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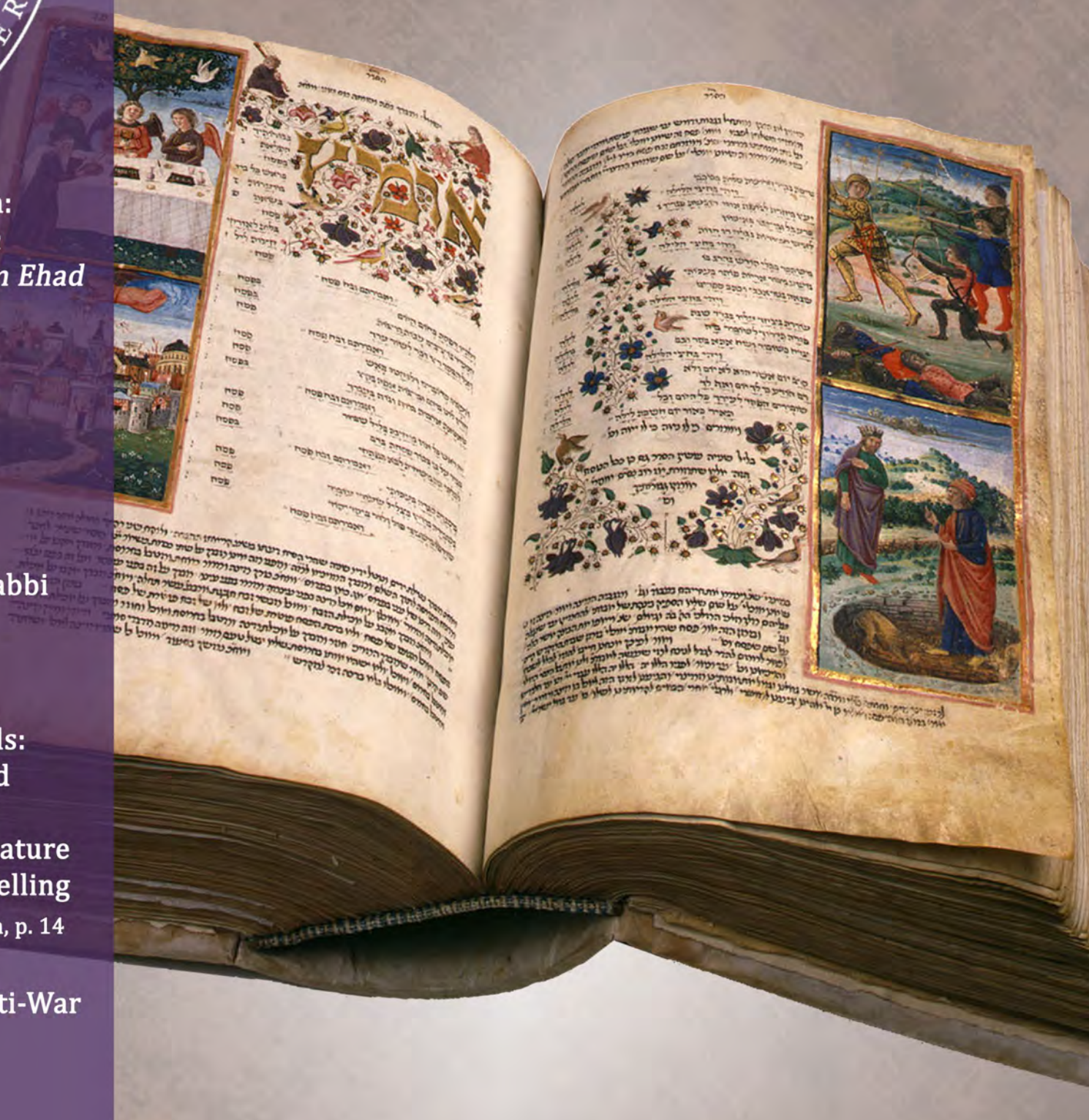
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March 24, 2010 / 9 Nisan 5770 Volume III, Issue 6

HAMEVASER

The Jewish Thought Magazine of the Yeshiva University Student Body

TORAH, LITERATURE, AND THE ARTS





Kol Hamevaser

The Student 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 Rashei Yeshivah, 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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This magazine contains words of Torah.

Please treat it with proper respect.

Editorial

Continuity at Yeshiva:

The Search for *Torah u-Gedulah be-Makom Ehad*

BY: Shlomo Zuckier

Continuity is the mark of any strong organization. In order to sustain consistent growth and output, to persist in achieving success, any group must have the ability to outlive each particular circumstance and eclipse any one generation or leader. Long stages of weak leadership can be damaging, even fatal, to an organization, as the realities of the world require it to be perpetually on the move, remaining relevant and vibrant. Yeshivot are no different, and it is not uncommon for a yeshivah to stagnate if it does not properly achieve this requisite continuity. We need only read the first *perek* of *Melakhim* about Bat Sheva's efforts to ensure a smooth transition from David to Shlomoⁱ to see that Tanakh is acutely concerned with continuity in transitions between leaders.

Yeshiva University has a rich tradition, and prominent within that is its history of strong rabbinic leadership. President Bernard Revel was the first leader of Yeshiva, and he built the intellectual framework underlying this institution. His successor, President Samuel Belkin, utilized his long tenure here to develop the infrastructure of the institution, starting the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, the Belfer Graduate School of Science, and Stern College for Women, turning Yeshiva into a university. Finally, President Norman Lamm both built on the hashkafic basis of Yeshiva that President Revel had established with his book *Torah Umadda* and other writings and also saved Yeshiva from bankruptcy and built its endowment.

All of these leaders held the dual title of President and Rosh HaYeshiva, serving as lay and *kelei kodesh* simultaneously and leading both the organizational and religious sectors of YU. Their knowledge of Torah and secular erudition, along with their organizational prowess, allowed them to lead and unite the institution. During the search for a successor for President Lamm, it was determined that no one person could sufficiently fill his big shoes, and Richard Joel was chosen as President, while R. Lamm continued to hold his position as Rosh HaYeshiva.

President Joel has, in his first seven years on the job, been superlatively successful in his role as President, significantly raising Yeshiva's endowment despite hard financial times and recently inaugurating the Glueck Center for Jewish Study building, the first major construction on the Wilf Campus in over twenty years. He has pushed for many new ac-

ademic and administrative hirings and has also moved to extend Yeshiva's involvement in the broader Jewish community through the CJF and similar institutions. In a word, he has built on and expanded his predecessors' successes at institutional and communal leadership.

At the same time, R. Lamm has continued to hold the Rosh HaYeshiva position, along with his new office as University Chancellor, from which he has offered guidance and wisdom to the YU community. He has given annual *shi'urim kelaliyim* (yeshiva-wide lectures), been interviewed for various publications (from *The Jerusalem Post* to *Kol Hamevaser*) and has represented Yeshiva to the world. He has recently, on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, been awarded many honors, from the establishment of Yad Lamm on the Wilf Campus to the inauguration of the Lamm Yadin Yadin Kollel, and, most recently, the creation of the annual Lamm Prize, awarded this year for the first time to Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks.

“The right Rosh HaYeshiva can steer this institution in the proper direction, create unity and a sense of purpose, and strengthen the religious ideals of the Jewish community, both within the yeshivah and outside it.”

As R. Lamm receives all these awards and everyone reflects back upon his illustrious career of service to Yeshiva University and *Kelal Yisrael* as a whole, it may be time to begin thinking not only about the past but also toward the future, to the point at which R. Lamm no longer serves as Rosh HaYeshiva. It is essential that R. Lamm's successor both command the respect of the yeshivah with his vast Torah erudition and simultaneously uphold the unique ideals and philosophy that this yeshivah holds dear.

In every yeshivah, the Rosh ha-Yeshivah (or simply Rosh Yeshivah, the term most yeshivot use to refer to their rabbinic leader) fills this double role. On the one hand, he serves as the Torah leader of the yeshivah and guides its intellectual growth with immense Torah scholarship. On the other hand, he functions as the spiritual and hashkafic head, projecting and promoting the religious values of the institution, which necessitates a serious understanding of practical and religious issues facing the community and a close match between him and the institution and community which he serves.

Neither of these roles can afford to be shortchanged. If the Rosh HaYeshiva is unable to overwhelmingly impress both the accomplished and budding scholars he leads by giving sophisticated *shi'urim kelaliyim* and the like, he will not be able to function properly,

as he will not be taken seriously by the Beit Midrash population. On the other side, a great *talmid hakham* with no vision or hashkafic understanding will not be able to suitably guide his yeshivah through the new pragmatic and religious problems that inevitably face every generation.

The stakes on this issue are of the highest importance. The right Rosh HaYeshivaⁱⁱ can steer this institution in the proper direction, create unity and a sense of purpose, and strengthen the religious ideals of the Jewish community, both within the yeshivah and outside it. Employing someone who does not fit properly can, however, be counterproductive, creating dissonance within the yeshivah or undermining its progress.

He-hakham einav be-rosho (the wise man has eyes in his head);ⁱⁱⁱ vision and planning are the mark of a strong institution, while turning the other way signifies a weak one. It is all too easy to pretend that this issue is not one that needs to be dealt with, but that only does a dis-

service to the *talmidim* of Yeshiva by pushing off and possibly intensifying a future problem. It is imperative that the leaders of Yeshiva

start thinking about this future scenario soon and begin setting in motion the structures necessary for a smooth transition to the next Rosh HaYeshiva.

As we congratulate R. Lamm on reaching the age of *gevurah*^{iv} and reflect upon his concomitant Torah and *gedulah*,^v it may be time to begin considering the next *gibbor ha-masorah* who will both portray excellence as a *gadol ba-Torah* and suitably lead the yeshivah of Yeshiva University into the future.

Shlomo Zuckier is a senior at YC majoring in Philosophy and Jewish Studies and is an Associate Editor for Kol Hamevaser.

ⁱ I could just as easily have cited examples from several other biblical stories (each of the *Avot* and their sons or Moshe and Yehoshua, for instance) to prove this point.

ⁱⁱ As the reader may note, I do not enter into the practical question of who would qualify as the “right Rosh HaYeshiva,” as that question may be premature and given that it is definitely not my place to speculate. This article simply underlines my understanding of which values are important in a Rosh HaYeshiva and what his impact must be on the community he serves.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Kohelet* 2:14.

^{iv} *Avot* 5:25.

^v See, for example, *Gittin* 59a.

Letter to-the-Editor

Dear Editor,

I write today in response to E. Goldschmidt's article printed in a recent edition of *Kol Hamevaser* titled “Chabad: Issues that Have Not Been Discussed on Campus” (February 2010, p. 11). Though her brief argument as to the inconsistency of Chabad messianism with traditional Jewish sources is well taken, she adds little to a point that has not been in serious dispute outside of Chabad. More problematic, however, is a methodological failure from which both her article and Dr. Berger's book,ⁱ from which she cites extensively, suffer. Namely, both presumably aim to confront a growing theological crisis but do so on the grounds of its manifestations, not its origin.

In Chabad Hasidism, perhaps more so even than in other Hasidic groups, the Rebbe is seen as something of an *axis mundi* whose mundane activities, and all the more so his public discourses, are viewed quite literally as divine revelation. The Chabad Hasid, and particularly the outspoken messianist who is unhindered by social pressures from the widespread disdain in which he and his views are held, sees himself as deriving those views directly from the teachings of the Rebbe and, through them, from God, who spoke through the Rebbe. Opposition to Chabad messianism that is not grounded deeply in these teachings and which does not convincingly demonstrate *from them* that *ongoing* activism in support of the Rebbe's active messianic career is both unjustified and ultimately in conflict with his larger goals will fall on deaf ears. Furthermore, it will only serve to confirm the suspicion held by many in Chabad's ranks that anti-messianism is simply veiled antagonism for the movement as a whole, which, were this the case, would justly be disregarded for its senselessness.

Although it might be countered that both Goldschmidt and Berger are primarily concerned with the broader (negative) impact of the movement on modern Jewry and not with the altering of Chabad's own beliefs, such that research into its theology would be less important than anecdotal observation of its members' activities, I find this unacceptable on two counts. First, it is precisely Chabad theology that is at issue here, and, therefore, combating it without a nuanced understanding of its nature severely undermines the validity of any opposition to it. Secondly (and this is, admittedly, more of a value judgment), if there is, indeed, a problem with Chabad theology vis-à-vis normative Jewish messianism, I believe that positive means for reintegration

should be sought out; aggressively “warning” other communities of the problem, and thereby isolating Chabad further, will only serve to exacerbate the problem.

Thus, if Goldschmidt and those who, rightly, join in her concerns are interested in doing more than waving the flag of their indignation (as if this alone could do any more than the yellow flags adorning Crown Heights homes do to hasten the Rebbe’s messianic advent), they would do well to immerse themselves in the Rebbe’s writings so as to produce an argument that is more likely to have the desired effect. This would, moreover, contribute positively to scholarly review of a massive corpus of literature that has until now received but scant attention in an academic milieu apparently more interested in Chabad’s religious-sociological impact on the Jewish community than on its scholarly and theological contributions.

Sincerely,
Hayyim Rothman, BRGS ‘11

ⁱ Please note that I have the utmost respect for Dr. Berger both as a person and as a scholar. This letter is intended neither to disparage him nor the article’s author, but only to voice my thoughts as to what I consider more effective as an approach to a problem, the seriousness of which I acknowledge as deeply, if not more so, than either of my contenders.

Torah, Literature, and the Arts

Modern Midrash:ⁱ

Creating New Meanings in an Ancient Text

BY: AJ Berkovitz

It is no surprise that the Bible is the most loved, hated, and best-selling book of all time. The Bible can be metaphorically compared to both water and ice. Although its text rarely changes, each generation and milieu finds different shades of meaning in its content. Before further exploring the above statement, it is helpful to explain the genesis of this article. In the recent *Kol Hamevaser* issue on Academic Jewish Studies, Ori Kanefsky wrote an intriguing and well-thought piece entitled “Bible Study: Interpretation and Experience” [*Kol Hamevaser* 3 (December 2009): 19-20] in which he expressed to need to introduce reader-response criticism into biblical study. Subsequent to its publication, the article received a scathing attack by a fellow student. In his critique, the student proclaims that applying reader-response criticism to the Bible is religiously harmful. One who does so creates meaning independent of what God intended, thus equating himself or herself to God.ⁱⁱ It is the substance of this critique that I wish to address herein.ⁱⁱⁱ This article will set out to explore and hopefully answer the following questions: Can a person uniquely and creatively interpret and reinterpret the Bible, even in opposition to the *sensus literalis* (*peshat*)? Can he or she then add his or her own layer of meaning and religious significance to the text, even in spite of the text’s traditional understanding? And, if so, is there any limit to creative interpretation?

Before answering these questions, several terms should be clarified. Because literary theory and interpretation assumes the existence of literature, it is pertinent that the word ‘literature’ have a workable definition. Literature has a long history of eluding objective classifica-

I will adopt Terry Eagleton’s notion that what we define as literature varies by time and place. Because literature is essentially a value judgment based on what society deems “fit to be read and preserved”^v its study is ultimately subjective. Dependent on circumstance and milieu, the same text will have different meanings to its readers.

The study of Tanakh is no exception. Although Tanakh has definite historical content and context, as history progressed, the meaning of its content also evolved. One vivid illustration of this evolution is the treatment of Amalek. It is a Biblical imperative to utterly decimate the remnants of Amalek.^{vi} In the absence of a clearly defined modern Amalekite nation, many Jews have created their own “Amalek.” For some, Amalek is social injustice, for others, they were the Nazis. As history progresses, it is inevitable that what or whom we identify as Amalek will morph and evolve. This is merely one example of how contemporary society views and reshapes the meaning of a stagnant text.

The next two terms that need to be clarified are opposites but not mutually exclusive: exegesis and eisegesis. The former interpretive style uses linguistic and historical evidence to uncover and explicate the biblical text internally. This is the methodology of the *Pash-tanim* such as Ibn Ezra and Rashbam. Eisegesis, however, refers to reading one’s own ideas and interpretations into a text. Rabbinic literature is replete with examples of eisegesis. For example, although the simple sense meaning of “*Lo tevashel gedi ba-halev immo*” is, “Do not cook a goat in its mother’s milk,” which, according to Rambam, is meant to prohibit a specific form of idolatrous worship,^{vii} Hazal reinterpret the verse to mean, “Do not cook milk and meat together.” By straying from the literal sense of the verse, and cre-

ative religious messages from the text in order to fulfill the spiritual and sometimes polemical needs of the masses. One incredible example of eisegetical and exegetical fusion is seen in Fragment Targum (*Targum Yerushalmi*) to Genesis 4:8:

“Cain said to Abel his brother, ‘Come let us go out to the field,’ and when the two of them had gone out to the field, Cain spoke up and said to Abel his brother, ‘There is no justice and there is no judge and there is no other world, neither to give reward to the righteous nor to exact punishment from the wicked. The world was not created with mercy, nor is it conducted with mercy. Why was your sacrifice accepted favorably, but from me it was not accepted with favor?’ Abel responded and said to Cain his brother, ‘There is justice and there is a judge, and there is another world, and there is giving reward to the righteous and punishment exacted from the wicked. The world was created with mercy, and with mercy it is conducted, but it is (also) conducted according to the fruits of good deed. Because my deeds were more upright than yours, my sacrifice was accepted favorably, but from you it was not accepted favorably.’ And the two of them were quarreling in the field, and Cain rose against Abel and killed him.”^{viii}

The Fragment Targum capitalized on the opportunity presented by a lacuna in the biblical narrative to act as both exegete and eisegete. Not only does the Targum fill in the missing discussion, but, the careful reader will notice, it also puts in the mouths of Cain and Abel a debate reminiscent of the intense polemics between the Pharisees and the Sadducees thousands of years later: Cain is painted as the Sadducee and Abel as the Pharisee. The Targum creates an additional layer of meaning by presenting a current struggle in guise of ancient characters. This aggadic passage, like many others, seeks to place Tanakh in a contemporary setting, making it relevant to its current readers – a homiletical strategy which is, to a great degree, analogous to the modern rabbinic sermon. Much like Hazal, we use methods to which we are accustomed, namely biblical and literary theory, to coax, cull, or create religious messages from the Bible text.

However, a distinction must be drawn between creation of new textual meanings via Aggadah and independent interpretation of Ha-

“Hazal’s Midrash Aggadah is an example *par excellence* of creating meaning through the fusion of exegesis and eisegesis.”

tion and definition. A full analysis of what exactly constitutes literature is beyond the scope of this article.^{iv} For our purposes, however, I will use literature in two different senses. “Literature,” in the sense of Rabbinic literature or Talmudic literature, refers to a canon or collected body of works viewed as part of our sacred tradition. The second usage denotes literature in the way we typically understand it: a literary artifice that we relate to individually. It is with reference to this latter usage that

actively extending its meaning to include all milk and meat, Hazal portray and endorse creative interpretation of biblical verses. This creative style, and others more drastic, pervades Midrash.

It should further be noted that Hazal’s Midrash Aggadah is an example *par excellence* of creating meaning through the fusion of exegesis and eisegesis. The nature and function of homiletical Aggadah, such as *Va-Yikra Rab-bah*, was to uncover and discover new and cre-

lakhah. While inventing new constructs and deviating from the confines of tradition is acceptable and even commendable with regard to the former, using a system parallel to but outside the latter can be divisive and destructive. Although Hazal departed from the literal sense of the verse in order to define Halakhah, because we bind ourselves to the Rabbinic interpretation of the law, we are required to work with and develop Halakhah from within the Rabbinic system.

As shown above, though, the restrictions that apply to creating Halakhah do not affect the invention of new aggadot. This difference stems from the fact that Aggadah is neither halakhically nor theologically binding, an idea explicitly expressed by the Geonim. Because the Karaites would constantly disparage the Rabbinic interpretation of the law by poking fun at various aggadot, R. Saadia Gaon declared: “We do not rely on Aggadah.”^{xix} Rav Hai Gaon later supplied the reason: “The teachings of Aggadah do not constitute an ongoing tradition. They are rather the product of an individual preacher’s fanciful exposition. They are not precise enough to be regarded as authoritative.”^x According to the Geonim, midrashim and aggadot are not part of our unchanging tradition. If they are truly the fanciful expositions of an individual preacher, does it make a difference whether the preacher lived in the 10th century or the 21st? As long as one keeps within a basic Jewish framework, any interpretation of a verse, as long as one does not claim it is *peshat*, is commendable and spiritually valuable.

In addition to being halakhically irrelevant, Aggadah is highly subjective. According to Ibn Ezra, “Some of it is like fine silk, and some of it is like crude burlap.”^{xi} There are good interpretations as well as horrific ones; the creation of Aggadic meanings is completely relative and non-authoritative. This sentiment is clearly expressed by Rabbi Yehiel of Paris in his disputation with Nicholas Donin about the Talmud in 1240: “It [Aggadah] contains puzzling teachings which a disbeliever [...] will find hard to believe, but there is no need to defend them. One may believe these teachings or not, as one desires, since no law is based on them.”^{xii} As long as Halakhah is not at stake, one can accept or reject Aggadah.

This logic is also seen in Ramban’s debate with Pablo Christiani in the 1263 Disputation of Barcelona. After Christiani tries to prove Christ as the Savior using Midrashic sources, Ramban remarks: “We have a book called Midrash, which, in essence, consists of homilies. It is just as if a bishop were to deliver a sermon that appealed to a listener and it were committed to writing. In this case, such a book of homilies – if one believes it, all is well and good, and if one does not, no harm is done.”^{xiii} There is no difference between homilies created a thousand years ago and homilies created today. In their eras, Hazal used the style of Midrash Aggadah as a medium of communicating religious ideals to the masses; likewise,

today one can use reader-response criticism to develop religious teachings and spirituality from Tanakh. This view parallels closely that of Abraham Joshua Heschel in *Heavenly Torah*. After quoting the midrashic claim that Jacob the Patriarch did not die, the debate among the Amoraim that ensued, and the conclusion that “I know full well that Jacob died, but I am trying to interpret the verse in every possible way. It is possible to say that he did not die in the sense that the righteous, even in death, may be deemed alive,”^{xiv} Heschel writes: “Midrash is irreducibly subjective. A scriptural verse may yield many interpretations, and which interpretation will be adopted will depend on motive of the interpreter. That motive will arise from matters of loftiest spiritual import: a conception about God, a conception about Torah, a conception of life.”^{xv} Recall the Cain and Abel Midrash above.

“The quest for constantly relevant religious meaning is admirable insofar as it does not end up completely negating the religious significance of the text.”

Just as Hazal acted on and reacted to their world, creating spiritual meaning from Tanakh based on their unique circumstance and milieu, it is our religious obligation to also create spiritual meaning and relate to the Bible on any of its levels: *peshat*, *derash*, historical, or spiritual. Hazal’s aggadot do not limit our intellectual creativity; they are, rather, the paradigm. Through Hazal, our religious and intellectual predecessors, we can understand how an unchanging text can be multifaceted and polyphonic. The midrashic theory of Hazal’s and the Rishonim’s time is analogous to the biblical and literary theory of our times. Hazal sought to understand the Bible as a religiously meaningful text, one with varied messages and complex values. We do, too. Additionally, because Hazal’s intellectual heirs did not see the need to identify the Rabbinic homily as binding and authoritative, we do not have to consider them such either. The Bible is literature and therefore its meaning, as proven by the members of our sacred heritage, changes and evolves over time. This idea follows that of Terry Eagleton: “All literary works, in other words, are ‘rewritten’, if only unconsciously, by the societies which read them; indeed there is no writing of a work which is not also a ‘re-writing’.”^{xvi} Biblical literature speaks to different people on different levels; therefore, it is requisite that everyone find his or her own religious inspiration within the text using any available means necessary.

However, there is one small, but supremely significant, caveat here. The quest for constantly relevant religious meaning is admirable insofar as it does not end up completely negating the religious significance of the text. For the seeker of inspiration, the employment of critical methods, both literary theory and academic criticism, can only be effective and affective only with the cognizance that the Bible is sacred literature. A person seeking religious inspiration cannot

gain it by debasing the text upon which his or her interpretation is based.

Unfortunately, to some, use of any method other than traditional exegesis seems threatening and destructive. My reaction to these people is similar to that of Reuven Malter, the protagonist of Chaim Potok’s *The Promise*. Reuven is a practitioner of what many refer to as “Academic Talmud.” After many confrontations with Rabbi Kalman, his rebbe, about Reuven’s ideas and beliefs, Reuven has a discussion with his father, David Malter, a teacher of Talmud and an academic. Reuven asks him, “How do I convince him that the way we study Talmud is not a threat?” David Malter responds, “But it is a threat, Reuven. I just told you it is a threat. In the hands of those who do not love the tradition it is a dangerous weapon.” Reuven shoots back: “Everything is dangerous in the wrong hands.

How do I convince him that we’re not a threat?”^{xvii}

We may now confidently and competently attempt to answer the questions stated above. One can uniquely and creatively reinterpret the Bible, even against its literal meaning. These interpretations are non-authoritative, inventive, religious expressions which may be suggested by anyone at any time. The only exception lies in the interpretation of Halakhah; we have a binding and authoritative system upon which we base our rulings and therefore must work within that system. Barring the creative explication of Halakhah, just as Hazal sought to create religious significance in their era, it is our religious duty to make the Bible and its messages, latent and creative, important and personal in ours. Because the Geonim and Rishonim viewed Hazal’s aggadic interpretation as subjective and relative, we, in turn, are allowed to create our own textual meanings, in spite of previous interpretative traditions. By doing so we are not supplanting God and claiming to be His equal; we follow in the footsteps of Hazal and make Torah relevant and dynamic, textually and spiritually.^{xviii}

Nevertheless, although we possess almost infinite creative freedom in inventing new, religiously significant meanings, we are limited to activities which do not destroy the inherent spirituality of the text and uproot basic Jewish values. One cannot emotionally pursue religious values while simultaneously undermining them. Creative expression and thought is highly encouraged; however, one must still retain respect for Hazal and their tradition, even when interpreting independently of it. This struggle is similar to that which Chaim Potok illustrates beautifully in a later scene in *The Promise*. Abraham Gordon, a professor of Jewish Thought at Zechariah Frankel Theological Seminary, asks Reuven Malter: “How can we teach others to regard the tradition critically and with love? I grew up loving it, and then learned to look at it critically. That’s everyone’s problem today. How to love and respect what you are being taught to dissect.”^{xix}

AJ Berkovitz is a junior at YC majoring in Jewish Studies, a Staff Writer for Kol Hamevaser, and respects Rabbinic tradition even when interpreting independently of it.

ⁱ Although “Midrash,” “Aggadah,” “Midrash Aggadah,” and “Early Biblical Interpretation” are each individual terms with specific meanings, in this essay, for the sake of both simplicity and audience, I will use them practically synonymously.

ⁱⁱ Yehoshua Blumenkopf, Letter, *Kol Hamevaser* 3,4 (February 2010): 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ My argument against Ori’s lament lies not in the fantasized religious dangers that lurk in reader-response criticism, but rather the purpose and nature of Academic Bible at YC. The purpose of YC Bible is to explore Tanakh on its own terms by ascertaining the literal-sense interpretation (*peshat*) of the text. Reader-response criticism by its very nature cannot uncover *peshat* as intended by the biblical authors. It can, however, aid one in his or her religious pursuits and be the basis of a “spiritual interpretation” of the Bible. If reader-response criticism were practiced in YC, it would more likely fall under the umbrella of the English Department, not because of religious aversion, but rather because of focus.

^{iv} For a good discussion of this issue, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

^v Ibid., pp. 9-14.

^{vi} *Devarim* 25:19.

^{vii} See Rambam, *Moreh ha-Nevukhim* 3:48.

^{viii} Translation by Dr. Moshe Bernstein taken from an in-class handout. The underlined portions are translations of the actual biblical text and the rest are the Targumic additions.

^{ix} *Otsar ha-Ge’onim, Hagigah*, p. 65.

^x Ibid., p. 59.

^{xi} See his introduction to his commentary on the Torah.

^{xii} J.D. Eisenstein (ed.), *Otsar Vikkuhim* [a collection of polemics and disputations] (Tel Aviv, 1969), p. 82.

^{xiii} Ibid., p. 89.

^{xiv} *Berakhot* 18a.

^{xv} Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted through the Generations*, ed. and transl. by Gordon Tucker and Leonard Levin (New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 23.

^{xvi} Eagleton, p. 12.

^{xvii} Chaim Potok, *The Promise* (New York: Random House, 1997), p. 295.

^{xviii} Cf. Blumenkopf, n. 2 above.

^{xix} Potok, p. 298.

Painting the Bible: A Different Form of *Parshanut*

BY: Ilana Gadish

“Come, let us make our father drink wine, and let us lie with him, that we may maintain life through our father.”ⁱ In Genesis 19, Lot and his daughters have just escaped Sodom, which is being razed to the ground behind them, when they come to a cave. In verse 31, Lot’s older daughter convinces her younger sister to join in her plan to repopulate the world, which they both think has been completely destroyed, by lying with the only man they believe to be left alive, their father. Over a span of two nights, the daughters both manage to become pregnant through him, and subsequently, the nations of Mo’av and Ammon are born.

The daughters’ motives in this narrative are not exactly clear, and many *parshanim*, biblical commentators, have taken different approaches to explaining the nature of the union between father and offspring. Ramban claims that the daughters understood that they had been saved for a reason, and therefore acted in such a way so as to ensure the continuation of mankind in the world. According to Ramban, Lot’s daughter’s had pure intentions, “*ve-hinnech hayu tsenu’ot*” (behold, they were modest).ⁱⁱ This approach paints the daughters in an innocent light, and Orazio Gentileschi, in the 17th century, did so as well.

Gentileschi, an Italian Renaissance painter, produced a work in 1621 titled “Lot and his Daughters,”ⁱⁱⁱ depicting the scene in which the elder daughter’s plan is hatched. As noted, his depiction is similar to Ramban’s interpretation of the event. In Gentileschi’s painting, Lot appears to be in a deep slumber, not conscious of his surroundings at all. This follows the *peshat* reading of the text, which notes, regarding both sisters’ advances on their father, “*ve-lo yada be-shikhvah u-be-*

where the city of Sodom is barely visible from afar, with smoke rising from it to the sky. The other sister sits in the background; only the side of her face is seen but her expression and body language indicate her fear and awe. The figures appear illuminated, yet the light source seems not to come from the enflamed city but from some other unknown source. Additionally, the objects behind the sisters remain in the dark. As a result, the figures seem to glow unnaturally; perhaps the artist wanted to convey that the sisters were being bathed in a miraculous light, indicating divine approval. According to Gentileschi’s painting, the daughters seem to have had innocent motives, contemplating the fearful future for mankind if they do not act. This piece, then, personifies Ramban’s assessment of the daughters, “*ve-hinnech hayu tsenu’ot*.”

Rashi’s interpretation differs from the Ramban/Gentileschi depiction of the scene. While Rashi cites *Be-Reshit Rabbah* as explaining that the daughters likened their own situation to that of the generation of the Flood in which the entire world was destroyed except for Noah’s family,^v he seems to think that despite their concern for the repopulation of the world, their actions still contained some aspect of *zenut*, licentiousness. Comparing the ways in which verses 33 and 35 describe the behaviors of the elder and younger daughters, Rashi understands that the more descriptive language in verse 33 conveys that the elder daughter’s actions were characterized by *zenut*. Because she made the initial suggestion, the elder daughter receives the stronger criticism from Rashi who claims that she instigated the incestuous event – “*patehah bi-zenut*.”^{vi}

Sifte Hakhamim writes that from Rashi’s *perush* we learn that “*le-shem zenut nitkavvenu ve-lo le-shem Shamayim* – their [the daughters’] intentions were licentious and not for the sake of Heaven.”^{vii} This comment

but even the younger daughter’s intentions were impure and illicit. This *perush* jibes well with those who read the story along with its accompanying commentaries and wonder, “Did the daughters *really* think there was nobody else in the world left?”

Interestingly enough, Artimesia Gentileschi, the daughter of Orazio Gentileschi, also completed a painting titled “Lot and his Daughters” in 1638.^{viii} Her work depicts a scene closer to the interpretations of Rashi and *Sifte Hakhamim*, one that attaches the motives of *zenut* to the daughters’ actions. In it, Lot is awake and conscious. One daughter is offering him wine while the other cuts a slice of bread, looking in his direction. This representation is indeed characterized by a sense of *zenut* and does not convey the fearful, dark and serious mood that Orazio Gentileschi’s painting of the scene suggests. Earlier, in 1520, Lucas van Leyden, a Dutch artist, portrayed the same biblical episode in a similar manner in his own rendition of “Lot

and when one compares these various renditions, the spectrum of *parshanut* is displayed in full, luminous color. Paintings of *Akeidat Yitshak*,^x the story of David and Batsheva, Delilah cutting Shimshon’s hair, and many others have all been produced by a myriad of painters spanning the centuries. Each painting has a different interpretation to offer, whether it mirrors closely the understanding of a particular commentary found in a regular *Mikra’ot Gedolot*, or whether it offers an alternative understanding, not found in traditional sources. These brilliant depictions often convey the deep emotions at play in a given biblical scene and communicate the complexity of a biblical text in a way that literary exegesis simply cannot.

It is important, then, to recognize art as a form of *parshanut*, and appreciate what a useful tool it can be in understanding Tanakh. By utilizing the incredible works produced throughout history by talented and thoughtful artists who understood the profound messages

“It is important, then, to recognize art as a form of *parshanut*, and appreciate what a useful tool it can be in understanding Tanakh.”

and his Daughters.”^{ix} Here, too, the daughters’ actions take on a more illicit, drunken nature rather than one driven by pure motives.

The point here is not to answer the question of whether or not Lot’s daughters had purely innocent motives. What becomes clear through comparison of these paintings is that art often conveys interpretations of biblical texts in a way that enhances our understandings of the texts. Standing in front of Orazio Gentileschi’s magnificent painting in Madrid brings to life the commentary of the Ramban in a way that reading the text alone cannot.

It is also important to remember that throughout history, a large percentage of the population was illiterate. While Jewish tradition emphasizes constant engagement in the textual study of Tanakh, Midrash, Mishnah, and Gemara, many Jews were still unable to read. As a result, visual representation was an effective mode of interpretation of ideas and stories, as well as a prime method of communicating a message or a lesson to a broad audience. Through the use of light, shading, colors, selection of detail, and placement of figures in a painting, an artist can convey to the viewer a multitude of ideas without any words. Standing before a visual masterpiece is a wholly unique experience. Even when texts are available, visual art can be especially powerful, evoking within the viewer notable emotional and intellectual responses. These feelings and ideas are similar to those that arise from the study of literary interpretation, expressed more vividly in visual form.

There are a countless number of paintings and depictions of various biblical scenes,

the Bible has to offer and conveyed those messages through the visual medium of artistic expression, the student of Tanakh gains a world of new understanding.

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“There are a countless number of paintings and depictions of various biblical scenes, and when one compares these various renditions, the spectrum of *parshanut* is displayed in full, luminous color.”

kumah” (he did not know about her lying down or her getting up).^{iv} The elder daughter is pictured pointing off into the distance,

takes Rashi’s interpretation even further. Not only were the elder daughter’s actions motivated by *zenut* because she was the initiator,

ⁱ Genesis 19:32. Translation from the *JPS Tanakh*, 2003.

ⁱⁱ Ramban to Genesis 19:32.

ⁱⁱⁱ The painting is currently hanging in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection in Madrid, Spain.

^{iv} Genesis 19:33, 35.

^v Rashi to Genesis 19:31, s.v. “*Ve-Ish ein ba-arets*,” quoting from *Be-Reshit Rabbah* 51:8.

^{vi} Ibid. 19:33, s.v. “*Va-Tishkav et aviha*.”

^{vii} Genesis 19, s.v. “*Katav*.”

^{viii} Artimesia Gentileschi’s “Lot and his Daughters” hangs in the Toledo Museum of Art in Toledo, Ohio.

^{ix} Lucas van Leyden’s “Lot and his Daughters” hangs in the Musee National du Louvre in Paris, France.

^x Mrs. Shani Taragin, Rosh Beit Midrash at Midreshet Lindenbaum, includes several paintings portraying Avraham bringing Yitshak for sacrifice in her source sheets for a fantastic shi’ur that she gives on *Akeidat Yitshak*. The shi’ur is available online at: http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/729055/Mrs._Shani_Taragin/Akedat_Yitzchak:_A_Methodological_Workshop.

A Yid in King Arthur's Courtⁱ

BY: Nicole Grubner

Arthurian legend is part of a literary tradition that spans nearly 900 years. While this history may not quite match up to Jewish history and all its accompanying literature, a 900-year tradition is an impressive feat. The popularization of the Arthurian story began when Geoffrey of Monmouth, a Welsh clergyman, wrote the Latin *Historia Regum Britanniae* around 1138. While this was not the first account of Arthur, it was certainly the literary work that catalyzed the popularity of the Arthurian tale – think modern day Harry Potter. Arthurian legend has been written about in almost every century since then in many languages, including French, Latin, German, Italian, and even Hebrew.ⁱⁱ King Arthur has been a part of popular culture, appearing in movies, poetry, prose, television, and comic books – the list goes on. Suffice it to say that King Arthur has made his presence known.

The legends of Arthur generally find their roots in a European literary tradition. However, there are certain motifs and themes that arise in Arthurian legend that are too familiar to accept as coming from a purely European tradition. In his article, “Jewish Influence Upon Arthurian Legend,” Curt Leviant explains:

“During the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, at the very time the Arthurian romances...were being formulated and written by Christian cleric-authors, Europe experienced renewed interest in biblical studies and exegesis; there was a diffusion of midrashic material...the writings of Rashi; there was geographic proximity between Jewish centers of exegesis (Paris, Troyes) and Christian ones (Paris, Clairvaux); and there was intellectual contact between Christian and Jew.”ⁱⁱⁱ

It comes as no surprise then that several parallels can be drawn between elements of Arthurian legend and both biblical and aggadic literature.

The idyllic image of the Arthurian tale has King Arthur's court set in a grand castle among the hills, a river flowing nearby. There are brave knights fighting for damsels in distress.

Chivalry, the knightly code of honor that upholds the values of

courage, bravery, virtue, and the like, is the name of the game. Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table embark on heroic quests, fighting evil and defending justice.

Although the literary Arthur is often imagined as a knight in shining armor, in actual fact much of the Arthurian tale takes place under Anglo-Saxon rule. The Anglo-Saxons were a Viking-like people. For the Anglo-Saxons, “fighting was a way of life [...] The Germanic tribes hated peace. Fighting was more honorable.”^{iv} The values that Arthur and his

knights represent seem to run counter to the value system upheld by the surrounding Anglo-Saxon society. Sir Thomas Malory, author of one of the most famous accounts of the Arthurian stories, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, outlines the code of Chivalry:

“Then the king established all his knights, and them that were of lands not rich he gave them lands, and charged them never to do outrageousness nor murder, and always to flee treason; also, by no means to be cruel, but to give mercy unto him that asketh mercy, upon pain of forfeiture of their worship and lordship of King Arthur for evermore; and always to do ladies, damsels, and gentlewomen succour, upon pain of death. Also, that no man take no battles in a wrongful quarrel for no law, nor for no world's goods. Unto this were all the knights sworn of the Table Round, both old and young.”^v

The knights pledge to be merciful and kind, to defend the weak, and to uphold the values of the Round Table.

While the values of the Round Table knights do not seem to reflect the values of Anglo-Saxon England, many of these values are extremely familiar to anyone who has read Tanakh. Throughout the texts of Tanakh, we are commanded to uphold justice and defend the weak. “You shall not cheat a poor or destitute hired person among your brethren or a proselyte who is in your land.”^{vi} “You shall not pervert the judgment of a proselyte or orphan, and you shall not take the garment of a widow as a pledge.”^{vii} “Learn to do good, seek justice, strengthen the robbed, perform justice for the orphan, plead the case of the widow.”^{viii} The values of the Round Table mirror these biblical values to a much greater extent than the values that existed in the reality of Anglo-Saxon England. If this is the case, then one must question from where the Round Table derives its value system, because these values could not have been adopted from the surrounding culture.

In addition to upholding justice, the Round Table represents equality. Every knight held an equal position at the table, and each knight's opinion held as much weight as the

“The values of the Round Table mirror these biblical values to a much greater extent than the values that existed in the reality of Anglo-Saxon England.”

next. The formation of the round table seems to very closely reflect the formation of the body that upheld justice in the time of the Temple. “The Sanhedrin would sit in a semicircle, so that all its members would be able to see each other. They would also have an equal view of all witnesses testifying.”^{ix} Though the *Sanhedrin* did not sit in a complete circle, the idea of equality and justice rings true in the *Sanhedrin*. Like the Knights of the Round Table upheld the code of Chivalry, the elders of the *Sanhedrin* act as “knights” for the up-

holding of Torah law.

There are clear parallels between Arthurian stories and themes and Jewish ideals. Perhaps, however, these parallels run deeper. There are a few specific literary elements within the Arthurian legends that suggest a much more focused connection between the two traditions. It could be posited that Camelot is, in fact, comparable to Jerusalem.

In several of the Arthurian texts, specifically Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, and later in Lord Tennyson's

Idylls of the King, both authors record a story that occurs near the very end of King Arthur's life, as Arthur is mortally wounded in battle. Lying on the ground, Arthur makes a final request to one of his most loyal knights, Sir Bedivere. He says to Bedivere, “Take thou Excalibur, my good sword, and go with it to yonder waterside, and when thou comest there, I charge thee: throw my sword in that water, and come again and tell me what thou there seest.”^x Sir Bedivere, knowing the special power of Excalibur, is reluctant to fulfill the king's final appeal. He returns to Arthur not once, but twice, saying that he had fulfilled the task, but based upon Bedivere's report, Arthur knew him to be lying. The third time Bedivere took the sword to the lake and threw it into the water. Malory describes the scene:

“Then Sir Bedivere departed and went to the sword, and lightly took it up, and went to the waterside; and there he bound the girdle about the hilts, and then he threw the sword as far into the water as he might; and there came an arm and an hand above the water and met it, and caught it, and so shook it thrice

and brandished, and then vanished away the hand with the sword in the water.”^{xi}

With this story in mind, attention must be paid to an account found in the Gemara in *Ta'anit*, which provides an account from the time of the destruction of the First Temple.

“When the first Holy Temple was destroyed, groups of young priests gathered with the keys to the Sanctuary in their hands. They ascended the roof and declared: ‘Master of the World! Since we have not merited to be trustworthy custo-

dians, let the keys be given back to You.’ They then threw the keys toward Heaven. A hand emerged and received them, and the priests threw themselves into the fire.”^{xii}

There is a clear parallel to be drawn between the Arthurian story and the aggadic story. Leviant points out a few of these similarities, namely, “the destruction of a kingdom by war, and a mysterious hand which comes from the heaven to take back the symbol of sovereignty.”^{xiii} Additionally, both symbols of sovereignty are returned via a messenger, and in both cases it can be inferred, either implicitly or explicitly, that the wielder is no longer worthy of having this item. It is for this reason that Leviant posits, “These motifs [...] seem to favor the Jewish story as a possible source.”^{xiv}

The comparison of the two stories can be taken a step further. The downfall of Camelot begins with an adulterous relationship between Arthur's wife, Guinevere, and one of his mightiest knights, Lancelot. The breakdown of the kingdom begins when this affair is discovered. Adultery is the catalyst for the fall of Camelot. So, too, in the destruction of the Temple; the book of Ezekiel describes the sins of Jerusalem at the time of the destruction. “And you relied on your beauty, and you went astray because of your fame, and you poured out your harlotries on every passerby; to him it would be.”^{xv} Furthermore, the destruction of the First Temple is attributed to the violation of the three cardinal sins committed by the Jewish people, namely, adultery, idolatry, and murder.^{xvi} The Jewish people were not only committing adultery on a *bein adam la-havero* (between man and man) level, but also on the level of *bein adam la-Makom* (between man and God). The Jewish people committed adultery against God. Just as the adultery of Guinevere led to the downfall of Camelot, the adultery of the Jewish people led to the fall of Jerusalem and the Holy Temple.

Hope remains at the end of these two accounts, and in this hope there remains one final parallel. At the end of King Arthur's life, three queens take the mortally wounded Arthur on a boat to the mystical Isle of Avalon. It is not explicitly stated whether Arthur dies on this journey, or whether he is healed, and sits, waiting



to return and reclaim his kingdom. Leviant writes, “Just as the English and Bretons viewed Arthur as a secular Christ, so did the Jews ascribe to David their messianic hopes.”^{xvii} Though Camelot has fallen, there remains a hope that one day Arthur will return and restore his kingship in Camelot. Similarly, the Jewish people believe and pray that one day, the Davidic line will be restored with the coming of the Messiah, and the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. Long live the King!

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ⁱ Special thanks must be given to Professor Lee Manion who teaches a course on Arthurian Legends at SCW. Much of the Arthurian material comes from his class.

ⁱⁱ Curt Leviant (ed.), *King Artus: A Hebrew Arthurian Romance of 1279* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

ⁱⁱⁱ Curt Leviant, “Jewish Influence Upon Arthurian Legends,” in Saul Lieberman and Arthur Hyman (eds.), *Salomon Wittmayer Baron Jubilee Volume On the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday*, v. 2 (Jerusalem: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1974), pp. 639-656.

^{iv} Michael Delahoyde, “Anglo-Saxon Culture,” Washington State University. Available at: <http://www.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/medieval/anglo-saxon.html>.

^v Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur: Sir Thomas Malory's Book of King Arthur and of his Noble Knights of the Round Table*, vol. 1 (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Library; Boulder, CO: NetLibrary, 1996), Book III, chapter 5.

^{vi} Deuteronomy 24:15. Translation by Artscroll.

^{vii} Ibid. 24:17. Translation by Artscroll.

^{viii} Isaiah 1:17. Translation found at www.chabad.org.

^{ix} Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, “Qualifications for a Jewish Judge and the Operation of the Sanhedrin,” from *The Handbook of Jewish Thought*, vol. 2 (New York: Moznaim Publishing Corp., 1992). Posted: July 21, 2004. Accessed March 18, 2010. Available at: <http://www.aish.com/jl/kc/48936377.html>.

^x Malory, “Le Morte Darthur,” in James J. Wilhelm (ed.), *The Romance of Arthur An Anthology of Medieval Texts in Translation* (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1994), p. 567.

^{xi} Ibid., pp. 567-568.

^{xii} Ta'anit 29b.

^{xiii} Leviant, “Jewish Influence.”

^{xiv} Ibid.

^{xv} Ezekiel 16:15. Translation found at www.chabad.org.

^{xvi} Yoma 9b.

^{xvii} Leviant, “Jewish Influence.”

“There are No Synonyms:”ⁱ Sound, Subtlety, and Suggestion in Torah Texts

BY: Ariel Caplan

As was noted in a recent *sihah* here in Yeshiva, gays are rapidly gaining acceptance in the non-Jewish world. However, according to a recent (February 10, 2010) poll carried out by CBS News/*New York Times*, support for homosexuals is not growing quite as quickly.

If you were paying a reasonable amount of attention, words that likely crossed your mind while reading the previous paragraph might have included, “What?,” “Excuse me?,” or “Huh?” But the fact remains that, assuming we can take support for homosexual participation in the U.S. armed forces as an indication of acceptance, gays and lesbians are being received far more warmly than homosexuals – 1.5 times more warmly, to be exact.

The pollsters asked 1,084 adults nationwide, “Do you favor or oppose _____ serving in the military?” In place of the blank, the questioners said either “gay men and les-

biens” or “homosexuals.” When the former phrase was used, 51% said they “strongly favor” service, while only 34% responded similarly to the latter phrase.ⁱⁱ

This is, of course, not the first time that different wordings of the same question have elicited varying responses. A 1987 paper by Tom W. Smith lists 10 different polls taken over the course of 17 years that display remarkable gradations in public perception of different names for charity. In the most striking example, a 1985 GSS (General Social Survey) poll, 64.7% responded that the government was spending too little on “assistance to the poor,” while only 19.3% said it was spending too little on “welfare.”ⁱⁱⁱ Similarly, Kenneth A. Rasinski cites a 1984 survey in which 52.0% felt too little money was spent on “solving problems of big cities,” while only 21.3% felt that the government should invest more in “assistance to big cities.”^{iv}

Why the disparity? Apparently, given that we are human beings, particular words and phrases conjure up positive or negative images in our heads, leading to instinctive, rather than reasoned and fact-based, responses. I could take this in a wildly different direction, lamenting the human condition, in which we think with our hearts rather than our heads and therefore make decisions we eventually come to regret. However, in context of this issue about Torah and Literature, I feel that a different avenue of exploration is appropriate, which justifies the second part of the title of this piece.

In recent decades, a generally positive trend has possessed and enthralled Tanakh-studying Jews^v in the Modern Orthodox (and *Dati Le'umi*) world: *peshat*-focused meta-analysis of stories or logically-divided sections of *sifrei Tanakh*. In this context, personalities such as Rav Menachem Leibtag, Rav Yoel Bin-Nun, Rav Yaaqov Medan, and Rav Chaim Sabato (to name those whose ideas I have been privileged to study most frequently) have produced wondrous works of Torah scholarship, weaving together related narratives, identifying key points and chiasmic structures, and finding a method to its literary madness when none readily presents itself.

At the same time (perhaps reacting to the Yeshivish/Haredi world's meta-midrashic orientation in which *diyyukim* in *ma'amarei Hazal* can become the sole basis for a worldview), our world has lost its taste for Midrash

“Vanished is our appreciation for the pristine beauty of a midrash which takes an odd word in a *pasuk* and derives from it a halakhah, a story, or a bit of missing information.”

Aggadah, and even – to an extent – for Midrash Halakhah, except where it appears in the Gemara. Vanished is our appreciation for the pristine beauty of a midrash which takes an odd word in a *pasuk* and derives from it a halakhah, a story, or a bit of missing information, often with a powerful message between the lines. Furthermore, we have forgotten how to read; even those who can parse *pesukim* with relative ease lack sensitivity to the subtleties of language – syntax, diction, sound techniques (such as repetition and alliteration), and the like. Indeed, we have discovered the forest, but we have lost sight of the trees.^{vi}

This phenomenon is particularly troubling because it reflects poorly both on our love of Torah and our understanding of *peshat*.

Individuals growing up in our community are – presumably as some form of punishment – sentenced to over a decade of drudgery involving the mathematical dissection of the English language combined with exhaustive analysis of classical works in foreign languages masquerading as English. We write book reports and penetratingly perspicacious essays; we chew over Chaucer and scrutinize Shakespeare; we hash and rehash motifs and themes, similes and metaphors. Above all, one message emerges from the

“sound and fury.”^{vii} the whole is the synergistic synthesis of its parts, and through accumulation of significant details, we can emerge with a greater understanding of the entire picture.

Why, then, do we not give Torah the respect it deserves and read it with an eye for detail? Why are we satisfied with noting instances of a *millah manhah* (*leitwort*), while ignoring all the other words that lie in between? What justifies demonstrating one section's parallelism to another section without a close reading of either one? How can we claim to understand *parashiyot*^{viii} when we cannot properly comprehend the *pesukim*, the phrases, the words which constitute them?

Perhaps a few examples will illustrate this point. To cite a familiar *pasuk*: “*Ki tissa et rosh Benei Yisrael li-pekudeihem, venatenu ish kofer nafsho...*” “When you count the head of the Children of Israel according to their number, each man should give the redemption of his soul...”^{ix} A careful reader will immediately ask: Why is the counting referred to with the word “*tissa*” (lit., “you will

lift up”), and what does this tell me about the nature of the counting?^x And why is the money paid in the context of the census referred to as “*kofer*?”^{xi} These questions, which may be the key to unlocking the underlying spiritual foundations of a national census, are easily overlooked in broader contextual study.

Let us further consider *Va-Yikra* 18 and 20, which discuss the various prohibitions that fall under the category of *arayot*. The word *tevel* is used in reference to both bestiality and one who has relations with his daughter-in-law, while the term *zimmah* appears uniquely regarding marriage of a mother and daughter to the same man. *To'evah* refers to both male homosexuality and the broad sweep of *arayot*. Similarly, references to *tum'ah* may be found regarding the prohibitions of *niddah*, *eshet ish*, and bestiality, but it is also a general consequence of *arayot*. We also might well note who is married, who is lain with, whose nakedness is uncovered, and who is simply a receptacle for *shikhvat ha-ish*. The variation between *pesukim* in this context likely indicates the unique aspects of each sin and highlights similarities to and distinctions from other *arayot*, or even *averot* outside the context of *arayot*. These subtle hints might easily be missed if we simply looked for the logic in the order of the various prohibitions. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how we might piece to-

gether the Torah's perspective on the spectrum of *arayot* without coming to terms with the various sectors of the puzzle.

When Hazal^{xii} note the Torah's odd wording in describing a non-kosher animal as "*einenah tehorah*,"^{xiii} they are not simply making a point about positive speech, using a *pasuk* as a starting point. Rather, through sensitively reading the *pesukim*, they are drawing a lesson about positive speech from a subtle yet powerful hint in the Torah. In other words, by observing the way that the Torah relates to a particular topic – not just overtly but even implicitly – we can gain insight into how the Torah expects us to understand and relate to it. In the case of non-kosher animals, the broader theme of positive speech is a more essential message. In other contexts, however, investigation of the local implications may be the more worthwhile endeavor. Either way, this example further indicates the value inherent in a close reading of the text.

Certainly, I do not mean to denigrate any of the fantastic work that has been done by contemporary masters of Tanakh, whose breadth of knowledge and depth of understanding have immeasurably enhanced our collective appreciation for the unfathomable profundity of Tanakh. I would merely like to add that "*Dibberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam*:"^{xiv} just as people use particular words to invest nuance and shades of meaning into their sentences, so too the decision to include a specific linguistic hint in the Torah is intentional, and it may be essential to understanding the ideas conveyed. These subtle messages may only be received by *benei adam* who can appreciate and relate to the *lashon* (or who are willing to learn from those who can and did).^{xv}

If we are willing to invest time into examining diction in secular books, based on the knowledge that the choice between synonymous words or phrases can have broad implications, certainly we should undertake Tanakh study with sensitivity on the micro-level, not just the macro-level. If we are not sensitive to the differences between gays and homosexuals, between *tevel* and *to'evah*, between *kesef* and *kofer* – we have certainly not learned how to read the Bible.

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ⁱ Theodore Sturgeon, interviewed by David D. Duncan, "The Push from Within: The Extrapolative Ability of Theodore Sturgeon." Available at: <http://www.physics.emory.edu/~weeks/misc/duncan.html>.

The entire quote reads: "Here's the point to be made – there are no synonyms. There are no two words that mean exactly the same thing. I don't care about the dictionaries of synonyms and antonyms. If there were two words

that meant exactly the same thing, there wouldn't be two words. That means that every word you use has a certain amount of semantic or psychological freight that it carries that makes it different from other words."

ⁱⁱ Kevin Hechtkopf, "Support for Gays in the Military Depends on the Question," "CBS News," February 11, 2010. Available at: <http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2010/02/11/politics/politicalhotshot/entry6198284.shtml>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tom W. Smith, "That Which We Call Well-fare by Any Other Name Would Smell Sweeter: An Analysis of the Impact of Question Wording on Response Patterns," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 51,1 (1987): 75-83.

^{iv} Kenneth A. Rasinski, "The Effect of Question Wording on Public Support for Government Spending," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 53,3 (1989): 388-94.

^v Of course, the fact that "Tanakh-studying Jews" refers to less than 100% of the population is infinitely more tragic than anything I intend to discuss.

^{vi} Certainly our community is not alone in neglecting the finer points of *peshuto shel mikra*. We surely have much to learn from our right-wing brethren in terms of appreciation for and seriousness in studying *derash*. However, the failure to read texts carefully seems relatively universal. The source of the trouble is, of course, presumably different: while our problem emerges from our focus on the broader themes; theirs likely derives from a general lack of emphasis on linguistics. I am far from qualified to render an opinion on whether their tradeoff is worthwhile. However, in our community, in which intensive language education is the norm, we are certainly at fault for attributing to human authors more linguistic talent than we do to their Creator.

^{vii} William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene v, line 27.

^{viii} I use this word in the sense of paragraphs in the Torah rather than weekly Torah portions.

^{ix} *Shemot* 30:12.

^x For one approach to this question, see *Or ha-Hayyim* ad loc.

^{xi} Ibn Ezra ad loc. deals with this issue.

^{xii} *Bava Batra* 123a.

^{xiii} *Be-Reshit* 7:8; also see *Va-Yikra Rabbah* 26:1 and other quotations in midrashic literature which explicitly mention that the use of extra words is strange.

^{xiv} *Kiddushin* 17b et al.

^{xv} To be fair, modern Tanakh study does not always ignore the finer details. However, this only increases the irony, as it seems that the students only pick up part of the *derekh* of their teachers.

An Interview with Rabbi Jeremy Wieder

BY: Staff

In what ways, if any, can exposure to secular literature improve one's avodas Hashem? How, if at all, can it increase one's understanding of the Torah?

There are two ways in which exposure to secular literature and, more generally, to the ideas of others – which is really what secular literature represents – can contribute to one's *avodas Hashem*. The first, which I heard R. Lichtenstein discuss a number of years ago, is that ideas that we regard as positive and would subscribe to, can usually be found somewhere within the works of Chazal. At times, however, these ideas are not readily accessible to us within the Rabbinic corpus; they tend to be more in the realm of Aggadah and are not always easy to extract. Moreover, sometimes the representation of a particular context may be more focused and clear as expressed in other literature, either on account of the nature of secular literature or because of the way we have become accustomed to study Aggadah.

The second is that sometimes the ideas found within secular literature genuinely conflict with the general outlook of Judaism, or at least Judaism as we think it to be, but a contrasting view helps us to clarify and refine our own ideas, even if we ultimately reject the particular value that is being espoused in the secular source. Occasionally, it might even stimulate us to reassess our assumptions of what Judaism actually says with respect to a given issue or idea regarding which we had made certain assumptions. At that point, we might conclude that our particular understanding of the Torah's viewpoint is not correct or that perhaps there is more than one view that conforms to Torah ideals.

Is the application of modern literary theory to biblical or Talmudic texts a valid or valuable way of studying them?

I am not going to address the question of validity, since if these approaches are valid when applied to secular literature, then, from a purely intellectual perspective, they are legitimate when applied to Tanach or Gemara as well.

But in terms of whether using them is spiritually valuable or not, I think on some level – and I am no expert on modern literary theory – there are certain aspects of modern literary theory which are very helpful in the study of Tanach in particular. Tanach, in its genre, is certainly literature – albeit divine literature and very good literature, *she-lo tehe Torah sheleimah shelanu ke-sichah beteilah shela-*

hem (our complete Torah should not be equated to their idle talk). To the extent that using these tools allows us to find meaning within the text that might have simply otherwise gone unnoticed, that is certainly desirable. The notion that we can only study Tanach the way it was studied 2,000 years ago or 1,000 years ago is mistaken. We believe that with respect to the divine word there are *shiv'im panim la-Torah* (seventy facets to the Torah), and if modern literary tools allow us to extract the *peshatos ha-mischaddeshim be-chol yomi* from the text, that is certainly worthwhile.

Consideration of this issue becomes more complex when addressed to Gemara and Rabbinic literature generally. The extent to which we regard Gemara as being fundamentally a legal text, with some non-legal material included, as opposed to also being a work of literature is an interesting question. That said, I think that more recently, there have been some very fine *talmidei chachamim* who have focused on the literary aspects of the Talmud and have shown that sometimes the way that a particular halachah or *sugya* is constructed, not only in terms of its content but also in terms of its form, can actually convey meaning. I may

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not always be convinced by this, but the approach does sometimes yield compelling results. When Chazal choose a certain metaphor that echoes biblical usage, that might tell us what they were thinking about in formulating that particular halachah and may shed light in a way that classical study alone does not. Such study is not typically *Halachah le-ma'aseh*, because Halachah has its own canons, but in terms of just studying *Torah lishmah*, I think it is valuable. Gemara is one of the things in which we certainly invest much energy and effort, and most of us do not focus on learning exclusively *la-asukei shema'tesa allibba de-hilchesa* (for the sake of concluding what the halachah should be). So there is some value in openness to and awareness of literary aspects in the Mishnah and Talmud and the application of modern literary techniques and approaches to those texts. With regards to Aggadah, such methods certainly are valuable.

Which thinkers who are not to be categorized as observant Jews do you feel it is most important to study? Which, in your opinion, have had the greatest impact upon Judaism?

My personal interests in non-Torah literature tend to veer towards contemporary non-fiction and thus I do not feel that I bring any expertise to bear on this question. But I would

add one note to the discussion. There are some who privilege a specific literary canon, written by “Dead White Men,” over other types of writing, but I am not convinced that this makes sense. There is nothing sacrosanct about Shakespeare or Plato when compared with more recent or non-Western literature, if one’s goal of involving oneself in the study of literature is to be able to grapple with broader society and not be solely inwardly focused. So while it might be valuable to study classical thinkers, it is also important to study modern ones. If one hopes to be truly engaged with

thetics and physical beauty on top of inner beauty, I think that it is very clear that on some level, at least as a practical matter, we certainly value it. The Halachah has many laws that factor in beauty, starting with the Torah’s disqualification of a Kohen who has a *mum*,ⁱⁱ which speaks to a certain theory of aesthetics. Perhaps this halachah is a concession to human nature and the Torah prohibits it because people generally perceive a *mum* as a bad thing, even though, from the perspective of the *Ribbono shel Olam*, externals do not matter, the only matter of significance being that which is on

“I think that both from a halachic and hashkafic perspective, beauty, when not coming at the expense of content, is certainly a value.”

contemporary ideas, to exclude everything that has been written recently because it is not part of “the canon,” because it is not “great literature” according to someone’s definition, intuitively makes little sense to me.

In terms of those who have had the greatest impact upon Judaism, I would guess that probably Aristotle has had the greatest impact upon Judaism because many Rishonim, especially the Rambam, were heavily influenced by him. Even the Ramban is reading Greek philosophy in one form or another and though he is often responding to and rejecting it, he is clearly still engaged with the subject matter.

What value, if any, is there in the study of modern Hebrew literature and/or European Yiddish and Hebrew literature?

Again, I have no expertise in this area. As an outsider, my comment would simply be that to the extent that someone attempts to engage with society, and does not look only inwardly but outwardly as well, contemporary Hebrew literature reflects current Israeli culture and there is value in its engagement. I suspect that the study of European Yiddish and Hebrew literature is valuable as well for those interested in seeing our most immediate roots. To the extent that those authors and their writings reflect the values of their contemporary Jewish society in the crucible of the yeshivos – even though theirs was a very different worldview than those of the yeshivos – and help us understand the Jews of the 19th century, how they lived, and the issues with which they grappled, there is value in studying them. This is true for other periods and their literature as well, but this time period is probably of greater personal interest to a large demographic segment of our community. Of course, the portrait of this community that emerges from its literary portrayal is more complex than the facile image being promulgated by some voices within our community.

How important are aesthetics and physical beauty? How does the concept of hitna’eh lefanav be-mitsvot reflect Judaism’s attitude to the physical world?

If one means “aesthetics and physical beauty” at the cost of internal beauty and substance, then the answer is that they are of trivial importance. If one speaks about the idea of aes-

thetics and physical beauty on top of inner beauty, I think that it is very clear that on some level, at least as a practical matter, we certainly value it. The Halachah has many laws that factor in beauty, starting with the Torah’s disqualification of a Kohen who has a *mum*,ⁱⁱ which speaks to a certain theory of aesthetics. Perhaps this halachah is a concession to human nature and the Torah prohibits it because people generally perceive a *mum* as a bad thing, even though, from the perspective of the *Ribbono shel Olam*, externals do not matter, the only matter of significance being that which is on

the inside. One could argue thus, but even if it is only a concession, it is a very broad-reaching one. By the same token, the notion that Chazal have in a number of halachic areas, for example *she-lo tisganneh al ba’alah* (that she not be repulsive to her husband),ⁱⁱⁱ is also a reflection of the impact that aesthetics and physicality have on people. Similarly, we have a concept of *noyei sukkah* (*sukkah* decorations), and the general principle of *hiddur mitsvah* (beautifying a mitsvah) assumes that since beauty is a reality of the human experience, Halachah and Hashkafah do not deny it but rather incorporate it. However, to elevate it to the level of a supreme value is very dangerous and shallow. One could own a beautiful *esrog* and want to use it for *arba’ah minim*, but if it is *pasul*, one simply would not fulfill the mitsvah. Only once the item is halachically kosher do we assume that the more *mehuddar* it is, the greater the fulfillment of the mitsvah.

It should be noted that Judaism’s value of beauty extends to literature as well. Prof. Yaakov Elman has pointed out that the Gemara in *Bava Metsi’a* 60b concludes that the terms *neshech* and *tarbis*^{iv} really refer to one and the same thing (interest), and the only reason they were both used is to make the violator liable to two sets of lashes for one act. Tosafos there ask: If this is the case why would the Torah use two different words to express one idea – it could simply repeat the same expression, if the goal is to punish the violator twice? The response is that it is more felicitous for the listener to use two different words.^v In addition, one who has studied poetry, and biblical poetry in particular, knows that one rarely encounters repetition of the same words in poetic parallels. That is what the Rishonim refer to when they comment on a phrase that it is *kefel ha-inyan be-millim shonos* (the matter repeated in different words). They do not explain why biblical poetry does not repeat the same words, but I believe that the answer is that repetition of the same idea with the same words violates our aesthetic sense.

So I think that both from a halachic and hashkafic perspective, beauty, when not coming at the expense of content, is certainly a value.

What place, if any, do the visual and performing arts and their study have in Judaism?

I would say that there are two levels on which this question can be addressed – the individual level and the communal level. On the individual level, assuming that the activity undertaken is halachically appropriate, if it contributes to an individual person’s growth – a person finds fulfillment in life either through engagement in the arts – that is desirable. For instance, if people use their skills in the visual arts to create beautiful *cheftsei mitsvah* (ritual objects) or even other works of art, that is certainly positive.

On the communal level, there is another issue, which may be more relevant in Erets Yisrael than in the Diaspora, namely, the creation of a Jewish community’s culture. To the extent that arts are part of a healthy, vibrant and dynamic society, that is worthwhile – again, when conforming to appropriate halachic guidelines.

Does music have a place in Judaism? If so, what kind of music? Is it valuable for a person to learn how to play an instrument as part of his education?

Of course music has a place in Judaism. Historically, it always has had a place, beginning with the *Avodah* (sacrificial service) in the *Beis ha-Mikdash*. *Shirah* (the singing of the Levites) was a central element, both in the popular mind and in the halachic fulfillment of the *Avodah*. Similarly, music and song can and should play an important role in the context of *tefillah* in the *beis ha-keneses*. There are, of course, some strictly halachic issues with regard to what exactly the permissibility of music is *bi-zeman ha-zeh*. But assuming that one has satisfied those requirements, music – and classically, *shirei kodesh* – certainly has always had a prominent place in Judaism.

I think that there is another point, which I speak about on the emotional, experiential level, and that is that sometimes music touches the soul and inspires a person. There is something in the depths of the human being that somehow music can evoke that not so many other things can. And that, simply as a part of the human experience, is very valuable. If I listen to certain kinds of music, frequently not

and not everyone can afford the time and effort required to learn to play an instrument. But for some people, doing so can serve as an opportunity for development of their personality and spirituality.

What are the potential pitfalls of artistic expression or their study, and how can they be avoided?

I would say that the pitfalls here and in literature fall into two categories. One type of pitfall relates to technical, halachic considerations. Halachah, in principle, has few issues with music, but art raises some potentially serious halachic issues. The prohibition of graven images,^{vi} sometimes three-dimensional and sometimes even two-dimensional, presents obstacles and imposes limits on artistic expression. There are more issues with sculpture than with two-dimensional painting and drawing, but there are concerns with both and people who are engaged in the visual arts need to be aware of the halachos in this area.

With regard to music (putting aside the question of music in a post-Churban era), there are relatively few issues, except the prohibition on hearing *kelei shir shel elilim* (musical instruments involved in idolatrous worship). So listening to a church organ for the purpose of deriving aesthetic pleasure from it is prohibited because it is *asur be-hana’ah* (forbidden to derive benefit from). Would that apply to listening to Gospel music on the radio as well? I would adopt the approach which is relevant to literature and art as well. It seems to me that the *Shulchan Aruch* is clear that the prohibition is on deriving *hana’ah* from *shir shel elilim*, that is, deriving benefit from *meshammeshei avodah zarah* (vessels used to serve idolatry). It is not the playing of the notes on the page that becomes *asur*, but rather the fact that music is coming from physical instruments which are consecrated to idolatrous worship is prohibited. So from that perspective, the prohibition is technically limited. Similarly, according to the *Mechaber* and Shach after him,^{vii} following Tosafos and the Rosh, the prohibition of art related to *avodah zarah* applies only to the actual object, in Tosafos’s formulation, that is itself *ne’evad*. It does not relate to a representation or picture of a religious object (unless the picture or representation itself is worshipped).^{viii}

But there is a second arena of concern.

“There is something in the depths of the human being that somehow music can evoke that not so many other things can.”

from Jewish sources, I am struck by the beauty and power of the music, and I feel as if it somehow divinely inspired. I think that that the power of the musical experience cannot be ignored.

In terms of whether it is appropriate to learn to play an instrument as part of one’s education, I think that it depends on the individual. To the extent that learning to play an instrument is personally fulfilling and meaningful, it should be viewed positively. We obviously all have limited energies and resources

When we consider studying subjects or material objects that evoke powerful emotions or ideas, the concern that arises is, what is the impact upon the reader/observer. And in that vein, I would add one other area of concern, namely *divrei cheshek* (erotic writing). With regard to these issues, because we are not dealing with the physical embodiment of *ervah* but a representation of it, it is dependent upon the response of the reader or the viewer to the particular text or item in question. Just as there are portions in Tanach that one might argue

would qualify as *divrei cheshek* – the *peshat* in *Shir ha-Shirim*, for example – yet it is not only *muttar* (permitted) but a *mitsvah* to study them (perhaps unless it has an arousing effect on a person), the same thing should apply to valuable secular literature. Certainly, there is a reference in the *Shulchan Aruch* to a prohibition on reading *divrei cheshek*,^{ix} but I understand that the *Mechabber* regards those works that happen to contain *divrei cheshek* as having no value in their own right. If, however, we are discussing reading valuable literature that incorporates sexuality in its portrayal of the human condition, I do not think that this is included in the prohibition. An individual for whom reading such literature has a negative impact, that is, if it is “*megareh yetser ha-ra*” (incites the evil inclination), must avoid doing so, but I believe that for most of us, given the societal context in which we have been raised and to which we are accustomed, this is not usually a concern.

This concern is applicable not only with respect to *arayos* but also with respect to the study of ideas foreign to Judaism generally, whether or not they be specifically *avodah zarah*-related. If a person studies something intensively and becomes enmeshed and involved in certain kinds of literature, he does not simply relate to the ideas dispassionately and these ideas can often become intertwined with one’s personality. We hope

that this is what transpires when it comes to Torah study, but it is potentially of concern

with some subjects of study. So one might study Christian art or literature and engage in literary and artistic analysis with minimal concern. But a person who becomes deeply involved in such study can become engaged on a completely different level, and this can become problematic. So there are both very specific halachic problems, as well as concerns that are halachic in some sense but depend more on the subjective interaction of the viewer, reader, or listener with a particular piece of art, literature, or music.

In terms of avoiding these pitfalls, I think that *lev yodea marras nafsho* (the heart recognizes the soul’s bitterness).^x A person has to know his capabilities and limitations. To take the example of a male studying 19th-century nudes, I do not think that studying the pictures themselves is inherently *asur*, but if that person feels that looking at them is going to have an arousing effect on him, he should avoid doing so. Similarly, when a student, for a History class, reads selections from the Christian Bible, I do not think there is much to be concerned about. But one who reads Christian literature extensively should be concerned about the impact it might have upon him.

In this context, I might point to comments that R. Carmy made many years ago in his citation of the Rav. R. Carmy noted said that he consulted with the Rav many times about issues with certain courses or topics taught at Yeshiva College and the Rav refused to give exact guidance about whether they should be offered. According to R. Carmy, the Rav

“scoffed at the notion that going to college, or what to study there, can be decided ‘like a question in *Yoreh De’ah*,’ with the mechanical straightforwardness suitable to ‘the kashrut of fish,’”^{xi} and I have no reason to think that this has changed. Most students, in most courses that they take, certainly in Yeshiva College and probably at most other universities, do not engage with the material in a sufficiently extensive or intensive fashion to warrant serious concern. One might then question what the real value in studying these subjects is, if that is the case, and that is a fair question. It may be that the value lies in exposure to the broader world. But regardless of the answer to the latter question, I do not see any cause for alarm.

However, I think that deep involvement in a field or subject matter demands greater care. Thus, it is critical that a person who studies these subjects intensively be very self-aware and cognizant of the potentially transformative effect.

Is it important that YU’s curriculum include mandatory courses in literature? in art? in music?

Without commenting on the specific subjects, I think that a serious college curriculum has to expose students to new ideas. One view of college would have it that the goal of a liberal arts education is to unsettle students and

“I think that the idea of learning about other ways of thinking – and that is what the Humanities, particularly literature, art, music, are about – is crucial.”

lead them to question everything that they have held until then. From my vantage point, and, I think, that of Yeshiva College, the goal is not to discomfit students in that way. At the same time, I think it is very important for students to be exposed to other ways of thinking, even if they ultimately do not accept them. Such exposure induces a certain kind of intellectual humility and respect for others who have different ideas, while the lack of such exposure leads to a certain kind of unbridled arrogance and condescension towards others.

So I think that the idea of learning about other ways of thinking – and that is what the Humanities, particularly literature, art, music, are about – is crucial.

Is it important to study a foreign language? Which ones have you studied and why did you choose them?

I have studied a number of languages in the course of my education. I do not know more than a few of them well, but I think I studied ten languages (not counting computer languages). The only languages in which I can say that I do have some level of expertise are Hebrew and Aramaic. Aside from those, I have studied Akkadian, Ugaritic, the equivalent of a year of Judeo-Arabic, a year of Spanish in college, French and German for doctoral exams, and Greek for a summer at the CUNY Institute.

That said, I think that studying foreign languages is not inherently important, but there are some aspects of language study that can be very valuable. For instance, having another

language is helpful for one’s understanding of one’s own language. As native English speakers, we sometimes fail to appreciate precision of expression and proper grammar, but studying another language can make us more aware of these and thus remedy those problems. Perhaps more importantly, studying a foreign language can serve as a gateway to studying a foreign culture; it is well nigh impossible to fully access a culture without being able to understand its language. (I am avoiding here the question of whether or not a language reflects a culture and influences/limits it. I believe that human beings have a universal “mentalese” and language is just a reflection of that and that language does not limit the way we think. This is, however, an area of much scholarly dispute.)

Perhaps most significantly, when studying the Torah, knowledge of Hebrew and, to a lesser degree Aramaic, is absolutely crucial. Although Chazal did not have formal grammar, Hebrew was their language (or at least one of their languages) and they grasped it intuitively. The Rishonim, though Hebrew was not their native language, had an excellent understanding of its grammar, even if modern grammar has developed further. Rashi, for instance, was an excellent grammarian, even if we do not subscribe to every aspect of his system. It is impossible to understand the gram-

matical comments of Rashi, as well as numerous of his other comments which often derive from midrashim that themselves are the outgrowth of grammatical and linguistic anomalies in the text, without knowing language.

The same thing is true, though to a lesser extent, when studying Aramaic. Studying Targumim, the Bavli, or the Yerushalmi requires Aramaic. Some people can manage with an intuitive/inductive approach, but there are times when that is insufficient and when not knowing the language well results in a serious deficiency in one’s study of Torah.

The same thing goes for studying other Semitic languages in order to understand Tanach better. The biblical Hebrew lexicon is limited, by definition, to the books of Tanach. Many biblical Hebrew words appear only once, and the only window we may have into their precise meaning, particularly if Chazal do not record any tradition about them, is if we possess knowledge of them from another Semitic language. That is why the Rishonim were very happy to make use of Arabic in understanding difficult texts. I have little doubt that Ibn Ezra and Rashi would have given much to have had access to Akkadian or Ugaritic lexica to be able to explain what those rare words in *Iyyov* and elsewhere mean. These words often appear only once and, without outside resources, we can only conjecture as to their meaning from the context. So from the perspective of the study of Torah itself, knowing another language is not an intrinsic value, but is, I think, a very powerful tool.

Similarly, many words in the Mishnah and Chazal generally, particularly in Erets Yisrael sources, come from Greek, and, on rarer occasions, from Latin or Persian. For the average person, most of the legwork has already been done by scholars. Occasionally, there will be new findings or understandings, but it is not necessary or productive for most people to invest the time to study Greek. You can get almost all of the foreign words by looking in the works of Albeck, Sperber, Jastrow and Sokoloff without having to do the spadework yourself.

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ⁱ Rashbam to *Be-Reshit* 37:2.

ⁱⁱ *Va-Yikra* 21:17.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Shabbat* 64b; *Yoma* 78b; *Ketubbot* 65b.

^{iv} *Va-Yikra* 25:37.

^v *Tosafot to Bava Metsi’a* 60b, s.v. “*Lammah hillekam ha-katuv? La’avor alav bi-shenei lavin.*”

^{vi} *Shemot* 20:3; *Devarim* 5:7; *Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh De’ah* 141.

^{vii} *Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh De’ah* 142:15, Shakh ad loc. #33.

^{viii} The issue of Rambam in *Hilkhot Avodah Zarah* 2:2-3, and how to interpret the passage in light of Rambam’s personal behavior, was discussed at length by Rabbis Parnes and Carmy and Drs. Berger and Kaplan in the early issues of *The Torah u-Madda Journal* (see below, n. 11). It should be noted that the view that Rambam permitted reading certain works only *le-havin u-le-horot* in the narrowest sense, in my opinion, is untenable not only because he makes no mention of this principle anywhere in the *Mishneh Torah*, but even more so because of his explanation of the principle *le-havin u-le-horot* in his Commentary to the Mishnah, *Pesachim* 4:9.

^{ix} *Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim* 307:16.

^x *Mishlei* 14:10.

^{xi} R. Shalom Carmy, “The Nature of Inquiry: A Common Sense Perspective,” *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 3 (1991-1992): 37-51, at pp. 48-49. Available at: http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/704631/Rabbi_Shalom_Carmy/The_Nature_of_Inquiry:_A_Common_Sense_Perspective_%5BReply_to_R%27_Parnes%5D.

Creation: An Endless Human Processⁱ

BY: Sarit Bendavid

The Genesis story is not merely part of the Biblical narrative in order to teach us how the world came into existence. “God gave the Book of Creation – that repository of the mysteries of creation – to man,” explains Rav Soloveitchik, “not simply for the sake of theoretical study but in order that man might continue the act of creation,”ⁱⁱ for “just as the Almighty constantly refined and improved the realm of existence during the six days of creation, so must man complete that creation and transform the domain of chaos and void into a perfect and beautiful reality.”ⁱⁱⁱ The Bible is a repository of imperatives contained within narrative,^{iv} and the Genesis story obligates us to imitate our Maker and continue in forming the world that He brought into being.

Human agency becomes clearly apparent in the transition from the first to the second chapter of Genesis. While in the first version of creation man is relegated to no more than a passive object, the second version of the story presents man as an active creature, able to act of his own will. In Genesis 1, God names night and day, heaven and earth, land and sea; in Genesis 2, the language of designation has been transferred to Adam, who names the animals and Eve. Additionally, while God creates vegetation in the first chapter, the second chapter relates man’s involvement, that “every herb of the field had not yet grown, for [...] man was not yet there to till the ground.”^v This transition from Genesis 1 to Genesis 2 epitomizes the concept that although He has created it, God hands creation over to man, authorizing him to actualize his potential and fashion the world.

“In essence, we create meaning in texts and infuse them with life when we interpret them.”

A prime example of human creation in the Bible is the building of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle). The building of the *Mishkan* represents our effort to create a home for God, to bring the Divine into our physical reality. This narrative, which ends *Sefer Shemot*, echoes the creation story at the beginning of *Sefer Bereshit*, forming bookends of these two books that parallel each other and highlight the transfer of divine creation into human hands. For instance, the words “*va-yekhal Moshe et ha-melakhah*,” “and Moshe completed the work,”^{vi} after the *Mishkan* was completed mirror the words “*va-yekhal E-lohim ba-yom ha-*

shevi’i melakhto,” “God completed, on the seventh day, His work,”^{vii} when God’s creation of the world was completed. In fact, the Talmud notes that Betsalel, the commissioned builder of the *Mishkan*, knew how to join the letters of the *shamayim* (heavens) and *arets* (earth), of the letters used to create the world; in building the *Mishkan*, he was in essence recreating what God had created in the raw.^{viii}

The human imperative of creativity, what defines us as humans according to Rav Soloveitchik, finds expression in our interpretations of texts.^{ix} While we may at times view the Bible as a closed text, we as readers actually participate in providing it with life. Bible scholar Michael Fishbane explains, “As a literary artifact, the words of the Bible require an interpreter for renewed life [...] it is the reader who performs the text in his mind, lingers in its silences and suggestions, and so serves as its midwife and voice.”^x The Torah, referred to as a *Torat Hayyim* (a Torah of Life), is a book that still lives, and it is kept alive by our fresh interpretations and applications of it. In essence, we *create* meaning in texts and infuse them with life when we interpret them.

This idea that interpretation is truly a process of creating meaning finds its sources in modern literary theory. “Each reading of a book,” maintained author Jorge Luis Borges, “each rereading, each memory of that rereading, reinvents the text.”^{xi} There is no one explicit or even inherent meaning in the text; textual interpretation is truly an activity involving listening to the text while at the same time imposing oneself upon it. We do not merely unearth it, but we *create* it based on our pre-

conceived notions and agendas, based on the world that we bring to the text in our efforts to make sense of it.

In recent years, many scholars have begun to apply these secular ideas and techniques to Biblical interpretation.^{xii} Many have shown that our interpretation is in fact fraught with the underlying notion that we create meaning. These ideas have enabled us to be aware of what is truly occurring when we interpret texts, whether they are secular or religious in nature, and I believe that we should apply these secular techniques in order to understand the Torah in the best way possible.^{xiii}

While creativity is necessary for interpretation, different levels of adherence to the literal text are demanded depending on the type of interpretation under scrutiny. For Midrash, there is much room for creativity.^{xiv} The elaborated homilies in *Midrash Rabbah* and other such midrashic works are rarely obvious from the text and certainly expand the narrative beyond a literal-philological explanation. A *darshan* (expounder) inserts his world into the text, making it have meaning in his social context. When a Rabbi gives a Shabbat *derashah* (sermon) from the pulpit, he is in fact utilizing his creative faculties in order to build a meaningful interpretation of the text that will resonate with his congregants. Bible scholar Uriel Simon explains that “the darshan may never rest content with merely interpreting the words of the text; he must dare to make it speak out. When he does it well, he becomes a partner in the creative process.”^{xv}

“God gave the Torah to the world to have a relationship with it, not just to transcend it, and our social and historical impositions do not desecrate the text.”

Even *peshat*, which can be defined as the plain, inherent meaning of the text that puts “exegetical inquiry always ahead of expounding a lesson,”^{xvi} certainly leaves room for creativity in interpretation. Rashbam famously coined the phrase “*ha-peshatot ha-mithaddeshim be-khol yom*,” “the *peshat* interpretations that emerge anew every day,” stressing the constant regeneration of *peshatot*, for the Bible is not a closed text, but one from which we must constantly produce new interpretations.^{xvii} Simon, questioning the need for new *peshat* interpretations, expands upon its necessity:

“Peshat [...] cannot ever be complete and final because our knowledge is always limited and partial, because every expansion of knowledge of which we are capable and every refinement of the methods we use require us to correct and adapt. Even more: every change in our existential situation as a result of the cataclysms of history leads to a shift in the way we

see ourselves and the Bible and accordingly demands new exegetical effort. The classical commentaries may be compared to masterpieces of art

whose beauty does not fade. And just as our generation does not find its self-expression in the creations of the past but only in the distinctive style that has been shaped by the conventions of the present, the study of Torah cannot rest content unless it is reinforced by creative exegetical work that arises out of and responds to the needs of this generation.”^{xviii,xix}

What is clear is that even in *peshat* interpretation, which is more focused on adhering to the intention of the author (a question often raised in modern literary theory), the exegete must necessarily impose his social context upon the

text in order to interpret it.

Even while *peshat* interpretations seem to express the original text more faithfully, “this is also their weak point,” explains Simon, for “they insist on the truth at the price of diminishing their message.”^{xx} The “message” that truly resonates with readers may equally be the intent of the text as much as the literal explanation, and, therefore, *pashtanim* are not really getting any closer to the text than are *darshanim*. R. Shalom Carmy asserts the importance of “the literary-theological approach” when studying *peshat*, one that does not view the *peshat* as an end of itself, but must be considered “within an overall program of Mahshevet Yisrael, Torah study and theological reflection,” or else such interpretation will “interfere with the primary vocation of elucidating *devar ha-Shem*.”^{xxi} R. Carmy is stressing that, even when striving for literal meaning, the overall theological messages must be our goal,

which requires the imposition of a creative mind to elicit significance from the fixed text.

An approach to the Torah that incorporates modern literary theories of interpretation may trouble some for it can lead to the conclusion that if we are charged with the ability, even the obligation, to create meaning, then there is no inherent sanctity or holiness to the Torah. While this seems like a dangerous approach, radically opposed to our general reverence for Torah, it is possible to interpret holiness as something created by man. Rav Soloveitchik maintains that “holiness is created by man, by flesh and blood” when we bring the Divine down into our physical reality. It is our job, therefore, to infuse our world with holiness by interpreting the Torah.^{xxii} Our Rabbis teach us that *dibberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam*, the Torah speaks in the language of man, and we are given the task to infuse its mundane language with sacredness.^{xxiii}

Alternatively, it is possible that all viable interpretations were created by God and given to the world at Sinai, and we are merely revealing them with the passage of time. Yet, this approach still acknowledges the existence of many truths. How do we “discover” the unrevealed ones? Or how do we choose which one to assert when our tradition contains more than one? Such decisions are based on our preconceived ideas, on the world that we carry with us to the text when we interpret it. God gave the Torah to the world to have a relationship with it, not just to transcend it, and our social and historical impositions do not desecrate the text. “Whatever the prophets will prophesy in each generation they received from Mount Sinai,” say Hazal,^{xxiv} and Simon extends this phrase’s application beyond prophecy to biblical interpretation as well: “In other words, historical contextualization does not damage the force of the prophecy as the word of God, but it must contribute a substantial amount to understanding it.”^{xxv}

While we see that the biblical text affords us room for creative input, we cannot neglect the actual words effacing us. The *pashtan* must strictly follow the rules of grammar and linguistics. Even concerning Midrash, Ithamar Gruenwald, Professor of Jewish studies at Tel Aviv University, explains:

“For all the elasticity that the scriptural text undergoes via midrashic hermeneutics, it is not so “deconstructed” as to make every interpretation possible. Midrash is certainly creator of a tradition; but it obeys certain basic presuppositions that safeguard it from becoming a counterproductive enterprise. Those presuppositions include the divine inspiration of Scripture, its permanence and its basically moral nature, and the centrality and indispensability of the cult.”^{xxvi}

His idea of midrashic conditions are: “formal principles of scriptural exegesis (the *Mid-dot* used in the interpretation of the Torah), social needs, new ideological and political positions, historical requirements, or any other current disposition of the community” as well as “the need to meet a certain consensus of opinions maintained and zealously guarded by the social group – even though that consensus may change from group to group, from generation to generation, and from place to place.”^{xxvii} Additionally, “tact and an inner feeling of respect for the conventions of the com-

find significance in it.

What I have tried to demonstrate is that biblical interpretation is in fact our attempt at reinventing text. Midrash seems to embrace the notion that contemporary readership finds its unique significance within the text, while *peshat* seems to strive for objectivity. However, all interpretations are really recreations of the original, but merely depend on how far they stray from the literal text in order to elicit significance. Biblical interpretation is a dialectical process of making Torah our own, while simultaneously respecting the objective words in front of us. There is a clear tension between viewing Torah as a literary artifact and a living book, between framing it as *devar Hashem* (the word of God) versus upholding the notion of *dibberah Torah ki-leshon benei adam*. How much authority do we have in interpretation? How much room is there for us in the Bible? Modern literary criticism has framed this discussion for us within the general framework of the author-interpreter relationship, and has helped us verbalize what is truly happening when we interpret texts. Assuming it is within the appropriate guidelines, we should embrace our agency of interpretation, for the “The Creator of the world diminished the image and stature of creation in order to leave something for man, the work of His hands, to do, in order to adorn man with the crown of creator and maker.”^{xxxi}

“Biblical interpretation is a dialectical process of making Torah our own, while simultaneously respecting the objective words in front of us.”

munity are the reasonable borders whose crossing makes an interpretation counterproductive at least, countercultural at worst.”^{xxviii} Joshua Levinson, Professor of Hebrew Literature at Hebrew University, similarly asserts concerning the *darshan*:

“Not only is the narrator confined by the nature of the material when he begins to retell the biblical story, but he is limited also to a specific cultural repertoire of plot structures: he can transform Joseph into a saint or a sinner but not into Don Juan. More importantly, the narrator must contend with the expectations and foreknowledge of his audience [...] The reader can read between the lines, fill in the gaps, and, like two people gazing at the night sky, draw different lines between the stars, but he cannot change the stars themselves.”^{xxix}

The Torah juxtaposes the building of the *Mishkan* to the commandment to keep Shabbat, and these two ideas are so linked that the prohibitions on Shabbat, *melakhot Shabbat*, are even based on exactly what we did to build the *Mishkan*.^{xxx} Shabbat is defined by a *lack* of action, by submitting ourselves to *not* do what was done in the building of the *Mishkan*, which epitomizes the creative process. If we apply this to biblical exegesis, the message is that we must balance neglecting our own biases and listening to the text, while at the same time embracing our own understanding of it in order to

While we are meant to imitate God in His creative capacity of creating *yesh me-ayin*, something from nothing, it is impossible for us to forge existence from thin air. In a way, biblical interpretation can be viewed as a process of *yesh me-yesh*, something from something, in which we work with the objective text through the lenses of our unique backgrounds. This tension between the divine object of the biblical text and the human agency of its interpretation extends beyond hermeneutics and permeates the entire religious experience, which can be characterized by its distinctive mix of force and freedom, an existence that creates *us* through divine Providence, while simultaneously allowing us to create *it* with our own free will.

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ⁱ This article was prompted by Yehoshua Blumenkopf’s letter-to-the-editor in *Kol Hamevaser* 3,4 (February 2010), p. 4, in which he wrote the following:

“Ori Kanefsky’s article (“Bible Study: Interpretation and Experience,” pp. 19-20) inappropriately applies modern literary theory to the Bible in a very damaging

manner...God intended to convey certain ideas in the Bible and it is those we should be studying, not ‘creating’ (p. 19) our own limited human meanings, thereby equating ourselves with God...The proper role of *mefareshim* and contemporary readers is to uncover the multiple meanings of the Bible, and it is to this endeavor that *shiv'im panim la-Torah* (there are seventy faces to the Torah) refers, not to the creation of new “meaning” by inserting ourselves into the text (ibid.).”

In response to this letter, I would like to legitimize the application of some ideas found in modern literary theory to the Bible, while at the same time respecting Blumenkopf’s ideas concerning the objective authority of the Torah. I believe that his words overlook the human participation in eliciting meaning from the Bible, even though I partially agree with him that there is a limit to how far we can take this idea.

Many of the ideas in this article were influenced by Kenneth Dauber’s article, “Beginning at the Beginning in Genesis,” *Ordinary Language Criticism: Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern U. Press, 2003), as well as my English professor Dr. Kim Evans’ application of his ideas in her class, “Gateway to Reading.”

I would also like to thank R. Mordechai Cohen and R. Richard Hidary for reviewing this article and offering me their insights.

ⁱⁱ R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, trans. Lawrence Kaplan (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983), p. 101.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Halakhic Man*, p. 106.

^{iv} See Ori Kanefsky’s article in this issue for more on Torah’s character as wisdom literature, p. 12.

^v *Be-Reshit* 2:5.

^{vi} *Shemot* 40:33.

^{vii} *Be-Reshit* 2:2. For a more detailed comparison of the two sections, see Nehama Leibowitz citing Martin Buber, *Iyyunim Hadashim be-Sefer Shemot*, pp. 350-52, as well as Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, the Hebrew University, 1987), p. 476.

^{viii} *Berakhot* 55a.

^{ix} *Halakhic Man*, p. 125.

^x Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979), pp. xi-xii.

^{xi} Joshua Levinson, “Dialogical Reading in the Rabbinic Exegetical Narrative,” *Poetics Today* 25,3 (Fall 2004): 497-528, at p. 498. Original source: Jorge Luis Borges, “Poetry,” *Seven Nights* (1980), trans. Eliot Weinberger (New York, 1984), pp. 76-77.

^{xii} Yaakov Beasley provides a brief breakdown of the different modern literary approaches towards Bible study in his review essay “Return of the Pashtanim,” *Tradition* 42,1 (Spring 2009): 67-83, at pp. 70-73.

^{xiii} See Mordechai Z. Cohen, “‘The Best of Poetry...’: Literary Approaches to the Bible in the Spanish *Peshat* Tradition,” *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 6 (1995-1996): 15-57, on the

precedent of applying secular literary techniques to the Bible, as well as Moshe J. Bernstein’s defense of such an approach in his review essay, “The Bible as Literature: The Literary Guide to the Bible: Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, Eds.,” in *Tradition* 31:2 (Winter 1997): 67-82.

^{xiv} Much literature has been produced in recent years on literary theory and Midrash. Some examples are: Geoffrey H. Hartman, “Midrash as Law and Literature,” *The Journal of Religion* 74,3 (July 1994): 338-355; Michael Fishbane (ed.), *The Midrashic Imagination: Exegesis, Thought, and History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Levinson, above, n. 11.

^{xv} Uriel Simon, “The Religious Significance of the Peshat,” trans. Edward L. Greenstein, *Tradition* 23:2 (Winter 1988): 41-63, at p. 42.

^{xvi} Ibid.

^{xvii} In Rashbam’s commentary to *Be-Reshit* 37:2. However, as R. Mordechai Z. Cohen pointed out to me in a personal discussion, this phrase can alternatively be explained as an attempt to constantly be getting closer to the inherent truth.

^{xviii} Simon, pp. 55-56.

^{xix} Ibid., p. 54. This sharply contrasts, for example, Ibn Ezra’s ambition in his Introduction to the Torah Commentary, The Fifth Way: “The Lord alone shall I fear, and I shall not show favor in (interpreting) the Torah.”

^{xx} Simon, p. 42.

^{xxi} Shalom Carmy, “A Room With a View, but a Room of our Own,” *Tradition* 28,3 (Spring 1994): 39-69, at pp. 41-42.

^{xxii} *Halakhic Man*, p. 47.

^{xxiii} This remains troublesome to me, though, and requires further thought, for it does not address the question of why we cannot then take any book of literature and infuse it with holiness as we do to the Torah.

^{xxiv} *Shemot Rabbah, Parashat Yitro* 28:6.

^{xxv} Simon, p. 59.

^{xxvi} Ithamar Gruenwald, “Midrash and ‘Midrashic Condition’: Preliminary Considerations,” in *The Midrashic Imagination* (above, n. 14), pp. 6-22, at p. 12.

^{xxvii} Ibid.

^{xxviii} Ibid., pp. 12-13.

^{xxix} Levinson, p. 504.

^{xxx} It is in fact a *mahaloket* (*Shabbat* 49b) whether the *melakhot* are based on the activities of the *Mishkan* or on the instances of the word “*melakhah*” in the Bible. Furthermore, it is a *mahaloket* amongst Rishonim whether it is the actions done in the *building* or in the *maintenance* of the *Mishkan*, but these discussions are beyond the realm of this article.

^{xxxi} *Halakhic Man*, p. 107.

The Weaver's Threads: How Name, Story, and Prayer Form a Braid between Torah, Literature and the Art of Storytellingⁱ

BY: Professor Peninnah Schram

In the Torah, God's first instruction to Adam is to name the living creatures in the Garden of Eden. The word "*shem*" contains the core Hebrew letters of the "*neshamah*." According to the Jewish tradition, names are important for identification and family history, and, more essentially, for revelation of the soul or essence of the individual. In *Midrash Tanhuma*, it states that we are each given three names: the one given to us at birth, the one that others give us, and the one we give ourselves.ⁱⁱ As Ralph Ellison writes: "We must first come into possession of our own names. For it is through our names that we first place ourselves in the world."ⁱⁱⁱ

In this essay, I will explicate and interpret what my "three" names have meant to me and how they have shaped my Jewish journey. In addition to this first strand comprised of my three given names, the second thread is composed of two significant stories I heard in childhood that shaped my values and perspectives as a Jewish storyteller. The third thread of the braid is a remarkable cantor's prayer which inspired me to write my own.

All of these three threads share the same wellspring, namely, Jewish sacred texts, other Jewish literature and the Jewish vocal tradition. The speaking voice calling out names and telling of sacred tales and the chanting voice singing prayers share one thing in common: the human voice. Voice is produced by breath. Once again, we have a related Hebrew word to "*neshamah*," that is, "*neshimah*," which means "breath." Therefore, when words of text are breathed, they unveil the soul. The voice is the messenger of the heart. My names, the stories I remember and tell, and an inspiring storyteller's prayer intertwined and guided me to discover who I am, Peninnah the Storyteller.

Knowing that names journey with us through life, my father gave me the Hebrew name for pearl, Peninnah, in memory of his mother Perel (Yiddish for "pearl"). My middle name became Pearl. In other words, I really have the same name given doubly in two languages, Peninnah Pearl.

My childhood in New London, Connecticut revolved around the home, the synagogue where my father was the cantor, and, of course, school. But since memory is non-linear, actually more of a spiral looping around and

around in strange configurations, I keep thinking back to the early stories I heard at home and to the music I heard in the synagogue that filled me with deep feelings of prayer. Those first remembered stories and chanted prayers are major formative experiences which influenced my life and the stories I continue to need to tell.

My father was a great storyteller and I loved hearing his stories from the time I can recall, which was about four or five years old. My father would often sit in his favorite living room chair and read his newspaper or book. However, whenever he saw me he would ask me which story I would like to hear. The mantle clock on the top of the Marshall & Mendel upright piano would tick loudly as I thought.

appears. It was magical! Images were magical! The themes of hospitality, hope and possibilities, all important Jewish concepts, nourished my being through this story. No wonder I asked to hear this story over and over. I also remember the joy my father had each time in telling me this story. As a direct result, when I began telling stories, first to my children and then publicly, I was drawn to finding and learning many Elijah the Prophet stories which became part of my repertoire, including that earliest remembered story. I later learned that Elijah the Prophet is our most popular acting hero spanning the centuries and the generations.

My mother, Dora Manchester, told me very different kinds of stories. She told me

times, my daughter." (As it happens, the number one hundred and one is connected to Judaism. It is found in the Talmud, *Hagigah* 9b: "He who repeats his chapter one hundred times does not compare to him who repeats it a hundred and one times.") My mother was always teaching me in practical ways.

Once I began to tell stories professionally, I also began to research folktales. One day I found that the tale my mother had told me "one hundred and one times" had been written originally in a late twelfth century collection of stories and moral lessons, *Sefer Hasidim*, but I am certain my mother never read this book. Rather, I learned that she had heard this story from her mother, who had also told it to my cousin to teach the value of patience. This is

the fluid way of folktales. This story journeyed through the centuries and across countries as people told it to teach that essential lesson of restraining anger. That story has become an important story in my life, too, as I have told it (often) to my children. My daughter is now telling it to her children. It is certainly good advice for healthy relationships. It is needed wisdom that had been given to me in shorthand by a wise storyteller.

As I grew older, I realized that Peninnah was not only my grandmother's name but a character in the Torah. Who is the original Peninnah? In the First Book of Samuel, Elkanah has two wives, Peninnah and Hannah. In this story, we have the archetypal couple where one wife is fertile, the other barren. Furthermore it is the barren wife who is more loved. Peninnah has many children while the loved wife Hannah remains barren. Peninnah is the vilified wife because she taunted Hannah for her barrenness and "vexed her sore" (I Samuel I:6). You might then say that Peninnah was un-

kind, insensitive, and unjust to her "rival."

I began to wonder why my father had chosen this name for me. True, it was his mother's name, but it also says in the Jewish tradition that our names have an influence on our lives. Did he want me to become like the biblical Peninnah? Did I want to grow into being her? These questions occurred to me, but too late for me to ask, for my father had passed on before I could ever ask him.

According to Jewish tradition, we bless our daughters with the names of our four biblical mothers so that they may grow up to be like "Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah" or take on the attributes of the name they are given, as in my case, Peninnah. I am puzzled by these



But invariably I would ask my father to tell me the same Elijah the Prophet story. With a smile, he would agree. My father usually told me stories in Yiddish. And with each telling, it was as if it were the first time I heard the story, for he was present at every telling. In my mind's ear, I still hear, in my father's voice, a certain phrase from that story, "And Elijah gave a whistle." And with each of the three times that Elijah whistled, wishes were granted to a hospitable good couple. After a time, Elijah visits this couple again to see how they are faring. When he finds out that the couple had not made wise use of those wishes, why, then "Elijah gave a whistle," again three times, and with each whistle one of the wonderful wishes dis-

teaching tales with didactic lessons about how to behave. She taught me to restrain my anger through a story about a man who, upon returning home after being in the Tsar's army and far away in Siberia for 25 years, almost shoots a stranger he mistakes for his wife's lover. However, just as he draws his revolver out of its holster, he realizes that the man is his own now-grown-up son. That vivid image of what almost-could-have-happened has remained in my memory since I was a child.

"Ma, I don't want to hear that story again. I've heard it a hundred times!" I would shout running to another room. But my mother was not intimidated. She just answered calmly, "And I'll tell it to you one hundred and one

seemingly contradictory issues: Why are the fertile wives so unloved? Why do they get such a bad “rap”? How then can I turn my name personally into a blessing? I have turned it over and over throughout the years trying to understand why my parents gave me the name Peninnah, the name of my father’s mother. Why would they give me a name that I would not want to own or live up to – to be like Peninnah?

I searched through the various midrashim on this story of Peninnah and Hannah. Since the Torah was written in shorthand, the rabbis wisely created the midrashic process of interpretation. They told imaginative stories to fill in “the spaces between words” of Torah text in order to explain what is left out or else reconcile what are seemingly contradictions in the text. The midrashim that I found were startling. Peninnah not only “vexed” Hannah, but irked her with such humiliating taunts:

“What would Peninnah say to her? ‘Did you get a scarf for your older son and an undergarment for your second son?’ Then, too, Peninnah would get up early [...] and say to Hannah, ‘Why don’t you rouse yourself and wash your children’s faces, so that they will be fit to go to school?’ At twelve o’clock, she would say, ‘Hannah, why don’t you rouse yourself and welcome your children who are about to return from school?’”^{iv}

How could Peninnah have said this to this defenseless unhappy yearning-to-be-a mother barren woman? And there is more, but enough for our purpose. I keep asking where was her compassion? So we need to ask the question again, as the rabbis did, *why* did Peninnah speak this way? And the answer given in the same midrash is: for the sake of “*harre’imah*.”^v This word “*harre’imah*” is interpreted by the midrash as “not ‘to make her fret’ but ‘to make her thunder’ against God in prayer on her own behalf. The Holy One said to Peninnah, ‘You make her “thunder” [*ra’am*] against Me. As you live, there are no thunders that are not followed by rain! I shall remember her at once.””^{vi} There it is! If Peninnah, the irritant, had not taunted Hannah, perhaps Hannah would not have found her strength to pray to God for a child with such *kavvanah* and deep tears. When Hannah finally goes to the temple and prays with a soundless voice and tears, only then does God hear her prayers and opens up her womb (with the rain that followed the thunder). Hannah gives birth to Samuel. She becomes fruitful due to the creative catalytic force of Peninnah.

I knew Peninnah meant “pearl” in Hebrew. But then I had an epiphany: a pearl is created through an irritant, a grain of sand, for example. Only then are the luminous layers added on one-by-one to form this precious jewel. I suddenly realized the positive role played by Peninnah in this biblical story.

I love the character of Peninnah as a role model for her strength, her fertility, her creativity, her practicality, and her earthiness. These

are qualities I can own proudly. That is a splendid legacy for me to continue so as to inspire and instill Jewish values and traditions through my stories. My name is a blessing!

It was about this time, that I took on another name, that is, I gave myself a name: Storyteller, even though I had been telling Jewish stories, transmitting Jewish values and wisdoms, and creating the link between generations for several years.

More recently, I discovered the concept of a person’s *pasuk*, a verse in Tanakh that begins and ends with the Hebrew letter of one’s name, and connects that person’s name with Torah. My son, Hazzan Mordechai Schram and his wife, Sonia Gordon-Walinsky, a Jewish artist/calligrapher, researched a *pasuk* for me and chose Proverbs 31:26: “Her mouth is full of wisdom, her tongue with kindly teaching.” Sonia then created for me an artistic rendering of that *pasuk* with both Hebrew and English texts surrounding my name in Hebrew.^{vii}

While names are stories, too, and reflect our inner qualities and characteristics, they are also a form of prayer. However, there are prayers that we say beyond our names (aloud or only with our breath and movement of our lips, like Hannah’s prayer). Prayers are words from the heart that connect us to a greater force that is both inside of us and in the wider world outside of us. In Judaism there are prayers to help put us into the right place in order to pray. Before there is prayer, there is a prayer. The “*Hinneni*” (“Here we stand”) is an awesome

“Just as my father walked into the congregation in order to symbolically bring them with him to the *bimah* to that precious sacred moment of praying together, I, too, as a storyteller, must go into the audience to tell, to share, and to interact.”

prologue prayer and it evokes all kinds of special associations for me. My father, Hazzan Samuel E. Manchester, traditionally chanted this prayer while walking up the aisle to the *ammud*. In this prayer, cantors plead with God to consider them worthy so as to accept the rest of the prayers on behalf of the congregation as a *shaliah tsibbur* (“messenger of the people”). Along with the chanting, I also remember the tears of my father because he prayed with his tears, too. Hearing him, we all “virtually” walked and chanted with him and asserted, “Here we stand,” up to the moment of entering into communal prayer.

After I began telling stories, I learned that the Hasidim have a storyteller’s prayer, to get the storytellers in the right frame of mind to begin their stories. Suddenly, “*Hinneni*” flashed through my mind. I gathered my images, my memories, my experiences and put them into words to form “My Storyteller’s Prayer:”^{viii}

“*Ribbono shel Olam*, God of the Universe, listen to my heart and my voice as I stand before You, wanting to tell our story.

Help me to understand and find the right feelings and words with which to transmit the tale.

Make my voice expressive and clear so that the collective wisdom of our

people can reach the hearts of those who listen.

May I merit to hear well with my ears and heart.

Keep me from the jealousy of other tellers and from my jealousy of them so that we may be able to share and hear each other with open hearts.

Allow me to assume this responsibility as my forebears did before me – to continue to retell our stories.

Help me to choose my stories wisely and let my words live.

Make me worthy to be a storyteller of our Jewish people.”

From these interwoven strands, specifically, my name, the teaching tales of my mother, my first remembered Elijah story of my father, and the Storyteller’s Prayer, I have become Peninnah the Storyteller. As a Jewish storyteller, I am a catalyst who provokes the audiences to ask questions, to laugh, as well as to touch their hearts, sometimes with resultant tears. I share stories in a creative and dignified way in order to instill hope, hospitality, peoplehood, faith, and other important Jewish values. My goal is to transmit our treasures given to us by our forebears. All of these ethical and moral stories have helped them survive and live with balance and foresight to improve relationships – always with the hope to achieve peace. I also understand that, just as my father walked into the congregation in order to symbolically bring them with him to the *bimah* to

that precious sacred moment of praying together, I, too, as a storyteller, must go into the audience to tell, to share, and to interact. Once that happens, I create a bond between us and with the story. It is a major responsibility that I have taken on as a storyteller. This is how these threads have become intertwined to form the basis of my life’s commitment to Judaism and the art of storytelling.

This is my story and the legacy of my father and of my mother. I stand now in their place, telling my stories as a *shelihat tsibbur*. With my voice, I pass on to the next generations the Jewish culture and customs, traditions and tales, the compassionate ethical lessons and learned wisdoms. I pray that our stories, the stories of ourselves and our people, remain treasured stories and that I, as a storyteller, may continue to share with others the richness of the Jewish tradition, both in formal and informal settings wherever the exchange of stories takes place.

This essay and the following questions can serve as a springboard for our own personal explorations into connections between Torah, our names, Literature and Art:

What do you feel about your birth name?
What is its origin?
Were you named after someone? Who?
What were the characteristics of that per-

son?

Do you “own” your name? Have you grown into your name?

How has it shaped your mythic sense of who you are?

What are your other names – that others have given you and that you have given yourself? Tell the stories about those names.

What is your *pasuk*?

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ⁱ This essay was excerpted and adapted from a published essay of mine, “The Weaver’s Thread: How Name, Story, and Prayer Form the Braid of My Spiritual Life,” *Spirituality, Ethnography, and Teaching: Stories from Within*, ed. Diana Denton and Will Ashton (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), pp. 72-81.

ⁱⁱ *Midrash Tanhuma* (Warsaw edition), *Parashat Va-Yakhel*, *siman* 1; *Kohelet Rabbah* 7:3; *Midrash Shemuel* 23.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ralph Ellison’s quote appeared in a book review written by Marina Warner in the *New York Times* Book Review section, February 16, 1997, p. 7M. Warner reviewed J. Kaplan and A. Bernays, *The Language of Names: What We Call Ourselves and Why It Matters* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1997).

^{iv} H.N. Bialik and Y. H. Ravnitzky, *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. W. G. Braude (NY: Schocken Books, 1992), p. 113. Based on *Midrash Pesikta Rabbah* 43:7.

^v I Samuel 1:6.

^{vi} *The Book of Legends*, *ibid*.

^{vii} Sonia Gordon-Walinsky, Jewish artist/calligrapher. Her artwork can be viewed at: www.pasukart.com.

^{viii} Peninnah Schram, *Jewish Stories One Generation Tells Another* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1987), xxxv.

Torah Observance

BY: Ori Kanefsky

If the Torah is meant to be a book of laws, then why does so much of it consist of narrative?

Of course, in assuming that the Torah is in fact a book of laws, I am not alone. Rashi also seems to entertain such a view of the Torah. In his very first comment to *Be-Reshit*, Rashi quotes a famous question posed by R. Yitshak: “The Torah had only to begin with, ‘This month shall be for you’ (*Shemot* 12:2), for that is the first law commanded to Israel; so why does the Torah begin with *Be-Reshit*?”ⁱ The question assumes precisely the perspective with which I began, namely that the Torah is purely a book of laws. Furthermore, rather than simply reject the major premise, the answer given, that the Torah started from *Be-Reshit* in order to justify God’s bestowal of Eretz Yisrael on the Jewish nation, upholds the first assumption. However, this answer is problematic for two reasons. First, the narrative that precedes *Shemot* 12 does not exclusively address issues of sovereignty over the land of Israel. Second, the text that follows *Shemot* 12 is also not simply a list of laws, but is rather filled with an extensive storyline. It would seem, then, that if we seek to appreciate the narrative of the Torah, rather than marginalize it, we might reject our initial hypothesis and redefine the nature of the Torah.

In search of this new classification, I would like to turn to a particular genre of literature. Narrative plays an important role in another textual realm: wisdom literature. Texts that take part in this literary tradition seek to leave their readers with moral instruction and judicious guidance. They shape one’s thoughts and ideas, on the one hand, and guide one’s actions and behavior, on the other. Similarly, since we believe that the Torah is the foundation of our religion and lifestyle, and especially because we believe it to be divine, everything in it – both its laws and its stories – have been placed there in order to in-

“Since we believe that the Torah is the foundation of our religion and lifestyle, and especially because we believe it to be divine, everything in it – both its laws and its stories – have been placed there in order to instruct us.”

struct us. Therefore, although only certain books of the Hebrew Bible may formally fit the model of wisdom literature, such as *Mishlei* or *Kohelet*, it seems that an analogy, if taken more generally, is appropriate.

Just like the Bible, wisdom literature is chock-full of stories and often features a running plot. Occasionally, authors of wisdom literature, such as Benjamin Franklin in *Poor*

Richard’s Almanack, simply list various ideas of wisdom and advice without any stories. Much more frequently, though, in this genre of writing, the wisdom is embedded in narrative. For example, the author of the Old English epic poem *Beowulf* clearly intends to convey certain life lessons to his readers:

“It is always better
To avenge dear ones than to indulge in
mourning.
For every one of us, living in this world
means waiting for our end. Let whoever
can
win glory before death. When a warrior
is gone,
That will be his best and only
bulwark.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In fact, in some ways, these lines summarize the theme of the entire poem. Yet, the author insists on telling an entire story that conveys this message through the development of a story. Part of the reason for this is that the effect of transmission through narrative is different than that of simple wisdom. When presented with such a text, one task that readers are charged with is to consider the role and function of narrative in achieving the author’s goals.

We might undertake this very same approach when reading the Torah. One way to view the narrative in the Torah is that it stands independent from the laws, as a separate genre of Pentateuchal writing. At times, however, we find intersections of these two modes, in which there is direct overlap between the two, as when the narrative acts out a law, introduces a new law, or even challenges a law. At these times, the relationship between the two seems to run much deeper than coincidental juxtaposition and must be considered more carefully.

Redundancy of laws in narrative comes as a surprise. In *Be-Midbar* 15:32-36, we find the story of the “mekoshesh etsim,” the “woodchopper.” In this very short story, one Israelite violates Shabbat by chopping wood and, as punishment, is stoned by the entire nation. But do we not already know this law? In

Shemot 31:14, we learn that one who violates Shabbat must be put to death. Addressing this question, Rashi, quoting the *Sifrei*, suggests that this narrative provides the additional information of which kind of death penalty a violator of Shabbat receives, namely stoning.ⁱⁱⁱ Why, though, could this information not have been provided together with the original law, or even in a subsequent verse? Why was it

transmitted through narrative? The choice of narrative form would seem to indicate that this passage is meant to convey more than just this additional piece of information.

A similar question arises when reading the ninth chapter of *Be-Midbar*. This chapter describes how Israel offered the *Korban Pesah*, the paschal sacrifice. It then narrates a scene in which a group of ritually impure individuals who are barred from participating in the offering protest their unjust exclusion. Moshe, after consulting with God, receives a commandment to institute *Pesach Sheni*, a makeup Pesah, which would take place a month later. This chapter appears to be strange for two reasons. First, the Torah only rarely digresses to inform us that Israel fulfills its commandments; why must we be told that they fulfill this one? Second, this story leads to the invention of an entirely new law. Again,

“The text of the Torah is self-reflective; it performs for its readers the observance of its own laws.”

why does this halakhah only arise through the narrative and not in a legal context?

Finally, I will point to one more instance of this phenomenon. This one appears eighteen chapters later, in *Be-Midbar* 27. Following the laws governing inheritance, a protest arises. The five daughters of Tselofhad stand before Moshe and complain that their father will lose out on inheriting his portion of the land since he died without any sons prior to the national distribution of land. Once again, Moshe appeals to God, who promptly delivers an expanded version of the inheritance laws, which includes the provision for daughters to inherit their father’s land in the absence of any sons. Here, too, we wonder why these laws were not given from the outset, and why they arrive specifically in the context of a story.

One might certainly analyze each of these cases independently and carefully assess the effects of narrative form in each. For example, one might argue that the “woodchopper” story functions to instill in readers an image of someone being put to death for violating Shabbat and thereby emphasize the gravity of Shabbat observance. Similarly, with respect to the latter two stories, one might suggest that the narratives serve to illustrate

the necessity of protesting injustice and the potential flexibility of Halakhah.

Here, I would like to propose a broader suggestion. An important feature of narrative is that it is performative. In wisdom literature, the narrative puts on a play, acts out its wisdom. In *Beowulf*, for example, rather than simply writing an essay on chivalry, the author chooses to have his characters *demonstrate* heroism, glory, and honor.

In the Torah, too, narrative takes on a performative quality. The text of the Torah is

self-reflective; it *performs* for its readers the observance of its own laws. Of course, this observance is a complicated one, as the examples of narrative presented above demonstrate. From these stories, we see that Israelites did not always obey the Torah’s laws, as in the case of the “woodchopper.” In fact, this represents a very common pattern in the Bible, by which stories frequently exhibit violation of the law rather than its observance. In the other two examples concerning *Pesach Sheni* and inheritance rights, entirely new laws actually arise from narratives in which individuals challenge the initial formulation of the laws. All of these stories, together with all of the others in the Torah that fall within this same intersection of law and narrative, come together to form a tapestry of Torah observance, one that both illustrates and complicates what it means to follow and live by

Halakhah.

The relationship between law and narrative is a complex one that is pregnant with countless interpretative possibilities. Further research is necessary to explore the full implication of this relationship, as well as to ponder why only certain laws are presented through narrative while others are not. It seems, however, that at least one result of this interweaving of the two genres is that their combination and interaction allow the Torah to be a book that observes itself, which, in some ways, is perhaps the greatest lesson of all.

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ⁱ Rashi to *Be-Reshit* 1:1.

ⁱⁱ Stephen Greenblatt (ed.), “Beowulf,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8th ed., vol. 1 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), lines 1384-1389, p. 64.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rashi to *Be-Midbar* 15:34.

Literary Bible: Moving Beyond Questions of Authorshipⁱ

BY: Jake Friedman

Recently, I posted a short *devar Torah* on my Facebook page. It sparked, as I hoped it might, a lively online discussion, rendering Facebook, at least momentarily, a vehicle for holy and honorable discourse. Aside from giving rise to my happy thoughts about using the implements of the secular world for Jewishly noble purposes, the issues raised in the discussion seemed wholly pertinent and important for the *Kol Hamevaser* community.

The *devar Torah* consisted of a short Robert Frost poem, an identification of the recurring motifs of circles and circularity in the rituals of Sukkot (including shaking the *arba minim*, *hosha not*, and *hakkafot*) and a synthesis of these secular and religious elements by way of my interpretation of *Kohelet*. All in all, it was an exercise in literary Bible study and literary interpretation of the mitsvot.

The *devar Torah* prompted questions from friends and relatives that challenge the validity of a literary approach to the Torah and mitsvot. In the spirit of our issue on “Torah, Literature, and the Arts,” I would like to present my defense of the deployment of contemporary techniques in literary theory for garnering meaning from biblical texts.

To clarify, I use the term “literary” to refer to a methodology of analysis that takes two elements of reading into account: textual cues that reflect evidence of creative authorship,ⁱⁱ and the questions that arise as a result of considering the text in a spirit of open-minded, interdisciplinary reflection.ⁱⁱⁱ

Some will argue that cues of the first type are not present in the Bible; that the Bible presents things exactly as they occurred. But is this even possible? There is no way around the fact that history first occurred, then was

reviewed, and then was compiled in order to fit into the Bible,^{iv} for not every word and deed that was uttered and performed by every character in the bible is recorded. This process of editing, culling words and deeds which are important and meaningful from what we can forget, is an active, creative process.

Once we are willing to admit that the biblical text has undergone a process of selection, we must read it under the assumption that the specific account we are reading, with its par-

ticularity of composition, is worthy of special attention.^v When we read the Bible seriously we are putting trust in the author that the details he chose to include or exclude are significant in one way or another. This trusting relationship is evident in nearly all classical Jewish sources where Tanna'im, Amora'im, Rishonim and Aharonim all respond to cues, such as obscure word choices or the inclusion of apparently irrelevant passages, with interest, rather than assuming that the Torah lacks a proper author.

The second type of cue critical for a literary analysis of the Bible, open-minded, interdisciplinary reflection, is not obviously consistent with traditional approaches to reading the Bible, yet I believe that a reconciliation is possible. Questioning the Bible based on information from other areas of study, such as anthropology, history, sociology, or philosophy, might be deemed a futile or misguided enterprise,^{vi} but I believe such questioning is valuable for modern readers of the Bible whose backgrounds are colored by their immersion in secular pursuits. For such readers, the words of the Bible and its classic commentaries frequently contain tacit responses to questions that arise in secular contexts, whether their respective authors were aware of these issues or not. Analysis of feminism through the story of Devorah, of politics through the story of Dinah, or of anthropology through the story of *Migdal Bavel* are operations that keep the words of the Torah constantly vivified. The Bible may set itself against the propositions set forth by the doctrines arising from these disciplines, or it may cultivate and further refine our under-

“When we read the Bible seriously we are putting trust in the author that the details he chose to include or exclude are significant in one way or another.”

standing of them, but either way it is well worth our efforts to look at the Torah in light of our knowledge of secular disciplines.

I would like to show one way in which a literary approach to Bible can be an especially enlightening approach by way of its application to the question of biblical authorship. The beginning of the Bible identifies no author. Tradition fills this silence with the assurance that authorship should be ascribed to God. Proponents of source criticism, on the other

hand, insist that the Bible is an amalgamation of legal and legendary folklore, and that it was composed by a redactor instead of a unique author.^{vii}

Source critics, such as the followers of the Documentary Hypothesis, might actually be supported by the lack of a named author, for it presents them with a ripe opportunity for claiming that the Bible has no unique author at all. However, source criticism frequently neglects to find significance in the present form of the text. Ignoring the present cohesiveness of the Bible seems imprudent. Leon Kass, a contemporary Bible scholar, writes in his introduction to *Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis*,

“Must one assume that the redactor was some pious fool who slavishly stitched together all the available disparate stories without rhyme or reason, heedless of the

“By putting the words of the Torah in the mouth of a third-person narrator, the Torah is insisting that we ask not, ‘What does God say?’ but rather the ubiquitous, ‘What does the *pasuk* say?’”

contradictions between them? Or should we rather not give the redactor the benefit of the doubt and assume he knew exactly what he was about?”^{viii}

Even if the style of the redactor is pastiche, his efforts still bear a work that should be viewed as a united whole.

Traditional readers usually write off the notion that we are meant to pay attention to the Bible’s lack of declared authorship; the omission of the author’s identity is a tacit assertion to its having been composed by God through some process beyond authorship, a quality that renders its completeness and authority unquestionable.^{ix} But even accepting God as the author of the Bible, as I am wont to do, the perspective presented therein is that of the third-person, indicating that we are not meant to perceive the text as a direct address from God.

Awareness that the Bible is not to be read as a direct address from its author leads us straight into the realm of literary theory. One key element of the literary treatment of texts is that it does not ask what the speaker or author meant, but what

the *text* means and how it is composed.^x Literary readers shift their attention from determining the author’s ostensible message and instead focus on the textual machineries at work within the text. The process of reading is thus reflected inwards; a reader is not asked to discern the authorial intention, but rather to report on the particular mechanics at work in his reading of the text, to tell an introspective story of his encounter with the text. By putting the words of the Torah in the mouth of a third-person narrator, the Torah is insisting that we ask not, “What does God say?” but rather the ubiquitous, “What does the *pasuk* say?”

The traditional approach frequently fails to dwell on the internal process of identifying the textual mechanisms that reveal meaning through the text, but instead focuses on alternate interpretations for those textual cues that are acknowledged in classical sources. I believe this conduct stems from the failing of the traditional approach to acknowledge the presence of the third-person narrator. Perceiving the Bible as an *address from God*, rather than a *book written by God*, encourages readers to see the Bible as a riddle or puzzle with a definite solution and discourages readers from devoting effort to the literary endeavor of introspective reading.

While the traditional attitude does cultivate a serious approach to the lessons of the Bible, it also fosters insensitivity to textual ambiguities and the alternate worldviews against which the Bible sets itself. Traditional

readers tend to favor readings that eschew any textual or moral awkwardness over interpretations that account

for these difficulties but suggest controversial theology or philosophy.

The literary approach overcomes the shortcomings of both aforementioned approaches. Readers adopting a literary approach will afford the Bible enough reverence to consider its message in full without attempting to demolish the structure of the text as source criticism does. At the same time, the external considerations of literary readers accentuate the significance of the Bible’s message with respect to competing ideologies and bring to life the many possible alternatives offered by ambiguities in the text.

Let us approach the issue of the concealment of the biblical author from a literary perspective. Although the biblical author is explicitly absent from the Bible’s immediate opening, evidence of the author’s involvement is manifest in the premeditated arrangement of the particular pieces of information that were chosen to be included in the text. Proceeding from the book of Genesis, we find that, while the author’s selection of the information in each verse may suffuse the work with his particular subjective position, outright mention of the author’s opinions are strikingly absent. Even in instances where the reader would benefit greatly from omniscient guidance, the author inserts no editorial comments. Subjective evaluations of words or deeds in the Bible are nearly always attributed to one of the personae being represented – often, God – but almost never to the narrator himself.

Genesis is full of glaring examples of this curious reticence of the narrator’s judgments: The ascension of Enoch is readily interpreted as either laudatory or disparaging; the daughters of Lot escape condemnation for seducing their father; the disagreement between Ya’akov and his sons regarding the retaliation in response to Dinah’s abduction is left with-

out an overt suggestion of whose response was correct; and, famously, the legendary struggle between Yosef and Yehudah unfolds without word from the narrator as to who may be right or wrong. Similarly, (with the odd exception of the *parashah* of *gid ha-nasheh*) none of the Genesis stories end with an explicit moral and the lessons are never spelled out. These instances exemplify the distinctly reticent style of the biblical narrator.

Reticence is a distinctive feature of the biblical text that complicates our efforts in considering the author's purpose in relating these stories. To what end would an author relate stories that are sparsely detailed and richly obfuscated? If the events were recorded for historicity's sake, their value seems to be compromised by their ambiguities, and if they were recorded in order to present a moral perspective, then their value seems compromised by the narrator's reluctance to explicate their significance. Nevertheless, we do not attack the Bible for being incomprehensible or obscure; instead, we increase the amount of attention we devote to its words, their relationships to one another, and their implications.

The stories in Genesis present lasting religious, moral, political, and familial issues. The responsibility of interpreting these stories, however, is left to the readers. In literary theory, the act of interpretation is a suspect undertaking. The meaning that is ascribed to a text by any reader's process of interpretation is necessarily informed by the knowledge and ideology brought to the text by the reader; meaning is not simply uncovered from within the text.^{ix} In order to be true to the text, its protean ambiguities should be retained, and to take ignore them and replace them with static interpretations exemplifies irresponsible readership.

When it comes to the Bible, however, it is not enough to simply identify the issues and ambiguities. The import of the problems set forth in the narrative of Genesis demands our attention and our best efforts at resolution. The responsibility to interpret the exegetical challenges posed by textual ambiguity engenders an obligation to, in the words of Leon Kass,

"grapple with the text and weigh alternative readings and judgments, always testing our opinions against the textual evidence as well as the differing interpretations and judgments of fellow readers of our own and earlier times."^x

The literary approach to Bible draws out our own personal interpretations and forces us to view them in a timeless arena of competing approaches to the text. Reading biblical narrative in this way forces us to reconsider our complacency with familiar solutions to textual problems and asks us to search for profound interpretations of which we were not previously aware. Readers who engage in this sort of dynamic literary approach learn to recognize the extraordinary timeless relevance and perpetual freshness of the biblical narrative.

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ⁱ The ideas I put forth in this article were made possible by the instruction I received in Dr. Adam Newton's course, "Interpreting Texts." Though I will not be citing any particular lectures, his course introduced me to the concepts of literary theory and its methodologies.

ⁱⁱ Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2000), p. 27.

ⁱⁱⁱ Culler, p. 14.

^{iv} The Gemara in *Hagigah* 13b, however, says that the Torah predated the universe by 974 generations. But even this midrashic statement must admit that there is a disparity in content between the objective course of history and the events portrayed in the Bible, whether or not there is a disparity in temporality. It is this translation from historical event to biblical account with which I am concerned.

^v Culler, p. 27.

^{vi} Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 14.

^{vii} See Rambam's Seventh Principle of Faith in his introduction to the tenth chapter of *Sanhedrin* in his Commentary to the Mishnah, where he asserts that, in fact, Moshe completely eliminated his imaginative abilities in order to receive the objective prophecy of the Torah from its author, God.

^{viii} Culler, p. 24.

^{ix} Ibid., p. 62.

^x Kass, p. 19.

The Pillar of Salt: Anti-War Protest Revisited

BY: Chesky Kopel

As the sun rose upon the earth, and Lot entered Tso'ar, the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah sulfurous fire from the Lord out of heaven. He annihilated those cities and the entire Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and the vegetation of the ground. Lot's wife looked back, and she thereupon turned into a pillar of salt.ⁱ

Much has been written regarding this pillar of salt. The story's uniquely fantastic character and distinctive imagery draws widespread attention to it. In the Oral Torah, for instance, there are more than a dozen references to the tragedy of Lot's wife, including not only discussions of its symbolism, but even some halakhic queries that result from it.ⁱⁱ Literature and popular culture as well, in many different times and contexts, have borrowed the motif of the "pillar of salt."ⁱⁱⁱ However, I do not intend here to undertake any sort of thorough analysis of its importance in either of these media. Rather, I want to consider a few select perspectives in order to appreciate the powerful imagery of this Biblical episode and the profound lessons that are to be learned from it.

This obscure incident raises a number of questions. Did God turn Lot's wife into a pillar of salt as a punishment?^{iv} If so, for what crime was she punished, and why did it merit such a severe sentence? Beyond all this remains the most glaring difficulty of all: Why salt? What is a pillar of salt meant to symbolize in the context of her offense and its consequences?

If Lot's wife did indeed commit a sin, it seems quite likely that it was related to her turning back to look upon the destruction of the cities in which she had made her home. The verses themselves indicate this, and, indeed, one of the angels of God had explicitly warned Lot and his wife: "Flee for your life! Do not look behind you, nor stop anywhere in the Plain; flee to the hills, lest you be swept away."^v

The angel had told them so. God was destroying the cities of the Plain in all His fury, and saving only Lot, his wife, and their daughters. For some reason, though, looking back toward the destruction would constitute a grave danger for them. Lot's wife failed to heed the warning, at the price of her life. The ambiguity of this warning of the angel seems to allow for two possible understandings of her implicit death sentence: God may have turned the wife of Lot into a pillar of salt to punish her for violating His decree not to look

back, or, perhaps, the angel did not bring any decree but simply cautioned in good faith against turning back, and her fate was some sort of an inevitable consequence of this error.^{vi}

The commentary of Rashi on these verses quotes the well-known terms of the Midrash, which explain this fate as a measure-for-measure punishment of earlier misdeeds committed by the wife of Lot.^{vii} In the commentary of Ramban on this matter, however, I encountered concepts that were much less familiar to me:

"Look Not Behind Thee, Neither Stay in All the Plain: [...] The punishment here was not because they would violate the warning of the angel by looking at them. Instead, the angel merely warned them on his own that punishment would overtake them for such a glance, and he warned Lot because of his merit, and all who listened took warning and saved their lives [...] Looking upon the atmosphere of a plague and all contagious diseases is very harmful, and they may cleave to him. Even the thought of them is harmful. Therefore, the leper is isolated and dwells alone. Similarly, those who have been bitten by mad animals such as a mad dog and other animals besides, when they look into water or any mirror, they behold in them the likeness of the offender, and as a result of this, they did just as the Rabbis have said in Tractate *Yoma*, and as the students of nature have mentioned. It was for this reason that Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt for the plague entered her mind when she saw the brimstone and salt^{viii} which descended upon them from heaven, and it cleaved to her."^{ix}

Ramban relates a danger inherent in looking upon, or even just thinking about, plagues and contagious diseases. In his terms, such reflection can give rise to the appearance of "the likeness of the offender" which is causing the plague or the disease. The likeness will then afflict its beholder, and cause the calamity to cleave to him. What might be most the most interesting idea gleaned from Ramban's words, though, is that he views this risk as a medical reality, and not as a conception that is at all metaphysical or religious by nature.

If it is to be assumed that Ramban's notion is based upon biological principles that are still accepted, it seems that these principles can only be related to the domain of psychology's effect on physical health.^x Ramban relates that one who witnesses suffering thereby experiences the likeness and presence of the

cause of that suffering. Such an experience will penetrate his psyche and make him more susceptible to affliction by that same cause.

With the introduction of this concept, Ramban's alternative approach to the understanding of the verse takes on a unique form. The wife of Lot did not necessarily commit any transgression at all. The angel issued a warning, relevant to all, that turning back towards the destruction of the Cities of the Plain would naturally bring dire and tragic consequences. Lot's wife made the unfortunate decision to ignore that warning.

The Torah's message in this episode now proves obscure and elusive. Indeed, Lot's wife perishes in a shocking manner, but only because of a natural, psychological endangerment into which she irresponsibly stumbled. By removing the notion of any flagrant offense on the part of Lot's wife, Ramban leaves in its stead a disillusioning and unclear reality.

I believe that one can begin to better appreciate the meaning of the mysterious interpretation of Ramban by carefully considering an important aspect of the story that he did not explicitly address. In fact, neither Rashi nor Ramban attempts to explain the motive behind Lot's wife's decision.

Why would she turn back at all, especially if she knew anything about the dangers such an action entailed? Of course, there are several possible reasons. She may have been

because the outcry against them before the Lord has become so great that the Lord has sent us to destroy it."^{xiv}

Lot's wife may have found it too difficult to accept the reality of God's decision and turned around to express just that. However, this resentful gaze, whether driven by sorrow or anger, demonstrated that she preferred that there be no destruction behind her, and such a preference had no means of fulfillment. The story in this light bears a harsh and serious message. The decision was final, and the cities of the Plain were to be annihilated. The wife of Lot was therefore stopped in her tracks by nature, by reality. She who had tried to move backwards and correct the past was now rendered lifeless as salt and stagnant as a pillar.

* * *

Slaughterhouse-Five by Kurt Vonnegut is an American literary classic. The work largely focuses upon the February 1945 firebombing of Dresden, Germany by the Allied Air Forces, and is replete with powerful imagery of moral protest. Dresden was a beautiful, non-militarized city, and the fierce Allied attack upon it was therefore quite controversial. Three days of heavy bombing and the resulting firestorm destroyed much of the city and its infrastructure, and killed tens of thousands of people.^{xv} Vonnegut survived the attack as an American

grew upon the ground.

"So it goes.

"Those were vile people in both those cities, as is well known. The world was better off without them.

"And Lot's wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she *did* look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human.

"So she was turned to a pillar of salt. So it goes.

"People aren't supposed to look back. I'm certainly not going to do it anymore.

"I've finished my war book now. The next one I write is going to be fun.

"This one is a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt."^{xvi}

In this passage, Vonnegut's piercing cynicism and terse black humor are as obvious as ever. He reads the Biblical story of Lot's wife and leads his readers down a path which no commentary that I have ever seen ventures. At first, Vonnegut establishes an implicit disapproval of the Bible's message, manifest in his assessment of God as the Great Destroyer of Sodom and Gomorrah. "Those were vile people in both those cities, as is well known. The world was better off without them." These terms are meant to sound perverse and troubling, because their conceptions are absolutely unacceptable by modern standards of morality and logic. When is there ever an entire region of only wicked people, who are all deserving of fiery, destructive death? Better yet, can fiery, destructive death ever serve a moral purpose?

What may be even more striking, however, is Vonnegut's fascination with the wife of Lot. "But she *did* look back" he relates, "and I love her for that, because it was so human." This description of the act of turning back as "so human" can mean several different things. He may have intended to appreciate that she was "only human," essentially imperfect and willing to permit her curiosity or disappointment to overcome her sense of what is ultimately right. Alternatively, he may have referred to the moral, caring human, unwilling to accept such destruction and suffering as just. Either way, the humanity displayed by the wife of Lot was rewarded with her instant demise, in the form of becoming a pillar of salt. So it goes.

He proceeds to indict her for what he perceived was the crime that merited this sentence: "People aren't supposed to look back." The wife of Lot did look back, and for this she was punished by God. After this, Vonnegut resolves upon himself to avoid her mistake. "I'm certainly not going to do it anymore. I've finished my war book now. The next one I write is going to be fun." Here again, his words are not meant to reflect his opinions. Vonnegut's concession to the will of God is sarcastic and resentful.

On this note, Vonnegut makes the wife of

Lot his heroine. She had turned back to that terrible destruction, and suffered the worst punishment for choosing to do so. In this sense the wife of Lot is his ultimate martyr, having perished in the struggle against the ideals of the Bible and its destructive God. These ideals were manifested as follows: Not only had God incinerated all of those people, but he even stifled Lot's wife in her attempt to protest their deaths. At this point Vonnegut decides that he, too, as the author of this book, is a pillar of salt. He was driven to look back by the very same motivations that inspired the wife of Lot to look back. Both individuals resorted to doing so as their answer to the dreadful, unchangeable past.

Within Vonnegut's audacious mission statement are two separate conclusions. One concerns the morality of God's downpour of wrath upon the cities, and the other concerns the right of an individual to oppose that wrath. The first is incidental, not integral to Vonnegut's message but essential in framing its relevance to the Biblical proof text. The actions of Lot's wife can only be seen as a protest against God if she finds something that He has done unacceptable. She, the great heroine, only bears such a protest if the author interpreting her feels the same way. The second conclusion is that there is honor in the resolve to protest such injustice, and that He who punishes this resolve commits a great crime against the spirit of humanity. It is in this second conclusion that Vonnegut defines his cause.

Vonnegut begrudgingly concludes that his "famous Dresden book"^{xvii} is doomed to failure. He concedes that "people aren't supposed to look back. I'm certainly not going to do it anymore." However, he means exactly the opposite. The very writing and publication of this book, in all its self-admitted folly, is a poignant statement of his mission to fight on against this terrible evil in which mankind is so deeply entrenched. It demonstrates his will to be Lot's wife and not Lot, a pillar of salt and not a man of harsh reality.

This powerful statement is made even more cogent by the context of Vonnegut's crusade. In the collective mind of Western society, World War II embodied the clearest moral necessity. The Allied Forces united in the cause of freedom to oppose tyranny, fascism, and genocide. Yet, even this great and righteous cause produced consequences that were not true to its essential message. Vonnegut saw the Allied firebombing of Dresden as the crime that would go unnoticed, the one that had to compete against Nazism and the Holocaust for a proper place in the moral conscience.^{xviii} It is in this very case that such a protest of values finds its most genuine and pronounced voice.

Is this book really "a failure" then? Perhaps Vonnegut was content with readers believing this. What remains unclear, though, is what exactly he himself believed. The publication of this book could have been his rejection of the perceived inevitability of warfare and his contribution to the determined effort

"Lot's wife may have found it too difficult to accept the reality of God's decision and turned around to express just that."

curious, and this human curiosity created a powerful, irresistible urge to behold the awesome events transpiring behind her. She may have gazed back in sadness and mourning, thinking about her friends (and even her own children, according to one midrashic view^{xi}) who were perishing in the great fire and brimstone. In a most extreme formulation, she turned around to protest, clinging to the image of a divine measure she felt was unfair and unwarranted. However, these are all just postulations.

In the framework of these suggestions, however, Ramban's "natural phenomenon" interpretation is given a more existential meaning. Lot's wife did not sin, but perished when forces of God's nature stood in the way of her objectives. In her decision to turn back towards the cities of the Plain, she may have allowed her emotions to guide her to dangerously rebellious intentions. God had willed the destruction of the residents of these cities, and sealed their fate. There was nothing that the wife of Lot, or anybody else, could do to stop or deter that action. Nearly every one of these residents was evil and corrupt^{xii} and their death was just and of ultimate Divine prerogative. The angel had made this point to both Lot and his wife as he rescued them from their home:

"For we^{xiii} are about to destroy this place,

prisoner of war, detained in Dresden for contract labor.

In the first chapter of the book, Vonnegut outlines the important considerations and emotions that went into his writing a work about this terrible time in his life. This chapter, like many of his writings, is composed in a somewhat informal tone, entirely in the first person. Towards the end of the chapter, just before Vonnegut begins the fictional segment of his story about the events in Dresden, he relates a curious personal incident. The setting is a motel room in Boston on a foggy night. He had been accommodated there by Lufthansa, since his flight to Frankfurt was postponed due to weather-related complications. His plan was to travel back to Dresden with a friend who had survived the attack together with him, in order to conduct research for the book he was planning to write. He spent some time that night reading, and this was one of his experiences:

"I looked through the Gideon Bible in my motel room for tales of great destruction. *The sun was risen upon the earth when Lot entered into Zo-ar*, I read. *Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of Heaven; and He overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and all that which*

to end it. More likely, though, Vonnegut agreed that his book was a practical failure, but practical considerations were never his point. To be human is to oppose the terror of killing.

Most likely of all, he had no idea what to believe.

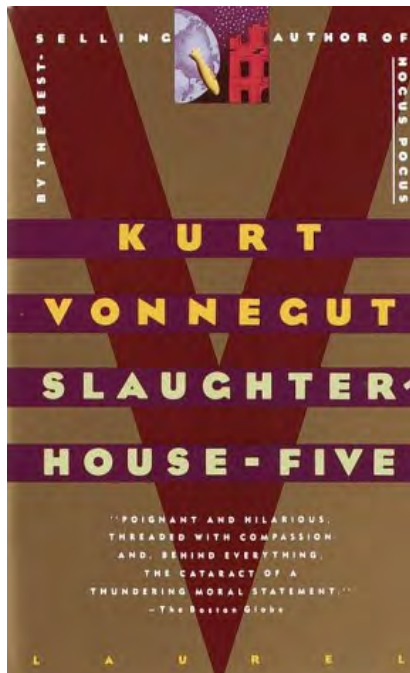
* * *

Vonnegut's approach to the story of the wife of Lot differs from those of Rashi and Ramban in a very obvious way. The great Torah scholars chose to look for the episode's moral and truthful message, out of reverence for the text and its ancient, sacred tradition. Vonnegut, however, chose to assume the interpretation most offensive to his sensibilities, and to construct his own moral message in contrast to it.

In this sense, the readings of Rashi and Vonnegut are not in direct conflict with each other. They come from entirely different perspectives and bear little relevance to one another. Some level of conflict does arguably arise, though, between the readings of Ramban and Vonnegut. Both see the act of turning back toward the destruction as centrally significant to the story, and as the primary cause of the fate of the wife of Lot. Both see turning back as a decision that was deemed inappropriate for its attempt to overcome the reality and the will of God. Ramban, having accepted this will of God as fair and just, framed this episode as a telling example of a painful but necessary consequence. Vonnegut, however, did not applaud the destruction of the cities of the Plain. He resentfully linked this bombardment with the worst examples of unjustified, human-afflicted tragedy. As such, he portrayed the wife of Lot

commentators I have referenced, I do not accept Vonnegut's attempt to read the Torah as a repression of these sentiments.

Still, Vonnegut's words demonstrate literary genius, and by drawing his stark protest in the face of the Bible, he captured the attention of readers in the most remarkable way. This style of his is not exclusive to one example. In a later chapter of the same work, one of Vonnegut's characters, a science fiction writer named Kilgore Trout, swiftly rejects the moral relevance of the entire New Testament,



and proposes a new Gospel to replace it.^{xix} Vonnegut saw the Bible as an old, archaic product of society, and not as the treatise of a Divine moral imperative.

Still, as I have said, the theme of *Slaughterhouse-Five* warrants emphasis. It may be tempting to ask about the relevance of anti-war protest to Halakhah and Jewish philosophy, but a better question is this: What is the relevance of anti-war protest to anything? Vonnegut answered this question powerfully by taking a stand in the face of reality, and I believe that

in doing so he answered the first question as well. War has achieved a central and inevitable role in every society as well as in Halakhah, but it is of utmost importance that neither forum sees it as ultimately essential. The Jewish prophets declared time and again the exalted vision of the great peace that is to prevail in the era of the redemption. For example, these are the words of God as prophesied by Isaiah:

"Thus He will judge among the nations and arbitrate for the many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks: Nation shall not take up sword

we are saying is give peace a chance,"^{xxi} declaring hope for peace and resolve to create it by stubbornly opposing society's adherence to a militaristic mindset. Indeed, all we are saying is "give peace a chance."

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ⁱ Genesis 19:23-26. All Bible excerpts are translated by the Jewish Publication Society (Philadelphia, PA: 1999).

ⁱⁱ See, e.g., *Berakhot* 54b and *Niddah* 70b.

ⁱⁱⁱ See, for example, Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), p. 16; Herman Melville, "Bartleby," in *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 69; Coldplay (Berryman, Buckland, Champion, Martin), "Viva la Vida" (Parlophone, 2008).

^{iv} These questions assume that the phrase "and she thereupon turned into a pillar of salt" refers to the wife of Lot herself. However, this is actually a matter of dispute. The commentary of *Hizkuni* on this verse suggests that the phrase refers to the land, which turned into a pillar of salt upon suffering God's "rain." Some understood the commentary of Ibn Ezra to these verses as drawing a similar conclusion. See for example Rabbeinu Bahya to Genesis 19:26. Still, most commentaries understand the phrase as referring to the wife of Lot, and I shall focus on this approach.

^v Genesis 19:17.

^{vi} The term "inevitable consequence" is not meant to imply the exclusion of the will of God in its occurrence. Indeed, there are those who posit in a religious framework that all punishment is, in some sense, human sin's inevitable effect on the sinner. The primary distinction that I intend to construct between the two understandings is in regard to whether or not Lot's wife violated the divine will.

^{vii} See Rashi to Genesis 19:17,26.

^{viii} Salt is never actually mentioned in this chapter as a destroying agent of the cities of the Plain (rather, verse 24 mentions "brim-

Given this detail, the act of turning around appears even more poignant and emotional.

^{xii} See Genesis 18:22-33. Abraham begged God to show mercy on the cities for the sake of the few righteous individuals within them, and in doing so found out that there were not even ten.

^{xiii} There are two angels addressing Lot at this point. It seems from verse 17 that only one of them later warned Lot not to turn back.

^{xiv} Genesis 19:13.

^{xv} "Dresden," *The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008).

^{xvi} Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1969), pp. 27-28. Vonnegut explains that when creatures from the planet Tralfamadore hear about or witness a death, they shrug and say "So it goes." Vonnegut appears to accept this practice upon himself as well for the duration of the book.

^{xvii} Ibid., p. 4.

^{xviii} See, for example, *ibid.*, p. 10. Here, Vonnegut is apparently reprimanded for embarking on this cause by a member of "the Committee on Social Thought." "And he told me about the concentration camps, and about how the Germans had made soap and candles out of the fat of dead Jews and so on. All I could say was 'I know, I know. I know.'"

^{xix} Ibid., pp. 108-110. In Trout's *The Gospel from Outer Space*, an extra-terrestrial visitor studies Christianity to learn why it has caused many of its followers to be so cruel. He concludes that God erred by revealing that Jesus was His son so early on in the savior's life. In the alien's new, alternative Gospel, Jesus is a "bum" and "not well connected." Later, when people lynch him, they are shocked to find out that they have harassed and killed the son of God himself. God then declared: "From this moment on, He will punish horribly anybody who torments a bum who has no connections!"

^{xx} Isaiah 2:4.

^{xxi} John Lennon (and Plastic Ono Band), "Give Peace a Chance" (Montreal, Quebec: Apple, 1969).

"Vonnegut [...] linked [the destruction of the cities of the Plain] with the worst examples of unjustified, human-afflicted tragedy. As such, he portrayed the wife of Lot as his martyr, and, in his most poignant statement, assumed her mission as his own."

as his martyr, and, in his most poignant statement, assumed her mission as his own.

I believe that the sentiments and the emotions displayed by Kurt Vonnegut in the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five* are highly appropriate and crucially important. There is a certain relevance and necessity for people to constantly protest the notion of war, the most evil of human creations, despite the fact that war may often be unavoidable and essential. Nonetheless, as a Torah-observant Jew, committed to the very same tradition as the great

against nation; they shall never again know war."^{xx}

The peaceful era represented in this verse may seem unachievable by any culture's standards, but only the hope for its coming facilitates the deepest moral commitment. It is through this commitment alone that the dream of peace can ever come true. As such, representatives of some of the greatest anti-war movements have not required rational or political basis for their demands to end any given war. They are content to sing refrains like, "all

stone and fire"), but does appear in Deuteronomy 29:22, in the recollection of this destruction.

^{ix} Ramban to Genesis 19:17, s.v. "*Al tabbit aharekha ve-al ta'amod be-kol ha-kikkar.*" Translated by Rabbi Dr. Charles B. Chavel (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1971).

^x This, too, is a complex topic, and its details are beyond the scope of this essay.

^{xi} *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 25 indicates that Lot and his wife (who is there given the name Idit) had left behind married daughters in Sodom.

General Jewish Thought

Rav Soloveitchik's "A Yid iz Geglichn tzu a Seyfer Toyre"

BY: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

Translator's Note: The following is a translation from the Yiddish of the fifth section of R. Soloveitchik's yortzayt shi'ur entitled "A Yid iz Geglichn tzu a Seyfer Toyre" – "A Jew is Compared to a Torah Scroll." (Previous sections appeared in prior issues of this paper.) Dr. Hillel Zeidman transcribed and published the shi'ur, with an introduction, in R. Elchanan Asher Adler (ed.), Beit Yosef Shaul, vol. 4 (New York: Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, 1994), pp. 17-67. A Hebrew translation by R. Shalom Carmy appeared in the same volume (pp. 68-103).

The present translation – the first rendition of this shi'ur into English – was prepared by Shaul Seidler-Feller, utilizing Dr. Zeidman's original Yiddish transcription and R. Carmy's helpful Hebrew equivalent. Thanks go to R. Elchanan Adler and R. Jacob J. Schacter for their assistance in refining and editing this work.

Section V

Soul and Spirit

We must now focus on the second question which we formulated earlier.¹ First, **of what does the "internal" Torah scroll consist? Which aspect of the human personality must one purify and sanctify through *ibbud li-shemah* (processing the material for the sake of the mitsvah)?** Second, how does the processing express itself? What does the Creator of the Universe demand of us with respect to **the development of our own personalities?**

Let us analyze the first part of this question, namely what it is that Judaism considers the "parchment" of the Jewish personality.

According to medieval philosophers, the human personality consists of soul (*nefesh*) and spirit (*ruah*). In *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 4:8, Rambam writes:

"The *nefesh* of all flesh expresses itself in the form that God gave it. The unique understanding which was implanted into human nature represents the form (the substance or spiritual personality) of a person who has reached completeness (*shelemut*) through his intellect. Regarding this form, the Torah says, 'Let Us make man in Our form, as Our likeness, etc.'ⁱⁱ [...] This [specific *nefesh*-personality] is not the natural *nefesh* which can be found in every living creature and which enables a person to eat, drink, reproduce, sense, and think. Rather, it manifests itself in intellect, through which the potential personality transforms into an actuality (*tsurat ha-nefesh*). Regarding this actualized personality did the verse write, 'In Our form,

as Our likeness.' Many times, this form (the full realization of all the intellectual capacities of man) is called, 'soul and spirit.'"

The *nefesh* represents the sum total of all physiological-psychological abilities – all the wants and needs of a person as a natural creature, as a "living soul." The hunger drive, the sexual drive, all five of the senses, the [drive to] chase after corporeal beauty and pleasure – the entire instinctual world of a human being – can be attributed to the "living soul," which is manifest in sensation and primitive feelings. [In other words,] the driving force of the "living soul" is the quest for gratification.

Rambam characterizes the *ruah*, in contrast to the *nefesh* alone, as the "unique understanding which was implanted into human nature," etc. The *ruah* represents knowledge, the human intellect, the ability to understand, the human drive for information and exploration, [and] the human talent to formulate ideas and principles, draw conclusions, classify the world, and fathom its laws: "a form which understands and grasps concepts."ⁱⁱⁱ The motto of the *ruah* is the search for truth.

It is self-understood that the "internal" Torah scroll is composed of these two basic aspects of the human personality, the *nefesh* and *ruah*: the "parchment" is the natural *nefesh*; the "writing" consists of the ideas and truths that the *ruah* supplies. Hence, when we require "processing of the parchment" with regard to the "internal" Torah scroll, we mean [to refer to] **the development of Natural Man and his conditioning to absorb the "letters" of the *ruah*.**

The feeling soul (*nefesh ha-margishah*), before it undergoes processing, is compared to the [raw] pelt of a kosher animal. Only after the processing is the *nefesh ha-margishah* transformed into parchment.

With that, we must establish one more important idea. Just as the Halakhah differentiates between the two surfaces of "external" [animal] hide, the hair side (*tsad ha-se'ar*) and the flesh side (*tsad ha-basar*), which, in processed form, are called "*kelaf*" and "*dukhsustos*," [respectively],^{iv} so does it see in the "internal" [human] skin both surfaces, the *tsad ha-se'ar* and the *tsad ha-basar*. When the human personality is developed, the *tsad ha-se'ar* is transformed into "internal" *kelaf* and the *tsad ha-basar* into "internal" *dukhsustos*.

[In this context,] we should not lose sight of the halakhot with regard to "external" Torah scrolls, *tefillin*, and *mezuzot*: *tefillin* are written on *kelaf*, a *mezuzah* on *dukhsustos*, and a Torah scroll on *gevil*, which combines the two, *kelaf* and *dukhsustos*, *tsad ha-basar* and *tsad ha-se'ar*.^v Rambam in *Hilkhot Tefillin* 1:8 quotes the discussions in *Shabbat* (79b) and *Menahot*

(32a) and writes: "It is a halakhah given to Moshe at Sinai that one write a Torah scroll on *gevil* in the area [from which] hair [grows]..."

The Men of Flesh and the Wicked of the World

The purpose of *mezuzot* and *tefillin* consists of remedying two different types of sins. The *mezuzah* comes to repair those sins that are rooted in the *tsad ha-basar* of the human personality; therefore, one writes a *mezuzah* on *dukhsustos* (the upper side of the skin), which symbolizes the flesh of a human being. The mitsvah of *tefillin*, [on the other hand,] was given as a remedy for those sins which are bound to the *tsad ha-se'ar* in people; therefore, Halakhah requires that they be written on *kelaf* (on the lower side of the skin), which represents the human being as a Hirsute Man (*Ish Sa'ir*).

A human being, as a Man of Flesh (*Ben Basar*) and *Ish Sa'ir*, is a sinner with whom the Torah constantly busied itself and whom it desired to purify and raise to a higher level of spiritual existence. On Rosh ha-Shanah, we pray in "*Malkhuyot*" (the Coronation passage) for the mending of human beings, both with respect to the *tsad ha-basar* and with respect to the *tsad ha-se'ar*. We beg of the Master of the Universe: "Let all the *Benei Basar* call out in Your Name, to cause all the Wicked of the World (*Rish'ei Arets*) to turn to You"^{vi} – the human being, as [both] a *Ben Basar* and as a *Resha Arets* (i.e. an *Ish Sa'ir*), should return to the Creator of the World.

The return of the *Benei Basar* and the *Rish'ei Arets* to the Master of the Universe can only come about when a person correctly grasps the idea of the *mezuzah* and *tefillin*.

Let us understand, fundamentally, how the sins of the *Benei Basar* express themselves and what the transgressions of the *Rish'ei Arets* are.

"Let all the *Benei Basar* call out in Your Name" – may the human personality which is bound to the corporeal be fixed. The *nefesh ha-margishah*, "which enables a person to eat, drink, reproduce, sense, and think," must be processed. It cannot remain raw material, a primitive hide. The skin on the *tsad ha-basar* does not want to absorb the letters of the Torah, since it is saturated with the moisture of flesh, [i.e.,] with raw instincts, with the passions of boiling hot blood, with the cravings of the naked, unabashed body. It [the skin on the *tsad ha-basar*] is full of sensuality, with the impurities of guzzling and gorging, drunkenness and corporeal licentiousness. If one would wish to attempt to write the letters of the Torah on such primitive skin, the filth would wipe away the ink. The first task, [then,] of processing the hide on the *tsad ha-basar*, i.e., [of processing] the *nefesh ha-margishah*, is the purification of the *nefesh* from the drive towards pleasure.

The Senses in the Service of Hashem, *Yit-barakh* (May He Be Blessed)

Judaism does not seek to destroy the *nefesh ha-margishah*. To the contrary – it conceives of [the *nefesh*] as the most important part of the human personality. The Halakhah very much values all five senses with their [attendant] feelings. If a person does not possess the sense of sight, for example, and cannot see the colorfulness, brightness, and magnificence of the world of the Holy One May He Be Blessed, or if he is a deaf-mute and is incapable of perceiving the sounds of the Act of Creation, he is not only physically blemished, but spiritually so. It is not for naught that Hazal ruled that a deaf-mute who cannot hear and cannot speak has the same status as a mentally incompetent person (*shoteh*) and a minor [in that he] is not obligated [to observe the mitsvot]. Also with respect to a blind person, R. Yehudah believes that he is exempted from all the mitsvot in the Torah.^{vii}

The *nefesh ha-margishah* brings a person into contact with the world. Through it, he senses the full impact of existence, the beauty and charm of Creation. Despite that, Judaism desires to purify the *nefesh ha-margishah* and to subject it to a procedure of processing in order to prepare the *tsad ha-basar* so that it should be able to absorb the letters of the passages of the *mezuzah*.

How, exactly, does one process this *nefesh ha-margishah*? The purpose of this procedure is to repair the sin of the Generation of the Flood. What was the nature of the Generation of the Flood's sin?

The Torah describes the sin in six words: "*Va-Yikhu la-hem nashim, mi-kol asher ba-haru*" (They took wives for themselves, whomsoever they chose).^{viii} When the *nefesh ha-margishah* sins, it acts as a spark (*nitsots*) of the Generation of the Flood, [which was characterized by] utter licentiousness and rejection of discipline with respect to the desires of the flesh. The sin is manifest in [the adoption] of the search for pleasure [as] a guiding principle, in the belief that nothing should stand in the way of a man who chases after gratification.

Therefore, the mending can [only] be accomplished through limitation, restraint, and modesty, which is a fundamental value of Judaism.

What is modesty? Modesty means "self-binding" – in [the sense of] "Avraham bound," not just "Yitshak his son," but also himself; modesty consists of laying the *nefesh ha-margishah* on the "altar, on top of the wood."^{ix} What do all the laws of prohibited foods and forbidden relationships demand if not the wondrous act of "binding?" When a Jew refuses a certain pleasure or indulgence which teases and pulls at him, he fulfills the "Passage of the Binding" in its fullest radiance.

Chabad: Some Perspectives on Hashra'at ha-Shekhinah

BY: Aviva Farkas

The *mezuzah* represents the symbol of the processing of the *nefesh ha-margishah* on the *tsad ha-basar*. It protects a Jew's house, his dining room, his bedroom, his private and intimate life, the silent phases of his existence. The quieter and more intimate the act, the greater the challenge of "whomsoever they chose" and the holier the "binding."

What is written in the *mezuzah*? "[You shall love Hashem, your God,] with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might."ⁱ Process your heart, so that even when it beats quickly and pulls [you] towards something obscene, you are able to control it. Process your blood, so that even when it boils, you are able to command it to calm down. Process your flesh, so that it not wash away the beautiful letters which are written on it. For this reason, a *mezuzah* is written on *dukhsustos*, which symbolizes man as one of the *Benei Basar*. Through the *mezuzah*, the *Benei Basar* will, in the end, return to the Master of the Universe.

The greater the seductive force of the "daughters of man, that they were good,"^{xi} is; the more powerful the drive of the *nefesh ha-margishah* towards the *tsad ha-basar*; the more a man yearns to act according to the principle "whomsoever they chose" – the more important are the processing of the hide and *hinnukh*, the more purely the *nefesh* leaves its internal struggle. The true "binding" of the *nefesh ha-margishah* is realized when one lays upon the altar the dearest, most beloved, and most enticing [desires], in the manner of "[Take] your son, your only one, whom you loved, Yitshak."^{xii}

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993), z"l, was Rosh HaYeshiva at YU/RIETS, was active in the Boston Jewish community, and is widely recognized as one of the leading Jewish thinkers of the 20th century.

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ⁱ See *Kol Hamevaser* 3,3 (December 2009): 27-28, at p. 28: "Of what, exactly, is the parchment of the 'internal' Torah scroll composed? And how does one process such a piece of parchment so that he should be able to write the letters of the Torah on it?"

ⁱⁱ *Be-Reshit* 1:26.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 4:8.

^{iv} *Shabbat* 79b; *Menahot* 32a. [See *Beit Yosefto Yoreh De'ah* 271:3 for a discussion of which side of the skin corresponds to which term.]

^v Torah scrolls: *Shulhan Arukh*, *Yoreh De'ah* 271:3; *tefillin*: *ibid.*, *Orah Hayyim* 32:7; *mezuza*: *ibid.*, *Yoreh De'ah* 288:6.

^{vi} This line comes from the *Aleinu* prayer recited all year round.

^{vii} *Bava Kamma* 87a.

^{viii} *Be-Reshit* 6:2.

^{ix} *Ibid.* 22:9.

^x *Devarim* 6:5.

^{xi} *Be-Reshit* 6:2.

^{xii} *Ibid.* 22:2.

This is a response to Estee Goldschmidt's article from the February issue of *Kol Hamevaser*, the title of which is "Chabad: Issues that Have Not Been Discussed on Campus." Her argument is that messianist Chabad *shelihim* "represent [other Jews] unfaithfully" and that "our community should be aroused to further study these ideas [those explored by Dr. Berger in his book, which show that Chabad Messianism is problematic]," presumably for the sake of being inspired to counteract Chabad influence, "which is growing at an alarmingly quick pace." Many arguments against Chabad were briefly referred to in her article. I think it is important to sort them out and categorize them.

Ms. Goldschmidt presents four main arguments; first, that elements of Chabad philosophy constitute *avodah zarah*. Second, that the majority of Lubavitchers believe that the Rebbe will (or at least is likely to) be the Mashiah when he comes back to life with the rest of *Kelal Yisrael* in *Aharit ha-Yamim*. Third, that believing that the deceased Rebbe is the Mashiah is wrong. Fourth, that the belief that the deceased Rebbe is Mashiah is heretical and/or should be treated as if it were heretical.

The idea that Chabad thought involves *avodah zarah* is the oldest of these polemics, and was first vocalized while the Rebbe was still alive. In more recent years, many have denounced certain ideas that have been developed and expressed by Lubavitchers since the Rebbe passed away, claiming that these ideas constitute *avodah zarah*. It is important not to conflate these two attacks. The first, as we shall see, is directed against the Rebbe himself and every one of his Hasidim. The second is directed only against a minority of the Lubavitcher community. I will deal with the first *avodah zarah* attack first, and the second *avodah zarah* attack last.

Unlike the other arguments, the first *avodah zarah* attack has nothing to do with the question of whether or not the Rebbe is Mashiah. In the 1980s, as a response to a *sihah* given by the Rebbe in which he stated that a rebbe is the "Essence and Being [of God] placed into a body," Rav Elazar Menachem Shach (the late Rosh Yeshiva of Ponevezh) declared that Chabad is *avodah zarah* and prohibited his followers from eating Chabad *shehitah*.ⁱ

There are several things that are important to keep in mind when confronted with this fact. First, according to the foundational Chabad philosophy book *Tanya*, the soul of every Jew is "literally a portion of God above." Not being an initiate, I would not brazenly claim to fully understand the theosophical ideas presented by either the *Ba'al ha-Tanya* or by the seventh Rebbe, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, his great-grandson. However, I would like to suggest that once the idea that every Jew literally

contains a piece of God is accepted, the idea that a rebbe contains God's "essence" immediately seems much less strange. The Rebbe is probably drawing upon the teachings of the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rav Shalom Dov Ber Schneerson, who made an almost identical statement regarding the soul of the *Ba'al ha-Tanya*.ⁱⁱ

Nor are statements similar to the Rebbe's particular to Chabad authorities, or even to controversial figures. In *Be-Reshit* 17:22, Rashi asserts, based upon the *Midrash Rabbah*, that *tsaddikim* are "*merkavto shel Makom*," literally, "the chariot(s) of God." Ramban there associates Rashi's comment with a kabbalistic idea (as usual, he does not make it clear what that idea is). In *Parashat Terumah*, while discussing the hidden symbolism of the *Mishkan*, Malbim, after quoting this *ma'amar Hazal*, observes that the *Avot* were called *merkavot la-Shekhinah* (chariots of the Divine Presence):

"Because all of their actions were controlled by the desires of the Godly souls within them...until the complete [essence of God] was pulled to follow the part [of God – that is, the soul]...therefore, they were the chariot, since they lowered the

the claim that most Lubavitchers believe that the Rebbe is or could be the Mashiah. I concede that, not only according to blogs, but also according to professional journalism on the subject, the overwhelming majority of Lubavitchers at least believe that it is possible that he is the Mashiah.^{iv} Nor do I dispute the claim that it is categorically wrong to believe that the Rebbe could be Mashiah despite the fact that he is deceased.

As far as the fourth argument is concerned, there are three possible approaches that a Jew who considers the belief that the Rebbe is or could be Mashiah to be untenable could take when relating to Lubavitchers who hold this belief. The first possible approach is to claim that the belief is heretical, and that therefore those who hold it should be treated like heretics. It is difficult to find a statement by any *posek* or Rosh Yeshiva taking this approach. Apparently, it is totally hypothetical.^v As far as I know, just about the only person who really considered Chabad thought to be heretical (barring those who make the new *avodah zarah* attacks, whose opinions will be addressed later), was, as we have seen, Rav Shach. However, as we have also seen, his opposition to Chabad

"If the Rebbe's statement had been commonly perceived by gedolim as idolatrous, more of them would have made their assessments known."

Divine Presence into this world. However, lofty individuals are few...despite the fact that every Jewish soul is an illuminating light...and literally a piece of God above, [most Jewish souls are] after all, mere sparks of God's great spirit...this is why our Sages say that the Divine Presence does not rest on less than 22,000 Jews since...[otherwise] they would not be sufficient to house the Divine Presence... Since our master, Moshe, was equivalent to 600,000 Jews, and in his soul all [of the types of] Divine lights were encompassed...he [even alone, like the Avot] was a dwelling place for the Divine Presence."ⁱⁱⁱ

As far as I am aware, nobody has ever accused the Malbim of being an adherent of *avodah zarah*.

Rav Shach is the only person who reacted to the Rebbe's statement by forbidding consumption of Chabad *shehitah*. We also know that the Rebbe had a strong friendship with Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik that dated back to their time together in Berlin, and that throughout his lifetime the Rebbe had positive relationships with various other *gedolim*, including the Gerer Rebbe and Rav Moshe Feinstein. They all recognized his greatness. If the Rebbe's statement had been commonly perceived by *gedolim* as idolatrous, more of them would have made their assessments known.

The claim that is most simply addressed is

was prompted by non-Messianic considerations.^{vi}

A second approach would be to say that the belief that the Rebbe is the Mashiah is not heretical, and that it is therefore permissible to pray with Lubavitchers who hold this belief and to eat their *shehitah*. This is the approach of most *posekim*, including many who are vehemently opposed to the idea that the Rebbe could be the Mashiah.

The third approach is the most interesting. It is to claim that although the belief that the Rebbe is Mashiah may not actually be heresy, those who espouse this belief should be treated as if they were heretics, since they are undermining the historical "basic contours of the faith." This is the approach of Dr. David Berger in his book, *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference*.^{vii} Dr. Berger's book has been extremely influential in Modern Orthodox circles around the globe.^{viii}

In a 1996 statement, Rav Ahron Soloveitchik explained his decision to sign his name to a newspaper ad which insisted that it is wrong to attack messianist Lubavitchers, despite the fact that he believed that the deceased Rebbe could not be the Mashiah. The explanation was that "Jewish unity and communal comity are poorly served by our attacking each other in public."^{ix} It could be puzzling that fewer prominent individuals who, while disagreeing with the messianists, believe that they should not be treated as *appikoresim*, have publicized

their opinions, and instead wait for their followers to ask *she'elot*. This phenomenon can partially be accounted for by the fact the Rav Soloveichik published his opinion in the mid-'90s, shortly after the Rebbe's passing, and that, since then, there have been developments within the Chabad Movement which have caused people to have reservations about publicly supporting it. Over the course of the past decade or so, many have expressed alarm regarding the "E-lohists," or Lubavitchers who state that the Rebbe is some kind of a member of the Godhead, pray to the Rebbe, or ascribe godlike powers to him. It is probably safe to assume that it is alarm about these phenomena that has restrained many *gedolim* from publicly defending Chabad messianists from persecution.

Unfortunately, it is true that there are a few unstable Hasidim who, after the Rebbe's death, started proclaiming that he was or is literally divine. Although all concern about this matter is legitimate, the question of whether all members of a group should be treated as if they have crossed the line, just because a couple of them have, is a serious one. Rav Aharon Feldman (Rosh Yeshivah of Ner Yisrael) has ruled that, since only a tiny minority of the Lubavitcher community has crossed this line, the principle of going after the majority should be employed, and that therefore Lubavitchers have not lost their *hezkat kashrut* (an *a priori* presumption of halakhic validity). Since they have not lost their *hezkat kashrut*, says Rabbi Feldman, it is permissible to eat meat that has been slaughtered by a Lubavitcher and to count a Lubavitcher in a *minyan* without inquiring into the opinions of the individual in question.^x

Others have argued that while explicit belief in the Rebbe as a god may be rare in Chabad communities, it is common in those communities to attribute godlike powers – like omniscience – to him. Therefore, these people claim, since there is a real concern that any given Lubavitcher may believe that the Rebbe is a kind of god, it is best to avoid eating Chabad *shehitah* and praying with Chabad *minyanim* unless one knows that the *shohet* or *minyan* members in question do not hold these objectionable beliefs. In other words, because of the prevalence of these beliefs in the Chabad community, all Lubavitchers have lost their *hezkat kashrut*. It would be interesting and very valuable to know whether Rav Feldman considers the proponents of this approach to be arguing with him only about the *metsei'ut* – about how many Lubavitchers actually hold such beliefs – or about the Halakhah – about whether attributing omnipotence or omniscience to a being other than God is considered to be *avodah zarah*.^{xi}

I do not know whether or not the claim that many Lubavitchers attribute godlike powers to the Rebbe is true. I just have a question. If someone told you that he believed that the angel Gabriel knows about everything that happens in this world, would you immediately refuse to count him in a *minyan*? If he says that God has quality "x," and that person "y" also has quality "x," does it necessarily follow that

he thinks that person "y" is a god? The answer to the second question is obviously "no," since we consider God to have attributes like "mercy." When I say that a person is merciful, I am obviously not claiming that he is a god. What is required, then, is to look at the sources to see if there is a difference between attributing a quality like "mercy" to a person and attributing a quality like omniscience to a person. What I have found is that in the early days of Hasidut, the followers of the Ba'al Shem Tov credited him with omniscience.^{xii} What is required now is a methodical search through the sources to see whether the fact that some Lubavitchers (or other Jews) sometimes attribute other qualities that we normally think of as divine qualities – like omnipotence – to the Rebbe (or angels) is necessarily problematic. In any case, it is difficult to imagine that there is a significant number of Lubavitchers who credit the Rebbe with omniscience.

The most upsetting line in the whole article is "Many Jews also overlook the differences between the Chabad communities and their own community due to a preference for tolerance, as well as the conveniences Chabad provides." I submit that we "overlook differences" for another reason. Hillel says that the mitzvah of "Ve-Ahavta le-re'akhah ka-mokha" (Love your friend as yourself)^{xiii} is the essence of the Torah, and that all of the rest is merely commentary.^{xiv} While discussing the importance of

"What is important is that they should feel constant pain about the division of Kelal Yisrael for which they are advocating [...] It seems to me that the safest path is to follow the directions of the posekim who recommend being mahmir on ahavat Yisrael."

this mitzvah, the Ba'al ha-Tanya observes that the meaning of "*barekheni Avinu kullanu ke-ehad*"^{xv} is that *berakhah* and holiness can only rest on *Kelal Yisrael* when we are united to a degree that will cause us to become, in a sense, one entity. When we are disunited, we are like a broken vessel that lets good things seep out through the cracks.^{xvi} The reason that a disunited Jewish nation is like a broken vessel is that, as has been mentioned earlier, all Jewish souls emanate from the same divine source, and therefore should naturally cleave together. When there is external discordant behavior that does not match the essential internal concord of souls, a tension is created that breaks the material of our people. "Tolerance" is a sad, weak little word. "Love" is a better one.

When people have thought very carefully, and arrived at painful conclusions that they publicize and implement in their own lives, they should certainly be respected for their integrity. What is important is that they should feel constant pain about the division of *Kelal Yisrael* for which they are advocating. If they do not, there is much cause for concern. It seems to me that the safest path is to follow the directions of the *posekim* who recommend being *mahmir* on *ahavat Yisrael*.

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ⁱ David Berger, *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and*

the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference (Portland, OR: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001), p. 7.

ⁱⁱ R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, *Branches of the Chassidic Menorah* (Brooklyn: Sichos in English, 1998), p. 5.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Rimzei ha-Mishkan*, Malbim's monograph on the symbolism of the *Mishkan*, which can be found printed next to his commentary on *Parashat Terumah*.

^{iv} Sue Fishkoff, *The Rebbe's Army* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005).

^v The RCA recently made repudiation of the belief in the Rebbe as the Mashiah into one of its membership standards. This is clearly based upon the *pesak* of R. Aharon Feldman (<http://moshiachtalk.tripod.com/feldman.pdf>). Basically, R. Feldman distinguishes between messianist and E-lohist Lubavitchers. He maintains that messianism is not *appikoresut*, and that it is therefore permissible to count a messianist, non-E-lohist Lubavitcher in a *minyan* and eat his *shehitah*.

Because it is obvious to R. Feldman that, supposing that Mashiah were to arise from the dead, he would be the greatest descendant of David who ever lived, and that the Rebbe was not as great as Rabbeinu ha-Kadosh or Rashi, he asserts that anyone who can prefer the Rebbe over the *gedolim* of the more distant past when predicting that he will rise from the dead and be the Mashiah is lacking in a proper un-

I feel that it is unfair that he the RCA are assessing people according to their own system without considering the possibility that those investigated might have a completely different *Weltanschauung*. *Le-havdil*, it is like a modern accusing the author of *Beowulf* of using words incorrectly.

^{vi} There is a statement attributed to R. Shach which specifically equates Chabad Messianism with *avodah zarah* (<http://www.theveshiva-world.com/article.php?p=2318>). This is where the distinction – suggested by Irving Greenberg and popularized by Dr. Berger in a footnote – between a "failed messiah" and a "false messiah" is helpful. Surely R. Shach did not believe that those who followed Bar Kokhba were serving *avodah zarah*. However, R. Shach could say that Bar Kokhba was a failed Messiah, while the Rebbe, who, in R. Shach's opinion, was a proponent of *avodah zarah*, was a false Messiah. *Le-shittato*, those who believed in the Rebbe's messiahship were serving *avodah zarah* through the transitive property. They followed the Rebbe, and the Rebbe followed *avodah zarah*. Therefore, they followed *avodah zarah* (*has ve-shalom*). This condemnation is similar to the ones used against the followers of Shabbetai Tsevi.

^{vii} What is the historical precedent for effectively excommunicating people for the sake of preserving historical norms?

^{viii} For example, in 2007, in Israel, a non-Jew who wanted to convert and who expressed Chabad-messianist views in front of a *beit din* was approved for conversion by the two [non-Hasidic] Haredi rabbis on the *beit din* and rejected by the two

Dati Le'umi rabbis on the *beit din*.

^{ix} Berger, *The Rebbe*, p. 71.

^x See above, n. 5.

^{xi} Obviously, attributing *real* omnipotence to any being other than God would constitute dualism. Similarly, attributing *real* omniscience to a being other than God (saying that someone who is not God could understand God) could be problematic for similar reasons (see Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhos Yesodei ha-Torah* 2:7-8). The question at hand is whether the statements "The Ba'al Shem Tov knows about everything that you do," or "The Rebbe runs the world" (as God's emissary) are dualistic. When I use the words omnipotent and omniscient, I am using them in the limited sense of "*be-Tahtonim*" and, when applicable, "as God's emissary."

^{xii} R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, *The Making of Chassidim* (Brooklyn, NY: Sichos in English, 1996).

^{xiii} *Va-Yikra* 19:18.

^{xiv} *Shabbat* 31a.

^{xv} A line from the last blessing of the morning *Shemoneh Esreh* prayer.

^{xvi} "*Kudsha Berikh Hu lo sharya ba-atar pagim*." Also see the famous last Mishnah of *Massekhet Uktzin*. Note also that "*ve-yasem lekha shalom*" is the last *berakhah* in *Birkat Kohanim*, and that "*Sim Shalom*" is the last *berakhah* in *Shemoneh Esreh*.

I have the greatest respect for R. Feldman, but

A Beit Midrash of One's Own

BY: Fran Tanner

The year was 1992. Fifteen years had passed since Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik had given the first Gemara shi'ur at Stern College for Women. Yet, a critical element of advanced Torah learning was still missing from the women's campus. The heart of the learning environment in male yeshivot, a beit midrash, was completely absent from the Stern picture.

For centuries, the beit midrash has served as the center for Torah learning and dialogue. What is a yeshivahⁱ without a beit midrash,

classrooms would be turned into a beit midrash. Students chose to give up having a convenience store in the 245 building, another project of the SLC, so that the money could be budgeted for this project. Zelda Braun, Dean of Students, oversaw the project.

In the following summer, the construction project began and eventually Stern's first beit midrash was born. The beit midrash seated 50 and had about 20 bookshelves. The Torah Activities Council got to work purchasing *sefarim* and students quickly began using the room for learning, praying, and TAC events.^{iv}

But anyone who knows Stern today

plans.^{vii}

Even once the administration was on board, it was not entirely smooth sailing. There were many details to be considered. One of the largest questions was where the new beit midrash would be located. Students pushed for a beit midrash on the first floor (where rooms 101 and 102 ended up being built) so that the Beit Midrash would be front and center, and more easily accessible on Shabbat.^{viii} The planning committee also grappled with the best way to accommodate both a quiet space for *tefillah* as well as space for the animated discussion of Torah, a consideration which, in a place where both learn-

ing and *tefillah* take place simultaneously and there are no *minyanim* *kevu'im*, presents quite a challenge. In addition, students, deans, rab-

bis, and the architect needed to work out a design that would allow the space to hold a *minyan* and be used for *tefillah* *be-tsibbur* when relevant. What the *mehitsah* would look like was a very pertinent discussion and the source of some challenge, both logistically and in terms of differing halakhic positions. Furthermore, in terms of the aesthetics, students worked with the architect to try to reach an agreement as to how the design could incorporate the traditional feel of a beit midrash while still reflecting modern, up-to-date, state of the art design as well.

Despite student efforts, the plans were not carried out in the promised time frame, and construction only began after almost three years of deliberation and discussion.^{ix} Most of the students who worked tirelessly to push for a new beit midrash would graduate before the project was completed, or even before the construction began, and never actually benefited from the fruits of their labor.^x With a larger vision in mind, these students selflessly continued to work on the planning of a beit

consideration that went into the planning. To address the learning-*davening* conflict, the room was designed in an L-shape; the front corner of the L-shaped room could be for more quiet study and *davening* and the middle open area for learning *be-havruta*. In addition, after much careful thought, the room was equipped with a cloth *mehitsah* which hangs from the ceiling, and is generally tucked away around a pole, but can be pulled out along a track in the ceiling at times when a *mehitsah* is called for. Wood table tops add to the traditional feel, while the *Aron Kodesh* made of glass with a design of leaves adds beauty and style. Overall, the space truly reflects an appropriate home, worthy of being a *mekom Torah*.

The Beit Midrash Committee this year has focused its efforts on thoroughly organizing, cataloguing, and labeling the *sefarim* and bookshelves, a stage which may be viewed as the final step in the process, much like settling into a new home after a move. The idea is to make the beit midrash accessible and easy to use for all students. The committee feels that Torah resources must be readily available, and any SCW woman should be able to walk in and feel like the beit midrash is hers and she can access what she needs with ease. Each and every Stern woman should feel invited to stake out her part in the vibrant Torah-study community that runs deep at the core of Yeshiva University's Stern College for Women.

While the story of our beit midrash, for the most part, usually goes untold, I think it holds relevant messages for today. First of all, an understanding of what went into creating this beit midrash deepens our appreciation for the *mekom Torah* and the opportunities it affords us that are easily within our reach today. But even more importantly, the tale of how our beit midrash came to be brings with it both encouragement and responsibility. Encouragement, for it is a story that can provide hope and inspiration for all aspiring student

"The women of Stern College needed a beit midrash that could serve as the nucleus of their Torah community and would reflect Stern's ideology of serious Torah studies for women."

without space for the *shakla ve-tarya*, the ongoing dialogue, the honing of ideas and exchange of Torah thought, that form the links of the chain of our *masorah*? An appropriate beit midrash is crucial in fostering this dialogue on the women's campus. Yet, for some reason, its existence was never so simple.

In spring of 1992, the Student Life Committee (SLC)ⁱⁱ raised the need for a beit midrash at a meeting with the administration. Students needed a place where they could learn *be-havruta*, they argued. In addition, they sought a better place for *tefillot*, as the current situation meant students were forced to *daven* in the halls and stairwells of the school and dorm buildings. The women of Stern College needed a beit midrash that could serve as the nucleus of their Torah community and would reflect Stern's ideology of serious Torah studies for women. According to Shana Bak, a Stern student at the time, in the September 1992 issue of *The Observer*, students "insisted that the presence of a beit midrash at the midtown center was an integral part of SCW and its messages."ⁱⁱⁱ

Students formed a committee devoted to campaigning for a beit midrash. To get their point across, they organized a "protest" gathering to demonstrate the need for a space designated for prayer and learning; for two weeks, students gathered for afternoon prayers in the presidential suite, then located on the seventh floor of the Stern building. Student efforts were endorsed by Dean Karen Bacon, who participated in the gathering to show her support.

The protest proved effective and the administration began planning for a beit midrash on the midtown campus. Administrators and students ultimately agreed that a wall on the sixth floor would be broken down and two

knows that the story of the beit midrash does not end there.

By 2005, the number of students in Stern had grown, as had the number of women engaged in serious Torah studies. The beit midrash was no longer sufficient. Students interested in learning Torah in the beit midrash were forced to avoid the room at peak times, learn in the libraries, and once again, *daven* in the hallways, because there simply was not enough room.^v Once again, a group of students began petitioning for change. "In 1992, the *chiddush* was to have a beit midrash at all and at that time, two joint classrooms were enough," wrote Ilana Levin and Adinah Weider, Editors-in-Chief of *The Observer*, in December 2005. "Thirteen years later, the level and style of women's learning have reached the stage where we are appealing to the administration for a significant change."^{vi}

Students used various avenues to call for change, including printing articles about the need for a more spacious beit midrash in almost every issue of the *Observer* and meeting with many Adminis-

trators. Their requests were eventually heard and the administration began to respond. Still, students continued to be actively involved in this project, assuring that administrative promises would indeed be carried out. Students organized the Beit Midrash Construction Committee which met with the architect and the administrators regarding the design. They also made personal phone calls, on a weekly or even daily basis, to Jeffery Rosengarten, the Vice President of Administrative Services, who was assigned to the project, for updates on the

"The tale of how our beit midrash came to be brings with it both encouragement and responsibility."

midrash even once it was clear that it would not be completed in their time.

The new beit midrash, generously dedicated by Lea and Leo Eisenberg, was finally ready for use in the Fall of 2007. It was built on the seventh floor, which had formerly held the presidential suite and a porch. The new beit midrash can hold about three times as many students and many more *sefarim*. Its final design reflects the long hours of careful

leaders. While many individuals were involved in the building of this beit midrash, from the architect, to the administrators, to the Eisenberg family, the project was initiated and carried out to the end because of the students who saw it through. If not for the student activists, both those in 1992 and those in 2005, the women of Stern College would still be *davening* in the hallways. The history of the beit midrash speaks of the impact each indi-

The Moral Imperative of Prayer^{i,ii}

BY: Jina Davidovich

vidual student has the potential to make on Stern College. But, at the same time, this story brings with it enormous responsibility, for these ambitious students have moved on, and are no longer here to strengthen the Stern community. The metaphorical baton has been passed over into our hands. Now it is up to us to succeed in adding to, bettering, and changing our college in general, and specifically building a community of *yoshevei beit ha-midrash*.

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ⁱ Stern is, of course, not a yeshivah in the traditional sense. However, Stern is part of a larger institution, Yeshiva University, which, as its name implies, strives to be both – a yeshivah and a university. One of the features that most reflects its yeshivah component on the Yeshiva College campus is the presence of several battei midrash.

ⁱⁱ The SLC is a group of student leaders committed to improving student life on campus, including former TAC and SCWC presidents and *The Observer's* Editor-in-Chief.

ⁱⁱⁱ Shana Bak, "From the *Observer* Archives Beit Midrash Project Completed," *The Yeshiva University Observer*, September 1992; reprinted in 51,4 (December 2005): 3.

^{iv} See *ibid.* Also see: Tiferet Unterman, "Architectural Designing for New Beit Midrash Underway," *The Yeshiva University Observer* 51,5 (February 2006): 1+.

^v Tiferet Unterman, "A Beit Midrash Double the Size Expected This Coming Fall," *The Yeshiva University Observer* 51, 9 (May 2006): 1+.

^{vi} Ilana Levin and Adinah Wieder, "We Need An Immediate Solution," *The Yeshiva University Observer* 51,4 (December 2005): 3+.

^{vii} Ilana Levin, "Editorial," *The Yeshiva University Observer* 51,9 (May 2006): 3.

^{viii} Levin and Wieder, "We Need."

^{ix} Adinah Wieder, "Construction of New Beit Midrash Commences," *The Yeshiva University Observer* 52,8 (May 2007): 1+.

^x Some, though, have benefited from the new space as students in the Graduate Program for Advanced Talmudic Studies for Women (GPATS).

If you tell a Jew that a horrible thing just happened, beyond the initial "oy" that inevitably escapes him, his natural inclination is to begin to pray. Even before the Jewish people received their national identity at Mount Sinai, Yitshak tells his son Ya'akov: "The voice is the voice of Ya'akov, but the hands are the hands of Eisav."ⁱⁱⁱ This verse is commonly understood as an expression of the Jewish people's greatest weapon: prayer.

We see numerous instances in the Torah that demonstrate the efficacy of prayer, which is nothing short of miraculous. And even today, in a time when locusts do not fall out of the sky and seas do not split on a regular basis, we see prayer as the catalyst to endless miracles.

I have often had people come up to me and ask about the significance of prayer: "How is it that you can use words that are not your own to communicate with an intangible God?" Whether it is the chanting of *Tehillim*, or a young man putting on phylacteries to the shock and confusion of flight attendants, prayer often looks odd and seems incomprehensible to those who have never experienced prayer in a genuine way. In answering the inquisitive, I carefully explain the importance of prayer as deriving from the connectedness with God that it allows each individual to achieve, as well as the obligation we have to praise God and recognize His presence in our lives.

But when does prayer meet a brick wall? A few months ago, I was met with a question about prayer that I could not answer – and the question was my own.

At the time, my grandmother was diagnosed with stage-four lung cancer after having been admitted to the hospital for pneumonia. I remember sitting in the room with her and attempting to comfort her to the best of my abilities. I stayed with her as I played translator between the old, brittle Russian woman and the eternal stream of doctors that entered and exited the room. On numerous occasions, she refused the medicine, claiming she was too frail for any more treatment, too sick to be poked and prodded any further. My heart broke with each painful groan that escaped her lips. Finally, looking up at the clock, I realized it was nearly sunset and I had yet to *daven Minhah*.

With more intensity than usual, I mouthed the words of *Ashrei*, asking God all the while to spare my grandmother from any more pain and suffering. When I reached *Refa'einu*, the section of *Shemoneh Esreh* where we pray that God heal the sick members of the Jewish people, I could not help but look at my grandmother. I had been inserting her name into this prayer for months, but today, seeing her frail condition and hearing the doctor's constant refrain about the limited amount of time she had left, her name – Miryam bat Beyla – was stuck in my throat.

There are endless halakhic debates pertaining to the role of modern medicine and its

relationship to Halakhah. Discussions of the relative values of euthanasia versus prolonging life travel like ping pong balls between various rabbis. But at that moment when I stood in prayer before God beside my grandmother and amidst the cacophony of sounds emanating from the various hospital monitors, I wondered where prayer fit into this equation. If my grandmother, who had lived a long life filled with joy, happiness, and fulfillment, wanted to end her suffering, should I pray to God for her life to continue? Standing there with my *siddur* in one hand and the medical reality of "no recovery" in the other, I mumbled her name and finished praying.

Each individual is obligated by Halakhah to seek out medical help. We learn from a *kal va-homer* based on the mitsvah of *hashavat aveidah*, returning lost property, that certainly if one must return property that someone else has lost, how much more so must one return health to one who has lost it.^{iv} However, if we were to follow this halakhic parallel, once an individual who loses an object gives up hope that he is going to find it (a state known as "ye'ush"), then the obligation to return it to him is nullified. Accordingly, if an individual gives up hope on his or her health being returned, is it still incumbent upon anyone to force him or her to have it retrieved?

The answer appears to be yes. A Gemara in *Avodah Zarah* determines that when one can ultimately achieve "*hayyei olam*," a long life, he or she cannot be concerned with the quality of "*hayyei sha'ah*," the short-term reality of his or her experience in treatment, regardless of whether or not this reality involves a significant amount of pain and suffering.^v The Halakhah goes as far as telling us that there is a precedent for forcing treatment upon a patient in the same way we would coerce someone to do any other mitsvah (though this type of persuasion no longer applies in modern times, as we do not have a *beit din* with the power to administer such coercion).^{vi}

However, the answer that I gave a moment ago – that regardless of "ye'ush" one must seek out care – becomes less clear in light of the following question: what if, medically, the notion of "*hayyei olam*" is out of the question? Is one still required to submit to treatment even if it is medically impossible that he or she will lead a healthy life once the treatment is complete? We are familiar with the importance that Judaism places on human life above almost all other concerns, but do we differentiate between a healthy, happy life and a life filled with pain and suffering?

It appears, in certain cases, that we do. When Rebbe was extremely sick, the Gemara points out that people were permitted to pray for him to die in an effort to end his suffering.^{vii} Furthermore, we learn that as part of the mitsvah of *bikkur holim*, visiting the sick, we are permitted to pray for the death of the suffering individual (if the situation warrants it).^{viii} Based upon the aforementioned Gemarot, Ran

determines that one can, in fact, *daven* for a fatally sick person to die.^{ix} Thus, it appears that in a case where an individual is not facing the possibility of "*hayyei olam*," praying to end their suffering is halakhically permissible. (The question of using medical treatments to actively end someone's life is a fascinating topic, but is beyond the scope of this article.)

Now, how did all of this information relate to me – standing in the hospital room with my sick grandmother who had but a short month left to live? When I finished *Minhah*, I began to think of the predicament I faced in the midst of my prayers: was it just for me to beg God that my grandmother continue to live when the doctors promised that her life would involve enormous amounts of pain and suffering? Or, perhaps, though I shuddered at the thought, was I praying for her to survive just so that I would not have to suffer the reality of losing a loved one? At the same time, in *Al ha-Teshuvah*, the Rav writes that *teshuvah*, and by extension, *tefillah*, is the active process of appealing to God by knocking on the gates of Heaven.^x In contemplating the possible inefficacy of my prayers, then, was I retracting my hand from God's doorbell by putting all my faith in the scans that said my grandmother would not recover? Should I have reached for the medical miracle?

When I asked my rabbis how to properly pray in this situation, I was met with a number of answers that all, essentially, boiled down to the following: pray for *rahamim*, mercy. In playing the "*rahamim* card," I was neither praying for my grandmother to live, and thus continue in pain, nor was I praying for her to pass away and end her suffering. It seemed like an excellent way to satisfy both sides. But the next day, I approached "*Refa'einu*" again, and the same deliberation hit me. I was not comfortable with merely *davening* for *rahamim* – it simply seemed too easy. By washing my hands of the requirement to pick a side of the fence, I felt my prayers wane in strength. I wanted to be my grandmother's warrior, the protagonist of stories found in books about faith and miracles. But then, my mind migrated to the image of the old, frail woman, surrounded by machines, being pumped with medication. In the place of the smile that I had grown accustomed to, sad eyes looked out at the world. I simply could not bring myself to say her name with the same feeling that I had done in months past.

It was not as though I thought my prayers were going to remove the cancer. In fact, Rambam teaches that one who prays over a sick individual and believes that his prayers have an immediate effect on his or her physical condition is a *kofer*, a heretic.^{xi} So, I ended another prayer still ambivalent as to what path I should take: Praying for the miracle? Praying for an end to suffering? Or simply praying for God to do what He thought was best?

The following day I came across an article about the paradigmatic prayer for a miracle: Avraham's prayer to God to save the evil city

of Sedom. R. Sarel Malitzky, a Judaic Studies teacher at Torah Academy of Bergen County, quotes the *Lehem Mishneh*, who presents a new angle from which one can approach this scene.^{xii} With what some may call audacity, Avraham confronts God and says: “It would be sacrilege for you to do such a thing [to destroy Sedom]!”^{xiii} After the famous back-and-forth between Avraham and God, God agrees to save the city if ten righteous individuals are found therein. However, Rambam, in *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, tells us that a city whose sins are greater than its merits can be destroyed immediately according to the law. This halakhah is based upon the occurrences in Sedom.^{xiv} Therefore, the *Lehem Mishneh*^{xv} asks, why would Hashem have agreed to save the city for ten righteous people, for surely the actions of ten people were not enough to make up for the sins of the majority of the city’s evil inhabitants? The *Lehem Mishneh* answers that though it is true that an evil city should be destroyed, *tefillah* has the overwhelming power to change Hashem’s judgment. Avraham prayed for the people of Sedom to be saved because he understood the immense power of prayer and its ability to change reality.

The lesson I learned was not only about Avraham’s belief in the power of his words, but the weight of prayer in general. There are many difficult situations that we face in life where we feel like hope is lost entirely. Though our eyes may turn to the Heavens for a miracle, it is incumbent upon each individual to put in a significant amount effort to meet the ends he desires – effort that is often manifest in prayer. It was at this juncture that I learned the moral imperative of prayer. It was not enough for me to raise my white flag and beseech God for *rahamim*. All too often we throw around our prayers without proper intent, using the name of God as though it were a credit card for a limitless account of miracles. The message of the *Lehem Mishneh* is not that we are all miracle workers, nor is it to reproach God for His actions, but, rather, that we are all accountable for the words of prayer that exit our mouths. In order to effectively pray for an individual, one must assess the situation, accept the responsibility of the weight of our words, and only then come before God with a plea.

Ultimately, I found myself cheating. Though I knew that praying for my grandmother’s life to be extended while she was in such pain was nothing short of torture, I could not bring myself to ask for the opposite. Instead, I tightly gripped my *siddur*, closed my eyes, and prayed that if a miracle could occur and my grandmother could be healthy, then by all means, God should allow her to continue to live. However, if no actions and no prayer could bring about a miracle, then I did not want to see my grandmother suffer any longer.

A few weeks later, my grandmother passed away. When the initial shock and devastation had slightly passed, I asked myself whether I thought there was more I could have done – perhaps I could have prayed harder, with more tears, more intent, more focus? Ultimately, I realized that I had done everything I could and when I asked for a miracle, God had simply responded, “Sorry, Jina, not this time.”

When I walked up to the podium to speak at my grandmother’s funeral, I remember considering the entire painful process that both my family and I had gone through since she had been diagnosed. However, I could not remove the feeling that this *was* God’s way of acting with kindness, *rahamim* – that if there could be no miracle, at least there would be no more pain. As I grabbed the sides of the podium, I looked out and started speaking in Russian that was littered with mistakes, relating that my grandmother was a woman who believed in God until the day she died. She was a proud member of a faith that believes that even in death, the most tragic part of human existence, God is present. Each time I would ask her how she was doing, even in the last few weeks that she was in the hospital, she would always respond by saying, “*Barukh Hashem*,” “Thank God.” Just as she knew that even in the end, God was with her, I am empowered with the belief that even as my family walks in the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil, for God is with us.^{xvi}

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ⁱ This article is dedicated to the *aliyyah* of the *neshamah* of Miryam bat Yosef, z”l.

ⁱⁱ Many of the sources, ideas, and research for this article come from a *sihah* given by R. David Katz, *menahel* of Michlelet Mevaseret Yerushalayim, January 2009. I also owe a special thank-you to another source, who prefers to remain anonymous, for helping me with the ideas in this article.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Be-Reshit* 27:22.

^{iv} The Gemara in *Bava Kamma* 81b learns from “*ve-hashevoto lo*” in *Devarim* 22:2 that one must not only return to a person his lost object, but must also perform “*hashavat gufo*,” “returning his body” [i.e., health]. Similarly, the Gemara in *Sanhedrin* 73a learns from this *pasuk* that one is obligated to return to a person “*aveidat gufo*,” “his lost body.” Many commentators explain this *derashah* as being based upon a *kal va-homer*: if there is an obligation to return a person’s lost object, certainly there is an obligation to restore his physical health.

^v *Avodah Zarah* 27b.

^{vi} *Tosefta*, *Shekalim* 1:2.

^{vii} *Ketubbot* 104a.

^{viii} *Nedarim* 40a.

^{ix} *Ran to Nedarim* 40a, s.v. “*Ein mevakesh*.”

^x R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Al ha-Teshuvah*, ed, Pinhas Peli (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1974), p. 57.

^{xi} Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Avodah Zarah* 11:12.

^{xii} R. Sarel Malitzky, “Powerful Tefillot,” *Kol Torah* (a student publication of Torah Academy of Bergen County) 18,8 (November 2008).

^{xiii} *Be-Reshit* 18:25.

^{xiv} Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3:2.

^{xv} *Lehem Mishneh* to *ibid*.

^{xvi} *Tehillim* 23:4

Book Reviews

Majestic and Inviting: A Review

BY: Alex Luxenberg

Reviewed Book: Rabbi Norman Lamm, The Royal Table: A Passover Haggadah, ed. Joel Wolowelsky (New York: OU Press, 2010).

My Passover came early this year, with the arrival of Yeshiva University Chancellor and Rosh HaYeshiva Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm’s newest book, *The Royal Table: A Passover Haggadah*. As I sat down and opened the Haggadah over a month before the *seder*, I immediately encountered the regality and joy that surround the first night of the holiday. Though family and friends did not surround me, I felt at home amongst the words and ideas of Rabbi Lamm. Utilizing his ability to write with the urgency and command of a seasoned pulpit rabbi on the one hand, and his avuncular and melodious tone on the other, Rabbi Lamm presents a Haggadah that is both accessible and insightful.

In order to compile the Haggadah, Dr. Joel Wolowelsky consulted the cornucopia of sermons and writings that have piled up over the years of Rabbi Lamm’s tenure. As noted in Rabbi Menachem Genack’s preface, Rabbi Lamm reviewed and edited the text after Wolowelsky narrowed down the topics and issues he thought most relevant to the *seder*. This process resulted in a thematically unified Haggadah. *The Royal Table*, “a symbol of [...] spiritual progress and worldly aristocracy” (p. 11), offers the reader a comprehensive look at the insightful musings and meditations that sprinkled Rabbi Lamm’s sermons throughout his career.

Though many of the concepts presented sprouted from a different generation, the messages and ideals are contemporary and relevant. Additionally, Rabbi Lamm draws on a wide range of sources, from Rabbis Yitshak Arama (author of the *Akeidat Yitshak*) to Nahman of Bratslav to Samson Raphael Hirsch. But, as in his other works, Rabbi Lamm also offers original insights on theology, education and social issues.

In a section that indicates his capacity as both a pedagogue and a grandfather, Rabbi Lamm presents a novel interpretation of the Four Sons that enables them to leap out from the pages of our ancient text into the 21st cen-

tury. For instance, in the context of the *Rasha*, Rabbi Lamm writes:

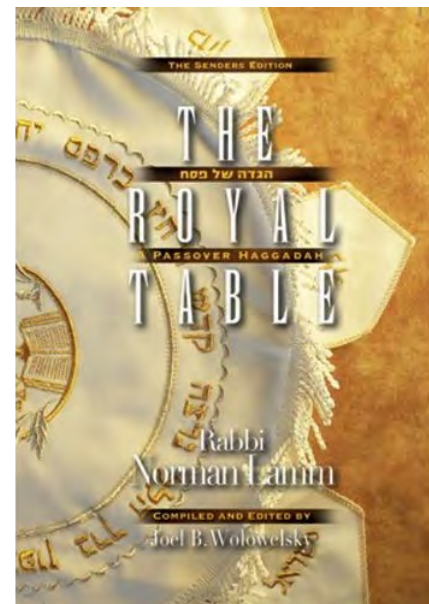
“There are many people today who openly violate many sacred Jewish institutions yet are ‘proud to be a Jew.’ They may dismiss Jewish observances as medieval anachronisms in the age of the Internet, yet they vigorously assert their Jewish identity. They are generally good-natured, intelligent, sympathetic souls, and are in their innermost hearts preciously Jewish. This is a case of being a *rasha* without *rish’ut*, without evil. Perhaps, then, such a second son should be called not ‘Wicked’ or ‘Evil,’ but ‘Mistaken’” (p. 40).

Rabbi Lamm is not willing to label one of the Four Sons – not citizens or neighbors, but sons and family members – as evil. He feels so connected to the *Rasha*, in fact, that he refers to

him as a “lovable *rasha*,” one who is “fairly common nowadays” (*ibid.*). The *Rasha*, Rabbi Lamm posits, is not at his essence a heretic, but someone who does not place religion in the spotlight. Sometimes, the *Rasha* may even be someone who supports our institutions or synagogues but is not fully committed to the rigor and challenges of a theocentric lifestyle. But how does one react to such a “Mistaken Son?”

Rabbi Lamm challenges us to “approach him with understanding and sympathy [...] argue with him, debate with him, teach him, educate him” (*ibid.*). At least part of the blame for the Mistaken Son’s behavior, he points out, falls on the shoulders of those that are closest to him. Rabbi Lamm thus teaches us here a lesson of inclusion, acceptance and tolerance. We often think the Four Sons to be distant from us, especially the *Rasha*, for it is uncomfortable to label loved ones this way, but Rabbi Lamm’s insight stresses the close relationship we have with the *Resha'im* around us, an understanding that enables us to identify more closely with this part of the Haggadah.

In the past, I had assumed the *Mi she-Eino Yodea Lish’ol*, the “Son Who Does not Know to Ask,” to be a simpleton, not because he does not have the mental capacity to ask questions, but because we as a community have not challenged him to do so. The fourth son, I thought, was the child in the back of the classroom doo-



Tanakh According to Nebuchadnezzar

BY: Yaakov Hoffman

Reviewed Book: Hayim ben Yosef Tawil, An Akkadian Lexical Companion for Biblical Hebrew: Etymological-Semantic and Idiomatic Equivalents with Supplement on Biblical Aramaic (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2009).

Prof. Hayim Tawil's new *Akkadian Lexical Companion for Biblical Hebrew* had been eagerly anticipated by Semitics and Bible enthusiasts for quite some time before its recent debut at the SOY Seform Sale. At YU, Hebrew and Bible are generally studied from a particularly Jewish perspective, with only occasional forays into some insights of the secular academic world and of modern philological study. This generally restricts YU students (and sometimes faculty) to knowledge of Hebrew and Aramaic, with some conversancy in Arabic among the most dedicated. It is therefore understandable that the appearance of this lexicon would be greeted with excitement at YU. Now, even those with limited or no knowledge of Akkadian will be able to see (almost) first-hand the usefulness of the language of the Babylonian Empire for the interpretation of the Bible. The seasoned scholar of Akkadian will also find in it new and exciting insights into biblical interpretation.

I must admit that I have never had the privilege of studying with Prof. Tawil, but I had heard much about him and his then-forthcoming magnum opus during my Arabic class (read: *havruta*) with Prof. Richard White last year. Tawil was previously known to me only as some of my friends' teacher for Intermediate Hebrew, so naturally I was intrigued by White's superlative descriptions of the man and his work. I was further surprised that the lexicon was to be published by Ktav, a respectable Jewish publishing house but one not generally known for putting out serious academic philology. But I reserved judgment until seeing a copy in person.

As I opened the fresh pages of the book to review it, ready to put my vast, one-semester knowledge of Akkadian to good use, I was at first surprised at the size of the book (490 almost-8.5x11-inch pages). The existing biblical lexica, such as that of Kohler and Baumgartner (KB), already contain much etymological comparison of Hebrew with Akkadian – how much more, I wondered, could there be to add? I was skeptical whether Tawil's novel insights into the relationship between Hebrew and Akkadian warranted the writing of a completely new, independent lexicon. He could simply have written a supplement to KB adding his own original material, perhaps to be incorporated in a forthcoming edition of that work.

Fortunately, Tawil addresses my concern already in the preface (p. ix): "More specifically, this *Akkadian Lexical Companion* does not confine its interest solely to etymological equivalents, but also embraces semantic and idiomatic relationships." Indeed, in the standard

lexica one finds only direct etymological use of Akkadian, rather than the comparison of usages of Akkadian and Hebrew words. Tawil's book, due to its exclusive focus on Akkadian, also has the advantage of being able to discuss in-depth the semantics of whole sentences and phrases involving a particular lexeme, based on Akkadian equivalents. Since all the information is gathered in one place, a Bible scholar will naturally prefer to consult this lexicon rather than scattered articles about points of similarity between Hebrew and Akkadian. Those wishing to delve deeper will also find copious bibliographic references.

It is also highly useful that the author has cross-referenced every entry with the appropriate page in the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* and the *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* where the equivalent Akkadian lexeme is thoroughly discussed. Those more interested in the Akkadian side of things will surely be particularly glad to be spared even the few minutes of having to look for the proper place in those multi-volume dictionaries. Also quite useful to the Assyriologist is the Akkadian-to-Hebrew index; such indices are unfortunately often lacking in other dictionaries.

For those not so Assyriologically inclined, Tawil has included a concise outline of Akkadian grammar. As someone highly interested in that subject, I would have liked to see this section expanded. I can understand, however, why it was kept short, given the limited and lexicographical focus of the work. It was also a nice touch that Tawil separated the section detailing Akkadian etymologies of names that appear in the Hebrew Bible from the main lexicon.

A full assessment of the scholastic quality and content of the entries is beyond the scope of this review and the Akkadian fluency of this reviewer. It seems to me, however, that some of the entries are unnecessary. For example, the entry on *"nahnu*, "we" (p. 25), simply points out that a Hebrew form more closely paralleling the Akkadian occurs in a few places. What does this teach us about Hebrew semantics and interpretation that we do not already know? From most of the entries, however, one can glean some new and interesting insight. For example, I learned that *'af'appei shahar* means "glimmerings of dawn" (related to Akkadian *wapû*, "to appear, shine") not "eyelids of dawn" as commonly assumed (p. 146a). Some of the entries just point to interesting parallel usages whose significance has not yet been analyzed, but having all such information in one place, even if it is not fully understood, is still certainly useful for the benefit of future scholars who may provide the necessary analysis.

The circumstances surrounding the publication of the lexicon include a few quirks, such as the book's publication by Ktav and its recording of the author's name with a patronymic (Hayim ben Yosef Tawil).ⁱⁱ Judging, however, by the reviews from such scholars as William Hallo and Moshe Bar-Asher (printed on the back cover), it seems to have been well

accepted by the academic world and should serve as an important resource to scholars. Anyone who avoids using this book due to its seeming identity crisis would be losing out on a valuable reference.

In an ideal world, this lexicon would have gone beyond its calling and included everything that Tawil could have discovered through semantic and idiomatic comparisons between Hebrew and other Semitic languages such as Ugaritic (although on that, see p. xi), with references to specific articles about biblical semantics. It could then have functioned as a complete reference guide and supplement to the existing lexica, which generally only analyze meaning based on context and etymology. I understand, however, that the work was a monumental undertaking, and Tawil is certainly to be applauded for what he has done therein.

I also would like to take this opportunity to note that the scholastic quality of this work suggests that Prof. Tawil is underutilized and underappreciated in our institution. The newfound fame that the lexicon generates could be a way to introduce him to a larger percentage of the student body, which would certainly gain from exposure to him. I also hope this will lead to him being more involved in teaching advanced classes, lectures, and workshops at the undergraduate level.

Most of all, I was happy to see that some of our faculty are spending time on groundbreaking projects to be used as general reference works and spearheading new advances in the understanding of the Bible and Semitic Languages. Nowadays, academics spend far too much time writing articles dealing with minutiae, while the standard reference works become more and more obsolete, with no one to revise or replace them for the benefit of the scholarly community. I salute Prof. Tawil and hope that his efforts will be emulated by many other academics who will produce comprehensive reference works for the use of the next generation of scholars.

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ⁱ Iyyov 3:9.

ⁱⁱ In addition, the end of the preface contains a strange usage of the blessing *Barukh she-halak mi-kevodo le-basar va-dam* ["Blessed is He Who set aside (a portion) of His honor to human beings"], said upon seeing a non-Jewish king. Did he mean *Barukh she-halak me-hokhmato le-basar va-dam* ["Blessed is He Who set aside (a portion) of His wisdom to human beings"], said upon seeing a non-Jewish scholar (but, ironically, not a Jewish scholar of secular subjects)? Also, the first word of the verse he quotes is vocalized incorrectly – read: "ve-koyer" (p. xiv).

dling out of boredom. It seems, then, that my understanding of the fourth son is similar to Rabbi Lamm's presentation of the *Rasha*. If so, what does Rabbi Lamm do with the fourth son?

In an effort to keep the narrative contemporary, he splits the fourth son into three categories of people: the unconcerned, the embarrassed and the assimilated. The Embarrassed Son, the one who is "overwhelmed, not knowing when to stand or sit, or when to pray silently or aloud" (p. 44), is especially interesting to me. I believe that there is a strong connection between Rabbi Lamms' models of the *Rasha* and the *Mi she-Eino Yodea Lish'ol*. They are both failings of our formal and informal educational system, those that were turned off from religion by an intolerant family member, friend or teacher. Each son was, at some point in his life, interested in engaging the world of Jewish thought and an observant lifestyle. But we, you and I, failed them in some way. Whether one chooses to be a professional educator or not, it is still each and every individual's responsibility to educate his or her loved ones. Perhaps we did not take their questions seriously; maybe we did not give them our time and energy. Rabbi Lamm is urging us to "never treat them with contempt, for they are precious and sacred souls" (p. 45).

The above is just a glimpse into the insights and interpretations that fill the pages of *The Royal Table*. Throughout the Haggadah, Rabbi Lamm takes history, theology and personal experiences and makes them applicable and real. The knowledge he has amassed through experience and study are evident and instructional on every page of the book. At times, the grandfather in him comes out as he offers examples based on events that took place in the 1960s, while at others he challenges the audience with the austerity of a teacher and rabbi. In the end, the Haggadah comes together as a fluid and unified text, presenting themes of tolerance, devotion and pride.

One piece of advice: As noted above, each interpretation can stand on its own and can therefore be presented as a self-supporting insight at the *seder*. I do suggest completing the Haggadah before the first night of Passover, however, so as to gain a greater appreciation of the presented text. Not only will you learn a tremendous amount, but your understanding of each individual essay will be that much greater when studied in conjunction with the others.

Hag Kasher ve-Sameah!

Alex Luxenberg is a junior at YC majoring in English and is a Staff Writer for Kol Hamevaser.

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