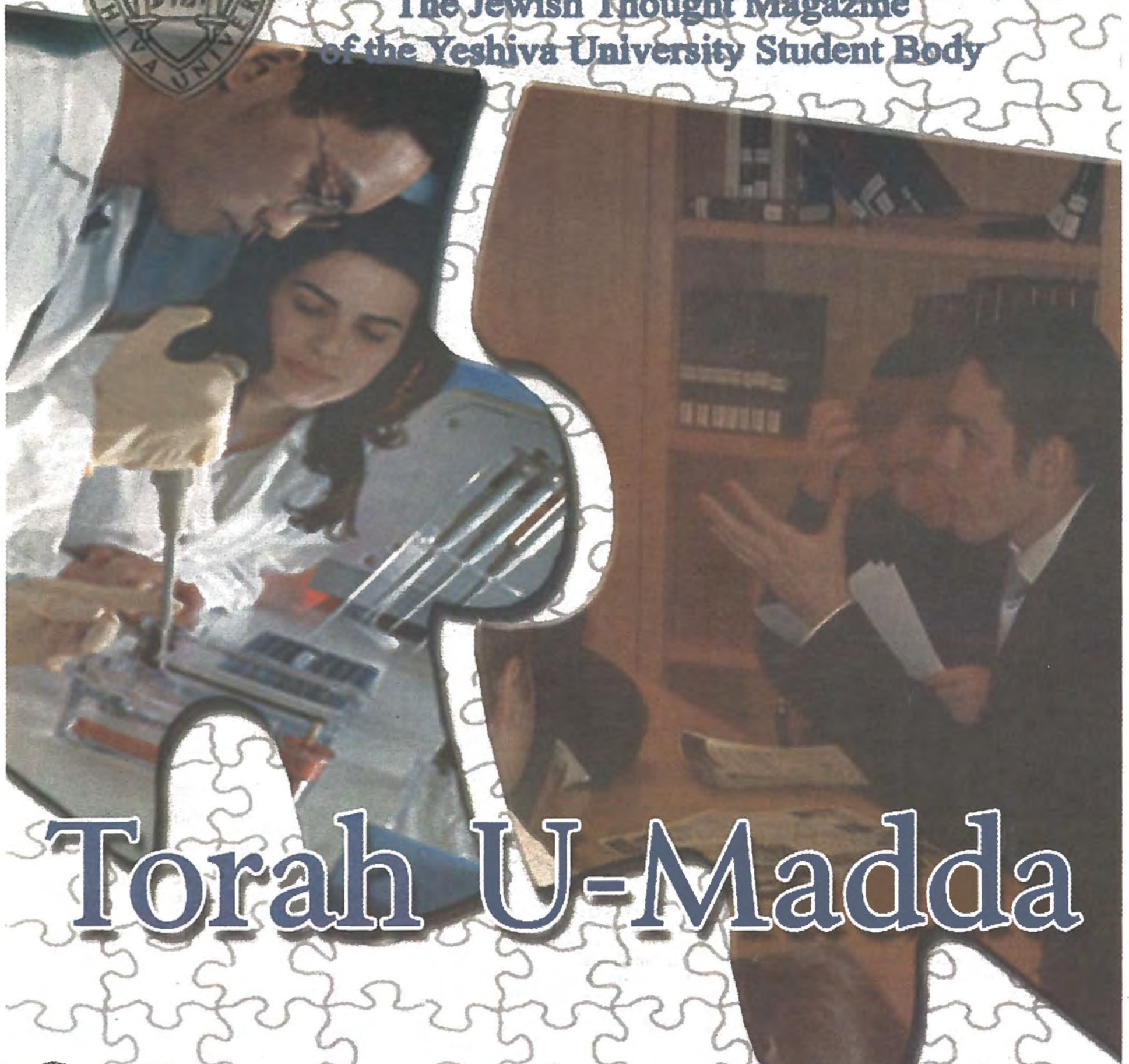




# KOL HAMEVASER

The Jewish Thought Magazine  
of the Yeshiva University Student Body



## Torah U-Madda

Volume I, Issue 5

February 27, 2008





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The Jewish Thought Magazine  
of the Yeshiva University Student Body

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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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# General Interest

## Was The Rav A Tsaddik?: In Search of Modern Orthodox Saints

BY NOAH GREENFIELD

This is not meant to sound like *kefirah*. Though, requiring such an introduction is usually not a good start.

As a student in Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein's *shiur*, I noticed once - and then every time after that momentous once - that whenever Rabbi Lichtenstein mentioned his illustrious teacher and father-in-law, Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, the Rav, he always referred to him as "the Rav z"l" (pronounced, 'Rav Zal'; meaning "may his memory be a blessing"). It struck me that a certain significant syllable was missing from this otherwise respectful reference to the Rav, namely, *Zis* (pronounced 'Zatsal'; meaning "may the saint's memory be a blessing"). Used to hearing great, recently deceased rabbis given the honorific extra syllable, I wondered why Rabbi Lichtenstein didn't refer to the Rav with "zts" (with the full 'oomph' of sainthood)? And then I thought a terrible thought: Perhaps, God forbid, Rabbi Lichtenstein didn't think the Rav was a *tsaddik*?

God forbid. I have no doubt at all that Rabbi Lichtenstein thinks the Rav was a *tsaddik*. And he would know this quite well, being a close student and devoted son-in-law.

Unfortunately (though a grateful *talmid* of Rabbi Lichtenstein), I was not a close student nor even a son-in-law of the Rav. I never saw him and I never heard him. From my personal encounters with the Rav, I do not know if he was a *tsaddik*. While I have read many of the Rav's writings, studied under many of his students, and heard and read countless stories about him, I still have no idea if the Rav was a *tsaddik*.

Isn't that strange? If you would take a relatively thoughtful member of another yeshiva, another Jewish community, and ask them if their Rav was a *tsaddik*, would any of them have any doubt in the matter? Even I would have no problem asserting that Rabbis Kook, Schneerson, Schach, and Auerbach, for example, were *tsaddikim*. Why hesitate when it comes to the Rav?

From all the tales of his students, I can't think of a single story that tells of the Rav's *tsidkut*. The stories are all great, and reveal wonderful and fascinating details about him. But, though I have heard stories of Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik (if I may, *zts"l*), the Rav's formidable grandfather, caring for babies left on his doorstep and playing horsey with local children, I have heard no such stories about the Rav.

The legends of the Rav paint a man who was a genius, a brilliant proponent of Brisk, a

passionate though tough educator, an excellent philosopher, a stirring speaker; an austere, rigorously pious, intensely devoted, intellectual - but not a *tsaddik*.

This is not the Rav's fault. The legends we tell about the Rav are the legends we want to tell, the legends we want to read, the legends we want to cherish. The image of any religious leader, and certainly the Rav, is developed largely by the community that reveres him. The Rav was probably a *tsaddik* - I certainly assume so. But what does it say about our community that we don't depict him as one? What does it tell us about our values, or lack thereof?

In the Modern Orthodox community, I do not think we value the *tsaddik* - we do not con-



must devote themselves entirely to Torah, *hessed*, and Jewish service. They must be wholly devoted to God and His people. Yet, modernity promotes distraction. Modernity does not just mean Torah U-Madda; it means Google, CNN, Facebook, PTA meetings, shidduch dating, etc. etc. If Moshe had a BlackBerry on Har Sinai, he would probably still be up there. If the Rambam had a Macbook, he may have been a better doctor, but we wouldn't have a Mishneh Torah.

The Modern Orthodox community is very distracted - often, for pretty good reasons. But I worry that we are putting ourselves in an environment where our *tsaddikim* are nearing extinction. If we actually believe what Hazal told us about the *tsaddik*, that he is "*Yesod Olam*" - the foundation of the universe, we might want to re-think our attitudes toward the *tsaddik*. We might want to re-assess our hagiography of the Rav, highlighting his *tsidkut*, and that of other Modern Orthodox leaders whose intellectual greatness too often distracts us from their purity of being, like, for example, Rabbis Lichtenstein and Schachter.

If we care not about the *tsaddik*, we may find ourselves in the near future without a *tsaddik* to care for us.

Noah Greenfield is a senior in YC, majoring in Philosophy and English

Editor's Note: If you have any stories about the Rav or other Modern Orthodox leaders that highlight their *tsidkus*, please send them to kolhamevasser@gmail.com.

sider the *tsaddik* a value at all. Some of us no doubt think the *tsaddik* is something the Hassidim made up. Others, if they thought about it, probably would say that *tsaddikim* are very important, but when and why would anyone in our community ever think about it? And, if we are not thinking about the *tsaddik*, if *tsidkut* is something we confuse with *Hassidut*, then what chances does our community have of attaining *tsidkut*? Indeed, what chances does our community have of even just creating, or even attracting, a *tsaddik*?

Michael Wyschogrod, in his insightful essay, "Is the Righteous Person a Contemporary Possibility?" (in which, for the record, he does not mention the Rav as an example of the *tsaddikim* he knew personally, though he studied with the Rav for 6 years), argues that *tsidkut* does not sit well with Modernity. *Tsaddikim*

<sup>1</sup> My definition of a *tsaddik*, though I admit this is no easy task: A person whose life is totally devoted in theory and in practice to good and God and for whom this is obvious from the most petty to the most sublime interactions with them. A *tsaddik* can be spotted at a distance and lives up to the name even to those closest to them. Ultimately, a *tsaddik* should conform to Potter Stewart's definition: You know it when you see it.

## Shemittah: From the Theoretical to the Practical

BY ABBY ATLAS

The concept of *shemittah* to an American Jew is just that: a concept. *Shemittah* is, most likely, a subject that Diaspora Jews are familiar with, but only in the realm of the theoretical. A yeshiva day school student may have learned about *shemittah* in a lesson on the weekly *parashah*. An older student may have heard a *shiur* on the rich philosophical dimensions underlying the mitzvah, such as the recognition of God's control in every aspect of life or the leveling of the economic playing field. However, only in Israel, where *shemittah* is in effect this year, can the mitzvah cross the line from a hypothetical idea to a living experience. Over winter vacation, I was among a group of students from Yeshiva University who were given the chance to not only learn about the mitzvah of *shemittah* in the Gruss Beit Midrash in Jerusalem, but also to see firsthand how the mitzvah impacts Israeli society practically, in the socioeconomic, political, and religious spheres.

Two groups, one from Stern College and one from Yeshiva College, were sent by the CJF on the Schusterman Family Winter Israel Mission and Service Corps. Both, composed of twenty students each, followed the same basic schedule each day of the weeklong mission. The mornings were designated for textual study on the subject of *shemittah*, followed by *shiurim* from various leaders and educators. Each afternoon, we heard lectures from a host of speakers spanning the spectrum of Israeli society and also spent many hours volunteering for various *hessed* organizations. The schedule of the day reflected the ideals of *Torah U'Madda*, even in the chronological organization of the day. The first address to which a Jew goes is the Torah; he or she then, through the lens of Torah, examines the surrounding society. On the mission, the first place we turned to learn about *shemittah* was the textual sources. After immersing ourselves in the halakhic and philosophical ideas prescribed by the Torah, we left the Beit Midrash, with our "Torah-tinted glasses" to see how the mitzvah is applied in Israel today.



# WikiTorah

BY BEN GREENFIELD

*Put down your sefer. By the end of our century, talmud Torah will be completely computerized and, barring some terrible downturn in human progress, it is inconceivable to think otherwise. As such, what follows is an idea that, whether you like it or not, will happen. It represents both the future of Torah study and its ideal state. I merely explain the impressive uses of such an innovation and argue why Yeshiva University should act immediately to take center stage in developing this extremely important project.*

If we stuffed the Yeshiva World into a single Beit Midrash, what would emerge?

For one thing, the quality and quantity of your personal learning would skyrocket. Next time your ventures in Berakhot inadvertently lead to a complex concept in Bava Metzia, simply walk over to Meir in the Mir preparing it for shiur and request a quick but thorough reid. When the Ramban can be read several ways, find the Porat Yosef avrekh rehearsing a habbura on that exact topic. After all, how many thousands of Jews have poured thousands of hours into the very *daf* sprawled open before you – if all those individuals sat together, you could finally benefit from collective knowledge. You would be left with the time and resources to better pound more sizeable and weighty sections of the *sugya*. And when you uncover your own interpretation of the Ramban or when you realize a *hakirah* in the Bavot fits poorly into Berakhot, head back over to your new found friends and share your discoveries. For it goes both ways: both imbibe and refine a sea of Torah knowledge constantly expanding and purifying itself.

But apart from your personal growth, imagine the effect on *shiur*. The current system is inherently skewed, for a *talmid* hears the voice of but one rebbe. The brilliance and creativity of our Roshei Yeshiva taken as obvious, we nonetheless cannot expect each individual rebbe to provide every minor *shitah* and sub-*shitah* on a given *sugya*; we cannot hope to hear every theoretically possible conceptual explanation and *nekud ha-makhaloket*; and we cannot demand to test every possible interpretation across *Shas*, charting how it affects topics and *shitot* in other realms. And if we somehow could expect such exhaustive rigor, a miracle might be necessary to lay it out in clear and time-efficient language. For no matter how sweet and sage our rebbe's voice is, it is no match for the roar of a full Beit Midrash.

Yet no miracle is required – only WikiTorah. If a *bahur* with Rabbi Sobolofsky composed a page on *shelakot*, if a rookie with

Rabbi Rosensweig uploaded the conceptual underpinnings of *shekhitah* as a mitzvah, if a person in Ponovizh posted his *hakira* in *migo*, that miraculous state of affairs would appear before our computer-focused eyes. A constantly expanding and self-editing guide to *iyun* Gemara would emerge, providing *talmidim* and *talmidei hakhamim* alike with the Torah's greatest resource since Matan Torah. With expansive knowledge of *shitot* and *hakirot* taken as basic knowledge, *shiur* would offer Roshei Yeshiva opportunity to dazzle their students with novel interpretations, critique of radical new posts, and analysis of how last week's suggestions radically affect far-off *sugyot*. By the next morning, his latest thoughts will appear online, ready for acceptance or rejection by the Torah community at large.

And that community should begin with YU. Yeshiva University is uniquely positioned to realize the WikiTorah dream. It is perhaps the world's only institution with sufficient fi-

## WIKIPEDIA



nancial resources, proper ideological support, and richness of Torah minds to get WikiTorah off the ground. What would be required? How about five kollel guys working on a short list of *sugyot*, and a stipend for Shiur Assistants committed to posting insights from *shiur*? Even if this does not immediately enter *haredi* or Israeli circles, simply imagine the effect on RIETS alone. An online resource – for both *hakhanah* and *hazarah* – where the sum total of Roshei Yeshiva's thoughts on any covered *sugya* exists open for all to see.

But seeing requires vision. Face it: the world is moving on-line. To quote a YU librarian: "Don't worry too much about the Library, it'll be gone in twenty years." So even if you disagree with the approach taken here, you, too, must ask yourself: when the library disappears, where will the Beit Midrash be?

Ben Greenfield is a new addition to the Kol HaMevaser staff and editor of the pshat-based [DvarTorahProject.blogspot.com](http://DvarTorahProject.blogspot.com)

As with most areas of halakha, there are many conflicting opinions as to the ideal way to practice the mitzvah of *shemittah*. The ramifications of these *makhlokot* are huge with regard to *shemittah* because of the mitzvah's profound impact on the Israeli economy. From the very beginning of the trip, the groups witnessed the tension between the halakha and the practical realities created by its application.

Within a period of a couple of days, the groups heard two speakers, representing two very different communities with two very opposing ideas about the ideal practice of *shemittah*. One speaker, Rav Shmuel Yakobovitch,



representing the *haredi* approach to the mitzvah, opposed the *heter mekhirah* (the sale of land to a non-Jew which permits the land to be worked). He said that the *heter mekhirah* is just a loophole, a backhanded way to undo the mitzvah of *shemittah*. *Shemittah*, he claimed, is a cherished mitzvah for us to practice, not a burden to be thrown down at the first possible opportunity. Another argument he advanced was that the *heter mekhirah* is a halakhic leniency that was permitted at the beginning of the resettlement of the Land of Israel in the beginning of the twentieth century. This *kula*, however, was only created under very specific circumstances, which he argued were no longer in effect. The position advocated by the *haredi* community is the purchase of produce from non-Jews rather than the sale of the land itself.

Not long after hearing Rav Yakobovitch speak, Rav Benny Lau, an advocate of the *heter mekhirah*, addressed the group. He spoke vehemently against the purchase of produce from non-Jews ("yevul nokhri") because he felt buying local produce from the surrounding Arabs is likely to fund terrorism. Another point that he emphasized was the fact that many Jews will not be able to afford the inflated prices of the imported or non-Jewish produce.

Non-religious Jews will simply not pay these prices and will resort to eating produce grown by Jews during the *shemittah* year, which is obviously prohibited, rather than rely on the *heter mekhirah* which, though contested, had the support of many Torah giants of the previous century. The audience heard the passion in Rav Lau's voice as he said countless times that the *heter mekhirah* is the position for those who feel responsible for the whole of Israeli society, not just the small percentage who are willing to buy *yevul nokhri*.

The juxtaposition of these speakers is just one illustration of how the mitzvah of *shemittah*

in Israel is "living and breathing," as was said many times over the course of the mission. The political dimension, of not wanting to support the surrounding Arabs, conflicts with the desire to practice the halakha without resorting to leniencies. The sociological concerns of whether or not non-religious Jews will practice the mitzvah without the *heter mekhirah* and the potentially enormous economic strain on Israeli society that will result if the *heter mekhirah* is dissolved are also major factors contributing to the tension associated with this mitzvah.

The practical ramifications of the mitzvah of *shemittah* affect Israelis on the individual and societal levels. When learning about the mitzvah of *shemittah*, and when learning Torah in general, one's study is not complete if it remains enclosed in the four walls of the Beit Midrash. After thorough study of the sources, taking the step to see the impact of Torah on the world around us is what makes Torah a *Torat Hayim*, a living Torah.

Abby Atlas is a senior in SCW, majoring in Biology



# I With My Choice

BY SIMON BOTNOWICK

Who are you? yelled the boy to the heavens above  
Are you someone to fear? Are you someone as I live  
Are you here when I need someone near to take heed?  
Do you hear when my tears call for you to take heed?  
Do you look down on me, do you see what I do?  
Do you take it for granted that I think of you?  
Does my path cross with yours, are they one and the same?  
Do you watch all my actions and whisper my name?  
Why must I answer all this on my own?  
Why must I make all these choices alone?  
All right then, I choose to see you here with me  
I choose not to lose you in pain or in gloom  
I choose that my actions be guided by you  
I choose to see you behind all that I do  
I choose to deal straight on the path that you set  
I choose to refuse the appeal to forget  
In choosing these choices I give up my choice  
I choose to obey your wordless voice  
For myself I'll require that which you desire  
I'll sift and search and dare not tire  
I'll find that which your voice calls for  
I know I've heard it here before  
Your voice, your will, they're here in me  
They guide me, though we quietly  
Though you dwell in the heavens and I'm a small child  
Only I with my choice can come you to dwell in

Religion is the belief that the world is governed by a Being who desires, and perhaps requires, our acknowledgment of His presence through action.

# Torah U-Madda

## Heftsa or Gavra? The Task of the Contemporary Orthodox Thinker

BY RABBI SHALOM CARMY

*While ATID's 2008 Scholar-in-Residence, Rabbi Carmy gave a seminar to the ATID Fellows based on a Hebrew translation of this article. A recording of it and his other speeches from ATID's Winter Conference are available online at [www.atid.org/events/07-12-19.asp](http://www.atid.org/events/07-12-19.asp).*

Mattan and David asked me to comment on the prospective need for Jewish thought in coming years. The task of Jewish thought or theology, as I see it, is to clarify what, as God-fearing Jews, we ought to think and why, and to facilitate the coincidence of our lives with our ideals.

Because Jewish theology is about commitment and integrity, it devolves upon indi-

viduals uncommitted, even hostile, to the religious or to Orthodox belief or practice—their erudition cannot be dispensed with and their criticisms do not always deserve to be dismissed—yet we cannot allow to dictate our agenda the ironist who merely sits on the sidelines, out primarily for entertainment, or whose main satisfaction is the opportunity to heckle. The point is to learn how to conduct our lives, not how to theorize about how we would lead our lives if we were to live them, and not just talk about living them.

The failure to distinguish between engagement with religious reality and philosophical or academic chatter is often revealed in the tendency to substitute name-dropping for serious thought. Sometimes gesturing at big names like Nietzsche and Wittgenstein and Geertz and



viduals for whom such commitment is a full-time engagement. Rambam, at the beginning of the *Guide*, goes out of his way to stress that the search for wisdom cannot be pursued in fugitive hours when one is not preoccupied with worldly pleasures, in the twilight between a day at the beach and the night after, or, he might add, the interstices of a career consumed by the quest for secular academic approbation.

To be sure, religious purity and moral virtue alone cannot substitute for scholarship or logical inference or articulateness. All these are necessary but not sufficient for clarity about our beliefs and their relation to our actions. Though we can learn a great deal from

Foucault or labels like post-structuralism provides convenient shorthand for argument and reflection. Often, however, simply asking what the vaunted theorists and movements are actually asserting and what reasons or arguments buttress their claims dispels the mystery. It is neither necessary nor worthwhile to make a great show of agonizing over the desperate need for an Orthodox response to ideas whose content and rationale we do not understand. If you can't explain it with a minimum of jargon, chances are it's less important than you think.

Opposed to this tendency is the conviction voiced by votaries of towering Jewish luminaries like R. Soloveitchik and R. Kook, or lead-

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ing non-Jewish thinkers like Kant or Kierkegaard or Wittgenstein and the like that their hero has said the final word and obviated the need for further effort. I firmly believe that guides of the recent and not so recent past have bequeathed us inexhaustible resources for our edification and education. With respect to any really important question it is likely that they have said something of relevance and value.

But "something" is not always enough. If the task of theology is to clarify our thought and direct our lives, it is necessary that we be able to reformulate the wisdom of previous generations and other minds in a manner that is adequate to our self-understanding and the challenges we face: "The words of the dead are modified in the guts of the living." Celebration is easy, as easy as the reflexive cynicism to which it is ostensibly opposed. Theology is hard. Aside from the profound unresolved conflicts that testify to the stature of the greatest thinkers, we have our own difficulties and paradoxes to work through. The very fact that R. Kook or the Rav devoted relatively little attention to a problem we regard as crucial is proof enough that we conceptualize the matter differently than they did. Even if we can extract something of relevance and value from their work we cannot avoid the labor required to make their insights our own. If you can't explain it with a minimum of quotation, it probably won't help much.

## II

Here are some areas that require substantial attention and creativity:

First and foremost, the great task confronting the contemporary Orthodox thinker is the same as that which called forth the best in the Rav and R. Kook and their less influential confreres: how to make the categories of religious life real for the present generation. The magnificent achievements of the past continue to speak to us. However, we cannot simply repeat them like embalmed slogans. We must refresh them in our own language; doing so, we create our own literature. The Rav, R. Kook and R. Hutner, to mention only three of the most creative Orthodox thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, experimented with a variety of prose genres. We may deliberately model our efforts to communicate Torah on their compositions or explore new modes of writing—shorter, longer, more exegetical or more personal, more poetic or more argumentative. What we must share with them is absolute commitment to Torah, painstaking discipline of thought and accurate expression, and ruthless honesty with ourselves.

How to interpret sacred texts and what makes for authoritative interpretation has become increasingly crucial for our community. In part this is due to blatant cynical experiments at "pushing the envelope" of interpretation—if the text never means what it appears to say, then anything goes. This anarchic impulse has analogies in other disciplines but naturally it is most troubling in the realm of religious truth. We can usually counter the attempts to stretch the "seventy faces of Torah" to the

breaking point by mobilizing our reserves of common sense, as we would do in ruling out distorted interpretations in other areas. Nonetheless, even in the course of ordinary, uncontrived learning we have been compelled to become far more self-conscious of the process of interpretation than our predecessors were. What counts as a truthful or at least legitimate construal of a text? Who counts as legit-



imate arbiter of interpretation? These questions will not be answered conclusively by importing some novel methodology from the humanities, but require instead a greater awareness of the immanent rhythms of the classical process of learning and reaching decisions in Torah. Sensitivity to these matters cannot be taken for granted and cannot be dispensed with.

R. Soloveitchik, of course, made a compelling case for the centrality of Halakha to Judaism and consequently to Jewish thought. Insofar as Judaism, like life, is about action rather than contemplation, and insofar as our relationship to G-d is manifested first and foremost in obedience to Him and solidarity with Him, we cannot forsake the primacy of Halakha and moral action, and our intellectual life will follow that pattern.

Partly due to the new preoccupation with authoritative interpretation, partly because we have had the chance to reflect on the achievement of our predecessors, our work will frequently be required to confront self-consciously, the variety of normative texts at our disposal. When, in the course of any inquiry, we privilege one type of source (Bible, Halakha, canonical commentaries and so forth) or one historical period, or regard one orientation as more authoritative than another, we must be ready to explain and justify our decisions. Our continuing recognition the primacy of the practical will be enriched by discussions articulating the synchronic and diachronic di-

mensions of our fundamental texts.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to Jewish belief in modernity is the distinctive nature of Jewish peoplehood. All particularity is a stumbling block to universalistic, homogenizing rationality. Unlike other universalistic religions, Judaism is defined by membership in a particular national community with a singular commitment and way of life. How we balance the

religious and the national elements of Judaism is a matter of inestimable importance for the nature of Orthodox life and thought. If you stress too much the purely national aspect of Jewish identity, you succumb to the lure of secular nationalistic chauvinism, all the more dangerous because wrapped in the mantle of religious language. If your theology does not do justice to the national element, you cannot account for the fundamental fact that Jews who fail to share your commitment remain Jews and you are left with a sectarian group rather than the people Israel.

Though R. Kook and R. Soloveitchik, among others, have dealt with this tension between human merit and divine election, the covenant of fate and the covenant of destiny, the proper synthesis, and its translation into lived reality, is elusive, and current trends, such as the erosion of ethnic distinctiveness in the West, reflected in the widespread acceptance of intermarriage, the unsettled situation in Israel and the failure of Zionism to "normalize" Jewish existence, and the glee with which liberal ideologists can associate convictions of religious distinctiveness with the culture of violence, necessitate vigilant reformulation in the light of our changing situation.

It may have been prescient of the Rav to devote a lengthy manuscript to a Jewish theology of the family. Whatever the private behavior of elites and underclass, divorce, at that time, was not yet treated as a normal no fault

rite of passage (in New York State, for example, civil divorce was granted only for adultery or extreme cruelty!). It was unimaginable that other rejections of conventional marriage would become sacrosanct in the eyes of the cultural establishment. Jewish ethics is not primarily about taking the right public positions; it is about living the right kind of life. Life is about personal relations and especially about our intimate, everyday personal relations. Are personal relations governed by fidelity to God and to the human beings to whom we are committed or are they comprehended in terms of our preferences alone? If we cannot experience the love that is born of fidelity to duty, then our attempts to respond obediently to halakhic imperatives and ideals are liable to be burdensome where they should be full of joy. Hence we must elaborate on a theological understanding of personal relations that is more than a recitation of particular *halakhot*.

Lastly, the present age, despite its extravagant demands for autonomy, is submissively deterministic when it comes to taking responsibility for our actions and omissions, and quite subservient to the *zeitgeist* when it comes to delineating our range of options in the face of prevalent social mores and trends. Jewish theologians cannot usurp the office of science and need not undertake the function of analytic philosophy in this area. However, as I have argued elsewhere at length, freedom is not something that we either have or don't have—it is something that we create by using and lose by abdicating. Here we surely have the responsibility of facilitating the imaginative scope and creative depth that enables individuals to develop freedom of the will. It is our task to make real the adventure that is ours, if we choose it, as finite, vulnerable yet free human beings.

Reviewing this brief list, it occurs to me that everything returns to the question of identity: Who are we, who are willing to take our stand as religious individuals, as part of a divinely founded religious community, who aim to conform our lives intellectually and actually to that commitment? One aspect of our identity is the question of who and how Torah is properly interpreted. The other pertains to the way we choose to create ourselves in action: how we understand our identity as Jews in conjunction with our identification with, and difference from, the rest of humanity, how we sanctify our everyday lives, and ultimately, whether we experience ourselves as *heftsas*, as passive entities molded by outside forces, or as *gavras* who with the help of G-d and in partnership with Him, venture to shape our own destinies before Him.

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# Text—My Prime-Mover: A Translation for the Outsider

BY SHIRA SCHWARTZ

One way or another, text has always stood at the center of my life. From the very first moment that children are capable of uttering words, Jewish parents are responsible for training them to recite the verse, "Moses commanded us Torah, an inheritance for the Congregation of Jacob."<sup>1</sup> Some are bequeathed money, jewelry, or property, and we are taught to love and respect our textual inheritance, to protect it, and, in turn, depend on it. Raised in



an Orthodox, Jewish community, the "People of the Book," with echoes of the Holocaust reverberating in every home, hallway, and classroom, I was brought up with both an intuitive understanding of the power that text and narrative have to preserve the past, and an implacable urgency to replenish the void left by destruction—to create. I learned that text is powerful because it can recreate whole realities, that is can resurrect. The written word is charged with the duty to translate the world of the Other, to render it universally intelligible. Generating proximity to experiences beyond the reader's locality, text makes the particular and foreign widely accessible and rescues the fleeting hopes and whims of everyday people from the abyss of historical indifference.

My relationship to text has been shaped in part by a dissonance between the cultural nuances of my home and school. While at home I received a Modern Orthodox education, replete with grand contemporary aspirations both personal and professional, "from nine to five" I was nurtured in the bosom of the Ultra-Orthodox community, a world that thrives off of the mysteries of tradition and a negation of self, which fears the post-modern autonomous individual.

In school, they taught us that text is powerful because it anchors. In fact, the entire existence of the Orthodox Jewish community, with its layered tradition and detailed ritual observance, seems to rely on this basic premise. I don't know the extent to which the average Orthodox Jew realizes this is true, and in that

respect, if my teachers would agree with my formulation of what they taught us; still, that is what they taught us.

They told us about great rabbis, who journeyed on foot for days to study in yeshiva, rabbis who submerged their feet in frigid water at night to prevent themselves from falling asleep, spending sixteen, seventeen, *eighteen hours* a day studying Torah.

The tales of fervent dedication to Torah study were coupled with a poignant longing for a world that was. This world took on many dif-

ferent forms: pre-Nazi Europe, the Davidic Monarchy, a forty-year sojourn in a miraculous desert—these ancient epochs were glorified, and it was text and narrative that seemed to "save them," and in turn, bring them back to save us. Text was tantamount to life, and studying our textual tradition was considered not only the most worthwhile endeavor a person could undertake, but a method of survival.

In this sense, there could not have been a more perfect breeding ground for a writer or scholar. I wrote and directed my first play in the fifth grade, a tale about schoolgirls who risk their lives to find provisions for Hanukkah candle lighting in Auschwitz; the all too familiar storyline didn't seem to disturb the grade school children who were my peers. The play was my pre-adolescent way of rendering our heavy history tangible, controllable. My history and culture provided me with artistic substance—*stories*—but more significantly, with a sense of purpose in telling those stories, and an urge to produce my own.

And indeed, I grew to depend on it, on the identity that text provided me with. I spent my high school summers poring over Jewish texts in intensive religious studies programs in Israel. During the year, I studied books we didn't cover in school with various study partners, gave lectures in my community, and established programs that brought text and life in closer contact with one another. I discovered a restorative capacity in studying and writing. Like so many of my ancestors, text sustained me.

But text can also suffocate. Powerful in that it is binding, text serves as a way of bronzing the past, locking it in a museum case to eternally project its authority; and sometimes the past is better left for dead. I never seemed to understand why my peers, and even my teachers, didn't appreciate my dedication to text, what we had been taught to see as the core value of our community. Brought up in a Modern Orthodox home, values like going to college and having a career were givens, unlike my Ultra-Orthodox schoolmates whose parents encouraged a more insular, nostalgic lifestyle and early marriage to the young men whose lives would be devoted to studying text, to learning Torah. Of course, it took me until the tenth grade to realize that my teachers had been conditioning me to marry a Torah scholar, not to be one. Transposing the values of my home onto the models set forth by my school, I found myself fumbling towards an absent persona: the Haredi, female Rosh Yeshiva. Suddenly, text denied me.

But the source of text's power lies in the reader's belief, in faith. As a child, I studied a lot of Midrash, a rabbinic of narrative biblical interpretation that attempts to resolve difficulties in the text in an almost fantasy-like style. Midrash builds on terseness and ambiguity, transforming everyday people into biblical heroes and elevating their private, simple actions, touched upon cursorily in the biblical narrative itself, to a magnitude of cosmic significance. These magical, literary expositions were the fabric of my Ultra-Orthodox education, and conditioned me, from a very young age to assess my own life through the prism of Midrash, to view my life as literary.

I was educated to believe, in the veracity of fantastical episodes recorded in Midrash, in the prowess of unknown ancestors, in an unfamiliar identity. This cultural matrix encouraged me to see in the world greater possibilities than it naturally had to offer me. But even as reason and experience argued against a romanticized, Midrashic reality, my faith in text propelled me to hope, to believe in my ability to write it.

And text is powerful because it is liberating. As a teenager, the sort of omniscience that text provided me with was intoxicatingly freeing. Chronological barriers dissipated and the entirety of Jewish history lay before me in the dozens of books that filled my shelves. That same intoxication propelled me to create, to follow the example set forth by the text I studied and add my own voice to the dialogue.

In university, I encountered a new textual terrain. A plethora of fresh voices sharpened those still echoing, crystallizing their ideas with language they themselves could not utter. I found myself at the nexus of two worlds, both pulling and daring me to grow and somehow, encompass them at once. Newfound academic language provided me with words—tools, to see my heritage for its pertinence. I grew to

see Midrash, my tradition, for more than its self-presentation; I grew to see it as penetrable. This nexus of divergent worlds became an origin point, where I learned to alchemize conflict, into broader, richer epistemes.

My tradition has shaped my identity both by inspiring it and limiting it, by providing me with models to emulate as well as the blockades I must break through in order to master them as my own. Midrash has taught me a lot about how we construct meaning through narrative and about the role text plays in that initiative; how texts can serve as conclusive authorities; coercion, to see the world through a particular lens. But Midrash has also taught me about the limits of text, about the reader's freedom and responsibility, to engage the text in an imaginative dialogue, to extrapolate, reform and reconstruct. Throughout history, people have turned to Midrash, not only as a means of closing text, but of opening it.

My struggle with and for identity has forced my sense of self to contract. Different from the people around me, this contraction has moved me towards productivity, pushing me to develop new language, new paradigms, new realities. Yet, more than the innovation it breeds, I find that text is powerful because it unifies. A common ground in which all ideas must plant themselves, text creates a space of communion for mankind, inside which every assertion must answer to the humble, normalizing authority of black and white. Like in Midrash, the language spoken there is not one



of objectivity. Through text, our experiences become accessible, and with that accessibility, myriad possibilities and perspectives are given their bit of earth in which to grow. And as I continue to claim agency over text through writing, I am laden with responsibility and opportunity both to nurture unborn worlds and to generate original models with which to handle the ever-evolving present.

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 33:4



# A Torah U-Madda Approach to Historical Inquiry

BY YOSEF LINDELL

Because we often define Torah U-madda as a type of synthesis, we attempt to view secular culture and knowledge through the prism of Torah values. One can select the classics of literature which prove most edifying, view the works of art that proclaim the God-given abilities of man, even see the rationally-ordered universe as a paean to the magnificence of divine choreography. But where does the academic study of history fit into this scheme? The critical scholar is expected to analyze texts with a healthy dose of skepticism, to dissect them by all means of inquiry, and, above all, to construct an unbiased and objective reconstruction of the past. If, however, adherence to Torah U-madda demands synthesis and says that we must study history to find religious meaning, then are we not imposing our own values on the events of the past? If we scour the recesses of the human experience for the eternal truths of our people, if we try to find the hand of God in the dynamics of history, do we not invalidate the very nature of the objective enterprise we have defined? And if we do not approach history with these biases, then how do we view its study as part of our religious personalities?

Before attempting to grapple with this question, it is instructive to examine how the study of history has been treated by Jewish historiography. Many argue that it is in the fundamentals of Jewish faith and the Torah itself that the concept of history is born.<sup>1</sup> The ancient pagan religions saw time as cyclical. The past, enshrouded in the mists of a mythical "dream-time," held nothing worth remembering—no promises, covenants, or consequences. Each cycle of drought or plenty and each war between the gods for heavenly domination was a mere manifestation of primeval chaos. An individual or a society could gain the favor of the gods through the proper sacrifices, but mankind as a whole could do nothing to change its fate or shape its future. There was no goal or purpose, no plan for history.

In God's call to Abraham, the concept of time and the meaning of history are radically redefined. In the past are God's promises of nationhood and covenant. The present is the arena in which man has the free-will to draw close to God and shape a future in which those promises can be fulfilled. The Exodus from Egypt was a historical event, never to be repeated, but indelibly etched upon our national consciousness through the grandeur of Revelation. The Torah stresses that our obligation to serve God lies in our historical connection to Him: "I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt from the house of slavery."<sup>2</sup> Our destiny, and with it all of mankind's, is contingent upon our fealty to the past. In the words of R. Jonathan Sacks, we find in Judaism "the unique attempt to endow events with meaning, and to see in the chroni-

cles of mankind something more than a mere succession of happenings - to see them as nothing less than a drama of redemption in which the fate of a nation reflects its loyalty or otherwise to a covenant with G-d."<sup>3</sup> History has meaning. Upon its stage of purposeful past, present, and future, an eternal covenant unfolds.

Thus, according to this interpretation, history is the basis for our faith and reaffirms our elected status and mission. Yet the meaning of history is much more important than the facts. Hazal, the consummate preservers of the Biblical tradition, sought to cull the proper theological messages by interpreting historical events. Aggadic literature emphasizes the values and ethics that we can learn from the Torah, but has little concern for the facts of the past.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Hazal lived through the stormy period of the late Second Temple era, but wrote

and the exalted tradition of our people. It could highlight the martyrdom of spiritual heroes. Sometimes, one could even attempt to discern the hints of the Divine plan that glimmer through the cracks of the past.

In his controversial work *Meor Einayim*, the 16<sup>th</sup> century scholar Azariah de Rossi offered a different approach to the value of historical inquiry. De Rossi rejected Livy's claim that we can learn from the mistakes of history, countering that as Jews, the Torah and Hazal teach us all we need, to know to follow the proper path of religious and ethical observance. He wrote, "What was—was, and there is in it no relevance to law or observance." "Still," he observed, "the refined soul yearns to know the truth of everything."<sup>5</sup>

In one sentence, de Rossi separated the study of history from the realm of religion. In his opinion, our religious tradition is perfectly

epitomized by Leopold Zunz, sought to study the history and culture of Judaism from a purely academic, critical, and allegedly objective perspective. This virtual explosion of interest in Jewish historiography continues until this very day.

Yet this movement and its successors were not without critics. Shemuel David Luzzatto, a 19<sup>th</sup> century traditional Jew of deeply held religious beliefs but an insatiable curiosity for academic scholarship that placed him squarely within the *Wissenschaft* circle, attacked the other scholars with whom he corresponded for lacking, "the faith which seeks to grasp the prophets as the word of God, and to see in Jewish history the singular chronicle of a singular people."<sup>6</sup> Like many of his predecessors, Luzzatto could not find value in a method of study that did not appeal to some higher religious purpose.

Additionally, the *Wissenschaft* scholars were not the unbiased observers they purported to be. By studying the Jewish past and people, they hoped to find precedents and justifications for their own ideologies, which were often at odds with traditional Judaism. Even what is termed as purely objective study is not always free from personal and religious biases.

This historical survey seems to demonstrate that although the interpretation of history holds an important place in our tradition, academic inquiry into the past does not. Furthermore, challenging commonly held assumptions and delving into the origins of the Torah and Jewish practice can lead one astray from religious belief. Perhaps I should end the article here, concluding that academic study cannot be countenanced from a Torah U-madda standpoint.

Yet, in the fractured world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I believe that the more conservative, and perhaps more traditional, approach to history is also fraught with danger. If we search our past in order to find theological truths and moral messages, do we not run the risk of shaping that very past by our preconceived religious notions and mores? In the search for continuity in our religious tradition, might we not unconsciously neglect certain troubling details for the sake of that continuity? Although there are many who argue that this is indeed a desirable outcome, I for one cannot stomach hagiography or falsification, no matter how noble the cause.

Perhaps most troubling is the fact that in the Orthodox community there have been recent trends toward historical triumphalism. Some subtly reinterpret the past both to match their current worldviews and value-systems and in an effort to undermine the legitimacy of other equally traditional approaches.<sup>7</sup> Such thinkers approach the past with the motto: "we are right, and we have always been right." In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this mode of thinking is unfortunately quite pervasive, even outside of Orthodox Jewish circles. The world we live in is



little about it except that which was relevant to their religious message. For example, in formulating the historical reason for the celebration of Hannukkah, the Talmud only mentions the miracle of the oil jug and ignores the military successes of the Maccabees. Hazal were not oblivious to these monumental military victories. Rather, they emphasized the oil because it better pointed to the continuing presence of God in the post-prophetic age.<sup>8</sup>

This didactic conception of history was the prevailing attitude among both Jews and non-Jews. The Roman historian Livy conceived of the study of history as a way to avoid the mistakes of the past.<sup>9</sup> Others saw it as a means for moral edification. The few Jewish historians in the medieval and early modern period followed a similar course. History demonstrated the unbroken chain of *massorah*

wholesome, requiring no external historical justification or support. Rather, one studies history out of a burning desire to know the truth, to fulfill an inner need to uncover what really happened.<sup>10</sup> Although de Rossi lived only on the cusp of the Scientific Revolution and well before the Enlightenment, his approach parallels that of many of their thinkers. Religion was a discipline unto itself, one that had no bearing on science or history. That the study of both theology and secular disciplines could be pursued without any semblance of contradiction was a notion appealed to by thinkers from Galileo to Moses Mendelssohn.

But in Jewish circles, de Rossi was a lone voice. It was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the formation of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement that the critical study of history began in earnest. The *Wissenschaft* school,



polarized, fragmented, and at war with itself. Every group struggles for recognition, propounding up history as its exclusive claim to legitimacy.

In my opinion, this is where critical historical inquiry becomes crucial. Using a fully unapologetic study of the past, one can cut through the propaganda and find the multiple strands of thought that weave themselves through the vicissitudes of time. As I study what came before, I struggle to isolate each thread, to understand its formation, its uniqueness, and how it fits into the whole. History is not monolithic. There is a rich diversity that spans the past and present, both in our Jewish heritage and our shared human heritage. Through this process of discovery, I hope to become more tolerant—and have the strength and courage to avoid the pitfalls of divisiveness.

It is this more expansive vision of human



nature that I believe can be harmonized with Torah U-madda. The expression of the multifaceted human tradition in history can guide us to a greater appreciation of the world which God has bestowed upon us. With all its wars, famines, and worries, it is a beautiful creation, populated by a humanity endowed with the precious and beautiful gift of free-will. Understanding human nature and God's creation can increase our faith. Even if we do not impose our beliefs upon a text, it does not mean that our faith is irrelevant to the study of history. As we view history more objectively and detach ourselves from it, we are paradoxically drawn closer, and we can begin to touch the tradition and memory that seep through the faded and often tattered pages of our shared human past. We do not resurrect the ancients to proclaim value-judgments, but only to explore. By understanding our ancestors from their own perspective, we create a deeper connection and find a more wholesome meaning.

Admittedly, what I propose here is not synthesis. One is forced to compartmentalize, creating a somewhat uneasy syncretism of objectivity and faith. And despite my attempt at objectivity, part of me knows and believes that the Divine truth is affirmed through history. The Torah tells us so. History itself demonstrates so. Precisely how it will be fully revealed, I do not know. No one really knows.

Sometimes the hand of God is easily apparent, but in the face of cataclysm and tragedy, we often struggle to find where He has hidden. Yet I am confident that a day will come when the grey rain-curtain will be rolled back, and the tapestry of history will be revealed before us in all its glory as the work of the Master Artisan.

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<sup>1</sup> This notion of a Jewish birth to history is widespread in scholarly and popular literature. See Yosef Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 8-9 and many of R. Jonathan Sacks' divrei torah on the web.

<sup>2</sup> *Shemot* 20:2.

<sup>3</sup> R. Jonathan Sacks, Parshat Vaera 5768: <http://www.chief Rabbi.org/thoughts/vaera5768.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Yerushalmi, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> See Salo W. Baron, *History and Jewish Historians* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1964), 206-07.

<sup>7</sup> Qtd. in Yerushalmi, p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> See Isaac Barzilay, *Between Reason and Faith: Anti-Rationalism in Italian Thought 1250-1650* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), 191 and Lester Segal, *Historical Consciousness and Religious Tradition in Azariah de Rossi's Me'or Einayim* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), 28-31.

<sup>9</sup> Qtd. in Yerushalmi, p. 92.

<sup>10</sup> For some examples of this phenomenon see Jacob J. Schacter, "Facing the Truths of History," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 8 (1998-99):200-73.

## A Modern Orthodox Jew in the Modernized World

BY AHARON ARAZI

In this article I take a stab at how some world trends may be affecting the Modern Orthodox community, namely, religious polarization, the dearth of leaders, and challenges to belief.<sup>1</sup> Then I argue that the internet can address emerging problems by fostering sincere dialogue.

### Religious Polarization

Polarization is a global trend.<sup>2</sup> In world religions like Judaism, this means the 'middle' empties out toward the poles of religious fundamentalism and secularization. The rise of secularization has shown itself most recently in books that celebrate atheism, with spokesmen Dawkins and Hitchens being well received on their talking tours.<sup>3</sup> Those who are not drawn away from religion towards secularism, might strengthen their religious ardor. In Modern Orthodox and other Jewish communities this response to secularization manifests itself as a movement toward Haredization.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary Modern Orthodox literature is telling: *Flipping Out*<sup>5</sup> discusses the pull "to the right," and *Off the Derech*<sup>6</sup> the pull "to the left." The bell curve of religious observance (if there ever was one) seems to be becoming more bimodal. Is the YU community following this trend?

From the admittedly impressionistic perspective of this author, the YU community also seems to be subject to polarization. For example, forty YU male and female students accompanied Rabbi J.J. Schachter to Nashville to address 3,000 Jews of different types and (life)styles at the UJC General Assembly. A month later, forty students - men and women completely separated - accompanied Rosh Yeshiva Rabbi Z. Sobolofsky to Israel on a *shemittah* Torah study trip over winter break. I know some students from each of the trips who would feel comfortable attending the other trip. But I have doubts as to whether most YU students would feel comfortable attending either trip. I also have doubts as to whether most non-YU Modern Orthodox students would consider attending a single-sex *shemittah* Torah study trip over winter break. There is no animosity, as I see it, just different crowds. Different crowds are inevitable; groups of friends develop together and reinforce one another.<sup>7</sup>

The immediate threat of polarization at YU is that it perpetuates crude stereotypes of either white shirt + black kippah or jeans + kippah *srugah*. What's threatening about such stereotypes is that it gives people the false impression that they can be thoughtlessly plopped into crude unrealistic categories (like 'right' and 'left') which automatically justify their religious identity.<sup>8</sup> One of the ways people formulate their identity is by contrasting themselves with others. This process jumps

from the level of the individual to the level of the group. When there are two central groups to choose from (since carving your own path takes tremendous strength and audacity), the process of identity formation comes to be based off of contrasting the qualities of the available groups. For example, I may say to myself: I know this group well and it is more serious about its Judaism, while that other group is more acculturated; I know this group cares more about humanity, while that other group cares more about God. It does not matter that such characterizations are not at all accurate. What matters, in the minds of impressionable young men and women like I was, is which group you will choose to identify yourself with, and, maybe more significantly, which group you will choose *not* to become a part of.<sup>9</sup> And knowledge of a group can be based on superficial stereotypes. This is no way to live, and definitely no way to live active, committed Judaism.

Religious inferiority/superiority complexes may develop. If I'm not a *shtark* premed YP student, my *yiddishkeit* must be worth less and may even be inconsequential in the eyes of God. I may experience a religious superiority complex because I am that *shtark* and I do come on time for morning *seider* and don't get tired at night *seider*, and could feel, (God forbid), morally superior to those *krum* IBC kids that aren't "for real." Both outcomes are ridiculously tragic.

Shifts in religious orientation arise, in part, from the orientation of those around you, those you use as a contrast to create a self identity. This is also true at an institutional level. "Open Orthodoxy" of *Yeshivat Chovevei Torah* is a movement within Modern Orthodoxy (the way they define themselves). Will the YU response be one of denial and isolationism ('we are the *real* bearers of tradition and you are not') or an adaptation (we are open and modern too!)? Also, will the 'kosher checks' on Young Israel rabbis deter RIETS *musmakhim* (this is 21<sup>st</sup> century America, we left Big Brother in the 17<sup>th</sup> century *shtetl*) or attract them (look, I'll prove it, we are *shtark* enough), or neither? Will responses cause the different elements of YU to undergo further bifurcation?

### Wanted: Religious Leaders

*Newsweek* published an issue based on lack of world leadership, and in that sense Modern Orthodoxy is part of the world. YU students have religious guides, and there are a handful of religious leaders at YU.<sup>10</sup> We have *rebbeim* in our *shiurim* or classes who are truly superb teachers. Some students are loyal to a particular *Rosh Yeshiva* and follow his *shitas*. Many of us have affiliations with *yeshivot* in Israel, and some maintain contact with their *rebbeim* there. Orthodox college students at other universities have a Jewish Learning Initiative rabbi and a Chabad rabbi. Synagogues



will be the next stop in life for finding religious leadership. But I can't help but get the sense of a lurking leaderless-ness.

At YU, the disunity in religious leadership amongst the *Roshei Yeshiva* is almost palpable.

With all due respect to the *Roshei Yeshiva*, I don't even know which way to pray in the main *beit midrash*; should I follow *Sgan Ruchani* Rabbi Blau, sticking to what I've done all my life in every community I have been in and pray toward the *aron ha-kodesh*, or turn slightly away from the *aron* toward the eastern wall so I can follow Rabbi Schachter whose breadth of knowledge is unparalleled? An informative documentary described the ongoing battle – *le-shem shamayim* – of who among his *talmidim* knew Rav Soloveitchik the best, and who is most accurately following in his path. Peers look at me funny for the *be-rakhah* I make on wraps since their *rosh yeshiva* holds differently. I bought spring water so that guests wouldn't have to feel uncomfortable – for reasons of *kashrut* – when I offered them tap water, since that too is a matter of *makhloket* amongst *roshei yeshiva*. *Makhloket* extends beyond the realm of *psak halakha*, and, naturally, hashkafic disagreements are unavoidable at YU – among *roshei yeshiva* and among students.

*Roshei Yeshiva* could, potentially, sit down and duke out all their issues until they arrive at some consensus. Alternatively, the Modern Orthodox Jewish community could appoint the most learned *rav* as the source of *psak*. But maybe the way we observe religion is no longer conducive to having centralized religion. We are disheartened by thoughtless devotion to *daat Torah* and enjoy the plurality of available halakhic opinions. We have been acculturated to this feature of modernity, the “free market of American religion”<sup>34</sup> characterized by a *smorgasbord* pick-what-you-like-and-deemphasize-the-rest type of religious lifestyle.<sup>35</sup> Rav Soloveitchik is attributed to be the leader of Modern Orthodoxy. Maybe part of the reason people liked him was because he refused to be a dominating leader; he hesitated to give *psak* and instead referred people to Rav Moshe; he would not recommend that his community adopt his *minhagim*; he demanded that people make their own life decisions.<sup>36</sup>

In this decentralized form of leadership, clusters of people who affiliate themselves with a broader ‘Modern Orthodox’ community gather around an individual affiliated with that community. Each community member can only have a personal connection with several religious leaders at most. Like the student to teacher ratios at any given university, the greater number of teachers/religious leaders, the more attention each student/community member receives. It is clear that under this model, there is a need for a greater number of religious leaders.

I write not about leaders in academia or business who happen also to be religious. I'm talking about people who lead the religious community in things connected to religion. The president of the shul, the *daf yomi* teacher, the *gabbai*, the coordinator of the *mishlah manot* drive, or the *bikur holim* club – all of

these are examples of religious leaders who are not rabbis. People like these who *osek btsarhei tsibur be-emunah* are what keeps the communal engine running. Here again, the *Newsweek* article is right: we need more people like you.

### Community of Faith or Faith to the Community?

“Chaim Isaac Waxman's *Jewish Baby Boomers: A Communal Perspective* quotes Will Herberg's classic study, Protestant, Catholic, Jew (first published in 1955, and revised in 1960), to suggest that, when Americans profess themselves “religious,” as they invariably do, they confess an abiding faith in faith itself, and in the “American way of life.”<sup>37</sup>

That statement was made in regard to American Jewish baby boomers in general, not Modern Orthodox Jews in particular. It would be presumptuous of me to question whether Modern Orthodox Jews, the ones ‘in the fold,’ are practicing intrinsically-motivated religion – whether the beliefs they espouse are internally sincere convictions – or whether they be-



lieve in belief. But for the purposes of our exploration, that question is asinine. External behavior can be more easily observed, and what is evident is that social pressure drives conformity. The value of communal conformity can be detrimental to dealing with challenges to a religious system of belief, since if I think I will be judged for raising an issue of belief, I will keep silent and act like I have no issue.

We are beginning to discuss issues that modernity confronts us with: feminism in halakhah,<sup>38</sup> homosexuality,<sup>39</sup> creation vs. evolution,<sup>40</sup> biblical criticism and divine authorship,<sup>41</sup> *goyim* and *am ha-nivhar*, science of *Hazal* vs. halakhot based on science of *Hazal*, and the list goes on. I sense that there are disproportionately more unasked questions than addressed issues.<sup>42</sup>

There are plenty of short answer justifications for the aforementioned challenges: women play a different role than men and halakha is sensitive to them, the act of homosexuality is forbidden while the drive is just like any other *yetser harah*, God created evolution and wrote the Torah, we follow the Meiri and have no qualms with *goyim*, *am ha-nivhar* means more responsibility not inherent superiority, we follow modern science but don't

change *gezeirot* in deference to *Hazal*, and the list goes on.<sup>43</sup> But thorough, substantive dialogue addressing the conflict between modernity and Torah doesn't seem to exist. In that sense, the Noah Feldman article could be taken as an opportunity to spur public discussion and thereby help Modern Orthodoxy achieve greater religious maturity.<sup>44</sup>

www.conclusion.com

All we have discussed until now seems to point to the internet as part of a solution. We spoke about polarization and the need to better understand the ‘other.’ We spoke about the need for religious leaders. And we spoke about the need to address matters that challenge our belief system. The subtext: dialogue, dialogue, dialogue.

On the internet, you can't tell the color of the kippah of the person you are speaking to. At other universities there is a message board on which incoming classmen can post questions. Creating a kosher online environment where YU students can meet each other (the ‘beis medrash crowd’ doesn't use

ple:” Jewish religious patterns, Jewish family patterns, socioeconomic characteristics and mobility, and Jewish cinema. I thank Dr. Chaim Waxman, Project Head for the report referred to, for his kind mentoring.

<sup>34</sup> Almond, Appleby & Silverman, *Strang Religion*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press 2003)

<sup>35</sup> Dawkins' *The God Delusion* and Hitchens' *God is Not Great*. Hitchens debate against R. Shmuley Boteach on the existence of God was a sold out event at the 92nd street Y in Manhattan on January 26th.

<sup>36</sup> Source available upon request: Aarazi@yu.edu

<sup>37</sup> Shalom Z. Berger, Daniel Jacobson and Chaim I. Waxman, *Flipping Out? Myth or Fact: The Impact of the “Year in Israel”* (Yashar Books, 2007)

<sup>38</sup> Faranack Margolese, *Off the Derech: Why Observant Jews Leave Judaism and how to respond to the challenge* (2005)

<sup>39</sup> Stereotypically at YU there are three crowds split up by dormitory: the black hat Muss crowd, the pothead Rubin crowd, and the *shtark* in jeans and colored-shirt Morgenstern crowd.

<sup>40</sup> That's why someone with tremendous insight designed split *srugi*-black velvet *yarmulkes* that said “I love every Jew.”

<sup>41</sup> Clearly this is oversimplifying the process of identity formation, and many more factors play a role, but the group-think factors described are a not insignificant ingredient.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Joel is an inspirational “*lei kodesh*” President, a leader who is religious. But he's not a “Religious Leader.” Rabbi Brander of the CJF is hard at work training more leaders for the Modern Orthodox Jewish community which needs teachers at its schools, (according to R. Blau's forthcoming article in “Religious Zionism: Orthodox Forum”) shuls, and for the broader Jewish world.

<sup>43</sup> Snider, Alvin, *WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A JEW TODAY?* Chronicle of Higher Education, (11/23/2001), Vol. 48, Issue 13

<sup>44</sup> Mervin Verbit lecture in “American Jewish Community” sociology course, Spring 2007. I'm exaggerating the situation to make a point; Jews who describe themselves as adherents to halakha have definite undeniable limitations, but there is still lots of ‘wiggle room’ depending on which *rav* you ask, or your level of punctiliousness.

<sup>45</sup> For the last point, I heard a personal story from a rabbi who, in high school, asked the Rav where he suggested attending: Columbia or YU? To which the Rav responded: “I have an opinion but I'm not going to tell you what it is.”

<sup>46</sup> Snider, Alvin, *WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A JEW TODAY?* Chronicle of Higher Education, (11/23/2001), Vol. 48, Issue 13

<sup>47</sup> Last year featured a public dialogue between Stern women who wanted to read megillah and Rabbi Lamm.

<sup>48</sup> Rabbi J.J. Schachter emphasized to the YU students at the UJC conference in Nashville that it was urgent to discuss homosexuality, at YU and in Modern Orthodoxy in general.

<sup>49</sup> A day after writing this I saw publicity for a speaker addressing this topic at Stern college. Awesome.

<sup>50</sup> In the Bible classes taught at Yeshiva College, for example, JEPD is a dirty word, not even mentioned, let alone addressed. One YC bible professor explained to me that it was more appropriate to let students approach him with issues they may have, rather than create religious issues for them. Another part of the reason biblical criticism is not addressed seems to be that the Orthodox response is not yet confident enough.

<sup>51</sup> I'd be delighted to be informed if you think otherwise, and where you experience open discussion.

<sup>52</sup> Though these issues may be discussed in private, my experience is that the *loci* of discussion is always external, grounded in a conceptual, theoretical-dogmatical system, not in individual's internal dialogue; it's not about what you believe in your heart or how to go about making yourself believe it, it's about intellectual understanding of how one could justify existing as Modern Orthodox Jews. R. Carmy teaches a course that probably addresses such issues and more, “Faith...”

<sup>53</sup> I am not talking about the potential damage on the relationship between Jews and non-Jews. Rather, I am echoing a point so eloquently articulated by R. Benjamin Samuels of Congregation Sha'arei Tefillah in Newton, that being forced to confront issues can be a constructive, identity-forming process.

<sup>54</sup> A kosher online YU environment might also be conducive place for *shidduhim* to happen?

<sup>1</sup> This notion and most others presented herein have been informed by a 2007 conference of the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute (JPPPI) in Israel whose annual assessment identified key “Societal Aspects of the Jewish Peo-



# Maximizing Talmud Torah

BY EPHRAIM METH

## 1. Inspiration

*Bittul Torah* is bad, forbidden. *Talmud Torah* is good, obligatory. Opportunities to study Torah, to decrease *bittul* and increase *talmud*, abound. The Steipler studied Torah while repairing his home. Many outstanding Jews study Torah while commuting. R. Chaim Volozhiner rules that one must study Torah while working, if the work's quality is not compromised. (*Nefesh ha-Haim* 1,8) Similarly, we must study Torah in college classes, if our gains from those classes are not compromised.

Obviously, perusing an open gemara in class is a blatant display of disrespect and often a *hillul Hashem*. Reviewing Torah by heart is less disrespectful, but nevertheless impedes concentration and participation and ultimately detracts from the class' dividends. The same usually applies to cutting class. Needless to say, the above acts also imbue us with negative character traits; flippancy towards any area of study necessarily morphs, to some degree, into flippancy in all areas.

Yet we can study Torah in college classes without disengaging ourselves from their content. Indeed, we can study Torah in classes by engaging ourselves, and our Torah, with their content. If we assiduously search for connections between Torah and the course material; if we politely yet persistently cite relevant Torah thoughts in class; if we pepper our papers with biblical and Talmudic sources, then we will decrease *bittul Torah* and maximize *talmud Torah*.

Are we capable of fulfilling this ambitious charge, of vanquishing this scourge of *bittul Torah*? Reflecting on our meager hoards of Torah knowledge, we often feel impoverished, and rightly so. Meditating on our feeble analytic and intuitive skills, we often feel inadequate, with good cause. Can we, orphans of orphans, honestly aspire to uphold R. Chaim Volozhiner's ruling or sincerely expect to emulate the Steipler?

Misplaced humility is the bugbear of aspiring *talmidei chachamim*. The ultimate pauper is bound by halakha to maximize his *talmud Torah*. (Ramham, *hilkhot talmud Torah* 1,1) Though our task be infinite, we are not free to slack off. (*Avot* 2,16)

Our pursuit of Torah and *yediat Hashem* must be premeditated. In this spirit, the following section will present some strategies that enable us to maximize *talmud Torah* in college classes.

## 2. Strategies

I

First, self confidence is vital. We may not have *shas* and *poskim* at our fingertips, but we

do have the *masekhtot* we have learned here in yeshiva, in Israel, and perhaps in high school. Most of us have some familiarity with *Tanakh* from elementary school, our rabbis' Shabbat *derashot*, YC bible classes, or from independent study. We have imbibed basic ideas of Jewish hashkafa, from parents or friends or teachers. If we seek reflections of these texts and ideas in the natural world or in the world of human creativity, we cannot fail to find them.



In other words, with proper guidance and well-grounded methodology, we can use our limited knowledge to formulate Torah perspectives on what we study in college.

Reflections of Torah in secular studies (and vice versa) come in many forms, ranging from concrete to abstract. The most concrete reflections are quotations. Just as Pharaoh and Bil'am are quoted by *Torah she-be-khtav*, gentle philosophers and politicians are quoted by Hazal. *Tamid* 31a discusses exploits of Alexander the Great; in *Bekhorot* 8b, the Athenian elders quote verbatim from an early Christian work; *Avodah Zara* 11b describes an ancient Roman ritual. Concrete reflections of ideas from outside the Torah world abound in Torah texts. Sometimes, they are lauded and developed; more often, they are disproved and disparaged. Hazal's responses to these ideas, beyond invaluable informing how we perceive our secular surroundings, make an excellent basis for papers.

Similarly, Torah is often cited in secular sources. These sources can radically depart from our traditional understanding, and must therefore be treated with caution. Yet such sources offer excellent entryways into oral and written discussions of Torah and Hazal. Just as Rabbi Dovid Tzvi Hoffman authored books attacking bible critics, we can write papers attacking postmodern hijackings of *Tanakh*, *gemara*, and other Jewish sources.

On a more abstract plane, Torah and secular sources often deal with similar issues. The legality of Shylock's contract in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* was discussed not only in Venetian courts, but in Rav Shlomo Yosef Zevin's *leOhr ha-Halakhah* (p. 403). As Dr. Mark Steiner has noted (*Torah u-Madda Journal* 9, p. 44), the debate between Heraclitus and Parmenides about change and becoming has a direct halakhic analog in *Avodah Zara* 48b. If

does halakhah rely on empirical and statistical evidence?

What broader issues does this *sugya* address? Might *hilkhot shegagot* have relevance to philosophical debates about free will? What philosophy of gender relations emerges from Meiri's introduction to *Masekhet Kiddushin*? What do discussions of *melakhim* in *Tanakh* and halakhah contribute to political theory?

The enterprise of maximizing *talmud Torah* cannot restrict itself to these questions. We should explore not only their variations, but new questions as well. Sources such as the *Torah u-Madda Journal*, *Leaves of Faith*, etc. are invaluable for such investigation. Of course, we should not research methodology at the expense of *bekiut*. There are times, however, that are allotted neither to *bekiut* nor *iyyun* (i.e. time set aside for researching papers) that can be used to develop necessary methodology.

We are only beginners. In *talmud Torah*, we fall far short of our teachers and mentors. Yet precisely because we are beginners, we cannot give up on account of our shortcomings. Our teachers crafted their legacies with perseverance and self-confidence, building *bekiut* and amassing *hiddushim* one step at a time. If we follow in their footsteps, as we ought to, we will not abandon our ambitions out of momentary frustration. Rather, we will struggle with our limited resources and insight to build a foundation for ever-expanding accomplishments. And, as we accustom ourselves to maximizing *talmud Torah*, our *avodah* will become increasingly less demanding and more relaxing.

## II

Second, persistence is the key to success. The *masmid*, rather than the *iluy*, is more likely to achieve his potential in Torah. Yeshiva *bochurim* use their spare time – waiting to fall asleep in bed, solitary meals, exercise, travel – to review *gemara* by heart or listen to *shiurim*. We can use some of that time to decide what *sugyot* to present in our next class, and how to present them.

Moreover, we need not wait until the semester's start to begin preparation; basic course information, especially syllabi, course titles, and summaries, enable us to prepare relevant *sugyot* in advance. Anticipating a course in abnormal psychology, we might prepare the *sugyot* of *heresh shoteh ve-Katan* or read the Steipler's *Eitzot veHadrachot*. For a course in economics, we might learn the sixth *perek* of *Bava Metzia* or study Rabbi Aaron Levine's *Moral Issues of the Marketplace in Jewish Law*. We will fail to find only if we fail to seek.

Professors are surprisingly receptive to and appreciative of Torah input in class and papers. If you have a relevant Torah thought, share it with the class. If you know a relevant

we keep our eyes open and our minds poised, we can reduce *bittul Torah* by noticing and expounding upon our own set of parallels.

The following questions have oft helped me notice reflections and articulate parallels:

Is this permissible or forbidden? Would halakhah, like American law, outlaw Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments? Would it allow King Lear to disinherit Cordelia, Brutus to murder Caesar, or Harry Potter to attend Hogwarts? May Jews read Augustine's *Confessions*, or not?

Does this reflect Torah values, or not? Is Cordelia's response to the tension between *kibbud av* and loving one's spouse affirmed or rejected by halakhah? How do Torah sources address the conflict between obedience and moral intuition indicated by Milgram? How fully does Torah accept Dumbledore's notion that love is the most powerful force of good, or reject Voldemort's vendetta against half-bloods? Would Torah laud Augustine's regret about "weeping the death of Dido for the love of Aeneas, but weeping not his own death for want of love to Thee," or not?

Does halakhah accept this definition, or not? Does depression as described in DSM-IV meet halakhah's criteria for *shoteh*, or not? Does the USA's criteria for determining poverty match those outlined in *hilkhot tzedakah*? Is there a difference between astronomical sunset and halakhic sunset? When



# A Conversation With Rabbi Michael Rosensweig

BY ARI LAMM

*Editor's Note: The following interview with Ha-Rav Michael Rosensweig, shlit"a, was conducted as an informal conversation and is not meant to reflect the full depth and nuance of Rav Rosensweig's positions on the issues discussed.*

*A variety of terms are utilized when referring to religion's engagement with the world of secular knowledge. What are the benefits and limitations of these terms? Is there one in particular which Rav Rosensweig prefers?*

I am mostly indifferent to the question of terms but I think that each term implies a different type of interaction and thus, entails diverse challenges and opportunities. Regardless of one's term of choice, the most important thing is to provide a direction or a framework for the interaction. As far as I am concerned all of these terms constitute different examples of a "Torah plus 'X.'" philosophy. By that I mean two things. First, the foundational Torah component needs to take clear priority not only in a quantitative sense but because it is the *raison d'être* of the entire enterprise. Torah values must motivate and direct the engagement of other knowledge and serve as the prism through which we assess other possible contributions, whether *Madda*, *Hokhmah*, *Derekh Eretz*, etc. Second, it is crucial that the perspective be one of "Torah plus."

We should not merely be seeking *permitted* engagement that falls within the accepted confines of Torah law and that does not contravene its values. If that were the case then our investment of time and effort would be much more difficult to justify. Instead, we should perceive meaningful engagement through the prism of Torah and for the sake of Torah as stemming from and reflecting a much more ambitious commitment to Torah. We believe that the Torah's agenda is broad, that it addresses and encompasses all dimensions of life, and that with the proper filters and methodologies these interactions can enhance our understanding of both the texts and values of Torah. It is therefore not "Torah and" but an expanded "Torah plus" ideology. In pursuing this goal, it is important to recognize the importance of a broad education, albeit one which is designed to maximize this orientation. One should not expect an immediate spiritual payoff every time that one opens a secular book or studies a subject of general interest. The benefits of an effective Torah plus education are likely to focus on involvements or interactions that contribute to shaping the individual as a thoughtful religious personality and that sensitize one to different areas of human experience.

Torah and Science is one such point of engagement. On the positive side, when there is harmony and reconciliation between the two,

then it is quite obvious that understanding scientific advances and appreciating the incredible intricacy of God's creation is consistent with and deepens religious commitment. When the *pasuk* says, "*ha-shamayim mesaperim kevod Kel, u-maaseh yadav magid ha-rakia*," speaking about the wonder of nature, we can understand why, historically, the intricacy of the natural world drives the argu-

more, scientific inquiry is necessarily empirically focused. An exclusively or overly empiricist orientation is one which is not always conducive to *emunah*. The areas in which Torah doctrine conflicts with current scientific theory, of course, constitute a complex challenge in their own right.

The relationship between Torah and the humanities, while potentially equally valuable,



ment from design, first articulated in the ancient and later in the medieval period. In his *Sefer ha-Mada*, Rambam frames the concept of *yedias Hashem* in terms of understanding physics and metaphysics. Scientific progress compels us to add astrophysics, genetics and other cutting-edge progress to the long list of discoveries that produce ever-greater awe and inspiration, leading to *yedias*, *yiras* and *ahavas Hashem*. Moreover, from a purely *halakhic* point of view, one has to keep up to date with scientific advances because they may have *halakhic* implications – advances in the fields of medicine and technology, for example, present issues that certainly have to be addressed by responsible *baalei halakha*. Thus, on a purely operational level as well as on an inspirational level Torah's engagement with Science can be very positive.

On the other hand, the challenges presented by this engagement relate to the implications of the more mechanistic view of life of which one who is deeply enmeshed in the world of science must be wary. A very chemical and physical view of the world, when overly narrow, creates an orientation that may pose challenges to the world of Torah particularly in terms of the central role of *tzelem Elokim* and all that implies about man's essential spirituality and transcendence. Further-

is much more amorphous and complex. On the positive side, a study of history, literature, psychology, etc., may aid in conveying, articulating, and sensitizing to the complexity of the human condition. When pursued from this perspective, an exposure to the humanities may provide great benefit by providing insight into man's great capacity for courage and nobility. We may also better understand man's tumultuous nature, his flaws, the compulsions and impulses that are addressed by *halakhic* rules and principles. The effort to understand man's great spiritual potential along with his struggles and challenges is an endeavor to better comprehend the very concept of *tzelem Elokim*, namely, man's transcendence, uniqueness and creative capacity. At the same time, since the study of the humanities does not deal with hard facts and data, we are presented with a very different set of challenges and problems. For instance, while some literature is extremely consistent with *halakhic* values, other material, whether in terms of language or underlying principles and perspectives, etc. can be antithetical to a *kedushah*-oriented way of life. Relative to our discussion of Torah and Science, the rules of engagement in this case are quite different.

*Do advocates of religion's engagement*

*Midrash*, quote it in a paper. *Lo ha-bayshan lamed*, the bashful do not learn (*Avot* 2,5); by keeping Torah thoughts to ourselves out of bashfulness, we fail to actualize the *talmud Torah* potential of classes.

(Nevertheless, some professors are less favorable towards or adept at dealing with such input, and this strategy for maximizing *Talmud Torah* should therefore only be implemented after consultation with one's professor. Moreover, to avoid misrepresentation of Torah, one should consult with *rebbeim* before executing this strategy.)

### III

Third, we cannot succeed in solitude. Friends, mentors, and teachers are crucial for advancement in *talmud Torah*. If a particular *shiur* is relevant to a class, discuss it with a classmate or friend over dinner. If you utilized Torah sources in a paper, invite someone in *kollel* to review it before submission. If contemporary intellectual culture – i.e. relativism in postmodern literature, determinism in psychology, etc. – troubles you, discuss it with a *rebbe*. If you need Torah sources for a paper, or general methodological advice, the aforementioned persons are excellent resources.

Moreover, teachers, mentors, and friends are important for inspiration as well as feedback. Great rabbis succeeded in maximizing *talmud Torah* while in college: the Rav, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, Rabbi Michael Rosensweig, et al. However, these paragons need not be our sole sources of inspiration; many mentors closer in age to ourselves, or friends who grow daily alongside us, are treading the same path and will ultimately achieve similar excellence. Without their shining examples, without reminding ourselves of what we are accomplishing and what we may someday achieve, we are easy prey for the demons of despair and discontent.

### 3. Conclusion

The above discussion has been exclusively practical. I do not intend to convey any position, negative or positive, about theoretical issues such as whether engaging in secular studies is *lekhatila*, *bediavad*, or *lekhatila-bediavad*. Needless to say, this issue demands extensive discussion in and of itself. My goal is solely to offer inspiration and advice to those of us who do engage in secular studies, whatever our motivation. May we all merit maximizing our service of Hashem and our understanding of His Torah.

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with secular hokhmah have a duty to advance the various fields of secular study in addition to a responsibility to benefit from them?

I don't think that there is necessarily a duty after all the reason for these engagements is the enhancement of Torah. Given that, we shouldn't see ourselves as obligated or duty-bound to contribute to the various intersecting fields, although serendipitously it is possible that this might occur. When it *does* occur it can certainly be fortuitous as well as mutually beneficial. But this does not serve as a motivation and I definitely do not see it as a necessity. Of course, there is independent religious-spiritual value in furthering fields that advance progress or knowledge and that contribute in various ways to man's physical and spiritual climate.

*How should believing Jews deal with the tension between universalism and Jewish particularism?*

The interrelation between universalism and particularism is often perceived in terms similar to the way many view the engagement between Torah and other cultures, that is, as long as there is no tension or contradiction both avenues can be pursued. Believing Jews who take that perspective would obviously say that the halakhic demands of the particular always outweigh the demands of the universal. Halakha allows, encourages, even demands certain universal obligations, but also imposes definite limits. According to this perspective one might pursue a universalistic agenda until it begins to conflict with a particularistic one. It seems to me that this perspective constitutes a compartmentalized approach to life and religion. It is partly this perspective that lead medieval thinkers associated with Averroes, for example, to develop the "double truth" theory that would reconcile any disparate conclusions between religion and philosophy. But according to the perspective we have been developing thus far – that engagement is part of a more ambitious understanding of Torah values and not simply permitted – we must reject this approach and seek an understanding of universalism and particularism that better fits our conception of *Torah u-Maddah*. We should advocate a holistic halakhic approach, albeit one that perceives the halakhic agenda as broad and ambitious. Thus, we should view universalism through the prism of halakhic rules, laws and values from which a coherent approach will emerge. This way we will better determine what is demanded of us, and also what can add value to our spiritual lives. This does not mean that a specific halakhic *makor* is required for every step, but a combination of explicit *halakhos*, an assessment of values that issue from the halakha, halakhic instinct or *daas Torah* and the sources themselves will provide us guidance on how to deal with universalism and particularism.

There are many areas in which *halakha* itself applies universal values. Everyone is aware that the *tefillos* of the *Yamim Nora'im* begin with a very heavy emphasis on the uni-

versal. The cluster of *dinei Benei Noah* and their underlying principles imply a certain universal posture. Within the laws of *tzedakah* there is the notion of "*mefarnesin aniyei aku'm im aniyei Yisrael*." These brief references and many others demonstrate that there is a universalistic aspect to life; sometimes a Jew is a cosmopolitan, a citizen of the world.

However, in addition to being an *or lagoyim* and all that implies about our larger responsibility to mankind the larger focus of *yahadus* is on *kedushas Yisrael* and the potential for accomplishment within the framework of the halakhic system and *Kelal Yisrael*. In the end these issues must be navigated by internal halakhic values and not simply by the conflict between halakha and the desire to be universalistic.

*Does the doctrine of elu ve-elu divrei Elokim Hayyim open the door to postmodernism or postmodernist relativism?*

It absolutely does not. There is a general misconception with regard to the proper definition of *elu ve-elu*. It reflects respect for a range of values and perspectives on halakhic and

fathom what those sources mean, and a recognition that the process undertaken by halakhic giants is inherently substantive.

Moreover, *Elu ve-elu* does not absolve one from the responsibility to come to halakhic conclusions, nor does it make a single conclusion any weaker. In fact the opposite may be true. The more you believe in multiple truths – if you see them as permutations of the same basic principle – the more you view the halakhic process of coming to a single, best normative conclusion as more authoritative. Decisive halakhic decision-making is designed to discriminate between *elu ve-elu* viewpoints. Thus *elu ve-elu* precludes any idea of relativism or a postmodernist perspective.

The *Arukh ha-Shulhan* describes *elu ve-elu* as a symphony, as opposed to a cacophony of discordant notes. It is part of a process that produces authoritative conclusions based on a sincere effort to penetrate the real intent of original sources. It certainly does not reflect a sense of arbitrariness, chaos or individual whim. Interpreting original sources is a complex endeavor and requires rigor and intense *yir'as shamayim*.



hashkafic issues; however, this range is not unlimited. We are dealing with a broad yet concretely defined group of sources and ideas. The need to relate reverently to the views of opposing halakhic authorities on a given subject is especially crucial, as even apparently subtle or nuanced differences can reflect important differences in approach. For example, a particular debate between Rambam and Raavad may seem confined to a narrow legal issue. But since they are both struggling to precisely formulate a halakhic concept, to extract the *devar Hashem* that defines halakhic outlook on a particular issue, their debate may reflect different perspectives, each of which represents an important halakhic idea and value. The range of *elu ve-elu* represents a variety of rigorous efforts to understand authoritative earlier sources and to define laws and principles. The experience and stature of the authority figure ensures a measure of validity at least for the values that underpin his position. *Elu ve-elu* does not signify an embrace of relativism but rather an honest attempt to

*Can cultural or historical context be utilized in the study of gemara or halakha? How should one interpret halakhot that seem to be dependent on contemporaneous historical or cultural factors?*

There is no simple answer to this question. It is important to distinguish between two issues: 1) what prompted the discussion of particular issues and the analysis of certain principles in a particular time or place; 2) the integrity and objectivity of halakhic decision-making in arriving at legal conclusions, notwithstanding prevailing factors. The Torah was intended to be practiced in the changing real world. It was also entrusted to *hakhmei mesorah* who were involved in that changing world, but who were committed to apply a given methodology of halakhic analysis and conclusion to halakhic problems, old and new. With respect to basic halakhic principles, then, the important issue is not so much what stimulates the discussion of a particular halakhic

issue, but the integrity and substance of the halakhic discussion that ensues and the conclusion reached. Thus, while *baalei halakha* may respond to very specific stimuli, their analysis is based on the principles and the *mesorah* of halakhic decision-making. The methods of halakhic analysis and the mechanism of reaching normative conclusions are largely applied equally to *Hoshen Mishpat* and *Even ha-Ezer*, where an interface with the real world is likely, and to *Kodshim* and *Toharos*, where interface with social and economic factors is unlikely. *Baalei halakha* are not detached computers immune to prevailing realities. If they were, they would be flawed *halakhists*, as they would not be able to properly calculate and integrate all the relevant factors that go into complex decisions. Nor would we have the benefit of their unique halakhic instinct and insight, sometimes called *da'as Torah*, which is a result of their total holistic commitment and experiences. However, it is crucial to recognize that *gedolei Torah* are first and foremost influenced by their halakhic commitment, training, and by the sources that they have studied. Therefore, even when historical circumstances engender a particular question or issue, we may feel fully confident in the halakhic response of *baalei halakha* who are steeped in learning and *yiras shamayim*. We have faith that this is the way the system was meant to unfold and that this is how questions are meant to be decided. Thus, *baalei halakha* of a certain stature are the ultimate arbiters of whether and when consideration will be given to socio-economic or socio-cultural issues. They filter these and other factors in their total approach to halakhic issues.

There are of course certain areas of halakha, especially *gezeros*, *takanos*, etc., where a given issue's socio-economic or cultural context may represent more of a direct factor in arriving at *pesak halakha* – after all, "*En gozerin gezerah al ha-tzibbur ela im ken ha-tzibbur yekholin la-amod bo*." Responsible *baalei halakha* must assess the impact of their positions. They must be *roeh es ha-nolad* and try to envision the possible consequences of their decisions.

A separate issue concerns whether in the study of *gemara* or halakha, one should look for and accentuate the economic, social, and historical context. I think that in the context of *talmud Torah* this is largely counterproductive.

The focus should be on the timeless discussions of the halakhic issues and the concepts that underpin them. *Gemara* study necessarily centers on the Talmudic text, but as *torah she-ba-al peh* the predominant focus should be upon the concepts and principles of the halakha and the unfolding of halakhic practice throughout Jewish history. Moreover, certainly one must be careful not to give the impression that socio-economic factors have an undue influence on the halakhic process, lest students incorrectly develop a relativist and historicist orientation to the study of *gemara* and halakha. At the same time, when undertaken very carefully to highlight the effectiveness, foresight,



and integrity of the halakhic system and its authorities, illuminating the context of the Talmudic discussion may serve to reinforce a sense of both relevance and reverence. While I have deep misgivings about the speculative lines-of-transmission studies of strata in the *gemara* and strongly oppose their introduction into the *talmud Torah* classroom for a variety of reasons, I admire the rigorous and careful works of several historians in the fields of ancient, medieval, and modern halakhic and intellectual history that reinforce the centrality and integrity of the halakhic process.

*How should believing Jews approach the constantly evolving field of contemporary Biblical criticism?*

I think that university students need to have some understanding of what is going on in the world of contemporary Biblical criticism if for no other reason than *da mah le-hashiv*. We ignore these issues at our peril. Exposure to this material requires proper religious guidance and a framework steeped in *yiras shamayim*. Furthermore, I think this has to be done very cautiously and carefully. The foundations of Biblical criticism present both explicit and implicit challenges to the divinity of the Torah. The assertion of multiple, human authorship obviously contravenes the tenets of our faith; but the treatment of the Torah as Near Eastern literature in contemporary Bible study, even absent the authorship claims, is equally unacceptable from a Torah point of view. And even when the motivation for exposure is *da mah le-hashiv*, the study of contemporary Biblical studies can still undermine one's reverence for *Torah she-bi-khtav* and the sense of trepidation which is a *sine qua non* as a *ben Torah* approaches Tanakh.

I believe, however that it is very important for the Orthodox community to encourage and develop a cadre of authentic Bible scholars whose *yiras shamayim* is *kodemes le-hokhmasam* and whose roots are in the *beis midrash*, that are able to effectively respond to contemporary Bible critics. Historically there have always been serious *talmidei hakhamim* who have exhibited leadership in this area, including such figures as Rav David Zevi Hoffman, Rav Chaim Heller, etc.

But while the average *talmid* needs to know how to confront the challenge of contemporary Bible study so that he is not blindsided at some later point, he needs to be very wary. While there are undoubtedly some insights to be gleaned from some contemporary literary Bible studies beyond *da mah le-hashiv*, I believe that the risks in these engagements largely outweigh the benefits. At the same time, we should be investing greater effort in expanding our own appreciation for Tanakh, building on traditional sources and the richly varied methods of the *midrash* and the *me-farshim* to penetrate the divine text of the Torah ever more deeply. Such effort will yield profound insights and further project critical values of *yahadus*.

*How should Torah u-Madda be taught to*

*young people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?*

All too often we have simply laid out a curriculum of Torah and secular studies in a very compartmentalized way – largely with the absence of any real thought or direction of how the interaction between the two is going to work. Historically the reasons for this are twofold. The positive reason stems from the desire to give people a broader education with the realization that the interaction between Torah and secular knowledge is going to be different for different people. Some people experience a particularly inspiring interaction between Torah life and the sciences or humanities while for others it is involvement in the workplace and so on and so forth. On the negative side, I believe that the lack of a coherent curricular framework has been mostly a lack of rigor and foresight. There is a sense that people will

somehow just figure out the proper rules of interaction and engagement on their own. This attitude has extremely detrimental consequences on two levels.

The first level may be termed “*sur me-ra*”, that is, there are topics or subjects that are simply inappropriate and objectionable with which engagement may not be beneficial. If the *Torah u-Madda* ideology is about determining what can enhance our Torah values, rather than about how far one can go without trampling upon the *halakha*, it simply does not make sense to posit all secular knowledge as equally valuable and enhancing. Nor should the standard or conventional college curriculum automatically be presumed to be fully appropriate for the *Torah u-Madda* experience. And while for individuals there is greater flexibility and room to adjust objective standards, there are topics and material that in my opinion have no place in the context of a *Torah u-Madda* curriculum. If indeed we are serious

about creating an educational system that is driven by Torah ideology we will exclude certain subjects and material. Some measure of free inquiry will have to be sacrificed to attain the ambitious spiritual-educational goals of *Torah u-Madda*. We can still build a very wide curriculum but it must have limits. With regard to literature, for example, there is so much great literature that is inspiring and edifying that it should not be too difficult to craft a curriculum in which one can exclude objectionable material. To date this has not been done. Much of the approach to building a curriculum has been primitive, or crude. There are undoubtedly many people who temperamentally and even ideologically might identify with the principle of the *Torah u-Madda* enterprise if only it was applied in a more consistent and rigorous manner. This particularly requires that we exhibit sensitivity toward issues per-

address both of these elements: *sur me-ra* and *aseh tov*.

While I personally identify strongly with the ideology of *Torah u-Madda* when pursued with the proper priorities and rules of engagement, it is important to recognize and respect the validity of the Torah-only approach, as well. Historically these two approaches, sometimes associated with the *Hakhmei Sefarad* and the *Hakhmei Ashkenaz* respectively, have co-existed with varying nuances. It is important to put the issue in perspective. There should be no debate about the absolute and exclusive centrality of Torah, as that is axiomatic. The issue primarily revolves around the method of achieving greater attainments and a more intense commitment to Torah. It stands to reason, that the *Torah u-Madda* approach is not ideal for everyone. However, it can be extremely rewarding to a much wider group if it is thoughtfully applied. It is evident that an appropriate Torah framework as well as halakhic-spiritual guidance will be critically components of *Torah u-Madda*'s success. This may mean taking unpopular steps, but this is a sacrifice that we should be willing to make.

*In terms of moving both the sur me-ra and aseh tov discussions forward, are there any specific examples of objectionable material that should be excluded as well as particularly beneficial material that should be given more focus?*

I don't want to get into specifics but I think that based on our discussion thus far the general idea should be clear. For example, I think that literature is very important as is the study of the history of ideas. But again we must be careful about how this material is taught. There is plenty of great literature that is inspiring and that conveys sensitivity to the human condition. We need to speak with experts in the field in order to design a curriculum that is meaningful for our unique students. In most cases, there is no need for a radical overhaul. However, exploring the issues and some significant tinkering is in order.

We must also think about issues of priority, especially the priority of time given to Torah. This is something to keep in mind as we try to upgrade the university's academic standards, which is certainly a good thing in many respects. If we're taking a holistic approach we must also ensure that students who possess the ability (and everybody else to the extent of their capability) are encouraged to be learning in the *beis midrash*. As noted, the priority of Torah in all of its dimensions is axiomatic to this philosophy. We have to ensure that our students are encouraged and fostered to become the most serious *talmidei hakhamim* possible. The impact that you have on that population in terms of *Torah u-Madda* is going to reverberate in a much more meaningful way across the Jewish world.

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taining to the “*sur me-ra*” perspective.

We are equally lacking an “*aseh tov*” perspective. We have not approached curricular and other issues with sufficient *Torah u-Madda* vision or ambition. On our campus we have a rare opportunity to educate students who are strongly committed to *talmud Torah*, many of whom spend the greater part of their day in the idealistic environment of the *beis midrash*. Very little effort has been invested into designing a curriculum for these students to capitalize on their unique talents and their unique interests. Why should they be given the same curriculum as practically any other university in the country when their background, their interests, their commitment to ethics, law, *tikkun Olam*, etc. are fundamentally different and extraordinarily advanced? Exposing them to certain material and perspectives might be incredibly constructive. A more rigorous and a more sophisticated approach to a *Torah u-Madda* education would be one which would



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# The Natural World

BY: MICHAEL KURIN

If one were to ask Stephen Hawking and then Rav Elyashiv (*le-havdil*) to account for the beginning of the universe, the origins of life, and to identify our primary source of knowledge, he would probably get conflicting responses. Many paths have been taken to deal with this conflict, ranging from intentional ignorance of the opposite side, to total synthesis, and many in between. The claim that by definition there should be no contradiction between science and Torah, since both were created by God, can actually be viewed in several ways. In the case of an apparent discrepancy either science or Torah can be wrong, or they can both be right, but our understanding of one (or both) of them is lacking. In reality, determining whether or not conflicts exist, and dealing with these conflicts, is purely a matter of perspective.

The scientific theory that receives the most media attention is evolution. The theory of evolution states that a process of natural selection, caused by mutations of DNA, created changes within species which allowed them to better adapt to their environments. It also led to the development of separate and more complex species of organisms. Currently, the scientific consensus is that this occurred through a process called "punctuated equilibrium," which means that instead of a totally gradual development, there were periods of time where no evolution occurred, followed by sudden outbursts of relatively fast evolution.<sup>1</sup> I often enjoy reminding my friends who are bothered by the prospect that humans originated from monkeys that this is really not the case. "*Hal-eval?*" we should have come from monkeys! According to the theory of evolution, we actually evolved from a tiny prokaryotic cell, which in turn may have come from chemical bubbles that were formed in the ocean. Monkeys are merely one of our closest cousins, but not our actual ancestors.

The potential problems that evolution pose to the traditional Jew are significant. Firstly, evolution requires more than several thousand years. Secondly, many people claim that the Torah's account of creation involves creations that came directly from God's words. Special concern also exists with the issue of "*tzelem Elokim*." For many, the combination of these factors, as well as the idea of 'randomness' that comes with the evolutionary theory, renders evolution unacceptable.

The word *kefira* is thrown around rather loosely on this topic. Before arguing against it, one must first understand the "*kefira* argument." This task is not as simple as it sounds. What does a person mean, really, when he brushes off an idea by calling it "*kefira*"? Of course he means that the idea conflicts with a religious belief that is important to him. But the *hakira* concerning his argument is as follows: does he mean that since the idea is *kefira*, it can be ignored, regardless of the mounted ev-

idence that supports it; or does he mean that since the idea is *kefira*, it must be incorrect, by definition, despite the apparent evidence? The latter is the more effective argument of the two. However, how does one dismiss scientific evidence, without knowing anything about science, and how exactly does he know that things that are *kefira* cannot be true? There is another important addition to his argument. The Torah, we must not forget, is also a source of knowledge and truth. If the knowledge obtained from the Torah conflicts with that obtained elsewhere, the two sources of knowledge need to be weighed against each other. The Torah can obviously override any other source of knowledge for those of us who believe in its divinity. However, in order to call an idea *kefira*, and claim that it contradicts the Torah's views, one must be a hundred percent certain that he understands exactly what the Torah means in that area.

In my opinion, we have to admit that properly interpreting the creation story is a complex matter. God is completely separate from our world and completely beyond the realm of our understanding. Consequently, it is

sensus of rishonim on the beginning of *Breishit*, the Torah's objective is not to teach us science<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, in my opinion, the creation story did not necessarily have to be given to us in an understandable manner. Most stories recorded in the Torah, such as *yetziat mitzrayim*, must be read literally due to their inherent connection with *ikarei emunah*. Others, however, such as the account of creation, do not share this connection. Without the logical necessity that it be clearly understandable, I do not believe that one can claim this about the creation story.

What I have ignored thus far is our ability to claim that we surely understand all parts of the Torah based on our *mesorah* of what it means. This is certainly a valid claim. However, upon examination of our *mesorah* regarding the creation story it seems that at the very least, many felt that creation was not necessarily a simple six day affair. Most explicitly, the Ramban calls creation a "great secret."<sup>4</sup> The *Mishnah* forbids one from teaching the creation story to more than one student at a time.<sup>5</sup> The *Midrash* says God created worlds and destroyed them.<sup>6</sup> Several *gedolim* of the past few

consider a class of 30 students. Each of those students has a birthday. The odds of having a class of 30 with exactly those birthdays is (1 : 30<sup>365</sup>), a very small number indeed. Of course, nobody would doubt that such a class exists based on those odds, since it is obvious that some combination of birthdays was necessary, and if it was not this combination, it would have been some other one. Similarly, if the world did not evolve in the way that it did, it would have evolved in some other way.

The previous argument has the potential to bother many people, since it implies that the world could possibly have developed in a different way, which goes against our belief that God carefully orchestrated the creation of the world, placing mankind at its center. The answer to this involves a very important *yesod* that is crucial to how we deal with the theory of evolution. The theory of evolution does not disprove the existence of God. In fact, the possibility that the world and its life forms gradually evolved is totally irrelevant to the question of God's exact role in creation. Would anyone claim that since it was a strong wind that caused the sea to split,<sup>10</sup> it was not an act of God? The fact that certain phenomena can be understood scientifically as well does not negate the fact that God was the driving force behind their occurrence. Despite this, evolution does have a small impact on our religious philosophy. It stops us from being able to use the intelligent design argument as a proof of God, since the beautifully designed world can now be understood in a way that does not need to involve God or miracles. However, most importantly, the fact that nothing forces us to conclude that God directly caused the complexity of the world does not give us reason to doubt that He did.

In the heat of the controversy surrounding evolution, even those Orthodox Jews who believe in the theory must be careful to remember that we certainly affirm that the development of our world was controlled, whether directly or indirectly, by God, and evolved according to His plan. The only difference between those who believe in evolution and those who do not is that the former do not believe that the beautiful creation necessarily implies a creator; but they certainly do not, and can not, reject God's influence. To reiterate, scientists can explain all they want, and they may even remove some of our ability to prove God's existence, but they will never enter the realm of being able to disprove God or His involvement in the world. As a final addition to this thought, it is almost embarrassing that a student in a high school Jewish philosophy class was the one to explain to me that belief in evolution actually enhances our perception of God's greatness. The student asked me: "What is more impressive, a being that can create things himself, or a being that can devise a system that will create the things for him?"

It is precisely for the above reason that although several people whom I admire greatly



not obvious that we, as finite beings, should be able to understand a sentence written by God in the same way we would understand a sentence written by a fellow human. Despite this, in areas connected to the Torah's primary purpose, providing a guide to life, it is logically compelling to assume that we may clearly understand God's written word. Since living by the Torah involves following all of the *mitzvot* and *halakhic* principles, it is required that these sections of the Torah be relatively clear to us. Several principles of faith must also be clearly outlined, as they are both inherently significant and crucial for the protection of our *shemirat ha-mitzvot*. Other things that the Torah discusses do not necessarily require the same type of clarity. Specifically, understanding the origins of the world (assuming the age of the world is not an *ikar emunah*) is not really part of our purpose in life.<sup>3</sup> As is clear from the con-

hundred years have endorsed the theory of evolution, most famously the Tiferet Yisrael,<sup>7</sup> and until recently, few had labeled it heresy. Therefore, I do not believe that one can claim that evolution is *kefira* based on the Torah's creation story.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, concerning the issue of "*tzelem Elokim*" and the uniqueness of man, evolution does not account for the soul, which is really what separates humankind and is the true *tzelem Elokim*.<sup>9</sup>

As mentioned above, the other controversial issue in evolution involves the idea that the world as we know it today could have evolved in a random fashion involving DNA mutations. Some are simply bothered by this idea. Others claim that it is probabilistically implausible for random mutations to have led to such complexity, and therefore reject the theory entirely. For the latter claim, I will quote the common argument used in our biology textbook. Con-



have taken the approach of defending the “randomness” of evolution<sup>11</sup>, I would prefer to clarify that randomness is a poor choice of words. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, natural selection means that species evolve in such a way that they adapt to gain more superior characteristics that would better equip them for their surrounding environments. Although the DNA mutations that allowed for these new characteristics are, by definition, random, there is absolutely nothing random about the overall visible development from simple organisms to increasingly more com-

pleted the chapters in the biology textbook that take the student through the steps of evolution, culminating with the emergence of mankind. When I arrived at that final chapter I was overtaken by emotion. I felt as if I had witnessed the entire story, and finally, little by little, the world had arrived at its desired form. I was left with a feeling of great nostalgia and spirituality. So much had developed from so little! The long and gradual process made the materialization of man seem like a tremendous accomplishment. Man’s long-awaited appearance was much more meaningful and exciting

Rambam claims that if he felt logically compelled to do so, he would have been willing to read the Torah’s creation story in such a way that would allow the eternity of the universe. Obviously, both Rav Saadia and the Rambam did not mean that we can simply ignore what the Torah probably means, and pretend that it means something else. Instead, they understood that those parts of the Torah that do not express things that are integral to its purpose, did not have to be communicated to us in a clear manner. Their default assumption is that the Torah means what it superficially says, but they agree that there is no strong logic that requires this simple interpretation. Therefore, when given good reason to, they assumed that those parts of the Torah were not communicated in a straightforward way.

<sup>3</sup> Rashi’s famous question of why the Torah did not begin with “*ha-hodesh ha-zeh*” assumes this idea. Also, when the Rashbam claims that the entire purpose of the Torah’s creation story is Shabbos he states this explicitly.

<sup>4</sup> Ramban, *Genesis* 1:1 (“sod gadol”)

<sup>5</sup> *Chaggiga* 12b. Dr. Feit explained that if the creation story is simply literal, what’s the big deal?

<sup>6</sup> *Breishit Rabba*, 1:1

<sup>7</sup> In his *drashot* in the back of *Mishnayos Yachin U’Boaz*, *Seder Nezikin*.

<sup>8</sup> For a long list of other supporting sources, see the list on Rabbi Slifkin’s website, <http://www.zootorah.com> → controversy → 3. The Issues: Torah and Science → list of sources. See also Rabbi Tendler’s article available at [http://64.233.196.104/search?q-cache:XukA4uDTFA0J:www.lookstein.org/articles/evolutionary\\_theory.htm+tiferet+visrael+whose+masterful&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=us](http://64.233.196.104/search?q-cache:XukA4uDTFA0J:www.lookstein.org/articles/evolutionary_theory.htm+tiferet+visrael+whose+masterful&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=us)

<sup>9</sup> See Dr. Loike and Rav Tendler’s article “Molecular Genetics, Evolution, and Torah Principles” in this year’s Torah U-Madda Journal. They make this argument.

<sup>10</sup> *Exodus* 14:21

<sup>11</sup> Dr. Loike and Rabbi Tendler’s article in Torah U-madda journal; Dr. Feit has a shiur on the topic that can be found at [www.yutorah.org](http://www.yutorah.org)

<sup>12</sup> See Dr. Loike and Rabbi Tendler for several suggestions that I will not discuss here.

<sup>13</sup> 2:1 and 10:6

<sup>14</sup> This is what I like to call the “yeshivish version of Torah U’Madda,” which can be found in its entirety on your local asher yatzar poster.

## And Never the Twain Shall Meet?

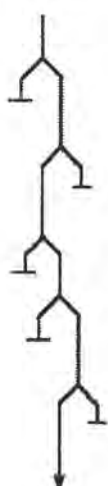
BY NINA BURSKY-TAMMAM

Left to my own devices, I don’t think I would have ever noticed that physics could represent a challenge to God’s involvement in the universe. My connection to science and my connection to God and the Torah each enriched and deepened my appreciation for the other, and in many respects, they were one and the same. Every so often, when not distracted by the tedium of the work involved, I would finish solving a physics problem and be suddenly overwhelmed by the mystifying but gratifying knowledge that God created a system so intricate and complex and yet so consistent that we can reduce problems to humanly understandable equations and, finally, solutions.

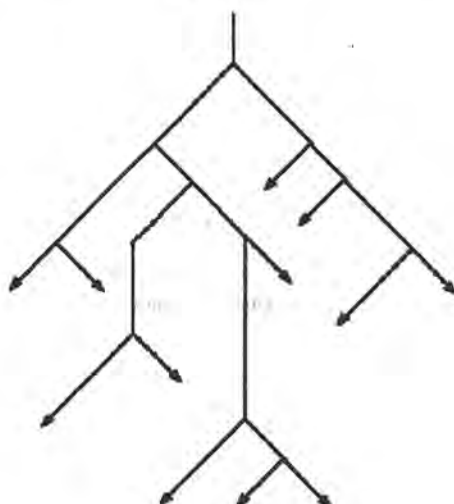
A friend once shared a similar experience of research related to the fundamental constants and patterns of our universe—some, like  $\pi$  and  $e$ , familiar to many of us from basic math classes, and some more advanced and infinitely complex, like the golden ratio, fractals, and logarithmic spirals. He described the excitement of seeing clear and definite order in the structure and dynamics of the universe and of seeing the moving elegance with which some of the mysteries of creation can be unraveled. God and science inseparably intertwined, as mathematics served as a source of humility and awe in his relationship with God. The idea that God was the source of its wisdom drove him to pursue it further and further.

But as I witnessed the interface between scientists and theologians more and more, it became clearer that this consonance and cooperation between faith and the physics I was studying was far from a universally accepted theory. The question of how to resolve differences between biblical texts and scientific evidence, especially within the realm of astrophysics, began to fascinate me. I went to every lecture I could find on the topic, and heard opinions that spanned the spectrum: from those who contended that any incongruity could be explained, to those who insisted that the two were irreconcilable. Most disconcerting was that at the heart of the discourse seemed to lie the consistent premise that there were, in fact, discrepancies that needed to be addressed—something I had thought to be impossible in relation to a Torah that I had been taught was all-encompassing and incontrovertibly true. I hungered for any source that could resolve this issue for me and grasped aimlessly at anything I could find to allay this new and dangerous question that had arisen to disturb my peaceful naiveté. I began reading the work of Gerald Schroeder, who argues that if you dig deep enough into the Bible, it is, in fact, consistent with scientific data. My roommate would sometimes tease me in the morning, telling me that she could hear me in my bed

A. Monotypic



B. Polytypic



plex, superior organisms. The gradual development into increasingly complex species that culminated (for our purposes) with the development of man is not random, but is a result of the process of natural selection. Furthermore, even if one were to believe that evolution from a scientific point of view should be described as random, we who believe in God’s role in the development of the world certainly would never describe it in such a way.

The final issue to deal with concerning evolution, leaving aside all the controversy, is what a *ben Torah* can take away from this theory<sup>12</sup>. In a private conversation, Dr. Feit once told me part of his outlook. After quoting the Rambam in *Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah*<sup>13</sup>, he explained that when a person studies aspects of biology to the extent that he obtains a deep understanding and appreciation for the complexity of life, and the complexity of the world, he will realize how much more complex God, the creator of it all, must be. Notice this is not the intelligent design argument, and I don’t think he meant that the biologist must constantly marvel at every being and remark “Wow! What an amazing God created such a beautiful thing!”<sup>14</sup> Rather, what I think he meant is that the study of the true complexity of beings can lead to a greater appreciation for the complexity of God.

My personal approach is that the study of the evolutionary process and the unfolding of events in the development of the world can give a person a more meaningful appreciation for the world than traditional creationism. I have a clear memory of when I

when there was so much that had been leading up to it for so long. This is an extension of the widely accepted answer to the famous question of why God took six days to create the world when He clearly could have just “snapped his fingers”. Evolution carries with it a great lesson of *mussar*: that the way to accomplish growth and development is through a gradual process. Growth will come through hard work and patience. So much was developing for such a long time, until we finally arrived at the finale of God’s plan for the world: the human race. Now, it is our purpose to accept our responsibility for the fulfillment of the remainder of God’s plan. Rather than fighting over the acceptability of scientific theories, we must focus on helping each other grow in Torah and *yirat shamayim* as we journey towards the true culmination of God’s plan for the world: the coming of *Moshiach tzidkeinu*.

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

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed but very understandable account, see Dr. Loike and Rav Tendler’s article in the recent Torah U-Madda journal.

<sup>2</sup> At least some of the Rishonim clearly understood this principle. Rav Saadia Gaon has a list of four reasons for which one would be permitted to read a section of the Torah in a non-literal way. More relevant to our topic, the



## Grammar and Theology

BY NOAH GREENFIELD

Almost every religious culture considers its language divine in origin. Within Judaism alone, Hebrew, Aramaic – and even Yiddish! – are considered holy tongues. This might make the thinking Jew reconsider her definition of *leshon ha-kodesh*. But, beyond that, it may be worthwhile to investigate as to what motivates just about every religion and religious culture to attribute its language(s) to the Divine. Certainly in the case of those Jewish thinkers who define *leshon ha-kodesh* as divine,<sup>1</sup> they must think their language has certain qualities which make it unique, such as being imbued with holiness of some sort,<sup>2</sup> or containing within it divine wisdom.<sup>3</sup> But, once again, many cultures think this of their languages. For example, Muslims think Arabic is *lisaanu-l' malaaki*, the language of angels. Many Arabic scholars find the beauty of the Arabic language found in the Quraan to be proof of its divinity. Other, more mystical scholars, find all sorts of esoteric significance within the shapes of the Arabic alphabet.<sup>4</sup> If languages – and perhaps language itself – are thought of as divine, perhaps more attention should be given to the theology of language, or, as boring as it may sound, a theology of grammar.

In my studies of English, Hebrew, and Arabic, I have noticed many parallels between the developments of those languages and that of Torah, particularly halakha. Moshe Koppel, in his *Meta-Halakha*, suggests that the writing down of Torah she-ba-al peh (TSBP) is similar to the codification of the grammar of any language. Nearly all languages developed as tools of verbal – that is, spoken and eventually written – communication. Only later did grammarians come around and try to describe the rules the languages obey. Similarly, TSBP initially was spoken, meaning, it was just done. Only when it began being concentrated into the the Mishna Rishona, and then the Mishna, *et cetera*, did general, overarching rules have to be created to describe its rules systematically.

Grammarians of any used language are always going to be faced with the problem of exceptions. For any overarching rule that is true 60%, 70%, 80%, 90% – even 99% – of the time, it by definition will have exceptions. There is rarely ever a rule that is 100%. Grammarians must explain these exceptions just as they must explain the rules. In this regard, grammar is very much like the halakhic process. Sources for rules must be cited, their underlying logic in and of themselves must be worked out, as well as their logic as part of the larger system. And then, all of the exceptions and seeming exceptions must be documented and explained, either with equally authoritative sources, or other reasons.

These other reasons share interesting sim-

ilarities with halakha. Haym Soloveitchik describes in his 'Rupture and Reconstruction' the mimetic (that is the way halakha was instinctively learned by mimicking parents at home) nature of halakha prior to the Holocaust. He suggests that that mimetic nature has been replaced by a return to textual analysis and not simply what is done (largely because it no longer is done). Language, too, prior to the rise of its grammarians, was just something that people spoke, learned from home and from one another. Then along came the grammarians, who tried making rules and making the language adhere to them. Suddenly, a tension was created. Grammarians would insist upon a certain syntax, a certain pronunciation and certain vocabulary. These were not based solely on what was being spoken, but what was spoken in the past and how certain texts were written, or, alternatively, based on abstract theories of how the language should be spoken. Sometimes the language would shift according to the grammarians, other times according to the masses. Similarly, with the writing down of the TSBP, and the return to textual authority experienced in our own day and by many Rishonim, such tension also existed.

א	'alep	ל	lamed	י
ב	bet	מ	mem	כ
ג	gimel	נ	nun	ך
ד	dalet	ס	samek	ק
ה	he	ע	ayin	ר
ו	waw	פ	pe	ש
ז	zayin	צ	tsade	ת
ח	het	ק	qop	
ט	tet	ר	resh	
י	yod	ש	sin	
כ	kaf	ת	tav	

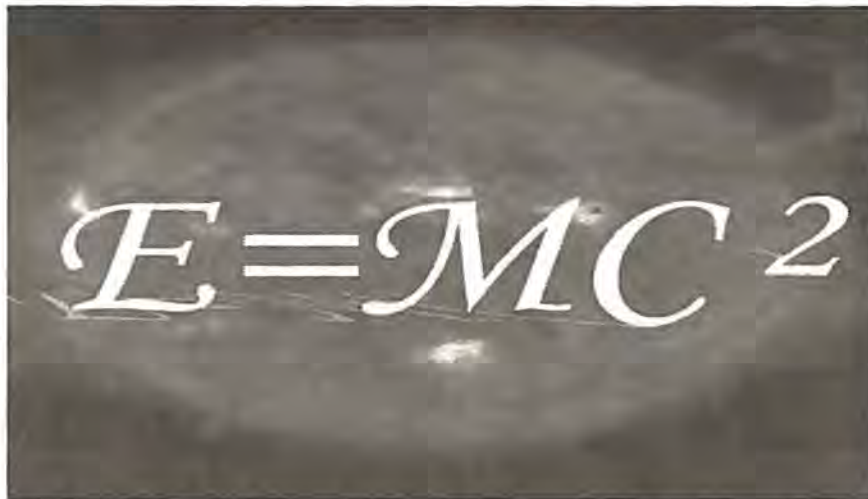
Within any given *sugya*, numerous sorts of determinants factor into the *pesak*. These range from interpretation of pesukim, interpretations of their interpretation, and the interpretation of those interpretations; hermeneutical logic; abstract logic; historical factors; political factors; social factors; theology, philosophy, and the surrounding theologies and philosophies. Boiled down, halakha is produced from the constant struggle between a divine legal and ethical system and its human application. In other words, *bashamayyim hi* and *lo bashamayyim hi*. Languages, too, face this same tension, especially those which maintain that they are divine. They, perhaps more than others, must try to halt, or at least limit, the infiltration of human laziness, foreign words, *et cetera*, into their language. Yet, at the same time, they must be flexible enough to remain spoken by masses who are likely to at best only

typing away on my calculator, late into the night, verifying the calculations upon which Schroeder's astounding reasoning was based. Indeed, it was astounding. He used modern physics and current understanding of time and space to show that there is no disagreement between the 5768 years Judaism traditionally counts as the age of our universe and the 15 billion years that cosmology has calculated. By taking into account a change in the reference frame through which we see each day of creation, the extra billions of years can be accounted for almost exactly. The argument was dumbfounding and, to a great extent, I felt relieved to find that reconciliation could be achieved—that the empirical truths of science

gion each address such different aspects of life that resolving seeming discrepancies between them is senseless—one exists in one realm and the second in another.

Dr. Aumann's position was relatively extreme, but it helped to liberate me from the misleading premise that science and faith were two rivaling approaches to the same ideas. I realized that they are, rather, two different languages, each designed to deal with different aspects of the world. This realization led me to understand that my initial, raw sense that the study of physics and of religion coexisted peacefully, illuminating one another was, perhaps, much truer than it was naïve.

A middle path was forged from this tur-



were compatible with the wisdom of my religion.

It took time for me to realize that though the answer may have satisfied the question, the question itself was not sound. I think Dr. Robert Aumann—the Israeli economist and Nobel Laureate—was the first to puncture my earlier understanding of the matter when he spoke at YU two years ago. In a lecture whose topic was "Torah and Science," with no hesitation or qualms, he brushed aside any question addressed to him about unifying scientific theory and the Jewish religion. Some members of the audience bristled audibly at his callous response, but it seemed to come from a sincere and profound belief that one simply could not be compared to the other. "Science is built to satisfy certain needs in our minds. It describes us," he said, while "religion is an experience—mainly an emotional and aesthetic one."

In physics, a vector is a line of a certain length that also has a certain direction. Two vectors can point in the same direction (parallel), in opposite directions (anti-parallel), or have some angle between them. Dr. Aumann made the claim that most people try to assert that science and religion are either parallel or anti-parallel, that they must either perfectly correspond to each other or completely contradict each other. But, he said, in truth they are neither—they are what he called "orthogonal," which means that they are perpendicular, or at a right angle with one another, existing on different planes. The two can be combined in any number of ways, but never could a situation of conflict between them arise. Science and reli-

bulent truth-seeking process, which led me to trust that science and religion are, indeed, orthogonal, but not entirely unrelated. There may be an even deeper wisdom in Dr. Aumann's analogy than he shared. (This is no surprise, since although physical theory is limited to describing physical phenomena, it has an eerie tendency of reflecting human psychology and behavior.) We live in a world of three dimensions, in which it is possible to define a "cross product" of two vectors—a new vector which results from the original two but which, when drawn, lies orthogonal to both of them. It is known that when two vectors lie orthogonal to each other, the cross product reaches its highest possible magnitude. Let us call the third, resultant vector of the cross-product our reality. The two vectors of science and religion may not be connected directly to each other, but they are both indisposably connected to the third, and only when distanced properly from each other can the most meaningful product result.

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intuit the grammar upon which the language is built. Often, both language and halakha must succumb to human weaknesses. (For instance, when a *gezeira* is ignored by the people, it is not normative. There are *deoraita* examples as

enstein's mastery of English, the language with the largest vocabulary, enable him to make sharper distinctions? Do his linguistic associations affect his hashkafic ones? For better or for worse?



well...). The idea of Torah *dibra bi-lshon bnei adam* is relevant here. It applies aptly to the Quraan as well, though with more theological problems.

So far, I have touched upon some of the similarities Torah has to linguistics. The opposite is equally true. Linguistics has some interesting similarities to Torah. R. Soloveitchik's Halakhic Man talks about the importance of halakha in providing Jews with a system in which to understand the reality around them. One applies halakhic concepts to understand the essence of one's environs. The same is true of language. Vocabularies provide definitions of reality for their speakers. Accordingly, different speakers of different languages will understand the world differently. Two fascinating examples: In Pashtun, the word for 'cousin' is the same for the word 'enemy'. Clearly, a Pashtun speaker will have a different concept of family, even if she no longer lives in a warring tribe but instead in a Pakistani suburb.

A major focus in modern linguistics has centered upon a small Brazilian tribe called Piraha who have a totally different concept of time than any other culture in the world. Whereas we describe the past as 'behind us' and the future as 'in front of us', they do just the opposite. Their logic is as follows: Once something happens, they know what it is, they can see it, so it is in front of them, whereas, the future, which is something they cannot see, is behind them. This is not just a semantic issue. This has affected their culture and spirituality, their whole weltanschauung, profoundly.

Language in this regard seems to live up to the ideal of shaping one's conceptions far more than halakha. I wonder how Hebrew and Aramaic (and the little Persian, Greek, Latin, in Rabbinic Literature) affect halakha and whether that is better or worse? Does R. Licht-

The next time you speak *leshon ha-kodesh*, consider the theology involved.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Kuzari 2:68

<sup>2</sup> Maimonides, Guide 3:8

<sup>3</sup> Abulafia, The Book of Letters

A basic Jewish parallel is the argument of R. Aqiva that the letters of the word 'sukka' serve to illustrate the halakhic parameters of sukka.

<sup>4</sup> A prime example: Onqelos' understanding of 'vayipah beapav nishmat hayyim, vayehi ha'adam lenefesh hayya,' namely, that 'man became a 'ruach memallela', a speaking spirit, equating speech as this divine quality breathed into man by God

<sup>5</sup> cf, for example, David Z. Hoffman, Mishna Rishona

## Beneath the Apple Tree: A Romance Between Torah and English Literature

BY JAMIE FOGEL

I am far from the first individual to try and grapple with the synthesis of Judaic and secular studies. Although I have found it puzzling that, while the phrase *Torah U-Madda* is a familiar and often clichéd one in the Yeshiva University student's vocabulary, it is a concept which is rarely delineated for the contemporary student. It seems to be taken for granted that the average student on campus understands this notion and most certainly agrees with it, since that student *has* chosen to spend three or four years studying here. But upon asking students about the definition of Torah U-Madda, I think one might find that most students would not be able to answer anything deeper about the nuances of that ideology than "it values an integration of secular studies with the religious." Dr Norman Lamm stressed this point in his address to the Yeshiva University alumni at the university's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary dinner. On May 20, 1979, he observed that, "We must give our students more effective guidance, so that this confrontation between the Jewish and the general world will take place for them in a more well defined way."<sup>1</sup>

This insufficient understanding of the nuances of Torah U-Madda, which for a long time was the only one I possessed, does not help address the questions that thinking students ought to be plagued by during their educational experience here. For most of my semesters on campus, including the present one, my daily schedule has been split between my Judaic and Literature classes and the resulting division of time forces me to ask critical questions about my daily studies. Firstly, for all those moments I spend reading about the early American puritan struggles and analyzing Modernist poetry, I wonder if that time could be better spent delving into sections of Navi that I have barely touched in my past studies, or into *sugyot* of gemara to which I have only recently begun to expose myself. The list of untouched materials is endless, but in truth, the real fear is that one day I might pick up that literature text and there will be no small voice at the back of my mind chiding me for not opening up *Sefer Yirmiyahu*, no small voice questioning my choice. I fear that there will come a point that I will have become so desensitized that this question of time well spent will no longer be a difficult assessment. Therefore, the second necessary question I ask myself is: have these materials I have chosen to read dulled my sensitivities and begun to exercise dominance over my Torah views and perspectives? The words of non-fiction, fiction and poetry penetrate the appreciative soul to a point that it sometimes becomes difficult to decipher what was once the author's thought from what has now become the

reader's own. Because of Literature's powerful and influential effects, these questions become acutely critical for the safeguarding of traditional Torah values.

As mentioned previously, I am not the first one to pose these challenges to Torah U-Madda's incorporation of liberal arts study into a Torah lifestyle. Rav Aharon Lichtenstein offers a three-pronged response to these questions in his article, "A Consideration of Synthesis from a Torah Perspective."<sup>2</sup> He maintains that there are three main dictums necessary to successfully integrate the secular world into our religious life. First, one must understand that Torah as a way of life, is the first and foremost goal—the only goal if you will. Spiritual growth and developing a connection with God is the force behind every action and so too must it be at the basis of any encounter with secular knowledge. The second principle is that the success of a Torah life is dependent on Torah study, both because it gives us insight into the will of God and because it "affects our total spiritual personality."<sup>3</sup> If these first two conditions of understanding are met, then the third condition—how one approaches general studies—can be made on firm ground. Rav Lichtenstein claims that secular knowledge is necessary if we have any intention of combating it and its negative influences on our society's standards of morality and religious observance. He also emphasizes the need to be able to combat the questioning forces within ourselves. These doubts and curiosities are expected and normal and we need to be equipped with the knowledge to answer them adequately. Rav Lichtenstein classifies secular knowledge at the very least as *hekhsher talmud Torah*. Secular knowledge gives access to much of Torah itself, using astronomy for example to help elucidate legal matters relating to declaring the new moon and physiology as an aid to *hilkhos Niddah*. Secular knowledge, Rav Lichtenstein maintains, also helps develop the "spiritual personality."<sup>4</sup> Through learning history, one sees the hand of God in politics, and literature helps us gain insight into human nature. Secular knowledge, at its very least, enables the observant Jew to stretch his appreciation of God to encompass every realm of the world, not just that of traditional Torah sources.

My own personal struggles are rooted in Rav Lichtenstein's second dictum which demands that Torah study must be the foundation upon which secular knowledge can peacefully rest. I do not feel that I have spent enough time in my years before college learning Torah. In fact, it is specifically in these college years that I have engaged in my most rigorous Torah study, which makes excelling in a dual curriculum all the more challenging. By the time I



reached twelfth grade I could easily write a paper on thematic motifs in *The Scarlet Letter*, while I had never yet written an equally rigorous work on themes present in *sefer Shmuel*. I have slowly come to realize that this flaw in my early education is the cause of these guilt pangs I feel when reading from my American literature anthology. Perhaps I would feel better equipped to handle Yeshiva University's curriculum if the dual curriculum of my childhood and adolescence had awarded more time and emphasis to Torah study.

I will just briefly address the difficult question of *bitul Torah*, which is another fundamental *halakhic* challenge facing the thoughtful student. Rav Lichtenstein maintains that this is a tricky issue that does not have one single answer. Consider for a moment that if the notion of *bitul Torah* was carried out to its complete end, it would be relegated to mathematics as well. Should the elementary school curriculum only teach simple, pragmatic arithmetic and stop there? Are square roots pushing the envelope in the battle against *bitul Torah*? The point is that each person or institution needs to assess for themselves at what point "the loss due to time spent on secular studies exceeds their contribution to the cause of Torah."<sup>5</sup> Not everyone is equipped to handle a dual curriculum and each person needs to be familiar enough with his or her own capabilities to make that choice honestly and carefully. Although this thought from Rav Lichtenstein seems well formulated and logical, this area of *bitul Torah* is still one which can cause much distress. It is very difficult to make these kinds of calculations and feel completely confident in one's analysis. But as made clear by many writers on the topic, the Torah U-Madda model was not created for those looking for spiritual bliss. As the Rav writes, "Religion enriches life, gives it depth and multi-dimensional visions, but does not always grant man the comfort and complacency that nearly always spell superficiality and shallow-mindedness."<sup>6</sup> The difficulty of assessing the way we spend our time is not easy and when our judgment is mistaken, we feel guilty and uncomfortable. But when we take this responsibility upon ourselves to assess time division, then as the Rav writes, our Judaism will be rich and fulfilling because we will have struggled, trying to do what is ideal for our relationship with God.

This tension and guilt resulting from the uncertainty of my assessment of time division, found one source of respite in my educational career at Stern. In my junior year, I was privileged to take two English literature courses with a professor whom I can honestly say changed my entire outlook on literature and its ability to harmonize with a Torah observant lifestyle. In her class, I learned something she called "close reading." It is this well-known literary analytical methodology that I only later in the semester realized was what I called *parshanut*. I'm not sure why it took me until age twenty to see the blatant parallels between intensive *Tanakh* study and literary analysis (per-

haps it was because my prior *Tanakh* education was not very good). But this professor, who was a deeply spiritual Jew, although not Orthodox, gently prodded this discovery. Besides for her strict demand that we "close read" the texts—analyzing every word, tone, gesture, theme, and punctuation, to name a few—she would read us her poetry, often created by rearranging words from passages in *Tanakh*, creating her own original thoughts which still retained the prophetic taste of the original text. There were few classes in which she did not reference some biblical story or example that paralleled our own topic of discussion. In that classroom, Torah was not something that could find room in its worldview for literature. Torah



was something that gently held hands with Literature; something that strolled romantically down an apple orchard's aisle, deep in probing discussion and debate with literature. In that classroom I experienced the fusion of the two areas of study. I was not sure how to identify its *derekh ha-limmud* if you will, but I knew that there was a way for the two worlds to fit together because I had experienced it twice a week for an entire year.

Only after the course was I able to identify a Jewish thinker with the religious phenomenon that many of us students experienced with this professor. Rav Kook and Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, both of whom are figures associated with forward thinking in regards to the study of secular subjects, present two versions of the synthesis between Torah study and secular knowledge. Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm in his "Two Versions of Synthesis,"<sup>7</sup> articulately delineates the fundamental differences between these two thinkers' inclusion of secular studies into the realm of permissible study. To state Rabbi Dr. Lamm's insightful point in a few sentences hardly does justice to the monumental conclusions he draws in the article, but it will have to suffice for the sake of this one.

Dr. Lamm explains that Rav Hirsch envisioned a somewhat inactive relationship between the two. Hirsch believed that secular studies and Torah were simultaneously introduced and now, merely appear in different forms. So there is no conflict between the two

because Torah and Wisdom have always existed without being enemies of each other. But because of this cooperative relationship, Dr. Lamm claims that there also can't be "any meaningful dialogue between them. They can cooperate, even as the limbs of the body cooperate and coordinate, but they cannot interact and speak to each other"<sup>8</sup>. Dr. Lamm explains that Hirsch's ideology, often associated with the slogan *Torah im Derekh Eretz* would be more accurately described as Torah "and" *Derekh Eretz*. The former suggests that the two areas butt heads and rigorously debate with one another, while the edited latter version emphasizes Hirsch's view more accurately—that the two areas do not become intimate and intertwined in their relationship but merely exists side by side without ever touching.

Rav Kook's model, on the other hand, is much more daring and discusses the issue in the realm of the metaphysical—in terms of *kodesh* and *hol*. He maintains that there needs to be an interaction between the two realms because the *hol* is waiting to be acted upon and sanctified by the *kodesh*. The *kodesh* is sterile if not used to transform the *hol* because the entire purpose of the *hol* is to be made sacred. In other words, for Rav Kook, there is only the sacred and the not-yet sacred. Therefore, the interaction between the two worlds for Rav Kook is necessary for the completion of each. In contrast, for Hirsch, secular studies are used to assist Torah and to establish it on firm scientific ground, like using physiology to understand and apply *hilkhot niddah*.

In the lessons of this English professor, I saw Rav Kook's model come to life. The somewhat gloomy fact that much of my analytical *Tanakh* skills were drawn from my original training in literary analysis did not change. I still saw that enhancement of the *kodesh* oc-



curing in my Judaic studies, where for example, I would sometimes draw on analytical experiences in my poetry class when studying *Shir ha-Shirim*. The *hidush* laid in the fact that I found myself writing poems for her poetry class surrounding Biblical themes; poems plucking language from *Megillat Ester* and *Eikha*, creating new themes and rhythms relating to my contemporary life. Most discussions about literature and poetry triggered some Torah thought, sometimes when the text was religious in nature and often when it was not. The division between secular and Torah became blurred, something that at the time made me uncomfortable, but which I now realize

was the exact synthesis Rav Kook was discussing. This was the educational experience I had always been waiting for. Amidst the sea of somewhat disconnected Hirschian relationships, where the literature seemed only to serve a purpose if it supported a specific Torah thought, this relationship was vibrant and dynamic, transforming each partner as it developed.

This synthesis is not one that is easily accomplished and has yet to be so masterfully done in any of my other studies. It is up to me to create this transformative relationship between my writing, a world I cannot imagine feeling creatively fulfilled without, and my world of intensive Torah study, one I cannot breathe without. The constant question of *bitul Torah* is always, and needs to always occupy a prominent place in any student's consciousness. There is no rest for the thoughtful student of a Torah U-Madda mindset. Tension that couples constant assessment is our fate, but it is that same tension which makes the resulting synthesis rewarding and spiritually engaging and makes our studies enter into the realm of extraordinary.

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Lamm. "Address to Alumni at Yeshiva College 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Golden Jubilee Celebration May 20, 1979." *Torah U'Madda Reader* (1986): 17-18.

<sup>2</sup> Aharon Lichtenstein. "A Consideration of General Studies from a Torah Point of View." *Torah U'Madda Reader* (1986): 33-38.

<sup>3</sup> Lichtenstein. "A Consideration," 34.

<sup>4</sup> Lichtenstein. "A Consideration," 35.

<sup>5</sup> Lichtenstein. "A Consideration," 37.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph B. Soloveitchik. "Sacred and Profane: *Kodesh* and *Chol* in the World Perspectives." *Torah U'Madda Reader* (1986): 21

<sup>7</sup> Norman Lamm. "Two Versions of Synthesis." *Torah U-Madda Reader* (1986): 39-45.

<sup>8</sup> Lamm. "Two Versions," 40.



# The Literary Approach to the Bible As a Response to Biblical Criticism

BY SIMCHA GROSS

Bible criticism (also known as the "Documentary Hypothesis") has been among the greatest intellectual threats to Judaism in modern times – indeed, not only to Judaism, but to all Biblically-based religions. Though its earliest proponents, like Julius Wellhausen, may have been motivated by anti-Semitic sentiments, the Bible critics of the modern era cannot be accused of such base motivations. And the success of the Bible criticism movement is unquestionable; it has so thoroughly pervaded the halls of academia as to have become a new form of intellectual dogma that most secular scholars are unwilling to even question.

A number of Jewish scholars, including Rabbi David Tzvi Hoffman, Umberto Cassuto and Rabbi J.H. Hertz, have offered responses to Bible criticism; yet no real systematic approach has been offered. Of course, the most basic, and indeed most consistent, response is that the assumptions that the scholars work with is far different than the ones that the religious person does (therefore it is aptly named the Documentary Hypothesis, and not fact). Meaning, if one believes that the text was written divinely then many of the problems that arise are thoroughly diminished, since an omniscient being can definitely be expected to have the capability to juggle a few different writing styles and ideas at the same time. Yet to some, this answer is not completely satisfying.

Recently scholarship has taken a turn away from disjointing the text to uniting it. Many scholars have begun to champion the literary approach to the bible, showing that ver-

with... singularities, we need not even submit to the dictate of identifying ourselves as religious or secular readers."<sup>ii</sup>

Though these scholars take the approach as a tool to better understand the message of the text, and not as a system to respond to biblical criticism, we will show how the holistic interpretation of the text (in Sternberg's words "ideological singularity" and "rhetoric devices") in vogue amongst modern scholars can serve both purposes.

But before we begin, a quick disclaimer must be stated. All discussions on biblical criticism are shrouded with warning signs and flashing red lights, the danger lurking in the distance. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, on the topic of writing a book on *taamey hamitzvot*, says: "...There are worries to be weighed. Might I not cause harm instead of helping?" And in the continuation: "And suppose my attempt fails? Will not those who would gladly do away with the cause for which I am living use my abortive efforts to strangle this cause entirely? "See here," they would gloat, "some entirely new attempts to rehabilitate Judaism – total failures!"<sup>iii</sup>

In other words, there is always a danger that the approaches offered and discussed do not appeal to the reader, and in response the reader abandons his faith entirely, or even minutely. Thus the disclaimer is as follows: this is an introduction and preliminary discussion only. This article does not offer all the approaches in existence, nor does the author believe that all viable approaches have already been thought of. Moreover, the author admits openly that this approach is not an overarching

tirely out of place and disconnected from the story's context. Indeed, E.A. Speiser, in the Anchor Bible's Book of Genesis, describes this story as "a completely independent unit," having "no connection with the drama of Joseph."<sup>iv</sup> Yet, through a number of verbal parallels, we can clearly demonstrate that the Yehudah and Tamar story should be linked to the larger Yosef story:

1. When describing Yosef's separation from his brothers, the Bible uses the verb "*hurad*"; when Yehudah separates from the brothers, the same verb is used: "*va-yered*".
2. In the climax of both narratives, the uncommon expressions "*haker nah*" and "*va-yaker*" are used. In Yosef's story, the terms are used when the brothers show their father Yosef's garment which they had doused in blood and ask him to identify it. "*haker nah*?" they ask him, and the text recounts that their father does indeed identify it: "*va-yaker*." Similarly, in the Yehudah and Tamar story, as Tamar is being led to execution, she sends Yehudah's possessions to him and asks him to identify them: "*haker nah*." Yehudah, in his redeeming moment, acknowledges them - "*va-yaker*" – as well as his own guilt. Both Yehudah's and Yosef's garments are the object that must be identified - "*va-yaker*".
3. While the Yehudah and Tamar story fits nicely with the story that immediately preceded it on account of verbal parallels, it also fits well with the next account thematically. As modern scholar, Robert Alter, notes: "When we return from the Judah to the Joseph story (Genesis 39), we move in pointed contrast from a tale of exposure through sexual continence to a tale of seeming defeat and ultimate triumph through sexual continence – Joseph and Potiphar's wife."<sup>v</sup>

Indeed by skimming through the entire Yosef narrative (Genesis 37-Genesis 50) we see that the text is constantly comparing and contrasting the various brothers, specifically Yosef, Yehudah and Reuven, with Reuven's personality serving primarily as a foil for that of Yehudah.<sup>vi</sup> In other words, a key theme underlying the Yosef narrative is to compare and contrast Yosef and Yehudah. Both leave the land – "*hurad*" and "*va-yered*". Both have trials and tribulations over a woman. The story ends with Yehudah rectifying his earlier sin of throwing Rachel's son, Yosef, into a pit by now offering to be thrown into a pit (jail) himself, this time to rescue Rachel's other son, Binyamin.<sup>vii</sup> In a sense, the story represents Yehudah's transition to family leader, from the sin of throwing Yosef into the pit he learns to admit his failures (by Tamar - "*tzadka mimeni*") and finally is willing to sacrifice his own life to rectify his earlier mistakes. Thus, by placing the Yehudah and Tamar story in the midst of the Yosef story the two are harmoniously linked, enabling us to easily identify the theme that runs throughout the end of Genesis; the similarities and differences between the two family

leaders – Yosef and Yehudah.

Thus, while Bible Criticism declares a multiplicity of texts from the fact that the flow of the story is immediately broken, we see that verbal cues from the text itself suggest that this was entirely intentional.

Modern scholars also use another feature of the Biblical text - "Doublets" or repetitive sequences - to suggest the existence of multiple Biblical authors. These are common features of the Bible, particularly in its various discussions of the Law. What are we to make of these repetitions? Robert Alter offers the following theory:

"Thinking in somewhat more concrete historical terms, various commentators have attributed the repetitive features of biblical narrative to its oral origins, to the background of folklore from which it draws, and to the composite nature of the text that has been transmitted to us. The last of these three explanations is the least interesting... under scrutiny most instances of repetition prove to be quite purposeful, and this would include the repetition not only of relatively brief statements but... of whole episodes."<sup>viii</sup>

Repetition is thus a purposeful tool, not necessarily a reflection of multiple authors. This can be done in a number of ways. Repetition of an event can be done to highlight differences between them. For instance, Robert Alter says:

"In II Kings 1, King Ahaziah sends a captain with his company three times to Elijah. The first two times, in identical verses, fire descends from the heavens and consumes the whole military contingent. The third time, the exact repetition is interrupted just as Elijah is about to perform his incendiary trick once more, when the third captain pleads for mercy and Elijah is prompted by an angel to grant the plea."<sup>ix</sup>

After Elijah grants the captain his plea and allows him to survive, Elijah is commanded by God to accompany the captain. While the first two captains attempted to bring Elijah with them on their terms, Elijah now accompanies the captain - not by his command, but by the command of God. Thus, the repetition serves to create a contrast between the first two captains and the last, highlighting and emphasizing Elijah's transition from one who is pursued to one who leads, answering only to God.

Another use of repetition is to create complementary accounts, two distinct messages that are conveyed by means of the same text. Robert Alter says:

"Just such a technique of placing two parallel accounts in dynamically complementary sequence is splendidly evident at the very beginning of the Hebrew Bible. There are, of course, two different creation stories. The first... begins with Genesis 1:1 and concludes with the report of the primeval Sabbath (Gen. 2:1-3)... The second version of the creation story... would then begin... In the second half of Genesis 2:4... going on to the creation of



bal tools and structures are used by a competent author (or more appropriately – Author) throughout many texts, creating parallels and highlighting certain unifying themes. This approach treats the text holistically, as Meir Sternberg, a literary scholar, says: "If the Bible is ideologically singular – and I believe so – then its singularity lies in the world view projected, together with the rhetoric devised to bring it home. And as long as we adhere to the text's self-definition as religious literature

theory, solving all problems. Yet it is a start.

To demonstrate how a literary approach to the Biblical text can serve both as a refutation of Bible critics, as well as to enhance the message of the text, let us begin with Genesis, the first Book of the Bible, and the story of Yosef. Yosef's story dominates the end of the Book of Genesis (Chapters 37-50). The flow of this story is, however, curiously interrupted by the story of Yehudah and his daughter-in-law, Tamar (Genesis 38), which seems to be en-



man, the vegetable world, the animal kingdom, and woman, in that order, and after the completion of creation proper at the end of Chapter 2, moving directly into the story of the serpent and the banishment from Eden.<sup>178</sup>

He continues to explain the "problems," and explains how they are in fact quite intentional: "Now, it is obvious enough that the two accounts are complementary rather than overlapping, each giving a different *kind* of information about how the world came into being." The first account "is concerned with the cosmic plan of creation and so begins appropriately with the primordial abyss whose surface is rippled by the wind from (or spirit of) God." The second account "is interested in man as a cultivator of his environment and as a moral agent, and so he begins with a comment on the original lack of vegetation and irrigation and ends with an elaborate report of the creation of woman."<sup>179</sup>

The two creation accounts, says Alter, are purposely contrasted. They consistently avoid addressing the same topics. Rather, they each serve a distinctive purpose, focusing on completely different aspects of creation.

Later, Alter explains the purpose of these complementary accounts. They give "divergent perspectives" that are "achieved through the combined versions in the broader vision of creation, man, and God. God is both transcendent and immanent... both magisterial in His omnipotence and actively, emphatically involved with His creation. The world is orderly, coherent, beautifully patterned, and at the same time it is a shifting tangle of resources and topography, both a mainstay and a baffling challenge to man. Humankind is the divinely appointed master of creation, and an internally divided rebel against the divine scheme, destined to scabble a painful living from the soil that has been blighted because of man."<sup>180</sup>

Alter's analysis bears a striking resemblance to that of Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik in his book *Lonely Man of Faith*: "We all know that the Bible offers two accounts of the creation of man. We are also aware of the theory suggested by Bible critics attributing these two accounts to two different traditions and sources. Of course, since we do unreservedly accept the unity and integrity of the Scriptures and their divine character, we reject the hypothesis which is based, like much Biblical criticism, on literary categories invented by modern man, ignoring completely the eidetic-noetic content of the Biblical story. It is, of course, true that the two accounts of the creation of man differ considerably. This incongruity was not discovered by the Bible critics. Our sages of old were aware of it. However, the answer lies not in an alleged dual tradition but in dual man, not in an imaginary contradiction between two versions but in a real contradiction in the nature of man. *The two accounts deal with two Adams, two men, two fathers of mankind, two types, two representatives of humanity, and it is no wonder that they are not identical.*"<sup>181</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Rabbi Soloveitchik takes the same track as Alter, arguing that the repetitive text is intentional, the purpose being to highlight and

demonstrate two different (in this case paradoxical) aspects of man, history and the world.

These are but a few of the many examples of recent scholarship's use of literary and verbal tools to unify texts that were previously held to be of differing authorship<sup>182</sup>. Moreover, as we have shown, a focus on these literary and verbal tools not only serves to unify the text, but also offers deep insight into the theme and message of the text itself, the desired goal in the study of *Tanach*.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, p. 37, Bloomington (1987)

<sup>179</sup> *Nineteen Letters*, Letter Nineteen, Page 333 in the Feldheim edition

<sup>180</sup> Alter p. 3

<sup>181</sup> *The Art of Biblical Narrative* p. 10

<sup>182</sup> Further thematic parallels: Reuven and Yehudah are contrasted three times: At Mechirah Yosef they give differing suggestions regarding what to do with Yosef, when trying to convince Yaacov to allow Binyamin to return with the brothers to Mitzrayim so as to receive enough food to survive the famine Reuven offers his two sons in lieu of Binyamin and is rejected, while Yehudah offers only himself as compensation and is accepted; Yosef cries twice in the story – the first time this happens Reuven separates himself from the brothers by blaming them for the troubles while the second time Yosef cries Yehudah separates himself from his brothers and accepts full guilt upon himself. This is how Reuven serves as a foil for Yehudah, and is another indication of Yehudah's clear role in the "Yosef narratives." See DvarTorahProject.blogspot.com on Parshat Mikeitz for more on this parallel.

<sup>183</sup> The connection between Yehudah and Binyamin also plays out throughout Tanach: Jerusalem is split between them, Shaul is from Binyamin while David is from Yehudah; Mordechai is a fusion of the two etc. The point of this footnote as well as the one above is to further demonstrate the veracity of the literary parallels above by the fact that the themes play out throughout Genesis specifically as well as Tanach as a whole.

<sup>184</sup> Alter p. 88

<sup>185</sup> Alter p. 90

<sup>186</sup> Alter p. 141

<sup>187</sup> Alter p. 147

<sup>188</sup> *Lonely Man of Faith* p. 9-10. See also p. 7 for his cryptic remarks on biblical criticism in general.

<sup>189</sup> Though these scholars may believe in variant authors, they nonetheless support a holistic approach to the bible.

<sup>190</sup> For other reading see David Sykes' dissertation "Patterns in Genesis" as well as Bruce T. Dahlberg *The Unity of Genesis*, Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives Volume II (Abingdon 1982), Jed H. Abraham *A Literary Solution to the Name Variations of Esau's wives*, Torah u-madda journal volume 7 (1997)

<sup>191</sup> I have not touched on Chiasmic structures and other such holistic tools due to limited space availability. However, the chiasmic structure is another tool utilized by the literary approach to the bible which is predicated on the belief of a holistic text. Indeed many Jewish scholars use these and other literary tools. See Rabbi Elchanan Samet's *Iyunim BeParshat HaShavuah*, as well as Rabbi Menachem Liebttag's website [www.tanach.org](http://www.tanach.org)

## Hadashim Gam Yeshanim: Using Non-Traditional Sources in the Study of Tanakh

BY BEN KANDEL

Learning Tanakh in the twenty-first century presents the Orthodox student and aspiring *talmid hakham* with unique opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, the explosion of Biblical scholarship over the last century has deepened our understanding of Tanakh tremendously. Archaeological, philological, literary, and historical discoveries and techniques have made it possible to uncover the meanings of obscure words, passages, and even whole stories that were not previously appreciated. On the other hand, much of modern scholarship carries with it the assumptions and attitudes of the academies that produced it, much of which are incompatible with our *ikkarei ha-emunah*. How are we to deal with this issue? Should we open our arms wide to all of modern Biblical scholarship, blithely ignoring the potentially deleterious effect that it may have on our commitment to and belief in traditional Judaism? If not, should we simply ignore the advances of the past century, ossifying our understanding of Tanach at the stage it was before the universities took an interest in Bible?

Although at first blush, this quandary may seem to be a modern one, the reality is that the



medieval commentators had to deal with similar issues. Medieval Jewish commentators did not live in a bubble of Jewish Rabbinic scholars. At the same time that the *rishonim* were composing their Biblical commentaries, Karaites and Christians were doing the same, often producing superb scholarly works. We will examine whether and how the medieval Jewish commentators utilized such ostensibly "contaminated" sources of wisdom and incorporated their insights into the Jewish commentaries.

As a rule, French commentators did not incorporate non-Rabbinic scholarship into their commentaries as much as Spanish ones did. The French commentators, including Rashi, Rashbam, and R. Yosef Kara did not use non-Rabbinic commentaries to help them understand difficult verses.<sup>1</sup> There are several places where Rashi and the other French commentators clearly show that they were aware of Christian interpretations of verses, and Rashbam even quotes the Vulgate once.<sup>2</sup> However, they always quote the Christian interpretation

in a polemic context, and do not seriously take into account the Christian understanding of the verse. For example, Christians claimed that the verse that states that God said, "Let us make man," was a proof for the Trinity. Rashi explains that God intended to teach proper respect, since even He asks permission from his angels before he made people, "even though they did not help to create [Man] and this made it possible for heretics to rebel."<sup>3</sup> It is clear from here that although Rashi was aware of the Christian reading of the verse, he mentions it only to show how it does not capture the true meaning of the verse. R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, who probably had more extensive contact with Christian scholarship,<sup>4</sup> goes so far as to say that Christian allegorical interpretation of Scripture "distorts the words to what they are not, for God does not want nor desire them to attach themselves to His Torah."<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, other medieval Jewish commentators made much more extensive use of non-Rabbinic Biblical commentaries. In one story recorded by Yosef ibn Aqnin, Rav Hai Gaon sent a student to the Catholic Patriarch for help in understanding a verse in Tehillim.<sup>6</sup> Ibn Ezra frequently quotes Karaite and other heretical commentators. In some circumstances, he mentions them only to ridicule and disprove them, but in others, he weighs their arguments seriously and sometimes agrees with them. For example, ibn Ezra quotes an argument between ben Zuta, a Karaite commentator, and Rav Saadiah Gaon,<sup>7</sup> and mocks ben Zuta's interpretations in several other places.<sup>8</sup> He also ridicules Hivvi al-Balkhi, a heretic condemned by both Rabbanites and Karaites,<sup>9</sup> and curses Anan ben David, one of the founders of Karaism.<sup>10</sup> However, in other places, ibn Ezra quotes non-Rabbinic commentators in an effort to understand difficult verses. For example, he frequently quotes Yefet ben Ali, an influential Karaite commentator, and often accepts his comments.<sup>11</sup> Even when ibn Ezra rejects interpretations offered by Karaites, he usually rejects them based on exegetical considerations, not polemic ones.

Ramban, in several of his commentaries, quotes Aristotle or other Greek philosophers. He uses the Greek concept of hyle, a primordial matter, which was first proposed by Aristotle,<sup>12</sup> to explain *ma'aseh bereishit*, how eggs develop into fully formed animals, and the relationship between blood and the soul.<sup>13</sup> He also notes that since Greek philosophers proved that the rainbow is caused by natural phenomena, it must have existed before God made it into a sign at the flood.<sup>14</sup> However, this use of Greek doctrines to explain Tanakh must be tempered by Ramban's somewhat ambivalent stance towards philosophic speculation. In one instance, Ramban even says that it is forbidden to read certain passages of Rambam's



Guide to the Perplexed that seem to contradict verses in the Torah!<sup>xvi</sup>

As we have seen, different *Rishonim* appear to take different stances on the advisability of using non-Rabbinic material to understand Tanakh. Now, however, the challenge from Karaism and Christian allegorical interpretations has receded, and new schools of thought have sprung up in their place. Although much of the material produced by modern scholarship of Tanakh is objectionable to Orthodox Jews, much of it can help understand certain passages in Tanakh better. I will give one brief example of a way in which modern literary approaches to Tanakh can help us better appreciate the flow and meaning of a seemingly needless repetition.<sup>xvii</sup>

Yosef's story has long fascinated readers of Tanakh. In the beginning of the story, Yaakov loves Yosef more than his other brothers and gives him a multicolored coat, possibly signifying Yaakov's intention to make Yosef his successor as the leader of the Jewish people.<sup>xviii</sup> However, the brothers' enmity for Yosef soon eclipses Yaakov's love for him, and Yosef is sold to Egypt, where he is forced to live separated from his family for many years.

In the chapter before Yosef finally reveals himself to his brothers, Yehuda gives a long monologue in an attempt to explain to Yosef why he should not take Binyamin as a slave. Yehuda's speech is the longest in all of Breishit.<sup>xix</sup> Throughout his speech, Yehuda does not claim even once that Binyamin is innocent. Instead, he emphasizes the emotional travails that he and his brothers had been through and the impact that taking Binyamin would have on their father. He mentions that Yaakov is his father no less than eleven times during his monologue. The last, climactic argument that Yehuda uses is that he cannot go to his father without Binyamin, "lest I see the evil that will befall my father."

At that point, Yosef cannot restrain himself any longer. After removing all the onlookers from the room, he reveals to his brothers that he is Yosef. He then immediately asks, "Is my father still alive?" Yosef reminds his brothers that their father, whom they pretended to be so worried about, was his father also. If the brothers were indeed so concerned with their father's emotional well-being, where was this concern when they sold Yosef to Egypt? How dare Yehuda sanctimoniously proclaim his concern for his father's emotional well-being?

Yosef's rhetorical question does more than just jolt the brothers into a guilt trip. The brothers had not forgotten their father's original love of Yosef. In addition to having the advantage of being the ruler of the land and therefore having the physical capabilities to do whatever he wants to the brothers, Yosef now has the moral high ground. Before Yosef's revelation, the brothers could at least comfort themselves with the knowledge that they were innocent, that the inexplicable behavior of the Egyptian viceroy was nothing more than a crazed tyrant's caprices. Now, however, they lose even this consolation; they are left physically and morally defenseless.

Confronted with the duplicity of their excuses and the sudden erosion of their moral advantage, the brothers are astounded and struck speechless. Yehuda, who before had been the brothers' most eloquent spokesman, cannot even answer Yosef's implied accusation. After seeing that his brothers cannot bring themselves to speak, Yosef begins speaking again. First, he calls his brothers to him, who silently obey. The difference in atmosphere between when the brothers first enter the room and this point is palpable. Before, the brothers resisted, arguing with Yosef, and tried to extricate themselves from an uncomfortable situation. Now, they wordlessly follow his orders, helplessly trapped in his palm without even the benefit of a clear conscience.

At this stage, however, Yosef changes the tone of his words to his brothers. Requesting the brothers to come close emphasizes the intimacy of the situation. No longer is Yosef the



overlord with the brothers trembling before him; now, all of the brothers have come close to each other. The brothers are referred to as "ehav", Yosef's brothers, three times in two verses. To emphasize his connection to his brothers and to blunt the edge of his previous implied attack on them, Yosef repeats: "I am Yosef, your brother, whom you sold to Egypt." Here, the emphasis is not on Yosef's relationship to his father; Yosef instead concentrates on the relationship between himself and his brothers – sordid though their past may be. Assuring the brothers that he still considers them part of his family, Yosef explains how despite outward appearances, it was God who sent him down to Egypt.

The two times that Yosef revealed himself clearly represent a development in the scene between Yosef and his brothers. At the beginning, Yosef emphasizes his connection to his father, implicitly accusing his brothers of mis-

conduct, and without assuring the brothers that they were in good hands. The second time, Yosef changes his emphasis and instead tries to calm the brothers, assuring them that their relationship was not completely destroyed when they sold him to Egypt. The kind of literary analysis utilized here enhances our understanding of this type of thematic and dramatic subtlety in a way that medieval and other pre-modern commentators do not. In addition, using literary techniques on Tanakh highlights aspects of the text that demonstrate its unity and artfulness. Robert Alter, one of the pioneering literary critics of Tanakh, notes that "the obtuseness of conventional source criticism is nowhere better illustrated than in its attributing to a duplication of sources this brilliantly effective repetition so obviously justified by the dramatic and psychological situation."<sup>xx</sup>

The issue of utilizing non-Orthodox works in our studies is complex and delicate, but one we must confront as we pursue our studies. The diversity of approaches practiced by the medieval authorities underscores the difficulties involved in determining the correct course of action. Although the benefits provided by modern scholarship cannot be denied, one must weight the advantages against the possible religious costs involved in pursuing these studies.

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<sup>i</sup> This was confirmed by several authorities in the field of medieval Jewish *parshanut*.

<sup>ii</sup> Shmot 20:13. See also his comments on Bereishit 49:10, Shmot 3:22, and Vayikra 11:3, which imply familiarity with Christian interpretations of verses.

<sup>iii</sup> For more on Trinitarian polemics in Rashi, Rashbam, and Bekhor Shor, see Ephraim Kanarfogel, *Trinitarian and Multiplicity Polemics in the Biblical Commentaries of Rashi, Rashbam, and Bekhor Shor*, Gesher, vol. 7, pp. 15-37. For a more thorough discussion of the place of anti-Christian polemics in the commentaries of Rashi and Rashbam, see Ezra Shereshevsky, *Rashi's and Christian Interpretations*, The Jewish Quarterly Review, New Ser., Vol. 61, No. 1. (Jul., 1970), pp. 76-86; and Avraham Grossman, *The School of Literal Jewish Exegesis in Northern France*, in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation*, Magne Saebø, ed., pp. 329-330, 339-340, 361-362.

<sup>iv</sup> Shaye D. Cohen (*Does Rashi's Torah Commentary Respond to Christianity? A Comparison of Rashi with Rashbam and Bekhor Shor*, in Kugel, James L., ed. *Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel*, Leiden, NLD: Brill, N.H.E.J., N.V. Koninklijke, Boekhandel en Drukkerij, 2003. p 465) has recently argued that Rashi's comment here is not necessarily directed against Christians, and could be directed against any theology that accepts more than one divinity. In any case,

Bekhor Shor (commentary ad. loc.) uses this verse as a springboard to attack the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

<sup>v</sup> Aryeh Grabois, *The Hebraica Veritas and Jewish-Christian Intellectual Relations in the Twelfth Century*, *Speculum*, Vol. 50, No. 4. (Oct., 1975), p. 623.

<sup>vi</sup> Commentary to Bemidbar 12:8.

<sup>vii</sup> This source was brought to my attention by Rabbi Hayyim Angel, who subsequently quoted it in an essay on methodology in learning Tanakh available at <http://www.jewishideas.org/node/50>. The original source is found in ibn Aqin's commentary to Shir ha-Shirim, page 490.

<sup>viii</sup> Commentary to Shmot 21:24.

<sup>ix</sup> Commentary to Shmot 2:2, 20:22, 21:35.

<sup>x</sup> Commentary to Shmot 14:27, 16:13. For more on al-Balkhi, see Judah Rosenthal, *Hivvi al-Balkhi: A Comparative Study*, *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Ser., Vol. 38, No. 3. (Jan., 1948), pp. 317-342.

<sup>xi</sup> Shmot 34:21.

<sup>xii</sup> See, for example, ibn Ezra's commentary on Shmot 3:3, 4:3, 12:29; Hoshea 3:4, 4:3, etc.

<sup>xiii</sup> Metaphysics 1032a17. Thanks to Dr. Louis Feldman for explaining this passage in the Ramban to me and giving me the reference in Aristotle.

<sup>xiv</sup> Bereishit 1:1 s.v. *ve-atah shma*, *ve-hachomer ha-zeh*; Vayikra 12:2 s.v. *ve-al da'at*, 17:14 s.v. *ve-al da'ati*. See also Dr. David Berger, *Nahmanides' Attitude Toward Secular Learning and Its Bearing upon His Stance in the Maimonidean Controversy*, M.A. Dissertation, p. 13-15.

<sup>xv</sup> Commentary to Bereishit 9:12. For more examples, see Berger, 24-31.

<sup>xvi</sup> Commentary to Bereishit 18:1.

<sup>xvii</sup> I will not consider here archaeological, historical, philological, and other types of contributions to our understanding of Tanakh. Many of these issues have been treated in fuller form in the collection of excellent essays published in Shalom Carmy, ed., *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah*, Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc, 1996.

<sup>xviii</sup> The only other time a *ketonet passim* is mentioned, it clearly has a connection to royalty (Shmuel Bet 13:18).

<sup>xix</sup> Yehuda's speech, from 45:18-34, is 17 verses long. The only monologue that compares in length is that of the servant of Avraham, 24:34-49.

<sup>xx</sup> *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Basic Books, 1981, p. 175. However, this point should not be overextended – Robert Alter accepts the basic premises of modern source criticism. The fact that literary approaches can undermine classical source criticism has not been lost on Biblical scholars. See Moshe J. Bernstein, *The Orthodox Jewish Scholar and Jewish Scholarship: Duties and Dilemmas*, *Torah Umadda Journal*, vol. 3, pp. 8-36, footnote 29; and David Berger, *On the Morality of the Patriarchs*, in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah*, pp. 145-146.



# The Artist and the Jew

BY TIKVA HECHT

O great creator of being, grant us one more hour to perform our art and perfect our lives.  
Jim Morrison

Creation means the realization of the ideal of holiness.  
Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

I want the freedom to try everything.  
Jim Morrison

The man of God... discovers his freedom in the halakhic principle.  
Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

In his *Halakhic Man*, Rabbi Soloveitchik writes: "The dream of creation is the central idea in the halakhic consciousness." He explains that the ability to create is the ultimate expression of man's free-will to shape his environment, beginning with his ability to improve his own self. Self-formation is, according to the Rav, at the core of repentance, and is what determines if man will achieve divine-providence or even prophecy. Through self-creation, man removes himself from the animal kingdom and journeys towards Godliness; the human possibility of obtaining autonomy, self-consciousness, and individuality is man's claim to being made in the image of God. The Halakhic Man is a figure devoted to self-creation, and to fulfilling the task he shares with God of creating a holy, unified world.

On reading *Halakhic Man* for the first time, I was mesmerized by this figure the Rav describes. This Halakhic Man, this man of God, sounded to me like an artist. The artist is overrun by a desire to create. In creation the artist finds strength, truth, purpose and selfhood. Through creation, the artist reaches for the beautiful, sensing there something sacred and infinite. There is only a small step that I think Halakhic Man takes beyond the artist. Halakhic Man is more willing to admit there is a link between beauty and God, and studies more methodically God's will. While the artist may come to question his strange and overwhelming devotion to an as-of-yet unrealized world, Halakhic Man doesn't doubt his restlessness or why it is the source of his redemption. Halakhic Man, then, is the artist supreme.

As a writer, I've never encountered a major conflict between art and halakha; or at least no conflict comparable to the practical problems faced by a female Orthodox vocalist or a *shomer Shabbat* actor. That said, my most pressing religious struggle arises from being both an artist and a Jew. At eighteen, I was only beginning to recognize this when I came across the Rav's philosophy.

Initially, I viewed my dilemma as a duel between freedom and servitude. To produce with my writing the effect I wanted, I felt it

necessary to engage and condition my whole self into being. I also needed to learn how to twist and turn reality, through words, until it said what I wanted it to. If I could do these two things—create myself and create order from apparent chaos—I would be able to see what tools and elements propel life, and then I would be able to take these in hand and create with them something meaningful, beautiful, and new. My drive to create developed a push within me to be masterful, powerful, individual, and guileless at all costs.

But, at the same time, I doubted my artistic goals; most of all, the possibility of creating something new. Only God is unique and free in a complete sense, and so only God really creates. My beating will, viewed through this lens, seemed like a trap. It kept me antagonistic to God by challenging the limits He set for me.



I wondered if achieving selfhood did not really mean hushing the above drives and accepting my role in God's creation as an *eved Hashem*. I continued to write, but the product was more along the lines of prayer than poetry.

This seesaw consciousness was character building, I guess, but overall stalling. I couldn't devote myself to being creative without bumping into feelings of futility, nor could I muster selfless trust in God at the expense of my own stubborn voice. Even more so, I had learned enough to know passivity and selflessness are not Jewish ideals. I felt certain there was a way to unify my feuding inner-voices, I just did not know what it was.

I think now it's obvious why *Halakhic Man* became so deeply important a book to me. The religious perspective, which had once made my creative impulses seem rebellious, now brightened them with sanctification. If creativity is the service of God, then the artist and the *eved Hashem*, both driven by "the dream of creation," share the same deep drives, values and motivations. My desire to create was my desire to be close to God. Accepting this, I thought, was witnessing my two tugging identities dissolve harmoniously into one.

Five years later, the opposite has proven

true. *Halakhic Man* redefined my struggle, but in its new form this struggle matured, intensified, and still sits in me today. At present, I can imagine a religious or an artistic existence that does not require amputating any specific part of my personality, but would blend creativity with reverence and lead to self-improvement and hopefully some greater contribution. The problem is that such an existence doesn't come in only one form. As I said, I can imagine a religious or an artistic existence that reaches these goals, but these are two separate existences with two separate interpretations of similar ends, and two separate ideal roads for reaching these ends. What I have learned since I was eighteen is that halakhic creativity is vastly different than artistic creativity. I did

them both a disservice by trying to defend one through the other. Currently, they wrestle like jealous siblings over my future. Despite a great deal of thought, conversation, and action related to this topic, I still don't understand fully why this is, or what to do about it. I hope I can offer some greater clarity on the matter, though, or that by putting forward my own questions, someone else might be able to offer me some clarity.

To begin with, the object I wish to create as a Jew and the one I wish to create as an artist are not the same. To achieve the former, I turn to learning; to achieve the latter, to writing. However, there are hours in the day to accommodate both pursuits, and if raw time was all that either needed, this balance would have been achieved by now. But art and Torah are more relationships than tasks; both demand commitments of full self-involvement. When I let writing determine my schedule, late nights get later looking for the right word. I can forget to sleep or eat trying to untangle a story line. I am obliged to account for every random emotion or impulse felt through the day, appreciating each as potential material. When Gemara dominates, I need my mind fresh early in the

morning. Sleeping at night and big breakfasts become important as preparation. Random associations are hushed while I try to organize only the thoughts that are relevant. I could console myself by saying that both lifestyles require focus and dedication, but, in reality, they get in each other's way. I have tried introducing qualities of one into the other, and with some success. After all, isn't it cliché to say that art requires spontaneity or scholarship pure objectivity?

Even so, there is a lot of truth in clichés, and more at stake between these two inclinations than bedtimes. Why is it that when you close your eyes and imagine an artist you see someone who looks and lives nothing like your prototypical Halakhic Man? Of course the answer is halakha, but what does this mean? Some people would argue that the difference between the cliché image of an artist and that of an observant Jew is a matter of morality, not creativity. But this mistakenly and insultingly disconnects the life of the artist from the art, and halakha from the philosophy and vital motivations of the Halakhic Man.

Halakha is creativity for Halakhic Man. I think of my father's face when he explains a brilliant *heter* of Rav Moshe's, marveling at the subtle agility of this great mind. It reminds me of my mother's face when she reads poetry. But they are not in awe of the same thing. When a rabbi is creative, his goal is to expand the law. His whole devotion is to halakha and he wants to ensure that its holiness pervades the core of everything. When he is presented with an unprecedented case, all his creative skills are exerted towards finding some semblance of this unknown in the past. His innovation lies in his potential to extend tradition—he can make constant what seems fractured and dislodged. To discover persistency is his relentless goal, and it shows in the way he lives his life.

In contrast, artists, or at least the type of artist I am, try to do the opposite. They also find unity between fractured and dislodged shards of existence, but the whole that is produced does not slip the unknown back into the known. It hopes to highlight how unknown the known ever was. There are artistic rules—chords, rhyme, complementary colors—but the artist relates to these rules with skepticism and respectful defiance. The height of innovation is to get beyond the rule to a place of insecurity where the flesh of reality can be exposed without pretense. This longing infuses the whole life of the artist. It doesn't necessitate immorality, but it doesn't encourage a sheltered existence either.

When I think of creating a halakhic self, I



# The Artful or Artless Jew?

BY NOAH CHESSE

think of a cautious life— one in which I, ideally, weigh every choice, aware of its infinite meaning and ultimate effect on my relationship with God. I recognize myself as a player in a greater drama requiring my utmost attention and diligence. I accept that I will make mistakes, but forgiving mistakes, especially ones due to lack of proper intention or forethought, is a painful process. I think of the creative person I aspire to be in this life, taking complete responsibility for myself as a potential resting place for God in this world.

But then I wonder: how good a writer would I be? I picture a life where art is my main devotion. It is a mostly quiet, thoughtful life, but not in the same way as the halakha-centered life described above. In this existence, experiences take on inherent value. Mistakes become less scary, indecision much more so. It is a life of commitment to reality as it is and to the varying shades of divinity that already rest within it. Tradition, alternatively embraced and held at arm's length, is second in priority to solitude and expressive space. I want to be this creative person too, sweeping up life and making of it what I will.

There are further sources of tension, in various degrees—artistic creativity is more feisty and emotional, halakhic creativity more humbling and intellectual. Though the division between beauty and truth is hard to explain (if it exists at all), I find that as an artist the first takes precedent, but as a Jew the second does. The list continues, but I think my point is made. I'm also aware that there are many similarities between my two devotions and the lives they prescribe, and that, in general, life requires negotiating between multiple identities. But in this case the overlap seems marginal and any balance unsatisfying precisely because both options are bidding over the same personal space—creativity, will, outlook. Perhaps my whole struggle merely testifies to how long I have before I fully understand what it would mean for me to truly be an artist or a Halakha Man. But if this is true for me, I think it is true for many of us. I know how to balance art and Torah—close my eyes for inappropriate movie scenes, reference William Blake in Bible class—but that's when everything is external, well-defined and well-behaved. Internally, the clash is messier and the stakes are higher. How can a battle between even the most worthy of opponents not result with one being the victor and one the defeated? Sincerely, how?

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*When I first saw the paintings of Rembrandt, they reminded me of the saying of Hazal (Jewish sages) on the creation of light. When G-d created light, it was so strong and bright that it was possible to see from one end of the world to the other, and G-d feared that evil doers would use it [to their advantage]. What did He do? He hid that light away for the righteous in the future. However, every so often there are great people that G-d blesses with a glimpse of this hidden light. I think that one of them was Rembrandt, and the light in his painting is the very light that G-d created in the days of creation.*

*-Rabbi Abraham Kook<sup>1</sup>*

*Our nation looks well upon the sweet beauty of art which is expressed through human creativity. However, this relationship is also limited as we draw close with the left hand we push away with the right.*

*-Rav Abraham Kook<sup>2</sup>*

The Torah value of art (the expression of an artist's feelings, thoughts, and world view through a particular material medium) is undefined. On the one hand, the traditional Jewish community, with its focus on the primacy of Torah study, has devoted very little attention to the topic. Additionally, the prohibitions of idolatry in the Torah place great Halakhic limitations on the content of art. Nevertheless, the Torah espouses appreciation of art as a conduit of religious practice in numerous narratives. This essay will straddle the tension-ridden topic of Torah and art by surveying various approaches to aesthetics in Jewish philosophy.

## I. Art in the Torah and Halakha

The primary example of art in the Torah is the *Mishkan*, G-d's Tabernacle. We find that the *Mishkan* had an elaborate architectural design, integrating gold, silver, bronze, and textiles dyed in regal colors. The Jewish people were enjoined to contribute the entire spectrum of raw materials in order to form the magnificent edifice.<sup>3</sup> By devoting almost ten chapters to describing the exact details of the *Mishkan's* size, structure, material, contents, and supernal beauty, the Torah reveals its appreciation of the aesthetic. Indeed, artistic beauty serves as a dynamic force in the construction of G-d's Holy abode, the place in which the Jew confronts G-d most intimately.

G-d appointed Betsalel as the contractor of the project, to oversee each and every detail of the *Mishkan's* construction. The Torah says "G-d has appointed by name Betsalel... and has filled him with the spirit of G-d, in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship."<sup>4</sup> Rashi explains that

"the spirit of God" refers to *Ruakh ha-Kodesh*, a form of communion with the divine. This passage indicates that G-d is the ultimate artist, the source from which all beauty and art flows forth. Bezalel was capable of sustaining his work only by feeding off of a divine reservoir of beauty. Betsalel simply served the role of an empowered conduit, through which G-d's splendor manifested itself in concrete reality.

In order to participate in the discussion of Jewish aesthetics it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the dictates of halakha, the axiological foundation from which Jewish philosophy blossoms. The Gemarah in Avodah Zarah 42b-43b identifies the verse "You shall not make with me neither gold nor silver gods,



you shall not make for yourself<sup>5</sup> as the point of departure. Many commentaries, including the *Sefer ha-Hinuch*<sup>6</sup>, view this prohibition as a preventative measure against idolatry. The Baalei Tosaphot<sup>7</sup>, on the other hand, argue that the prohibition serves the purpose of distancing us from thinking that we ourselves are gods who are capable of creating the entire spectrum of the physical universe through our artwork. After all, if we celebrate the unrestrained custom of carving human statues or painting the entire spectrum of spectacles in the universe, we may begin to entertain thoughts of being on the same plane as G-d.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, if we were permitted to create 'images' of G-d then we might consider ourselves to be even greater than G-d. Due to this looming possibility, the Torah sought to train us with humility, with a sense of our proper place in the world as G-d's creations, as possessing a limited creative capacity.<sup>9</sup>

## II. Art in Jewish Philosophy

Martin Buber

Although Martin Buber never devoted a full volume to the topic of aesthetics, his various writings offer dispersed insights. Buber focuses mostly on the artist and his or her process of creating art. His treatment of aesthetics from the artists' vantage point, deals with three central concepts: energy, direction, and form. Buber explains that investment of *energy* contains a motive that generates the *direction* of art, which simultaneously produces a specific material manifestation, a *form* of art. The *form* sustains the *energy* and *direction*, making the artwork significant.

Let us further trace the meaning of each of these ideas. Buber contended that the *energy*, the content of one's inner psyche, put into

or derived from the process of art can be used to turn inwards for personal religious growth or focused outward for better communication with the outside world. Art, thereby contributes to forming a "life of dialogue" in both directions, inwards with ones self—the "I"—and outwards with the "thou."

The investment of energy into an artwork with a specific intentionality defines the makeup of the artwork. Buber elevates the notion of intention as the guiding force to the creative process; intentionality generates *direction*, order and meaning, in an artwork. In *Hasidim and Modern Men*, Buber defines the role of intentionality in the following manner: "The Hasidic teaching of *kavana* is twofold: that enjoyment, the internalizing of that which is without, should take place in holiness and that creation, the externalizing of that which is within, should take place in holiness. Through holy creation and through holy enjoyment the redemption of the world is accomplished."

Art that is *directed* becomes a creative act of holiness. Allowing the process of art to unfold naturally, according to the flow of *energy*,



intentionality, and *direction*, defines the creative act, the hallmark of the artist. It is this creative act which according to Buber, sustains and eventually redeems the "I-thou" relationship.

#### Immanuel Levinas

Immanuel Levinas invests a surprising amount of energy into aesthetics in *Existence and Existents*. In this book, Levinas is committed to the view that the representational work of art is an essentially idolatrous object. By this he means that art is the attempt to represent that which is unable to be represented, the infinity of the "other," which refers to a companion or metaphorically, G-d. Any image of living being violates the liveliness of that being; and image sits in silence compared to the animate nature of the "other." As such, Levinas, much like Plato, employs rather sharp

tizing the consumer to the beauty of G-d's world. Arousing awe and delight through his artwork, the artist intertwines physical beauty with spiritual purpose. In order to accomplish this end, Rav Kook wrote that the artist "expresses the deepest crevices of his soul."<sup>11</sup> The artist uses his inner yearnings to connect human beings, nature, and G-d.

Jewish art, Rav Kook believed, must not imitate pagan art, which historically "lacked purity and tenderness." Pagan art "puts blood soaked hands on the delicate flower of beauty and fine art" because it detaches art from the restraints of ethics and morality. Instead, Jewish art, should be placed within the realm of the ethical and honorable.<sup>12</sup>

#### Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik

In conjunction with his halakhic analysis of art, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik posits a

form of G-dliness than creation. Within this context, art becomes a spiritual opportunity, a potential channel that one can use to draw closer to G-d.

#### III. Conclusion

The Torah value of art is accompanied by a sense of passion and opportunity coupled with hesitation and nervousness. With this in mind, we must engage the discipline of art with deliberate carefulness, pushing forward with excitement and openness on the one hand, and pulling back with reservation and prudence on the other.

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## Postmodern Orthodoxy: Judaism in a Globalizing World

BY SHALOM SCHLAGMAN

We are all familiar with the term Modern Orthodox, yet we may not understand its meaning entirely. At first glance, Modern Orthodox stands as a hybrid name: the believers thereof set out to reconcile the task of tradition and religion with the realities of contemporary life. Yet, we must also recognize that Modern Orthodox is a double entendre, and might just as easily refer to the theological reconciliation of traditional Jewish thought with uniquely Modernist ideas. The original leaders of the movement were deeply affected by the Modernist philosophical worldview, and, thus, the name Modern Orthodox may be translated to "Modernist-Orthodox."

In America, a harbor of many varied cultures, Modernism reached its height "after the mid 1920s."<sup>1</sup> The modernist ideal was marked not only by the cosmopolitan endeavor, but also by the (nearly opposite) task of searching for a uniquely American identity by reconstituting the mix of cultures. Bill Brown notes that in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Americans searching for a unique cultural heritage went as far as to claim the traditions of Native Americans, in order to establish an extended heritage of American Culture. Interestingly, the same technology that allowed mass transit and international movement allowed for a cosmopolitanism that bore the Modernist search for the composite identity and also bred a xenophobic patriotism that led to both the Indian Citizenship Act and the Immigration Act.<sup>2</sup>

Modernists, like W. B. Yeats<sup>3</sup> noticed the fragmentation of the cultural and the individual experience, and exclaimed, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" (Yeats 1920). To combat the anarchy, Jew and Modernist alike harmonized the dichotomy by fusing the bifurcated parts and sewing the seams. In the face of anarchy, Yeats finds salvation in "a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*... A shape with lion body and the head of a man." The *Spiritus Mundi*, the Spirit of the World (possibly a parallel to Jung's Collective Unconscious), sends out the image of the sphinx, the ultimate para-



language to condemn art because of its inherent deficiency and distance from absolute reality. Abstract images of objects, according to Levinas, fall short of real live visual exposure to that object. Encountering the "other" through the avenue of art does not allow one to reap an ethical relationship, the primary purpose of any relation with the "other."

While Levinas certainly rejects the idolatry of representational realism, he praises the way in which art occasionally allows for access into the hidden and primordial dimensions of the "other." This seemingly paradoxical position maintains that at the same time that art closes out it also opens up as well, by giving access to the non-ethical and non-social aspects of the "other." In other words, art takes the "other" out of its context and allows the critic to view it through a totally different lens that may be helpful in organizing it together with other objects.<sup>10</sup>

#### Rav Abraham Kook

Rav Abraham Kook believed that the artist brings the world together by showing the unity of G-d's creation of the universe. The artist thereby serves the valuable role of sensi-

philosophical one: "Adam the first is not only a creative theoretician. He is also a creative aesthete. He fashions ideas with his mind and beauty with his heart. He enjoys both his intellectual and aesthetic creativity and takes pride in it."<sup>13</sup> The Rav believed that creativity is one of the trademarks of the human being. Adam's role is "to fill the earth and subdue it" and this can only be accomplished through creativity. With this mandate, there is great dignity bestowed upon the artist, who fills the earth with his or her creativity.

The creative act, in order to be valid and valuable, must be within the context of spirituality, of relation to G-d. Similar to Buber, the Rav posits that art must lie within the realm of furthering and deepening ones relationship to his Creator. For example, a Jew is encouraged to dance and sing in order to cultivate a relationship with G-d. Indeed, one should utilize various forms of art and beauty to express one's relationship with G-d.

The drive for creativity is a natural one, one that should be refined and even promoted, according to the Rav. In fact, the Talmud remarks that one of the key ways of gaining closeness with G-d is via *Imitatio dei*, the imitation of G-d's actions. There is no greater

<sup>1</sup> Kook, Abraham. *Yovel Orot*. p. 167.

<sup>2</sup> Kook, Abraham. *Iggrot HaReiya*. Number 158.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 35:4-10.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 35:30-31.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 20:20.

<sup>6</sup> *Sefer Ha-Chinuch*, Mitzvah 39.

<sup>7</sup> *Avodah Zarah* 42b-43b

<sup>8</sup> The Chatam Sofer (responsa Yorah Deah 128) was once approached by a student who was studying art, asking if it would be permissible to attend an art academy where he would have to sculpt a full human form. The Chatam Sofer responded that the student may attend the art academy so long as he does not complete the entire human sculpture; instead, he should ask a friend to finish off the last part. This answer relies upon the leniency of the Rabbenu Asher who says that "the prohibition against the human form is only in a complete figure." Despite his lenient ruling, the Chatam Sofer's warned his student of the power of art: "perhaps after the completion of the work it will be beautiful and the artist or those around him might adore the beautiful form so much as to bow to it, even without any divinity in mind, simply for its beauty."

<sup>9</sup> For a more in depth analysis of the interplay between Halacha and art please see: Kadden, Aytan. "Human Creativity: Art and Halakha." *Alei Tzion*, Volume 6: 1997.

<sup>10</sup> Buber, Martin. *Hasidism and Modern Man*, ed. and trans. Maurice Friedman (New York; 1966), p. 108.

<sup>11</sup> Allentuck, Marcia. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 30, No. 1. (Autumn, 1971), pp. 35-38.

<sup>12</sup> Schmiedgen, Peter "Art and Idolatry: Aesthetics and Alterity in Levinas" *Contretemps* 3, July 2002 p. 148-60.

<sup>13</sup> Kook, Abraham. *Yovel Orot*. Number 153.

<sup>14</sup> Kook, Abraham. *Iggrot HaReiyah*. Number 158. Rav Kook wrote this in his letter to the founders of Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem.

<sup>15</sup> Soloveitchik, R. Joseph. *Lonely Man of Faith*. Doubleday, New York: 1965. p. 18-20.



digm of synthesis, to save Yeats.

In the post 1920s, American Jews, a largely immigrant population, faced stark xenophobia, and learned that Americanism was the only way of life in the new world. In correlation to the Modernist synthesis of identity, American Jews were forced to reconcile American life with Jewish life (even if only to abandon one cultural heritage or the other). During the middle of the century, many American Jewish groups (Conservative, Reform and Orthodox) took up this hybridizing quest and forged a composite identity. In contemporary times, no Jewish group or movement has continued to uphold the hybrid identity as strongly as the Modern Orthodox movement, which includes institutions like Yeshiva University and leaders like Rav Soloveitchik.

In *Halakhic Man*, Rav Soloveitchik writes<sup>19</sup>, "The Halakha, which was given to us from Sinai, is the objectification of religion in clear and determinate forms...It translates subjectivity into objectivity, the amorphous flow of religious experience into a fixed pattern of lawfulness" (*Halakhic Man* 59). Earlier in the book, he notes that, "When halakhic man approaches reality, he comes with his Torah, given to him from Sinai, in hand. He orients himself to the world by mean of fixed statutes...well furnished with rules...[he] draws near the world with an *a priori* relation" (ibid. 19). The Rav, an exemplary Modernist theologian, sees conceptual *Halakha*, the precursor to the personal religious experience, as a unified, monolithic, corpus of communal sacred law, just as Jung saw the precursors to personality in the communal archetypes of the Collective Unconscious<sup>20</sup>. By creating objective *halakha* and an objective religious experience, the Rav alleviates the possibility that the community has defected from its original religious mandate. The "anarchy" that Yeats fears is combated by images drawn from the *Spiritus Mundi*; the "amorphous flow of religious experience" that the Rav fears is combated by laws drawn from the *halakha*, "a fixed pattern of lawfulness."

Yet, the translations of "subjectivity into objectivity" is not without its risks. By objectifying the religious experience, Modern Orthodoxy diminishes the value inherent in both the cultural and individual experience of man-God dynamic. In the *halakhic* realm, the Modern Orthodox practitioner loses sight of the poly-vocal quality of our Rabbinic tradition in favor of clear principles of legal determination. In the theological realm, he rejects the multivalent nature of God's sovereignty and loses sight of the individuality inherent in the God-human dynamic. In the personal sphere, the task of forming a composite Modern-orthodox identity levels the unique relationship with the Almighty. On a national level, Modern-Orthodoxy limits the God-people dynamic: the "King who reigns over kings," the God of all people, becomes the God of the particular sect

without exception. In all cases, the *Spiritus Mundi* bestows but one set of precepts on all of mankind, be they Archetypes, *Halakhot* or any other Modernist reincarnation of Kantian *synthetic a priori*. I would like to outline how a Postmodern view of our traditional text might better serve these three religious spheres.



## I. The personal divine dynamic: Prayer in a Postmodern world

Many thinkers and writers have recognized the vast import of speech in the human endeavor: each word captures in symbolic meaning a tangible object, person, or even ineffable feelings or abstract concepts. In fact, the Torah recognizes the importance of language clearly in two stories in Genesis: Adam names the animals (Gen 2:19-20) and the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1ff). Language, the translation of experience to symbol, of tangible to abstraction, is itself the symbol of our ability to interact with God, the ultimate harbor of intangible meaning. Prayer, then, may be seen as the pristine expression of human language. In prayer, we, beings of the physical, reach out to the non-corporeal All-Knowing utilizing language, the translational point between the physical and the amorphous, to create the connection between the two.

The modernist thinker stops here; he acknowledges words as the significant units of meaning and sees language as a system of signifiers and referents. In contrast, the postmodern thinker understands that language cannot be limited to simple spoken words. Whereas human language, packaged in words, is merely the vehicles for the translation of meaning, Pure Language is meaning itself. Walter Benjamin<sup>21</sup>, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century German-Jewish philosopher, writes, "Conversation strives toward silence, and the listener is really the silent partner. The speaker receives meaning from him; the silent one is the unappropriated source

of meaning" ("Metaphysics" 6). A conversation creates a medium for interaction through Pure Language: the speaker imparts information through his words and the listener transmits meaning in response. God, the only speaker of pure language<sup>22</sup> and the truest "unappropriated source of meaning" conveys his

meaning to man dually: 1. The Torah, written in the language of man, captures the information and meaning he would like to impart as speaker. 2. Through a lifelong, silent partnership with each person God imparts meaning as the listener. In the Postmodern review, our prayer allows us to access the meaning of a unique relationship with the Almighty. We transmit information to God through our words, and, in return, receive meaning from the silent partner. Hence, prayer is the medium for meaningful dialogue.

## II. Postmodern Halakha

Modernist literary critics diminished the import of the author's intent from the meaning of his text.<sup>23</sup> Yet, they did not empower the reader to enter into the dialogue or quest for his own meaning. Every reader, given the proper training, ought to deduce the same interpretation. Not so, the postmodern reader. When engaging a text, the postmodern reader understands that he enters the relationship dynamic as the silent partner, sharing meaning with the text.

In the realm of halakha, and interpretation of the Jewish legal canon, we must identify the limitations of the modernist approach. From a modernist stance, only the trained interpreter has the right to engage the halakhic corpus, and each *poseq*, given the same information, ought to deduce the exact *halakhic* meaning, as if unadulterated by humanity. Yet, God instructs us that Torah and its teachings do not belong in heaven. "*Lo ba-shamayim hi*," He ex-

claims, and we must respond by taking the charge of Torah and mitzvot, and lifting the world through the divine interaction. As the silent partner, each Jew is obligated to participate in a relationship with the text. He must not scrutinize information, but, instead, he must interpret meaningful halakhic knowledge through the web of relationships between himself, the text, the legal application and the history of legal decision and precedent. Surely, a nation in a land with a singular law and ideology must create a unified code of law by which to live. Exilic Judaism, as the name suggests, has no common land. In this scenario, national and religious unity<sup>24</sup> can only stem from a common history, a common mode of relation to the Almighty and common meeting places of religious practice.<sup>25</sup> In the time of the Sanhedrin, each of the nation's legal decisors was allowed his own view of halakha.<sup>26</sup> The rabbinic dictum "there are seventy faces of Torah" can in the postmodern world be expanded to include each person who engages the halakhic process.

## III Globalization and *Am Segula*: Fighting the Xenophobia Within

As discussed earlier, Modernism was born out of the combined phenomena of increased transnationalism and increased xenophobic patriotism. Unfortunately, the Jewish response to xenophobia included accepting overbearing patriotism as essential to people-hood. Below the surface of the Modern-Orthodox synthesis lies a feeling of hidden chosen-ness and supremacy. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests a new theological model that combats the xenophobic tendency from without and from within. In the globally connected world, cultures and ethnicities are not forced to synthesize together, but may be simultaneously viewed side-by-side, and appreciated individually through their juxtaposition.

In this postmodern world, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks developed the theory that "the Hebrew Bible...is the counter-narrative of Western civilization. It is the anti-Platonic story."<sup>27</sup> Rabbi Sacks believes that Western thinkers since Plato have devalued the particular in favor of the universal. The Torah, he points out, "is the story of the Jewish people, the children of Abraham and Sarah. The people of the covenant..." But this particular story only begins in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter. The first 11 chapters deal with "universal themes. Adam and Eve...Cain and Abel...The story of the Flood...the *brit bnei Noach*, the first universal moral code. All of those things are universal. They have got nothing to do with the Jewish people whatsoever."

In fact, Rabbi Sacks sees the story of the Tower of Babel as the turning point in the biblical narrative; this is the moment which forces God to demand particular nations, and diverse relationships with mankind. The people of the world attempt to create a single great civiliza-



# Ailu ve-Ailu Intolerant

BY BEN GREENFIELD

*Ailu ve-Ailu* (AA) is flimsy and deformed from all the stretching Orthodox Jews have put it through. An interesting idea, certainly accurate within its own context, is now employed in inappropriate situations, to an insincere, immature, and intellectually appalling effect. If that famous *bat kol* would grace us today, it would certainly declare, "I retract my previous statement. You guys are objectively wrong."

There are many (ab)uses, but the most troublesome is when AA concludes an hashkafic

discussion. "Sure, Satmar feels Zionism is a *to'evah* while Rav Kook considers it the sprouting of our salvation, but ~~that is the~~ beauty of Judaism- *Ailu ve-Ailu Divrei Elokim Hayyim*." Similar statements are made regarding the confrontation of hassidut and litvak ideals, the contrast between the Haredi and Modern Orthodox outlook, or the cultural approaches of Sefardim and Ashkenazim.

These statements are stupid! This is why: God has one Will. He has particular goals and desires for the world. Right? He doesn't want you to murder. He doesn't want you to kiss Prime Ministers of Iran. Conversely, he does hope you infuse this world with kindness, peace, Torah, mitzvot, *tzedek*, and *mishpat*. When you contemplate getting up for minyan, God cares – God is interested in you making the right choice.

So, when deciding between enlisting in Tzahal or sitting in the Mir, does He suddenly disappear with a thunderous, "Oh, I don't care – do whatever the heaven you like." When you tell an audience of Bais Yaakov students that "Tznius is a woman's *ikkar avodah*, like Talmud Torah is for men," can you imagine Hashem flatly murmuring, "no comment." Are you a Jew or a Deist?<sup>1</sup>

These arguments matter to God and one side is wrong. Obviously, that "wrong" position may not be evil incarnate. It often represents a very good, sufficiently efficient way to bring God's presence into our world. But the "right" choice, by definition, is more capable of doing so. When presented with the range of options, settling on anything but the ideal is tragic. But can every unique individual fit into one monotonous Jewish life plan? Of course not: each person is a different equation, with varying personal strengths and weaknesses producing a singular "right for you." But don't abuse the system. Be critical! One "right for you" still implies a thousand "wrong for

you's!" Similarly, "right for you" does not equal "right for all of you": how likely is it for your entire community and yeshiva to all share the exact personality type which justifies your collective hashkafot? Examine yourself before maintaining the status quo. More importantly, note that many personality traits may not be ideal themselves. Granted, not every Jew has the sophistication and clearheadedness to study Torah – and for that person, doing so is absolutely incorrect – but if they could press the magic button to change themselves, shouldn't they? If joining the IDF is actually destructive for certain communities, is that a matter of personal choice or a signal to do *teshuva*?<sup>2</sup> Never use AA to glorify the *bediavad*.

Which takes me from hashkafa to halakha. This type of statement is equally troubling: "Some *Gedolim* hold that brushing your teeth on Shabbat is not problematic. I looked into the issue and I see a glaring *Issur Daaraita*, but *Ailu ve-Ailu*." From the times of the Mishnah, halakhic disputes faced a sole arbiter: Truth. What is Gemara but a back-and-forth of proofs, rebuttals, and counter-proofs! The tradition continued to the *Rishonim*, who refused to tolerate a differing opinion – they fought a *Milkhemet Hashem*, using all the tools the rational mind granted them. Did they forget AA? Clearly, if you can bring proof for your *shita*, it is not one opinion in a care bear world of AA, it is Right.

This idea scares some people. Our Western culture is one of tolerance and diversity, where right and wrong only exist in questions of terrorism (wrong), cigarettes (wrong), and more tolerance and diversity (absolutely right.) *Ha-raya!*: scan the last five years of Disney movies for a moral message – apparently celebrating our differences is the only ethical ideal. Granted, tolerance has its time and place, but never confuse a sense of restraint or an openness to new voices with the strange philosophy that all sides are somehow actually right. Pretend, if it suits you, but never believe. And don't get too cocky either. Upon cognizing that Truth never travels by way of AA but only through serious debate and reason, you should find yourself less arrogant and hubristic. After all, it is the self-loving and un-introspective lover of AA who quickly designates his personal views as God's Truth, while the dedicated rejectionist approaches the world with thoughtful ears and inquisitive mind: skeptical, but curious and fair.

And don't be so frightened! Leaving behind the cozy comforts of AA may appear unpleasant, but bear in mind, you never believed

tion with "one language and one thought" (Genesis 11:1), a universal culture. God immediately recognizes that "that is not human[...and] intercedes, takes away their language and, from that moment, humanity is divided into a multiplicity of languages, faiths, cultures, civilisations. Diversity" (Sacks). After this, God chose one person, one family with whom to relate: Avraham and Sarah, and, ultimately the people of Israel. Rabbi Sacks, notes, "Number one: the God of Judaism is the God of the whole world. But, number two, the faith of Judaism is not the faith of all the world. It never was intended to be." The bible acknowledges that though the man-God dynamic is universal, a heritage of being sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, the parameters of the relationship must be particular to each culture and religion.<sup>3</sup> The story of Avraham and Sarah tells our divine narrative, and we must embrace our narrative not as universally authoritative, but as uniquely our own.

The global world bears a chorus of multicultural voices. God, being infinite, is able to engage in unlimited unique and meaningful relationships; seeing each culture and individual for his or her uniqueness. As Postmodern Orthodox Jews, let us take up the challenge of exploring our unique and particular relationship with God, and support all others, Jewish and Gentile, in their particular divine quest.

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<sup>1</sup> Ross, Dorothy, "Review of *Sampler of Modernism's Modernist Culture in America* by Daniel Joseph Singal." *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 21, No. 1. (Mar., 1993), pp. 121-125.

<sup>2</sup> Brown, Bill. "Identity Culture." *American Literary History*, Vol. 10, No. 1. (Spring, 1998), pp. 164-184.

<sup>3</sup> Yeats, W. B. "Second Coming" First Printed in *The Dial* (1920). This text taken from <http://www.thebeckoning.com/poetry/yeats/yeats5.html>

<sup>4</sup> Soloveitchik, Rabbi Joseph B. *Halakhic Man*. Lawrence Kaplan trans. The Jewish Publication Society. Philadelphia: 1983

<sup>5</sup> In fact, both Jung and the Rav admit to drawing their ideas from Kant's epistemological model of the *synthetic a priori*, see *Halakhic Man*, esp pgs. 19-20 and Jung, "On the Concept of the Archetype."

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin, Walter. "The Metaphysics of Youth." *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings* Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings Ed.

Rodney Livingstone Trans. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

See also Walter Benjamin's "On Language as Such and the Language of Man" in *Reflections*. Peter Demetz Ed. Edmund Jephcott Trans. New York: Schocken Books. 1986

<sup>7</sup> It is possible that in the Benjaminic view, Biblical prophets received messages from God as transmissions of Pure Language and were charged with translating the message into the language of Man.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Barthes's essay "Death of the Author," where he outlines the next step in the process. The modernists had "killed" the author, and Barthe and the postmodernists heralded in the age of the reader.

<sup>9</sup> Clearly, the postmodern flirtation with post-nationalism would affects our interpretation of "national unity." By national unity I intend to focus on commonality through mythos, ethos and community, and not on State-logic.

<sup>10</sup> The meaningful application of the history and practice, and the individual relationship to the religious centers are predicated solely on the individual relations with God, and not on a national unity. With this understanding of *halakha* the "fixed pattern of lawfulness", the Rav's version of the rules *a priori*, loses centrality in the face of the individuals relationship with that very *halakhic* corpus.

<sup>11</sup> Though he was bound to follow the rule of the majority for socio-legal concerns, as noted above

<sup>12</sup> Sacks, Rabbi Dr. Jonathan. "Jewish Identity: The concept of a chosen people" Lecture delivered May 8, 2001. Text found at <http://www.chief Rabbi.org/faith/identity.html>

<sup>13</sup> Rabbi Yuval Sherlow put it well in his *Bein Mishkan le-'Egel* when he writes, "In the King's palace, there is no room for 'other gods before me'...but it appears that this principle is not reciprocal, we are not alone in the King's palace...but we find other queens and concubines" (Pages 21-22, Orig Heb., translation mine).



in it in the first place. After all, has anyone ever applied AA to a religious group to their left? Do Orthodox congregants accept the Conservative movement with warm calls for open tolerance? Has a single Haredi figure ever admitted, "We had Rav Shach and they had the Rav." Let's be honest for a moment –

math and science, and, naturally, foreign from the way humans assess their everyday world.

For if you foster a genuine sympathy for "multiple-truth" or the "beauty of contradiction" you might find the implicit baggage difficult to maneuver with. Go ahead, take the relativistic route: deny human ability to per-

vision for the world and a particular method of functioning. Armed with Torah and logic we may uncover these details or we may not- but their eternal, unchanging existence is a fundamental tenet.

Yet this is not the case for Law; when our legal system is confronted with complex cases, the court searches through potential precedents that may contribute to some form of proof. But when the proceedings fail to find fault on either side and we face two potential verdicts that both jibe with the system – the legalist delights. His decision, a personal selection between two respectable courses, now morphs into law itself. (For contrast, imagine if a scientist could simply declare, "the results were inconclusive, but nonetheless I have ruled that there is life on Pluto!") At that moment of human decision, both alternatives beam equally Truthful. Both complement the current set of laws, and as such, are both legitimate. This characterizes a basic aspect of legal systems: they do not depend on pre-existing objective facts. A legal system never claims to reflect a higher emanation of Truth- it seeks only to find resolution within itself.

The same for halakha. Hashem communicates His will to His people through very limited texts. As such, they are subject to multiple interpretations, many of which fit snugly into our finite source information. When that occurs, all such options are equally valid. Since neither the views of the House of Shammai nor of the House of Hillel lead to direct contradiction with halakhic precedent, both express legitimate courses of action. Both are *divrei elokim hayyim*.

But bear in mind: despite the *Ailu ve-Ailu* conclusion, halakhic quarrels always commence with just that: quarrel – vicious and merciless. Throw proof-texts as spears and aim for the jugular. If the *pasuk*, *brait*a, or Rambam challenges the opponent's approach, fling him into the sea of Wrong and remain alone on your island of Truth. Only after passing this unforgiving test, only after proving one's validity, can a *shita* claim the crown of *Ailu ve-Ailu*. Prima facie respect of an opinion prior to sufficient critique grants idiocy in the place of legitimacy.

In my initial paragraph, I described AA's contemporary use as "insincere, immature, and intellectually appalling." I wasn't kidding. Blurring boundaries and ignoring distinctions in order to relate a specific halakhic notion to realms unprepared for such comparison is immature. And why is this done? To fulfill a subconscious need for justification in the presence of others. Insincere in that despite its proudly open-minded interpretation, AA is employed on an extremely subjective, close-minded basis. And finally, intellectually appalling for if a *frum* Jew would step back and consider the epistemological and moral significance of his statement, he would label himself a *kofeir gamur*.

So why are we so bound to this false interpretation? Why do our *Rebbeim* espouse it as a Jewish value? Because, as heresy goes, it's extremely useful. For the first time in Jewish history, variant strands of religious practice and personal culture exist in the same Jewish community. Lacking a proper education in AA, most religious individuals will resort to vicious intolerance. This does not have to be: one can respect the other as a Jew even while recognizing his faults but, granted, it is difficult. Simply put, we lack the sophistication to maintain *Ahavat Yisrael* without resorting to AA – to express esteem without assuming multiple truth. So we fool ourselves: teach the masses that the other is right because it's the only way to convince him that the other is human. Rejecting our masquerade would only lead to more sectarian tension and disunity, something the religious community obviously cannot afford.

Thus, in its place we have created a culture of comfortable compromise – to the point that AA is a basic part of our theological identity. But I can't imagine that the simple Jew of two hundred years ago ever considered it. When a Litvak businessman traveled through the heart of Hassadic Europe, he was probably tolerated with warmth, but certainly not gazed upon with the admiring eyes of today's naive Orthodox. Our great-grandparents may have lived full lives, never having the term *Ailu ve-Ailu* grace their ears. Although in contemporary society we rightfully value such diversity, let's not cross the line and project our mistaken, post-modern, *shaat hadakhak* philosophy onto God's eternal Self.

Who knows: we might be wrong and He might not be so tolerant.

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AA serves but one role: permitting a relatively unique belief (every group to its own degree and no more) to coexist with an emotional attachment to pseudo-traditionalism, simultaneously justifying the foolishness of the *frum* and the newness of the self. Or, in its halakhic context, AA enables us to argue with a *posek*, while concomitantly declaring him infallible.

But more to the point, a simple analysis of the notion itself reveals just how awkward AA can be. When I previously discussed hashkafic issues I only addressed one facet, the behavioral effect of hashkafa. But behind every practical question of joining the army or becoming a hassid or teaching women Talmud looms conceptual, philosophical discourse. What protects Israel – Torah or Torah with an army? Do a Rebbe's prayers bear supernatural powers? What is the role of women in intellectual and communal life? Answering AA to this form of query – saying two *factual* opposites are concurrently correct – intimates an irrational approval of contradiction. Yuch! Contradiction is anathema to the Jewish thinker. Halakha recoils from its gruesome countenance, *makhshava* flees from its very mention, and so too any human field of study attempts to construct a sizable, useful set of information utterly free of contradiction. Denying this principle is disastrous in Torah, impossible in

ceive a single Truth, better yet, deny the artificially constructed notion of Truth itself. Taken to its logical (and in modern times, relatively popular) conclusion, you'll soon realize that moral codes are artificial cultural products, that one and one equaling two is a consequence of your social upbringing, and that the image before your eyes may be but the dream of a dozing butterfly.

So wake up! *Ailu ve-Ailu* doesn't demand that sort of subjective nonsense from you. Let us discover *Ailu ve-Ailu* anew, the way the *bat kol* intended it.

*Ailu ve-Ailu* relates to a very specific meta-Halakhic feature. The *hiddush* is subtle, and for proper explanation, we must contrast life on Pluto with the death penalty on Earth:

In scientific pursuits, we know or we fail. Months of inventive research and moments of brilliant abstraction may produce a wealth of data, but if two mutually exclusive conclusions still fit those findings, we grieve and lament. For only one explanation is correct, even if we fail to detect it. There either is or is not life on Pluto – only one possibility exists – and wishing we had more information will never alter that fact.

This description applies equally to hashkafa. Hashem has, as it were, a particular

<sup>1</sup> From a recently published collection of *sikhot* by R. Weinberg ZT"l, Rosh Yeshiva of Ner Yisrael.

<sup>2</sup> This article is not taking sides on any of the heated Hashkafic or Halakhic issues presented as examples. The only position it takes is that a position must be taken.

<sup>3</sup> See Note 2.



# Hazal's Vision of Truth: A Response to *Ailu ve-Ailu* Intolerant

BY LEOR HACKEL

"'Masters of assemblies' (Kohelet 12:11)—these are the wise scholars who sit in various groups and occupy themselves with the study of Torah. These defile and these purify, these prohibit and these permit, these disqualify and these declare fit. Let one say: 'how can I ever learn Torah now?' Scripture states that 'all' are 'given from one shepherd.' One G-d gave them, one leader proclaimed them from the mouth of the master of all matters, Blessed is He, as is written: 'And G-d Spoke all these words.' (Exodus 20:1)"

-Hagiga 3b

I couldn't help but keep these words of Hazal in mind as I read the questions Ben Greenfield raises regarding Judaism's conception of truth—and he does raise some important questions. How does a doctrine of multiple truths differ from postmodernism? How could God want two things from us at once? With much due respect to Ben, though, he unfortunately seems to have missed what the wealth of traditional sources on the subject indicates. Just as in *lamdus* or *halakha* we would not invent our own *chiddushim* without checking in with our classical sources, we cannot allow ourselves to interpret fundamental statements of Jewish philosophy without seeing how our tradition has understood them over time. I hope that through careful consideration we can see that many of his criticisms are unnecessary and misguided, as we find a deeper conception of *ailu ve-ailu* that is both philosophically mandated and taught to us through the *mekorot* of our *mesorah*<sup>1</sup>.

In discussing the Talmudic dictum "*Ailu ve-ailu divrei elokim hayim*" ("These and those are the words of the Living God")<sup>2</sup>, Ben's article rejects any notion of multiple truths in *hashkafa* as a form of postmodern relativism, writing that "these arguments matter to G-d and one side is wrong." However, Ben sets up a straw man, oversimplifying a philosophy of multiple truths to mean that in disputes G-d "suddenly disappear[s] with a thunderous, 'Oh, I don't care- do whatever the heaven you like.'"

Frankly, it is no nod to postmodernism whatsoever to recognize that we live in a world in which no one can penetrate his or her subjective veil. Philosophers struggled to understand the nature of knowledge for centuries before postmodernism evolved. The first thing any student of epistemology discovers is how little we can claim to know about anything in any absolute sense, and how colored our

claims of knowledge often are. In fact, throughout the history of epistemology, very little has been decisively proven as knowledge, beyond the Cartesian givens (i.e. my own existence and my sensory experiences). Any other claims invariably enter a realm of epistemological dispute, as we wade through a sea of subjective knowledge, striving towards truth yet bound by the distinct perspectives through which we view the world. Additionally, modern perceptual psychology affirms the subjective nature of our experience. Recognizing this

handed down to the sages of each generation to decide. As the Ketzot HaChoshen writes in the introduction to his work, the Torah was handed over to the human intellect for interpretation. Indeed, as Ben writes, "G-d has one Will:" the will of the Living God is that we determine halakhic/hashkafic truth ourselves with the tools we have been given<sup>4</sup>.

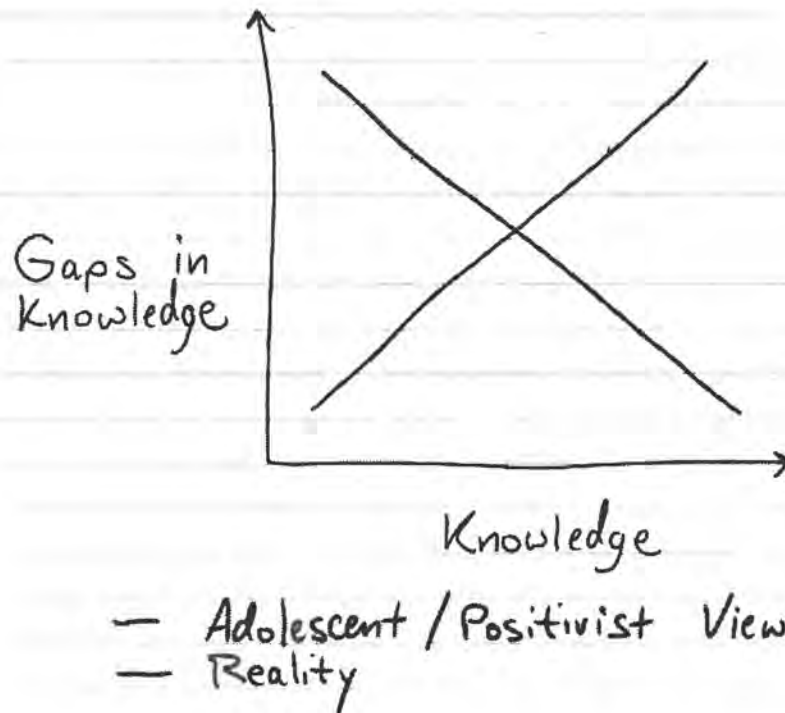
It is true that (unlike postmodernism) Judaism does start with a set of givens and does not accept the halakhic or hashkafic opinion of every John Doe off the street as *ailu ve-ailu*."

divided in their intellects, and it is impossible that the intellects of all men will follow one route...and thus, each and every person sees one aspect according to his intellectual lot." A second side of an argument does not merely, as Ben claims, "represent a very good, sufficiently efficient way to bring G-d's presence into our world" that nonetheless "is wrong." Rather, each side bears truth, and each of us may perceive differently which truth outweighs the other.

Ben's essay claims that "saying two *factual* opposites are concurrently correct intimates an irrational approval of contradiction." No. Saying that disparate arguments each bear levels of truth honestly recognizes the complexities of the world around us, and the limitations we each have. If we don't recognize these facts, what do we do instead with all the serious questions about truth raised by epistemology and, yes, by postmodernism?

It is not only the job of the Sages to see all the sides present in any matter—all legitimate, all real, and all true—and only then to decide which side is dominant. The ability to engage in this process is also a prerequisite to reach the highest levels of Torah scholarship. The *Gemara* in *Masechet Sanhedrin 17a* declares that we "may appoint to a Sanhedrin only one who knows how to purify a *sheretz* according to the Torah." Let's keep in mind that the *sheretz* is unquestionably defiled according to Torah law, case closed, no questions asked. It should be utterly clear to us from this passage alone that *ailu ve-ailu* most certainly is not "a very specific meta-Halakhic feature," as Ben's article suggests. There is no equal weight to both sides here in practice; a *sheretz* is *tamei*. And yet, to gain entrance to the highest order of *hakhamim*, one must truly understand the *svarot* with which we could declare the *sheretz* pure.<sup>6</sup> Further *Gemara*<sup>7</sup> tell of scholars who could purify the *sheretz* in one hundred different ways. On the operative level, we may only follow one side in a halakhic dispute, but we can never deny that more than one side exists. Yes, as Ben notes in arguing that truth is monolithic, "God does not want us to murder." God also declared the *sheretz tamei*.

It might be tempting to think, as Ben writes, that "the Rishonim...refused to tolerate a differing opinion- they fought a *Milkhemet Hashem*... Clearly, if you can bring proof for your *shita*, it is not one opinion in a care bear world of AA, it is Right." Perhaps, though, we should first look at what those Rishonim themselves actually wrote about their arguments—for example, Ramban's introduction to the



feature of our world represents a simple act of intellectual honesty on our part, and nothing more.

Keeping in mind the different viewpoints our world encompasses, we can begin to understand *ailu ve-ailu* as our Sages teach it to us. In discussing the above passage of *ailu ve-ailu* in *Eruvin*, the Ritva tells that the French Talmudic scholars were asked how both sides of an argument could possibly represent God's will. They responded, based on a *midrash*<sup>3</sup>, that when Moshe ascended on high to receive the Torah, he was shown 49 aspects (*panim*) towards forbidding and 49 aspects towards permitting each matter. When he asked God about this, God answered that these matters will be

Nonetheless, Hazal saw that any issue in halakha has differing aspects and perspectives inherently present within it. In *Be'er HaGolah*<sup>4</sup>, Maharal likens this phenomenon to Aristotelian physics, which states that all matter in the world consists of four basic elements (earth, wind water and fire) mixed in different combinations. Just as (according to this doctrine) every material object contains some proportion of each element but only one dominant element, so too any halakhic question contains valid arguments towards different sides and (usually) one dominant side among them. After all, as Maharal writes there: "Even if an object is defiled, it is impossible that it will have no aspect towards purity....And men are



work he not-so-incidentally titled *Milkhemet Hashem*: "And you, reader of my book, do not say in your heart that in my eyes my answers to HaRav Rabbi Zerachia z"l [the Ba'al HaMe'or] are all victorious answers that clearly force you to give in despite stubborn resistance, such that you then glory in yourself if you find where to doubt one of them...for the matter is not so. All students of our Talmud know that no *makhloket* in understanding it has final proofs."

So does this mean that we are a bunch of wishy-washy relativists, and that Hashem answers with a "no comment" when we decide how to live our lives? Heaven forbid that we should interpret *ailu ve-ailu* like this! Rather, when understood properly, the subjectivist approach of "*elu v'elu*" represents empowerment and responsibility.

R' Tzadok HaKohen M'Lublin<sup>8</sup> makes a fascinating observation on the *Gemara* in *Yoma* 75b. In the incident the *Gemara* there relates, R' Akiva offers such a radical interpretation of Scripture that R' Yishmael directs his students, "Go out and tell Akiva, 'Akiva, you have erred!'" R' Tzadok points out that R' Akiva's interpretation could not have been a total error; obviously, from R' Akiva's own perspective, he was correct and R' Yishmael in error. And yet, notes R' Tzadok, R' Yishmael still had the right to declare from his position, "Akiva, you have erred!"

After all, as the *Gemara* itself states in *Nida* 20b, "A judge has nothing but what his eyes see." R' Yishmael undeniably saw reality as he saw it, and could see it no other way. His words do not merely represent an opinion or a random choice between two potential truths, but rather the very real way in which he viewed the world. To declare anything other than, "Akiva, you have erred!" would have been dishonest of him, irrespective of how things might look from R' Akiva's shoes.

Two ideologies can both contain truth in theory. Yet when I must decide which I will accept, I have an obligation to follow what I see as true, judging situations with the tools I have. *Ailu ve-ailu* does not represent any apathetic openness to all options; it mandates my responsibility to follow the truth as I see it, once I have struggled through the various possibilities. Rather than representing a free-for-all, *ailu ve-ailu* makes me personally responsible for seeking the truth.<sup>9</sup>

Seen in this light, I have to point out the difficulties with Ben's belief regarding what *ailu ve-ailu* should mean (though again, we should already feel wary about an interpretation that lacks a basis in—and even runs counter to—our classical sources). In legal cases in which two decisions fit within our source texts, Ben writes that a "decision - a personal selection between two respectable courses- morphs into law itself." *Has ve-halila* that our system of law depends upon mere personal selection, and that it does not matter which judgment we render—even between two textually legitimate options. Such a notion should upset us far more than any hints of post-modernism. A judge has an obligation to root through *svarot*, struggling to glimpse truth,

eventually arriving at the way that he earnestly sees the situation at hand.<sup>10</sup> Anything less would be a distortion and mockery of justice, and anything more would demand a level of objectivity to which we are not privy in this world.

Yes, life would be simpler if we state that truth really is monolithic, and that God really does have only one concrete, practical will in halakha/haskafa. But try telling that to R' Eliezer after he was told "*lo ba-shamayim hi*" ("[Torah] is not in the Heavens") and excommunicated despite a Heavenly voice declaring that he is correct in all halakhic matters!<sup>11</sup>

In short, Ben's portrayal of *ailu ve-ailu* misconstrues it, and thus rejects it for the wrong reasons. He correctly notes that *ailu ve-ailu* can be and has been misapplied at times to embrace or justify all views. However, this is not what multiple truths and *ailu va-ailu* actually mean, and their potential abuse does not warrant throwing aside a couple thousand years of secular and Jewish philosophy. It should also be obvious at this point that *Hazal's ailu ve-ailu* worldview never means that we eventually "deny the artificially constructed notion of Truth itself." Instead, the notion of truth becomes all the more precious to us, as we must seek it out ourselves.

So where are we left? With the humbling appreciation that we can never see past our own subjectivity; with a sense of intellectual honesty; with respect for those with whom we disagree despite our own opinions; and conversely, with an empowered sense of obligation to follow truth as we see it despite

recognizing the existence of other perspectives. As Rabbi Hayyim Angel writes<sup>12</sup>, "By definition we have objective and subjective components mixed into our perceptions...Somewhat paradoxically, apprehending this lack of true clarity may bring us one step closer toward gaining clarity in our ever-growing relationship with God." Recognizing the subjective nature of our world at once empowers us to follow our visions of truth while still letting us maintain an honest appreciation for other possible viewpoints.

But then again, you didn't need me to tell you that. Had I just finished the quote with which I opened, Hazal could have told you this far better than I could: "Hence... acquire for yourself a discerning heart to hear the words of those who declare impure and those who pronounce pure, the words of those who prohibit and the words of those who permit, and the words of those who disqualify and the words of those who declare fit."

May it be His will that we do.

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<sup>3</sup> *Midrash Tehillim*, perek 12.

<sup>4</sup> The midrash makes this point clear in God's answer to Moshe: "*acharei rabim l'hatot*—if the majority declares impure it is impure, if they declare pure, it is pure." Apparently, the matter is *undecided* until we decide it. See also, among others: Tosfot Rabbeinu Peretz, who quotes this midrash; Maharsha (*Chagiga* 3b, s.v. *Natnu*), who offers an almost identical interpretation; Rashi to *Ketuvot* 57a s.v. *Ha Km* "l and Rambam in *Hakdama La-Mishna*, who write that in a *svara*-based disagreement, neither side can be declared untrue.

<sup>5</sup> *Be'er Rishon*.

<sup>6</sup> Maharal (*Derush al HaTorah*) explicitly state this interpretation of the *Gemara*, though its context in *Eruvin* 13b and *Midrash Tehillim* perek 12 also highlight this non-legalistic aspect of the *shoretz* condition.

<sup>7</sup> *Yerushalmi Sanhedrin* 4<sup>th</sup> perek, and *Bavli Eruvin* 13b. Significantly, this statement in *Eruvin* directly precedes the story of the heavenly voice declaring *ailu ve-ailu*. The context of the *ailu ve-ailu* along with the stories of Rabbi Meir recorded on the same *amud*, already point to a multiple-truths interpretation of *ailu ve-ailu*.

<sup>8</sup> *Machshevot Charutz*, Section 19.

<sup>9</sup> After all, despite his comments quoted above, Ramban continues in his introduction to *Milkhemet Hashem*: "But we will put forth all our effort and will have done enough in each *machloket* by pushing away one side with *svarot* that weigh against it; rejecting it through *sugyot*; and placing fortitude in the hands of the one who advances our side, from the *pshat* of the laws and logic of the *sugyot*, with agreement of the proper intellect. This is the goal of our efforts, and the intention of every scholar and God-fearer in the study of *Gemara*."

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Rabbeinu Yonah's commentary to *Avot* 1:1, s.v. "*Hevu metunim*."

<sup>11</sup> *Bava Metzia* 59b.

<sup>12</sup> *Through an Opaque Lens*, pg. 19. Sephardic Publication Foundation, Inc. New York. 2006



<sup>1</sup> Almost all *mekorot* quoted here have been culled from the shiurim and research of *mori ve-rabi* HaRav Chaim Eisen shlit'a. Any merit in this article (which he has not seen) is his, and any error or misrepresentation is mine.

<sup>2</sup> *Eruvin* 13b, stated regarding the dissensions



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