



KOL HAMEVASER

The Jewish Thought Magazine
of the Yeshiva University Student Body

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Judaism and Pop Culture

MATSYA!

Volume I, Issue 2

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ABOUT KOL HAMEVASER

KOL HAMEVASER IS A MAGAZINE OF JEWISH THOUGHT DEDICATED TO SPARKING THE DISCUSSION OF JEWISH ISSUES ON THE YESHIVA UNIVERSITY CAMPUS. IT WILL SERVE AS A FORUM FOR THE INTRODUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF NEW IDEAS. THE MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS TO KOL HAMEVASER WILL BE THE UNDERGRADUATE POPULATION, ALONG WITH REGULAR INPUT FROM RIETS ROSHEI YESHIVA, YU PROFESSORS, EDUCATORS FROM YESHIVOT AND SEMINARIES IN ISRAEL, AND OUTSIDE EXPERTS. IN ADDITION TO THE REGULAR EDITIONS, KOL HAMEVASER WILL BE SPONSORING IN-DEPTH SPECIAL ISSUES, SPEAKERS, DISCUSSION GROUPS, SHABBATONIM, AND REGULAR WEB ACTIVITY. WE HOPE TO FACILITATE THE RELIGIOUS AND INTELLECTUAL GROWTH OF YESHIVA UNIVERSITY AND THE LARGER JEWISH COMMUNITY.

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COMING SOON: DEREKH HALIMUD, JEW AND GENTILE

Editorials

Simply Complex

BY GILAH KLETENIK

People adore simplification and for the obvious reason; it makes matters less complex. In our daily tasks we strive for this route-of-least-complication, with hopes that the job will get done faster. And usually, this is the case. In other areas too, we gravitate towards the most straightforward, albeit effortless path. However, too often we apply this method in dealing with matters of great profundity, namely, the tendency to bifurcate complex matters into easily digestible tidbits – in the hopes that this might elucidate matters and, similarly, simplify them. Unfortunately, however, when we choose this path, we run the risk of oversimplification and in so doing incur the hefty liability of overlooking complexities, an indiscretion that tends to backfire and even further complicate matters. Let me explain.

In matters of theology and belief, this path of oversimplification, which masquerades as clarification, is frequently transformed into blanket black-and-white declarations and practices. These declarations are usually uttered by a person of at least mild prominence and are subsequently accepted, at least in practice, point-blank by that leader’s admiring followers. These followers accept the leader’s views because, well, it’s easy. It’s far easier to consent to another’s conclusions than to take the time and effort to engage in one’s own evaluation. This method not only saves precious time, but also satisfies our lazy tendencies.

Regrettably, when we follow such a path we essentially shirk our God-given responsibility and end-up thrusting that Divine bequest of intellect, along with it the mighty power of free will, onto another person. We insult our own sensibilities and consequently ignore our own individuality by accepting another’s assessment as right for ourselves. There is seldom, if ever, a one-size-fits-all approach in matters of faith and spirituality. Instead, we ought to each evaluate for ourselves, with the help of classical sources, the complexities on both sides of the matter.

The discussion of popular culture and Judaism is not new; be it the 2nd century Jew considering an evening of entertainment at Caesarea’s amphitheater, the 12th century Spanish nobleman accepting an invitation to a wine party, or the 19th century Lithuanian Yeshiva student flirting with the purchase of the latest novel, we are not alone in our deliberations. In fact, the Midrash and Talmud record a handful of comments and discussions surrounding this matter.

In *Avoda Zara* 18b there is a lengthy discussion surrounding attending events at stadiums, circuses and theaters – the era’s temples of popular culture. In this text, all comments uniformly denounce engagement in popular culture and two primary reasons to this approach emerge. The first is that these were traditionally places of idolatry and the second because these activities constitute bitul Torah. In Tractate *Derech Eretz, perek HaNichnas*: 5, a more favorable approach to popular culture surfaces: “One who steals from many people, what ought he to do? He ought to go and dig pits, ditches and cisterns (as water holes for public use) and repair roads and theaters, afterwards he shall be forgiven.” Evidently, this approach views popular culture favorably, as funding theater renovations constitutes sufficient public good so as to warrant forgiveness for theft.

At the very least, these two texts suggest two distinct approaches to popular culture, one favorable, the other significantly less so. Nowadays, there are a plethora of different approaches to pop-culture that color the spectrum of those originally articulated in our sources. As in all areas where there is no clear-cut halakhic *assur* or *mutar* verdict, we as individuals, in lieu of relying solely on the opinions and erudition of others, are empowered to play the field and discover what balance is best for ourselves.

Honest Introspection

BY SEFI LERNER

Torah and Pop-Culture. I’ve thought about it, I guess. I grew up in a home where the movies I watched were carefully monitored, I was permitted to pick one TV show a week to watch and I rarely listened to the radio. Things aren’t so different now except that I now monitor my own exposure to “what’s out there.” It’s obvious to me that this behavior is primarily driven by a sensitivity to halakha and the morals that halakha reflects. The messages and underlying assumptions in so much of pop-culture espouse the antithesis of the ideals with which

I hope to lead my life as a halakhic individual. I find it necessary to weed out the good (or at least neutral) from the bad.

After reading some of the articles included in this issue, I asked myself again: Have I really thought about Torah and pop-culture? What is their relationship? Do I even have an opinion on this matter or am I just following my impulses? I would never write off pop-culture completely nor can I ever embrace it entirely. I find value in its entertainment and its providing an opportunity for a healthy break, yet I also see harm in many of the subversive messages embedded within many movies, TV shows, magazines and songs. Those that argue that pop-culture has what to teach us through the moral messages and discovery of self that it provides often point to one line or one scene, forgetting the broader picture that surrounds it. And while I too appreciate that some movies have inspiring messages and thought provoking themes, I wonder if we could not have gotten the same benefit from a different source, one about which we have no concerns. So why do I sometimes watch movies or an occasional TV show? To be honest, because I enjoy it! Recognizing that as the truthful answer I can move forward, being mindful of how much time I spend on these activities and being cautious of what I select for my entertainment. And sure, my eyes will light up when I come across those sharp and concise lines offering insight into my life or a movie whose theme forces me to think deeply about an important topic.

What do I think about Torah and pop-culture? I think that the questions are better than the answers. But I think that as long as we are questioning, monitoring, filtering and constantly evaluating our behavior we can find some good, healthy entertainment in the world of pop-culture.

Letters to the Editor

To the Editor:

Binyamin Ehrenkranz's article, "In Defense of Flipping Out," makes a strong case for the post-high-school experience in Israel, and thoughtfully addresses many of the fears that some parents still have about sending their youngsters overseas to a yeshiva in Israel.

However, he conveniently glosses over the major issue of the "flipping out" syndrome: fueled with a newfound adherence to Jewish law, some students become increasingly intolerant of their parents' lifestyle. Ehrenkranz overlooks the fact that it's the attitude of their children—not their level of observance—that Modern Orthodox parents are objecting to.

In fact, most Modern Orthodox parents wouldn't describe their kids as "flipping out" if they were simply spending more time engaged in Torah study or increasing their religious commitment to mitzvot. It's only when important ties to family and community are unnecessarily and unfairly broken by obstinate students returning from Israel that the issue of "flipping out" becomes a problem.

As a rule, Modern Orthodox parents are delighted by the benefits that the Israel yeshiva experience provides, as evidenced by the enormously high percentage of yeshiva high school students who currently attend a yeshiva program in Israel after graduating. A second year in Israel, once a subject for debate and tension, has increasingly become the norm rather than the exception. If Modern Orthodox parents were so afraid of their kids "flipping out," clearly they would not be as comfortable allowing their youngsters to leave home for a year or two in the first place.

From the title of his article, Ehrenkranz feels the need to defend the practice of "flipping out." However, there should be no defense for children returning from Israel after studying at a yeshiva and imposing their values on other family members and friends.

Michael Feldstein
Stamford, Ct

Olam Habah: A Fantasy?

BY MICHAEL KURIN

The recent worldwide captivation over the finale to the Harry Potter series is testimony to the powerful effect that novels and movies can have on mankind. To a lesser extent, fantasy trilogies such as the *Lord of the Rings*, *the Matrix*, and both sets of *Star Wars* attracted and excited many fans throughout the world, and are indisputably classics. When one involves himself in the reading or watching of a classic, he can experience an emotion of deep happiness resulting from his knowledge that he is involved in something that has become a part of so many people's lives, and thus a part of the world. This feeling leads to a greater and more meaningful appreciation of the world. This is the most basic value that a *ben Torah* can gain from fantasies. However, together with the ability to penetrate people's emotions and have a strong impact on their lives comes the great responsibility of making that influence a positive one. In the following article I will develop various ways that fantasies can benefit the religious life of a thinking Jew.

I. Themes in Fantasy and their Relevance to Judaism

Unlike most other genres, most fantasy movies successfully impart a positive message and important moral values that are particularly important for their younger fans. One important idea found in fantasy is the willingness of the hero to do good even in the face of difficult challenges. Harry's heeding of Dumbledore's plea that he do what is right, not what is easy, is a basic tenet of Jewish thought and mussar. Additionally, Neo's character stands as a stark contrast to Cypher's view that ignorance is bliss.

Another theme in fantasy is the potential in everyone for good and evil, which is greatly emphasized by the special connection that often exists between the story's heroin and its villain: Darth Vader is Luke's father; part of Lord Voldemort's soul exists inside Harry Potter. Here it is also important to point out that many of the villains of fantasy tales are very intelligent and powerful, and originally had great potential for good. Chazal tell us *kol hagadol m'chaveiro, yitzro gadol heimenu*.¹ The fact that Anikan Skywalker, with whom the force resonated more strongly than any other Jedi, became the story's villain is a strong parallel of this idea.

The theme of dying "*al Kiddush Hashem*," *l'havdil*, is very apparent in these stories, as Dumbledore, Snape, Harry, Neo and Anikan all perform such heroic acts. Although all of these lessons could have been learned by reading *sefarim*, a film or novel has the advantage of powerfully driving home these messages through the emotional involvement of the audience and readers.

Many of these lessons resonate so clearly with us because many fantasies have a strong basis in Biblical stories and contain many Biblical references. Although this is not the main thrust of this article, they deserve some mention. The most obvious of these references is Messianism; each of the stories mentioned above features a hero constantly referred to as "The One," who is chosen through prophecy. Other themes with religious roots include the guidance of an old and wise leader, a strong contrast between good and evil, and of course the famous phrase "May the Force be with you." The extent to which one notices Torah ideals in secular contexts, instead of the other way



around, can be a good indicator of his growth in *avodat Hashem*.

II. Why Fantasy?

I would like to deal with a simple question. As was mentioned earlier, fantasy seems to attract more fans than other genres. The release of the final Harry Potter novel demonstrated that devotees of fantasy have closer emotional ties to their genre than any other type of fan. Why is it that people are so strongly drawn to fantasy? The high levels of suspense, excitement and especially passion that are strongly expressed can certainly play on one's emotions, but these qualities are not unique to the fantasy genre. The answer, I believe, is certainly no *chiddush*: people are enticed by the notion that there is more to the world than merely what they experience and see. It is not childish to be excited by the thought that people can do magic. The prospect of a world full of elves, hobbits, and other mysterious creatures is a fascinating

one. The possibility that we are all living in a matrix is intriguing. People want to believe that "the Force" really exists. These ideas have the capacity to spark a person's interest in a much deeper way than a comedy or an action film. Fantasies do not simply provide entertainment; they give the audience a glimpse of the world they wish could be real.

III. Fantasy in a Jewish Context

The arousal of a person's emotions by their imagining a fantasy world can be extended into their thoughts even when not reading a book or watching a movie. Thus, fantasies have the potential to increase a feel-

Alternatively, people could simply be amazed by their introduction to a new world in which people can go beyond the limitations that we take for granted. This idea can also be taken one important step further. I believe it is clear that when people are excited by fantasies, for the above-mentioned reasons, they are not merely excited about the idea of magic. They themselves want to be the hero. I presume that if a poll were taken, a vast majority of people would admit to wishing they could be Harry Potter. Even when reminded that they would have had to encounter many near-death experiences without knowing that they would survive, and knowing that they have the responsibility of giving their lives to save the world, most people would still opt for both the magical powers, and the task of leading a revolution. This is most-likely based on three desires that human beings naturally possess: the desire for power, *kavod*, and a sense of purpose. These yearnings can be used for great good, and also for great evil, as is conveniently highlighted by most fantasy stories themselves.ⁱⁱ

More importantly, the unique combination of the fascination with magic along with passionate heroism and the drama of revolutionizing the world, which is only found in fantasies, is exactly how many wish to envision the coming of Moshiach. When the Rambamⁱⁱⁱ *paskins* like the Gemara in *Brachos*^{iv} that the only difference between the days of the *Moshiach* and the current world will be *shibud malchuyos*, we can't help but feel a bit of disappointment. Doesn't *Tanach* stress that the war of *Gog U'Magog* will be so brutal that it will take seven months to bury the dead? Won't the *Moshiach* arise from an explosion of fire, brimstone, and smoke? Won't he have supernatural powers that he will use to lead the Jewish revolution? Are these powers not hinted to in *Tanach*?^{vi}

Moreover, and perhaps most striking, when we long for the coming of the *Moshiach*, and I believe we sincerely do, we really envision or wish to actually be the *Moshiach*, or at least one of his "sidekicks (*l'havdil*). Once again, who doesn't wish they were Harry Potter? There is something enticing about the supernatural powers, the *kavod* of the entire Jewish people looking up to you, and the passion of being the leader. Even though we genuinely want the *Moshiach*, whoever it may be, perhaps subconsciously we really wish it could be ourselves.

In light of all of this, should we conclude that fantasies corrupt our visions of *Moshiach* with hopes that are not realistic or ideal in the Jewish system of values? Perhaps fantasies do not corrupt our longing for *Moshiach*, but instead make them more tangible, by giving us a glimpse of our dreams so that we continue to yearn for *Moshiach* with even more intensity.

ing of wonder about the world. If this feeling is properly directed in a religious context, it can be a great enhancement to one's *avodah*.

Now, one must evaluate the different Jewish contexts in which this feeling of wonder and yearning for a more magical world can be placed. In order to do this we must specify further, why is it that people wish for a world that contains more than what they experience? A strong possibility is the idea presented in the beginning of *Likkutei Amarim*, that every person has an innate yearning for spirituality. Since today's world is devoid of spirituality, this tendency may manifest itself through attraction to fantasies. If this is the case, our emotional draw to the fantasy genre should excite us, and hopefully bring us to realize that we need to look no further than our own religion to fulfill our desire for meaning. There really is something about the world that is more than what we see in our daily lives, and that thing is God's hand. Fantasy stories could be used as illustrations that aid us in internalizing this idea.



IV. The Pleasure of Fantasy

Finally, there is one aspect of fantasy reading or watching that I believe to be a clear benefit. The Rambam says that in the world to come there will be no eating or drinking, rather the righteous will have pleasure from basking in God’s presence.^{vii} The Rambam acknowledges that this vision of paradise is impossible for a human being to fathom. How enjoyable will the reward of *olam haba* really be? How are we supposed to understand a pleasure that is void of physicality, one that is purely spiritual? While reading the final novel of the Harry Potter series this summer, and I admit, getting immense pleasure doing so, I tried to identify the pleasure I was feeling. I believe it was the exhilaration of the plot development and the excitement that everything from the previous six books was coming together. Everything that I had read about in the past made more sense. With each revelation of a new detail of the plot, the more everything made sense, and the more pleasure I felt. I then realized that this pleasure did not stem from eating or drinking, it had nothing to do with drugs or girls, and it wasn’t because my animalistic tendencies to enjoy violence allowed me to be entertained by action. Instead, there was depth to my pleasure, and it stemmed from a satisfying understanding of the past. Thus, in a way, the pleasure was spiritual.

So you see that my title was not an attempt to question one of the Rambam’s thirteen principles, but rather I was alluding to the following idea: I believe that fantasies, like Shabbos (*l’havdil elef alpei havdalos*), are *m’ein olam haba*. A fantasy delights us by proposing that there is more to the world than what we experience. It stimulates our emotions, slowly develops ideas and reveals to us the meaning of the past, and empowers us with a strong sense of purpose. So too, *olam haba* will enamor us with an understanding of the spiritual worlds and their rela-

tion to our world, show us the beauty of Jewish history, and reveal to us a deeper understanding of the Torah, and most importantly, God. He who takes measures to ensure that he anxiously awaits this pleasure should surely be praised! And any methodology that can help us grasp the concept of this pleasure should surely be valued!^{viii}

Michael Kurin is a senior in YC, majoring in Biology and Physics

ⁱ Sukkah, 52a
ⁱⁱ As an aside, on that simple level, fantasies can be a useful reminder to us to use these desires for the greater good.
ⁱⁱⁱ Hilchos Melachim, 12:2
^{iv} Brachot, 34b
^v Ezekiel 39:12
^{vi} i.e. Isaiah 11:4
^{vii} See Hilchos Teshuva and Introduction to Perek Chelek
^{viii} Coming back down to Earth, it is of utmost importance that each of us realize and internalize that every movie watched, and every novel read is a few dapim less of Gemara. I think there is clearly much to be gained from movie-watching and novel-reading, particularly in the fantasy genre. However, we must remember that although it is meritorious to internalize the concept of *olam haba*, our true purpose and goal towards which we should strive involves the actual preparation for that *olam haba*, which can only be accomplished through the traditional study of Torah.

And Then We Can Start Giving Mussar Through Baseball

An Interview With Rabbi Aaron Rakeffet

BY MATTAN ERDER

Do the approaches and justifications that Modern Orthodoxy uses for secular studies and intellectual pursuits apply equally to popular culture?

Well, you don’t have to be a Torah U’Madda person to see the value of leisure and relaxation. We see this concept first through Shaul Hamelech asking Dovid to play the *kinor*, which is translated as a harp. A lot has been said explaining why Shaul needed a harp to be played for him. Many people say he had psychological problems, that he needed the chance to escape, but you could learn a simpler *pshat* that everyone needs a respite from the pressures of life. We do have the concept of resting, and taking a break. If you want to look at it from a mussar point of view, it should be no different then sleeping or reading, which a *ben Torah* does to strengthen himself, to be a better *eved Hashem*. We don’t praise the *nazir*, he has to bring a *korban chatat*. Rav Kook had a beautiful exposition on it where he explained that the Torah allows for all individuals, it doesn’t encourage everyone to be a *nazir*, but if a person has that need, it gives him the advice to be a *nazir*. Rav Kook gave that advice to Rav Dovid Cohen, his *talmid muvhak*, who was a *nazir olam* in a certain sense, because he felt he needed it.

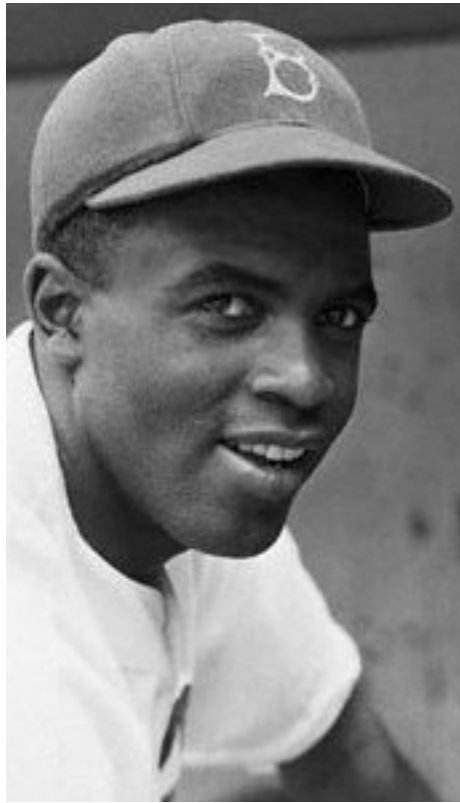
Most of us are not like the *Nazir*, we live a normal life, and what we have to do as

human beings ultimately is to strengthen the *avodat Hashem* which is the bedrock of life. With that in mind, forgetting about Torah U’Madda, a Lakewood boy and a Satmar chassid also go occasionally to a baseball game. The question when it comes to popular culture is, what can we take and what can’t we take? Here, there can obviously be hashkafic differences. We all know there’s a famous picture of the 6th Lubavitcher Rebbe and 7th Lubavitcher Rebbe playing a game of chess together. If you read the memoir literature of the Litvish yeshivas, and even *Making of a Gadol* by Rav Nossan Kaminetzky, you will see that *gedolei Yisroel* play chess. You can say “what are they playing chess for?” but this was a respite from learning. But notice that they were always thinking. Their type of respite was thinking.

You talk about popular culture, I was just in America, but while I was gone there was a big explosion here in Israel. Certain elements assured a concert where there was totally separate seating. So you see that these elements look at a concert of *gedolei zamrei chassidut* as decadent Western culture. Others viewed it as a *kiddush Hashem*, we can have our concerts and give people a chance to sing and dance. And believe me, to be happy is a mitzvah, plain and simple. *Mitzvah gedolah lihiyot b’simcha tamid*, to quote Rav Nachman Breslav. And if you know modern psychology, a happier person is much healthier and able to function better, and achieve more. So others viewed it as a beautiful thing. You see there can be *machloket*.



Obviously, I'm not in favor of western culture on the lowest level with the rock stars and the sex and the drugs, but look at Matisyahu. One of my grandsons is a fan of Matisyahu. I don't understand a word of what he sings, so my grandson who was born here in Israel explains his English to me. He tells me it's Jamaican English. You can take Matisyahu and listen to him and say it doesn't speak to me, but he brings others closer to *yiddishkeit*. To each his own; I can't force what I view as my escape on someone else. But I certainly will honor and respect the *gedolei* Torah who are experts in music, who listen to classical music, who can explain the greatness of the symphonies, Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, Mozart, etc. This is all healthy as part of the service of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. That has nothing to do with Torah u'madda.



Can one gain mussar or moral instruction from sports, and if so, how?

There's no question that athletes become models, and there's a lot to learn from a good athlete. Hopefully we can learn about fair play. From Joe DiMaggio, I don't have to tell you how much mussar you can learn from a guy that always hustled. *Halevai*, we should daven, *l'havdil*, with the same feeling that he went to the ballpark every day. He was always running around on the field. He was asked in the late 1940's, why are you running, what do you have to prove, you're already well-known? He answered "there may be a kid who's never seen me before, and he should know that I always hustle." There's a lot of bad in athletics. You see these guys are arrested for dog fighting, the drugs, the women, what happened with Rodriguez. This is *ma'asim shebechol yom* with the breakdown of society. Marriage is not sacred, a woman has become nothing more than

an object, there's no concept of love or subjectivity. Of course, a person has to differentiate. On the other hand, we shouldn't be naïve. A yeshiva boy who goes to a ballgame knows he's basically looking at non-Jews who are poor role models. He's going for the sport. Shawn Green may be born Jewish, but he's not yet the *gadol hador*.

It's my feeling, and I spoke about this recently, that baseball has such a hold on our youth *davka* because it's slow-moving and you can think. In other words, there's inside basketball and inside football and inside baseball. It's beneath the surface. What play are you going to use? In other sports it's quick; you don't play a role in it. But in baseball, left-hander, right-hander, pull the infield in, push the outfield back, give up the run, worry about the bunt, go for the double play, the squeeze, should he steal, what do you do, put him in scoring position, hit away. There's so much involved that you have time to think. To me, if you have that Talmudic mind, it's one of the reasons you like baseball.

I also want to state something else- that one of the most inspiring figures I've seen in my life was Jackie Robinson. There, you have enough mussar. Leaving alone the fact that he had a beautiful marriage, and his wife should live and be well, but what the man did to break the color barrier, to go against all odds, to be maledicted and not respond. You talk about Branch Rickey who never went to the ballpark on Sunday. He promised his mother, who was a pious Christian, some sect of Protestant, and to them it was, pardon the term, *apikorsut* to go to the ballpark on Sunday. So he never went. There's so much you can develop and learn from all that. From that point of view, you do have what to learn. And it's no different than the Gemara. The Gemara in *Kiddushin* talks about *kibbud av v'em* and says our greatest role models are gentiles who wouldn't wake up their fathers to get precious stones or the *Para Adumah*. Whatever was involved, they wouldn't wake up their fathers. So you see the Gemara didn't hesitate to use gentiles as examples. So *baruch* Hashem we have role models, and a good rebbe can do a lot from baseball, or all sports.

Now, it may all be *sh TUYOT*, someone can be cynical and sarcastic. But, when all is said and done, I would say that over the years my knowledge of baseball made hundreds of kids into *bonei* Torah. You ask me how? I don't say this applies to the kollel, because they're older and they're established. But you have no idea the effect it has on younger students when the rebbe knows baseball. You can ask them 20 or 30 years later and they'll say "Rebbe you changed my life when you talked about Mickey Mantle and Joe DiMaggio." Why? Because a kid comes into a rebbe's shiur, and the rebbe knows how to learn a little, and *beseder*, he's a *yarei shamayim*, and he's living Torah. In the kid's mind, who can be like the rebbe? He's from a different generation. Suddenly the rebbe opens his mouth to talk baseball and he's one of the kids. Now he can teach Torah.

Do you believe there has been a shift in the way today's modern Orthodox students consume and relate to American culture compared to previous generations of students?

There's no question that there's been a swing to the right. In my day everyone went to Broadway shows. This brings up the whole question of *kol isha*, which is not germane to our discussion now, but there's no question people went to Broadway shows. The more erudite among us went to operas. I can tell you I have friends that are *musmachim* of the Yeshiva who until today will travel to Italy to catch an opera. I don't understand it, but they love opera. Of course we're talking about respectable Broadway shows, not ones with nudity etc, but certainly we had no difficulty going to a show like *Fiddler on the Roof*. Today I get the *sha'ala* whether one can go to *Fiddler on the Roof* because of *kol isha*. I don't want to get into the halakhic aspects, but you can justify it. We know that *gedolei Yisrael* went to opera in Berlin, and that is a fact. There's no question there is a swing to the right. I don't believe today that YU guys are running to Broadway shows or operas. I would like to believe that today the guys are bigger *matmidim* than they were in our time, which may or may not be the reality.

Also I have to say something else which I think is very important. When we were growing up we had no Torah recreation. You know what songs we sang? *Baruch Elokeinu shebaranu lichvodo... v'karev pezureinu...* Today, *baruch* Hashem, you have Chassidic singers. What began with Shlomo Carlebach and Modzitz in the mid 50s is a total revolution today. So you don't have to go hear rappers and shmappers and hear curse words and maledictions, you have beautiful songs in our world. That too has borrowed from a lot of the general culture; we have rappers of *divrei* Torah, of *divrei* mussar, of *divrei chassidut*. It's fascinating, the shifting gears here.

You're right, gears have shifted to the right, which is part of Orthodoxy today, and you have to recognize it. Most of my students wear a black hat and a uniform. Alright, I am not part of that world, but I understand their world. To me it's a compliment that I don't need that to be frum. They need the *chassidut*, the identity, the inner connection. *Baruch* Hashem. If that's what keeps you frum, I'm in favor of wearing two black hats! *Frumkeit* to me is more important than anything. *Baruch* hashem, I come from a different generation.

How did the European Rabbonim and Roshei Yeshiva who immigrated to America in the first half of the 20th century and afterwards, view and react to the American culture they were exposed to?

The European crowd came in, and they were overwhelmed. How do you think you would feel if you were plucked up from America and placed in Russia? Not even communist Russia, but the Russia of today. The cultural change is overwhelming. If you

do it willingly, then you at least know what you're getting into. These people were plucked up, running away from Hitler. They came to America not out of choice, but out of coercion. So I can't say they integrated, but they were aware. In other words, even Rav Yeruchom Gorelick knew there was baseball and baseball was here to stay, and there was culture. Alright, Rav Yeruchom could be cynical, but the reality was reality. That they were never part of it goes without saying.

The Rav was a different story. The Rav came to America in 1932 out of his own free will and volition. He wasn't running away yet. Now, the Rav always had an interest in music, he and Rav Hutner liked opera already from Berlin. Rav Hutner already knew about music, perhaps more so than the Rav. The Rav's interest in baseball was not so much his own interest, but the reality that in order to speak with his own grandchildren, he had to know baseball.

One story is documented with eye witnesses, and this is the story many have spoken about. At one point, his Twersky grandchildren are learning in Brisk in Yerushalayim, and you can date it by when the Red Sox won the pennant. I think it was 73', 74', the early 70's. Those were difficult years in Israel, so I'm totally out of baseball in those years, we're lucky to be alive; it's the Yom Kippur war and right after. So the Red Sox won the pennant, and the Rav sends a telegram to his grandchildren in Brisk, "We Won! We Won! – *Zaide*."

So I would say he integrated on the American scene, he knew about television, he watched television, he knew about popular culture. At times he quoted from popular culture in his lectures, but not in the shiurim. It's interesting that in the shiurim he was completely a Rosh Yeshiva, but on Saturday nights in Boston, on Tuesday when he commented on *divrei Aggadah* in Moriah at the end of the shiur, or on Sunday morning in Boston at the *chevreh Shas*, you saw that the man knew what was going on. Did he partake? I don't believe as far as I know that he went to ballgames, or movies. He did occasionally watch television, and he loved westerns. That's a fact. He would lose himself in a western, and the family would not bother him. That was his escape. So that's the answer. We have to differentiate between saying that the Rav knew who Elvis Pressley was and that he appreciated him. I'm positive that he knew who Elvis Pressley was. Did he know that Elvis Pressley was once a *shabbos goy*? That I don't know. Did he ever go to hear Elvis Pressley? Absolutely not.

From a Torah perspective, what are the most significant differences between American popular culture and Israeli popular culture? Does the fact that Israeli culture is in Hebrew and produced by Jewish people living in a Jewish society change the way we should approach it?

You raise a wonderful question, and the

truth is that the Israeli secular culture that you're referring to is unfortunately no different than the American culture. A general in the Israeli Army, Yakov Amidror, got into a lot of trouble by calling the average Israeli today a *goy dover ivrit*, a Hebrew speaking gentile. I used a different term, *anusim ha-fuchim*, inverted marranos. I mean someone who is a proud Israeli on the outside, but on the inside has no Jewish values. All he knows is democracy, humanism and universalism. These are beautiful values, but they are not *Torat Hashem temima*, not Shabbat and kashrut, and *taharat mishpacha*, and the uniqueness of the Jewish people, and Jewish survival and *Eretz Yisrael*, and *akeidat Yitzchak*, and *malchut* and *Mashiach Tzidkeinu*. There's nothing there.

You do have to give credit to the Torah element here, and the world that I come from which is not afraid of the big world, what you would call the Torah U'madda world. They organized a school a number of years ago called Maale Film School. We're turning out movie producers who are *bnei Torah*, who can put out sensitive films about Torah, about issues that are facing us, without hatred, without enmity, without lack of understanding. We have here a whole culture of singers that are becoming popular; unfortunately, they just put that concert into *cherem*. You have endless *ba'alei teshuva* from the world of music and entertainment.

But in general, the people setting the tone in the public thoroughfare today are Jews who are three or four generations removed from any understanding of what Torah is about. They go to secular schools, they have values, but their values are totally Western. So these kids grow up without anything, so when you talk about popular culture, the culture here is no different than America, outside of the fact that here it's in Hebrew. They curse in Hebrew, they parade around in Hebrew. Understand, it's absolutely no different. The Israeli cultural scene is no different than America. And this leads me to baseball. If everything in Israel apes America, why can't we get off the floor with the IBL (Israel Baseball League)? I look forward to the day when we stop aping American culture with nudity, with sex, with obscenities. Israelis should stop aping the negative aspects of American culture, and take our baseball devotion. And then we can start giving mussar through baseball.

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Special thanks to Michael Kurin for his work transcribing the interview.

Halachic Judaism and American Pop Culture: Confluence or Conflict?

BY NOAH CHESSES

It is a fact that Orthodox Jews in America have been deeply influenced by American pop culture. Magazines rest on our coffee tables, athletes serve as our youth's role models, and televisions adorn our dens. In short, we participate in an entertainment-saturated social community, defined by assumptions, standards, and values that are not our own. As such, there is no way to escape the diffi-



cult challenge that our generation is faced with: the growing gap between the ideas and ideals of American pop culture and those of Halachic Judaism.

The far-reaching implications of this challenge should be painfully obvious to our Yeshiva University community, a community that takes pride in being able to sit comfortably in multiple worlds, steeped in the depths of our Torah tradition and at the same time open to and involved in modernity. We cannot ignore the fact that we are fighting a battle of values. The vulgar language, drug use, sexual content, and disregard of rules that characterize a large percentage of pop culture are directly antithetical to the mandate of our Torah.

Wikipedia, for example, lists Barbie, Elvis Presley, Michael Jackson, Britney Spears, and Madonna as central personalities of American pop culture. Compare this list to those figures that we celebrate most in our Torah communities, like Rabbi Ahron Lichtenstein and Senator Lieberman, to list a few.

Could you imagine a more opposite group of individuals? The point is that American pop culture, as we know so well, promotes radical materialism, narcissism, anti-intellectualism, and unrestrained pleasure seeking. Meanwhile, our Torah community strives to teach and to live the values of modesty, intellectual discipline, sanctity, family, community, and *shemirat hamitzvot*, among other values.

Clearly, any engagement with pop culture that involves seeing underdressed women, or hearing militantly atheistic or plu-

ralistic ideology must be vigorously eschewed. Any Jew who exposes him or herself to such sights and sounds is in deliberate violation of halachah.

While it appears that the conflict of cultures is absolute and irreconcilable, we must separate the potentially positive parts of pop culture. As a form of leisure, pop culture presents us with a few healthy options. Going to the ballpark on *Chol HaMoed Pesach*, reading *Harry Potter*, and viewing certain movies are great opportunities for relaxation and recreation. The first concern, of course, must always be the yardstick of halacha, both its particular dictates and its underlying spirit. Competent halachic authorities, who are well-versed in both halakhah and contemporary trends in pop culture, must be consulted in order to determine the aspects of pop culture that are halakhically permissible.

After identifying Halachikly neutral areas of pop culture we cannot just allow people to go out and enjoy them. Instead we must operate by educating toward the complexity of the choice to engage in pop culture. We must accustom every individual to weigh the potential benefit and risk involved. 'Does this movie or magazine enhance my relationship with G-d? Does it help me relax? Does it violate my personal standards and values?' After considering these rigorous checkpoints we ought to acknowledge that there exist ample opportunities for healthy fun and amusement.

Our treatment of the interface between Orthodox Judaism and American pop culture thus far has been only in the ideal plane of how these two forces in our lives can and should relate to one another. Realistically, this approach, on its own, will not serve as a viable solution to the dilemma lurking in the background. The state of our predicament is that we are already deeply embedded in pop culture; we already measure ourselves with the standards of pop culture to such an extent that limiting pop culture to a form of occasional relaxation would be tantamount to dismissing the lifestyles of hundreds of thousands of observant Jewish Americans. Even if we think that pop culture is a waste of time, our predicament does not allow us to reject it; instead it summons us to start providing helpful judgments on the matter.

Therefore, looking toward the future, we must, as a responsible community, consider more creative and multifaceted approaches. Rather than letting the less committed laity carry the agenda on this matter, the leaders of Halachic Judaism in America must assume a more active role. They need to know what is going on and offer calibrated and insightful guidance as opposed to passively acquiescing or sneering. While there is certainly no formula for this task, Rabbinic figures must begin to think proactively about bringing the ideals of Halachic Judaism into dialogue with

American pop culture. They must acknowledge the frightening fact that pop culture shapes behavior; it forms patterns of ideas and sets of values that influence individuals and social institutions in numerous ways. It is therefore imperative to explicitly articulate some sort of ideology or general guidance on the matter. Only then is there hope of influencing our current reality to catch up with our community's complex Torah ideology.

H. Richard Niebuhr, an important 20th century Christian theologian-ethicist once articulated numerous models for the relationship between religious and secular culture: 1) there are those who strive to create a harmonious synthesis between the two, 2) those who view the two as being in continual tension, and finally 3) those who seek to transform secular culture through religion.

The first option is unrealistic when honestly assessing the state of American pop culture in 2007; it would be absolutely impossible to synthesize Britney Spears and Torah. Only if we were to include high culture, like literature and visual arts, would this become a viable possibility. The second option also seems impractical. While it may service the conflict on a theoretical plane, in day to day life most people cannot live stably with perpetual paradox and tension.

The third option, I believe, should serve as a paradigm for our community. We should be more aware of the impact of pop culture and respond by creating a more expansive dialogue between positive pop culture and Torah values. In other words we should strive to view select parts of pop culture as having religious import. While this might be quite challenging considering Wikipedia's definition of pop culture, if we were to add items like Newsweek, Jazz, a Broadway show, and Sesame Street, or figures like Michael Jordan and Mickey Mouse, to the list of pop culture then we have more to work with. These areas can, by investing some effort, be used as ways to develop our understanding of the human race or appreciation of the way that G-d orchestrates the world.

Adopting this model, together with the approach of pop culture as a form of leisure, might better equip our community to confront the growing dissonance between Halachic Judaism and contemporary culture. At the same time it is impossible to underemphasize the need for caution and common sense. We should encourage our parents, siblings, and children to speak with their rabbis and teachers about their encounters with pop culture. Let us continue to promote good judgment and selectivity as we engage this issue with seriousness and sensitivity.

Noah Chesses is a staff writer for Kol Hamevaser

For Those Who Don't Not Watch TV (But Still Don't Watch It)

BY TIKVA HECHT

Rabbi asked R. Joshua b. Korha: In virtue of what have you reached such a good old age? ...He replied: Never in my life have I gazed at the countenance of a wicked man.

Megillah, 28a

There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written.

Oscar Wildeⁱ

The community I grew up in has a tendency to determine the hashkafic position of its members through a question. “Do you own a TV?” You either do or you don’t (or you do, but say you don’t, or don’t, but say you do). Schools, shidduchim, shuls, all the major “S” establishments of a functioning Orthodox community, use television to regulate who is appropriate and who is not.

I’m frustrated by this situation not only because it creates poles, but because I have trouble respecting either pole created. On one side stand people who are closing themselves off to anything that is not morally white-washed. Movies, music, and TV, are evaluated based on the occurrence of certain details. Admittedly, regulating our exposure to the details under discussion sums up a vast majority of halacha. My problem with this approach is that it results in a kosher-calculating checklist inflexible to the fact that, while Chazal used euphemisms when discussing sensitive topics, great rabbim unabashedly followed their teachers into the most private areas of life because “this is Torah and I need to learn.”ⁱⁱ Of course, one could argue that there is no comparison between exposing one’s self to the R-rated side of life when it is conducted as the Torah prescribes, and exposing one’s self to this side of life through *The Simpsons*. In fact, I agree: there is no comparison. This is precisely why the kosher checklist does not work. Both Torah and a large segment of modern entertainment refuse to provide shelter from life’s grittiest and most private experiences. However, secular society tends to think such honesty comes only in direct proportion to ugliness. Cynicism and crude humor are applauded because politeness is considered a quaint pleasure and a means to maintaining illusions. Oddly enough, this sounds like a strange twist on asceticism. Torah on the other hand promotes honesty because it strives for holiness to infiltrate all of life, implying that existence can only be fully explored when processed via a high moral standard. What follows from this distinction is that the pieces of

American culture which pass the kosher test greatly lack artistic or intellectual integrity in comparison to what fails.

How can this be acceptable to a Torah community? God presents His words in an artistic form that allows disparate moments of life to be subtly and intricately integrated into a kaleidoscopic vision whose beauty and wisdom transcend its parts. This is the aspiration of all subsequent art. Agonizing over details is

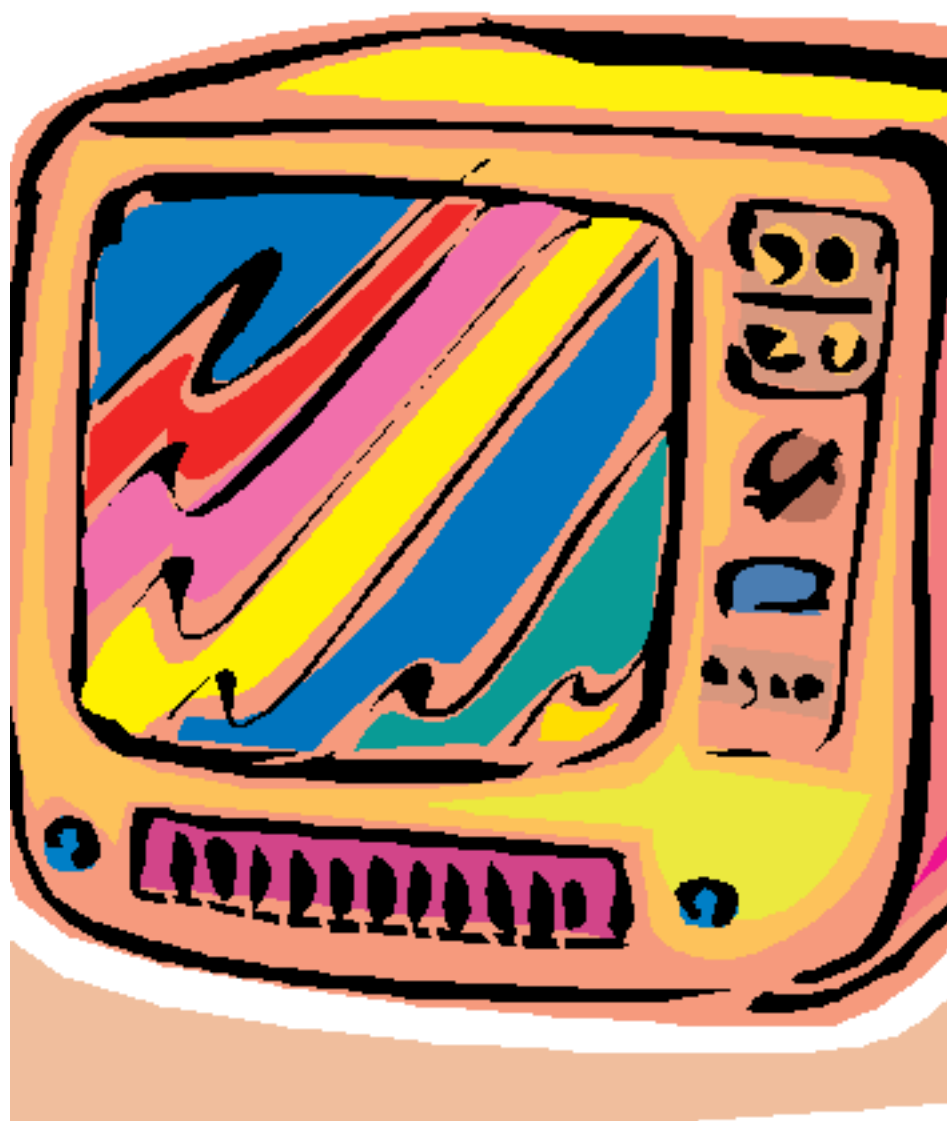
TV doesn’t inspire affinity, as much as apologetic tones. The argument I’ve always heard is that an intelligent person can *learn* from everything and *relate* anything to Torah. This may be true, but the fairly obvious counter argument is equally true, mainly that an intelligent person can learn from *everything* and relate *anything* to Torah! Once we consider every act as being potentially educational, being potentially educational is no longer a meaningful cri-

terion to use when prioritizing one’s time. Everyday lives of the mainstream.”ⁱⁱⁱ It is the vernacular people use to express, and think about, themselves. Skinny jeans, Harry Potter, *Superbad*, gay rights parades, low-carb diets and Starbucks are all examples of our pop culture. Epiphanies about one’s adolescence derived from a conversation comparing Harry Potter to *Superbad* while wearing skinny jeans after the gay rights parade over a low-carb latte at Starbucks is an example of pop culture. Analyzing Harry Potter or *Superbad* or Starbucks in a removed, academic fashion to extract impersonal information is not pop culture.^{iv} This distinction is important because it’s important to admit that when we stare bright-eyed at an imax, wild-eyed at a concert, or tired-eyed at a TV, we are not there to study, but to experience what it is to be human.

Emanuel Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity*, explains that communication between human beings is not an exchange of facts, but occurs through expression in which “the manifestation and the manifested coincide” and yet “the manifestation... remains exterior to every image one would retain of it.”^v Communication is inseparable from the ones communicating, despite the fact that the ones communicating always exist beyond the confines of the communication. Culture is a communication; the greatest benefit it offers is the chance to relate to another person and to our self. This is valuable only if personality is valuable. Rabbi Norman Lamm, in *Torah Umadda*, writes: “Faith, trust, worship—all are meaningful if all of man, in his entirety, every facet of his person and every aspect of his personality, is immersed in such faith, trust and worship.”^{vi} Anything that contributes so integrally to faith, trust and worship is valuable.

Before one can evoke a part of the self to the worship of God, one must be in touch with this part of the self. The self is not confined to the intellect, but includes the ability to laugh and make others laugh, athleticism, estheticism, nostalgia, rebelliousness, a beautiful voice, a quick wit, the need for safety or a good night’s sleep. Knowing the self means knowing about pride, foolishness, empty promises and moments of despair when God is far away. All of this is valuable. All this leads to worship of God.

However, all this also marks man’s distance from God. The more personality is uncovered, the stronger the human component in the relationship between man and God becomes, the more blatantly man stands in contrast to God. Aviva Zorenberg explains in *The Particulars of Rapture* that the difference between “speaking to God face to face,” which Moshe did, and “seeing God’s face,” which Moshe did not, is that seeing God’s face is a



as much the obsession of the artist as the halachist, but one would think a vision of the whole is as important to the halachist as it is to the artist. When culture is dissected along lines that ignore the value of this whole, we become dulled to human complexities. Nice becomes the word of choice. Even when I see reasons for why TV should be deemed *assur*, I’m bothered by that which those who hold this way deem *mutar*.

On the other hand, the camp that watches

Entertainment may have a moral, but, unless that moral cannot be better obtained, so what? Extracting Torah values from pop culture is a rather redundant activity. If we are going to claim modern culture has value, we need to argue for the value of that which does not obviously coincide with Torah.

Pop culture, according to Wikipedia, “comprises the daily interactions, needs, desires and cultural ‘moments’ that make up the

request to “become that very face,”^{vii} while speaking with God face to face “respects difference.”^{viii} She concludes: “The only union possible is in relationship, which means separateness.”^{ix} If Torah is bound to one’s heart, then self-discovery and Torah study will inevitably overlap, but we still must understand who we are, individually and as a species, as opposed to God, before we can turn and face Him.

This will create tension. Torah is not self-evident and, as man discovers himself, he will discover points of contention between what he deems appropriate or desirable, and what God does. Such tension only points to the seemingly obvious observation that God has a number of *chidushim* up His metaphorical sleeve; that He wants to challenge us to reconsider our responses and refine our thoughts as much as He wants us to have our own responses and individual thoughts. A developed sense of self is a pre-requisite to a mature relationship and, subsequently, to growth.^x Between God’s ideal just out of man’s reach, and man’s nature unsure of God, lies the Jew.

This dynamic, between God, man and Judaism, is re-invented in every human being. This provides pop culture with its importance. For better or worse, pop culture harbors the re-inventing force, the uniqueness, of a generation. Art (and Torah) is characterized by embodying universal messages. Culture, on the other hand, is the collection of distinct ways in which a certain group expresses certain versions of these universal messages in relation to current events, sentiments, and other values. It is a constant dialogue between self-identity and group-identity occurring through words, humor, music, fashion, even nervous ticks. Once Jews accept an idealistic version of Torah Umaddah,^{xi} and opt to leave the ghetto, though our voice might be one of discord, to extract ourselves from this conversation altogether is an insult to God-given personality and an invitation to stagnate. Conversation though is not exempt from the ruling hand of halacha. It is an area fiercely guarded by Torah. This is because with self-discovery comes self-creation. On one hand, this is the incredible ability to use free choice to decide who one wants to be—it makes us similar to God. On the other hand, this is the immensely dangerous condition that one can be reinvented in a false image—it makes us similar to idols.

In his book *Sex, Drugs, and Coco Puffs*, Chuck Klosterman, mines the lowest of low culture for truths about humanity in modern America. It’s a brilliant book, but rather depressing mainly because, if we are who Klosterman claims we are, we are pathetic. We’re pathetic because rather than creating a culture which probes into the intangible recesses of the human soul as it swings its legs over infinity, we’ve created a culture where “being interesting has been replaced by being identifiable.”^{xii} Self-expression has turned into the immediate need to be recognized. The success of Facebook is somewhat, if not largely, due to its role as a tabloid for, by and of the people. Reality TV, as Klosterman points out, has made it popular to define one’s self by

dominant characteristics that function to create drama.^{xiii} This is reflective of the desire to glorify the self, but is as useful to communication as defined by Levinas as braced shoes are to a child learning to walk. The result is a society overflowing with facts but devoid of expression. Once man is convinced he can report himself, he becomes incredibly impatient with relationships—the discovery of the other or the new. An increase in pleasure or products becomes the only imaginable reason for human or divine interaction. God and man both become idols. In the words of a good friend: “Attempting to grasp and portray the human character in the arts is noble. Believing that one has succeeded in doing so is depraved.” The worst of pop culture has tried to convince us that we can be what we watch. This, I believe, is more dangerous than nudity, violence, or obscenities, found in recent questionable, yet quality, works of expression. As long as there is dialogue, the self, the other and Torah have infinity in which to lay their case and look each other in the eye. However, how can even Torah combat a growing sentiment to look away? For example, consider the following: The community I grew up in has a tendency to determine the hashkafic position of its members through a question. “Do you own a TV?”

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ⁱ Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. (New York: Signet Classic, 1983), p. 17.

ⁱⁱ T.B. Brachos, 62a

ⁱⁱⁱ “Popular culture.” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 1 Oct 2007, 04:55 UTC. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 3 Oct 2007

<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Popular_culture&oldid=161475191>.

^{iv} However, the notion to study pop culture at all might itself be a pop culture phenomenon.

^v Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*. Trans., Alphonso Lingis, (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), p. 296.

^{vi} Lamm, Norman. *Torah Umadda*. (New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1990), p. 224.

^{vii} Zornberg, Avivah. *The Particulars of Rap-ture*. (New York: Doubleday, 2001), p. 441.

^{viii} Ibid. p. 442.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x This is an idea my father, Rabbi Benjamin Hecht, often impressed on me. He explores the nature of this tension, and how we are to deal with it once it arises, in his article *Tree of Knowledge Part III*, which can be found at www.nishma.org.

^{xi} As opposed to a pragmatic form of Torah Umaddah, which considers interaction with the secular world as an unwanted necessity allowed only in order to survive.

^{xii} Klosterman, Chuck. *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*. (New York: Scribner, 2003), p. 40.

^{xiii} Ibid. p. 39.

My Rated-R Career

BY AVI MERMELSTEIN

The more I begin and abandon this article after the first two paragraphs, the more I realize that while this article could be about many things, trying to make it so will doom it to becoming none of them. So, instead of focusing on why and how I came to Hollywood to pursue a career as a television writer, I will limit myself to discussing some of the points at which my experiences intersect with my religion.

Practically, the main obstacle for Orthodox Jews attempting to work in the TV/movie industry is Shabbos. There are essentially two parts to making a film or TV show—writing and everything else, which is called production. If the word “production” suggests factory work, that’s because it is very much like that. There are a lot of workers, each with his or her own specialty. They work very long hours, many of which they spend standing around waiting. Some comedies film only a couple of times a week, but

TV/movie people are surprisingly understanding, respectful, and accommodating of their religious obligations. For example, when my last boss in Hollywood understood the difficulties I faced in procuring kosher food at the remote location where we were filming, he personally gave me money to buy microwaveable meals and instructed the catering staff to prepare the food for me per my instructions. He is an exceptionally generous man, but I have not found that spirit of tolerance to be as exceptional as I originally feared.

Even if the religious Jewish scriptwriter finds the practical challenges to his or her career surmountable, perhaps no more difficult than those of the average job, he or she may find that writing for television presents unique challenges to Orthodox Jews. Leaving aside certain branches of Orthodoxy that condemn owning or viewing a television altogether, even Modern Orthodoxy maintains an ambivalent relationship with the medium. Besides being a waste of time, television has



most shows film five days a week, including Friday nights. There are a lot more jobs on the production side of things, but they require you to be available on Friday nights, and thus are essentially closed to people who can’t work then. While a smarter, more realistic person may have grasped this concept in principle, I discovered it only through the frustrating experience of getting a call back and an interview that ended when I mentioned my inability to work Friday nights. I’m only aware of one current *shomer* Shabbos actor in television, and actors—who only have to be available for the filming of scenes in which they appear—are unique among the production staff in their ability to alter their schedules of availability. Other people on the production side do not have that flexibility.

For the religious Jew, that leaves writing. While writing for a television show may present scheduling conflicts with Shabbos and Yom Tov, several Orthodox Jews have successfully worked around these problems. Most Jews who enter the professional world and strive to be *shomer* Shabbos encounter these conflicts at one point or another. Nevertheless, from what I have seen and heard, if Orthodox Jews are upfront and honest about what their religion allows and forbids (and it doesn’t interfere with a production schedule),

the reputation of being a conduit to inappropriate content. How could any religious Jew contribute to that?

When I was first thinking of moving to Los Angeles, I contacted a few Orthodox writers and asked them about how they dealt with the apparent conflict. One failed to see any conflict, to the extent that he didn’t understand the question. Another differentiated between shows that are about sex or violence and shows that use instances of sex or violence incidentally or illustratively. A third acknowledged some sort of problem and said it was something I should struggle with my whole career, but thought that if I was doing good work, I would have nothing to be ashamed of. Not surprisingly, these vague and tepid responses did not entirely assuage my worries about a conflict. However, they helped me realize the two main difficulties with my method of inquiry: I wasn’t phrasing the question sharply because I wasn’t sure exactly what I was asking and I was looking for an objective answer to a question that had to be answered subjectively—to my own satisfaction.

Returning to the question, perhaps I can better define the source of the apparent conflict by breaking down the content using the television ratings system, NLSV (nudity, lan-

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guage, sex, and violence). As people, as Jews, and especially as religious Jews, we're usually against violence. And while we're OK with sex, we like to keep it out of the public eye. And there is a concept of avoiding "bad" or "vulgar" language — of speaking in euphemisms if the conversation is necessary. So, to me, there are potentially two problems here: 1) Depicting a life based on a value system in some ways antithetical to mine. 2) Possibly subjecting other people to things they should probably avoid watching.

I don't think the first is a real problem. In fact, it may argue for more religious Jews writing for TV. Good writing usually depicts life as it is, not as it should be. Entertaining writing sometimes depicts life as the writers wish it (or as the writers believe the viewers wish it), not life as it is. While the life depicted on television and in movies rarely reflects the values of religious Jews, I don't think religious Jewish writers have to depict a life that only reflects their values. A writer can make it clear he or she doesn't agree with the actions or lifestyles of the characters by methods obvious and subtle: a movie can end with the imprisonment of a violent, profane adulterer, with the villain's more sympathetic foil triumphing, with an authority figure coming down in a machine to bring everyone to their senses, or with the viewers being allowed to draw their own conclusions — viewers can learn from the story in many ways. The Torah (*l'havdil*) isn't always a list of things to emulate. Sometimes the people in the stories make mistakes.

As for subjecting other Jews to things they should probably avoid watching, I am less sanguine. While violence and bad language are not the types of things Jews should immerse themselves in, taking them in is not technically forbidden by halacha, as far as I know (though I do not doubt that a creative *posek* could come up with several technical violations). Specific halachot, however, clearly proscribe watching *erva*, and attempt to shield Jews from being subjected to sex and nudity outside the context of their own marriages. While the prohibition of *histaklus* (as I understand it, looking at a woman for pleasure) leaves some room for subjectivity, as a general rule, Jews really shouldn't be subjecting themselves to scenes of nudity and sex. I guess you could talk about the nudity in *Schindler's List* or something and say it depends on context, but that's a stretch of a comparison; most of the nudity and sex on TV or in movies cannot be classified as anything other than *erva*, which probably makes a person responsible for it guilty of "*lifnei iver*."

After worrying about these philosophical questions for a while, I ended up working for *Deadwood*, a show that exposed viewers to copious amounts of violence, obscenity of record-setting proportions, and some sex and nudity as well (at least some of which a reasonable viewer could be expected to find pleasurable). *Deadwood* also featured wonderful use of language and insight into the

human character; to the extent that some people called it the best-written show on television (its first season won a Golden Globe to that effect). Over the course of my internship, I wrote drafts of many scenes (most of which never made it onto the show). I never actually wrote any sex scenes or scenes with nudity — I don't know if that was a conscious decision or a lack of opportunity. While I felt that the show did not usually use the nudity or sex gratuitously or in an erotic context, I am still not entirely comfortable being associated with that part of the show (the language also bothered me, to a lesser extent; the violence, less so), and would not feel comfortable recommending *Deadwood* to several of my friends.

If I am still not comfortable with some aspects of writing for television then why am I still trying to do it? Well, for one thing, I like writing. I believe I've been blessed with a talent for it (despite the evidence of this article to the contrary) and, as far as I can tell, it's what I do best. I think that television gives me the best chance to make a living as a writer, and that the improbable confluence of coincidences that has given me several great opportunities to possibly make my living that way suggests to me that I should at least give it a try.

However, on a broader level, returning to my first potential problem with Hollywood writing—its depiction of a value system antithetical to Judaism's—I think that, given the opportunity, a religious Jew should attempt to influence the culture he or she finds objectionable by putting forth his or her own point of view, whether overtly or subtly. It's probably not great for Jews to constantly imbibe a lifestyle that is not theirs—inevitably, what they see will stick with them and affect the way they think about the world. While it is good for them to see other cultures, as most of them will be exposed to those cultures anyway and have to deal with them successfully to make it in the world, if that's all they see, if that's the only culture reinforced by media, then Jewish culture and values will suffer from lack of representation. And while the only way to get those values represented is by depicting them, the only way to get a chance to do that is to go through the system that currently depicts other lifestyles.ⁱ

Avi Mermelstein (YC '04) has interned with the writers of The West Wing and Deadwood. Like everyone else in Hollywood, he is currently working on at least one script.

ⁱ I do not know if I will ever be in a position to write a show or movie that depicts religious Jews, or subtly incorporates religious values. If I am, I do not know whether the show will have much of an impact, in either changing the culture depicted in the media, offering an alternative, or even closing, however microscopically, the wide chasm of misunderstanding between the secular and religious people of Israel, America, and everywhere else. And, if it does, I do not know whether I will feel it was worth it. It's just the best idea I've been able to come up with so far.

Fencing

BY ESTHER BARUH

In Pirkei Avot, the quintessential collection of Torah aphorisms, our Sages advise us to "make a fence round the Torah." Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz explains: "Surround it with cautionary rules that shall, like a danger signal, halt a man before he gets within breaking distance of the Divine Statute itself." The value of having "cautionary rules" around the Torah is clear — however the complexity lies in knowing when to apply them. Thus, we rely on the spiritual fences created by Chazal, with the implicit understanding that Chazal used their Divine wisdom in discerning the areas wherein we are most likely to slip in our observance. But what about creating *gedarim* — spiritual fences — of our own?

Personal *gedarim* that we create for our-



selves are like blankets: They may be smothering and a burden, if we blindly pile on too many. But, if we use them appropriately, they may serve to keep us warm, while not overheating us. A person might sometimes feel stifled if the *gedarim* around mitzvot are used improperly. But proper usage keeps a person secure in his or her observance, without burying him or her in its restrictions.

When we choose to build a spiritual fence of our own making around our observance, it is highly important to understand what exactly we are trying to protect, and what the source of the extra measure is. We cannot simply muffle ourselves in restrictions without understanding why they are there, and what objectives we hope for them to achieve. *Gedarim* can ensure and enhance: They ensure that mitzvot are being kept by helping us steer clear of situations that may bring us to violate a mitzvah. And they enhance our religious life if used properly, because they allow us to understand how vital it is that our Torah principles remain safe.

We are complex; we are multifaceted; we are nuanced. We insult our own intelligence when we declare something "good" or

"bad" without realizing that often, things are more complex than a blanket statement allows for. Sometimes it is necessary to subdivide an issue into its various parts and examine each one separately to be able to come to a conclusion on the issue as a whole. Are there positive aspects? Are there negative aspects? Which outweighs the other?

This is especially necessary with the somewhat knotty question of watching television and movies. It is not enough to simply write them off as all bad — we must first ask, do television and movies have enough of a constructive value that such value supersedes the dangerous strings attached to these activities? My answer to this is no — in this particular aspect of pop culture, the negative features overshadow the positive ones, and so I believe that television and movies do not deserve entry into our Jewish lifestyles.

By excluding TV and movies from our lives, we are building a spiritual fence around ourselves, which ensures that we stand clear of seeing and hearing things that may lead us to sin. This fence guards us from dulling our sensitivities in matters of morality and sanctity. When we choose to place a *geder* around ourselves in order to separate ourselves from immorality and sin — to sanctify ourselves, if you will — by eliminating unwarranted, harmful influences that chip away at our clear understanding of Torah morals and values — we are engaging in the necessary act of Jewish self-preservation.

The vulgarity of television and movies creeps insidiously into our brains and hearts, opening us to secular culture's casual indifference to violence, immorality and meanness. And at such a cost: What a loss of purity, of truth, of clarity we sustain by allowing ourselves to be entertained by matters that mock the essential core of Jewish modesty and observance. Ideas in television are not only antithetical to Torah, but also come from a source that values the objectification of women, delights in splashing violence across the screen and profits from showcasing promiscuity. When we watch such things, we allow these ideas to be absorbed, however unconsciously, into our very being. Consequently, we lose a little bit of that part of us that says, "Hey, this is completely and unequivocally WRONG." Because when these ideas get lodged into our brains, right up there next to our understanding of right and wrong, they make those lines that were once clear just a bit fuzzy. We should feel indignant when we see these things occur! But when such scenes and personalities flash across our vision over and over and over, we get just a bit lazy in training ourselves to instinctively realize that violence, cruelty and immorality are wrong. Vice becomes more relative, and we are slowly less and less repelled by what should be shocking and offensive to us as Jews, who follow a stricter

moral code.

Nicholas Johnson, commissioner of the U.S. Federal Communications Commission from 1966 to 1973, noted, “All television is educational. The question is, what does it teach?” While there might be shows that may have a constructive message, such as informative documentaries, or shows that portray moral dilemmas, the overall effect of television is negative. Television, as noted above, teaches us to relinquish our sensitivity to values that often are in direct opposition to Torah morals and ethics. Unfortunately, it is nearly impossible to filter what we watch - who can honestly say that they always have the self-control to switch the TV off or change the channel when an inappropriate scene presents itself? Thus we watch and see things that we shouldn’t, and inadvertently educate ourselves in attitudes and ideas that are decidedly not in keeping with Judaism.

Much of the time, issues that affect our Torah observance contain various complexities that serve to complicate our decisions about what to do, what action to take. When do we say that something is unequivocally bad or good? There is almost always a hint of gray. With some ideas and questions, the gray is much hazier, and only by looking very closely can we discern a form or semblance of the matter. With others, it is more distinct, and we can more easily draw conclusions. Such is the case with the aspect of popular culture discussed here. Despite the shades of gray that may be present, the overwhelming darkness of television and movies overshadows any constructive purposes they may have. Letting this darkness cast a pall on our spiritual clarity and purity can only be to our detriment. It corrodes our sense of Jewish modesty and dignity. What begins as offensive – meanness for the sake of humor, cruelty for the sake of drama, unfettered promiscuity, violence and vulgarity – gradually becomes less and less shocking, until it becomes entertaining. And the price we pay for this is high: moral ambiguity, eroded ethical clarity and the validation of principles that are contradictory to Torah. These values are the antithesis of the G-d-fearing Jew; they are the opposite of what defines us as a people.

To consciously allow this physical manifestation of the temptations of the evil inclination into our lives may, G-d forbid, give rise to the dwindling of our spiritual sensitivities and subtleties. As individuals – and as a people – this is a cost that we cannot afford to pay.

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i Pirkei Avot 1:1.

ii Hertz, Joseph H. Sayings of the Fathers. New York: Behrman House, Inc., 1945. 12.

iii Cited by Lawrence Kelemen, “The Truth About Television.” 29 December 2002.

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Secularizing Jewish Music

BY DANIEL LOWENSTEIN

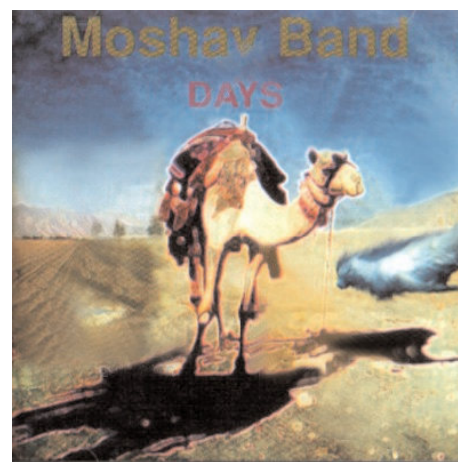
Years ago when I was in yeshiva high school, the school used to make Rosh Chodesh chagigot. Usually at these chagigas there was some sort of music, some really shvach dancing, and bagels. They were a good way to get out of Gemorah class and get free breakfast. One *Rosh Chodesh* the school deviated from the normal program and had a big concert where they got some new band. They were probably what one would describe as a Jewish boy band. The music was Jewish, though at the time something seemed innocently humorous to me. The tune to which the words were sung were more akin to something I might hear on MTV and the dancing reminded me of a Backstreet Boys video. I remember one song with the words *Shma Yisroel* and some dance moves that were actually pretty... maybe I would call it ‘provocative.’ My friends and I laughed thinking it was all very funny. Now, looking back being, for better or worse, what you might call a ‘Modern Orthodox flip out,’ things seem more...complicated.

What I saw back in high school was not necessarily the beginning of secularly infiltrated Jewish music. It may be that many of the traditional *niggunim* from Europe originated from secular sources. Yet, there is definitely either a resurgence or expansion of the types of secular music that are being brought into the fold. There is now a whole genre of techno Jewish music. In fact, many CDs now have a token techno song along with the token Sefardi song.

Whether this phenomenon is good or bad is probably just as controversial as listening to secular music. I have heard a somewhat large range of opinions. Some think that secularized Jewish music is just as *treif* as secular techno and boy band music. In order for one to maintain a state of *kedusha*, a barrier needs to be put up to keep out all manifestations of the *tumah* that pervades Western society and the intentions of those who write its music. Compromising and mixing by definition loses the exclusivity that defines *kedusha*; and there is no such thing as half *kodesh*. There are those within the latter opinion who are ok with secular music on its own, within halachic guidelines, of course, yet don’t think it should be brought into weddings. In a sense, there is room for *chol* but the distinction between *kodesh* and *chol* should be defined and ever present. The mingling of the two is the problem.

On the other end, one person I asked about the topic said that it was better to have people channel their need for secular music into kosher means. He could have meant many things, though the following two are likely. He could have meant that we have to make a concession to people’s desires and concede the *bedievedness* of such music. Alternatively, he may have been suggesting that

we should be *kashering* music and *mekadesh-ing* peoples desires. The former meaning, better the people eat *basar shechutah* than *neveilah*. While the latter, being *mekadesh* the secular is always a good thing. The latter position could be supported in that the very idea of being *mekadesh chol* implies an interaction with *chol* in the first place. This viewpoint thereby assumes that it is possible to transform something *chol* into an entire new identity of *kedusha*. Not only that, but there may be sparks of *kedusha* embedded in the *chol* that we can extract. The counterargument, however, is how do you know whether you are being *mekadesh* the secular or being *mechalel* the *kodesh*? Additionally, if you are doing both, when is the gain greater than the loss?



In what might be a relative middle road is the opinion of those who think there is room to distinguish between the types of secular music being assimilated. As long as the music is in good taste and appropriate there is no problem. I remember that one of the *Roshei Yeshiva*, at a *tisch*, responded to a question about secular music by saying that music should have kosher words and a kosher beat. I imagine he would distinguish between bringing in country or soft rock on the one hand, and rap or techno on the other. The provocative dance moves to *Shma Yisroel* that I saw shouldn’t necessarily reflect on all the other music that seems in good taste. After all, some maintain that we have always been taking good music from the secular host culture.

Though all may agree that Rap is out of the realm of acceptable secular music, I have not heard many people express any problem with Matisyahu or the new track on Lipa’s CD that apparently uses a rap beat in the beginning. Generally, the attitude seems to be: What does it matter if Matisyahu’s style is borrowed from a culture not exactly in consonance with a Torah *hashkafa*, as long as the music itself fits within the *halacha*? I have had trouble explaining the other side to people who ask, “if you take away the words what could possibly be wrong with a beat, and what is a kosher beat anyways?” Some may respond that you know a non-kosher

beat when you hear it. Though they couldn’t give a rigorous definition if asked, they would say our intuitions suffice for this matter. They would explain that the criteria we judge music by might not be properly expressible in language.

Aside from specific concerns with the beat or dance moves is the general concern of modeling Jewish music after the type of secular music which is designed only to entertain. The pop MTV culture we live in sees music as a means for casual diversion and a quick fix, with no need to have real content or message. When Jewish music follows suite and focuses on leisure and entertainment at the expense of inspiring religious sentiment and expressing religious experience, it becomes lightheaded and superficial. What happens is that you get what some have appropriately dubbed, “pop culture Jewish music.” This music, though not necessarily objectionable on the grounds of a non-kosher beat, is accused of being shallow, frivolous, and not in line with the moods and experiences that Jewish music should foster. The distinction here should not be confused for the difference between good and bad music. Though there certainly has been a relatively recent explosion of bad Jewish music, the problem may be due to the birth of a financially motivated modern Jewish music industry and not to secular influences. Though I would certainly love to blame the hordes of CDs that all sound the same on secular culture, the low quality most probably relates to the financial incentives of producing such music and the opportunities that recording technology creates. Jewish Pop music, on the other hand, may be innovative and catchy and at the same time lack any real ideas or experiences to communicate.

Two opposing views on this issue seem to define the range of opinions on lightheaded or just neutral Jewish music. One is that light headed music fosters no genuine experience and should be kept out of the Torah world. We shouldn’t use Torah just as a means to cleanse whatever we find entertaining. The other goes somewhere along the lines of, when I want to listen to something light while I’m driving, I’m not looking for a genuine religious experience. And I would rather listen to something clean and related to Torah than the radio. Within this latter view, which seems to admit that there is something lacking in this music, a distinction between these types of Jewish music would need to be made. I imagine that the appropriate settings for each type of music would also need to be clarified. Music that does nothing for the listener and is there to occupy him just enough to not need secular music is not something we should bring into *batei midrashim* and *shuls*.

In any event, the growth of a pop culture within the *frum* world probably isn’t such a good thing. The world of browsing

Only Simchas, Burberry headbands, and all you can eat *cholent* may not be the society Chazal had in mind when they said in numerous Gemaras, “*Yisroel kedoshim hem.*”¹ Though material is not intrinsically evil, it tends to be a sure breeding ground for materialism. Additionally, although Chazal never advocated asceticism for all, they did say that people should separate from even those things that are allowed to them.² Light headed music comes from a light headed place and encourages light headedness. Surely heavy headedness twenty-four hours a day is not required either, but I would like to think there’s something in the middle. There is a lot of Jewish music out there that’s not heavy, but couldn’t be called pop. To be honest, a large portion of the secular music scene actually hates pop music and its teenybopper fan base as much as I do. There are many serious secular artists that are out there that make music that is thoughtful and meant to communicate meaningful experience. Many such experiences and thoughts may be unacceptable, but within a *hashkafah* that allows the borrowing of music styles, many of these forms could be incorporated.

In light of such considerations, a benchmark to judge music might be to see what it produces. Namely, do the people listening to such music grow in *yirat shamayim*, become inspired to serve G-d better, or do they remain static Jews who are in the fold? Jewish music should be a place of *kedusha*, not just neutrality. Yes, identifying with Orthodoxy and feeling part of Jewish culture are pretty important, but being mired in materialism and frivolity in the fold is not okay. Jewish music should be judged by the values it purports to come from; does it help instill those values, or does it merely not betray them?

In the end it may be a good thing that people are channeling their leisure desires into places of *kedusha*, even if its not the most *kadosh* of places. Yet, it would be a terrible thing if we mistook Torah for a culture that merely entertains, or even one that provides a common heritage. Chazal may have had just such a problem in mind when they said, in *Sanhedrin*, that one who makes the words of *Shir Hashirim* into a song brings evil to the world.³ Whatever concessions the Jewish world makes to the desire for the secular music we hear on the street, we should be careful to keep *frumkite* more than just a culture of *cholent* and catchy music.

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Chocolate-Covered Pills

BY CHANA WIZNITZER

...every piece of knowledge which enriches the mind in any direction helps to enrich not a little the Jewish outlook on man and nature which it is sought to attain.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirschⁱ

Our society suffers from a peculiar inability to see matters as being subtle and complex, preferring to lump them into large categories of good and bad, right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate. It is for this reason that so many instinctively shudder when they hear the term “popular culture;” to them, these words connote nothing but the glorification of dangerous behavior like drinking and drugs, or immoral behavior such as adultery or promiscuity.

As such, the immediate desire of many is to shelter their children from the nefarious influences of these songs or movies, preferring to hide them within a soft cocoon until maturation. At this point the transition from child to adult is completed as quickly as possible with as little exposure to the outside world as possible. I find this attitude problematic and incomprehensible. To deny the beauty and utility of today’s music, movies and overall culture is to claim that God cannot be found within these worlds. It is to limit God, to claim that he can only be found within the studyhouse, the place of learning and within the literary texts that speak to the highly educated. But God cannot appear within the radio song, the contemporary movie or the TV show; here God is made an outcast and somehow does not exist.

The Chassidic masters explain that everything in this world can be used for good or bad, and that all things can serve to testify to God’s greatness. The Ba’al Shem Tov explained that “a believer of the highest degree does not differentiate between study of a holy volume or study of a child’s prattle or even of a gentile’s talk for, if he considers it well, he can extract from everything a lesson in Torah.”ⁱⁱ This idea echoes the Arizal’s understanding of *kelipot*, the shells that cover over the pure and brilliant spark of truth. It is man’s task to transform the *kelipot nogah*, (veiled sparks), to uncloak them and uplift them. How does he accomplish this? By something as simple as reciting a blessing over a piece of food, which elevates the food and infuses it with holiness. Every material item contains “sparks of holiness that are released when that item is used for the sake of heaven.”ⁱⁱⁱ If this is the case when one merely recites a blessing before eating a piece of food, how much the more so can a Torah-observant Jew elevate a popular song by listening to it and drawing inspiration from it, thereby releasing sparks of holiness.

The question becomes, what exactly do teenagers and adults find in contemporary music? Do they truly listen to it in order to learn from it and to assimilate lessons that will aid them in going about their lives as Jews, or do they listen to it for pleasure and enjoyment? The answer to this is multifaceted. Intriguingly, although people do not necessarily *think* they listen to music for reasons other than pleasure or because it’s what everyone else is doing, they are consistently learning.

There are songs for every person and melodies to awaken every teenager. Some songs, such as Linkin Park’s “Numb,” focus on the emptiness that comes of constantly trying to imitate others, even one’s parents, and the importance of forging one’s own identity. This idea powerfully echoes statements made by the Rav, who explains that “I never wish to wear the mask of another person in order to ingratiate myself with the masses ... I rejoice in being alone and indi-

and find so hard to take off, to Speechwriter LLC’s condemnation of society through its hit “Clones.”

Contemporary music, far from being consistently trashy, dirty or otherwise flawed, often allows for beautiful messages. Music is not above critiquing itself and its perceived shallowness, but it is also an outlet for the constantly growing adolescent. It is even an asset, for it allows for the clarification and absorption of new ideas and philosophical systems, and a way to harmlessly fight against a perceived oppressor while learning about oneself. Supposedly lowbrow music and theoretically highbrow culture discuss the same themes and attempt to get at the same idea – the meaning of life.

If this is the case with music, what of TV shows and movies? Surely these, exclaims the suspicious parent, are rife with references to drugs, sex and other undesirable elements? TV is ruining my child! Not necessarily. As with all things, this very much de-



vidualistic. If I am found wanting, then my achievements may very well be inconsequential. However, if I am a pygmy, at least I am a pygmy who possesses the Divine Image. I must chart my own path.”^{iv} Other songs, like Nickelback’s “If Everyone Cared,” focus on the need to be kinder toward one another, to embrace humanity rather than to engage in war or cruelty toward one another. Some songs, like Switchfoot’s “This is Your Life,” ask questions: “This is your life/ are you who you want to be?” Others, like Hoobastank’s “Crawling in the Dark,” suggest that there are no easy answers. Lyrics may be personal or universal; from Dashboard Confessional’s “The Places You Have Come to Fear the Most,” which explores the masks we wear

depends upon the child and the TV show in question. I know that I in particular have learned much from various TV shows, most specifically the popular *Heroes* and *Grey’s Anatomy*. These television shows allow me to see and learn about myself as reflected through the personalities and character traits of their protagonists. They also provide me with the situational contexts to consider problems, dilemmas and moral quandaries that engage us in everyday life. *Heroes* explores the moral dilemmas of individuals granted superpowers. If I had the power to read minds, travel through time or manipulate machines, would I use it for good or evil? And what *is* good and evil? Can one determine that the only way to save the world is to stand

¹ Chullin 7b, Kesuvos 65b, Shabbos 86a

² See Ramban to Vayikra 19:2

³ Sanhedrin 101a

idly by while countless lives are lost in a preventable tragedy, or must one do everything in one's power to avert this tragedy, even if people continue in their wicked ways? Is it ethical to kill a child who is being manipulated by evil people and may indirectly cost you your life, or must one refrain from harming an innocent?

Ethical dilemmas are also rampant on the beloved *Grey's Anatomy*, medical drama extraordinaire. These range from medical ethics to the important questions of relationships and friendships. What defines a friendship? What is a true relationship? Are lies ever acceptable? The show's characteristic use of voice-overs at beginning and end reveal the nugget of knowledge that the episode will demonstrate. Meredith Grey, the show's central character, asserts, "Communication. It's the first thing we really learn in life. Funny thing is, once we grow up, learn our words and really start talking the harder it becomes to know what to say. Or how to ask for what we really need." Isn't that a truth? The beauty of this show, once again, is that many watch it for its soap opera appeal; people are attracted to the sex, the drama, the good-looking actors and actresses. They do not realize that they are learning. Having eavesdropped on the conversations that take place in the elevators as our Thursday night Stern coterie heads back upstairs after watching, I can assure you they are.

If TV shows are simply a more palatable form of showing ourselves to ourselves, it follows that movies do this to an even stronger extent. When watching movies, we are able to identify with the characters, to see ourselves in them, to take on their problems and questions and gauge the truth of their answers. Some movies exist to entertain, certainly; there are "chick flicks," action movies and romantic comedies. But there are darker movies and these are the ones that truly speak to us; the ones that cause us to question ourselves and our beliefs. Best picture winner *Crash* and last year's jarring, gritty *Babel* have that quality in common. In every scenario that arises in the films various people's lives intersect and we are asked to judge people only to realize that we cannot because judging another is utterly impossible. Does this not echo a Judaic dictum, that of judging each person favorably? It may be even better to realize that we cannot judge at all...

The famous Maggid of Dubno once explained why he chose to speak to people through parables rather than bluntly and strongly in a more conventional and straightforward manner. He explained why he chose to use parables in the form of a parable. There once was a child who was sick, he related. The child would not take his medicine. Finally, the doctor found a method through which the child would take his medicine — he would give him chocolate-covered pills so that the child would not taste the bitterness.

Our lowbrow culture is exactly what the Maggid's parables once were, a palatable way of critiquing ourselves. It allows us to recognize all that is wrong with us and all

that is flawed as well as our disguises, masks and the veneer that society wears. It is the appealing package in which ethics, morals and other philosophical ideas are wrapped; one



tastes the chocolate rather than the bitterness of the medicine. There are many who have no idea they have even been given a pill. They are too busy relishing the taste of the chocolate on their tongue, learning without even realizing it. And this is the most effective way of teaching — to learn through what is pleasurable and seems completely devoid of important content. Parables over fire and brimstone speeches. Contemporary culture to the rescue. Chocolate covered pills.

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ⁱ *Judaism Eternal* by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Chapter XVII, "Relation of General to Jewish Education", page 211

ⁱⁱ *Tales of the Baal Shem Tov* by Yisroel Ya'akov Klapholtz, Volume 5, page 48
ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.chabad.org/library/article.htm/aid/361900/jewish/Kelipot-and-Sitra-Achra.html>

^{iv} *The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* by Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, Volume 2, pages 226-227

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It's Time to Stop Ignoring Jewish Culture

BY PAUL ADAM

For better or worse, the most recognizable Jewish figures in America are not rabbis, philosophers and intellectuals, but writers, actors and entertainers. This has been the case for most of the last fifty years. It's undeniable that Jewish contributions to American popular culture inform many Jews' self-perception (and how we are perceived by the rest of the country). Let's leave aside that more Jews have seen *Exodus*, or *Gentleman's Agreement* than have read *Iggros Moshe*, *Halakhic Man* or for that matter, *Man is Not Alone*. If we ask ourselves what themes, symbols and values are truly important to American Jews, the films would offer a very different answer than the books. We should not presume to say that *Halakhic Man's* an-

timorous and distanced stance towards Jewish film, theatre, literature and music.

To my knowledge, no Jewish artists' bodies of work have been explored from a religious-philosophical perspective. Even serious Orthodox and religious literature, when compared to the enormous volumes of modern Jewish fiction, music, and film in America is hopelessly scant. There is certainly no lack of literature that addresses relevant scientific topics from an Orthodox perspective. Is it unreasonable to expect a serious discussion of cultural topics, too? It seems that a compounded series of misunderstandings is holding up the conversation.

Let us begin with the distancing label of "Cultural Judaism." It's a sort of catchall for the works of these Jewish artists, sometimes the identities of the artists themselves.ⁱ The



swer is more valuable or substantial, because many Jews will inevitably find the films to be the most resonant. Why is this the case? This is only the first of many questions we can ask about the relationship between Jewish popular culture and Orthodox thought. Why do some important aspects of Orthodoxy, like *Shavuot* and *Succot*, simply fail to find representation in Jewish popular culture? How is the mainstream Orthodox response to anti-Semitism and the Holocaust different from Hollywood's? Orthodox scholars could address these insightfully if they took a less

immediate problem is that the image conjured up by "Cultural Jew" has very little to do with being a serious Jewish artist or devotee of Jewish cultural studies. The term seems to be conflated in people's minds with mere Jewish secularism. In "Return of the King," a recent episode of the HBO series *Entourage*, Jewish talent agent Ari Gold must fidget and sweat through an entire Yom Kippur in Hollywood without using his mobile phone to broker a deal for his client. He is aware in the most superficial sense of the importance of Yom Kippur (his wife will yell at

him if he uses the phone). Yet his pushiness, sarcasm and neurosis conform to Hollywood's popular notions of Jewish behavior. Culturally, Ari Gold fits the Jewish mold, but not religiously. One should not mistake Ari for a "Cultural Jew," because "Cultural Judaism" does not automatically fill the vacuum left by an absence of religiosity. That, if anything, would be Jewish secularism, although in some cases, it can be chalked up to plain indifference.

It's a mistake to think of the body of Jewish Culture as a cohesive, organized "movement." Yet, I have heard instances in which "Cultural Judaism" is used in the same sense as Modern-Orthodox Judaism, or Reform Judaism. "Cultural Judaism" we should remember has no intellectual and spiritual leaders and no authoritative, widely accepted creeds. Inventing such religious significance for Barry Levinson, Marc Chagall or Saul Bellow, and their respective works, from thin air doesn't help the conversation either. Belief in the ideas and creeds of Cultural Judaism, if such things exist, certainly doesn't preclude belief in tenets of Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform Judaism. Nobody forces Jewish screenwriters to affirm that Judaism is a culture and a lifestyle as much as it is a religion. This means that "Cultural Judaism" does not seek to replace other religious movements, however frequently it seems to be the case.

If an interest in the cultural work of American Jews is treated as its own religious movement, it becomes easy to dismiss the phenomenon as a conflicting ideology. But is "Cultural Judaism" really incompatible with mainstream Orthodoxy; more importantly, can it teach no lessons to Orthodox Jews? There is a further double standard here that is problematic. The Orthodox community has been quick to embrace literature and film that comes from within- *Ushpizin* comes to mind- while it remains neutral or ignorant of major developments in Jewish popular culture that come from without. Halacha is part of the answer, but not all of it. We no longer consider physics, biology or psychology to be halachically dangerous, except in extreme cases. Jewish Cultural Studies should not be treated as guilty until proven innocent. We risk forgetting that John Zorn's jazz music, Leon Uris' *Exodus* and the original version of *The Jazz Singer* (to name more obvious examples) overtly reference our ritual and liturgy- sometimes reverently. The often debated connections to Jewish religiosity in science and social science are far more tenuous, *The Camel, the Hare and the Hyrax* notwithstanding.

The best way to approach important pieces of Jewish literature, film, and other media requires some intellectual discipline. We must try to appreciate films, music, and literature and ignore any preconceptions we might bring to the work. Questions regarding which Jews have read Saul Bellow's *Herzog* and which Jews have seen Woody Allen's *Broadway Danny Rose* should be irrelevant to us. Just as we wouldn't assume that a sec-

ular Jew couldn't learn anything from Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's *The Lonely Man of Faith*, we shouldn't presuppose that Orthodox Jews can gain nothing intellectually from *Herzog*. Both books deal extensively with man's inner mental states and his quest to find a meaningful role in society. Both books begin with a confrontation of the pain of existence and end in redemption. But Bellow and Malamud wrote more in the vernacular of the American experience- sex, regret, and divorce, while Rabbi Soloveitchik's discussion of a covenantal community of prayer and faith deals with the experience of belief and hope in a refined abstract. There is merit in reading and discussing existential solitude in both broad and narrow terms. That is the foundation of *k'lal u'perat*.

Of course talking at length about the merits of Jewish-American culture won't do any good if it doesn't lead to more cultural literacy. We shouldn't wait for others to read books, see exhibits and films, or listen to albums and report to us. *This is one of too many qualifications we are putting on engagement with our cultural heritage. We also need to avoid other restricting mentalities like a binary "kosher or *treif*" rating system. Nothing good will come of Yeshiva University students watching *Lost* and *The West Wing* and reading Tom Clancy in their dorm rooms while duplicitously refusing to touch Philip Roth because of dodgy allegations that he is a self-hating Jew. We don't accept a mediocre involvement in the sciences, so why should it get a pass in the Jewish Arts? Some leadership and initiative on consuming and discussing Jewish cultural works and events will have to come from the Orthodox laity or its Rabbis, but continued apathy to both risks estranging us from the cultural life of our own people.

Paul Adam is a senior in YC, majoring in History

ⁱ Jerry Seinfeld's television work, inextricably linked to his own persona, is a good example.

If You Want To Be Successful, You have To Be Practical

An Interview with Rabbi Rapp

BY ARI LAMM

Is it possible to engage pop culture i.e. sports, movies, television and still live a lekhathila Jewish life?

Playing sports is one matter, while following sports may be another. Do you see a place in Judaism for sports fans?

I think that they have their place. I don't think sports will lead to spiritual growth in most cases. People will tell you, "*yesh adam koneh olamo beshaa ahas*" – that's Bucky Dent, who had a nothing career, and with one swing of the bat was immortalized. There's "*yesh adam maphsid olamo beshaa shel ahas*" – that's Bill Buckner, who had 2,500 hits, but he is only remembered for one thing. While this is good material for *Derashas*, it does not

In its own right, playing sports is worthwhile as exercise. Exercise is very important. However, it's another issue to be a spectator, which is not the healthiest thing to do physically, but mentally may have a place. Nevertheless, one must be careful in how one relaxes. One can say, I need a diversion so I put on the Yankee game, and that would be one thing. But if I put on the Yankee game because that's what I do every night, that is problematic.



create objective, spiritual growth. I think sports have a place in terms of relaxation. People need diversions and sports can definitely be a *muttar* type of diversion. However, in terms of it on its own leading to spiritual growth, I'd be surprised if it did.

How do you view going to the movies "for fun?"

Obviously, there is an issue of what's *muttar* and what's not, but assuming that a movie is *muttar*, it is no different than a novel. As such, a movie could certainly be a diversion.

Additionally, a movie can have the potential to effect spiritual growth. It could raise issues, it could present thought points that you might not have thought of otherwise. Therefore, I would put movies in the same categories as novels, with the caveat that a large percentage of movies – maybe a large percentage of novels also – have halakhic issues unto themselves.

What do you see as the place of popular music in the life of a Jew? Is there a place at all?

Music definitely has its place in Judaism. That's a lot of what the *Levi'im* did for a living. I remember the late Rosh Yeshiva of *Kerem be-Yavneh* used to enjoy classical music. I imagine that was his way of relaxing, and that's a fine way of doing it. However, that rarely leads to spiritual growth. Maybe if someone really knows music and can appreciate the genius of music, much like biology they'd be able to see God in it. Nevertheless, for the typical person listening to typical music, it is a diversion, but one that is *muttar* in many cases. That said, there is a halakhic issue with music. The *Mishna Berurah* says that nowadays, we're not allowed to listen to it, and R. Moshe [Feinstein] seems to be leaning that way. Nevertheless, based on the burgeoning Jewish music market, I think most people do not *paskin* that way.

You mentioned the Jewish music industry. Is there a positive value to attempting to create a unique Jewish popular culture?

I think it has a value for people who are looking for that. If someone has a desire to listen to wild music, then I imagine that there might be a value to having underlying Jewish lyrics rather than "Stairway to Heaven" – and *halevai* the quality should be as good. Take Shlomo Carlebach for instance: the amount of people he was *mekarev* through his music... Say what you want about him, but that's a big number. So, if done the right way, there is value to it.

Are there people for whom you would encourage more engagement with popular culture, or less engagement with popular culture? How should one determine what is and is not appropriate?

Being that I see popular culture more as a diversion, it's a matter of what works for you. Take movies for example. I would imagine that anything rated "R," and most things rated "PG-13," are halakhically problematic. If someone can enjoy movies while avoiding these issues, then it would be appropriate. If someone will inevitably lose control of themselves and watch inappropriate movies, then it would not be appropriate. It goes according to the individual. Again, if we're not seeing this as something that leads to spiritual growth, and just something that allows to you to learn better, daven better, or do whatever it is you have to do with your life, then it becomes very personal. Some people like movies, and some

people don't.

How important is the character of an artist in terms of determining the spiritual worth of that artist's work?

Let's talk about this issue in terms of classical music, because in terms of rock music the character of the artist is going to come out in the lyrics, and that is obviously going to be an issue. Let's take Wagner. Wagner wasn't a good guy. Even Mozart wasn't morally high on the list. I don't know how much of a difference it makes. Maybe I don't appreciate music enough, but I don't find the person's character in classical music. Moreover, these people have the advantage of being dead, meaning, I'm not going to start worshipping them and following them on tour. I'm not going to become a "Mozart head."

From an educational standpoint, how should educators of Jewish young people deal with popular culture? How do you confront this issue?

As a *rebbe*, especially a high school *rebbe*, there is a need for the *rebbe* to seem relevant. There is a *le-havin u-le-horot* element in that you should know when the World Series is going on and when the Super Bowl is. Your students should feel that they can relate to you. They shouldn't think that when the rabbi says something it can be dismissed because "oh, he just lives on Mars." Also, if you call *shiur* for six o'clock on Super Bowl Sunday, that's silly, because no one's going to come. You have to know what's going on. You have to be able to present yourself as somewhat cool. I imagine for Rav Schachter and his *talmidim* it's not that important, but if you have less motivated students this is extremely important. You can see this approach in the yeshivas in Israel. Some yeshivas now take their kids to watch the Super Bowl. They realize that they're all going anyhow, so better than them going to a bar, they'll take a *tiyul* and bring them to a hotel. There's definitely something practical to that. Sometimes, if you want to be successful, you have to be practical.

In a college atmosphere, there is a lot more freedom of movement, and personal flexibility, so how would you recommend one budget his or her time?

Obviously, there are classes. Beyond classes, there's studying. A person has to be realistic in determining the amount of time he's going to need to do his college classes. He should try to maintain a steady night-*seder* throughout the year, with the possible exception of finals. If a guy wants to totally shut down night-*seder* for finals, that's understandable. Obviously he shouldn't miss. If a student feels that he's being pushed too hard, then to take off a night – a Thursday night, a *motza'ei Shabbos*, or a night when there aren't any classes the next day – and catch a *muttar* movie, or watch a DVD is understandable. However, if you're on Xbox from eight to ten

every night, and then once in a while you have a night-*seder*, that's not okay. Some students need more, and some students need less. In most cases, I don't think that pop culture needs to be budgeted in. I think you'll know when you need it, and when you don't.

How, then, does Judaism categorize recreation, or "R&R"?

As Rav Schachter says, there are things that are *chiuvim*, there are things that are *assur*, and then there's everything else that is *reshus*. This falls into the "everything else" category. You don't get a *mitzvah* for listening to a Yankee game, but it has a different type of worth. On the other hand, there's the question of whether you could be doing a *mitzvah* instead and if the answer is yes, it's better to be learning Torah, etc., but if you need to unwind, then this is okay. It's a *reshus*.

In your opinion, how concerned should Jews be with their depiction in popular media or popular culture in general?

Anti-Semitism is a bad thing. We don't like Jews getting slaughtered. Therefore, we should be very concerned if Jews are perceived as being cheaters or thieves. This is the case particularly for Orthodox Jews: if people think of Orthodox Jews as the ones sitting in Otisville for cheating on their taxes, then that's a tremendous *hillul Hashem*. But do we have to go and make ourselves look better? The answer is that we should already be acting in such a way. I'll give you an example. I was once in Boro Park in a shop, and I came to check-out, and they said they don't take credit cards. So I told them I'd write a check, but they said they don't take checks. The bill was \$100, and I didn't have cash on me, so they called over the manager. He looked at my check, and said, "This check's good." I asked him what magic power he had that made my check good. He answered, "Well, I see your address is in Washington Heights, and I know people there are honest, and their checks don't bounce." *Halevai* that every Jew should act in a way where people will look at all of our checks and say, "your name's Goldberg? Okay, your check is good." So it's a big Kiddush Hashem if we act that way, but to have groups running around saying, "Hey! Jews are great!" – I just don't see the point.

I've never been a big fan of all these political action groups that tell everyone how great Jews are. Rav Ya'akov Kamenetsky has a *vort* on *Parashas Ha'azinu*. He quotes the *Gemara* in *Sanhedrin* quoting a *Pasuk*, which says, "*ein ben-David ba, ad she-titya'esh min ha-geulah*." *Mashiah* is not going to come until we give up hope on it. That seems to be very strange. It goes against "we want *Mashiah* now!" Rav Ya'akov adds another question, at the beginning of *Sefer Shemos*, in *Parashas Va'era*, Moshe goes to Pharaoh and says "Let my people go," and Pharaoh ends up saying, not only won't I let them go, but the Jews used to get *Teven*, and now they won't even get that anymore. Why was it necessary

for us to be told this? Rav Ya'akov answers that as long as we think the *Geulah* is going to come by talking to the *goyim* and engaging in the political process, then forget it. It's not going to work. We have to keep good relationships, but if you think that that's where you're going to put all your hope, well then you have to realize that while we have to be an *or la-Goyim*, that's not where we have to put all our faith.

How does one handle popular culture in the context of raising one's children?

I assume that most guys in YU are not going to go on to become cloistered *Hassidim*, so *memeilah* we don't need to do anything to encourage contact with pop culture as it's going to happen on its own. For me personally, we don't have a TV in our house. It just becomes such a waste of time. I remember when I was growing up, we had a TV in our house and I wasted hours in front of it. One wonders whether my time would have been better spent biking, or doing something more productive. I'm not an expert in parenting, but I find that it's easier to say "yes," than "no," so providing children with other options, encouraging extra-curricular activities that have value rather than prohibiting certain types of pop culture is more effective.

How does popular, lowbrow culture relate to the issue of Torah-u-Madda?

If you understand Torah U'Madda as using secular knowledge to better understand the Torah, pop culture would not be seen as the positive form of Madda which we encourage. If you take the view that secular knowledge enhances one's appreciation of G-d and his universe, it may fit-in in limited cases.

Rabbi Daniel Rapp is an Assistant Visiting Professor of Talmud and the Assistant Dean of Undergraduate Judaic Studies



For Our Own Sake

BY ALISA UNGER

One of the struggles of being an Orthodox Jew has always been the often precarious relationship with the encircling world. Although several Jewish sects have completely detached themselves from any form of stumbling and remain in isolation, the Torah U'Madda philosophy embraces the ideal of safeguarding the traditions of old, while simultaneously keeping up with modernity. Its goal is to walk the golden mean and keep a strong balance with the progressing world community, which in modern times would include pop culture. As with many ideals, however, moderation is a tightrope related to each individual's ability to maintain equilibrium, despite the enticement and boredom of either pull. The point is not to live in two different worlds, but rather to join the two and view everything encountered through the same spyglass.

and of itself a strengthening of belief through the available answers. As for those questions left unanswered, therein lays the small bit of faith required in a religion that leaves marginal room for doubt.

In the original forming of the Torah U'Madda philosophy, the prime focus was on the obsessions of the time – namely those of a higher society, where culture was the everyday talk, even that of the plebeians. In present times, though, operatic performances and scientific advances are no longer the standard conversation dominating friendly get-togethers. Many consider the change in topic a sign of the broad decline society has been set on, the lack of interest in Culture a rather major blemish on the profile of a generation surpassing all others in technology and communication. By now there is no longer any shame in the matter, the more cultured views and discussions are considered more elite than ever before, allowing those disinterested

Jewish people were immersed in their proximate society, the 21st century sums up every generation without question. The very concept of living Orthodox Jewish while simultaneously integrating the outside world is a known paradox. To order everyday life according to what chachamim detail in Gemara and in their instruction manuals, would be to banish all actions that exclude total focus on Hashem and the Torah, barring any Madda that does not further appreciation of G-d. Those who would do so blame much of the current assimilation and intermarriage on the non-exclusive behavior of Jews in general.

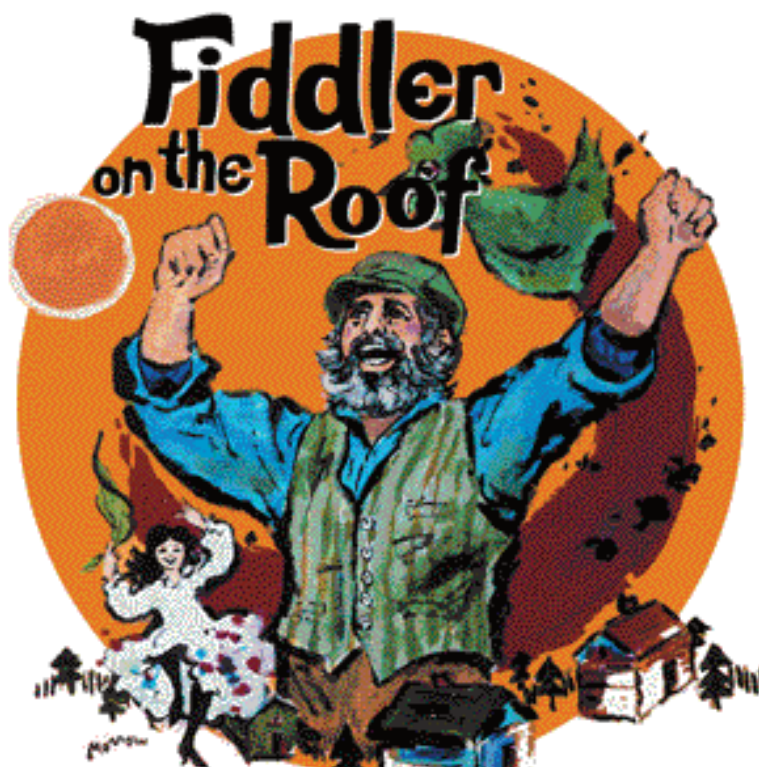
There are some who would prefer a more sundry life experience to the one offered, however, and from their point of view have no choice but to take the risk and attempt a Torah U'Madda lifestyle. Constant exposure to a culture would naturally result in a desire to acclimate outer and inner society to reach some kind of equilibrium – in this case, Jewish and non-Jewish. While some have taken to changing the inner to better suit the outer, many Jews have accepted the danger in doing so and have chosen instead to trace the outer society's better aspects and try to use them within the inner. Matisyahu, the National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene, and Shuli Rand have managed to do so in the entertainment realm, using pop music, operettas, and film to further spirituality rather than as an escape. When it comes to other aspects of living, though, the beneficial points become more blurred: be it manner of speech, clothing, ethics, or even thought process, the question turns to whether such changes are advantageous rather than damaging.

Every American in touch with a community larger than a five-block radius is aware, if not connected to, the popularity of simpler dialogue. Those who enjoy expressing their awareness of their surroundings have adapted their personal style of dress to conform – or not – to the fashion masterminds' latest vision. At the next level, people desiring to be welcome in this larger community have adjusted their ethical views to fit-in with the ethics of the community, or have excellent reason prepared to elucidate their audacity to believe otherwise. The immersion of an individual in the populace is so profound as to create an unfathomable indifference to the control of the encompassment.

The concept of being entirely ignorant to the stimulants of a great idea, a hatred for someone on the other side of the earth, or an adherence to a higher power is a truly robotic intelligence that governs life. Any person is subject to the influences of his or her environment or his or her role models. The tragedy would not be in the influences themselves; it would be in the lack of awareness with regards to the influences. To try to reject

them would be a futile endeavor, impossible in today's world. What is required is to live as an individual with independent thought, aware of where the influences are originating, and thus to make decisions with the knowledge that they are according to the beliefs and doctrines of those who bear the wisdom of guidance. Religion requires every self's consent. Without the yearning to think, consent is no longer at the hands of the individual, but at the mercy of whatever managed to shape his or her mind into the form in which it subsists. The Torah U'Madda philosophy is to take the influences of Madda and be discerning and critical in choosing those that will assist us in being true to the Torah world we exist in.

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In general, the theme of “*Ma rabu maasecha Hashem*” encompasses much of the appreciative aspects of the more secular pursuits involved in Madda. The beauty of art, the perfect sense made by science – it all increases the wonder and intelligence in the universe, with all credit due to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. Many of the scientific and mathematical questions posed are included in the Talmud, encouraging debate over whether or not they can even be referred to as secular subjects. Philosophy is more detrimental, causing discomfort towards the religion as it would to any institution with a set dogma. But, the challenge philosophy presents is in

in their topics freedom to be as they will. Consequently, pop culture and everything it represents plays an enormously influential role in every person's life, Jews being no exception. Whether explicitly or otherwise, as humans, people internalize everything they see, hear, and experience. Once aware of the surrounding culture, it is difficult to let go; even being a nonconformist is admitting that there is some image that is being battled. Ignoring it completely is yet more of an admission, a constant awareness of the colossal tarnishes trying to disturb the peace.

American culture is not to be taken lightly. If ever there was a time when the

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The *Gadlus* of Calvin and Hobbes

BY MATTAN ERDER

I have never been able to understand why supposedly serious newspapers like the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal don't include the comic sections that are so commonly found in other segments of the American press. Many people probably feel that comic strips are childish, silly, and unbecoming of such serious forums. These people are misguided and wrong. On the contrary, the best comic strips often operate on a higher intellectual level than the opinions page and news magazines of even the most prestigious publications.

Some comics present fully developed worldviews. For example, the famous and

grader, interacting with his parents, teacher, neighbor, bullies, classmates, babysitter, and several other recurring characters. In addition, the strip presents a picture of Calvin's inner life as he imagines himself alternatively as a space explorer, a dinosaur, a private detective, an inventor, and the super hero "Stupendous Man," among other alter egos. Much of the humor arises from the clashes between Calvin's imagination and the "real world."

However, the most interesting clash between these two realities comes from the strip's second main character, the stuffed tiger Hobbes. To most observers, Hobbes appears as a limp and raggedy child's plaything. From Calvin's perspective, things are differ-

to life."ⁱ This apparently post-modern statement affirms the validity of both perspectives. However, I think Watterson's explanation is too modest, and does not spell out completely the radical statement the strip makes about the nature of reality.ⁱⁱ

It seems to me that rather than settling for an affirmation of both Calvin and the other characters' viewpoints, *Calvin and Hobbes* forces its readers to choose between them and decide which of these mutually exclusive options is more real. Is the world a boring, mundane, and even cruel place, or is it an exciting, fascinating and fantastic one? Two elements of the strip lead me to believe that within the world of the comic, Calvin's worldview is more authentic. More generally, the portrayals of Calvin's inner world display bright colors and elaborate artistry. The portrayals of real life are far less vivid and more minimalist in style. Furthermore, Hobbes's persona is too powerful and real to be ignored. He is too different from Calvin to be a product of the first-grader's imagination. If my reading is correct, the subtle message of *Calvin and Hobbes* is that the world we are used to viewing as "real" may be less authentic than we suppose.

With this interpretation, *Calvin and Hobbes* emerges as an existential drama. Calvin has discovered a world that is more real than the one he was given, and has to struggle to maintain it in the face of challenges. Rosalyn the babysitter, Moe the bully, and the sensible Susie Derkins all try, in their own way, to convince Calvin to join their mundane world and abandon his imaginings. Calvin refuses to bow, refuses to come back down to earth and accept a mundane existence. In the process, he forges his friendship with Hobbes, a friendship that is deeper than any of its real-world counterparts. This behavior is noble, not delusional. Rather than admit defeat, Calvin perseveres, seeking out and finding a better reality.

This brings me to *Klal Yisrael*. The above description of one aspect of Calvin's personalityⁱⁱⁱ reminds me of what we Jews are supposed to be like. We are enjoined to seek Hashem out when He is to be found and to call upon Him when he is near.^{iv} Even if the rest of the world sees secularity, we are supposed to affirm that His glory fills the universe. When looking at the existence, we are supposed to see a little bit further and dig a little bit deeper, noticing the layers of meaning in the natural world and the significance of the most commonplace actions. We are supposed to have Calvin-like obstinacy and independence, the determination to confront the universe on Jewish terms in the face of oppressors and naysayers.

This vision is lofty, and consequently, we easily lose sight of it. It is for this reason that I value positive interaction with popular

culture of the caliber represented by *Calvin and Hobbes*; and not just because it is 100% free of *pritzus* and *nibbul peh*. We all need periodic reminders of the Jewish vision, and I would submit that these reminders are often more effective when they come from an unexpected place. We are used to gaining inspiration from the books of the prophets, the mussar *shmooze* and the *kumzitz*. At the same time, because they are so common, it is easy to become desensitized to these sources of spirituality. Some of the moments that I found most inspiring in my personal experience have happened far away from these settings. I would hypothesize that these moments were so powerful to me *davka* because they came out of nowhere and surprised me, shaking me out of complacency. If this is true, then the generally negative environment that surrounds the positive messages within popular culture actually makes these messages hit harder.

This observation does not translate into a well-defined *shitta* about how to integrate popular culture and Torah. The potential reinforcement of Torah values does not justify viewing problematic material or wasting long hours searching for nuggets of enlightenment in the strangest of places. In reality, I suspect that most people's degree of involvement in pop culture has a lot more to do with their personal tastes and predilections than it does with hashkafa, halakha or Torah U'Madda theorizing. However, any encounter with popular culture, whether it is *lechatchila* or *bedieved*, has the potential to spark a rediscovery of Torah values. In Calvin's words, at the end of a strip that depicts him digging for dirty rocks, weird roots, and disgusting grubs: "There's treasure everywhere."

Mattan Erder is Managing Editor of Kol Hamevaser



venerable *Peanuts* strip presents a view of a cold and unsympathetic world, yet manages to find and appreciate the silver lining of humor and innocence that is also present. The *Far Side*, by bestowing human traits and conversation onto animals and inanimate objects, succeeds in pointing out the more absurd aspects of the human condition and self-image. Other strips offer shrewd and witty commentary on politics, society, family life and the American workplace. But for me, the most profound and exalted comic of all is Bill Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes*, which ran from 1985-1995 in newspapers across the country and has been enshrined in a collection of books.

Calvin and Hobbes chronicles the life of its main characters and namesakes, the imaginative six-year-old Calvin and his stuffed pet tiger Hobbes. Calvin navigates life as a first

ent; Hobbes stands erect, walks around, pounces, throws snowballs, and engages in sophisticated conversation. He complements the rambunctious Calvin with his feline wisdom and detachment. Many simplistic readers think that the animated Hobbes is a figment of Calvin's imagination. Other interpreters of this type believe that he is magical, only coming to life when Calvin is around.

The comic's author dismisses both of these viewpoints. In the *Tenth Anniversary Edition*, Watterson writes that; "The nature of Hobbes's reality doesn't really interest me, and each story goes out of its way to avoid resolving the issue. Calvin sees Hobbes one way, and everyone else sees Hobbes another way. I show two versions of reality, and each makes complete sense to the participant who sees it... Hobbes is more about the subjective nature of reality than about dolls coming

ⁱ *The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Edition*, New York, 1995. Page 22

ⁱⁱ In other venues, Watterson has made statements that conform to the reading I am about to present. See, for example, his 1987 interview in *Honk* magazine cited in footnote 9 of the Wikipedia *Calvin and Hobbes* entry.

ⁱⁱⁱ There are others that are far less heroic.

^{iv} Isaiah 55:6

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