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# KOL HAMEVASER

THE JEWISH THOUGHT MAGAZINE OF THE YESHIVA UNIVERSITY STUDENT BODY

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Postcard titled Prohibited Learning  
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*Kol Hamevaser*, the Jewish Thought magazine of the Yeshiva University student body, is dedicated to sparking discussion of Jewish issues on the Yeshiva University campus and beyond. The magazine hopes to facilitate the religious and intellectual growth of its readership and serves as a forum for students to express their views on a variety of issues that face the Jewish community. It also provides opportunities for young thinkers to engage Judaism intellectually and creatively, and to mature into confident leaders.

*Kol Hamevaser* is published monthly and its primary contributors are undergraduates, although it includes input from RIETS Roshei Yeshivah, YU professors, and outside figures. In addition to its print magazine, *Kol Hamevaser* also sponsors special events, speakers, discussion groups, conferences, and shabbatonim.

We encourage anyone interested in writing about or discussing Jewish issues to get involved in our community, and to participate in the magazine, the conversation, and our club's events. Find us online at kolhamevaser.com, or on Facebook or Twitter.

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## Editor's Thoughts: A Philosophical Approach

BY ELEORAH SANDMAN

As a result of its gruesome explication in the liturgies of Yom Kippur and Tish'ah be-Av, the death of R. Hanina ben Teradyon, one of the Ten Martyrs, is a widely known story. A version of this aggadah, recorded in the *Sifrei Devarim*,<sup>1</sup> describes that when it was decreed that R. Hanina ben Teradyon would be burned with his *sefer Torah*, his wife executed, and his daughter forced into hard labor, each family member recited a different scriptural verse of *tsiduk ha-din*, justification of the Divine decree.<sup>2</sup> Immediately after the execution, a surprising character makes an appearance: the philosopher. He stands up before the Roman officials and declares, "Do not be brazen enough to think that you have burned the Torah, for it has returned to the place from which it came, to the house of its Father." This is an odd remark for a philosopher—it hardly addresses any looming metaphysical, epistemological, or ethical issue.<sup>3</sup> Rather, it is a claim to bolster religious confidence, much the type of claim we would expect from a rabbinic figure.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it is the rabbinic figure (and his family) who pronounces the most philosophically attuned statement of the Midrash, the one that addresses the moral perfection of God in affirming Divine justice. What, then, is the role of the philosopher if not to, well, philosophize?

One approach to answering this question would be to deny the premise; perhaps the philosopher really is making a profound statement,

<sup>1</sup> *Ha'azinu* 307

<sup>2</sup> *It is the Midrash itself that refers to these verses as tsiduk ha-din. See Avodah Zarah 18a for another version of the story. There, exact reasons are given for the Divine decree.*

and it is up to the reader to decode the message. Chaya Halberstam, for example, looks to the end of the aggadah, where the Romans announce the execution of the philosopher for his statement defending the Torah. The philosopher declares that these are good tidings, for his share will be in the World to Come along with the martyred rabbi. Halberstam understands the philosopher as making a statement about God's power and justice—"God...appears to have lost control of the wickedness of his human creation, but he compensates for it by effecting true justice in the heavens."<sup>5</sup> The philosopher, then, is countering the *tsiduk ha-din* of Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon by claiming God did not act righteously and could only make up for it after the fact.

A second approach is to acknowledge the oddity and then explain the literary brilliance behind it. Perhaps the Midrash wants to convey that the rabbis had a greater understanding of God's ways than that of a Roman. Or maybe we would expect that the Romans would be more likely to listen to one of their own sages than to a Jew, and the Midrash is emphasizing that the expression of the idea of an amaranthine Torah is foul enough to these heathens that they would even kill one of their own. The possibilities under this approach are many.

As a third approach, the reader, unable to craft a response, would simply catalogue the question and move on. After all, alternate versions of this aggadah in *Avodah Zarah* 18a and *Semahot* 8:13 omit the philosopher

<sup>3</sup> *See Ted Honderich, The Oxford Companion to Philosophy, p.666, Oxford, 1995.*

<sup>4</sup> *In the version in Avodah Zarah, and in a third version in Semahot 8:13, it is R. Hanina ben Teradyon himself who similarly remarks that while the*

entirely.

A final approach would insist that we are misunderstanding the character in our aggadah. The previous approaches were predicated on the expectation that the philosopher's job is to philosophize. What if the term "philosopher" has other connotations? In *Shabbat* 116a, Rashi understands that this character is a *min*, or infidel.<sup>6</sup> Inserting this understanding into the *Sifre*, the story then highlights the conversion of this infidel to the belief system that will gain him access to the World to Come.<sup>7</sup>

Using artistic license, I would like to suggest that each of these approaches to explaining the odd comment of this specific philosopher sheds light on the identity and reception of a philosopher in general. According to the first approach, a philosopher is one who speaks mundane words, though closer inspection shows that his message is instead profound. The second, broader approach might lead us to conclude that a philosopher is not the ultimate disseminator of knowledge. The third explanation indicates that the philosopher may have what to add to a conversation, but no one else is interested in understanding, and the masses will instead seek less sophisticated answers to their questions. Finally, a philosopher can be a dangerous heretic, overturning the very values of a particular people, refusing to relinquish his views until the day of his death.

This is not an exhaustive content-of-character list for every philosopher. Rather, it shows that

*parchment was burning, the letters were instead flying away.*

<sup>5</sup> *Law and Truth in Rabbinic Literature, p.142, Indiana, 2010.*

<sup>6</sup> *Tosafot there cite Rashi's explanation and also note the literal*

a philosopher's job is varied, and the results of his or her labor are inconclusive. This year's first issue of *Kol Hamevaser* explores works of philosophers, influences of their philosophies, and the authors' own philosophizing on novel questions posed by the twenty-first century student. Read Miriam Pearl Klahr's article about Ahad Ha'am's impact on contemporary Israeli culture. Examine Aryeh Sklar's novel approach to reconciling contradictions in Rambam's *Moreh Nevukhim*. Learn about Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein's approach to tragedy as explained by Avraham Wein. All the articles published here are thought provoking, well-researched, and represent the hard work of the authors.

Lastly, I would like to welcome everybody to a new year of *Kol Hamevaser*. Welcome to this year's new editors: Daniel Shlian (editor in chief), Sima Grossman (associate editor), Matt Lubin (associate editor), and Elianne Neuman (assistant editor). Publishing a magazine of this caliber is not easy, and they have put in many hours to make it a success. Welcome to our writers and staff, many new recruits to *Kol Hamevaser* among them, who have already started to engage our campuses in high-level discussion. And welcome to you, our readers. Join the discussion, get involved with our events, and let us know how we can make *Kol Hamevaser* even better. *Eleorah Sandman is the Editor in Chief of Kol Hamevaser. She is a senior at Stern College and a first year student at GPATS.*

*translation from the Greek, "lover of wisdom."*

<sup>7</sup> *Compare to the version in Avodah Zarah where the executioner hastens Rabbi Hanina's painful death in order to gain access to Olam Habbah.*



## Maimonides and the Mean of Doctrines

By ARYEH SKLAR

Just about every essay written about Maimonides and the contradictions apparent in his philosophic magnum opus, the Guide for the Perplexed, begins with some pithy statement about how Maimonides' use of contradictions created more controversy than conclusions. Arthur Hyman, in his essay, "Interpreting Maimonides," states that, "Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* is a difficult and enigmatic work which many times perplexed the very reader it was supposed to guide."<sup>1</sup> Warren Harvey writes, "Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* is a book of puzzles... No one will gainsay that Maimonides did a superb job of concealment. After almost eight centuries, students of the

*Guide* are still trying to figure out its puzzles."<sup>2</sup> Menachem Kellner states, "Maimonides precipitated a cottage industry in Jewish intellectual circles, and has kept his interpreters busy ever since for close to a millennium."<sup>3</sup>

This serves as a warning of sorts for the reader of interpretations of the Guide. How can one proceed to ascertain Maimonides' true belief? When there are multiple interpretations which seem correct, which one should be accepted? The discussion invariably involves Maimonides' declaration of his use of contradictions early in the Guide, especially the seventh contradiction. The seventh reason for contradiction, one that Maimonides promises he will employ in the Guide, is translated thusly by Pines (18):<sup>4</sup> In speaking about very obscure matters it is necessary to conceal some parts and disclose others. Sometimes in the case of certain dicta this necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of a certain premise, whereas in another place necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis

of another premise contradicting the first one...The vulgar must in no way be aware of the contradiction; the author accordingly uses some device to conceal it by all means.

The interpretations of this passage are too numerous in number to be discussed in their entirety here.<sup>5</sup> What I would like to offer here is one possible approach to some of the seeming contradictions, one which I have not seen emphasized elsewhere. That is, when there are competing sources of truth, such as the Aristotelian and the popular-religious, and the conflict cannot be resolved

*Maimonides seems to consider both faith and reasoning itself as moral virtues*

through logical demonstration, the position one should take is the middle path, the mean of opinions. This means adopting aspects of the two opinions and synthesizing the best of the religious and philosophical approaches, in order to relieve the tension between the two accepted sources of truth. This is most obvious in cases where Maimonides lists conflicting or competing opinions in the Guide, such as with regards to providence and prophecy, and his own opinion is obscured by other passages in the Guide. Before attempting to apply this theory to those cases to show its possibility as an interpretive method of some of the contradictions of the Guide, first we will establish the philosophical and religious basis within Maimonides' thought for such an approach.

Firstly, given Maimonides' consistent advocacy of the middle path as the ultimate goal of man in so many of his writings, his approach to writing the Guide could align with this as well. In his commentary to the Mishnah,<sup>6</sup> in his Mishneh Torah,<sup>7</sup> and in his Guide,<sup>8</sup>

he repeatedly refers to a type of middle path reminiscent of Aristotle's, with some important changes.<sup>9</sup> That is, in most cases, one should seek the middle way between two extremes of moral vices, such as the middle way between greediness and being a spendthrift. Similarly, one should find the

middle path between cowardice and recklessness. And so on for most moral ills. Generally, the Golden Mean is understood to be a way of perfecting and maintaining moral attributes. How can opinions be considered in that category? Strikingly, Maimonides seems to consider both faith and reasoning itself as moral virtues.<sup>10</sup> In the Guide, 3:53, Maimonides states (631):

[W]hen you walk in the way of the moral virtues, you do justice to your rational soul, giving her the due that is her right. And because every moral virtue is called zedakah, it says: "And he believed in the Lord, and it was accounted to him as zedakah" (Gen. 15:6). **I refer to the virtue of faith.** Thus, ideas and concepts can be included in the category of moral perfection, to be done through the Golden Mean.

There is another way that intellect and moral virtues converge in Maimonidean thought. Though Aristotle derived the basis for the Golden Mean from the tendency of nature to follow the

middle path, Maimonides derives the basis instead from the religious invocation to imitate God, *imitatio dei*.<sup>11</sup> As Marvin Fox put it, "Maimonides works here fully inside the Jewish tradition. He readily adopts the outer form of the mean as his theoretical base and principle of explanation, but the specific contents of the good life

are defined not by way of nature but by way of the imitation of God."<sup>12</sup> *Imitatio dei*, another recurring theme in Maimonides' writings, covers two areas that Maimonides was most interested in: the perfection of character traits, and also the perfection of one's intellect.<sup>13</sup> If the perfection of the intellect occurs in the same fashion as the perfection of character traits, it makes sense that one should seek the mean of intellectual ideas when it would not compromise rational perfection. Further, the very use of contradictions for pedagogical purposes can be an expression of *imitatio dei*, according to Maimonides. Maimonides states that the way the prophetic works of the Bible are written is such that the true opinions are hidden in the text, whether through the contradiction of differing parables, or the contradiction of stating a proviso out of its proper place, because of a certain necessity, such that it seems to be a contradiction. But he goes on to write that the question of whether the

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"seventh cause" described above, that of concealment and obfuscation, is to be found in the books of the Prophets is "a matter for speculative study and investigation" (19). Although he expresses doubt if the seventh cause was actually employed or not, he concedes its possibility. Thus, by employing it in his own writing, he is following after those

who have had communion with God, a God-approved style of writing. From here we see that, at least in certain aspects, "*imitatio dei*" is relevant to the manner of inquiry necessary to determine metaphysical truths, and thus could be applicable regarding the Golden Mean as well.

It is also clear from Maimonides' declaration of the purpose of the Guide, and the audience he is writing to, that he sought a kind of *religious* solution as well. In the very beginning of his introduction to the Guide (5-6) he describes the student who is "a religious man for whom the validity of our Law has become established in his soul and has become actual in his belief." On the other hand, the student has also "studied the sciences of the philosophers and come to know what they signify." Maimonides proposes to help this student "remove most of the difficulties." His task, then, is that this must be done in a way that will allow the student to feel that the Torah law is still valid, and that he is not abandoning reason by believing in and following the Torah. Submission to one truth over another would not seem to work if Maimonides is to be successful. Many times, not all contradictions are merely apparent, and many seem insurmountable. Thus, when truth is unknown - when there are two competing sources for truth - the Golden Mean must be employed. A synthetic approach can at times be

the best solution for Maimonides' audience.

Maimonides writes regarding the contradictions in the Guide that the masses must not be aware of their existence. According to the above suggestion, this is because

*Maimonides allows his religiously and philosophically committed reader to take a middle path between the two*

Maimonides only wants the reader to see the synthesized version, but not out of what it was created. To accept

this synthesized version, one is required to accept two sources of truth when dealing with doubt—the philosophical and religious—and also be willing to come to a moderate position between both of them. The ignorant philosopher would not accept the religious truth, and the ignorant religious person would not accept the philosophic truth,<sup>14</sup> and the nuanced mean is where neither has to suffer.

As mentioned previously, Maimonides' method can be most easily seen in lists of multiple opinions in the Guide for a given topic. In each case, there are at least three opinions, two of which are at the extremes. It is my contention that in each of these cases, Maimonides advocates the moderate position, the 'mean' of opinions. The listing of multiple possible positions occurs primarily in three places in the Guide: regarding creation, prophecy, and providence.

Maimonides tells us that, in some fashion, the positions regarding creation aligns with that of prophecy. Specifically, he states in the Guide 2:32 (360), "The opinions of people concerning prophecy are like their opinions concerning the eternity of the world or creation of the world. I mean by this that just as the people to whose mind the existence of the Deity is firmly established, have, as we have set forth [in 2.13], three opinions concerning the eternity or creation of the world, so are there three

opinions concerning prophecy." The mystery, or puzzle, is in what way did Maimonides intend that these align?<sup>15</sup> A quick listing of the positions and who believes them are as follows:

C1 - Creation *ex nihilo* (those who believe in the Torah)  
C2 - Creation out of eternal matter (Plato)  
C3 - Eternal universe (Aristotle)

P1 - Prophecy is given to whomever God chooses (the vulgar)

P2 - Prophecy is a natural process and God has no part in who receives it (the philosopher)  
P3 - Prophecy is natural but can be hindered by God at His choosing (the Torah and our foundation)

The maximum number of possible combinations, at the face of it, is nine in all. However, there are a few combinations that are highly improbable. We have to assume that there must be some sort of philosophical parallel, or group parallel, with each of the correspondences. Meaning, we can say with certainty there are specific combinations that Maimonides would never had had in mind. He never would have thought that Aristotle's eternity of the world would correspond with the view of prophecy that it can be presented to nearly anyone, because one philosophically casts God as impotent, and the other omnipotent as regards to choice and communication with man. Thus there has to be some sort of line-up regarding the philosophical underpinnings of the

positions. Similarly, it is difficult to argue that the "philosopher" group as regards to prophecy could line up

with the vulgar group as regards to creation, simply because the groups themselves are so incompatible.

Thus, we seem "stuck" with three opinions about possible combinations, and each of those possibilities do indeed find expression in the works of

three modern Maimonidean scholars: Harvey<sup>16</sup>, Davidson<sup>17</sup>, and Kaplan<sup>18</sup>. Where Creation is the first number and prophecy the second, Harvey sees it as 1:1, 2:2, 3:3, Davidson sees it as 1:1, 2:3, 3:2, and Kaplan lines it up as 1:3, 2:1, 3:2, and each possibility has its advantages and disadvantages.

Let us begin with Harvey's combination. Creation *ex nihilo* lines up well with ultimate freedom by God to choose anyone as a prophet, both granting God omnipotence. This would mean, however, that Maimonides believes Creation *ex nihilo* lines up with the position of the vulgar, which defies the exoteric reading of the Guide. The Platonic view of creation also lines up as a group parallel with the naturalist view of prophecy, which Maimonides marks as the position of the philosophers. But there is a great disadvantage with this view, because Maimonides emphasizes that the naturalist view does not allow God to step in and block prophecy from those who deserve it naturally, while the Platonic view would allow it. Additionally, Aristotle's view of





creation should not concur with God's ability to prevent prophecy from someone. Harvey is forced to explain that Maimonides would have to argue against the accepted Aristotelian view that the eternity of the world necessitates God's inability to act in it—a necessity that Maimonides seems to accept within the Aristotelian view.

Kaplan represents a “religious” approach to Maimonides, wherein Maimonides aligns creation *ex nihilo* with prophecy that allows for God obstructing it from certain people. But Kaplan lines up Platonic creation with absolutely free choice by God in prophecy. It is difficult to understand why each one could not apply to the other. Meaning, it is even easier to argue creation *ex nihilo* could align with absolutely free divine choice in prophecy, and Platonic creation with a limited divine choice.

That is, in fact, the position argued by Davidson. Thus, the Platonic creation would line up with the “Law of Moses” view of prophecy, and based on this analysis he concludes that Maimonides believed the Platonic view of creation to be true. However, there are still a few issues to work out. This interpretation relies on a rarely-held position that Maimonides is really a Platonic philosopher, at least as regards to creation. While it is true that he allows for the Platonic view of creation as a “possible opinion” in the Guide, he is fairly explicit in his vehement denial of Jewish belief to allow for the Platonic view, which he equates to the Aristotelian one in that regard. Furthermore, the Platonic view of creation does not appear to be obviously present in the Guide or in Maimonides' other writings. As Davidson himself notes, it also seems to go against the thrust of Maimonides' argument in the Guide for the creation of the world. Maimonides spends a large amount of his book showing that creation *ex nihilo* is equal in demonstrative proof

as Aristotle's theory of an eternal world, meaning that both do not have it. He spends very little time on the Platonic theory. If he was hiding his theory through esotericism, it would be the Aristotelian one, which he fights against in the Guide, if anything. So why would he do this?

By supposing Maimonides is seeking the middle of these opinions here, these issues could be resolved. Within the theories of creation, there is an Aristotelian view of eternity of the universe, and there is the religious/traditional view of creation *ex nihilo*. The middle path, then, is a Platonic view that allows for creation and miracles. The others could not be chosen. If creation *ex nihilo* is picked, Maimonides' audience would feel it has abandoned its intellect. If the view of an eternal world is picked, Maimonides' audience will feel its religious foundation crumbling, with no miracles and no revelation. Instead, Platonic creation can take the best features of both Aristotelian eternity and religious creation *ex nihilo*: eternal matter but with the possibility of miracles.

Indeed, Maimonides explicitly states that he agrees with Aristotle half-way. In Guide 2:29 (346) he states, “We agree with Aristotle with regard to one half of his opinion...” He goes on to state this half as being an eternal world a parte post, until God miraculously changes it. Is this really any part of Aristotle's position? It can hardly be said to be in any semblance to Aristotle's theory of an eternal universe. The real half that could be agreed upon would be the state of eternal matter. That is closer to Aristotelian philosophy than that of agreeing to an eternal world a parte post were God never to miraculously change it. However, he could not do this if the audience remained convinced the philosophic demonstrable truth lies of with Aristotelian eternity. So his first job was to lower the demonstrable truth of eternity to the same level as

Platonic creation and creation *ex nihilo*. Then, and only then, could he create a successful synthesis. While not necessarily believing in the Platonic view of creation himself, Maimonides allows his religiously and philosophically committed reader to take a middle path between the two.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, there are three opinions regarding prophecy. One is a view of prophecy that sees it as wholly miraculous, and anyone God chooses can receive it. Another is a view of prophecy that is wholly naturalistic, believing that God cannot choose any particular person to receive or not receive that prophecy. Both pose a problem to the religious philosopher. The philosopher believes in divine overflow, and the perfection of the intellect to receive prophecy, so the first view of prophecy cannot be true. The second position, however, poses a problem to the religious person who believes that God has an active part in the process in which the person to which prophecy is conveyed receives his prophecy. Thus, Maimonides chose the opinion that represents the best of both, that prophecy is a natural process in which God has the power to withhold prophecy should He will it. In this synthesis model, Maimonides was not saying that there is a correspondence of a precise nature in both discussions. Rather, there are three opinions, two of which are at extremes, and a third opinion exists that can be seen as a moderate view. Another area Maimonides discusses various views and has his own in the Guide is in regard to divine providence. In Guide 3:17, Maimonides lists six opinions as regards to providence, including his own. These are:

Everything is random, there is no providence (Epicurus)

Only permanent and ordered things have providence, but not individuals (Aristotle)

Everything has divine providence (Asharite)

Man has free will, but divine providence also acts over everything using divine wisdom (Mutazilite)

Man and God have free will, and God is just. Divine providence acts over all humans using divine justice. This may imply some “suffering of love.” It may also imply violations of natural law. (Believers in the Torah)

Maimonides explains the problems he has with each of these theories, and proposes his own that combines the Torah theory with Aristotle's theory. It is important to point out that Maimonides explicitly connects Aristotle's view with that about creation. Regarding Aristotle's view, he writes, “This view is closely connected with his theory of the Eternity of the Universe and with his opinion that everything different from the existing order of things in Nature is impossible. It is the belief of those who turned away from our Law...” If so, it would make sense for Maimonides to take elements of it into account as he did for creation. Thus, his own opinion is such that he agrees with the Torah view in that Divine providence exists for human individuals who excel in intellectual perfection. However, Aristotle is correct about other aspects of the world, such as individual animals, the natural world, which are left to chance. A leaf blows because of natural chance, not because God specifically willed it. In doing this, he explicitly combines the two approaches to form a synthesized third.<sup>20</sup>

In summation, Maimonides' method of contradictions could be related to his doctrine of the mean, at least in cases of unproven opinions. We have seen that faith and reasoning are subject to the category of virtue and vice, and that following the middle path among both moral and intellectual extremes can fulfill *imitatio dei*. We proposed that Maimonides wrote his Guide with contradictions that are resolved through the mean because

it would fulfill another aspect of *imitatio dei*, following God's own use of contradictions. In some cases, where Maimonides lists multiple opinions and obfuscates what his own opinion is, he appears to support the

position which follows the mean. In other cases, it is clear that his own position does, in fact, combine aspects of other opinions. Thus, it can be said that Maimonides believes not only in the doctrine of the mean, but also the

mean of doctrines.

*Aryeh Sklar is a student at Bernard Revel School for Jewish Studies majoring in Jewish Philosophy*

1 Arthur Hyman, “Interpreting Maimonides,” *Gesher*, Vol. 5 (1976), 46

2 Warren Z. Harvey, “A Third Approach To Maimonides' Cosmogony-Prophetology Puzzle”, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 74, No. 3 (July, 1981), 287

3 Kellner, Menachem, “Reading Rambam: Approaches to the Interpretation of Maimonides,” *Jewish History* Vol. 5, No. 2 (Fall, 1991), 75

4 All translations of the Guide of the Perplexed and pagination are from the Pines translation of *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963

5 See for example, Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, IL: Free, 1952) 38-94; and his “How to Begin to Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*,” *Pines' Guide of the Perplexed*, xi-lvi, and Joseph Buijss' response, “The Philosophical Character of Maimonides' Guide - A Critique of Strauss' Interpretation,” *Judaism*, Vol. 27 (1978), 448-457. For an approach not too dissimilar from the one argued in this paper, see especially Marvin Fox, *Interpreting Maimonides: Studies in Methodology, Metaphysics and Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago

Press, 1990), 67-90, and Yair Lorberbaum, “On Contradictions, Rationality, Dialectics, and Esotericism in Maimonides' 'Guide of the Perplexed'”, *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (Jun., 2002), 711-750

6 Such as his introduction to *Avot and Avot* 4:4

7 Such as Code of Maimonides, *Laws of Temperaments (Hilkhot De'ot) Chapters 1 and 2*

8 Such as his reasoning for circumcision in *Guide* 3:49

9 See Fox's “The Doctrine of the Mean in Aristotle and Maimonides” in *Interpreting Maimonides: Studies in Methodology, Metaphysics and Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 93-123, also found in *Maimonides: A Collection of Critical Essays* (IN: Notre Dame Press, 1998), 234-263

10 See Menachem Kellner, *Science in the Bet Midrash* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2009), 165-173

11 See Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Temperaments* 1:6, and his *Book of the Commandments: positive commandment* #8

12 Fox *ibid.*, 253

13 See Howard Kreisel, “Imitatio Dei in Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed,” *AJS Review* Vol. 19, No. 2 (1994), 169-211

14 Indeed, this is what drives Maimonides to write in his introduction to *Avot* that he will censor the names of the philosophers he has in mind, as the masses would throw out the very valid ideas just based on where they came from.

15 It is true that some suggest that Maimonides only meant a simple relationship in terms of the number three, see Masha Turner, “Examining the Relationship Between the Opinions on Creation and the Opinions on Prophecy in the Guide of the Perplexed” (Heb.), in *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy & Kabbalah*, No. 50/52 (2003), 73-82. However, even early figures such as Abravanel (in his commentary to the Guide, 2:32) realized that this is a very difficult approach, as there was no reason for Maimonides to create an explicit relationship between the two, and the similarity of the number three has no real importance and could have manifested in the similarity to the number of forefathers, or other such famous “threes”.

16 Harvey, “A Third Approach To Maimonides' Cosmogony-Prophetology Puzzle”, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 74, No. 3 (July, 1981), 287-301

17 See Herbert Davidson, “Maimonides' Secret Position on Creation,” in Isadore Twersky, ed., *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1979) 16-40

18 *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol 70 (1977), 233-56

19 Presented here are only a few positions regarding Maimonides on creation. For further study into the topic, see *Jewish Philosophy: Perspectives and Retrospectives*, Academic Studies Press, 2012, 157-232

20 To appreciate the vast literature and for further study into the topic of Maimonides on divine providence, see Israel J. Dienstag, “Maimonides on Providence – A Bibliography” (Heb.), *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy & Kabbalah*, No. 20 (Winter 1987), 17-28

## Ahad Ha'am and His Dream for Israel's Soul

BY MIRIAM PEARL KLAHR

On everyone.”<sup>1</sup> Though Bible study is far from new for both the religious and secular sectors of Israeli society, the joining of the two is unique. As part of secular Israeli society's original

December 21, 2014, the second night of Hanukkah, Project 929, an online initiative committed to studying one

chapter of Tanakh each day, was launched. The goal of the site is to “help Israelis from all walks of life understand how the biblical text is relevant to them from a social perspective. One in which the Bible is a shared text that belongs to

*Asher Ginsberg, who later adopted the pen name of Ahad Ha'am, devoted his life to defining and nurturing “true” national Jewish freedom through the creation of an Israeli culture rooted in Jewish tradition.*

efforts to recreate Jewish culture, it drew upon Tanakh's stories of heroism. However, an important part of this process was also rejecting the traditional

and religious interpretations of Tanakh that the religious clung to. In contrast, on the Project 929 website one finds a mixture of these two worlds as artists, writers, rabbis, and politicians offer insights regarding the daily chapter. There one can find traditional Rabbinic midrashim alongside feminist interpretations of the biblical text. This development is a far cry from earlier models of Israeli culture, which focused on creating a new, liberated Jew, divorcing themselves from the past and performing anti-religious activities such as eating pork on Yom Kippur.

Yet upon closer examination,





this movement to build an Israeli culture that is not specifically religious but steeped in traditional Jewish texts and values is not entirely new. "What is national freedom if not a people's inner freedom to cultivate its abilities along the beaten path of its history?" wrote Ahad Ha'am, father of cultural Zionism<sup>2</sup>. Asher Ginsberg, who later adopted the pen name of Ahad Ha'am, devoted his life to defining and nurturing "true" national Jewish freedom through the creation of an Israeli culture rooted in Jewish tradition.

In 1856 Ahad Ha'am was born to a Hasidic family in the small village of Skvyra, Ukraine. Like all Hassidic boys Ahad Ha'am attended *heder*; however, he also secretly self-taught himself to read Russian. At the age of twelve his family moved to the city of Kiev, where his father finally agreed to hire a secular studies tutor.<sup>3</sup> Slowly Ahad Ha'am shed his traditional Jewish beliefs, yet he never fully aligned himself with the Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment, which pushed

for complete integration of Jews within secular society.

In an essay titled "Slavery in Freedom," Ahad Ha'am describes the

emancipated Jews of France<sup>4</sup>. He explains that their attainment of

political freedom came at the price of moral and intellectual slavery. In the process of becoming full French citizens, they denied the existence of Jewish nationality. They stripped themselves of their natural bonds with their brothers, entering into what Ahad Ha'am considered a form of moral slavery. Similarly, for the first time in history, Jews had to explain to both others and themselves why they still identified as Jews even after becoming French citizens. However, their feelings of debt towards France for their newly gained rights prevented them from honestly relating to their Jewish identity, thrusting them into a sort of intellectual slavery. While

*But Ahad Ha'am's greatest victory is probably felt through the revival of the Hebrew language.*

these Jews were free to vote and take part in the country, they had lost the freedom to be themselves. Instead of advancing Jewish culture, they now constantly measured themselves against other cultures. Ahad Ha'am believed that even when not trying to assimilate, emancipated Jews could no longer produce true original work. "Even what is good in our literature is good

only in that it resembles more or less the good products of other literatures<sup>5</sup>" he wrote. For these reasons Ahad Ha'am believed that "it is only in the latest period, that of emancipation and assimilation that Jewish culture has become sterile and ceased to bear new fruit."<sup>6</sup>

Of course Ahad Ha'am also acknowledged that Eastern European Jews, denied of Emancipation, were not fully free. He extolled their spiritual freedom, one which Ahad Ha'am claimed he would never sacrifice for emancipation of any form. Yet he also recognized how the physical cruelty of anti-Semitism stifled their cultural creativity. Thus Ahad Ha'am turned to Zionism in his search for Jewish freedom. However, he was quickly disenchanted with the Zionist vision of his day. Hovevei Zion, a nineteenth century study group movement, and later on Theodor Herzl, advocated for political Zionism. They envisioned a state filled with Jews from across the diaspora. There the Jews would rule themselves, become a powerful people, and at long last put an end to the anti-Semitism. But Ahad Ha'am found the goals of political Zionism to be impractical and misguided.<sup>7</sup> He believed that an ingathering of all the Jews to the land of Israel was an impossible dream. Even more importantly, he believed that the primary challenge facing the Jewish nation was one other than physical harm.

Ahad Ha'am's concern was the dying spiritual life force of Judaism.<sup>8</sup> Though Ahad Ha'am was not observant, he held a deep respect for Jewish culture and ethics. "The love for Torah is a basis of our language's existence," he wrote, using the word language broadly to represent all of Jewish culture. He believed that at one time faith was the source of this

love, but that in the new state the source would be nationalism<sup>9</sup>. Ahad Ha'am asserted that a Jewish national culture revival must precede any political activity; that before a state could be established, Jews needed to settle in Palestine and allow a Jewish culture to flourish. Therefore, Ahad Ha'am envisioned a small Jewish state which did not necessarily need to be governed by Jews. In his eyes, the essential factor was that it be a place devoid of intellectual and physical constraints, allowing Jewish culture to organically develop there. He believed that the minority of Jews living in Israel would form a spiritual center and an exemplary model for the many Jews dispersed throughout the world. "Palestine will be the national, spiritual center for Judaism, a center beloved of all the people and dear to it, serving to unify the nation and fuse it into one body; a center for the law and the science, for language and literature, for physical labor and spiritual elevation; a miniature representation of what the Jewish people ought to be," said Ahad Ha'am<sup>10</sup>. He desired a home of refuge not just for Jewish wanderers but also for the national spirit; he dreamed of a Jewish State and not just a state for the Jews.<sup>11</sup>

What happened to Ahad Ha'am's dream? Did it ever ripen to fruition? Like with many thinkers, the influence Ahad Ha'am's thought and philosophy had upon Israeli society is debatable. From a political standpoint his impact was limited. In 1889 Ahad Ha'am established the Bnei Moshe Association to promote Jewish cultural nationalism, but the organization dissolved within eight years<sup>12</sup>. In 1901, inspired by Ahad Ha'am, Chaim Weizmann began the "Democratic Faction," an opposition faction within the Zionist Organization that called for the organization of cultural activities by the Zionist Organization. By 1904, however, due to weak leadership, the faction ceased to exist. Though Ahad Ha'am's philosophy originally

found followers in the members of the first Aliyah, as European anti-Semitism worsened, Zionists focused more on creating a political state as quickly as possible, instead of slowly first creating a Jewish culture. Furthermore, his belief that mass immigration to the Jewish homeland of Zion was impossible proved wrong.<sup>13</sup> From Herzl onward, the primary concern of Israeli politicians has not been the cultivation of a unique Jewish culture, but rather the physical development of the state, from establishing a political system to ensuring its security.<sup>14</sup>

However, the Jewish political state that was established in 1948 was not free of Ahad Ha'am's influence. In the few years that Bnei Moshe operated, it managed to pass a resolution at the Second Zionist Congress to establish educational and cultural activities of national character in Israel and the Diaspora, such as distributing Hebrew literature to both communities. The organization also set up a network of Hebraic schools that promoted the significance of Jewish texts and the Hebrew language from a cultural perspective<sup>15</sup>. But Ahad Ha'am's greatest victory is probably felt through the revival of the Hebrew language.

Herzl wrote that "the language which proves itself to be of greatest utility for general intercourse will be adopted as our national tongue."<sup>16</sup> Herzl associated Yiddish with the weak diaspora Jew and saw no particular value in revitalizing the Hebrew language which most Jews could not speak at his time. Instead he believed that the European language determined to be most convenient for communication should be the language of the State of Israel. Ahad Ha'am believed that bringing the biblical Hebrew language back to life was a crucial step in creating a national Jewish

culture. Use of the Hebrew Language would build a culture rooted in the history and wisdom of the Jewish people, allowing the Jewish Bible to be at the cultural core of the Jewish people. It would give the people of Israel access to the rich intellectual texts of Jewish History<sup>17</sup> and a unique voice rooted in their past. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda read an article of Ahad Ha'am's containing these ideas and was persuaded that the success of the Zionist movement was dependent on the Hebrew language. Ben-Yehuda then dedicated his entire life to codifying a modernized Hebrew language. Since its revitalization, the Hebrew Language has come to represent the Zionist spirit and life force in many ways. Hebraizing one's name has come to be a strong symbol of nationality. In fact, David Ben-Gurion, who Hebraized his name from David Greene, required all the members of his cabinet to do so as well<sup>18</sup>. The ultimate use of Hebrew, through literary expression, also plays a key role in Israel's cultural development. It is often said that Zionist thoughts and movements are best gauged through studying Hebrew poetry and prose<sup>19</sup>. Furthermore, the literature does not only reflect developments and trends, it also casts a remarkably strong influence on Israeli society. The revived Hebrew language is not just a medium for connecting to past texts and communicating; the language itself is an integral part of Israeli culture.

For much of Zionist History Ahad Ha'am's voice regarding Israeli culture seemed all but forgotten. Israeli culture focused on creating a new Jew, liberated from traditional Judaism. However, as Israel faces the twenty-first century, one can sense a shift towards the dream of Ahad Ha'am. Whether it is directly related to the revival of the Hebrew language and Ahad Ha'am vision, or a result of the breakdown of Oslo and post-



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Zionist thinking which vilifies political Zionism, is hard to determine. But what is clear is that Israeli culture is shifting. Song writers are referencing Jewish texts and values<sup>20</sup>. Meir Banai's "Hear My Cry," an album whose lyrics quote heavily from the Yom Kippur liturgy, and hard rocker Berry Sakharof "Red Lips," whose lyrics are taken from the writings of 11th-

1 Beth Kisseleff, "Secuar Bible Study for the Ineternet Age," *The Tower*, June 2015, available at <http://www.thetower.org/article/secular-bible-study-for-the-internet-age/>

2 *Ahad Ha'am, HaShiloah, 1902*

3 *Ahad Ha'am, Encyclopedia of Zionism and Israel*, vol. 1, New York, 1971, 13-14

4 *Ahad Ha'am, Slavery in Freedom*, transl. by Leon Simon, (Kessinger Publishing Rare Reprints, 2010)

5 *Ahad Ha'am, "The Spiritual Revival" in Selected Essays of Ahad Haam*, transl. by Leon Simon (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1962). 265

6 *Ahad Ha'am, "The Spiritual Revival" in Selected Essays of Ahad Haam*, transl. by Leon Simon (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1962). 265

century Spanish Jewish poet Solomon ibn Gabirol, are only two such examples<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, Project 929 is far from the only initiative to bring Jewish textual learning into common Israeli culture. Jerusalem based Beit Avi Chai and Tel Aviv based ALMA both engage a diverse spectrum of Israeli society in Jewish learning. Similarly, the Beit Midrash is no longer

7 Yaakov Shavit, "Ahad Ha-'Am and Hebrew National Culture: Realist or Utopianist?," *Jewish History*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Fall, 1990). 71-87

8 Ofir Haivry, "On Zion: A Reality That Fashions Imagination" in *New Essays on Zionism* (Shalem Press, Jerusalem, 2007). 83

9 *Ahad Haam, Igrot Ahad Haam, 1923*

10 *Ahad Haam, "An Open Letter to my Brethren in the Spirit", 1891*

11 Yoram Hazony, "The Guardian of the Jews" in, in *New Essays on Zionism* (Shalem Press, Jerusalem, 2007). 58

12 *Ahad Haam (1856-1927) available at http://www.knesset.gov.il/lexicon/eng/echad\_haam\_eng.htm*

13 Yaakov Shavit, "Ahad Ha-'Am and Hebrew National Culture: Realist or Utopianist?," *Jewish History*, Vol.

only an Orthodox institution which serves a religious purpose. Study halls devoted to analyzing the Bible and the Talmud as a national and cultural source of wisdom are spreading throughout Israel. Michal Goodman, founder of Ein Prat, a Beit Midrash where religious and secular students come together to study both Jewish and Western texts, writes, "Ahad

4, No. 2 (Fall, 1990). 71-87

14 Steven J. Zipperstein, *Ahad Haam*, available at [http://www.yivo-encyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Ahad\\_Ha-Am](http://www.yivo-encyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Ahad_Ha-Am)

15 *Encyclopedia Judaica: Bnei Moshe available at http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsources/judaica/ejud\_0002\_0003\_0\_02449.html*

16 Herzl, *The Jewish State*, 146

17 Yoram Hazony, "The Guardian of the Jews" in *New Essays on Zionism* (Shalem Press, Jerusalem, 2007). 60

18 *Israel By Jill DuBois, Mair Rosh, 97*

19 Haim Bresheeth, "Self and other in Zionism: Palestine and Israel in recent Hebrew literature," *Libcom.org*, September 2014, available at <https://libcom.org/library/self-other-zionism-palestine-israel-recent-he>

Ha'am is in. A new-old paradigm is taking hold: a secularism based not on the repudiation of Judaism but on the willingness, and the desire, to be influenced by it<sup>22</sup>."

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*brew-literature-haim-bresheeth*

20 *Though the Bible was a common source for early Zionist folk songs, the spirit was anti-traditional, often using biblical quotations in subversive ways. The music of today revisits the Bible from a more traditional standpoint and will for instance cite prayers, something early Israeli music never did. (Daniel Gordis Tikva Seminar Lecture, August 2015).*

21 Yossi Klein Halevi, "Israeli Rock Music's Spiritual New Sound," *Wall Street Journal*, June 2015, available at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/israeli-rock-musics-spiritual-new-sound-1434122493>

22 Micha Goodman, "Making Jews out of Zionists," *Mosaic Magazine*, November 2013, available at <http://mosaicmagazine.com/response/2013/11/making-jews-out-of-zionists/>

a combination of critical analysis of his sermon and outside knowledge of Jewish theology. One such example is his famous *Kuntris HaHessed*.

Although Rav Hutner devotes over twenty pages to explaining different aspects of "kindness" and its importance on Rosh Hashanah, a richer, more nuanced perspective is left for the reader to discover.



## II – The Prominence of Hessed

The holiday marking the New Year has been given many names in the Torah and rabbinic works. Each title evokes a different aspect of the day: "Yom Teruah" recalls the shofar blowing. "Yom Ha-Zikaron" and the more colloquial name "Yom Ha-Din" evoke the fear of judgement that will ensue.<sup>2</sup> The later term "Rosh Hashanah" simply describes it as the beginning of the New Year for chronology, *shemittah*, and *yovel*.<sup>3</sup> However, Rav Hutner develops another dimension to Rosh Hashanah: kindness.

As in most of his *ma'amarim*, Rav Hutner quotes a source that serves as the textual basis for this idea. One of the more famous narratives of Rosh Hashanah in Tanakh appears in *Sefer Nehemiah*.<sup>4</sup> Ezra and Nehemiah gather the Jews to the newly built Temple and teach them various laws of the Torah that they were neglecting. Upon learning of their numerous transgressions, the Jews begin to cry bitterly. Nehemiah comforts them, insisting that instead of crying, they should rejoice in their renewed commitment to God and their faith that, and He would forgive them, and express this rejoicing and gratitude

through feasting. Additionally, Nehemia instructs the Jews to send portions of food to those who lacked the financial means to celebrate.

While most readers studying these verses would focus on the usual themes of accepting God as King or repentance,<sup>5</sup> Rav Hutner chose to focus on a different element, namely the seemingly extraneous insistence to supply the impoverished with food and drink. Why was it so important to mention this command? Just as a similar verse was used in Megillat Esther as the source for the commandment to give *matanot laevyonim*, gifts to the poor, on Purim,<sup>6</sup> Rav Hutner uses this verse as the source to conclude "that acts of kindness are embedded into the framework of the holiness of the day."<sup>7</sup>

The continuation of the *ma'amar* elaborates on the centrality of *hessed* to Rosh Hashanah. Rav Hutner explains that Rosh Hashanah does not merely commemorate the creation of the world, but also heralds the reawakening of the powerful spiritual forces of creation. Indeed, these "holy lights," as Rav Hutner calls the spiritual forces involved in the historically singular act of creation, are qualitatively different than those employed in the perpetuation of the world after its creation. The Talmud states that the first chapter in *Bereishit* should not be expounded publically.<sup>8</sup> Rav Hutner explains that this is because the chapter describes those spiritual forces of creation that are not expressed anymore – other than on Rosh Hashanah. Because the creation of man "in the image of God" is mentioned in this chapter, it stands

to reason that divine characteristics of man are most expressed during this time as well. Because the world was created with kindness – '*olam hessed yibaneh*'<sup>9</sup> – man is enjoined to imitate God and perform acts of kindness which better manifest his image of God.

## III – The Role of Kindness

Although performing acts of kindness is obviously a virtue, the connection between doing these acts and the other themes of Rosh Hashanah appears to be somewhat tenuous. One might suggest that acts of kindness would be in consonance with a day dedicated to accepting God as the King, because such acts represent sacrificing the "I" for a greater purpose, cause, or entity. However, a starkly different perspective is discussed by Rav Hutner.

In his second discourse, Rav Hutner states that *hessed* in its notional form<sup>10</sup> does not involve any loss on the part of the beneficiary, because this would limit the giver's munificence.<sup>11</sup> It is only once the desire to do good is manifested in the physical world that the act of kindness appears to involve an element of sacrifice. Thus, although traditional acts of kindness generally involve an expenditure of resources,<sup>12</sup> the impetus or desire to do good is not a manifestation of nullification or servitude.

Moreover, kindness is not only a lack of subservience, but also an act of empowerment. At the end of his first discourse, Rav Hutner summarizes the imperative to perform acts of kindness as it relates to Rosh Hashanah as a time of creation, specifically the creation of man in the image of God. In other words, it is the commandment of *imitatio dei* that is mandating kindness.<sup>13</sup> It is not medium of self-nullification, but a tool of divine empowerment.

Kindness is actually a manifestation of creativity. This idea is best reflected in *The Lonely Man of Faith*.<sup>14</sup> In this

work, Rav Joseph B. Solovetchik develops an exegetical framework for understanding the two accounts of man's creation in *Bereishit*. Adam I is created "in the image of God," and charged with dominating the world in order to achieve the grandeur that man deserves as being the pinnacle of creation and an "image of God," while Adam II seeks a covenantal relationship with God involving servitude and sacrifice. Even if one were to ignore the secular overtones of Adam I, such a description is still far from a picture of self-nullification. Reduced to its simplest form, Adam I is a creative being. Kindness may be the product of such creative impulses; but such acts would only further buttress man's position as munificent caretaker (or, in cruder terms, benevolent despot) of his surroundings. This concept of man actualizing his divine potential and thereby imitating God is expressed even more forcefully in the *Sefer Habahir*<sup>15</sup> which recounts God commenting that as long as Avraham was alive he did not have to do any "work" because Avraham embodied the *middah* of *hessed*.<sup>16</sup> Avraham, as it were, assumed God's role. How does such a perspective abet servitude to God and acceptance of His kingship, the much more apparent theme of Rosh Hashanah?

## IV – Degrees of Nullification

In order to reconcile this apparent contradiction, one must first understand the concept of nullification before God. Understandably, this relationship with God is not binary but occurs in the varying degrees of conception of the self and God. Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Habad Hasiudut, however, notes<sup>17</sup> that there are two broad degrees of nullification: 1) *bittul b'yesh* and 2) *bittul bmtziut*. The first degree is the internalization that God is the Supreme Being that rules the physical and spiritual realms, while the latter is the understanding that God transcends

## Rav Hutner and Kindness on Rosh Hashanah and Tanakh

BY TZVI BENOFF

### I – Introduction

Rav Yitzchok Hutner was one of the most influential Orthodox philosophers and theologians of the twentieth century. As *Rosh Yeshiva* of Yeshivat Rabbi Chaim Berlin, he became well known for his *ma'amarim*, discourses on Jewish theology, that he would deliver to students during holidays.<sup>1</sup> Drawing upon his rich and diverse

background, Rav Hutner combined the Lithuanian analysis he learned in *Knesset Yisrael*, the Chassidic and Kabbalistic philosophy of his mentor Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook, and general scholarship, to transform seemingly benign textual nuances into fundamental theological principles rife with practical implications for personal and communal divine service. One of the largest influences on Rav Hutner's

thought was the Maharal, R. Bezalel Loew of Prague. Maharal's influence was not limited to content, but also to style. Like Maharal, Rav Hutner often explains esoteric ideas in a manner that is understandable even to the uninitiated laymen. Moreover, he would often leave much of the broader concept to be deduced by the reader through

*Because the world was created with kindness – 'olam hessed yibaneh – man is enjoined to imitate God and perform acts of kindness which better manifest his image of God.*



the worlds and that there is nothing but God; the purest form of fear is the fear of what God is and not what He does. Avraham and Moshe personify these two perspectives. The Talmud states<sup>18</sup> that the degree of servitude of Moshe was greater than that of Avraham, because Avraham declared that he was “dust and ashes,” whereas Moshe declared that he was “nothing.” Rabbi Elya Weintraub, a student of Rav Hutner, explains that Avraham found God by looking through the world.<sup>19</sup> This is best expressed by the Midrash,<sup>20</sup> which relates that Avraham gazed at the world as if it were a building and was able to perceive the builder. The building must exist as a separate, distinct entity if one hopes to find its builder. Thus, Avraham could internalize the reality that God was the creator and ruler of the world. However, Moshe’s degree of *hitbatlut*, or self-abnegation, transcended the world. He, along with the rest of creation, was nothing, merely an expression of godliness.

Such a distinction leads one to the conclusion that Moshe was on a higher spiritual level than Avraham. Indeed, one of the Rambam’s Thirteen Principles of Faith<sup>21</sup> is that Moshe was the greatest prophet that ever lived, enabling him to receive the Torah. However, such a position is problematic. Maharal<sup>22</sup> and others state that Avraham, along with the other forefathers, became a *merkavah*, a chariot for God (to drive and propel His will forward). In other words, they totally nullified themselves to the will of God. If Moshe’s degree of



nullification was greater, why wasn’t he a part of this dynamic as well? This problem is also connected to Rosh Hashanah. The *Midrash Rabbah*<sup>23</sup> states that Avraham is connected to the holiday of Rosh Hashanah, and Maharal<sup>24</sup> comments that Avraham was even born on Rosh Hashanah. If Rosh Hashanah is a day of accepting God’s sovereign over the world, why is Moshe not representative of this day instead?

#### V – The Roles of Avraham and Moshe<sup>25</sup> An analysis of

Maharal’s descriptions of Moshe and Avraham leads to the conclusion that these biblical figures manifested two different stages of a Jew’s relationship with God: Avraham was the first Jew, while Moshe was the paradigm of a Jew. This distinction is manifested with Maharal’s concept of *nivdal*, separate, a term used to describe a qualitative gap between two entities. Such a gap may be required for two reasons: 1) because the second entity is qualitatively different from the first or 2) because the second entity is to be the counterpart of the first (thus, this separation facilitates the second entity’s connection to the first). Maharal states<sup>26</sup> that Avraham was called a *ger* because he was separate from the nations of the world. Similarly, he was given the commandment of circumcision to separate himself from the physical world.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Avraham was separated from the physical, heathen world to serve as the beginning of the Jewish nation.<sup>28</sup> Moshe, however, was to be the ideal Jew, the one capable of leading the Jewish nation and receiving the Torah. He was therefore born circumcised, a stage which Avraham spent the first 98 years of life building up

to.<sup>29</sup> To be able to relate to the entire Jewish entity, he needed to sever all ties with specific components of it. Thus, Moshe was separated from the Jewish nation because he was the spiritual embodiment of the entire Jewish nation.<sup>30</sup> He was raised in the Egyptian palace, away from the rest of the Jewish people. Moreover, he married a convert, someone who had no biological connection to the Jewish nation. In effect, he became a parallel Jewish nation unto himself.<sup>31</sup> While Avraham’s role was to serve as a transition (i.e. a separation) between the nations of the world and the Jews, Moshe’s role was to serve as a counterpart to the Jewish nation by serving as its emissary to God and receiving the Torah.

Rav Weintraub’s analysis of the Talmudic statement above indicates that being an initiator requires that the individual serving as a bridge remain anchored on *both* ends. In order to begin the quest of “traveling beyond the world” to find God, one needs to remain grounded in the world. Thus, Avraham needed to retain a sense of self, that he was something physical – dust and ashes. The Torah, however, is something that is completely spiritual, something so transcendent that it predates the world by 2000 years.<sup>32</sup> As such, Maharal writes<sup>33</sup> that Avraham was able to divine the practical *mitzvot* of the Torah but could not receive the text itself. The ability to receive and bring down the Torah requires someone with a higher degree of nullification and connection to the divine – Moshe.

However, Moshe’s qualifications were insufficient without the efforts of Avraham. The Midrash states<sup>34</sup> that the angels did not allow Moshe to accept the Torah until God changed Moshe’s face<sup>35</sup> to resemble Avraham’s. Maharal explains that the only way to bring down the Torah is through *hessed*. Thus, although Moshe was the medium capable of receiving the Torah, he needed to build upon

Avraham’s connection to God, the bridge Avraham created between the physical and spiritual realms, in order to do so.

Based on the above, one can now understand why Moshe was not part of the *merkavah*. The forefathers who were part of the *merkavah* were the progenitors of the Jewish nation. By becoming the *merkavah* they succeeded in engendering an intimate connection with God into the Jewish spiritual makeup.<sup>36</sup> It would be impossible for a *nivdal* to fulfill that role because he is separated from them; one cannot help form the entity that one was separated from. On a deeper level, the *merkavah* was only established with the participation of all three forefathers; each of those traits alone only comprised a part of being a vehicle (i.e. subservient) to God. Moshe, however, was the complement to the Jewish nation and the mouthpiece of God. He did not constrict divine service to a particular trait. In a sense, his role transcended the diffraction of normative *dveikut*, cleaving to God with a particular trait.<sup>37</sup>

#### V – Rosh Hashanah: The First Step One can now understand why Rosh Hashanah is so critically connected to the theme of *hessed*.

Accepting God’s dominion is a graduated process with well-defined steps. Although the ultimate goal may be to internalize that there is nothing but God, the first step must be to acknowledge that God is the ruler of the world. However, there must also be people to accept God as the King.<sup>38</sup> Thus, we also celebrate the birthday of man, an entity created in His image, capable of giving to others and furthering the divine plan of revealing the Godliness of this world. By performing acts of kindness, man harnesses his ability as a creator, thereby reinforcing and elevating his status as a physical being infused with spirituality – an “image of God.”

It is only later, on Yom Kippur, that we can achieve the next step in connecting God. On this day Moshe brought down the second set of *luhot* and the Jews’ *teshuva* process was completed. When the Temple stood, the Kohen Gadol would enter the Holy of Holies, a realm that took up no physical space.<sup>39</sup> This sanctuary was the bridge to

the spiritual worlds,<sup>40</sup> in which the most intimate connection with God occurred. This is the second stage of *hitbatlut*, the nullification of Moshe.<sup>41</sup> This perspective also influences the process of repentance. In order to step out of the mire of sin, one foot must first remain grounded in the cesspool. Thus, on Rosh Hashanah, we accept

God as the King of the World. When God is the king of the world, the full severity of sins becomes instantly apparent for even the most distant Jews, like those who stood before Ezra and Nehemia. Although pain and sorrow may rightfully ensue, Ezra and Nehemia’s commandment to rejoice and perform kindness serve

as a reminder of the potential of both man and God’s infinite kindness to facilitate genuine repentance, thereby ultimately reaching the second level of *bitul* on Yom Kippur:<sup>42</sup> when there is nothing but God.<sup>43</sup>

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*Dereh Hayyim 1:2*

*34 Shmot Rabbah Yitro 28:1*

*35 The significance of Hahsem transforming Moshe’s face may be for one of several reasons. One is that it is the medium through which other people interact with the individual. Thus, one’s expression is only an externality and does not fully encapsulate the individual’s complete personality. Another possibility is that the face is traditionally associated with kindness. The constant phrase in Tanach is to find favor in one’s eyes. Similarly, the final berachah in Shmoneh Esrei states “Sim...vhessed...barheinu Avinu... b’or panecha.”*

*36 See Pachad Yitzhak: Rosh Hashanah Discourse 2.*

*37 Thus, he is referred to as “ish.” (See also Ma’amarei Pahad Yitzhak: Sukkot Discourse 10 in which Rav Hutner describes the divine service of Ya’akov in similar terms. See Tiferet Yisrael Chapter 24 and Sefer Halikutim: Moshe for complete comparison of Moshe and Ya’akov.) However, see Tiferet Yisrael Chapter 24 in which Maharal says that Avraham is called Adam because he is a progenitor.*

*38 See Peirush ha-Gra Mishlei Chapter 27.*

*39 Megillah 10b. The application of this Gemara to the Yom Kippur service was told to the author by Rabbi Mendel Blachman.*

*1 See the introduction to each volume of Pahad Yitzhak in which Rav Hutner acknowledges and explains his unique style of delivery and content.*

*2 See Ramban to Vayikra 23:24 who elaborates on the term “zikaron” and its relevance to judgment.*

*3 See Rosh Hashanah 2a.*

*4 Nehemia 8*

*5 For example, see Ralbag to Nehemia 8:10.*

*6 See Maimonides end of Laws of Yom Tov about giving food to the poor for celebrating holidays, and compare to here and Megillat Ester. See also Laws of Megillah. See also Metzudat David to Nehemia 8: 10 and Ralbag ad loc.*

*7 Pahad Yitzhak: Rosh Hashanah. Discourse 1, Chap. 1.*

*8 Masechet Hagigah 13a*

*9 Psalms 89: 3*

*10 Rav Hutner calls this term “betaharta ha’atzmit”*

*11 Although Rav Hutner does not state this explicitly, it can be inferred from his explanation in the second discourse (2, 4).*

*12 This notional form of kindness is more apparent when the kindness involves spiritual elements. Thus, Thus what?*

*13 This is the reason for the concept of “mah hu rahum af atah rahum” (Masefet Sofrim 3: 17), “just as He (God) is merciful, so too should you (man) be merciful”. See Pahad Yitzhak: Pesah (43).*

*14 Chapter 1.*

*15 See Sefer Ha-Likuttim: DAC”H Tzemach Tzedek. Vol. 1 Avraham 3:1.*

*16 A full understanding of this concept is beyond the author’s capability. However the term melachah is important. This term refers to creative work. Such a term was used to describe the process of creation (see Breishit 2,2) – transforming the tohu vavohu into its fullest potential. Kindness could be conceptualized as acts that facilitate someone or something developing into its full potential. (See also Bava Batra 10a regarding the discussion between Turnus Rufus and Rabbi Akiva regarding the necessity of creating rich and poor people, and a discussion about the importance of charity.)*

*17 Likkutei Amarim Ch. 34 and Sidur, “Introduction to Tikkun Hatzot”*

*18 Hullin 87b*

*19 Hayei Yosef. Discourse on the Two Sets of Tablets, note 3.*

*20 Be-Reishit Rabbah Lech Lecha 39.*

*21 See Maimonides’s Intorduction to Perek Helek.*

*22 Netivot Olam (Netiv Ahavat Hashem, Chapter 1), Tiferet Yisrael Chapter 20, id. Chapter 24.*

*23 Vayikra Rabbah Emor 29*

*24 Hiddushei Aggadot: Rosh Hashanah 10b.*

*25 The vast majority of this concept is explained fully in Tiferet Yisrael Chapter 24.*

*26 Gevurot Hashem Chapter 38.*

*27 Tiferet Yisrael Chapter 24.*

*28 One can argue that Avraham’s status of a nivdal was also for the second reason – that he and the Jewish nation was the spiritual counterpart of the physical world. Although this is true, the discussion of this essay is describing Avraham and Moshe’s status from the perspective of the Jewish people.*

*29 Gevurot Hshem Chapter 19.*

*30 Gevurot Hashem Chapter 33. Moshe is referred to as the tzurah, the ideal spiritual form, of the Jewish people.*

*31 One can now understand god’s desire to create an entire new nation out of Moshe after the Jews had sinned by creating the Golden Calf.*

*32 Avodah Zarah 9a*

*33 Tiferet Yisrael Chapter 20 and*



40 See *Likkutei Amarim Chapters 53-55*.

41 Thus, Moshe received the second set of Tablets on Yom Kippur: One can also better understand the midrash that Moshe was initially destined to become the High Priest (see Rashi to *Shemot* 5).

42 For a more nuanced description

of the role of Rosh Hashanah, see *Likkutei Torah and Sefer Halikutim (Avraham, 3, 1)*, which indicate a significant degree of bittul on Rosh Hashanah as well. To understand this dichotomy, see *Bet Yishai Drashot (Ma'amar Behirat Yisrael)* and *Pahad Yitzhak: Rosh Hashanah (Discourse 20)*, which describe two perspectives of Rosh Hashanah. (This answer can also be used to homiletically explain why Yom Kip-

pur is omitted in Nehemia. See *Yal-kut Shimoni ad loc.*, which alludes to several themes of Yom Kippur. Thus, although both themes are present, the theme of Yom Kippur was stressed on Rosh Hashanah.)

43 See *Likkutei Torah* that describes the process of repentance as developing a connection with G-d that transcends the rift of sin. See also *Sifsei*

*Hayyim* that describes the spiritual transformation between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in slightly different terms. However, the general idea is the same. See also *Sihot Rabbi Shimshon David Pinkus: Yom Kippur (Discourse 1)* and *Pahad Yitzhak: Rosh Hashanah (Discourse 20)* which also develop this theme.

## Behind the Beards: A Philosophical Survey of Modern Orthodox Neo-Hasidism

By NETANEL PALEY

You have seen their flowing beards and pe'ot. You have seen their gartlach (prayer belts) and pocket editions of Sihot Ha-Ran. Perhaps you have even seen them clap and jump in your otherwise uneventful morning minyan. We all call them neo-Hasidim, a term coined to account for the renewed popularity of Hassidic texts and customs in non-Hasidic circles, ranging from Modern Orthodox post-Israel youth, to Haredi rabbis. But beneath the external trappings, who are these bohemian firebrands? What do they really believe, and why do they encounter so much cynicism from onlookers?

Despite recent discussion of neo-Hasidism, these questions, which relate to the philosophical underpinnings of the movement,



have been largely overlooked. Perhaps the most widely read treatment<sup>1</sup>, Barbara Bensoussan's article in the Winter 2014 issue of *Jewish Action* magazine, appears to treat Modern Orthodox neo-Hasidut as a sociological phenomenon rather than a theological doctrine.<sup>2</sup> Rather than describing the movement's ideological

foundations, the article discusses, in general terms, the inspiration and alternative spiritual avenues that neo-Hasidut provides to young adults. To be sure, Bensoussan mentions the revival of Hassidic texts, and, to a lesser degree, Hassidic practices, as central to the ethos of the movement. However, since this is the extent of the article's philosophical inquiry, several vital questions remain unanswered. This is entirely appropriate for an article in *Jewish Action*, as it generally serves to orient its chiefly older readership of social, not ideological, phenomena in the Modern Orthodox community. For members of the younger generation, however, many of whom encounter

neo-Hasidim in their social circles, and to whom neo-Hasidut may be ideologically relevant because of their still-evolving, fluid worldviews, this article can hardly be considered an adequate investigation. Taken out of context, it would not be difficult to recognize it as the work of a reporter, albeit a respectful, impartial one.

Yet if Bensoussan's work can easily be discerned as that of an outsider, it is by no means unusual in this regard.

Of the very few organized discussions on neo-Hasidut, the recent Orthodox Forum, held earlier this year at Yeshiva University<sup>3</sup>, received considerable attention from neo-Hasidim for its embarrassingly biased and cynical tone, as well as its remarkably poor timing at a moment when neo-Hasidut

had finally gained some acceptance in the broader community.<sup>4</sup> Though the topics presented may have been well-researched, and though the organizers allowed the participation of scholars who find genuine spiritual inspiration from Hassidic texts, such as Rabbi Josh Rosenfeld of Lincoln Square Synagogue, it was quite easy for the neo-Hasidic participants to detect the contemptuous nature of the discussion. In their comments on Twitter, an established social medium for neo-Hasidic scholarship, these observers dismissed the Forum because it disingenuously ignored the bonafide spiritual and emotional impact of studying Hassidic texts.<sup>5</sup> By regarding neo-Hasidut as little more than a social, perhaps even psychosocial phenomenon, the organizers of the Forum displayed their own theological biases, and, more importantly, their

utter detachment from the emotional needs of today's Modern Orthodox youth, many of whom rely on neo-Hasidut for inspiration, as evident in Bensoussan's article.

This emotional aspect may be what best identifies neo-Hasidut, as described by Bensoussan, as a philosophical ideology rather than a mere Modern Orthodox zeitgeist. It is clear that common neo-Hasidic practices, including clapping, dancing, and playing instruments during davening, distinguishing one's appearance with a beard and pe'ot, and attending lively farbrengens (Hassidic gatherings) are ideally intended to enhance one's emotional connection to Jewish ritual and custom. This sort of emotionally engaged activity is what distinguished Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's 1970s Jewish Renewal movement and Arthur Green's Havurat Shalom, which perhaps can be viewed as precursors, albeit halakhically distant ones, to modern neo-Hasidut.<sup>6</sup> Though perhaps less clear, what I have seen from my personal interactions with people who identify with this movement, most neo-Hasidim primarily study Hassidic works that address the

*In a sense, then, neo-Hasidic pathos supplies an emotional content to rote observance that is difficult to teach in a classroom and difficult to maintain following the typical gap year in Israel*

emotional dimension of Judaism. It is indeed more likely to encounter a young neo-Hasid studying Sihot Ha-Ran of R. Nahman of Bratslav than Tanya of R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady, because, as a general rule, the former's work is more explicitly concerned with the psychological landscape of Jewish belief and observance.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, though the accusation is often leveled at them<sup>8</sup>, few neo-Hasidim actually study Kabbalah, and if they do, they use books that dilute Kabbalistic concepts into practical terms that emphasize the emotional and attitudinal in the service of God.<sup>9</sup> In a sense, then, neo-Hasidic pathos supplies an emotional content to rote observance that is difficult to teach in a classroom and difficult to maintain following the typical gap year in Israel. For the average post-Israel young adult, who may struggle to connect with the Talmudic rigor of classic mussar texts or the Rav's ambiguous existential angst, neo-Hasidut serves as an ideal avenue for remaining emotionally invested in his or her avodat Hashem, an essential component of a healthy religious lifestyle.

Such a goal is of course central to the thought of Hassidut in general, which emphasizes religious passion even in the mundane motions of everyday life. From the Baal Shem Tov himself<sup>10</sup> to the Lubavitcher Rebbe<sup>11</sup>, one would be hard-pressed to find a Hassidic master who does not repeatedly emphasize the constant fervor required for a profound relationship with God. But in neo-Hasidut, especially the mystical variety promulgated by a few massively popular Haredi rabbis in Jerusalem, this fervor takes on a new force and urgency. Figures such as R. Yitshak Meir Morgenstern and R. Tsvi Meir Zilberberg deliver fiery discourses on the relevance of Hassidic passion in

the face of a contemporary mood that is hostile to religion. In fact, R. Yitshak Moshe Erlanger and R. Avraham Tsvi Kluger, two of the leaders of Haredi neo-Hasidut, even argue that the current generation possesses spiritual capabilities beyond those of prior generations.<sup>12</sup> According to Jonathan Garb, a scholar of Jewish mysticism, these rabbis, some of whom are former members of specific Hassidic groups, display the unique ability to transcend sectarian boundaries by attracting followers from all walks of Jewish life. Their appeals to the emotional issues of contemporary observance as well as their relative youth win them a relevance and charisma that older Haredi roshei yeshivah rarely enjoy.<sup>13</sup> Lest one contend that these neo-Hasidic leaders simply repurpose

*For the neo-Hasid, as well as the Kabbalist, every line, every word, and every letter of Torah contains infinite layers of meaning by virtue of its Divine origin.*

Hassidic texts for their sermons and are not engaged in exegetical creativity, Garb notes that they do not shy away from innovation, especially in their written work. Of particular note are the imaginative hermeneutics of R. Morgenstern, which Garb describes as a "kabbalistic reinterpretation of Talmudic and halakhic texts".<sup>14</sup> Traditionally, Hassidic exegesis focuses on Scripture, but many classic works, especially R. Natan of Nemyrov's *Likutei Halakhot*, extend their unique Midrashic approaches to the world of halakhic literature. For Hassidim, this is second nature, so R. Morgenstern's derashot do not necessarily strike them as especially novel. But in light of R. Morgenstern's growing popularity among non-Hasidim—many Modern Orthodox neo-Hasidim receive his weekly pamphlet by email—one has to wonder whether the study of Talmud and other halakhic texts is now a different experience for those in his

circle. Haredi roshei yeshivah, and perhaps some of Yeshiva University's own, might frown at this relatively liberal derekh ha-limmud, but after reading R. Morgenstern's *Nishmatin Hadtin*, it is difficult to deny its ingenuity and utility as a new way to infuse dryly legalistic Talmudic passages with spiritual and emotional resonance.

From a broader perspective, R. Morgenstern's innovation reflects the neo-Hasidic approach to Torah study in general: what Bible scholar James Kugel calls omnisignificance.<sup>15</sup> For the neo-Hasid, as well as the Kabbalist, every line, every word, and every letter of Torah contains infinite layers of meaning by virtue of its Divine origin. In truth, this doctrine has its roots in the derashot R. Akiva expounded on every kots (crown) on certain Hebrew letters<sup>16</sup>, and later in the Ramban's well-known comment that the entirety of the Torah constitutes one Name of God.<sup>17</sup> The Kabbalist, and now the neo-Hasidic Kabbalist, extends the belief to include Torah she-ba'al peh, granting him license to expound even the most technical of halakhot in a Midrashic light. Talmudic purists will surely shake their heads in disapproval, but what makes R. Haim Soloveitchik's platonic hakiroi any more plausible than a trained Kabbalist's hakirah of the same contradiction in the Rambam? Neither can necessarily prove to arrive at the Rambam's original intent, and yet both are legitimate hermeneutic avenues, as both have roots in the tradition of shivim panim la-Torah (Masoretic Doctrine of manifold meaning) and are propounded by highly qualified Torah scholars. It is no wonder that neo-Hasidic shiurim, such as those delivered at UofPurim meetings<sup>18</sup>, include sources from across the historical and hashkafic spectrum. Neo-Hasidut blurs the line between tradition and innovation in Aggadic and Midrashic exegesis, giving way to an all-encompassing truth of a postmodern flavor.



The neo-Hasid's belief in omnisignificance reaches into other realms as well. Needless to say, the omnisignificance of every minute detail of reality, otherwise known as hashgaha peratit, is a key element of neo-Hasidic philosophy just as it is a core tenet of Hassidic thought.<sup>19</sup> Beyond that, however, neo-Hasidut sees omnisignificance in the Jew's experience of the material world that is permissible to him or her. For the neo-Hasid, "kadesh atsmekha be-mutar lakh" "Sanctify yourself with that which is permissible for you"<sup>20</sup>, is not a moral imperative for setting boundaries on material pleasures, as traditionally understood<sup>21</sup>, but an exhortation to find the Divine in those pleasures. Obviously, this type of omnisignificance is on a more concealed plane of Divinity than that of the Torah's omnisignificance. But any belief in omnisignificance stems from a broader belief in the immanence and omnipresence of God Himself in all aspects of existence, including human expression. Therefore, it is not surprising to learn that many Modern Orthodox neo-Hasidim find spiritual exuberance, even redemption, in all kinds of music. The Vermont-based jam band Phish is especially popular on the neo-Hasidic Twittersphere<sup>22</sup>, but neo-Hasidut itself has already



produced its own homegrown music, most notably Omek HaDavar and Zusha. This renewed focus on the artistic and aesthetic is decidedly Hassidic in character, and may reflect a deep-seated appreciation for the Godly sanctity that can be revealed in human expression.

Because of the uniquely emotional nature of neo-Hassidic thought, it is natural that neo-Hassidim are criticized for a supposed lack of intellectual rigor or even just a lesser focus on intensive Talmud study. As quoted in Bensoussan's article, a rabbinic leader in RIETS wondered aloud whether neo-Hassidut is capable of producing talmidei hakhamim.<sup>23</sup> The problems with this perfunctory evaluation of the movement are too troubling to ignore. Perhaps the most notable of these is the erroneous assumption that the study of Hassidut is by definition not intellectually challenging. Though younger students interested in Hassidut are encouraged by yeshiva and seminary teachers to begin with entry-level works such as Netivot Shalom, many who are just a few years older can navigate the Kabbalistic and Midrashic wordplay of Tanya and Likutei Moharan as well as a yeshiva student can navigate a piece in the Ketsot Ha-Hoshen (casuistic work on Hoshen Mishpat). And more advanced texts that are well-known for their difficulty, such as those of the Chabad rabbis (Torah Ohr of R. Shneur Zalman, Hemshekh Samekh Vav of R. Shmuel Dov Ber, and others), are well

on their way to becoming required reading in neo-Hassidic circles. This sophistication extends to original work as well; already, one notable neo-Hassid has published a book about a highly esoteric Kabbalistic concept<sup>24</sup>, which has been acclaimed by the prolific scholar of Jewish mysticism Elliot R. Wolfson. Another has produced a thesis on Polish Hassidut as well as a Hebrew book about sin and repentance that includes a diverse array of Hassidic sources.<sup>25</sup> Though every community includes elements that are less academically inclined than others, such high-level output attests to neo-Hassidut's capability of sophistication, which in turn speaks volumes about the intellectual depth of Hassidic texts.

In spite of that, the aforementioned RIETS leader, in his apparent assumption that every new spiritual movement must produce talmidei hakhamim, seems to view neo-Hassidut through his own Talmud-centric lens. Yet a simple survey of young adults, even those studying in Israel, would reveal that many struggle to glean religious inspiration from poring over a Gemara. Yeshiva University's own R. Moshe Tzvi Weinberg, a popular teacher and mashgiah ruhani in the Stone Beit Midrash Program, is quoted in the Jewish Action article saying that there are a significant number of students who do not necessarily feel at home in the legalistic atmosphere of the Beit Midrash.<sup>26</sup> As R. Weinberg continues, neo-Hassidut essentially solves a

problem Modern Orthodoxy has hardly addressed, by offering alternatives to the impersonal Talmudism that is given precedence in the community.<sup>27</sup> It is a basic principle of Hassidic thought that one does not need to be a talmid hakham to be a good Jew<sup>28</sup>; indeed, many scholars agree that the very origin of Hassidut was a natural response to the exclusive intellectual nature of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe.<sup>29</sup> It might be too much to suggest that history is repeating itself here, but at the very least, it is unfair to blame neo-Hassidut for engineering a legitimate solution to a serious socio-religious problem.

Unfortunately, the indictments do not stop there. Some complaints may be more well-informed than others, but many stem from personal biases. It is easy for opponents to claim that neo-Hassidim in general are less stringent in their observance of halakhah, because some might daven later or learn less Gemara, but actually, any laxity is a result of one's own personal decisions. Hassidic sources never advocate for a looser adherence to Jewish law, and neither do neo-Hassidic teachers, so it is merely a hasty generalization to assume that such leniency is part of neo-Hassidic philosophy. The same is true for the purported antinomianism, or determinism, of the rabbis of Izbica and Radzyn (Mei ha-Shiloakh, Ohr Yesharim, and others), which is grossly misunderstood by those who have not studied these works intensively.<sup>30</sup> No, neo-Hassidut does

not equal antinomianism, and yes, the rabbis of Izbica and Radzyn knew that the Rambam states that humans have total free will<sup>31</sup>, which is the opposite of antinomianism. It is only because neo-Hassidut is accused of theological simplicity and superficiality that unreasonable allegations gain any traction. In truth, the philosophy of neo-Hassidut, especially regarding the exceedingly complex interplay of Divine Knowledge and Free Will, is a richly nuanced field of study that deserves to enter the Modern Orthodox conversation.

But the better option would be to ignore the demarcations within Jewish philosophy entirely. Thankfully, Yeshiva University has accomplished this to some degree, by hiring R. Moshe Weinberger and R. Moshe Tzvi Weinberg to teach Hassidut to contrast with the mitnaged-friendly atmosphere of the Beit Midrash (which has two pitiful shelves of sifrei Hassidut). Until Hassidut is celebrated along with mussar and the thought of the Rav, and until academic discussions like the Orthodox Forum can respect Hassidut as a mode of spirituality, the Modern Orthodox philosophical conversation cannot be regarded as intellectually honest. When that happens, the hope is that we will have no need for the label and category that is neo-Hassidut.

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1 Due to its publication in the Orthodox Union's magazine, which is distributed to Orthodox homes across the United States free of charge.

2 Barbara Bensoussan, "Rekindling the Flame: Neo-Chassidus Brings the Inner Light of Torah to Modern Orthodoxy", *Jewish Action*, December 1, 2014". Available at [www.ou.org](http://www.ou.org)

3 Commentator Staff, "Orthodox Forum on Hassidut at Yeshiva University",

April 19, 2015. Available at [yucommentator.org](http://yucommentator.org)

4 The forum was held just two months after the publication of the complimentary Jewish Action article.

5 Some of these comments were serious, but many were light-hearted and sarcastic. Rabbi Rosenfeld wrote several humorous tweets with the hashtag #RejectedForumPapers; one can be seen at <https://twitter.com/shuaros/status/568050442812456960>

6 This is my own idea, based on Arthur Green's own label of his movement; he gave a talk at Brown University in 2014 titled "The Neo-Hassidic Imagination." Bensoussan also mentions a view that Shlomo Carlebach was partially responsible for a revival of Hassidic song and prayer, and he in fact was friends with Schachter-Shalomi.

7 For instance, *Sihot Ha-Ran* and *Likutei*

*Etsot* summarize the practical, spiritual, and emotional lessons contained in the larger, more complex *Likutei Moharan*.

8 Firsthand experience.

9 For example, *Siftei Hen* by R. Shmuel Kraus and *Talelei Hayyim* by R. Haim Cohen, also known as the "Helban" (Milkman).

10 See, for example, *Keter Shem Tov*, sec. 168

11 See, for example, *Likutei Sihot*, Vol. XV, pp. 50-56

12 Jonathan Garb, "Mystical and Spiritual Discourse in the Contemporary Ashkenazi Haredi Worlds". *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, Vol. 9. March 2010. pp. 17-36

13 *ibid.* See also Alan Brill, "The new Haredi Hasidism – Zilberstein, Erlanger, Morgenstern, Kluger, and Schwartz". *Book of Doctrines and Opinions*. July 28, 2013. Available at [kavvanah.wordpress.com](http://kavvanah.wordpress.com)

14 Garb, 2010

15 James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical*

*Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven and London, 1981), pp. 103-4. See, also, Yaakov Elman, "The Rebirth of Omnisignificant Biblical Exegesis in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries" available online at [www.biu.ac.il](http://www.biu.ac.il)

16 *Menahot* 29b; see also *Eruvin* 21b, where the idea is cited without mentioning R. Akiva

17 Ramban, *Introduction to Commentary on the Torah*

18 [youtube.com/uofpurim](http://youtube.com/uofpurim)

19 See *Keter Shem Tov*, *Addenda*, 395. See, also, *Sha'ar ha-Otiyot*, "Hashgaha Peratit"

20 *Yevamot* 20a

21 See Ramban to *Lev. 19:2*

22 From personal experience on Twitter.

23 Bensoussan, 2014

24 Yoel Rosenfeld, *Botsina de-Kardnuta*

25 Dovid Bashevkin, *be-Rogez Raheim Tizkor*

26 Bensoussan, 2014

27 *Ibid.*

28 Many Hasidic stories, in addition to Hasidic exegetical teachings, emphasize the spiritual capabilities of simple, ignorant Jews. For one well-known example from the *Baal Shem Tov*, see R. Yosef Yitshak Schneerson's *Sefer ha-Sihot* 5703, pp. 167-168.

29 See, for example, Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm's *The Religious Thought of Hasidism: Text and Commentary*. KTAV Publishing House, 1999, p. xlii

30 See Shaul Magid, *Hasidism on the Margin: Reconciliation, Antinomianism, and Messianism*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2005. 432 pp.

31 Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 5:1

## Sanctuary and Sacrifice: Rambam's View of Korbanot

BY DOVID SCHWARTZ

Introduction

Earlier this year, writing for *The Times of Israel*, in an open letter to God, Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz claimed that the idea of animal sacrifice is outdated. "Your people," he writes, addressing Hashem, "must be a light to the nations, not a source of darkness by returning to a practice once deemed honorable but now perceived by the global masses as barbaric."<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Yanklowitz further claims that Rambam "taught that prayer was evolution from animal sacrifice and a more silent meditative type of worship will eventually supersede prayer with words." While I am in no position to comment on whether or not Rabbi Yanklowitz and the global masses really do perceive sacrifice as barbaric, I believe that his claim about Rambam is incorrect. Given the current popularity of this theory, I would like to present my own understanding of the issue.

This article will attempt to prove that Rambam in fact thought that there will be *korbanot* in *Bayit Shelishi*. To determine Rambam's, view I will

analyze the relevant material from both *The Guide of the Perplexed* and the *Mishneh Torah*. This article is not necessarily meant as a response to

*Hashem thinks of sacrifice and temples as a lower form of worship*

Rabbi Yanklowitz in particular, but a general explanation of Rambam's position as I understand it, in response to the commonly held position that Rambam thought there would not be *korbanot* in *Bayit Shelishi*.

### Background

Before addressing the topic at hand, some general background to Rambam's thought is necessary. Rambam famously contended that all *mitsvot* in the Torah are means to man's perfection; in particular, they are all "bound up with three things: opinions, moral qualities, and political civic actions."<sup>2</sup> Much of the third part of *The Guide of the Perplexed*, in fact, is dedicated to

explaining what "purpose" the various *mitsvot* have and how they function to achieve these ends. Most famous, perhaps, is Rambam's position on *korbanot*; namely, that they are a lesser means of Divine worship and were instituted with the goal of eliminating idolatry.

The way that this goal is accomplished is by satisfying the pagan hunger for animal sacrifice: by granting the Jews the opportunity to offer animals within the framework of Judaism, there is no longer a need for them to turn to idolatry, and hence the draw towards idolatry is significantly weakened.

The typical argument runs as follows: given that Rambam posits that the *only* reasons for *korbanot* are the abolition of idolatry through redirecting the pagan drive to sacrifice animals towards Hashem and the appeasement of the unenlightened masses, when *Bayit Shelishi* is built, there will be no sacrifices, as the reasons for sacrifices are no longer applicable. I would like to underscore my impression (bolstered by reading Rabbi Yanklowitz's article) that those who follow this line of reasoning believe that there will in fact be non-animal sacrifices, i.e. meal offerings in *Bayit Shelishi*, and it will only be animal sacrifices that will be abolished.





Thus, in order to hold the above position, one must believe the following: (1) The only two functions of *korbanot* are to redirect a pagan drive to sacrifice animals and to appease the unenlightened masses; (2) These reasons have been rendered irrelevant today; (3) There will therefore not be any animal sacrifices in *Bayit Shelishi*. I would like to respectfully disagree with all three of these points. For the sake of simplicity, however, I will start with the third and progress backwards. Due to the complex nature of Rambam's opinion, I will begin by quoting and paraphrasing relevant sections of *The Guide to the Perplexed*, starting with the passages which discuss the reasons for *korbanot* and their intended function. Rambam writes that one of the goals of the Torah is that the Jewish people should dedicate their lives to the service of Hashem:

and at that time the way of life generally accepted and customary in the whole world and the universal service upon which we were brought up consisted in offering various species of living beings in the temples . . . His wisdom, may He be exalted, and His gracious ruse,<sup>3</sup> which is manifest in regard to all His creatures, did not require that He give us a Law prescribing the rejection, abandonment, and abolition of all these kinds of worship.<sup>4</sup>

Rambam makes two points here: first, Hashem thinks of sacrifice and temples as a lower form of worship;<sup>5</sup> second, these forms of worship were only commanded because the Jewish people at that time were so accustomed to such practice, that abolishing it “would have been similar to the appearance of a prophet in these times who, calling upon people to worship God, would say ‘God has given you a Law forbidding you to pray to Him, to fast, to call upon Him for help in misfortune. Your worship should consist solely in

meditation without any words at all.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, *korbanot* did not only serve the function of keeping the unenlightened masses at bay. In this chapter, Rambam adds another function of the *korbanot*: the abolition of idolatry. This was accomplished by redirecting the pagan practices of sacrifice to the service of Hashem. Thus, in summary, “in anticipation of what the soul is naturally incapable of receiving, [Hashem prescribed] the laws that we have mentioned so that the first intention should be achieved, namely, the apprehension of Him, May He be exalted, and the rejection of idolatry.”<sup>7</sup>

#### Can a *Mitsvah* Cease to Apply?

In claiming that, according to Rambam, there will not be any animal *korbanot* in *Bayit Shelishi*, one would need to make three assumptions. Firstly, one must claim that Rambam holds that once the reason for a *mitsvah* ceases to apply, the *mitsvah* itself ceases to apply as a result. Secondly, one must assume that whereas the rationale for animal *korbanot* are no longer applicable, the rationale for having a Temple would be, thus enabling a situation where we would have *Bayit Shelishi* without animal *korbanot*. Finally, one must also assume that Rambam would distinguish between animal and non-animal offerings. I would like to take issue with each one of these assumptions. Before discussing the first assumption, I would like to note that Rambam nowhere states that once the reason for a *mitsvah* ceases to apply, the *mitsvah* ceases to apply. I do not mean to imply that by mere dint of the fact that Rambam does not make this statement means he disagrees with it.<sup>8</sup> I mention this only to demonstrate that the questions remains unresolved and is in need of clarification.

As it happens, a similar question was addressed by the Beit Yosef (R. Yosef Karo).<sup>9</sup> He claims, firstly and primarily, the *mitsvot* are “decrees of the Lord”. That is, they are indisputably binding,

regardless of our ability to perceive their *ta'amim* (reasons).<sup>10</sup> Secondly, man can often make mistakes in the areas of reason and rationality. Thus, there may be certain instances where one may not be able to understand the purpose of a *mitsvah*. This lack of understanding would neither result in an exemption (for these *mitsvot* are “decrees of the Lord”), nor would it follow that there is indeed no reason for it, for it is quite possible—even probable—that the human endeavor to find rationality in God's law failed, rather than the law failing to have any rationality.<sup>11</sup>

Given these claims, I suggest that a *ta'am* for a *mitsvah* cannot undermine it altogether. To say otherwise would necessitate that the reason suggested is definitely and unequivocally the reason for the *mitsvah*. If indeed we assume that if we fail to find a reason for *mitsvah*, it is due to our own inabilities, then we are saying, in essence, that we cannot assuredly rely our powers to determine the reasons of *mitsvot*.<sup>12</sup> Certainly, then, no one—not even Rambam—should be so confident in his understanding of a *ta'am* as to allow for the total neutralization of a *mitsvah*. It is important to note that whether or not the Beit Yosef is correct philosophically, he gave a *legal* understanding of *ta'amei hamitsvot*, and as the greatest Halakhic authority of the past millennium, his opinion has weight as such. Regardless, I will also attempt to demonstrate that Rambam takes the position of the Beit Yosef regarding a *mitsvah*'s application being independent of any possible reason.

First, we shall address Rambam's closing passage in his *Hilkhot Me'ilah*.<sup>13</sup> There, he notes the distinction between *hukkim* and *mishpatim*, explaining that the former are those commandments whose reasons and rationales are not as easily understood by man, whereas the latter are those commandments whose benefits are obvious. He writes:

Behold, the Torah says “And

you shall guard all of my laws (*hukkotai*) and keep all of my rules (*mishpatai*) and you shall do them” (Vayikra 19:37). [The meaning of] “And you shall do them” is known—it means observing the *hukkim*. The guarding means that you shall not think [the *hukkim*] less than the *mishpatim*. The *mishpatim* are those laws whose reason and benefit of their observance is known, such as the prohibition of theft, murder and honoring one's father and mother. The *hukkim* are those commandments whose reasons are not known. The Sages teach that *hukkim* are those laws [about which Hashem says] “I set for you and you have no permission to be skeptical of them,” even though a man may have some doubts in his heart about them, and the nations of the world attack them [in attempt to undermine their legitimacy]. . . All of the *korbanot* are *hukkim*, and consequently the sages have said that it is even on the service of the *korbanot* that the world depends. . .

In this passage, Rambam warns against precisely what many advocates of the above position are doing: being skeptical of *mitsvot* because the nations of the world (“the global masses”) seek to undermine their legitimacy. A stronger formulation comes at the end of *Hilkhot Temurah* (4:13): “Despite the fact that all of the *mitsvot* are decrees of the King . . . it is [nonetheless] appropriate to ponder them, and, to the extent that you are able, attempt to prescribe some reason for them.” Finally, with striking similarity to the Beit Yosef's formulation, Rambam writes in *The Guide of the Perplexed* that if we were somehow unable to understand the reason for a *hok* (such as *korbanot*) it is due to “the incapacity of our intellects or the deficiency of our knowledge.”<sup>14</sup>

Clearly, Rambam's view is that the



very institution of *ta'amei ha-mitsvot* (searching for the reasons of the commandments) is an afterthought to obeying the “decrees of the King”. Primarily, though, one must concentrate one's powers on fulfilling the *mitsvah*, rather than its explication. Further, even if one were to rationalize a *mitsvah*, one cannot be sure that the suggested reason would be definitive. It certainly and unequivocally follows from these passages that under no circumstances can the reason which man ascribes the *mitsvah* serve to undermine it.

In summary, in order to maintain there will not be any animal sacrifices in *Bayit Shelishi*, one must hold that once the rationale for a *mitsvah* becomes irrelevant, the *mitsvah* no longer applies. As has been demonstrated, Rambam does not take such a position.

#### Distinction between the *Beit ha-Mikdash* and *Korbanot*

Many who believe that animal sacrifices will not be reinstated still contend that Rambam thought it possible to have a *Beit ha-Mikdash* without *korbanot*. However, I would like to demonstrate through an analysis of a previously quoted source that this is in fact not true. First, categorically, one cannot posit that Rambam thinks that there will not be *korbanot* in *Bayit Shelishi*, for according to Rambam, the reason for the institution of *korbanot* - the abolition of idolatry - is the very same reason for the institution of a *Beit ha-Mikdash*. Thus, by contending that there is no longer a need to

abolish idolatry, and thus no reason for *korbanot*, it necessarily follows that, according to Rambam, there will be no Third Temple either. As we have seen, Rambam wrote that, in Biblical times, the *modus operandi* of religious worship was “offering various species of living beings in the temples” and Hashem, in His wisdom, “did not require that He give us a Law prescribing the rejection, abandonment, and abolition of all of these kinds of worship.”

I would like to underscore that Rambam here draws no distinction between the “gracious ruse” of Hashem's concession of the Temple and His concession of *korbanot*. Hashem, as it were, “suffered the above-mentioned kinds of worship to remain [that is the worship in a Temple and the worship through sacrifice], but transferred them from created of imaginary and unreal things to His own name. . . Thus he commanded us to build a temple for Him: *And let them make me a Sanctuary*.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, Rambam describes the very same reasons for both the sacrifices themselves and the existence of a temple: the abolition of idolatry and the appeasement of the ignorant. It is impossible to have one without the other.

Thus, the belief that there will be a temple without animal sacrifices is self-contradictory. According to Rambam, it cannot be that we will have a Third Temple, if not for the purpose of offering *korbanot* therein.

#### Desire for *Korbanot* and Animal vs. Non-Animal Sacrifices

In order to maintain the position above, one must further claim that *korbanot* are no longer needed. This can be understood in three different ways. One, is that there is no longer a need to abolish idolatry, in which case the concern of abolishing idolatry through *korbanot* is no longer relevant. Consequently, even if the Jewish people continue to have a strong desire to bring *korbanot*, the general undesirability of *korbanot* (as something God “suffered”) outweighs the Jewish people's desire. Two, the Jewish people today do not sufficiently desire sacrifices to warrant God's “suffering of it,” even while *korbanot* may serve to abolish idolatry. Three, while idolatry remains a concern, *korbanot* can no longer effectively serve that need. While I certainly do not possess the resources, training, or ability to conclusively pass judgement on such a claim, allow me to offer my impressions of the situation from having spent the past two years in “*Dati Leumi*” (national-religious) environments, last year at Yeshivat Har Etzion, and the year before at Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh.

While I would imagine the need for abolition of idolatry is not pressing (whether it exists altogether, I am in no position to say), I cannot agree with the claim that the entire Jewish people today no longer want sacrifices. In certain crowds, no doubt, the notion of skirted priests slaughtering goats and sprinkling their blood on an altar, to borrow the formulation of a teacher of mine, may not seem like a religiously satisfying experience; however, I do not think everyone shares this sentiment.

Take, for example, the *Dati Leumi* community, a community heavily influenced by messianic thought, or the *Hardal* (right-wing, Zionist-nationalist) community, which is even more messianic by an order of magnitude. Temple service, including *korbanot*, comprises a fundamental component of their respective worldviews. In fact, the *Dati Leumi* community is so committed to the messianic vision of sacrifice, that

Rambam's opinion is often sugar-coated so as not to imply that *korbanot* are somehow a lower form of service than prayer.<sup>16</sup> which is indeed his actual opinion as demonstrated above. I do not think we even need mention members of the Ultra-Orthodox community, who would positively recoil at the notion that there would not be any *korbanot* in *Bayit Shelishi* merely because it did not conform to some Aristotelian conception of religion. Can anyone really imagine the thousands of “Briskers” (members of the intellectual community of the late R. Yitzchak Ze'ev Soloveitchik) in Israel today shrugging their shoulders apathetically at the claim that the *Kodshim* (laws of the Temple and Sacrifices) that they study is actually some relic of a barbaric past?

However, here I would like to concede a point. Rambam states that Hashem “suffered” these worships because to abolish them would be tantamount to a prophet commanding people to worship in contemporary times, but prohibiting prayer.<sup>17</sup> I do not know if this standard would be met today. It may very well be that the Jewish people today do not have equal commitment to sacrificial worship as they have to prayer. However, I am further unsure of whether this standard is necessary, or if a lower standard might likewise suffice. Therefore, while I cannot reject this contention outright, I would like to call it to question. I believe the matter requires more investigation.

Regarding the contention that Rambam differentiates between animal and non-animal sacrifices, there is not much to be said. In fact, there is nothing to be said at all. This is because Rambam himself says absolutely nothing about this: nowhere in any of Rambam's writings is any distinction of this sort drawn between animal and non-animal sacrifice. To draw this distinction then, is to project Western sentiment on to the philosophy of Rambam.

#### The Function of *Korbanot*

I would now like to investigate the



purpose of *korbanot*. Previously, we have seen that *korbanot* serve the dual function of appealing the ignorant masses and redirecting the urge to sacrifice to pagan deities. I believe that there are in fact two more functions of *korbanot* according to Rambam: drawing near to Hashem and seeking forgiveness for one's sins. While these reasons may seem obvious, and I think they are, they tend to be ignored in discussion of Rambam. For all his insistence that sacrifices are less than ideal, Rambam still writes that sacrificing an animal is an action "through which one [comes] near to God and [seeks] forgiveness for one's sins."<sup>18</sup> Therefore, *korbanot* would not become irrelevant when *Bayit Shelishi* will be built—we will *always* need to come closer to Hashem, and we will *always* need forgiveness for sin.<sup>19</sup> One could contend, however, that given the mechanism for achieving this closeness and atonement is an inferior one, and given, further, that the two *main* goals—appeasing the masses and abolition of idolatry—are rendered obsolete, *korbanot* would likewise be done away with. However, this not a very likely argument. Given that Rambam himself never says that if the ascribed reason for the *mitsvah* is no longer applicable that *mitsvah* itself ceases to apply, it would be quite speculative to propose that Rambam not only agreed to this, but *also* posited that if only the *main* reasons for the *mitsvah* are no longer applicable while secondary concerns are, the *mitsvah* will cease to apply.

**Conclusion**

This article sought to demonstrate that Rambam did in fact believe that there will be *korbanot* in *Bayit Shelishi*. The issues centered around whether Rambam held that a *mitsvah* would cease to apply if the rationale for the *mitsvah* did not, and whether the reason for *korbanot* is indeed still applicable. I attempted to demonstrate that in order to for the *mitsvah*'s rationale to undermine the

*mitsvah* itself, one must suppose that the rationale to be definitive, a supposition which Rambam himself rejects. Although this article was not intended as a response to Rabbi Yanklowitz, but a general exposition of the issues he raised, there remains one methodological question I would like to bring up. Until this point, I discussed Rambam's opinion; now, I would like to discuss whether Rambam's philosophy presents us with a desirable educational model. Should the student attempt to synthesize his own modern Western values - specifically in terms of conclusion, rather than elucidation - when engaging texts and issues of Jewish philosophy? Or, perhaps, ought a student avoid such synthesis, and draw his own philosophical conclusions by privileging the ideals of the Torah at the expense of his own proclivities? Rambam clearly thought the former, and I suspect Rabbi Yanklowitz does as well. While this question is primarily philosophical, in concluding this article, I wish to

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pose the question from an educational perspective. Given the sharp divisions between Western and classical Jewish values today, which position yields the greatest educational advantage when we draw philosophical conclusions? Is it pedagogically wiser to attempt a synthesis, knowing that some Western values will ultimately demand our rejection? Or would it be more strategic to reject any such attempt, and opt instead for an adoption of classically held Jewish values *in toto*, at the expense of our Western sentiment?

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1 Shmuly Yanklowitz, "Please G-d, Help me to understand why we must pray for a Third Temple!" *Times of Israel*, 1 January 2015, available at: [www.timesofisrael.com](http://www.timesofisrael.com)

2 *Guide of the Perplexed*, transl. by Shlomo Pines, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 524

3 This expression appears a few times throughout the chapter. For a less malicious translation of the Judeo-Arabic *ta'la'uf*, see R. Kapach who translates it as *nihul, management*, *Moreh Ha-Nevukhim*, translated by Joseph Kapach. (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1972), 574 n. 6, 10. See also Schwarz, *Moreh Ha-Nevukhim* (Tel Aviv University, 2002), 373 n. 2 who calls it a "gracious subtlety". (Somewhat strangely, Pines cannot make up his mind exactly how to translate this word, and in the opening sentence of this very chapter translates it as "wily graciousness" as opposed to the "gracious ruse" he uses throughout the rest of the chapter.)

4 *Guide of the Perplexed*, transl. by Shlomo Pines, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 526

5 This theme runs throughout the chapter. However, I also understand that many scholars took different views on Rambam's position regarding sacrifices. Allow me, then, to bolster my position with additional quotations from this chapter. First, "It is contrary to a man's nature that he should suddenly abandon all the different kinds of Divine service and the different customs in which he has been brought up. . . ." Now, here Rambam indicates that God refrains from forcing man to change from those customs which have become "a matter of course".

*i.e. korbanot*. Rambam would only say this if he presumed that there would be some reason for Hashem to abolish *korbanot*, for, otherwise, it would be irrelevant. Second, "What prevented Him from giving us, as part of our nature, the will to do that which he desires us to do, and to abandon the kind of worship He rejects?" Here too, it is fairly evident that Rambam believes Hashem rejects the worship of *korbanot*. Finally, "All these [above] restrictions served to limit this kind of worship." If indeed Hashem does limit this kind of worship - *i.e. korbanot* - He certainly does not think highly of it. Thus, the above interpretation is, if not correct, at least reasonable. For further discussion of this topic see, for instance, Moses Narboni, *Bei'ur le-Sefer Moreh Nevukhim* (New York: Om Publishing Co., 1946), p. 62, Shem Tov, *Perush le-Sefer Moreh Nevukhim* (New York: Om Publishing Co., 1946), p. 45b, and Isaac Abarbanel, *Introduction to Peirush on Sefer Vayikra*, as well as scholarly literature, as cited, for example, in Walter Orenstein, "The Maimonidean Rationale for Sacrificies," *Hebrew Studies* 24 (1983) pp. 33-39.

6 Pines, 526. The question of why Hashem

did not simply change the Jews' attitude at that time is addressed by Rambam later in this chapter (*ibid*, 529)

7 *ibid*. 527.

8 Though, I do think it fair to expect this contention to be proven.

9 *Beit Yosef to Tur, Yoreh De'ah 181:1, s.v. Umah*

10 It should be noted, however, that the *Beit Yosef* here takes issue with the *Tur*, who, in the *Beit Yosef's* understanding, believed Rambam to limit the Biblical prohibition of shaving sideburns according to its rationale, namely to avoid dressing like idolatrous priests. The *Darkei Moshe*, *ad loc.*, took issue with the *Beit Yosef* for thinking the *Tur* could ascribe such an opinion to Rambam. Regardless, all of these authorities reject such an opinion, some even rejecting the notion that anyone might have taken it altogether.

11 See also R. Bahya's comment to *Devarim*

29:28.

12 See Rambam's closing comments in his *Sefer Ha-Mitsvot*, in which he discusses the possible dangers that may result from knowing the true reasons for *mitsvot*. See also Shores 3 in *Sefer Ha-Mitsvot*, where Rambam explicitly states that any *mitsvah* that he counted in his *Sefer Ha-Mitsvot* applies forever. Rambam quotes *korban-related* *mitsvot* one-hundred and eighteen times, by my count.

13 *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Me'ilah*, 8:8. While it is possible that the Rambam in *Mishneh Torah* contradicts *The Guide of the Perplexed*, there is no reason to assume that any view Rambam writes in the *Mishneh Torah* is *de facto* rejected in the thought of *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Therefore, I contend that unless one can demonstrate that Rambam thought differently in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, whatever position taken in the *Mishneh Torah* holds true throughout Rambam's thought. As such, given Rambam does not indicate that he believes *mitsvot* can cease to apply anywhere in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, we cannot ascribe this position to him just because he held the

opposite view in the *Mishneh Torah*.

14 *Guide of the Perplexed*, transl. by Shlomo Pines, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 507. My thanks to Matt Lubin for pointing me to this source.

15 *ibid*. Verse from *Shemot* 25:8. Cf. *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Beit Ha-Bichera* 1:1, where Rambam writes that the function of the *Beit Hamikdash* is to have a place for sacrifices. See also note 10 above.

16 My thanks to Rabbi Chanoch Waxman for drawing my attention to this phenomenon within the *Da'ati Leumi* community.

17 Pines, 326-327

18 Pines, 582.

19 This assumes that Rambam believes *in* to be possible in the period of *Bayit Shelishi*, which indeed is his opinion. Cf. *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Melakhim u-Mil'hamoteihen*, 11:1-13.

## What is Divine "Power?"<sup>1</sup>

By ALEX MAGED

Can God create a rock so heavy that even He cannot lift it? Theologians have been debating this question, known formally as the "omnipotence paradox," since at least the middle ages. In a sense, the premise behind it is nonsensical: to suggest that something unlimited might actually be limited by the fact that it cannot have any limits is semantically clever, but it is practically meaningless. Thus intimated the great Catholic thinker Thomas Aquinas when he reflected, in his *Summa Theologica*, that "some things are not subject to [divine] power, because they fall short of being possible [altogether]."<sup>2</sup> Averroes, a prominent Muslim philosopher, echoed these

sentiments in his *Incoherence of the Incoherence* by claiming that "even the omnipotent cannot bring it about that existence should become identical with nonexistence."<sup>3</sup> So no, these men would insist, God cannot create a rock that He cannot lift. To suggest otherwise is illogical.

Nowhere does our Tanakh directly discuss the dilemma of omnipotence. We do, however, find a passing reference to one of God's "inabilities," in a well-known passage in the book of Bamidbar. After the sin of the spies, the Israelites criticize God for "bring[ing] us to this land to fall by the sword."<sup>4</sup> They decide that they no longer wish to settle the land of Canaan and agitate to "appoint

a [new] leader and return to Egypt!"<sup>5</sup> God, for His part, threatens to destroy the people and to recreate the nation from Moshe's progeny. But Moshe is not interested in this offer. He replies:

If You kill this nation like one man, the nations who have heard of Your reputation will say as follows: 'Since the Lord lacked the ability to bring this







nation to the land which He swore to them, He slaughtered them in the desert' (Numbers 14:15-6).

Ultimately, Moshe succeeds: God relents and the people are saved.

The dynamic of "power" that animates this exchange is interesting to us on at least three levels. Firstly, Moshe dares to debate God—not an unusual move for Biblical personalities, but a radical one nonetheless. Secondly, he actually wins the debate. And thirdly—and most relevant for our purposes—Moshe's argument seems, at least at first glance, to turn on the most juvenile of considerations. We almost sense that God spared the Israelites simply so that He could continue splitting seas and stopping suns on their behalf—lest anybody entertain the thought that He had somehow lost that power.

But what is power, really? Twice during his exchange with God does Moshe use this word (כח, in Hebrew) in order to advance his case. At the beginning of his plea, Moshe declares that "You have brought this nation out of Egypt with great power" (14:13). Prime facie, "power" here means the ability to do something—or, as political

scientist Robert Dahl memorably put it, "getting B to do something that B would not otherwise do."<sup>6</sup>

Yet sometimes we need to exercise power in order *not* to do something. It is this second definition of power which Moshe adopts in his closing

remarks:

Now please, let the *power* (כח) of the Lord be made greater (א.ת.ב), as you spoke, saying: The Lord is slow to anger and abundantly kind, forgiving iniquity and transgression... Please forgive the iniquity of this nation in accordance with your great (א.ת.ב) kindness, as You have borne this people from Egypt until now (14:17-19).

Following the sin of the Golden Calf, God taught Moshe His "thirteen attributes of mercy." Those are precisely the attributes which Moshe

quotes in our passage. Whereas God had promised to make a "great" (א.ת.ב) nation out of Moshe (14:12), Moshe insinuates that it is through God's "great (א.ת.ב) kindness" that the "greatness" of His "power" is truly manifest. Those who really possess power do not exercise it through their petulance but through their patience, Moshe hints. It takes more power to forgive than it does to exact revenge.

Perhaps this idea is

even truer of God than it is of humans. In *In His Mercy*, a short monograph on the "thirteen attributes," R. Ezra Bick presents his readers with a startling observation to this effect. He begins by discussing the notion of sin:

Sin is by definition something that opposes the divine will. Therefore, we may logically assert that God's will [to sustain] existence does not include that which runs in opposition to His will. The very first sin already brings an end to the [process of God granting us continued existence]. Sin, by definition—and this is the critical point—runs in opposition to the divine will and thus contradicts the reality of existence. The very fact that existence stems from [God], and that He brings all worlds into existence...necessitates that a world with sin cannot continue to exist. Regardless of how exactly we define God's objectives in creating the world—a subject that has of course been subject to fierce debate among thinkers throughout the generations—sin is clearly not among them. A world that is in opposition to God's will cannot exist by His will; this is inherently self-contradictory.<sup>7</sup>

Taken to its logical extreme, R. Bick's point implies that one who sins should immediately cease to exist. And yet, despite all of our shortcomings, we continue to live. How can this be? Here is the explanation that R. Moshe Cordovero ("Ramak") presents in his own treatise on the "thirteen attributes," entitled *Tomer Devorah*:

No man ever sinned against G-d without G-d Himself

bestowing that man's existence and the ability to move his limbs, at that very moment. Even though a person uses this very power to transgress, God does not withhold it from him at all. Rather, the Holy One, Blessed is He, tolerates this insult and continues to bestow on him the power to move his limbs. Even at the very moment that a person uses God's power for transgression, sin and infuriating deeds, the Holy One, Blessed is He, continues to grant it to him!<sup>8</sup>

Ramak's insight is remarkable: in order to forgive others, God has to negate Himself. This concept is known in Kabbalistic thought as *tsimtsum*, or "divine contraction." It states that just as we must make space for God in our lives, so too must He make space for us in His. Unless God is big enough to make Himself small, He cannot enter into a relationship with man.

That may be what Moshe is referring to in our passage. Had God "slaughtered the Israelites" after they sinned, then the "nations of the world" would have been correct to conclude that "He lacked the ability to bring them into the land which He had promised them." A God who cannot tolerate human mistakes is quite literally incapable of coexisting with humanity. Moshe understands how power works. He knows that if God cannot "contract"—that is, control—*Himself*, as it were, then His ability to wield influence over His subjects will be severely limited as a result.

It is no accident that the Torah chooses to communicate this idea through a debate in which Moshe defeats God, as it were. The medium fits the message perfectly. That message, in a word, is that even absolute power must recognize limits. By submitting to this principle,

God "gives in" to Moshe on two levels simultaneously: not only does He back down from the immediate threat to the Jewish nation, He also acknowledges the validity of Moshe's theological challenge. The result is that both sides "win" in the end. Not through force but through forbearance does God demonstrate His greatness. That, too, is a paradox of power. Aquinas and Averroes conceived of the paradox in metaphysical terms; Moshe teaches us to consider its moral dimension as well.

Nor is this principle limited

to the realm of *bein adam le-makom*. Like God, we must resist the urge to constantly assert ourselves if we are to leave room for others to enter into our lives. Real strength is not imposing, but inviting. In the words of our sages: "Who is powerful? He who conquers his own nature."<sup>9</sup>

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1 This article originally appeared on <<http://whatspshat.org/2014/06/12/shelakh/>>

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3 Averroes. *Incoherence of the Incoherence*, Second Discussion. Translated by Simon Van Den Bergh. Available at: [www.muslimphilosophy.com](http://www.muslimphilosophy.com).

4 Num. 14:3. All translations from the Judaica Press, available at: [www.chabad.org](http://www.chabad.org).

5 Num. 14:4.

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## Of Sensitivity and Humility: An Exposition of Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein's Approach to the Suffering of Others<sup>1</sup>

By AVRAHAM WEIN

Over the course of the last century, two immeasurably significant events occurred in Jewish history. The first was the Holocaust, which consisted of the murder of six million Jews and the suffering of countless more. The second was the establishment of the State of Israel, a redemption of sorts from a seemingly endless exile. Both the scale and the proximity of the two events prompted many to attempt to explain the reason they happened. In order to do so, the proposed explanations needed to address the issue of the evil and suffering so prominently exhibited and experienced during the Holocaust. The questions of evil and suffering are age-old questions,<sup>2</sup> and despite the unprecedented scale and singularity of the Holocaust, they are relevant to other tragic events of the last century as well. Twenty-first century calamities like the Indian Ocean Tsunami, Nepal Earthquake and Hurricane Katrina also appropriately triggered these questions.<sup>3</sup> At various junctures in Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein's tenure as Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion, he deemed it important to address these events and the issues raised by them. In doing so, he presented a consistent, honest, and nuanced approach

that preached humility and sensitivity in both understanding and responding to the suffering of others. This approach in many ways was explicitly impacted by that of his father-in-law, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. Additionally, a few relevant comments by Rabbis Shalom Carmy and Emmanuel Feldman further develop and illustrate Rabbi Lichtenstein's opinion. A careful survey and presentation of his approach to these issues will demonstrate its importance by illustrating how Rabbi Lichtenstein's approach is simultaneously theological, philosophically, and morally compelling, thereby providing a suitable framework for us to confront tragedy.

### The Problem of Evil and Suffering

In a sermon delivered in the aftermath of the tragic Tsunami of 2004, Rabbi Lichtenstein addressed the basic issue at hand: "Questions regarding the evil and suffering in the world - questions that lie beneath the surface of our existence, on the level of primal consciousness, from time immemorial - exist all the time; they arise at especially terrible times, such as now, following this disaster."<sup>4</sup> These questions Rabbi Lichtenstein references are neatly summarized in a chapter of his book *By His Light* discussing the challenges of the

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Holocaust. He writes, “The question which concerns us principally is the prophetic query echoing throughout the generations, the question of theodicy: Why do the righteous suffer?”<sup>5</sup>

This central question causes some to pontificate about why such an event took place. In doing so, they consider the surrounding circumstances, location, people involved, and time of the event.<sup>6</sup> What compounds the issue is the relationship between sin and suffering. Rabbi Lichtenstein notes that “both the prophets and Chazal generally connected destruction with sin.”<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Lichtenstein believes that those precedents in Hazal and the prophets have caused some people to arrive at their conclusions, attributing tragedies to misdeeds in the areas of Zionism, immodesty and Sabbath observance, amongst other areas.<sup>8</sup>

#### Proposed Solutions and Interpretations

Rabbi Lichtenstein describes this general group of interpreters in his sermon delivered after the Indian Ocean tsunami. He writes: “Some people concern themselves with the question of why it happened, voicing opinions on why the tragedy occurred specifically in that place and that time. These same people, in different circumstances, also explain why infants and young children die. Apparently, they consider themselves experts in the ways of Divine Providence.”<sup>9</sup> This tongue-in-cheek quote reflects the basic assumption of the group of interpreters Rabbi Lichtenstein takes issue with;

they deem themselves capable of understanding the ways of God.

In his writings, Rabbi Lichtenstein presents various solutions and responses proposed by others to the question of suffering broadly and to the Holocaust and other events specifically.<sup>10</sup> One non-religious approach described by Rabbi Lichtenstein is to abandon faith completely as the result of the scale of the event. While Rabbi Lichtenstein advocates not being judgmental of those who have this type of response and perhaps even sympathizing with them, he does not believe this approach is within the parameters of religious thought.

In *By His Light*, Rabbi Lichtenstein mentions three different approaches to the meaning of the Holocaust. The first is “Not only is it untrue that God ignored what was transpiring, but, on the contrary, the Holocaust was the fulfillment of His will. We need to recognize this and confess that it occurred ‘because of our sins.’”<sup>11</sup> This approach, known as the “*mi-penei hata’einu*” approach, calls on us to examine the behavior of the Jews preceding the Holocaust and identify their sins which sparked the Holocaust.<sup>12</sup> A second approach is the opposite of the first: God gave man free choice and is now unable to interfere.<sup>13</sup> A third approach is the combination of the first two: “The Holocaust represents *hester panim*, the hiding of God’s face. It is neither a purposeful act on His part, nor is He

bound by human freedom of choice, but rather it is a situation whereby God withdrew His hand because of the sins of Am Yisrael.”<sup>14</sup>

Rabbi Lichtenstein takes issue with these approaches as a whole, but particularly dislikes the first, the “*mi-penei hata’einu*” approach. He presents a variety of reasons for his discomfort with it. The first is that the implication of this approach leads to a statement that is morally unacceptable to Rabbi Lichtenstein because it requires that we view the Jews in Europe as a gravely sinful community to such a degree that they precipitated the Holocaust. He cannot fathom daring to make such a harsh accusation against a previous generation, especially one with many holy and saintly people in its midst. He cites a narrative in Isaiah where the prophet is punished for uttering an accusation against his community.<sup>15</sup> He argues that if Isaiah was punished for his accusation, how dare we feel comfortable making such a serious one? The alternate option within this approach is also unbearable for Rabbi Lichtenstein because it would force us to believe that terrible punishments are actually the deserved and appropriate response to standard sins. By adjusting our standards of sin and punishment we are now compelled to perceive God, the God of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy, from an entirely different and much more severe perspective. Rabbi Lichtenstein considers this modification unacceptable because it clashes with too much of the broader corpus about our understanding of God.<sup>16</sup>

In another context Rabbi Lichtenstein presents two additional elements of discomfort with the “*mi-penei hata’einu*” approach. First, the staggering enormity of the group murdered seems too vast to fathom within any philosophical approach. Second, he contends that historically, Western Europe, the area which would be presumed to have sinned the most, was hit much more mildly than Eastern Europe where many practiced

traditional Judaism.<sup>17</sup>

Rabbi Lichtenstein also finds faults in the other two approaches of either believing God was unable to interfere or that it was a period of *hester panim*. He argues, “maintaining that God’s hands were tied, as it were—we must also reject, for this would imply that we deny Him any role in the course of history.”<sup>18</sup> Finally, he comments that the “*hester panim*” approach also “leaves us with a question: Why? Was the situation so dire that we really deserved for God to hide His face from us?”<sup>19</sup>

#### Yodea Da’at Elyon?

Aside from the specific flaws with these individual approaches, Rabbi Lichtenstein also presents a number of broader and more fundamental issues. His first issue, simply put, is that we are neither Hazal nor prophets.<sup>20</sup> He writes that despite many sources of a causal nexus between sin and suffering easily found in Nevi’im and Hazal, “contemporaneously... to asseverate with assurance is out of the question. Such statements constitute the height of arrogance vis-a-vis the *Ribbono Shel Olam*.”<sup>21</sup> Rabbi Lichtenstein considers it both arrogant and pretentious for a modern man to provide explanations for these tragic events because it is impossible for him to have any certainty that there is validity to what he is saying. Elsewhere, Rabbi Lichtenstein commented: “such explanations are in the realm of prophets, and perhaps Chazal – but we? Who gave us the right to speak in such terms?”<sup>22</sup>

Rabbi Lichtenstein finds support for his approach in a famous Midrash about Bilaam and was wont to quote it as such. The Talmud<sup>23</sup> describes how Bilaam believed he knew God’s mind. The Talmud strongly rebukes him: “This person, who claimed to know God’s mind— could he not understand his donkey’s mind?” Rabbi Lichtenstein understands the message of this Midrash to be that it is utterly foolish for one to consider himself capable of understanding the ways of the *Ribbono Shel Olam*. He

writes: “It would be foolish of me to pretend to read cuneiforms or picture languages, and it’s folly for a person to imagine that he understands God’s supreme wisdom.”<sup>24</sup> Aside from Rabbi Lichtenstein’s qualms about the ability of modern man to interpret tragic events, he also finds moral fault in the self-confidence inherent in doing so.<sup>25</sup> Rabbi Lichtenstein therefore has no stomach for the frightful demonstration of arrogance by those who make such statements.

Despite his strong objections to the aforementioned approaches, Rabbi Lichtenstein makes a critical qualification about his views. He does not think it is impossible that any of the previous interpretations are inherently untrue, and may in fact be correct. It is intellectually dishonest to categorically rule them out. Nonetheless he believes that, “it’s much better to admit you don’t know rather than to give answers which are, in every way, unsatisfactory from a spiritual point of view.”<sup>26</sup>

#### Further Illustrations of Rabbi Lichtenstein’s Approach

An idea articulated by Rabbi Emanuel Feldman potentially provides further support for Rabbi Lichtenstein’s approach. In an article penned following a number of dramatic statements about the causes of Hurricane Katrina, Rabbi Feldman argued that, in contrast to Rabbi Lichtenstein, the prophets and sages of old were not “as all-knowing as some of us claim to be.”<sup>27</sup> He cites Biblical and Talmudic examples to demonstrate how even they did not consider themselves capable of identifying the cause of tragic events. Rabbi Feldman’s idea goes beyond Rabbi Lichtenstein’s approach in that the distinction made between the prophets and Hazal on the one hand, and us on the other is lacking in that even our great predecessors did not

consider themselves all-knowledgeable in the ways of God. Thus it is also a display of arrogance because implicitly one is demonstrating that he considers himself to be more knowledgeable of God’s ways than even the prophets and sages.

Rabbi Shalom Carmy, a student of Rabbi Lichtenstein, both further develops and illustrates R a b b i

Lichtenstein’s point about considering oneself capable of interpreting contemporary events. Beyond the issue of the assumption of understanding the unexplainable ways of God, there is also an issue with the common methodology utilized to arrive at such interpretations. Rabbi Carmy offers a description of the evidence often adduced in support of interpretive claims. He writes: “typically their argumentation leans heavily on the drama of breathtaking coincidences, on inventive correlations between God’s purposes and the calendar of the sequence of *parshiyot*, and marvelous gematriyot and other numerical calculations.” Tongue-in-cheek, Rabbi Carmy continues: “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.”<sup>28</sup> Rabbi Carmy’s point not only indicates his alignment with Rabbi Lichtenstein on this issue but simultaneously serves as a valuable illustration of Rabbi Lichtenstein’s point. Hazal and the Prophets may have been capable of suggesting general interpretations for God’s ways, but who are we? The tools Rabbi Carmy describes reflect how ludicrous it is for one to believe that he can understand the ways of *Ribbono Shel Olam* through such *pshetlakh*. Finally, Rabbi Carmy makes another crucial point: “What happens when

our communal or personal calamities, regarded as divinely ordained afflictions, become the subject of clever *pshetlakh*?”<sup>29</sup> Simply put, what type of effect will there be on our communities if the most serious and sensitive of issues in our communities are not dealt with intellectual, philosophical and religious rigor?<sup>30</sup>

Rabbi Carmy finds an additional fault with the assumed self-confidence of those who offer explanations for tragedies and elaborates beyond Rabbi Lichtenstein on the issue. He comments that often the proposed explanations of tragedies made by preachers are truly dedicated “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 weigh against.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, beyond being pretentious and arrogant, it can also serve as a distasteful display of opportunistic attack against those who do not align with one’s views.

#### Responding With Humility

Rabbi Lichtenstein instead preaches an approach of humility. He writes about the Holocaust: “The first thing that is required, then, when relating to the Holocaust, is absolute humility and complete self-nullification. First and foremost, I refer to humility in relation to God. This means avoiding all those philosophical and theological statements, issued from all sides, with great pretension, seeking to provide one or another explanation – while the best response is silence.”<sup>32</sup> In another context describing the Holocaust, Rabbi Lichtenstein remarked that “it is preferable to live with the question and with the faith surrounding it rather than to try and grasp at explanations of one kind or another. We cannot nor will we ever be able to provide an adequate explanation for what happened.”<sup>33</sup>

Rabbi Lichtenstein believes that a sense of humility is necessary for other events besides the Holocaust: “Someone who cannot provide an answer for what took place during the Holocaust should not be overly eager

to provide explanations for current events.”<sup>34, 35</sup> He concludes his remarks following the Tsunami with: “the message that arises in the wake of the events of the Twentieth Century is that we have no business poking our noses into the ‘why;’ in the context of such questions, what is required of us is absolute humility”.<sup>36, 37</sup>

#### Not Just Humility

Yet Rabbi Lichtenstein does not believe that simply exhibiting humility with regards to interpreting events is a sufficient response to the suffering of others.<sup>38</sup> In his comments on Hurricane Sandy he argued: “A person lives through a period of tragedy; hopefully one would expect a response which, on the part of the person, does not focus upon his understanding and perception of why and how the *Ribbono Shel Olam* is running the world.”<sup>39</sup> He instead believes that the point of focus should be shifted and as such, “the question is not only what we should say, but what we should do. On this level, our responses subdivide into actions with practical effects and actions with emotional effects.”<sup>40</sup>

First and foremost, Rabbi Lichtenstein makes a critical point about one’s mindset with regards to the suffering of others. He writes: “the primary of *hovot halevavot* upon our relation the suffering of others is felt, however, insofar as the suffering becomes in some sense and on some level, our own. From a purely moral standpoint this degree of empathy is desirable in itself, as a reflection of the ability to transcend egocentrism and weave an element of fellowship, community, or universality into the fabric of personal identity.”<sup>41</sup> To further illustrate this point, he references the famous example from *Kol Dodi Dofek* about the two headed Jew who has both heads scalded when boiling water is poured on one.

This mindset has a number of ramifications. The first is that it calls for *tefillah* as a response to the suffering of others in the same manner one would respond with *tefillah* to personal



suffering.<sup>42</sup> It also crucially focuses on *tikkun*, amending one's ways. Rabbi Lichtenstein argues that there should be no difference between the self and extended self in this obligation. Yet the obligation and opportunity to amend one's ways need not result from finger-pointing

or ascription of blame. While a general connection between sin and destruction should be acknowledged,

this does not have to impact one's *teshuvah* and therefore "continued adherence to that tenet remains more a facet of *emunah* than of *teshuvah*."<sup>43</sup> Rabbi Lichtenstein argues the obligation of *tikkun* "can be approached without the self-righteousness and without recrimination in a forward looking spirit rooted in commitment to both *avodat Hashem* and *ahavat Yisrael*."<sup>44</sup> Thus, while still preaching *tikkun*, Rabbi Lichtenstein is able to divert the focus from ascribing blame to others for their sins.

On one level, Rabbi Lichtenstein stresses that it is obviously important to provide practical support and assistance via charity and other kind acts, and refers to this as *hesed*. Yet he also preaches a different kind of response, that of sensitivity. While perhaps of less practical assistance to those suffering, Rabbi Lichtenstein considers this to be of utmost importance. Similar to his point about viewing it as one's personal suffering, Rabbi Lichtenstein calls for a sense of identification with those suffering because of its attitudinal significance. He quotes the Talmud which indicates "that Chazal regard such a situation, where a person does not participate in communal distress, as a most severe manifestation of egotism."<sup>45</sup> As a paradigm for his approach, Rabbi Lichtenstein quotes another Talmudic saying: when the Israelites fought Amalek in the desert, Moshe sat on a

rock, instead of on a chair or cushion: "Moshe said, 'Since Israel is suffering, I too am with them in suffering.' And whoever makes himself suffer with the community, will merit to experience the community's consolation."<sup>46</sup> Whether Moshe sits on a rock or on a sofa makes

no difference at all to those who are waging the war against Amalek; nevertheless, Moshe would never think of

not identifying with the nation in its time of trouble, in the midst of war."<sup>47</sup> He also presents other places in *Hazal* where one is obligated to perform certain minor acts in order to keep specific things in mind.

Rabbi Lichtenstein thinks identification is crucial on a number of levels. First, he believes that it may actually help those suffering. Despite not offering anything on the material level, a display of sympathy and identification with the pain of those suffering may provide them with solace. Beyond this though, he stresses an additional important element—the development of sensitivity for the sake of ourselves. He writes: "We must aspire at least to attain a level where we will have human sensitivity...our sensitivity and sympathy are necessary to aid those who have suffered loss and injury, while they are also demanded of us as part of our service of God. These feelings are important not only for the sake of our interpersonal relationships and our relationship with God, but also for the sake of our relationship with ourselves, namely, for developing our moral character and refining our religious personalities."<sup>48</sup> Thus, a sense of identification is critical for Rabbi Lichtenstein.

Specifically in the context of the Holocaust, Rabbi Lichtenstein describes particular messages and lessons that must be learned. These lessons include higher levels of love for

fellow Jews, recognizing how fortunate we are, humility, faith, strength and possessing a sense of mission. He describes how there is a burden of continuity, a mission "to continue that great and impressive world, with all its different facets, that was cut down and destroyed in its prime, a flourishing, thriving world of Torah, culture and creativity that was annihilated. We bear this obligation not only because it is necessary, but because we – who stand here today – are the emissaries of those holy, great, saintly people."<sup>49</sup> These lessons and messages delineated by Rabbi Lichtenstein reflect his approach of learning from the suffering and including those lessons into how one responds in the future.

#### You Sing Praise?

Another important element of Rabbi Lichtenstein's approach to the suffering of others is his view of the sufferings of non-Jews. He addresses the issue on three levels. He writes: "The ethnic factor is of little moment on the philosophical level. In dealing with theodicy, whether Job was Jewish, Gentile or fictional is wholly irrelevant."<sup>50</sup> A second level is that of compassion, prayer and sensitivity. He believes that we are charged with acting with all of these emotions for victims of all nations. Rabbi Lichtenstein presents<sup>51</sup> various historical precedents as proof for this approach, such as Avraham and Sodom, Jonah and Nineveh,<sup>52</sup> as well as a Midrash in the context of *keri'at Yam Suf* where God criticizes the angels for



not displaying sensitivity towards the drowning Egyptians.<sup>53</sup> He considers this approach intuitive if we truly strive to abide by our tradition. He writes: "the tendency, prevalent in much of the contemporary Torah world in Israel as well as in the Diaspora, of almost total obliviousness to non-Jewish suffering is shamefully deplorable... the notion that only Jewish affliction is worthy of Jewish response needs to be excoriated and eradicated."<sup>54</sup> On a third level though, Rabbi Lichtenstein does make a distinction between the sufferings of the two groups. He writes: "On the practical level, however, it is of considerable import. Up to a point, this is fully understandable humanly, and also, from our perspective, morally. There is no gainsaying the fact... that Judaism espouses a double ethic. The Halakhah indeed champions a double standard grounded in recognition of Kedushat Yisrael and the perception, of relevance to ideal bland universalism."<sup>55</sup> Thus Rabbi Lichtenstein does believe in prioritizing the needs of Jews ahead of non-Jews.

#### Acceptance

All the above notwithstanding, Rabbi Lichtenstein argues that there is another obligation a Jew has in response to suffering. Jews, writes Rabbi Lichtenstein, must "accept God's judgment, despite our incomprehension... The philosophical and religious difficulties are present, and there is no point in denying them, but we are believers and descendants of believers. With great humility, even

when our comprehension is lacking, we must regard ourselves, even at difficult times, as being able to cope psychologically, and also practically (to some extent)."<sup>56</sup> While clearly a difficult task, as Rabbi Lichtenstein admits, it is necessary for a Jew to be submissive and to maintain his belief in God's supreme wisdom.<sup>57</sup>

#### Rabbi Lichtenstein and the Rav

Beyond being the son-in-law of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Rabbi Lichtenstein was in many ways one of the intellectual heirs of the Rav. With regard to question of suffering in general, as well as the suffering of others, Rabbi Lichtenstein very much continues the tradition of the Rav. This is very evident in Rabbi Lichtenstein's affinity for quoting the Rav on the topic.<sup>58</sup> More specifically though, Rabbi Lichtenstein's philosophy is comparable with the Rav's in at least five ways.

Rabbi Soloveitchik emphasizes how *halakhah* recognizes and legitimizes the experience of suffering. In fact, for one to ignore it would be a missed opportunity. In *Out of the Whirlwind* the Rav writes: "The practical topic Halakha did not and could not evolve a metaphysic of suffering. It simply refused. It was not eager to find the rationale of evil and to convert the negation into an affirmation. It neither justified evil nor denied and hid it. The topical Halakha always held the view

that evil exists and that man must face it in perplexity and embarrassment."<sup>59</sup> Rav Lichtenstein likewise emphasized that suffering is an important and legitimate experience, one that certainly should not be ignored. The Rav and Rabbi Lichtenstein present a variety of reasons for this.<sup>60</sup> Firstly, to deny the suffering of others is morally objectionable. If they are experiencing pain and suffering, how can one dare to tell him that he is not really suffering and it is all just an illusion? Secondly, suffering is an important experience for man if visited upon him, and has many redemptive qualities. Third, Rabbi Soloveitchik mentions that to modern man these metaphysical explanations are of no use, meaning a modern man does not find it to be relevant or valuable to his emotional experience.<sup>61</sup>

Another way in which the Rav and Rabbi Lichtenstein compare also serves as a fourth reason for not explaining away suffering. The Rav emphasizes our inability to understand the ways of God and thus it is inconceivable to try to explain to someone that their suffering is an illusion, if we are finite and cannot know the infinite big picture.<sup>62</sup> This idea is the subject of the opening pages of *Kol Dodi Dofek*. The Rav writes: "There is evil that is not susceptible to explanation and comprehension. Only by comprehending the world in its totality can man gain insight into

the essence of suffering. However, as long as man's perception is limited and fragmented, so that he sees only isolated portions of the cosmic drama and the mighty saga of history, he cannot delve into the recesses of evil and the mystery of suffering."<sup>63</sup>

The Rav also believes that the point of focus should be on response and not trying to philosophize about the nature of the event. This is the subject of the Rav's famous distinction between fate and destiny. He writes: "the emphasis is removed from causal and teleological considerations and is directed to the realm of action."<sup>64</sup> Rabbi Lichtenstein draws from this reflection of the Rav tremendously in his own philosophy as he makes this very same distinction. The Rav also indirectly makes an important point about relating to the suffering of others. He quotes the story of Job to show how it is crucial to sympathize with those suffering. He understands God's critique of Job as: "You were still short of attaining that great trait of loving-kindness in two respects: (a) never did you bear the communal yoke, nor did you participate in the trouble and grief of the community, and (b) you did not feel the pain of the individual sufferer."<sup>65</sup> This is very much in line with Rabbi Lichtenstein's argument that there is an imperative to identify and sympathize with others who are suffering. Finally, the Rav argues there

must be another element to a Jew's suffering. In the same manner that Rabbi Lichtenstein argues for acceptance and continued faith in response to suffering, Rabbi Soloveitchik writes: "the third proposition is faith... the topical Halakhah has always believed, based on an eschatological vision, that at some future date, some distant date, evil will be overcome, evil will disappear."<sup>66</sup> Once again, the Rav and Rabbi Lichtenstein both agree that man must accept the Divine verdict of suffering with faith and humility.

Rabbi Lichtenstein's approach to the suffering of others is significant because it displays a true sensitivity to moral, Halakhic, and philosophical principles simultaneously. It also, under the radar, takes a dramatic stance against proponents of Divine interpretation amongst whom are some revered rishonim.<sup>67</sup> While Rabbi Lichtenstein does not clearly delineate when exactly the *heter* for general divine interpretation ends, he holds that it is our responsibility to respond with a sense of humility and sensitivity to those suffering. In this manner, Rabbi Lichtenstein's philosophy is appropriate and crucial when one deals with the suffering of others.

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2 For relevant sources see Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek* (New York, NY: Yeshiva University, 2006), 1.

3 Rabbi Lichtenstein makes this point (albeit implicitly) in a number of places. See Aharon Lichtenstein, "The

*Duties of the Heart and the Response to Suffering*," in Aharon Lichtenstein, *Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Learning - Volume 2* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Pub. House, 2004), 144. and Aharon Lichtenstein, "I Am with Him in Distress: The Challenges of the Holocaust," adapted by Reuven Ziegler, *By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God*. (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Pub. House, 2003), 165. For a more explicit and thorough example of this argument see Eliezer Berkovits, *Faith After The Holocaust* (New York,

NY: KTAV Pub. House, 1973), 128-130.

4 Aharon Lichtenstein, "After the Tsunami," *The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash*, available at: [etzion.org.il/en/](http://etzion.org.il/en/)

5 *By His Light*, 165.

6 The connection between sin and destruction in *Hazal* is not always evident though. See Yaakov Elman, "When Permission is Given: Aspects

of Divine Providence," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought* 24:4 (Summer 1989), 24-45 and Yitzchak Blau, "Afflictions of Love: The Relationship between Suffering and Sin," *The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash*. Also see *Avot* 4:15, *Berachot* 5a, *Berachot* 7a and *Shabbat* 55b for some examples. For an interesting analysis of Rabbi Akiva's approach to theodicy see Maier Becker, "Rabbi Akiva and Theodicy," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought* 37:1 (Spring 2003), 52-60.



7 Aharon Lichtenstein, "Is This Not a Brand Plucked From the Fire?" *Confronting the Aftermath of the Holocaust*. Alei Etzion 16 (Iyar 5769), 175. This point also appears in other of his writings. See *Leaves of Faith*, 145 and "Tsunami." For a few examples of this phenomenon in Hazal see *Sotah* 1:7-9, *Avot* 5:8-9, *Moed Katan* 28a, *Shabbat* 2:6, *Shabbat* 13b, *Shabbat* 55a-b and *Gen. Rabbah* 84:7. Also see the writings of my revered teachers Rabbi Shalom Carmy and Rabbi Mosheh Lichtenstein who address the validity of this claim with regard to the Torah. See Mosheh Lichtenstein, "Weep for what Amalek has Done unto You - Lamentation and Memory of the Holocaust in Our Generation," *Milín Havivin Journal* 2 (June 2006): 25-41. and Shalom Carmy, "Cold Fury, Hidden Face, the Jealousy of Israel: Two Kinds of Religious Estrangement in the Torah," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought* 43:4 (Winter 2010): 21-35. It is worth noting that Rabbi Lichtenstein does not really examine the validity of this claim with regard to the Torah explicitly.

8 For a survey of these type of propositions see Emmanuel Feldman, "Plunging Into Mighty Waters And Emerging With A Broken Shard": *New Orleans and the Mind of God*, *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought* 40:1 (Spring 2007): 5-16, at pgs. 5-6. With regard to the Holocaust see the approaches of Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum and Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook referenced in Reuven Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility*, (New York, NY: OU Press, 2012), 276-277. For some more specific contemporary examples see *The Associated Press*, "Shas Rabbi: Hurricane Is Bush's Punishment For Pull-out Support," *Haaretz Online Edition*, 7 September, 2005, available at [www.haaretz.com](http://www.haaretz.com), VIN News Staff, "Satmar Rebbe Attacks Zionism Says Blood Of The Three Slain Boys Is On Parents' Hands," 2 July, 2014, available at <http://www.vosizneias.com/>, and Jesse

Lempel, "Rabbi's Unwitting Lesson in How Not To React to Nepal's Earthquake," 27 April, 2015, available at [forward.com](http://forward.com). Also see the comments of Rabbis Zechariah Wallerstein and Rabbi Yosef Mizrachi following the horrific fire in Brooklyn this past year available at "torahanytime.com."

9 "Tsunami"

10 For a survey of approaches within a Jewish philosophical lens see *Leaves of Faith* 2, 144. For a broader survey of approaches to the Holocaust specifically see Tamir Granot, "Faith and the Holocaust," *The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash and Moshe Maya, A World Built, Destroyed, and Rebuilt: Rabbi Yehudah Amital's Confrontation with the Memory of the Holocaust* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Pub. House 2005).

11 *By His Light*, 162-163. For other places where he puts forth these solutions see *Alei Etzion* 16, 178., Aharon Lichtenstein., "On Appropriate Religious Responses to Hurricane Sandy." *Pages Of Faith- Exploring the Thought of Harav Aharon Lichtenstein*, available at: [pagesoffaith.wordpress.com](http://pagesoffaith.wordpress.com) and *Leaves of Faith* 2, 145.

12 For an explanation of Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner's *mi-penei hata'einu* approach see Joseph Grunblatt, *Exile and Redemption: Meditations on Jewish History* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1988), 145-147.

13 *By His Light*, 162-163.

14 *ibid.*

15 *Isaiah* 6:5.

16 *By His Light*, 163-164.

17 *Pages Of Faith*.

18 *By His Light*, 164.

19 *ibid.*

20 This may be a reflection of Rabbi Lichtenstein's broader philosophy of immense respect of Hazal. See Aharon Lichtenstein, *Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Learning* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Pub. House, 2003), 11-12.

21 *Leaves of Faith* 2, 145.

22 *Alei Etzion* 16, 179.

23 *Sanhedrin* 105b

24 *Pages Of Faith*.

25 *ibid.*

26 *ibid.* For a similar perspective see Moshe Rosenberg, "Towards a Jewish Response to Natural Disaster," *YUTorah Online*, available at [yutorah.org](http://yutorah.org).

27 Emmanuel Feldman, "Plunging Into Mighty Waters And Emerging With A Broken Shard": *New Orleans and the Mind of God*, *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought* 40:1 (Spring 2007): 5-16, at pg. 6.

28 Shalom Carmy, "Cops and Robbers," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 40.4 (Winter 2007): 1-6, at page 5. Rabbi Carmy does acknowledge the entertainment value of such an approach though.

29 *ibid.* For a dramatically variant form of this type of approach see Gidon Rothstein, "Can a Reasonable Person See the Hand of God in Cataclysmic World Events?," *YUTorah Online*, available at [yutorah.org](http://yutorah.org). As will be demonstrated later on in the article, it is possible Rabbi Lichtenstein would respond to Rothstein's argument that it is not necessary to use those means in order to turn towards the path of repentance.

30 Additionally it makes it impossible to offer the type of responses discussed later on in the article. This

approach seems to fall in line with a comment made against simplicity by Rabbi Lichtenstein in *By His Light* where he argues for presenting students with a variety of views and preaches the importance of complexity. See Aharon Lichtenstein, "Bittachon: Trust in God," adapted by Reuven Ziegler, *By His Light*, 157-158. Rabbi Carmy's point also aligns with a point made by the Rav. See Joseph Epstein, *Shiurei Harav* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Pub. House, 1974), 6.

31 Shalom Carmy, "Cops and Robbers," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 40.4 (Winter 2007): 1-6, at page 6. In a different context, my esteemed teacher Rabbi Michael Rosensweig termed this the "mi-penei hatat'hem" approach.

32 *Alei Etzion* 16, 179.

33 *By His Light*, 164.

34 *ibid.*

35 This is also clear because of the consistency of his comments in his discussions of other tragic events as well as in his more general discussions of the suffering of others. See *Leaves of Faith* 2, 145.

36 "Tsunami"

37 I think Rabbi Lichtenstein's call for humility is related to his discomfort with declaring the State of Israel to be the "reshit tsemihat ge'ulateinu." Who are we to say whether this is the beginning of the ultimate redemption or not? See Elyashiv Reichner, *By Faith Alone: The Story of Rabbi Yehuda Amital* (New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2011), 69.

38 This also serves as an additional reason why Rabbi Lichtenstein finds fault in the previous approaches.

39 *Pages Of Faith*.

40 "Tsunami"

41 *Leaves of Faith* 2, 144.

42 See *Psalms* 130. Also see the famous debate between the Rambam and Ramban regarding the nature and scope of the Biblical obligation of prayer.

43 *Leaves of Faith* 2, 146.

44 *ibid.*

45 "Tsunami"

46 *Ta'anit* 11a

47 "Tsunami"

48 *ibid.*

49 *Alei Etzion* 16, 184.

50 *Leaves of Faith* 2, 146-147.

51 See "Tsunami" and *Leaves of Faith* 2, 146-147.

52 For another similarity between the approaches of the Rav and Rabbi Lichtenstein, see Abraham R. Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav: Man of Faith in the Modern World* volume 2 (Jersey City: Ktav Publishing House, 1989) 142-146.

53 *Sanhedrin* 39b

54 *Leaves of Faith* 2, 147.

55 *ibid.*

56 "Tsunami"

57 This approach fits in very well with a possible reading of the story of the deaths of Aharon's sons. See Alex

Israel, *Parshat Shemini: The Deaths of Nadav, Avihu, and Uzzah – Lessons for Yom HaShoah*, *Beit Hillel- Attentive Spiritual Leadership*, available at <http://eng.beithillel.org.il/>.

58 For examples see *Alei Etzion* 16, 180. and *Leaves of Faith* 2, 118.

59 Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, *Out of the Whirlwind: Essays on Mourning, Suffering and the Human Condition* (Hoboken, NJ: Toras Horav Foundation, 2003), 101.

60 For a clear expression of this in Rabbi Lichtenstein's thought see *Leaves of Faith* 2, 126-128.

61 *Out of the Whirlwind*, 99-100.

62 This may be connected to the same reason why the Rav argues that rational proofs of God fail in Uvi-

kashtem Misham since in both cases an inadequate response is a distortion. While See Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, *And From There You Shall Seek*. (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Pub. House, 2008), 12.

63 *Kol Dodi Dofek*, 5.

64 *ibid.* 7.

65 *ibid.* 15.

66 *Out of the Whirlwind*, 103-104.

67 For some of the relevant sources in the Ramban see C.J. Henoch, "The Religious Thought of Nachmanides -from His Exegesis of the Mitzvot," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought*, 11:1 (Spring 1970), 64-83.

## Rashi, Tosafot, and Hazal's Knowledge of Tanakh

BY ARYEH SKLAR

The Jerusalem Talmud records the tradition that the Tannaitic sage Samuel could recall the midwife who delivered him. R. Yehoshua ben Levi stated that he could remember his mohel. R. Yohanan claimed he could even remember the women who happened to be in the room when his mother gave birth to him.

The incredible memory displayed by many of the Talmudic sages is manifested, of course, in their teaching and studying. Page after page of Talmud displays the incredible mastery of the sages for the whole of the Torah and tradition. A midrash records that R. Yohanan ben Zakkai's oral recitation of his learning was so practiced that just based on where he was up to in his recitation, he could tell what time of day it was without looking outside for three days straight. In another Talmudic passage, R. Yohanan himself viewed negatively anyone who recited Tanakh and the Mishnah

without a melody meant for easy memorization. He believed Tanakh needed a melody, as it was something to be memorized, a feat which many rabbis appear to have accomplished." For example, the Talmud records that R. Meir was once in a town for Purim where there was no scroll of Esther to read from, so he proceeded to write it out completely from memory to read on Purim. Another passage in the Jerusalem Talmud states that Rabbi Yehudah praised the generation that R. Yishmael b. R. Yose lived in, for he could write all of Tanakh by heart.

This amazing command of Torah knowledge is why, among other reasons, Orthodox Jews today hold the rabbis of the Talmud in such high esteem. The suggestion that those rabbis could be mistaken in their studies is a last resort, and in some communities, an act of heresy. It thus comes as a shock to many religious readers of the Talmud that Tosafot would declare that "sometimes, they

[the rabbis of the Talmud] were not proficient in knowledge of verses [of Tanakh]."

Tosafot say this in order to explain a strange exchange in the Talmud, where Rabah bar R. Shilah and R. Nahman bar Yitzhak seem not to be aware that the same word appears in two different verses. To Tosafot, this is not difficult to understand, as it is but evidence of their lack of knowledge in Tanakh. They point to another Talmudic passage that is seemingly much more explicit in this regard. In *Bava Kamma* 55a, we find:

*R. Hanina b. Agil asked R. Hiyya b. Abba: Why in the first Decalogue is there no mention of tov [Rashi: "so that it shall be good (tov) for you"], whereas in the second Decalogue there is a mention of tov [Deuteronomy 22:7]?*

*He replied: Before you ask me why tov is mentioned there,*





in Exodus, and the second version in Deuteronomy, was unfamiliar to R. Hiyya bar Abba.

Though Tosafot do not have a problem providing this answer for the exchange in Bava Batra, they conclude approvingly with the interpretation of a fellow Tosafot, R. Samuel ben Meir, known as the Rashbam, who finds a way to read the Talmudic passage so that it need not rely on the conclusion that rabbis of the Talmud did not know Tanakh well enough. However, the Tosafist Rabbeinu Asher in his Tosafot ha-Ros (*ad loc.*), rejects Rashbam's approach entirely, writing that Rashbam "needlessly struggled" to resolve the apparent difficulty, and that the simpler answer is that "there are many times that the Amoraim did not remember verses." In fact, the Rosh points to yet another passage in the Talmud, which seems to indicate that R. Sheshet was unaware that the source of the law, that a *sherets* (insects, rodents), is ritually impure, is an explicit verse in the Torah.

There are a few more passages to add to this position, which Tosafot do not quote. The Talmud states:

*Rebbi once opened his storehouse [of foodstuffs] in a year of scarcity, proclaiming: Let those enter who have studied the Tanakh, or the Mishnah, or the Gemara, or the Halakhah, or the Aggadah; there is no admission, however, for the ignorant.*

The fact that there is a stated difference between those who know Tanakh and those who know Talmud leads R. Samuel Strashun, known as the Rashash (*ad loc.*) to state:

*Implying it was possible for there to be someone who knew Mishnah or Talmud, but not Tanakh... This [attitude] is unlike those who heap scorn on contemporary rabbinic leaders who are expert in Talmud and halakhic decisions but not Tanakh.*

It would seem that Rashash felt the need to use this concept to defend

great rabbis against the Maskilim of the 1800s who were deriding them for not knowing Tanakh.

R. Yannai, in one well-known *m i d r a s h* seems to declare that he never knew a certain verse in Psalms:

*R. Yannai was sitting and*

*interpreting next to his window. He heard an announcement: "Who wants to buy the elixir of life?" [R. Yannai pressed the peddler to reveal what he was selling.] He took out a book of Psalms and showed him the verse, "Who is the man who wants life?... Guard your tongue from evil...!" Said R. Yannai: Even Solomon announced and said, "He who guards his mouth and his tongue, guards his soul from distress." R. Yannai said, "All my life I read this verse and did not understand its interpretation, until this peddler came and taught me, "Who is the man who wants life."*

The commentators to Leviticus Rabbah invariably question what R. Yannai learned from the peddler, who had simply quoted a verse to him. If the Tosafists are correct, one could assume that R. Yannai truly never knew of the verse in Psalms. However, it could be that he simply never considered its explanation. We have other passages in the Talmud that reflect this lack of knowledge. The Talmud records an interesting story:

*R. Abahu praised R. Safra to the heretics as a learned man, and he was thus exempted by them from paying taxes for thirteen years. One day, happening upon him, they said to him, "It is written, 'I have only known you of all the*

*families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.'*

*If one is angry does one vent it on one's friend?"*

*But he was silent and could not give them an answer, so they wound a scarf round his neck and tortured him. When R. Abahu came and found him [in that state] he said to*

*them, "Why do you torture him?" They responded, "Didn't you tell us that he is a great man? He cannot explain to us the meaning of this verse!"*

*He responded, "I may have told you [that he was learned] in Tannaitic teaching; did I tell you [he was learned] in Scripture?" They asked, "How is it then that you know it?" He replied, "We who are frequently with you, set ourselves the task of studying it thoroughly, but others do not study it as carefully."*

R. Abahu claimed that rabbis of his time only studied Scripture well to be able to answer heretics. Apparently, rabbis were sometimes asked questions about Scripture, and it was not necessarily assumed they would know the answer. Another Talmudic passage states:

*Zutra b. Tovia was [once] expounding a Scriptural lesson in the presence of R. Yehudah. Coming to the verse, "And these are the last words of David," he said to R. Yehudah, "'Last words' - implying that there were former words. What were those former [words]?" He [R. Yehudah] kept silent, without saying anything. Again he said: "Last words! This implies there were former words. What were those former [words]?" He [then] replied,*

*"What, do you think that one who does not know an explanation of that text is not an eminent man?"*

Lastly, the Talmud states that R. Kahane declared that he had lived for eighteen years and never knew (until that moment) that Scripture always has a plain understanding, "*ein mikra yotzei mi-yedei peshuto.*" This leads the venerable R. Moses Sofer, known as the Chatam Sofer, to write, "We see from this that Hazal did the opposite [of the expected educational plan], teaching their sons only Talmud, and Scripture only according to their *derashot*, without teaching them the *peshat* at all."

Thus, we see several cases where absolute facility in verses was not present or not required. The great R. Zvi Hirsch Chajes, in his *Mavo Ha-Talmud*, also freely admits to this contention. Even more recently, R. Joseph Messas engages in no apologetics when it comes to this topic. In one letter, he responds to someone who expressed surprise that he would say that the rabbis of the Talmud could forget or not know verses from Tanakh. "Do not be surprised, my friend, for we find this in Bava Kama [55a]... And there is also Bava Batra 113a..."

Tosafot's position may be related to their understanding of the Talmudic statement which appears in three places that one must divide one's learning into thirds - one third for Tanakh, one third for Mishnah, and one third for Talmud. R. Tam is quoted in Tosafot in both places that since the Talmud states that the Babylonian Talmud is totally assorted and mixed with all three elements, learning the Babylonian Talmud fulfills this law.

R. Tam, and the other Tosafists of his time, would have seen precedent for their own educational curriculum in the educational curriculum of some of the sages of the Talmud. Since, in their interpretation, some of the rabbis of the Talmud were not experts in Tanakh, they would have concluded that they had license to follow in the footsteps of their religious forebears. R. Tam and

the other Tosafists would not have seen it too shocking to suggest this lack of knowledge, nor viewed it as an insult to those rabbis, since their own knowledge of Tanakh was deficient as well. There are many indications that, for the most part, the Tosafists post-Crusades did not have any formal Tanakh study in their academies. For example, R. Joseph Kimhi charged R. Tam with disregarding the study of Tanakh. Rabbeinu Tam himself is quoted as saying that he had neither the strength nor ability to write a commentary on Tanakh like his grandfather Rashi did. In his ethical will, another Tosafist, R. Yehudah b. ha-Rosh, urges his children to learn Tanakh, as he laments that did not have a chance when he studied in his youth in the academies in Ashkenaz.

Tosafot generally linked their learning abilities and curriculum to the Talmudic sages. The Talmud quotes R. Ashi who states that the power of memory in his time was bad, comparing it to the amount of water one would collect by sticking his finger into a tarpit which returns to its form after the finger is removed. Tosafot lament that:

*So it is for us, that once we finish one tractate and start another, we immediately forget the first.*

Rashi, I contend, disagreed with the idea that one need not study Tanakh. It is clear that Rashi emphasized the value of knowing Tanakh, as we see in his quoting of an additional homiletic interpretation to Exodus 31:18:

*Just as a bride is adorned with twenty-four ornaments, those mentioned in the book of Isaiah (3:18-22), so, too, a Torah scholar must be expert in the twenty-four books [of Tanach].*

However, Rashi placed limits on how much priority Tanakh should take in one's learning schedule for two reasons, which I will proceed to show. Firstly, he understood there was a paramount importance to memorization of *halakhic* teachings and principles in a time where they could be forgotten. True, one cannot ignore the fact that the rabbis of the Talmud were not all

complete experts in Tanakh, but they had an "excuse". They had a bigger priority - the commitment of the Oral Law to memory. That priority, however, would not apply in Rashi's time. Secondly, one had to place adequate importance on knowing Jewish law, in order to teach those who did not have the capability of deciding the law. This priority indeed would apply in Rashi's time. Though those priorities came at the expense of studying Tanakh, to Rashi, they did not override it.

One can see the importance of memorization of the Talmud from Rashi's interpretation of the discussion of the Talmud regarding which among Tanakh, Mishnah, and Talmud, is the most valuable to study. The Talmud states:

*Our Rabbis taught: They who occupy themselves with the Tanakh [alone] are somewhat meritorious; with Mishnah, are indeed meritorious, and are rewarded for it; with Gemara, there can be nothing more meritorious; yet run always to the Mishnah more than to the Gemara.*

*Now, this is self-contradictory. You say, "with Gemara, there can be nothing more meritorious," and then you say, "Yet run always to the Mishnah more than to the Gemara!" Said R. Yohanan: This teaching was taught in the days of Rabbi, when everyone abandoned the Mishnah and went to the Gemara. Hence, he subsequently taught them, "Yet run always to the Mishnah more than to the Gemara."*

The Talmud thus concludes that the Talmud is more meritorious to study

than Mishnah and Tanakh. Rashi provides an explanation that Mishnah and Talmud are valued higher than Tanakh because Mishnah and Talmud were not available in writing like Tanakh is, and therefore they were at risk of being forgotten:

*That the [learning of] the Mishnah and the Talmud is better than [Tanakh] because they rely on memorization, and it was being forgotten in their days. The Talmud was not in writing,*

*nor was it allowed to be written, and it was only because of the narrowing of the hearts [and people were forgetting]*

*that the later generations began to write it down.*

Rashi apparently believed that at the time this statement was made, the success of Jewish education relied on the study of Talmud as a priority. We find this in other areas as well. The Talmud states that the Mishnah gives preeminence to lenient positions above more stringent standards, "the power of the lenient position is better." According to Rashi, those who maintain a learning tradition were "better", for a person who relied on precedent and teachings of his teachers would not be afraid to be lenient in certain cases. It would make sense that in times when those traditions could be forgotten, Rashi would see Talmud memorization as paramount. Indeed, elsewhere, Rashi criticizes those who spend too much time in *pilpul* and not enough in memorization of the law.

Rashi provides another reason why one should not study too much Tanakh, which is that one must know Torah law, either as a layman to know what to do, or a rabbi to teach it. For example, the Mishnah states that

certain books of Tanakh should not be read on the Sabbath "because of neglect of the Bet Midrash." Rashi interprets this to mean that since the rabbi of the congregation is set to deliver a discourse on the Sabbath to the people who work all week, which will teach them Jewish law, it is "better for them to hear that than to learn *Ketuvim*." We find this concept again in Rashi's commentary to Ecclesiastes, where he writes that though Tanakh, Mishnah, and Talmud are all equally the special inheritance of the Jewish people,

*if he is king [i.e. expert] in Tanakh and in Mishnah, he must still be subservient to the Talmud-learner, because he arranges before him the practical decisions of prohibition and permissibility, uncleanness and cleanness, and laws of jurisprudence... He who has Tanakh and Mishnah, but no Talmud, what benefit does he have?*

Thus, Rashi sees Talmud knowledge as necessary for deciding law, and teaching it to the layman who only knows Tanakh, or Mishnah. There is another comment of Rashi related to this. The Talmud states that a person should keep his children away from "*higayyon*." Rashi writes that this may refer to learning more than the proper amount of Tanakh, which can be deleterious by "drawing one away" from other studies. This seems to be the same concerns as we have seen before. If one studies Tanakh too much, one may neglect the necessary memorization of the Oral Law, as well as the knowledge necessary in order to decide the law.

Let us review in broad strokes what we have claimed so far. The Tosafists, especially in the time of Rabbeinu Tam, focused on Talmud study at the expense of Tanakh study, even so far as to interpret the great sages of the Talmud as being deficient in their own knowledge of Tanakh. However, Rashi did not

allow the Talmudic "excuse" from exempting one from studying



Tanakh, especially since the Talmud was now already written. A distinction between Rashi and other scholars was already noticed in the late 14th century by Profiat Duran (Efodi),

*In this period, I note that Jewish scholars, even the greatest among them, show great disdain for biblical studies. It is enough for them to read the weekly portion [shenayim mikra ve-ehad Targum] and still it is possible that if you ask them about a particular verse, they will not know where it is. They consider one who spends time doing biblical studies a fool; the Talmud is our mainstay. This disease is rampant in France and Germany in our generation, as it was in the preceding period. But in earlier generations it was not so. We see the glory of the Talmudists uplifted by ... the great Rashi who delved into the meaning of Scripture and wrote beautiful commentaries on it, including wonderful formulations about grammar and syntax.*

Let us conclude with the words of the Rav, R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who argued in a 1955 letter to Dr. Samuel Belkin that rabbinical ordination at RIETS should include classes in Tanakh, especially on the Pentateuch.

*A thorough knowledge of the Pentateuch with its two basic commentaries is a must. The candidate for rabbinical degree ought to know not only the intricate*

*laws of migo, but also the five books of Moses. The teaching of the Pentateuch must pursue a two-fold purpose. First, the knowledge of the halakhic components of the Humash... Second, the profound understanding of the Biblical narratives not only as historical records of a distant past but also as parts of the great historical drama of our people and as archetypes of the Jewish paradoxical destiny charged with powerful ethical motifs.*

This is the 60th year that his advice has gone unheeded.