will be in the future, as it states: “You will be called priests of God” (Isaiah 61:6), and as it says, “Torah will go forth from Zion” (Seforno, Exodus 19:6).

Seforno connects charging the Jewish people to become a “kingdom of priests” with the prophetic vision of all the nations serving God together.

⁸ *Sanhedrin* (56a), which discusses the seven Noahide laws, derives the commandment of establishing courts of justice from the verse that presents the mission of Abraham and his descendants as performing *tzedaka u-mishpat*, what is just and right.

⁹ “For the lips of a priest guard knowledge, and men seek rulings from his mouth, for he is a messenger of the Lord of Hosts” (Malachi 2:7).

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When the people of Israel enter the Land of Israel, their destiny vis-à-vis the nations becomes apparent once again. The people of Israel do not enter their land in order to build a legacy disconnected from the other nations. Just the opposite. According to the Sages, when the Torah was written “very clearly” on the stones immediately following the entrance into the land (Deuteronomy 27:8), this means that the Torah was written in 70 languages, so that all the nations could partake and understand.¹⁰ The nations were tasked with learning the Torah that was written for them. The Gemara even points out that they were punished for failing to learn the words of Torah, as was expected of them.¹¹

In several places, Netziv of Volozhin links writing the Torah in 70 languages with Israel’s role as “light to the nations,” a mission that he sees as the purpose of all creation:

To be a light to the nations regarding how to live, this is the purpose of creation . . . and this began with the days of Joshua, with the stones on which we were commanded to write the Written Law in seventy languages (*Harhev Davar*, Genesis 17:4).¹²

The Temple is also intended for the nations, and this is evident not only in prophetic visions for the future, but in descriptions of the past as well. The first Temple, which Solomon built, was intended to have profound significance even for the nations, endowing them with knowledge of God, which is connected to learning Torah in its broader sense: “So that all the peoples of the earth will know Your name and revere You as does Your people Israel” (I Kings 8:43).¹³ Spreading God’s Torah to all of humanity, through the people of Israel, is more than a prophetic vision; it is a deep part of the destiny of the people of Israel from its beginning, and accompanies the nation throughout all the foundational events that

¹⁰ *Sota* 32a and 36a.

¹¹ “They should have learned, and they did not learn” (*Sota* 35b).

¹² Compare this to his *Ha’amek Davar* on Deuteronomy 27:5: “And you shall build there an altar’ — as God did on Mount Ebal, when they were chosen as a covenantal people, and as Isaiah the prophet said: ‘I created you, and I appointed you a covenantal people, a light to the nations’ (Isaiah 42:6) . . . to establish a covenant regarding every nation’s beliefs, that they should abandon their belief in other gods and believe in one God. A covenant has already been made with our forefather Abraham in this regard . . . and regarding this it is written, ‘You will be a father of many nations,’ and today this covenant is established with all of Israel. This began on Mount Ebal when they wrote the Torah in seventy languages.”

¹³ In the context of the earlier verse: “If a foreigner who is not of Your people Israel comes from a distant land for the sake of Your name” (I Kings 8:41).

shape its character. This understanding needs to undergird any discussion of this issue.

Torah Study for Non-Jews: Foundational Sources

The earliest source discussing non-Jews and Torah study actually looks favorably upon the matter:

Rabbi Meir would say: From where is it derived that even a non-Jew who studies Torah is considered like a High Priest? It is derived from: “You shall therefore keep My statutes and My ordinances, which if a person does, he shall live by them” (Leviticus 18:5). The phrase: “Which if priests, Levites, and Israelites do they shall live by them,” is not stated, but rather: “A person.” You have therefore learned that even a non-Jew who studies Torah is considered like a High Priest (*Sanhedrin* 59a).¹⁴

The Gemara emphasizes, “which if a *person* does, he shall live by them,” meaning any person, a non-Jew as well as a Jew. Unlike priesthood, which is inherited, the crown of Torah is left aside, and anyone who wants to take it can come and do so. *Sifra* quotes a similar interpretation at great length, which expounds upon many verses regarding the possibility of becoming close to God and walking in His ways as directed toward all of humanity and not just Israel:

“He shall live by them” — Rabbi Yirmiya would say: You say, from where is it derived that even a non-Jew who fulfills the Torah is considered like a High Priest? The verse teaches: “Which if a person does, he shall live by them.” Similarly, he says: It does not state: “May that be the Torah for the priests, Levites, and Israelites,” but rather: “May that be the Torah for the people, O Lord God” (II Samuel 7:19). So too, he says, it does not state: “Open the gates, and let the priests, Levites, and Israelites enter,” but rather: “Open the gates, and let a righteous nation that keeps faith enter” (Isaiah 26:2). So too, he says, it does not state: “Do good, O Lord, to the priests, and the Levites, and the Israelites,” but rather: “Do good, O Lord, to the good” (Psalms 125:4). Thus, *even a non-Jew who fulfills the Torah* is like a High Priest (*Sifra*, *Aharei Mot* 9:13).

Yet, alongside these tannaitic sources—the *Sifra* and R. Meir—we also find the following statement:

Rabbi Yohanan says: A non-Jew who studies Torah is liable to receive the death penalty, as it is stated: “Moses commanded *us* the law [Torah], an

¹⁴ Parallel passages appear in *Bava Kamma* 38a and *Avoda Zara* 3a.

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inheritance of the congregation of Jacob” (Deuteronomy 33:4), indicating that it is an inheritance for us, and not for them (*Sanhedrin* 59a).

From that point on, throughout the generations, the discussion has primarily revolved around R. Yohanan’s strict reading, while almost entirely ignoring the position of the *tanna* R. Meir. This despite the fact that while R. Yohanan’s words appear only once in the Talmud, R. Meir’s words appear in three separate places.

Elsewhere, Rabbi Ami, R. Yohanan’s student in the Land of Israel, also expresses reservations about Torah study for non-Jews:

R. Ami said: The secrets of the Torah may be transmitted only to one who possesses the following five characteristics: . . . R. Ami said further: The words of Torah may not be transmitted to a non-Jew, as it is stated (Psalms 147:20): “He has not dealt so with any nation, and as for His ordinances, they have not known them” (*Hagiga* 13a).

The Gemara itself acknowledges the tension between the statements of R. Meir and R. Yohanan. It resolves the conflict by suggesting that the statement of R. Meir, that a non-Jew who studies Torah is like a High Priest, refers to studying the seven Noahide laws, not the entire Torah. But in light of our discussion thus far, this explanation is problematic. It is difficult to understand study of the seven Noahide laws—which do not directly relate to a person’s relationship to God but rather mostly address protection from harm in various life situations—as a fulfillment of the great vision, “Torah will go forth from Zion and the word of God from Jerusalem.”¹⁵

II. The Prohibition as Context Dependent

Let us closely analyze the foundations for the prohibition against non-Jews studying Torah as well as how the prohibition has been understood, so that the relevant sources can provide halakhic and philosophic guidance to situations that extend beyond non-Jews studying the Noahide laws.

There are two models with regard to prohibitions against dissemination of Torah. The first model is a prohibition that is dependent on context. One example of this model is the prohibition against women studying

¹⁵ There are attempts to deal with the relative paucity of the seven commandments by arguing that these commandments are just general principles, from which we can derive many more details. As the *Sefer ha-Hinukh* states, “Truly those seven are general types, but they contain numerous details” (Commandment 416). However, even if we significantly expand the number of commandments, they are still limited to particular areas of life, and do not relate at all to the key question of worshipping God.

Torah (*Sota* 21b).¹⁶ Many *Aharonim* argue that this prohibition is dependent on context, and that in today's reality, with the change in women's place in Jewish life, it is actually a great mitzva for women to study Torah.¹⁷

The second model is that the prohibition reflects a fundamental problem. For example, the prohibition against writing down the Oral Law can be understood in this way (*Gittin* 60b).¹⁸ Committing the Oral Law to writing undermines its essence and changes its character. Nevertheless, despite the fact that there is a fundamental prohibition, the Sages superseded the prohibition:

They said: It is better to uproot the Torah, so that Torah is not forgotten from the Jewish people. "It is a time to act for God: 'Violate' Your Torah" (*Temura* 14b, playing off Psalms 119:126).

Is R. Yohanan and R. Ami's prohibition of a non-Jew studying Torah dependent on context, or does it reflect a fundamental problem? I suggest that both logic and analysis of the relevant passages lead to understanding this prohibition as being dependent on context. First, and most importantly, the broader picture points to this understanding; the Torah and the prophets' visions describe teaching Torah to non-Jews as a destiny that we long for, and certainly not a prohibited act. So too, the fact that the rabbis draw a comparison between the prohibition against teaching Torah to a non-Jew and the prohibition against transmitting Torah to an ignorant person supports our understanding that the prohibition is not fundamental, but rather, dependent on context. Regarding a non-Jew studying Torah, the Gemara states:

Rabbi Yohanan says: A non-Jew who studies Torah is liable to the death penalty, as it is stated: "Moses commanded us the law, an inheritance [of the congregation of Jacob]" (Deuteronomy 33:4)—it is an inheritance

¹⁶ The Gemara quotes a proof text: "As it is written, 'I, wisdom, dwell with cunning' (Proverbs 8:12). When wisdom enters a person, cunning enters with it." Similarly Maimonides writes, "One should not teach one's daughter Torah, because most women cannot concentrate their attention on study and therefore transform the words of Torah into idle matters because of their lack of understanding" (*Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 1:13).

¹⁷ For example, Hafetz Hayim famously stated: "It seems that all this applies to previous times, when each person lived in the place of their parents and it was a very strong assumption that everyone would follow what their parents passed down to them. In that case, we would say not to teach Torah [to women] . . . but today, there is a great mitzva to teach them" (*Likkutei Halakhot, Sota*, ch. 3, 21–22).

¹⁸ "It is written: 'Write down these words' (Exodus 34:27), and it is written: 'According to these words' (*ibid.*) [about the verbal covenant]. How so? Written words cannot be said verbally, and spoken words cannot be written."

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for us, and not for them. [The Gemara challenges this:] If so, count this prohibition among the seven [Noahide] *mitzvot*? The one who says [the verse is referring to the Torah as] an inheritance [*morasha*], [this prohibition is included in the prohibition of robbery, as a gentile who studies Torah robs it]. And the one who says [the verse is referring to the Torah as] betrothed [*me'orasa*], the punishment is like one who engages in intercourse with a betrothed young woman, which is stoning (*Sanhedrin* 59a).

The Gemara suggests that the prohibition against non-Jews studying Torah is hiding in plain sight among the seven Noahide Laws—either in the category of robbery, as a non-Jew who studies Torah robs the Jewish people of the exclusive inheritance of the Torah, or in the category of illicit sexual relations, if the verse is read as likening Torah to a betrothed woman, with whom engaging in intercourse is a capital offense. This interpretation appears in a parallel context, regarding studying Torah in the presence of an ignorant person:

Anyone who engages in Torah study in the presence of an ignorant person is considered as though he had sexual relations with the ignorant person's betrothed bride in his presence, as it is stated: "Moses commanded us the law, an inheritance for the congregation of Jacob." Do not read it as inheritance [*morasha*]; rather, read it as betrothed [*me'orasa*] (*Pesahim* 49b).

The comparison of the Torah to Israel's "betrothed young woman" implies that there is a prohibition against "betraying" the Torah by exposing the Torah to foreign, defiling eyes, similar to one who engages in intercourse with another man's betrothed. The aggadic literature uses this metaphor to issue a severe warning regarding defiling the Torah, not necessarily to express a fundamental, across-the-board prohibition of non-Jews studying Torah in any form.¹⁹ Indeed, throughout the generations, rabbinic authorities interpreted the prohibition against non-Jews studying Torah as applying in a certain context, and even explained the precise context in which that study was forbidden.

¹⁹ The aggadic nature of this warning is highlighted by the continuation of the passage, which cannot be entertained as normative halakha: "It was taught in a *baraita* that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi says: It is prohibited for an ignorant person to eat meat, as it is stated: 'This is the law [Torah] of the beast and of the fowl' (Leviticus 11:46). He expounds: Anyone who engages in Torah study is permitted to eat the meat of animals and fowl, and anyone who does not engage in Torah study is prohibited to eat the meat of animals or fowl. Rabbi Elazar said: It is permitted to stab an ignorant person to death on Yom Kippur that occurs on Shabbat" (*Pesahim* 49b).

Seridei Esh: The Prohibition as “Robbing the Torah”

Rabbi Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg explains that the Gemara’s comparison of the prohibition against a non-Jew studying Torah to the prohibition of robbery indicates that it applies only when the non-Jew intends to “rob” the Torah by denying that it belongs to Israel:

In truth, R. Yohanan’s teaching . . . indicating that [Torah] is an inheritance for us, and not for them, whether we follow the rationale regarding a betrothed women or the rationale regarding robbery, applies only to the case of a non-Jew who says that the Torah is his and does not belong uniquely to Israel, for such a person “robs” Israel of its birthright and preferential status. However, the teaching does not apply to one who reads the books of Israel in order to gain knowledge and wisdom (*Seridei Esh* 2:55).

The halakhic conclusion from this understanding is that the prohibition applies only to non-Jews who are likely to deny that the Torah belongs fully to Israel, similar to how a betrothed young woman “belongs” exclusively to her betrothed. R. Weinberg continues:

It seems that the essence of the prohibition against a non-Jew studying Torah is the concern that he might take the Torah from Israel by denying that Israel has a preferential status with regard to the Torah. This is what the Sages meant when they described the Torah as similar to a betrothed young woman or a man’s wife (the language of the *Sifri*), or the prohibition as similar to robbery. These different comparisons all refer to one thing: “robbing” the covenant that God made with His people to single them out and distinguish them from all other nations.

The prohibition consists of “robbing” Israel’s covenant with the Master of the Universe, which is expressed through God giving the Torah to Israel. The prohibition, therefore, does not apply in a situation where there is no concern that the non-Jew will deny or “rob” this covenant. R. Weinberg’s words were very relevant historically, because early Christians exploited their knowledge of Torah to claim that God had nullified His covenant with Israel and replaced it with a covenant with the “spiritual Israel” (meaning Christianity).²⁰ This amounted to “stealing the identity” of the Jewish people. In another passage, R. Weinberg mentions

²⁰ Regarding the proposal that the Jewish-Christian polemic is underlying R. Yohanan’s condemnation of Gentiles’ Torah study, see *Ta’anit* 27b, where R. Yohanan prohibits Jews to fast on Sundays, “because of the Christians,” presumably as this could be perceived as giving recognition to the Christian holy day.

“a certain sage” who argues that the statements of R. Yohanan and R. Ami are referring to early sects of Christianity.²¹

According to this understanding, it is clear why the Gemara relates so stringently to this prohibition: It goes beyond sharing Torah recklessly, to stealing the most essential, inner part of a person, the core of our identity as a nation. The Torah is not just *morasha*, meaning our inheritance or property, but, rather, *me'orasa*—it belongs to us in an absolute, elemental way. Misappropriating the Torah thus constitutes the most heinous desecration of our covenant with God. And, therefore, the issue of a non-Jew studying Torah is dependent on the historical context of stealing and denying the Jewish people’s identity. In a time and place where this “stealing” does not happen, allowing a non-Jew to study Torah is merely a matter of the Talmudic principle: “This one benefits, and that one is not harmed” (*Bava Kamma* 20a).

Similarly, Meiri explains that the context of this prohibition is a concern that Jews will be led astray because of the non-Jew’s knowledge of Torah:

He will look like one of our people, and others will learn from him . . . they will think he is one of us, since they see that he has knowledge, and they will be led astray (*Beit ha-Behira, Sanhedrin* 59a).

A corollary of this, according to Meiri, is that it is a great virtue for a non-Jew to study Torah in the right way, as we will see later.²²

Maimonides: Using the Knowledge Against the Jewish People

In Maimonides’ Responsa we find an instructive passage in which he limits the prohibition against non-Jews studying Torah exclusively to

²¹ “And I will not hold back from saying to his honor that more than thirty years ago I found in a certain book in the name of a certain sage, that the statements in *Sanhedrin* regarding a non-Jew who observes the Sabbath and who studies Torah, were referring to a sect of early Christians, who violated the covenant of circumcision, but observed the Sabbath and studied Torah, and they would mix with the Israelites on Sabbath and holidays, and would listen to everything the Israelites said, and later they would go and slander them to the authorities” (*Seridei Esh* 2:56).

²² “But we do not prevent them from doing other *mitzvot*, since it is said that their sacrifices and acts of righteousness are accepted . . . Nevertheless, we respect a person who studies the seven commandments and the details thereof, and all that is derived from them—even though most of the principles of Torah are included in them—as if that person is the High Priest, because there is no concern that he will lead people astray . . . and all the more so if his study is intended to understand the purpose and perfection of our Torah, so that if he finds the Torah is perfect, he will go back and convert, and all the more so if he studies and fulfills the fundamental commandments for their own sake, even the parts that are not derived from the seven Noahide laws.”

Muslims. This reflects Maimonides' understanding that at its root, the prohibition is intended to avoid placing a stumbling block before Jewish people living under Muslim rule, i.e., to prevent them from being led astray by Jewishly knowledgeable Muslims. The context for his position is medieval Muslim-Jewish polemics in which the Muslims claimed that the Torah had been fundamentally corrupted. The Muslims' Torah study was intended to find fault in the Torah:

It is permitted to teach *mitzvot* to Christians in order to draw them to our religion, but it is not permitted to teach any of this to the Ishmaelites, because of what is known about their beliefs, that Torah is not from Heaven. When they learn something from the biblical verses that contradicts what they made up themselves on the basis of their mixed-up stories and confused ideas, the biblical verses will not prove to them that they made a mistake. Rather, they will interpret the verses according to their mistaken assumptions, and they could respond to us using these verses, according to their claims, and lead astray all Jewish people and converts who lack knowledge. This will be a stumbling block for Israel, who are imprisoned among them [in Exile] due to their sins (Responsa of Maimonides #149).

If Muslims learn Torah, it will not function as a “light to the nations” for them, but, rather, it will be exploited as a weapon for leading astray the Jewish people, who live dispersed throughout Muslim lands. Maimonides is not similarly concerned about Christians, who believe in the verity of the Torah text, because in their case the context in which the Torah is transmitted does not create a stumbling block for Israel:

But the uncircumcised [Christians] believe in the unchanging text of the Torah, they just discover different aspects of it according to their mistaken interpretations, and make their own explanations, for which they are known. Yet if we convince them of the correct interpretation, we might be able to return them to good, and even if they do not return when we want them to return, this will not create a stumbling block for us, and we will not find in their text anything different than our texts.

This responsum of Maimonides seems to have far-reaching halakhic implications: It suggests that by Maimonides' time, the Talmudic prohibition against non-Jews studying Torah was to be applied only to Muslims. Furthermore, it indicates that there is no fundamental prohibition, even for the Muslims, because in R. Yohanan's time, when this prohibition first arose, Islam did not yet exist. Maimonides' responsum implies

that the prohibition is dependent on context, and that in each generation we must determine whether, and under what circumstances, there is a danger in non-Jews studying Torah.²³

It is interesting to note that in the laws of Umar, which delineate the status of the non-Muslim minority in lands under Muslim rule, Christians and Jews are forbidden to teach their children the Koran. The reason seems to be a concern that they will denigrate the Koran.²⁴

Sharing Torah Appropriately

The understanding that the prohibition against non-Jews studying Torah is dependent on context does not necessarily signify that teaching them Torah is entirely acceptable. As R. Yohanan's statement implies, the Torah is the heart of Jewish existence. Torah is potent and powerful; it is connected to our very existence like a flame to an ember. Clearly, teaching Torah beyond the Jewish people demands caution. However, even if we accept that the prohibition is intended to prevent a particular problem, we must investigate whether or how the prohibition is relevant to our own current, specific context.

²³ R. Baruch Oberlander of Budapest explains that this statement of Maimonides, which indicates across-the-board permission to study Torah with any non-Jew who is not Muslim, barely impacted halakhic discussion on this issue, because the halakhic decisors had a different, corrupted version of the manuscript of Maimonides: "It is very surprising that despite all the halakhic decisors' long discussions regarding permitting non-Jews to study parts of the Torah, no one relies on the across-the-board permission found in Maimonides' responsum. According to Maimonides, only studying Torah with Ishmaelites [i.e., Muslims] is forbidden, but it is permissible to teach Torah to Christians. The explanation for this is simple. Until the previous generation, Maimonides' words were known only through the responsa printed in *Pe'er ha-Dor* #50 (Amsterdam, 1765), and in this edition there was an incorrect version of his words, and therefore this permission was not known." "*Limmud Torah le-Notzrim*," *He'orot u-Ve'urim: Ohalei Torah* #947 (Ekev, 20 Av 5767), 62–72, see esp. at p. 71; available at: www.haoros.com/download.asp?kovetzID=943&ext=pdf. Maimonides' distinction between different religions raises a variety of interesting questions about the implications of teaching Torah to those lacking any religion. Elsewhere, Maimonides seems to indicate that studying Torah can be a stumbling block for the non-Jew himself (Muslim or Christian), because it might threaten his unique identity: "A non-Jew who studies Torah is punishable by death. The non-Jew can study only the seven Noahide laws The general principle is that we cannot allow a non-Jew to make up his own religion and perform *mitzvot* for their own sake, of his own accord. The non-Jew must either be a righteous convert and accept all the *mitzvot* or keep his own religion without adding or subtracting from it" (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 10:9). I hope to address this passage, which relates to Maimonides' approach to other religions, in an upcoming study.

²⁴ Jacob Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Sourcebook, 315–1791* (JPS, 1938), 13–15.

The variety of positions adopted by the *Rishonim* and *Abaronim* show us that we need to understand the problem addressed by the prohibition in the unique context of each particular period. In the time of early Christianity, the threat came from blurring the distinction between Jewish and Christian identities and using Torah knowledge to deny the Jewish covenant with God. Christians usurped the Jews' connection to the Torah, claiming it for themselves instead. In the lands of Islam, the danger lay in providing "ammunition" to Islam in its polemics to claim that the Torah was fundamentally corrupted. In every generation, we must determine anew whether teaching non-Jews Torah remains problematic and prohibited, just as Maimonides did when he analyzed the damage that could result from this study in his Muslim milieu, while permitting it for those living under Christian rule.

Why is this frequent reassessment necessary? The answer is that transmitting the Torah of Israel to someone from a different nation requires thinking, translating, and adapting the Torah to the language and worldview of the non-Jew. Part of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks' greatness was his ability to teach and share Torah on the world stage in a way that gave humanity insights and tools for dealing with the profound contemporary problems with which many nations are concerned.²⁵ This is difficult to do effectively, as cultures that have "a little of this and a little of that" may sow confusion and create a Tower of Babel-like mixture of identities.

One Talmudic example of this idea is found in the story of King Ptolemy II assembling 72 Jewish sages to independently and simultaneously translate the Torah to Greek. God bestowed wisdom upon them so that they all identically altered the translation of certain words in order to make their work acceptable according to the worldview and opinions of the non-Jewish king (*Megilla* 9a). These 72 sages bring to mind the

²⁵ My friend Assaf Malach suggests that just as Rav Kook, in his time, wrote *Ma'amar ha-Dor* ("Essay for This Generation"), which addresses the question of how to "translate" the Torah to meet the needs of his generation, so, too, we need some kind of "Essay for this Generation Regarding Non-Jews," which will provide guidance on appropriate ways of creating an encounter between a person from a different culture and the Torah. According to Rav Kook, part of loving humanity is getting to know the other nations, their ways of life, and their characters: "The higher level of loving creation must spread love of humanity to all people, despite all differences in opinion, religion, and belief, and despite divisions of race and climate. The right thing to do is to deeply understand the ideas of the different nations and groups, to learn as much as possible about their characters and their qualities, in order to know how to base love of humanity on foundations that approach the practical" (*Middot ha-Re'ayah, Ahava* 10). Thank you to my friend R. Yitzchak Blau for this reference.

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70 nations and 70 languages in which the Torah is to be written and explicated.²⁶ The story teaches us that sharing the Torah requires us to consider our audience, to ensure that the Torah can truly be “a light to the nations.” In effect, writing the Torah in 70 languages, which occurs when the people of Israel enter the Land of Israel, teaches us that we need to adapt the Torah to “the language of each person,” to each nation according to its language and speech.

I learned this lesson from personal experience in my travels to China. I was invited by a group of Chinese people to give lectures on Torah-related topics. Through examining Chinese culture, I tried to identify which topics would be relevant and helpful for Chinese people and which would remain on the other side of the culture divide. Among other things, I learned from a preliminary discussion that the Chinese see great importance in the Jewish understanding of disagreement as positive, represented by the statement: “These and those are the words of the living God.” As the Chinese culture prescribes self-deprecation in the face of authority and has a negative attitude toward disagreement (an approach that has only intensified under Communism), it was a novel idea for them to see diversity of opinions as a blessing, as 70 faces that express the name of God in diverse ways. They were also struck by the importance and value that Judaism attaches to each individual within society.²⁷

Perhaps this can also help us understand the Gemara’s answer with which we opened our discussion: A non-Jew who studies Torah is like the High Priest when he studies specifically the seven Noahide laws, because these commandments symbolize and represent the parts of Torah that are relevant to everyone. There are other aspects of Torah, those that are unique to the covenant between Israel and God, which the non-Jew should not study.

On the other hand, we can also identify times in which people use certain content from the Torah for harmful purposes. An example would be New Age movements that use Kabbalistic sources to engage with sexuality in an immodest way; instead of increasing holiness, they desecrate the holy.

²⁶ The *Aharonim* explain that the Gemara is speaking about the 70 sages of the Sanhedrin, plus the President and Chief Judge of the court (see Rashash, *Sanhedrin* 16b).

²⁷ The story of my travels to China and what I learned from them appears in my book, *Ha-Hayyim ke-Sippur* (Gilui, 2019) [Hebrew] in the chapter, “Journey to China.”

III. Prohibition of a Non-Jew Studying Torah as Fundamental

Non-Jews Studying Torah as Damaging the Covenant

Until now we have discussed the position that sees the problem as dependent on a particular historical context. However, there are also *Rishonim* and *Aharonim* who understand the prohibition as fundamental, independent of any particular context. For example, Rash MiShantz comments on a *Tosefta* about a case where an abandoned baby is found, and it is unknown whether the child is a Jew or non-Jew. He says that the baby must follow the stringencies of both sides: the stringency for a Jew, that he is obligated in *mitzvot*, and the stringency for a non-Jew, that he is forbidden from studying Torah (*Makhsirin* 2:7).

Similarly, in a practical discussion regarding a case that came before him, Rabbi Akiva Eger makes an even more far-reaching ruling, based on his understanding of a nuance in the words of Tosafot. He rules that the prohibition is so fundamental, that even if a non-Jew comes to convert, there may be a prohibition to teach him Torah until he completes his conversion. In this case, the non-Jew lived in a place where the law forbade conversion. The rabbi asking the question wanted to teach the non-Jew Torah in the meantime, until he could move to a country where conversion was permitted, and then he could complete the process. Yet, R. Akiva Eger concluded: "It is not in my power to permit."²⁸

Yet even according to these opinions, which see this prohibition as independent of context, we can ask: What is the reason for and the nature of the prohibition? *Sanhedrin* indicates that the prohibition stems from the connection between the Jewish people and the Torah, one that is intimate and unique, expressed in the separateness of the Jewish people, as we see in the verse: "You shall be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy, and I have set you apart from other peoples to be Mine" (Leviticus 20:26).

R. Yohanan, the author of the statement prohibiting a non-Jew studying Torah, elsewhere sees the essence of the intimate covenant between Israel and God to be revealed in the Oral Law:

R. Yohanan says: The Holy One, Blessed be He, made a covenant with Israel only for the sake of the matters that were transmitted orally [*be'al peh*],

²⁸ Responsa of R. Akiva Eger, first ed., #41. We should point out that R. Akiva Eger himself explained that his reading of Tosafot is in opposition to Maharsha's interpretation. Maharsha learns from the story of Hillel and a non-Jew who comes to him to convert that it is permitted to teach Torah to a non-Jew who is studying toward conversion.

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as it is stated (Exodus 34:27): “For on the basis of [*al pi*] these matters I have made a covenant with you and with Israel” (*Gittin* 60b).²⁹

The Oral Law expresses a unique, intimate connection between the people of Israel and their Father in Heaven, and expresses the communion and covenant to which no foreigner can come near. From this, we also understand those opinions that limit the prohibition to the Oral Law alone,³⁰ because the prohibition applies only to the special space where the covenant could be harmed.

According to this approach, R. Yohanan takes a fundamentally different approach than R. Meir and the *Sifra*, who emphasize the “Torah of Humanity [*Adam*],” which belongs to every person and not just to Israel. Both of these approaches—emphasizing that the Torah is part of the unique covenant with Israel, and seeing the Torah as addressing every person as they are—are valid, as we say: “These and those are the words of the living God.”

These two approaches are both reflected in Shabbat. In Exodus, Shabbat appears as a “sign of the covenant” (Exodus 31:16) between the Jewish people and God, and consequently the non-Jew has no part in it. In fact, a non-Jew who keeps Shabbat undermines the unique covenant with the people of Israel. In contrast, in Genesis, Shabbat is universal, and addresses the entire world (see Genesis 2:1–3). Similarly, the Gemara states that “a non-Jew who keeps Shabbat is punishable by death” (*Sanhedrin* 58b), although R. Akiva states that a non-Jewish resident of Israel must keep the prohibitions of labor on Shabbat on the same level that a Jew is required to keep the prohibitions of labor on a Festival (*Keritut* 9a).

Fulfilling the Covenant: Exclusivity or Uniqueness?

Yet, does keeping the unique covenant between Israel and God indeed obligate us to be separate and isolated? There were time periods in which this was certainly the case, when cooperating with the nations too closely would have been harmful to the Jewish people. However, we can suggest another alternative: Fulfilling Israel’s mission with regard to the nations, being a “light to the nations,” does not blur Israel’s uniqueness, but actually strengthens it.

²⁹ Thank you to R. Sarel Rosenblatt for pointing out the connection between these two statements of R. Yohanan.

³⁰ See, e.g., Netziv, Responsa *Meshiv Davar* 2:76.

According to this approach, the unique status of Israel is actually derived from its destiny and mission vis-à-vis all of humanity. We can already see the roots of this approach at Mount Sinai, where Israel is described as a “treasured possession among all the peoples” (Exodus 19:5). The verses there emphasize that Israel belongs to God precisely because of its position as a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” a people who fulfills its mission regarding the Torah by teaching the world. Israel is treasured, in this context, not as a special race, but depending on its actions in the framework of its covenant with God.

The covenant is thus composed of two circles. In the inner circle, we are a “treasured possession among all peoples.” We uphold our covenant with God, and, as a result, we bring the voice of Torah to the world. In certain generations, the uniqueness of the covenant lies in this first circle, which emphasizes exclusivity, and, consequentially, the prohibition of non-Jews studying Torah. However, this very same covenant, the covenant of our destiny, obligates our generation, in which information is free and accessible, to open up new possibilities for fulfilling the covenant by spreading Torah. Doing so positions us to more profoundly achieve our destiny of being a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Non-Jews Studying Torah and Limits on Jewish Mysticism

Another way of understanding the nature of the prohibition comes from the context in which R. Yohanan’s statement appears: a passage that discusses limits on disseminating Jewish mysticism. The Mishna (*Hagiga* 2:1) discusses the prohibition against transmitting the story of Creation or the story of the Chariot (Ezekiel’s vision, which is a foundational text of Jewish mysticism) to the wrong people or inappropriately. It was in this context that the Talmud forbade transmitting words of Torah to a non-Jew:

R. Ami said: The [mystical] secrets of the Torah may be transmitted only to one who possesses the following five characteristics: “The captain of fifty, and the man of favor, and the counselor, and the cunning charmer, and the skillful enchanter” (Isaiah 3:3).³¹ And R. Ami said further: The words of Torah may not be transmitted to a non-Jew, as it is stated (Psalms 147:20): “He has not dealt so with any nation, and as for His ordinances, they have not known them” (*Hagiga* 13a).

³¹ The Talmud addresses each of the five characteristics, alluded to in the verse in Isaiah, as prerequisites to enter the study of Jewish mysticism; e.g., “the captain of fifty” sets an age requirement below which one should not embark on such study.

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The essence of the prohibition, then, is about our approach to content that must remain esoteric, limited to the inner circle of people, who know how to respect and safeguard its transmission.

Change in the Status of Jewish Mysticism

However, comparing the prohibitions against teaching non-Jews Torah and against sharing Jewish mysticism demands that we also compare the changes taking place regarding the dissemination of such content. In our time, Jewish mysticism has been shared more widely than ever before, at least in part because the greater intellectual sophistication of recent generations requires a corresponding sophistication in understanding and relating to divinity. This tension—between revealing the esoteric inappropriately and not revealing that wisdom at all, thus denying many people the light of Torah—always accompanies the teaching of Jewish mysticism. Even in the Zohar itself, Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai says: “Woe to me if I reveal, and woe to me if I do not reveal” (*Zohar* 3:127b).

By analogy, we may suggest that a similar resolution of this tension needs to take place regarding sharing Torah with non-Jews. The hidden Torah for Jews is parallel to the revealed Torah for non-Jews. This tension—between the need for secrecy, intimacy, respect, and the covenant, on the one hand, and the need to share and influence, on the other—must always accompany the important process of teaching Torah to non-Jews.

IV. Being a Light to the Nations: Practical Halakha

As I stated earlier, we are living in a time in which it is imperative that non-Jews study Torah; it is part of fulfilling the prophetic vision that “they all invoke the Lord by name and serve Him with one accord” (Zephaniah 3:9) and that “Torah will go forth from Zion and the word of God from Jerusalem.”

Our analysis here of the Gemara and the commentaries on the topic of Torah study by non-Jews indicates that the process of sharing Torah, of being a light to the nations, does not constitute a violation of the covenant and of the uniqueness of the Jewish people. That said, close reading of the texts and striving to discover the will of God in our time lead to the conclusion that the serious reservations that exist about non-Jews studying Torah should be translated today into caution, into sharing Torah that is adapted to the particular audience, so that it does not harm the recipient or harm the uniqueness of the giver.

In halakhic language, we can permit teaching Torah to non-Jews—even though doing so is, at first glance, against the simple meaning of the Gemara—by relying on a number of approaches and considerations:

First, the approach that there is no fundamental prohibition, but only a prohibition dependent on context. As stated, this approach is derived from the simple meaning of the Talmudic passage. Maimonides also espouses this approach, by limiting the prohibition to Muslims, as does the *Seridei Esh*, by limiting it to early Christians. Accordingly, each generation must examine its own circumstances in order to determine how non-Jews may study Torah in that generation.

Second, the Gemara itself permits studying the seven Noahide laws, and some *Rishonim* significantly expand the definition of these seven commandments. Meiri (*Sanhedrin* 59a) writes: “Nevertheless, as long as he is studying the principles of the seven commandments and their details, and what is derived from them, even though this includes most of the principles of Torah, we respect him even as if he were the High Priest.” The Noahide laws can be expanded to include fear of God, knowledge of God, charity, and repentance, as we see in the prayer of Solomon, which invites the non-Jew to come and pray in the Temple out of fear and knowledge of God.

Finally, we can rely on *Aharonim*, such as Netziv, who limit the prohibition to Oral Law alone. The rationale behind this limitation is preventing study that could harm the intimacy of the covenant between Israel and God.

In addition to these fundamental distinctions, some *Aharonim* outline other directions for severely limiting the prohibition. Rabbi Yissachar Ber Eilenberg (16th–17th century Poland and Moravia) suggests that the entire passage in *Hagiga* does not reflect the halakha, and that this is why many rabbis teach Torah to non-Jews.³² In a much more limited interpretation, the *Turei Even* explains the passage in *Hagiga* as saying that because the root of the prohibition against a non-Jew studying Torah is, according to the Gemara, the prohibition of robbery, when the Jew

³² Responsa *Be'er Sheva*, *Be'er Mayim Hayyim* 14: “I tried to understand, what do the rabbis who learn Torah with non-Jews rely on? . . . And I did not see or hear anyone who mentions this. Why does not a single author from all the halakhic decisors, whether earlier or later, bring this ruling of R. Ami? This question is particularly strong regarding Maimonides, for it is well known that he does not leave out any ruling taught in the Gemara that is reflected in the halakha. Because of all this I would say, were I not afraid of my friends, that the halakhic decisors did not bring R. Ami because the halakha does not go according to him.”

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chooses, of his own volition, to teach the non-Jew, this does not constitute robbery.³³

Another exception found in the sources is the non-Jew who studies in order to reach the source of truth and who is prepared to accept the conclusions and convert if he “finds the Torah is perfect.”³⁴ Alternatively, there are those who limit the prohibition to actual idolaters, and do not apply it to every non-Jew.³⁵ Similarly, others define the prohibition as applying only to certain kinds of study—only in-depth study is forbidden, and not superficial,³⁶ or only regular and not occasional study.³⁷

These permissions are not just dubious loopholes. Fear and stringency today can impair our ability to fulfill God’s will regarding the destiny and mission of the Jewish people. “The humility of Rabbi Zekharia ben Avkolas destroyed our Temple” (*Gittin* 56a), and we cannot “sit on the fence” without making a decision. The prophetic vision, and the vision of the Temple as the heart of all humanity, from which the Torah goes forth to many nations, call upon us to harness our spirit and to find the paths—which are not always simple—to disseminate and teach Torah to non-Jews in a way that is appropriate, accurate, and illuminating. In doing so, we respond to the Divine call: “I, the Lord, in My grace, have summoned you, and I have grasped you by the hand. I created you, and I appointed you, a covenantal people, a light to the nations” (Isaiah 42:6–7).

— *Translated from Hebrew by Rachael Gelfman Schultz*

³³ “Therefore, he says that R. Ami follows those who say ‘inheritance’ [our inheritance and not theirs] and because it is robbery, but in a case where a Jew transmits and teaches of his own will, there is no robbery” (*Turei Even, Hagiga* 13a).

³⁴ Meiri, *Sanhedrin* 59a: “All the more so if his study is intended to understand the purpose and perfection of our Torah, so that if he finds the Torah is perfect, he will go back and convert, and all the more so if he studies and fulfills the fundamental commandments for their own sake, even the parts that are not derived from the seven Noahide laws.”

³⁵ *Hatam Sofer ha-Shalem, Meiri, Hagiga* 13a.

³⁶ Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch, *Yad Peshuta on Hilkhos Melakhim* 10:9.

³⁷ Responsa *Seridei Esh* 2:56.