



# KOL HAMEVASER

The Jewish Thought Magazine  
of the Yeshiva University Student Body

**The years after high school are a time of profound religious growth and development, whether in Yeshiva, University, or Yeshiva University. This issue includes insights and personal reflections about the process of religious transformation.**

## **Religious Growth and Change**

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אור לחי תשרי תשס"ה • WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 2007

7:30 PM

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## STAFF

### Managing Editors

Mattan Erder  
David Lasher

### Staff Writers

Noah Cheses  
Alex Ozar  
Ayol Samuels

### Interviewer

Ari Lamm

### Art Editor

Avi Feld

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# On Leaving Yeshiva

BY ALEX OZAR

Taken as a whole, Judaism is a religion which confers spiritual value on the entirety of human experience. A Jew can and must be a Jew whether in the hallowed walls of the *shul* or *bais Medrash*, his place of business, or his home. Further, on a personal level, Judaism addresses not only the realms of external action and expression, but rather guides and confronts the Jew in totality, from his most basic emotions to his most sophisticated faculties. There is no decision in any area of Jewish life and living, no matter how minor, mundane, and apparently insignificant, which is not in some way affected, if not directly legislated, by the corpus of Jewish law and thought. In short, the profane, those areas apparently devoid of spiritual content, provides no sanctuary from the holy, rather it itself becomes a sanctuary for the holy. Thus, the Jew is both enabled and obligated to experience the totality of his life, even his most mundane activities, no differently than were he a *kohen* serving in the *bais Hamikdash*.

In this light, the central Jewish concept of a *bais hamikdash* is, prima facie, out of place in Judaism. For one, the very idea of having a specific geographic center of holiness and worship is difficult. If the Jew sees the whole world as G-d's sanctuary, why does he need one in miniature? Secondly, the *Mikdash* was dedicated totally and exclusively to holiness and the ritual worship of G-d; it and its contents were forbidden for profane uses, and profane activities in its confines was a grave offense. Further, the *Mikdash* and its service demanded, in various degrees, the suppression of the human self, a point illustrated strikingly in the Torah's account of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. They were struck down for the sin of performing a service of their own innovation, or, according to the Midrash (See *Rashi* and *Sifrei* ad loc.), for some form of arrogance in connection with the service. Apparently, the *Mikdash* could not tolerate such an expression of autonomous human selfhood. Even more striking, in the aftermath of Nadav and Avihu's death, Aharon and his sons were proscribed from any showing of grief in the face of their tragic loss, instead being required to complete the temple dedication as if unaffected. Again, the *Mikdash* demands that the human nullify himself entirely before G-d. Now, if indeed the Jewish ideal is the sanctification of life in its entirety, profane included, it seems odd that its most important place could tolerate the holy exclusively.

I believe the solution to this problem can be found through a careful reading of the chapters following the Nadav and Avihu narrative, paying close attention to the progression of ideas. After the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, the Torah enjoins the *kohanim* against

entering the *Mikdash* inebriated, and then devotes many chapters to detailing the various laws of ritual impurity, along with some of the dietary laws. After this, the Torah resumes the narrative with *Acharei Mos* (these words indicating that these chapters are to be read as a unit), where Aharon is given the details of the Yom Kippur service. Following all this, we find *parshas Kedoshim*, with its vast array of laws governing every aspect of life. What is the meaning of this progression?

As is made evident from the context, the function of the laws relating to ritual defilement and proscription of alcohol is to ensure the sanctity and integrity of the *Mikdash*. The deaths of Nadav and Avihu pointedly demonstrated the absolute necessity of maintaining that sanctity, as its violation resulted in tragedy. The laws of ritual defilement proclaim that while defilements exist and must be dealt with appropriately, they must remain



outside the *Mikdash*. At this point, the narrative is resumed with *Acharei Mos* and the details of the Yom Kippur service. With the *Mikdash* secured against defilement, Aharon could be given instructions as to the proper method of positively engaging the *Mikdash*. So far so good, but in what way does *parshas Kedoshim* follow from this?

I believe that the message is as follows: *Kedoshim*, with its laws for all areas of Jewish life, from agriculture to business to interpersonal relationships, expresses the Jewish ideal, in which no place, activity, or inner experience, no matter how apparently mundane, remains un sanctified. The Jew can and must be a *Kadosh* in the totality of his life experience. However, the Torah reminds us that while this is the goal, it is not the first step. *Parshas Kedoshim* is to be seen against the backdrop of the *parshiyos* preceding it, which proclaim loudly the centrality of a *Mikdash* uncompromised in its sanctity. The message then, is clear: In order to ultimately

transform the entire world, profane included, into a *Mikdash*, we must first build and protect the spiritually pure *Mikdash* at our core.

## II

In recent years, it has become accepted for post-high school students to spend a year or two studying in an institute of higher Jewish learning in Israel. This is a special opportunity for the students to dramatically grow and develop in terms of their learning and *yirat shamayim*, and for many it is a truly transformative experience. Students feel that they have finally found themselves and their place in the world, dedicating themselves to a life of self-fulfillment in the world of Torah. This sense of purpose and direction, along with the nurturing, often idyllic setting of the Yeshiva, provide the student with a profound feeling of contentment and inner-peace. Unfortunately,

for spiritual development are stunted, leaving them frustrated and yearning for those days past when they were still in Israel. These students bemoan the fact that they have been forced by the exigencies of life to abandon their beloved yeshivas in exchange for a life of secular and pragmatic pursuits, the so-called "real world." This they consider a crushing blow to their spiritual development. While I certainly understand this sentiment, and I admit to experiencing it myself, I believe that in most cases it is fundamentally misguided.

First of all, we must clarify the actual value and function of the spiritual development accomplished in the sheltered confines of the Yeshiva. That it does exist is apparent to the naked eye; no one can deny the change and growth of countless individuals. What does raise an eyebrow though, is that once outside the Yeshiva, this apparent change, growth, and commitment often seems transient and short-lived. It seems that often the spiritual development and commitment that results from the Yeshiva experience, as great as it may be, has no backbone. And I do not believe that this phenomenon can be blamed entirely on overwhelming forces and pressures of the secular world. I can testify personally that commitments which I had genuinely felt to be ironclad while in Yeshiva, simply evaporated upon my return home, not because of any external pressure, but simply due to reverting to eighteen years worth of deeply ingrained habit. In other words, while in Yeshiva I appeared to be a different person, and to be sincerely dedicated to certain principles and modes of behavior, the truth was that the changes, at least on a practical level, were often only surface deep.

Why is this the case? To put it bluntly, the Yeshiva is an artificial environment. The reason so many people grow so rapidly and so drastically is because it is easy. The Yeshiva student is provided with a schedule and structure entirely dedicated to developing his learning and *yirat shamayim*, is surrounded by fellow likeminded students all working towards the same goals, and is supported and encouraged by a dynamic and powerfully influential staff. In this environment, spiritual growth is for many simply the path of least resistance. Therefore, when the environment disappears, we should not be shocked if the spiritual growth goes along with it.

I believe leaving the Yeshiva to return to the "real world" can actually be a positive and productive step in one's development as a *ben Torah*. First, it provides the student with the ability to gauge himself and his growth accurately, an obvious prerequisite for continued development. Furthermore, what development one does achieve, while it may not compare quantitatively to that of the Yeshiva, is qualitatively so much greater. Gains achieved

this experience does have one definite shortcoming: it ends.

With the exception of a select few, most students return from their time in Israel in order to attend college and begin the path towards their professional careers. The students must once again deal with the difficulties, obstacles, and banalities of a secular and pragmatically driven world. In place of spending their days and nights engaging their spirits in the worship of G-d and the study of His word, they are forced to attend classes in which they are often uninterested and fight for the advantages requisite for a successful career.

Understandably, this transition is for many a difficult one. No longer in the nourishing, insular walls of the Yeshiva, the students' commitment to Torah and *yiraat shamayim* begin to fade, while, at least at first, their thirst and desire do not. Both because of the straining demands made on their time, and the various distractions involved, the students' quests

through challenge and struggle are always more rewarding, and in this case I believe they are also more real. To change in a difficult environment, certainly one in which the forces of habit are the strongest, one must truly change himself, which is the only change that really counts.

Most importantly, the place of the Jew cannot be in a protected fortress only, but must extend to the world at large, encompassing the whole of human experience, the mundane included. We must, at the very least, have the ability to be Jews not only in the spiritually pure environment of the Yeshiva, but also in the home, school, and workplace. Religious commitment that can be sustained only within the narrow confines of the Yeshiva, but not in the university or workplace cannot be genuinely Jewish. The world in its entirety must be our *Mikdash*.

What then is the value and function of the sheltered Yeshiva experience? It is in the Yeshiva where we have the opportunity to grow and cultivate our spiritual core, our most fundamental beliefs, perspectives and commitments, the *Mikdash* within us. Free from the corrupting impurities of the world, we develop uninhibited our inner identity as Jews dedicated to *avodas Hashem* and the ultimate realization of His kingdom on earth. What we must take from our Yeshiva experience is not mere quantitative behaviors, but rather a deep, personal commitment and orientation to the values of Judaism which colors, whether greatly or subtly, all our decisions as we confront the world. To be sure, our external religious behaviors and commitments will often whither, and we will find ourselves sliding backwards on the path of spiritual development. However, even when we fall, we will be facing in the right direction, always yearning and striving for our goals. In the Yeshiva we have the opportunity to create and fortify a spiritual core, our own personal *Mikdash*. We can then confidently and proudly act and assert our identity as Jews in the totality of human experience, from holy to profane, and from success to failure, making the whole world our *Mikdash*.

For clarity's sake, I am not saying that leaving Yeshiva is always a positive step; it often isn't. It is truly a challenge, and many do not succeed. My point though, in too few words, is this: We should view leaving Yeshiva to engage the world at large as nothing less than an opportunity to further our spiritual development in both quality and scope. It is an opportunity to allow our spiritual core, the holiness of the Yeshiva, to permeate the whole of our existence.

Alex Ozar is a Staff Writer for Kol Hamevaser

# Letter to an Orthodox Burn-out

BY SETH HERSTIC

*This is an abridged version of a larger letter. The full version can be found at <http://www.kolhamevaser.com>*

Dear Noah,

It was great to see you the other night. It reminded me of the good old days when you and I would sit in the upper deck behind home plate at Shea stadium and scream our lungs out over every bad call and every great play. I really miss those times. It's amazing how three years of mutual silence has had no affect on our ability to laugh and converse. We can still have a great time together, and I suppose that's the mark of true friendship. It is because of this connection, this dedication and this brotherhood, that I feel able and permitted to speak to you candidly now.

Noah, we spoke about everything the other night. We spoke about school, work, new movies, old movies, and our most precious memories. We did imitations of all the teachers from our past and reminisced about all the mischief we used to cause. But there was something we didn't speak about at all, something we stayed away from as if it was leprous. This topic, which I felt was begging to be discussed and addressed, kept eluding us, and we kept eluding it. The topic I'm referring to is of course the topic of Judaism, more specifically your Judaism.

I can tell that you and *Yiddishkeit* are engaged in your own mutual silence at the moment. It's as if at some point over the last few years you decided that God, Torah, and *Am Yisrael* ran out of room for you. Alternatively, maybe you were the one who was unaccommodating. Either way, there was a break. A fissure formed between you and the Eternal, and I could see it in your eyes and hear it in your voice last Thursday night.

Whatever the reason, I don't really care that much. Your numerical reading on the religious barometer doesn't interest me. I'm much more concerned about where you're headed on the religious/spiritual map than where you are, and I care much more about what you want out of Judaism than what it has given you. This preference of mine, call it 'Destination over Location in *Avodat Hashem*,' is not an original one, rather it is actually a major theme in the Talmud and *Sifrei Mussar*.<sup>1</sup>

Noah, I fear that your Judaism is not one of movement, evolution, ascent, or struggle; I fear that it is a stagnant Judaism, devoid of life and vibrancy. I get the impression that you view the Torah's vision for you as a stifling and restrictive one, one that will suffocate your individuality and creativity if you fully embrace it. And I also fear that your view of

God has been tainted. I imagine that you see the Almighty as a ruthless and nitpicking slave owner, who will punish his slaves (us) for even the most insignificant wrongdoings. In your mind, you see God holding a whip in one hand and the Books of Life and Death in the other. You fail to see the God who stands with His arms open and ready to embrace His beloved children.

If I'm correct, and your vision of Judaism is so limited, then your perspective of things is similar to that of the model Man of Fate, and far from the perspective of the Man of Destiny. These two types of men and outlooks were contrasted by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik *zt"l* in his essay "*Kol Dodi Dofek*:"

"What is an existence of fate? It is an existence of duress, in the nature of 'against your will do you live.' It is a factual existence, simply one line in a [long] chain of mechanical causality, devoid of significance, direction, purpose, and subordinate to the forces of the



environment into whose midst the individual is pushed, unconsulted by Providence. The 'I' of fate emerges as an object. As an object, man appears as acted upon and not as an actor.

What is an Existence of Destiny? It is an active existence, when man confronts the environment into which he has been cast with an understanding of his uniqueness and his value, freedom and capacity; without compromising his integrity and independence in his struggle with the outside world. The slogan of the 'I' of destiny is: 'Against your will you are born, and against your will you die,' but by your free will do you live."<sup>2</sup>

Although the Rav does not say it explicitly in his essay, I think I am right in assuming that the two types of men who experience these two divergent types of existences approach *Avodat Hashem* in totally different ways.

For starters, their morning routines differ. The Man of Fate opens his eyes in the morning and lets out a sigh of disappointment and despair. It is the beginning of another day of restrictions, obligations, and fear for him;

what does he have to look forward to? He drips out of bed and slimes his way to *minyan*. He arrives at synagogue a few minutes late, throws on his *Tefillin*, and then mumbles his way through the prayers. He doesn't want to talk to God, and he doesn't want to praise Him, but he will say the words every morning because it is his habit and obligation. He thinks, "I am a slave to God; what can I do? If I don't obey, I will be punished in the next world and feel guilt in this one."<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, the Man of Destiny rises before the dawn and springs out of bed. Full of purpose and joy, he prepares his mind and body to sing praise to his Creator. He understands his mission this day, appreciates his unique role to play, and contemplates how he will leave his signature mark on the moment. He eagerly awaits the sunrise, and when it finally arrives, he pours out his heart to the Almighty in petition and in song. He learns Torah with vigor and sensitivity. He tries to unearth a new gem of wisdom, to produce a

*chiddush!*

In short, the Man of Destiny meets the day with dignity and wonder, thrill and hope, whereas the Man of Fate meets the day with resignation, sloth, and gloom. In fact, these two men never see things in the same light. Where the Man of Fate sees burden, the Man of Destiny sees opportunity. Where the Man of Fate sees religious shackles, the Man of Destiny sees the keys to life. The Man of Fate wants to escape his Master's whip, and the Man of Destiny wants to redeem his existence and come near to his Father in heaven.

Both of these men are very human; they both have their struggles and hardships, and they both possess strong inclinations towards evil. However, their varied visions of Judaism, and their opposing views of their missions in life, nearly make their existences antithetic. By ascribing to them "opposing views," I do not mean that one of these men views his life from the Fate perspective and that the other man views his life from the Destiny perspective. On the contrary, both

men, at their core, are Men of Fate, with a “Vision of Fate” and fully know and appreciate this fact. They realize that they were both born against their will as Jews. They know that they have to keep the *mitzvot* whether they like it or not. They have no choice in the matter. God, in a way, has thrust Himself upon them, and they cannot escape their fate. However, the Man of Destiny does one better. He takes his Judaism to the level of purpose, choice, action, and direction; he *builds* upon the Fate Vision. Indeed, this act of ascent on the part of the Man of Destiny encapsulates and represents the essence of our task in this world.

I mentioned earlier that I thought your separation from God, Torah, and *Am Yisrael* was a result of viewing the Torah’s vision for you as a stifling one. I think you feel that if you totally give in to Torah, you will be stripped of your creativity and lose your uniqueness. Well, Noah, if painting pictures of the Crucifixion is your idea of creativity, then yes, embracing the Torah will stifle you. But I’m not talking about art. Don’t get me wrong, art is obviously a branch of creativity, and artistic expression certainly has a place within the Jewish framework, but when I talk about creativity and individuality in Judaism, I’m not referring to a guitar-playing hippie who designs finger puppets.<sup>4</sup> I’m talking about a much broader creativity and a more exalted individuality. I’m talking about the concept of every Jew having his own unique role to play in the drama of our people’s history and destiny. I’m talking about how no Jew is superfluous, and how every Jew must use his or her God-given gifts and holy distinctiveness to hasten the coming of the Messiah. I’m talking about how every man wishes to bring something new into his world, and how this is also God’s wish. I’m talking about *chiddushei Torah* (new insights into the Torah). I’m talking about how man is a partner with God in the creation of the world. I’m talking about all these things.

I suspect that this exalted vision of *Avodat Hashem* (founded upon the Vision of Destiny and the Call of Creativity) is one that is very foreign to you. This is because you have never met the right people. You have never learned Torah from someone who believed in this brand of Judaism, taught this brand of Judaism, and practiced this brand of Judaism. Not only have you never learned Torah from such a man, but you have never observed such a man in an informal setting, playing with his children, conversing with his wife, laughing with his friends, walking in the park, etc. Observing the mundane actions of a true Jew in a relaxed setting can be extremely educational and inspirational; it may even be more important and spiritually productive than formal Jewish education.

I was fortunate enough to receive this informal Jewish education and this majestic vision of Judaism in Israel, in yeshiva. It was there that I learned a Torah of destiny from men of destiny, and resided, conversed, and

relaxed in an environment of destiny. My yeshiva, *Lev HaTorah*, was one that stressed an active, ascending, creative, and vibrant service of God; a service of joy that demanded our uniqueness. We were all encouraged to be ourselves, but to be ourselves within the framework of authentic halakhic Judaism.

Noah, I hate to say it, but I think the only way for you to mend your relationship with God, Torah, your people, and yourself, is to spend some time learning in Israel. I won’t quote any esoteric sources about the powers of the land to prove this to you, nor will I make any claims about the mysterious realms of the soul. All I will tell you is the concrete facts: for whatever reason, be it sociological, economical, or psychological, the Torah educators in Israel are the best in the world, and our homeland’s environment is the most conducive for learning Torah and becoming acquainted with Judaism and holiness. No other country, state, or yeshiva compares.

I remember the old days Noah, the days when you were the first to minyan, and the days when you would sneak peaks at your *Pirkei Avot* in the middle of history class. There was a time when your Judaism meant something to you, when it touched your heart, when it was alive in you, when you were excited about it. You can’t just give up on it now; it hasn’t given up on you. Like the proverbial “Beloved” in the Song of Songs, God and Torah still beckon you; still wait for you to open the door to your destiny, not your fate! I too wait for you to open that door; and I know you can, with God’s help.

Your friend,

Seth

*Seth Herstic is spending this year in Israel at Yeshivat Lev Hatorah. When he gets back he will be a senior majoring in sociology.*

<sup>1</sup> See for example *Avot* 2:21, *Sanhedrin* 105b, and Rav Dessler, *Treatise on Choice: Part I*, in *Mikhtav Me-Eliyahu*, vol. 1 (*Bnei Berak*, 1964)

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek*, trans. David Z. Gordon (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2006), 2

<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the Man of Fate might not go to synagogue or consciously keep any commandments. His vision of *Yiddishkeit* could be so bleak, that he decides to completely separate himself from his faith and community.

<sup>4</sup> Such a hippie could very well be a true-blue Orthodox Jew who views his life through the lens of Destiny, but I’m not concerned with that type of creativity and uniqueness at the moment.

# Religious Development and Personal Growth

BY RABBI YOSEF BLAU

My student years were a time of profound religious development and personal growth. As I prepared to give an account of these changes, I realized that my perspective on a deepened observance of Judaism may not correspond to what is currently popular in yeshiva circles. Over the years, I have learned that our tradition incorporates a variety of expressions of religiosity. I will focus on the model that has resonated for me.

In high school, we associated growth in learning with accumulating knowledge and exposure to more commentators. At Yeshiva, I learned to think about a difficulty instead of looking for an answer. Torah study became a cognitive act with religious significance. *Hasmadah* is more than spending many hours in the Beis Midrash; it requires concentrating intensely on trying to understand the sources and to resolve apparent contradictions. We absorbed this lesson in shiur when we observed the Rav *zt”l* not being satisfied with an explanation until it was precisely formulated and conceptually clear. We realized that he did not sleep well until both the *Rambam* and the *Raavad*, or the *Ramban* and *Baal Hamaor*’s positions had been explained. Each opinion reflected a different perspective on the fundamental question that was below the surface of the Talmudic discussion.

Many of the conceptual formulations that I learned transformed my observance. The distinction between *kiyum she’b’lev* (an internal state of mind) and the *maaseh ha’mitzvah* (the technical performance) gave new depths to

experiencing a holiday or attempting to do *t’shuvah*. Observing Shabbos is enhanced when one has an understanding of what the criteria are for defining an activity as “work” and the nature of a *sh’vut d’rabbanan*. Because of this conceptual approach, decades later I continue to gain insight into the prayers and the unique sanctity (*k’dushat ha’yom*) of each holiday.

Even before entering college, I had a philosophical bent. Yeshiva high school ended at 5:45 on weeknights, and I would be in the library by seven o’clock for two hours of reading. Maintaining religious commitment would have been difficult if I had not been exposed to serious Jewish thought. It is not necessary to have an answer for every apparent conflict between science and religion, but it is critical that the study of Judaism be as intellectually challenging as physics and mathematics.

The sense that there is infinite depth to Torah and that mastering its texts takes more than a lifetime is a powerful stimulant. It is enhanced by the realization that the additional knowledge will enrich all aspects of one’s religious life. When the Rav explained customs, they took on new meanings. One who is engaged in analyzing a halakhah will be less likely to observe it in a mechanical way.

For those of us who did not compartmentalize, our secular education was part of our growth. Literature sensitized us to the human condition. The sciences expanded our awareness of the wonders of God’s creation. Our intellectual horizons were widened. We followed the *Rambam* in both the *Mishneh Torah*



# Religious Radiance

BY CHAVA CHAITOVSKY

and the *Sefer Hamitzvot*, connecting our love of Hashem with knowledge of His Torah and His creation.

As a result of this broad concept of Torah, an ethical and moral sensitivity was communicated. Injustice to others became our concern. It is difficult to pin down where the ethical dimension of Judaism was stressed. Most likely it inhered in the ethos of the time. Judaism and humanism were not seen as conflicting. American society was more innocent, almost naïve. Our European *roshei yeshiva*, acutely aware of the contrast between how Jews suffered in Europe and how we were treated in America, appreciated this country and its freedom. Our ethical concerns extended beyond our fellow Jews.

Life at Yeshiva was more than an intellectual pursuit. Bonding with our fellow students enabled us to appreciate the value of friendship and the importance of community. Aware of the small percentage of the broader Jewish community that shared our experiences, we understood that we had a responsibility to provide leadership and a connection to Torah knowledge to those who were uneducated.

More important than the knowledge that we gained and even the camaraderie we shared was the development of an adult religious personality. It included taking responsibility for our decisions. As we began to look for a spouse, pick a career and find a job, our *rebbei'im* trusted us to make intelligent choices. Once our teachers gave us the tools, we had to decide how to use them. Accepting responsibilities can be daunting. When the Rav called on his students and asked what we thought, it was frightening, but it also told us that we have the ability to say something worthwhile.

The message communicated was that we would be the next generation of Jewish leaders. We were expected to be both loyal and independent. Creativity in Torah had not ended. Life was going to present many challenges, and we did not have all the answers. None of us thought we would be Torah scholars on the level of our *roshei yeshiva*. We were in awe of the Rav and had no illusions about becoming Torah giants by his standards.

It sounds paradoxical, but we were simultaneously aware of the gap and our inadequacy while feeling reassured that we could handle the mantle of leadership. The years in Yeshiva were a unique opportunity for growth in Torah and for exposure to greatness. Graduating or earning *s'mikhah* was not the end of the process. When functioning as adults there would be different kinds of opportunity for further growth. For those willing to accept the burdens, the years at Yeshiva had been the preparation for accepting religious leadership

Rabbi Blau is the Mashgiach Ruchani of RIETS

With apologies to my tenth grade Jewish History teacher, I admit that I do not remember much of what I learned in that class. But I will never forget the mantra she repeated numerous times: "Jewish History does not take place in a vacuum." The historical path of *Am Yisrael* has been shaped by numerous sociological and political dynamics of the "outside" environment. In the same vein, the religious journey of a single member of *Am Yisrael* must both incorporate and influence a larger context. Religious growth cannot take place in a vacuum either.

The modern Hebrew word for religious, "*Dati*," does not appear in Torah or *Nevi'im*. The approximate parallel used most often in Tanakh is "*Kadosh*." What, exactly, does "*Kadosh*" mean? The mandate of *Kedusha* for *Am Yisrael* appears in juxtaposition to another phrase: *Mamlechet Kohanim*.<sup>1</sup> A *Kohen*, a priest, serves as a bridge between the ordinary and the Divine, an ordinary person with an extraordinary role to play. Rabbi Menachem Leibtag often affirms the idea that *Kedusha* connotes a single item distinguished from a whole for the exclusive purpose of elevating that whole. One example is a *Kohen* amidst his people; another is Shabbat. We distinguish Shabbat from the other days of the week in several ways, but the purpose of Shabbat is to rejuvenate our spiritual lives and inspire our other six days until Shabbat arrives again. Shabbat is the quintessential example of one dimension of *Kedusha*, *Kedushat Zman*. In addition to time, *Kedusha* also expresses itself in the two dimensions of space- *Kedushat Makom*, and of personality- *Kedushat Adam*. True religious growth, or an increase in *Kedusha*, must somehow radiate an influence outwards in each of the dimensions of time, space, and personality.

The time of greatest religious upheaval, change and growth in our community is, undoubtedly, the period of young adulthood: roughly between the ages of seventeen and twenty four. With the year or years in Israel at the core of the process and the setting-in of semi-reality that follows, many members of the Modern Orthodox world oscillate between several different viewpoints and *Hashkafot* during these years. As part of natural development, one's sense of idealism peaks during this same time. Combining that with a relatively light set of responsibilities and commitments yields a young person eager to "do it all" religiously and who sees no reason why anyone would do otherwise. These are years of great religious acceleration for many members of our community. But even putting aside the dangers of accelerating too quickly and reaching higher speeds than one can control, it is simply untrue that a few years of religious acceleration can provide the power for a lifetime of religious commitment. Yes, these

first years of independence can provide great opportunities for a head start on religious growth, but nothing more than that. A curriculum for religious life must include long-term plans for continued opportunities to explore Torah and spirituality. Just as the *Kedushat Zman* of Shabbat must radiate into the week that follows, the active pursuit of greater *Kedusha* during the *Zman* of young adulthood must be revisited and revitalized periodically throughout one's life.

That is not an easy task. As an intellectual Modern Orthodox woman who by nature gravitates towards *Limud Torah* as a source of spiritual expression, I wonder anxiously about my ability to cultivate spirituality when I will reach the stages of life that lie beyond the (new) Beren Campus *Beit Midrash*. For men as well, I presume that the prospect of leaving the *Beit Midrash* (in a formal way, anyway) after several years of utilizing it as a spiritual home base can be quite daunting. But it should not be paralyzing. After all, religious expression outside the *Makom Kadosh* of the *Beit Midrash* may not feel like home, but it should not be completely foreign either. Rav Aharon Lichtenstein compares the concept of

standards for acceptable behavior need serious readjustment. In the discussion that I overheard, one of the students added a caveat of "I don't usually do this but...". Would the same social circle accept, "I don't usually spend Friday night at a club but...", or "I don't usually eat in *treif* restaurants but..."? The issue of *Hillul Hashem* if the cheating is discovered has no bearing on the fact that it is simply reprehensible behavior. Whether for an ordinary assignment, a final paper or an exam, the prospect of cheating should disgust the sensitivities of any *Oved Hashem*. If the experience of religious growth limits itself to the four walls of the *Beit Midrash* and the four *Amot* of ritualistic halakha, it cannot be called *Kedusha*. A true increase in *Kedusha* within a person will express itself in his or her moral standards and how s/he treats other people, *davka* outside the *Beit Midrash*.

Treating other people correctly begins with our own families and friends in areas like *rechilus*, but it does not end there. Achieving greater heights in our own *kedushat Adam* through the religious growth of these years must be accompanied by a realization of the potential for *kedushat Adam* in all Jews and



"spiritual specialization" to a major within a liberal arts education.<sup>2</sup> While a majority of young men and some young women "major" in *Limud Torah* during these formative years of religious development, that cannot be to the absolute exclusion of the other "core subjects" of *Avodah* and *Gemillut Hasadim*, which also provide valid and valuable options for "religious majors" if one so chooses. And it goes without saying that any number of hours spent learning cannot make up for violating basic standards of ethical conduct. At times, we all find ourselves in situations that involve interacting with someone other than *Hakhmei Hamesorah*. As undergraduates in Yeshiva University, we have a somewhat unique opportunity for a practicum in applying Torah beyond the *Beit Midrash* while still seriously engaged in its theoretical study. Overall, the student body is failing the practicum miserably. When "very *frum*" students have absolutely no reservations about publicly discussing their plans of copying an assignment from a friend in a different lab section, it indicates that our undergraduate community's

the *Tzelem Elokim* inherent in all people. Besides applying a sense of *Kedusha* to the areas of life inherently outside the *Beit Midrash*, we need to recognize our responsibility to, as it were, bring other people inside the world of the *Beit Midrash*. Torah cannot only be learned; it must be taught. Undergraduate students have innumerable opportunities to act as emissaries of Torah and Torah values to those outside the immediate undergraduate community. These include, but are not limited to, participating in TLN, NCSY and other *kiruv* projects, and the UJC General Assembly.

While the opportunities to exercise a proper sense of morality present themselves to us during the course of a normal day, the opportunities to offer the wisdom of Torah to others require a commitment of our most precious resource: our time. The basis for the *Mitzvah* of *Tzedakah* is a realization that every resource a person has is really only on loan from G-d; it is a tool he has been given in order to accomplish a certain task. Someone who has been blessed financially has concur-

# In Defense of "Flipping Out"

BY BINYAMIN EHRENKRANZ

Every *Elul*, a few thousand young men and women get used to a new way of life as they settle in to *yeshivot* and seminaries in Israel. By the end of the year, many of them will return home different people. Those close to them will be taken by surprise. There will exist among some a drive to view such changes derisively. "Oh, he totally flipped." Like any social pejorative, the very use of the term "flipping out" conjures up the most negative associations in reach, in this case, a detachment from relative normalcy. This might very well include taking forever to daven, sitting in a *beit midrash* for hours on end, and distance from cultural, even familial, interests and activities. Oh, and then there's the dour uniform, unpolished lexicon, and denial of another gender's existence. All of this might describe one who has, supposedly, flipped out. But does such a caricature really do justice to the experience just had?

This stereotype, not uncommon in our communities, is misguided and represents a gross misunderstanding of modern young adults' spiritual development. While there are a number of instances in which disappointment is based on a fundamental inability to understand the individual's development and on the other side, his or her failure to find acceptance, many others are not. Disdain for "flipping out" instead frequently stems from an absence of sensitivity to what the goals of Torah study are and sensibility in relating to those goals' achievement. Lately, it is hard to tell if either is improving.

Last month the leader of a major American Orthodox organization adopted terminology that labels the enlightened state in which some young men and women return from Israel a "syndrome." In a widely syndicated article, the leader, a rabbi in good standing with many in the Yeshiva University student body and staff, offered strategies to "combat" the Flipping Out Syndrome (FOS). "The more communication between educators and parents and between students and parents, the better the odds are for an easy and pleasant transition back home after the year," he wrote. He further suggested that parents set up weekly phone *chavrutot* and keep in touch with rabbis and teachers; *yeshivot* and seminaries should encourage students to relate feelings back home to keep the folks aware of any changes, maybe scheduling time for letter-writing; and schools should urge parents to take a week off to come to Israel and learn with their children during the year. Though surely well intended, the diagnosis and suggested remedies missed the mark.

Though there certainly are some cases of tension between returnees and their parents, the suggestion that this is predominantly the case is speculative and counterproductive. The primary accomplishment of this kind of

claim is to further discourage some parents from allowing their children to go to Israel altogether - effectively putting at greater risk their children's Jewish identity. Moreover, widespread FOS diagnosis is unfortunate in that it heaps straw onto the indefatigable scarecrow of the right-wing maniacs suffocating Modern Orthodoxy. Exaggerating the number of flip outs adds to the population of this imaginary crowd and strains the tensions between various streams of Orthodoxy.

Leaving aside students from totally unfiliated families and those coming from non-Jewish high schools, the matter of post-Israel conflicts has little to do with parents ill-prepared for their children's return or even a lack of communication between the two in the interim. There is no lack of communication between the average first-year student and his or her parents. In fact, increased contact would pose a new challenge, as time learning in Israel has already been hampered by the ubiquity and inexpensiveness of personal technology. Text-messaging, phone games, and sometimes daily calls to America fight for a share of the short days which should be



spent getting used to serious Torah learning. Also, while some parents who visit and spend a good chunk of time in the *yeshiva* or seminary are impressed and have a positive experience, oftentimes parents come in and three, four days, sometimes a week is lost to visiting or touring, while *shuir*, *chavrusas*, and night *seder* are left behind. The problem nowadays is not that parents are not aware of how their children are doing in Israel. They are over-connected.

## ATTITUDES & REACTIONS

In truth, much of the attitude toward those returning to America from *yeshiva* or seminary study is already determined by the approach taken to going in the first place. If one views the opportunity to take a year off to serve G-d and position themselves for greater commitment to Jewish observance with admiration or even envy, then any growth can hardly disappoint. But if time learning in Israel is seen as a luxury, a possibility to study intensively and uninterrupted, but with a proviso of

returning with similar life goals and interests identifying with modern American ideals, then the greater the change the higher the ensuing disappointment. University of Pennsylvania turning into Stern College, and Wall Street dreams giving way to nine-to-five accounting, for example, are prone to be less than satisfying.

Many parents, not having been privileged to even a day school education, are perform in the latter position. Reactions to their children definitely vary, but the onus of cordial relations with parents of this type is certainly not on the parents themselves. They often do not have the background to relate, much less appreciate, the change their children will undergo to begin with. The responsibility is on the returnees to be careful and smart about their ways, and the *yeshivas* and seminaries to not just advise this, but also implore their students to do so.

Parents with stronger backgrounds, however, should know better. That members of the Modern Orthodox community are willing to lend hands to wallop with scorn those retuning with new passion for Jewish learning and observance is not just sad, it is hypocritical. Perhaps the greatest weakness of some of the most fervent wavers of the Modern Orthodoxy flag whom I have encountered among American laypersons is a lack of real desire to toe the line personally in essential areas: dedicated, regular Torah learning and *mussar* study, concern for exactitude in following halacha, and carefulness in choices of entertainment containing halachically problematic content. It would make sense then, that when their children return heavily invested in these very areas, some cognitive dissonance may set it in.

The sentiment of such reactions can be presumed to have prompted a tom-foolish song devised a few years ago about the nature of many returnees from learning in Israel. Though the singers ridiculed an array of attitudes across the spectrum of these students, perhaps its most offensive lyrics were: "I just heard a half hour halacha *shuir*! And decided to change the way I've lived for 18 years." The implication is that one should not adjust their actions to meet the Torah's expectations. Is this the ideology of a G-d-fearing Jew?

## CULTURE SHOCK

To be sure, there are some who stand in disservice to the truly committed by opting to masquerade as such, hollow of any character refinement or supernal motives. Pretension can disguise itself in pious garb, and even lurk behind a *Gemara*, but imposters are usually easy to identify. Within a few short years, sometimes months, little is left of even the costume.

Meanwhile, the lion's share of those returning after serious learning suffers deep

rently been charged with the task of *Tzedakah*; few of us would respect a millionaire who stingily hoards every penny he makes with no regard for social welfare. Time is no different. We have been granted the gift of living in the era of extended adolescence. While we have this time of limited responsibilities, we cannot hoard it all exclusively for our own religious development. It astounds me to hear that some students believe that the Center for the Jewish Future should not run certain training programs because they conflict with Night *Seder*. Do not participate if you so choose, but do not invalidate the desire of others to invest some time in caring for the development of others. In fact, respect it. And take care that you, too, find a way to ensure that your personal religious development can earn the *Shem* of *Kedusha* by impacting those who have not had the opportunities that you have had.

*Shlomo Hamelekh* built the *Beit Hamikdash* with windows that were *Shkufim Atumim*.<sup>3</sup> The *Gemara* in *Menachot*<sup>4</sup> explains that these windows were cut on an angle such that they were narrow on the inside and wider on the outside to show that "Lo L'Orah Ani Tzaruch": G-d does not need light. If G-d does not need light, though, why were there windows at all? Perhaps *Rashi's* comment on the *Gemara* there answers this question. He comments that this design, in fact, ensured that the maximum amount of the inner light of the *Mikdash* would shine outwards. We do not have the *Beit Hamikdash*, but we can take a lesson from *Shlomo Hamelekh*, the wisest of all men, in relation to the years of early adulthood that we have been *Mekadesh* for religious growth. We must create *Halonei Shkufim Atumim* so that the increased light within can shine outwards. Religious growth cannot take place in a vacuum of time, nor of space, nor of personality. A beginning physics student practices equations with situations that occur in a vacuum, because a vacuum does not have certain factors that can interrupt one's careful calculations: it's easier that way. But the answers obtained from those calculations also cannot be transferred to real life. Real religious growth cannot take place in a vacuum.

*Chava Chaitovsky is a Senior at Stern College for Women. She is majoring in Judaic Studies and Psychology.*

<sup>1</sup> Shemot 19:6

<sup>2</sup> Ziegler, Rabbi Reuven, adapted from addresses by Rav Aharon Lichtenstein. "Determining Objectives in Religious Growth: Spiritual Specialization or Spiritual Breadth?" By His Light. Ktav: Jersey City, 2003. 75-100.

<sup>3</sup> Melachim 1:4-6

<sup>4</sup> Menachot 86b

# A Halakhic Jew

BY SHIMSHON AYZENBERG

culture shock. Aside from the sudden dearth of freely available kosher food and traffic running at full throttle Shabbat morning, the given Jewish and greater local communities now differ from the student's newfound social religious values. Even secular Israeli Jews are more spiritually curious than ordinary Americans, it may seem, and the Orthodox community now is somehow much less sophisticated than it was a year ago. Newfound adherence to a Jewish lifestyle as defined by halacha – at the heart of so-called Flipping Out Syndrome – becomes complicated, as those returning from being immersed in an environment highly sensitive to religious practice are challenged by one that can seem by and large apathetic. The respect that those around returnees have for halacha sets the tone of interaction with them. Again, those with less background or sensitivity are at the most extreme disadvantage.

*Yeshivot* and seminaries have probably neglected addressing this reality in proper fashion. Indeed, the answer to back-home fights over beach vacations, or even the state of the family kitchen, is less likely to be found in weekly phone *chavrutot* or expensive visits to check in, than in mindful approaches in teaching and learning. Specifically, what's in order is greater sensitization of students to the realities they will confront upon their return. Teachers and heads of *yeshivot* and *midrashot* need to adopt a greater ken for those who might be challenged by less inspired lifestyles and communities. And, yes, parents should be involved. The idea of phone *chavrutot* is still a good one in many cases, in that it may show parents in "real-time" their children's developing interest and growth in learning and expose them to Torah study they might not otherwise be involved in. Visiting can also be valuable inasmuch as it does not cause significant interruption to learning.

But all of this is still not enough. Synagogues and other rabbinic leadership within the Modern Orthodox community need to build serious commitment to Modern Orthodoxy in its genuine form, meaning intense involvement in learning and careful observance of halacha. The place to start might be expending less energy on the need to engage the broader world and more on reinforcing concrete spiritual commitments. Then there would be greater understanding of what goes on during the year in Israel, and how beautiful it is.

*Binyamin Ehrenkranz, YC '09*

Yeshiva University is an intellectual battlefield. Everyone hears the beating drums. Some endure the battle. Many are meek and hide in indifference. Others quit in self-defeat.

After a year studying in Israel, I came back to United States full of infantile convictions and creedal certainties. However, as I matured and met people who are not hampered by ancient laws, rites, and ideas, I began to ask the fateful question, why do such things hamper me? I will briefly explain why I decided to be an orthodox Jew.

## The Lonely

What created my predicament of doubt was the emergence of choice between a religious and a secular life. This choice comes only to the truly "lonely" among us. Every serious religious person is profoundly lonely. As a result of his unique experiences in life, this loneliness cannot be apprehended by others. The lonely person, therefore, has a hard time joining and participating in a "*Hashkafic* community." This is because a *Hashkafic* community is demarcated by outer conformity so that no one should ever be internally lonely. Uniformity in clothing and vernacular are made to represent, for individual Jews, an affirmation of their participation in a larger collective. Individuals amalgamate into masses that are characterized by sameness, insipidness, and solipsism. The *Hashkafic* community's uniform system of belief narrowly restricts freedom of thought. Belief in G-d, the special teachings, and the grand teacher must be publicly reaffirmed to relatives, friends, and strangers almost daily.

When I was repelled by these tendencies and encountered loneliness for the first time, a daunting question popped into my head: if Orthodox Judaism is so insipid and solipsistic, why do I bother being a Jew? This is when a real and gnawing choice crept in. Standing remorselessly at a forked road of two equal paths, *Yiddishkeit* or *Friekiet*, before me was the kind of choice when one has absolutely nothing to lose. Many Jews who were born orthodox and brought up religiously, especially those from a *Hashkafic* community, would feel guilt for turning their backs on the heritage of their parents. I would feel none. My grandfather was a Jew by birth and a Stalinist to his grave; my father, a Jew by birth and a Christian by faith. Divorced from my own heritage by two generations, I, as a so-called *Ba'al Teshuva*, would feel no guilt turning back the clock, or perhaps, moving it exponentially forward (depending on one's frame of reference).

## The Choice

What did Frederick Nietzsche mean when he made "the madman" declare arrogantly but mournfully, "God is dead"? It seems that before the modern era people had no choice whether they wanted to be dominated by religion. Everyone has that choice now. A dynamic, potent, and fully accepting secular culture wiggles its tail tauntingly in the face of all religions. What exemplifies the Western experience is a powerfully clear and omnipresent



freedom of choice, not only in the realm of politics, but in all areas of our public and individual lives. Indeed, some of us who end up lonely, who are confronted by choice and feel virtually no guilt, feel a powerful desire to leave the fold of Torah and *Mitzvoth* and join the outer secular culture forthwith.

The empty promise of this choice, however, should not delude the thinking person. Secular culture, and society as a whole, is a melting pot plagued by an identity crisis. Due to the radical departure in modern times from the Judeo-Christian framework, the biggest philosophical question today is whether that framework is still valid.

Until the 20th century, the Judeo-Christian culture provided Western Man a cultural identity based on an affiliation with one's religious persuasion. Christianity was, of course, considered superior to Judaism. Nevertheless, all Europeans felt that their shared Western culture, influenced by a system of values from the Bible, was superior to other values, cultures, and identities.

Then the bloodiest wars in history occurred in the very bosom of the Western world. Moreover, as the world suddenly shrunk because of globalization, whether real or perceived, Western Man came in closer contact with Eastern cultures. This automatically rendered the traditional Eurocentric Judeo-Christian worldview anachronistic. It appeared that no longer was the Westerner the

only civilized man. As a result, the steep decline of religion and the preponderance of secularism squelched the remainder of the old and religiously oriented value-based Western identity. Concurrently, many progressive Jews who attempted to base their identity on a Western model, most notably with the ideas of Zionism, undercut the meaning of Jewish identity itself.

More specifically, as American culture constantly stews itself into a melting pot, it prods Jews to assimilate, begging more to succumb to their assimilatory cravings. So as individual Jews face an existential threat, it is a prerogative, more than ever before, to truly understand who we are as Orthodox Jews.

## The Hashkafic Jew

Who is an Orthodox Jew in America today? All orthodox Jews, whether they like it or not, or admit it or not, were drastically influenced by the unprecedented social changes of the 19th century and the implosion of the Western identity in the 20th century. As a result, two kinds of Orthodox Jews emerged, (a) the "*Hashkafic* Jew" and (b) the "Halakhic Jew." They differ in what defines them as Jews.

The paramount feature of the *Hashkafic* Jew is his elitism. This elitism is the underlying bulwark guarding against any foreign influence from the secular world. More importantly, this elitism causes each *Hashkafic* community to reject other communities. *Hashkafic* elitism is rooted in old Judeo-Christian values that denigrated, abhorred, and often dehumanized the peoples of other cultures in order to guard against the stark realization that humanity is kaleidoscopic and deeply complex. Because of humankind's age-old inclination for elitist tendencies, cultural pluralism has never truly been achieved in the broader sense. The West, by boastfully viewing itself as the "only true civilization," particularly undermined cultural pluralism. From Europe's exploration of other lands and its colonization of other peoples to the advances in the art and technology of warfare in the modern age, as a sense of morality lagged far behind, the ubiquitous elitism among nations engendered perpetual conflict, culminating in two very bloody world wars. Jewish communities, in turn, living in such an environment incorporated this elitism and developed *Hashkafic* outlooks that to this day, as if frozen in time, continuously undermine unity within *Am Yisroel*, and amity between Jews and non-Jews.

Just as there are individuals in the West today who object to the old Judeo-Christian elitist tendencies, there is also a lonely Orthodox Jew who is willfully outside of the *Hashkafic* community because he does not



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wish to alienate himself from any person, whether Jew or a non-Jew. Inundated by doubt, he is presented with a raw choice. He may discover a Jewish identity for himself that is not based on a *Hashkafa*, and remain part of the Jewish people, or he may not, finding religious identity superfluous and out-moded as so many secular people see it, and leave the fold entirely.

When I was presented with this choice, I wondered why some Jews like me choose to become Orthodox? It cannot be that they are attracted to the elitism of their surrogate *Hashkafic* communities; I was not an elitist until I joined a community and was thought of by my mentors as their success story. Jews become Orthodox, rather, because of practical and utilitarian reasons - because it is convenient for them. They run away from their prior realities and seek a support system where they can live with fewer worries. This system is a *Hashkafic* community, which, like any organized religion, provides its vouchsafed member with acceptance, education, marriage, and a slew of like-minded friends. As such, some of the strongest advocates of a particular *Hashkafa* are *Ba'alei Teshuva*.

I became orthodox because my parents fought and a rabbi took me into his home, cared for me, and provided a safe heaven from

my dysfunctional home. As I grew older, Orthodox Judaism proved to be bittersweet. It was an act and a way to get away from my home. As a teenager searching for an identity distinct of my parents, I dropped the act and forgot about the rabbi. I hung around friends who organized trance parties on Friday nights, visited "the village" often, smoked weed on the weekends, and on the side experimented with a few hard drugs. However, before long, I was unable to persist in such conditions and once again joined a *Hashkafic* community. This time I grew a beard, and enrolled into one of the main *Yeshivot* in Israel for *Ba'alei Teshuva*. I felt perfectly comfortable as a Jew. That is, until I came to YU.

#### The Halakhic Jew

I used to hate YU. But now I see it as a beacon of hope, an island in a vast ocean of confusion upon which stands a modern-day Temple of Delphi. At ancient Delphi there was a plaque inscribed with two words: "Know Thyself." This phrase is a great Socratic battle cry. The battle is within us. Socrates was a heretic in a society that rejected re-assessment, introspection, endless questioning, endless rediscovery, and self-knowledge. Similarly, YU's openness toward self-knowl-

edge is heresy in the mind of a *Hashkafic* Jew.

After three years in YU I understood that while I became Orthodox to escape from what I thought was a dangerous world, Judaism is not an "opiate of the masses," but hard work, an endless battle. No one achieves tranquility of soul. I was disillusioned by this realization. If life is already not easy, why should I make my life even harder by being Jewish?

Oddly, even with feelings utterly devoid of *kavanah*, I continued to keep Halakha. I davened thrice daily, ate only strictly kosher food, and kept Shabbos. I had no emotional connection to Judaism, but I refused to sever my connection to the Jewish people. Rabbi Norman Lamm in his essay "Faith and Doubt" talks about "cognitive faith," one's faith in the Almighty, and "functional faith," one's faithfulness to Halakha. I believe that the difference between the two faiths is relevant to our Jewish identity today. One may experience doubts in his beliefs in *Yiddishkeit* and struggle with its demands. In fact, it is quite natural to do so. As long as he does not relinquish his "functional faith," he is unequivocally part of the Jewish people. A Jew who is not defined by *Hashkafa*, his cognitive faith, but by Halakhah, his functional faith, is a Halakhic Jew.

#### The Love

In the end, Jewish identity rests on love. As the *Tzemach Tzedek* writes in *Derech Mitzvosea* on *Ahavas Yisroel*, when one loves the Jewish people he also loves G-d. Rabbi Avraham *HaKohen* Kook taught that if one does not also love humanity he cannot properly love the Jewish people (*Midot HaRiyah, Ahavah*, 10). Love is characterized by what one is willing to do for another. The Rambam (*Hilchos Teshuva*, 10:3), along with many medieval commentators, states that just as a man should love a woman so should he love G-d, with personal sacrifice. Similarly, love of the Jewish people denotes sacrifice for the Jewish people. Love is to transcend one's being, one's ego. In America's ego-driven culture, where college students selfishly think mostly about getting ahead or swimming in the enticing pleasures of life, one must at certain times, when repelled by the *Hashkafic* community and confronted by choice, think less of himself and more of the Jewish people.

*Shimshon Ayzenberg is a senior in YC, majoring in Jewish History*

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# The Main Thing is to Think

*An interview with HaRav Aharon Bina*

By DAVID LASHER

*What should outwardly observant students who are having problems with emunah do?*

Rabbi Soloveitchik used to say that everyone is allowed to be unsure about God. We all have times when things about God are unclear to us.

There are no answers to this [questions in *emunah*] in a *sefer*. I do not believe when people say, "I'll prove to you that God exists." The minute you prove God exists, there's no more Judaism. What does *emunah* mean? If I see that there is a table in front of me, it is not *emunah*. I see the table. *Emunah* is something which you cannot prove. There's no pictures. There's no DVD. I like to believe that every Jew is born with something inside them, but it has to be developed. If you go to the right yeshiva, or you go to the right rebbe, it can help.

When one is a child, everything is "brainwash." Therefore, if one has, what I would call, "good intellectual brainwash" as a child then that person can build on that solid foundation. However, if one did not have good intellectual brainwash then that person needs *Rabbonim* with whom to talk.

The stronger question is what caused problems in this person's *emunah*? Did the student at one time have strong *emunah* and for some reason lost it, or did the person never really have *emunah* at all?

*What role should blind faith play in one's religious development?*

I will tell you like this: I have a lot of questions, a lot of questions. During my ten years at Ponovez, the *Mashgiach* used to talk twice a week about *emunah*. I used to get fed up with this. Today I thank him because I have so many questions about Jews and so many questions about Judaism. There is a famous line in Yiddish, "from a question we don't die." I have questions, but that doesn't destroy my *emunah*.

The biggest question for our generation is the Holocaust. There is no answer. The second biggest question is if we have a Jewish State after the Holocaust, how much more do we have to suffer? Why did we have to go through two Intifadas? Why did we have to suffer from Hizbollah and their garbage? Our people are being killed! I don't have an answer, the question is stronger. But for some stupid reason, I love God and I believe in God.

And I will tell you the famous story about Nachmanides. One of his *talmidim* died very young. Nachmanides got upset before he died. He said to him [Nachmanides to his student], "listen, you're going to go through seven levels until you see the main boss, God,

upstairs. When you get to God, tell Him you're my *Talmid*, and tell Him I want to know why God took you so young, you're one of my favorite students! After, come and tell me why in a dream. He came back to the *Ramban*, and said to him, "Rebbe, when you get upstairs there are no more questions." There are many things in life in which the question is stronger than the answer, *darkei Hashem*- God works in mysterious ways.

You see this through the wars, God always takes the best guys. Whether religious, not religious, if you look into their personalities you see that God takes the best guys.

I used to have a driving teacher. He was killed in the first Lebanon War, about twenty five years ago. His name was Rami. He was not a religious guy. I don't think he knew anything about religion, but he had the most



pure, beautiful soul. God took him. Why? I don't have an answer. But as I say all the time to the boys, "as much as you try to throw away God, God is still there, God is still there."

*What should guys do after yeshiva to continue in the right direction. What is the biggest challenge they are facing once they leave?*

People ask me, "what are you doing in yeshiva with the guys?" I can't explain. I know many things that we do, but what "changes them in a positive way," I can't explain. But I believe that to be across from the Holy of Holies, to watch *HaRav Nebenzahl* every day, and to be in yeshiva, you get a big culture shock, like chemotherapy for a few months. Eventually the *talmid* wakes up and says, "what am I?" "Who I am?" Like I said, everybody has the changing point, and then people start to think, and then they start to learn, and then they come back second year.

The biggest *yisurim* is everything- whether the internet, girls, everything. How do you stay very strong? You have to pray for this. You have to be connected to the Rebbeim that

you learned from in Israel. You have to try to push yourself to be very close to your Rebbe in YU. Even if the Rebbe is not close to you, push yourself on him! Be a nudge! For a good job you nudge, so nudge the Rebbe. Also, you have the assistant *Mashgichim*, become connected to them. I met one of them, Rabbi Blass, he impressed me.

And second I will say, for some reason, boys in YU love to say "I'm not happy." I think it's a fashion. If you ask a girl, "why did you pick this dress?" She doesn't know. It is the fashion! I don't understand. There's no better place than YU.

YU is a great place. Every place has its faults. Not every husband is perfect. Not every wife is perfect. Yet there are still many people together! You try to live with the faults. There are many great things about YU. There's no center like it with so many boys sitting and learning. There's no yeshiva in America with such great Rebbeim, huge *Talmidei Chachamim!* And the pre-med is great. They say that everybody gets accepted to very good medical schools, Einstein and others. What's the problem? Perfect? Nobody's perfect! The only perfect guy is the almighty. And also very important, to stick with and be stuck to very good friends.

Also, it is very important to be connected with your *Rabbonim* in *Eretz Yisrael*. Whenever you have an opportunity, instead of going to Florida for a vacation, come to Israel. I see through the years, the people who keep in contact with the yeshiva, spiritually, the yeshiva keeps in contact with them. And the same goes for the *Rabbonim*.

For example, next week, a boy who learned in yeshiva about 20 years ago, then went to YU, and after became a lawyer, will be coming to Yeshiva. Every year before *Rosh Hashana* he comes here for a week. One year his wife was pregnant. That year he asked me if he could come. I said "only if your wife gives you permission." She did, so for a week he came to learn. Last year he came together with his son. The most important thing is to be connected. Everybody is connected with his bank. This is the spiritual bank – the yeshiva in *Eretz Yisrael*.

*In terms of one's ability to grow spiritually, how important is it to live in Eretz Yisrael?*

You can grow in America also. It is much easier in *Eretz Yisrael* and much harder in *Eretz Yisrael!* Since in *Eretz Yisrael* it's more holy, there is more *Yetzer Hara*. So wherever you go, it's hard.

Also, you don't divorce a wife for Aliyah and you don't pick a girl that's not so good because you want to make Aliyah. You take the best girl for you. She doesn't want to come to Israel, don't come to Israel. A good wife is more important than *Eretz Yisrael*.

*What about the the Gemara that says you can divorce your wife to come to Eretz Yisrael?*

Not in our time anymore. This halakha is not for our time. I have a relative who went to Rav Shach and asked him if he could divorce his wife because she didn't want to cover her hair. Rav Shach said to him, "no way!" You don't do these kinds of things anymore. Even though the *Gemara* in *Kesubos*, *Perek Shvi'i* says you can, no more.

*When guys have Ta'avahs in Chutz La'aretz, what should they do?*

If they have *Ta'avos*, get married young. We live in a crazy world. *Barukh Hashem* everyone has healthy *Ta'avos*. If somebody doesn't have *Ta'avos* then there's something wrong with him.

*Are there reasons to push off marriage? Can one push off marriage to develop in learning?*

It's very true, it's easier to develop learning without a wife. But the world is so crazy you have to get married young. I don't go to this kind of extreme, but Rav Nebenzahl married all his children at eighteen. I went to him and asked, "Rav Nebenzahl, you think your children know about marriage?" He said to me, "Rav Bina, maybe they are not ready for marriage, but they are not ready for this crazy world." I'm not saying to marry as young as eighteen, but twenty two or twenty one...

*In Chutz La'Aretz how should guys and girls interact? Can they hang out? How should they meet each other?*

I'm not a social adviser. People don't need my advice, for this, they are much smarter.

*How important is dress to a religious personality?*

Dressing in black and white? Not important! As long as you go to *daven* with long pants, I don't care. You can wear jeans, not jeans, blue, red, whatever your taste, your girlfriend's taste, or your wife's taste. The only thing is, for an American, there is no heter to go to *davening* with shorts. This is the only thing that really counts. The rest is all stupidity.

*When people are thinking about jobs, how should they be thinking about balancing their personal and family needs against Tzarchei Tzibbur?*

You have a halakha of *Ma'aser Kesafim*, you have to give ten percent to the *Kelal*. My

personal philosophy is that the more you help other people, the more God will help you. This is my experience. I am sixty years old soon. This is what I've seen. When you take care of other the people, God takes care of you.

*What about people who are thinking about going into Chinuch versus going into law or business?*

*Chinuch* on one side is not a Jewish job. There's no money there. You don't live for money, but money makes your life much easier. In *Chinuch* they pay *bubkus*, so it's very hard to make a living. For *Chinuch*, you have to need it like drugs. You must be crazy about it. If you are crazy about something, you don't care if you have money, or not. I also believe you cannot study *Chinuch* in university. You can develop in university, but *Chinuch* must be in your blood. Like a businessman, you must be born with it. Sometimes you have a kid in class in elementary school, and you can see then that he will be a great businessman, it is the same with *Chinuch*.

*What's the relationship between friendship and religious growth? What happens if your responsibilities to your friends come into conflict with your religious growth?*

I'm going to answer like this: I try to push our guys to work in *Kiruv* because when you work in *Kiruv*, you do *Kiruv* to yourself also. But regular friends in college or at home that are not good guys, keep away. My father once said a good line to me, "Aharon you can think about me whatever you want to think, but if you look at my friends each one of them is, what you call in Hebrew, *Eser*— the best. When you want judge a person, look at his friends.

*How much time should people devote to activities other than learning like Chesed, Kiruv, and Chinuch?*

Each guy is an individual. One of the alumni just called me from England. He's doing a lot of work in *Kiruv*, but he hasn't paid attention to university. I said to him, "for the next 2 years don't do any *Kiruv*. Just do *Kiruv* to yourself." But if you are capable, try on the weekends- if not every weekend, then every second weekend, or even once a month. Every person has to judge for himself how much he is capable of, how much he can do. It's not easy, especially in YU.

*How should we study Mussar? From Sefarim? From speeches? From watching our Rebbeim? Or is there some other way? What is the best way to develop in these areas?*

Everything together. But, the main thing is to be honest with yourself. The main thing is to learn *Pirkei Avos*, to believe in this, and to

be honest with yourself every day. Like we say to the boys in yeshiva, "be honest with yourselves." Look in the mirror and get to know yourself. Don't cheat! If you have pimples, or if you have red eyes, or black eyes – don't tell everybody "I have blue eyes" – be honest! If you are bald, don't trim your hair. If you are blond, don't turn your hair brown. Even though it's very hard to be honest with yourself, be honest with yourself!

*After the guys leave yeshiva, what do you hope stays with them?*

First, my philosophy is to wait 5 years. I saw guys that left yeshiva very strong, but after 5 years they are complete *Shekatzim*. And I saw guys that left yeshiva not so good, and through YU, or wherever they went, they did very well. They came back. Rav Nachman mi-Breslov writes in many of his *sephorim*, "a Jew you don't give up on." You never know, sometimes the girl can save him, sometimes his friends can save him...

If you ask me, what are our goals as to what the guys should get from the year? Before everything is *Bein Adam la-Chavero*. This is before everything. Go to *Minyan*, learn every day, be part of the community, and give to the community. This is easy? No! This is, according to some, the reason the Mishna said, against your will you were born, and against your will you live, and against your will you die. You need a lot of *Siy'ata Di'Shmaya*.

I think if you go to a place like YU, try to squeeze it. It is a good orange. Every orange has some bad taste also. In *Netiv Aryeh* there are bad things. In YU there are bad things. Every place has bad, but try to see the good—the good part of the orange. I feel that over the last few years, especially working with Vice President Davis, YU has improved a lot for the guys. Dr. Davis is great! He really wants the best for the boys. I don't agree with him about everything, but I see that he means well. He really believes that his job is to serve the guys.

*What is the main point of guys' time in Eretz Yisrael?*

The main thing in *Eretz Yisrael* when you come is not just learning, you can learn in America. The main thing in coming to Israel is to get to know yourself, be yourself. But don't cheat! Get to know yourself. When you know yourself, you know your pluses, you know your minuses, and you know how to try and make your pluses more than your minuses. If you just learn learn learn learn learn then to go to YU, in the meantime you will fall down. It's not just that in Israel you don't fall down, but you do thinking. The main thing is to think.

*Rav Aharon Bina is the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Netiv Aryeh.*

# Growing Pains

BY AYOL SAMUELS

We are inquisitive beings. Not only are we members of the human race, whose sheer consciousness creates a critical frame of mind, but we are also Orthodox Jews, whose sacred text, the Talmud, is replete with questions. Finally, we are students in a college, a place that encourages questions and critical thinking in a range of disciplines. To be sure, many of the questions we ask have great utility. It is through these questions, and the conflict they produce, that progress and development occur. Let us look at a couple of examples.

This idea of advancement via challenging questions is part and parcel of the scientific method, whether used in biology, history, psychology, or any other area. Very simply, hypotheses are posited, facts are gathered to support the hypotheses, and a theory is proposed that provides an overarching explanation. Most of the time, contradictory facts are later encountered that raise serious problems with the theory and require it to be tweaked. Sometimes, enough contradictory evidence is compiled to make necessary a scientific revolution. Finally, a new theory is created that gives us a better, more all-encompassing understanding of the world. It is the questions that produce progress, reevaluation always proving necessary in order to move forward.

This type of learning and developing by challenging preconceived notions is done subconsciously throughout childhood. According to Jean Piaget, one of the most influential developmental psychologists, children create abstractions about the world based on the limited experiences they have. They use these abstractions to understand new events and act in situations that they have never encountered. Just like the scientific method, as these children encounter more and more situations, many questions are raised about their current "theory." These ideas about the world must be continuously sharpened until enough divergences are present to necessitate a "revolution." The child creates a new way of looking at the world based on all the newly acquired

information, entering a new stage of development and having a much better understanding of the world.

It seems that this powerful tool of questioning and reevaluating previous assumptions could be a huge asset when trying to grow religiously and spiritually, which is presumably a main goal for many of us as Orthodox Jews. If the previous two examples are any indication, then addressing conflicts between our experiences and reasoning, on the one hand, and our religious beliefs, actions and feelings, on the other, has the capacity to bring us to a completely new level of understanding of and relationship with God.

Of course, I am working with the belief that, in addition to tradition, our senses and reason are ways of arriving closer to the truth (all equal leaps of faith), and, while our experiences and reason might be slightly less relevant in terms of halakha, they have much to add in terms of religious thought, theology, and axiology. Therefore, our beliefs, whether based on tradition or not, are subject to the scrutiny of our senses and reason. It is when we are able to synthesize and mesh these two that we can get ever closer to the truth and to a more intricate relationship with the Almighty. After all, how can you passionately love, fear, or worship One whom you do not know well? So, to better understand our relationship with God and better perform our part, we must ask questions based on our senses and experiences. These questions, which Rabbi Norman Lamm calls "methodological doubt," are not a necessary evil but a springboard from which to grow.

To give a concrete and familiar demonstration, let us say that we were told in kindergarten that anything God does is good and that He is also in control of everything that happens. Eventually, one comes to the realization that there is, in fact, evil in the world and that there are even some commandments, by God himself, that do not seem "good." Only by grappling with the realization that what we took in kindergarten at face value is not so, can we establish a deeper and more complex relationship with God. Likewise, one might have originally thought that his practice of Judaism was completely of his own volition and later realize that most people affiliate with the culture and religion that they are born into. To understand his mode of service to God, a reevaluation of his original notion of freewill might be necessary. Just as maturing people create more complex relationships with each other and with the surrounding world by changing previous assumptions and asking new questions, so should they mature in their relationship with God and their service to Him.

Obviously, there are serious dangers inher-



# Yeshiva University: A Sanctuary For Religious Growth?

BY NOAH CHESES

ent in reevaluation and questioning that, rather than foster religious growth, can destroy or stifle it. First, to sincerely ask some of the serious questions facing today's religious man, one must be willing to accept an answer that will lead him down a different path. Hence, one may abandon his faith as a result. More often, though, one might discover that he cannot find satisfactory answers to his questions but will still desire to continue on the path of *torah u'mitzvot*. And, while Rabbi Lamm, in his especially enlightening piece, "Faith and Doubt," builds off William James and says that it is perfectly legitimate to keep doubt in the cognitive realm while leaving the "functional faith," the realm of performance, unscathed, it is hard to believe that one's commitment and fervor will remain the same. It is for this reason that Rav Nachman Bratzlaver, in his story, "the Wise Man and the Simpleton," poignantly commends the simpleton for his *emuna temima*, his simple faith, while rebuking the wise man for spending so much time "searching" and neglecting his relationship with God.

Although this is a very serious concern, I imagine that God understands man's desire to know Him and that He would sympathize with and even expect the possible pitfalls on this quest. If the prevalent paradigm of man and wife can truly be used to understand our relationship with God, then wouldn't a couple desire the deepest and most developed relationship possible? Wouldn't a spouse be willing to risk the setbacks to hopefully ultimately attain much greater closeness? So too in the relationship between man and God; when there are no questions asked and no reevaluation permitted, there is little room for religious growth. If one thinks, however, that the relationship with God is and should be a simple one, then it is a relationship that has no paradigm in human relationships and we are a lot further from the Almighty than we thought.

While the questions one asks in his relationship with God and with Judaism are very personal and the main onus in addressing them lies on the individual, there should still be some sort of public forum for them. As religious believers and thinkers, a solid basis and foundation is required, and one of the very important ways to achieve this is by addressing difficult questions. I am not sure whether the best place for this is in a *chaburah*, in *shiurim*, or elsewhere but I ask our new Dean of RIETS, Rabbi Yona Reiss, that the rich system of belief, Jewish philosophy, and the relationship with God somehow be addressed in our amazing Yeshiva education.

*Ayol Samuels is a staff writer for Kol Hamevaser*

The Yeshiva years are a time for personal growth and development, introspection and self-definition. The unique intensity of Yeshiva University's multifaceted experience can and should provide an ideal environment for this broadening and deepening of a *ben* or *bat Torah's* religious growth. Especially after a year or two of devoted growth in a Yeshiva in Israel, the YU undergraduate experience should not be viewed as hindrance to continued growth, but instead as a springboard.

While we all know that the path of religious development in YU is winding, filled with trials, sacrifices, and sometimes even risks, I believe that the tension filled lifestyle generates a special energy that directly propels spiritual growth. The long, demanding, and overly busy days, for example, force every serious *ben* or *bat Torah* to create a sturdy yet versatile hierarchy of life priorities that informs the choices necessitated by the constant balancing act in YU. This daily process, when greeted with integrity and cautiousness, nurtures and perpetuates the formation of a more nuanced and sophisticated religious self-awareness.

While the conditions for such growth are obviously specific to the individual, in this short piece I offer some practical strategies and tactics that have served me well in trying to tackle some of the tests and trials of my YU undergraduate life.

## 1. "Aseh Lecha Rav:" Guidance From Those Who Have Made It Through The Maze

In *Messilat Yesharim*, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato, presents a metaphor for life that accentuates the need for finding ourselves role models and Rabbeim and to "shepherd us:"

"Our world can be compared to a garden in the shape of a maze. In this garden the hedges are arranged like walls and among them are numerous paths, confusing and interconnected, one the same as the next. The goal of the



person walking through the maze is to reach the gazebo at the center of the garden. Of these paths, some lead directly to the gazebo and some deceptively lead a person further from the gazebo.

One who walks along these paths is not capable of seeing or knowing at all if he is taking the right route or a mistaken one since they all look the same to the observer. Only the individual who stands at the gazebo knows the most direct route. The one who stands at the gazebo sees all the paths before him and discerns the correct ones from the false ones, and is capable of forewarning those who are walking through them: "this is the route. Take it!" Any person willing to trust in this individual will reach the desired destination; one who is not willing to do this and who follows his own eyes instead, will surely remain lost and fail to reach it."<sup>1</sup>

Attending YU and taking both sides of the institution seriously can be described as nothing less than a maze. Often we find ourselves confused and a little lost, not knowing which path to take in order to reach our desired destination. Guidance from those who have made it through to end of the maze, whether it is an older person that we identify with and look up to or our Shiur Rebbe, is of utmost necessity. While we must never surrender the independence and free choice that gives us our dignity as human beings, we would all benefit from the sagacious advice of a Torah personality that understands us and cares about our spiritual well being. It would serve us well to take fuller advantage of the reservoirs of life experience and Torah wisdom that are availed to us through the many and diverse personalities around YU.

## 2. "U'Kanah Lecha Chaver:" Creating A Community Of Friends With Shared Values

The centrality of a strong *Chevre* can not be underemphasized. Rabbenu Yonah, in his commentary on *Pirkei Avot* (1:6), stresses that as *bonei* or *bnotei Torah* we must surround ourselves with a tight-knit group of friends that share our commitment to living a Torah lifestyle. We must create the atmosphere crucial to proper religious and emotional development by forming a cohesive community of seekers (*mevakshim*) that pray, learn, socialize, and question together.

By creating a circle of good people with similar values and that care about our state of religiosity, we establish a spiritual support system. There will always be someone to hold us to our own standards, to provide a spiritual lift when it is most needed, to share our spiritual high points, and most importantly, to mitigate our feeling of loneliness and helplessness in a time of intense religious struggle.

## 3. "Taphasta Merubeh Lo Taphasta:" Less Is More

There has developed an unfortunate sentiment at YU in which many of the talmidim are compelled to finish and get out of YU from the moment they walk in. This feeling of urgency has created impossible workloads, severe pressure and anxiety, and worst of all it has precluded the possibility of reaping the benefits of religious growth in YU.

One of my *Rabbeim* in *Shaalvim* explained this increasing problem through the following parable:

There was once a young man who was determined to drive across America, from NY to LA, in less than three weeks. Before the trip he planned carefully, making sure that he had the best set of directions. Along the way the pressure of time weighed heavily so he began to drive with increasing speed; soon enough he became obsessed with trying to pass as many cars as possible. After three weeks of driving he found himself crossing the boarder of Canada. He realized that he had become fixated upon the wrong values and goals to the extent that he neglected to refer back to his own set of directions. He had planned on being on the other side of the continent, but he was somewhere else; he was lost.

My Rebbe compared the tendency to rush things in YU to the driver who was pressured into pressing on the gas harder and harder without even realizing where he was headed. The most effective strategy to overcome this palpable pressure in YU is to take things slowly. This means, for instance, taking fewer credits a semester in order to allow for ample time to do *Chazarah* on *Iyun shiur*. This means choosing extra curricular activities carefully and sparingly in order to ensure the permanence of a night seder. In a sentence, if we are to maintain religious growth in YU we must slow down the pace in order to take the necessary time to check our directions so that we know at all times where we are, where we are headed, and how to get there.

## 4. *Cheshbon HaNefesh: Self-Reflection As The Groundwork For Growth.*

Performing a *Cheshbon HaNefesh*, a directed introspection about religious progress, is an essential ingredient to the recipe of growth in YU. Whether this means taking ten minutes at the beginning of every semester to write out our goals for growth, discussing certain ambitions for self-development with a best friend, or keeping a daily or weekly journal, we must capitalize on the power of *Cheshbon HaNefesh*. Such a simple act can make such a big difference; it forces us to live life more efficiently. Reflecting concretely upon our strengths and weaknesses,

# Conformity *Lishma*

BY MATTAN ERDER

upon our deepest yearnings, hopes, and dreams helps move our ideas and feelings from thought to deed. It allows us to track our journeys of religious growth and create stronger memories of our rises and falls; we are better prepared to gain confidence from our successes and in a better position to learn from our mistakes and to try again.

5. “*Havi Dan et Kol Adam L’Kaf Zechut:” Developing An Attitude of Optimism*

Pessimism, cynicism, and negativity may be the greatest threat to religious growth in YU. In order to create a paradigm shift from these sentiments, we need to begin with ourselves and then work outwards. We need to rid ourselves of the unnecessary sarcasm and hostile complaining that hovers over our campus. If we fill our fertile minds with toxic waste, with negative attitudes, then we will wreak havoc in our inner worlds by stunting our efforts at sincere religious growth.

To combat this pervasive force of anti-growth, we must adopt a positive outlook. This means standing guard at the gate of our minds and only allowing in the very best information. This means that we accept responsibility for the fact that no matter what happens to us, we alone have the capacity to choose how to respond to it. We must control our thoughts, eliminate the weeds of negativity, and strive to interpret events with a cautious optimism.

As we continue along our life-long trek towards the religious ideal of spiritual ‘wholeness,’ it would benefit us to realize and appreciate all the positive opportunities for growth that the YU experience places so conveniently at our fingertips. Personally, I can share that each source of tension, and there are many, has forced me to mold my spiritual personality, to dig deeper into my religious self and to understand it in a more sophisticated and nuanced fashion. Indeed, Yeshiva University has served as a sanctuary for my religious growth.

It is my sincerest hope that we, as individuals and as a YU community, continue to genuinely look into our souls, to engage in a process of inner refinement, and to thereby strive for deeper and higher standards. Such is the ideal and perhaps the essence of any ideal in this world of imperfection is the very striving for fulfillment, the very attempt to overcome each obstacle and use it as an opportunity for growth.

*Noah Cheses is a staff writer for Kol Hamevaser*

<sup>1</sup> Luzzatto, R. Moshe Chaim trans. Leibler, Yosef. *The Path of the Just*. Jerusalem: Feldheim, 2004. Page 20.

“When an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which is in his best interests to convey.”<sup>1</sup>

This insight of social psychologist Erving Goffman subtly undermines many cherished and intuitive views about our religious lives. We often assume that the actions of others, especially those from a different segment of the religious spectrum, are driven by a need to socially conform. However, when examining ourselves, we believe that we are motivated by internal convictions. If Goffman is correct, and people’s actions in a public context are almost always designed to gain social advantages, then our religious motivations are suspect.

Orthodox Jews ideally strive to serve God, observe His commandments, and learn His Torah in a frame of mind characterized as *lishma* (for their own sake). Although this word can be interpreted in various ways,<sup>2</sup> all these interpretations share a common element of selflessness. Someone acting *lishma* is not concerned for personal benefit, and certainly should not be worried at all about societal repercussions. Yet the communal nature of Orthodox Judaism ensures that most of our religious observance occurs in public, making it very tempting to “fake it.” Under these conditions, the ideal of *lishma* actions is difficult to realize.

It is not only this elevated standard that is compromised by our seeming domination by external social forces. Even if our motivations are not totally *lishma*, we want our religious growth to at least be, for the lack of a better term, real. Real religious growth is minimally the product of internal conviction and a desire to do the right thing, even if these aspirations are not entirely pure. Most of us would agree that, on the face of it, actions done for the approval of friends, Rabbis, or community are nothing but social conformity. In a close knit community such as ours, these types of influences play an extremely powerful role in creating and supporting religious commitment. An unfortunate side effect is the loss of religious authenticity.

The *mussar* methodology of the Novardock yeshiva represented a radical and noble attempt to rise above this troubling aspect of the human condition. Among other practices, Novardockers periodically submitted themselves to public humiliation. The idea was that enough embarrassment could remove a person’s need to socially conform. Once stripped of their last shred of social dignity, the student would subsequently be free to act based only on pure considerations of justice and truth, without any fear of communal repercussions. I am not in a position to say how successful this approach was in late 19th or early 20th century Lithuania, but I have a feeling that most 21st century people would

be uncomfortable with putting these practices into effect in their own religious lives.

A more temperate approach to this challenge is found in the rabbinic statement that: “A person should always engage in Torah and good deeds, even if not for their own sake, for this will lead to engagement for its own sake.”<sup>3</sup> The *Rambam* interprets this statement as it relates to *Talmud Torah* in his introduction to the tenth *Perek* of *Sanhedrin*. There, the *Rambam* describes how people in various stages of life display impure motivations. Teachers bribe young children into learning with candy, while older students learn for money. At an even more advanced stage, personal honor and respect become the primary motivations for study. The *Rambam* concludes that “all this is deplorable. However, it is necessary, in view of the weakness of the human mind.” Needless to say, those who reach a certain stage of enlightenment will realize that the ultimate goal of learning Torah is to understand the truth.

In the *Rambam’s* description, ulterior motivations are to be tolerated until they are eventually shed as part of a process of increasing religious maturity. Non-*Lishma* developments have value, as they are part of a framework that holds out the promise of eventually sprouting into full-fledged commitment to truth for its own sake. Yet, this approach only provides a partial solution to our problem. It is obvious from the *Rambam’s* writings that he did not expect many people to achieve complete detachment from the most powerful urges of the human psyche. How should those of us who do not expect to transcend social influences in the near future, treat them in the interim? It seems to me that the combination of intense introspection and the making of intelligent choices can convert these intrusive pressures into catalysts of religious growth.

In the context of an article on *Pesach*, Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook provides a fascinating definition of freedom:

“The difference between a slave and a free person is not merely a matter of social position, that due to circumstances this one is enslaved to another, and this one is not enslaved. We can find an enlightened slave whose spirit is free, and a free man with the mentality of a slave. True freedom is that uplifted spirit by which the individual - as well as the nation as a whole - is inspired to remain faithful to his inner essence, to the spiritual attribute of the Divine image within him. It is that quality which enables us to feel that our life has value and meaning.”<sup>4</sup>

Taking an approach similar to Rav Kook’s, I would argue that we shouldn’t lose confidence because of the societal forces that impact our behavior. The more significant task is ensuring that the social structures we are part of influence us in a way that allows us to “remain faithful to our inner essence.” Staying true to our real selves first requires that we continuously examine and clarify what our deepest values and goals as servants

of G-d are. Authentic religious growth can only be pursued once there is a sense of the desired direction.<sup>5</sup>

Knowledge of what drives us is another indispensable part of the effort to achieve authenticity in our avoda. Some people are influenced most powerfully by their friends. Others are more inclined to seek the approval of authority figures or the opposite sex. Each individual needs to identify which of these or other factors is most significant for them. Once armed with a general conception of our goals and an understanding of which forces really determine our behavior, we can begin making informed social choices that will advance religious growth. These choices will take different forms for different people. For some, it will mean eliminating exposure to some negative influences entirely. In other situations, additional sources of inspiration are necessary to counterbalance conflicting messages. Alternatively, increased exposure to a spiritually challenging environment may solidify religious growth. Most importantly, choosing the right spiritual community can enable a person to achieve their goals in a manner far beyond what would be possible as an atomized individual.

While it is impossible to completely stop external influences from having their impact, there is no reason to sit passively and let them do so. In whatever form, we already make choices about which chevreh to associate with, how to structure our family lives, which educational and cultural institutions to patronize, and which authority figures to listen to. We can take a proactive approach to making these choices, and do so with our ultimate religious goals and beliefs in mind. Taking this active and introspective stance, the *oved hashem* can transform the social forces that hold us captive into tools used to sculpt a religious identity.

*Mattan Erder is Co-Managing Editor of Kol Hamevaser*

<sup>1</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), 4

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, *Nefesh HaChaim* 4:1

<sup>3</sup> Sotah 22b, *Sanhedrin* 105b, *Rambam Hilchot Talmud Torah* 3:5

<sup>4</sup> Ma’amarei Ha’Reayah: Kovetz Ma’amarim, (Jerusalem, 1984) 157

<sup>5</sup> It may be argued that the same social forces that are so powerful in determining our behavior extend their reach into the deepest recesses of our souls and make it impossible to make these types of judgments in an independent way. I would respond that regardless of the merits of that argument, we have no choice but to try. The psychoanalysts and sociologists can tell us later if we have succeeded.

# Individual Suffering and Religious Growth

BY DAVID LASHER

“*Aicha*,” the cry of communal tragedy, has its etymological roots in the interrogative *aich* (how). The word’s double meaning, “alas” and “how,” gives insight into the experience of suffering itself. Many times when we suffer, we not only express our anguish, but we also ask why God is causing us pain.

Understanding the first word of Lamentations as a question is particularly fitting, as the answer is ultimately reassuring. In fact, we read the reasons behind the tragic downfall of the temple every day. “Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods,”<sup>2</sup> which, as *Rashi* points out, has its roots in a separation from the law, “for the Lord’s anger will flare up against you.”<sup>3</sup> God promises us that if our hearts are not turned towards Him, then He will take away His precious gifts. Although our punishment was devastating, it was also a fulfillment of a promise that God made to us. Through our chastisement at the hand of God, we palpably felt His presence in our communal destiny. The very fact that we were still in His plan should remind us of His other promise, the promise of our eventual redemption.<sup>4</sup>

However much we are reassured regarding our communal destiny, the suffering that comes to an individual has no such guarantee. We all stand alone before God’s judgment. We have no prophetic assurance of our individual delivery. Exactly opposite, we know that we began in dust and we most assuredly know that to dust we shall return. We see suffering and jubilation, magnanimity and miserliness, but in all this, we see no rhyme and no reason. Moshe asked God, and we ask in every generation, “Lord of the Universe, why do some righteous men prosper and others are in adversity, some wicked men prosper and others are in adversity?”<sup>5</sup> The initial answer in the *Gemara* gives us very little comfort; “He replied to him, Moshe, the righteous man who prospers is the righteous man the son of a righteous man” etc. The continuation of the discussion in the *Gemara* identifies with our inability to accept this answer. The discussion ends with the position of R. Meir, that an answer to this question “was not granted to him [Moshe]. For it is said: “And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious,”<sup>6</sup> although he may not deserve it, “And I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy,”<sup>7</sup> although he may not deserve it. Now as then, questions about suffering reverberate in our minds regardless of what answers we propose.

These questions take on momentous significance when the suffering person asks them. As his instinctive cry of *aicha* comes to his lips, he will often also be asking these questions to God. Lord of the Universe, why is it that you have caused me to suffer? With no answer forthcoming, unfortunately, some

lose their faith.

In this light, Raba’s view on suffering makes a very concrete contribution.

“Raba (some say, R. Hisda) says: If a man sees that painful sufferings visit him, let him examine his conduct. For it is said: Let us search and try our ways, and return unto the Lord.<sup>8</sup> If he examines and finds nothing [objectionable], let him attribute it to the neglect of the study of the Torah. For it is said: Happy is the man whom Thou chastenest, O Lord, and teachest out of Thy law.<sup>9</sup> If he did attribute it [thus], and still did not find [this to be the cause], let him be sure that these are chastenings of love. For it is said: For whom the Lord loveth He correcteth.”<sup>10</sup>

His perspective is grounded in a causal view of individual suffering. Although this viewpoint is compelling, it ends up leaving modern man unsatisfied. Our awareness and experience of randomness has left us traumatized and like no other time in history, Moshe’s question plagues man.

It is with some version of these concerns in mind that Emmanuel Levinas, in his Talmudic lectures, asserts that in times of suffering—those time in which God is not apparent, we must affirm His role in our lives. He explains that it is specifically when we cannot sense God’s presence in our lives that we can move from our shallow faith in a father who is always there, to a truer and more penetrating realization that He is the facticity of the world. This compelling rhetoric is on first glance sound. However, nothing separates this faith-action from the creation of a specter that is not there.

I think by considering the background to the questions that are provoked by suffering, we can find a different approach to this issue. How does this experience of questioning God come about? I am speaking strictly for those who have had an experience of God and believe in Him. When we encounter a crisis, our sense of our place in the world is turned upside down. Everything we thought we knew yesterday no longer applies. This breakdown often goes so far as to cause us to question the root of all that happens to us: God.

When the process ends in a destruction of our faith, it is because we judged God and found Him wanting. It proves that our faith was both contingent and semi-idolatrous.<sup>11</sup> Contingent because we believed only as long as God did what we expected or charged Him to do<sup>12</sup> and idolatrous because we are only interested in selling ourselves to the highest bidder, seemingly regardless of whom he is.

If, as it seems to be the case, most of us are not blown away by the question of theodicy, why does our faith only hold out until we ourselves are suffering?<sup>13</sup> It seems that either we are so insensitive to the rest of the world that that question only matters in regards to our-

selves, or the question is not really driven by intellectual considerations. The first is true *ga'avah* and as the *Gemara* tells us, this perspective consequently pushes God out of this world.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, the second path indicates the lashing out of an individual. To defend the ground he feels has slipped from beneath his feet, he fights to carve himself out a space. His attack on God is not an intellectual one *per se*, rather it is the attack of a wounded animal.

In other words, the situation engenders negative feelings in the person; God becomes the bad guy. The individual disconnects from the entity that he perceives has done harm to him. However, the truth is that God is not any different today than He was yesterday. The only thing that has changed is the person’s relationship with Him. With this realization, the process of rebuilding a connection to God can begin.

We know that when an individual loses a loved one, they are charged with being *chazzan*—leading the congregation in blessing Hashem and publicizing His name. For the individual this isn’t the first in a series of davenings. This is not the first time that he has proclaimed “*Hashem elokeinu Hashem echad*,” rather this is a link in the continuous chain of a Jew’s life of realization of his creator. He has not affirmed God in the void, rather he has rather deepened his understanding of the God with whom he talked yesterday and to whom he will talk tomorrow. The onus upon us is to realize that the God who caused us this hardship is the very same God who blesses us with the breath of life. We must realize that not only does our transient suffering come from God, but that all the good in our lives is due to His will.

David Lasher is Co-Managing Editor of Kol Hamevaser

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Rav Shalom Carmy, Rav Aharon Bina, and Rav Shai Gerson as many of the ideas in this article have their origins in their words.

<sup>2</sup> Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures. Dt 11:16 . Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society. 1997

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* 11:17

<sup>4</sup> See *Makot* 24b and Deut 30:1-5

<sup>5</sup> *Brachot* 7a. The quoted *Gemaras* have been taken, with small changes, from the Soncino translation of the Talmud.

<sup>6</sup> Ex. XXXIII, 19

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Lam. III, 40

<sup>9</sup> Ps. XCIV, 12

<sup>10</sup> Prov. III, 12

<sup>11</sup> Also, see *Lonely Man of Faith*, 104

<sup>12</sup> This may be why this moment is so important to Levinas.

<sup>13</sup> I am not hereby dismissing the question of theodicy, rather, as I am discussing a believer, I am pointing out that since this individual’s faith was not destroyed by the question in the past, why should it be now.

<sup>14</sup> *Sotah* 5a. This move to self-centeredness is indicated by what happens to the question of theodicy when it is centered on the individual. Instead of “how could you do this,” the question becomes “how could you do this *to me*.”

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