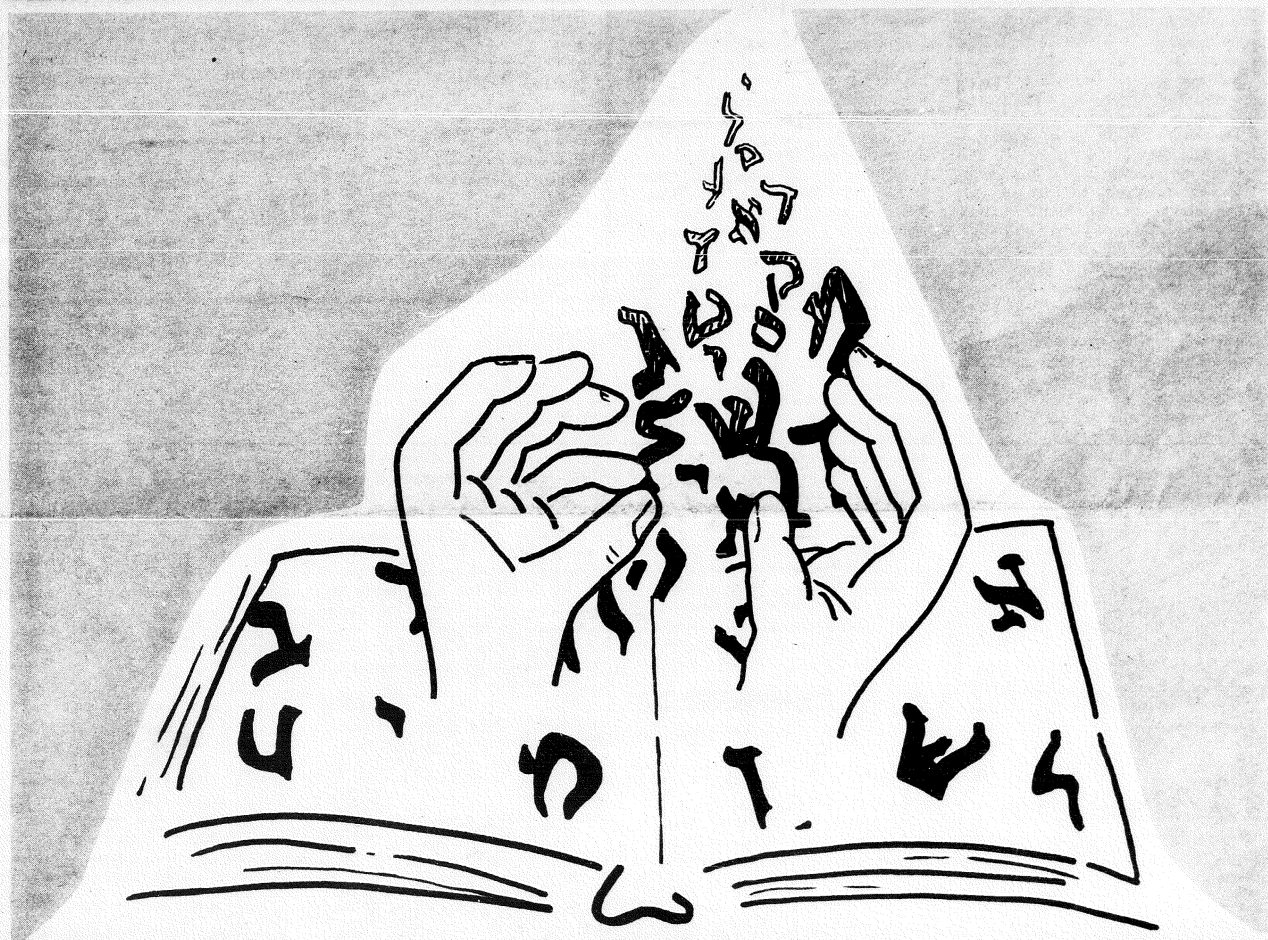


# HAMEVASER

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**HAMEVASER**

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## A Tale of Two Paupers

By YEHUDA SUSSMAN

A *rosh yeshiva* at RIETS and Kenny, the counterman at a local fast food restaurant, don't have much in common — until one looks at their W-4 forms. Their earnings are approximately the same. This is, of course, not to say that their financial situations are equivalent. Kenny doesn't pay for his children's *yeshiva* tuition.

Too harsh an assessment? Not really. Including pay for "peripheral" *shiurim* (*Mishna Brura*, *Minchat Chinukh*, kollels, and the like), a *rosh yeshiva* on the average earns only \$25,000 annually. Several receive even less for their services. That makes for a salary that is less than a third of what Dr. Menachem Elon receives as visiting professor of Talmudic Law at N.Y.U. That makes for a salary that is significantly beneath the college faculty's pay scale. And that makes for an embarrassment to an institution proud of its newfound fiscal solvency.

Why are the *roshei yeshiva* paid so poorly? The explanation given by members of the administration is that University policy views a *shiur* as a part-time proposition. If an MYP *shiur* counts for only eight credits a semester, then the instructor should receive eight credits worth of pay. Implicit in the payroll position is the supposition that in order to make ends meet, the *roshei yeshiva* will take on second jobs. And they do. Virtually all of them double as pulpit rabbis or as guest lecturers in communities around the metropolitan area.

Upon reflection, the administration position is a difficult one to support. It is both degrading to *talmidei chachamim* and denigrating to the Torah they represent. From an individual perspective, a *rosh yeshiva* is forced to work an inordinate number of hours just to earn a decent living. If Torah means anything to us at all, it should disturb us that those who teach it on the highest levels should be paid the wages of

hash slingers. Worse, on the communal level, *chinukh* comes to be viewed as a less than desirable profession. When *rebbeim* scrounge because Yeshiva scrimps, the message the community at large receives is that Torah doesn't pay, that *rebbeim* can't earn a respectable living, that the best and the brightest ought to look elsewhere for their livelihoods. Hardly the message Yeshiva should want to communicate to American Jewry.

Moreover, the salary policy proves to be as detrimental to the *talmid* as it is unfair to the *rebbe*. A *shiur* is not a ten-hour a week proposition. It entails the four hours of daily *sefer* that surround it. It demands many more hours of preparation and thought. It requires still more hours set aside for the personal supervision of *talmidim* in their development as *lamdanim* and *bernei Torah*. These are not realistic things to expect of men forced to juggle two or three positions just to keep themselves and their families afloat. As a result, *sefer* time finds few *rebbeim* in the *Beit Midrash*. Many *talmidim* soon follow suit. Their learning and overall spiritual development suffer. The message they have received is that *shiur* is the sum of their learning, not merely the focus of their preparations.

Furthermore, *semikha* students are assured throughout their tenure at RIETS that upon ordination Yeshiva will help with job placement and salary arbitration. To the young rabbi, unsure of his abilities and uncertain of his future, faith in such assistance is critical. Yet it must be difficult for him to take those assurances seriously when his *rebbeim* are paid so poorly by the very institution claiming to guarantee his future. If, in this age of swimming pools and Torah U'Mada fellows, funds sufficient to pay *roshei yeshiva* professional wages cannot be found, his doubts in the university will be well founded.

## LETTERS

### A Dialogue About Dialogue

Postscript to "Dead Pieces of Bark":

I recently came across some comments made by Sidney Kwestel, President of the O.U., at their most recent convention, that are quite relevant:

Nevertheless the Orthodox delegates [to the Jewish Agency Assembly] have not responded in kind and have always acted agreeably and courteously to all other delegates. Indeed, the Union has always adhered to the teaching of Hillel, 'Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people and bringing them nearer to the Torah.' Aaron walked a tightrope — he was uncompromising in his commitment to Torah, but at the same time he

stretched out his hand to all of *Klal Yisrael* — he befriended Jews who had drifted away from Torah. As the prophet Malakhi tells, "Verabim heishiv meavon." Aaron was most successful in bringing many nearer to the Torah. Thus, while we oppose concepts and movements which are not based on the belief in *Torah miSinai* and on adherence to Torah principles, nonetheless the Union has always extended a friendly hand to all Jews regardless of the level of their religious observance. Simply stated, we may disagree but the manner in which we do it is not disagreeable.

Nathaniel Helfgot  
YC '85, RIETS '88

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To the Editor:

Nathaniel Helfgot makes the following comment in his letter printed in *Hamevaser*, Dec. 1986: "There is the method of public discourse in the 'way of peace'. The *Rav shlita*'s letter published in *Conservative Judaism* in 1956 is one classic example of such an approach. 'Be of the disciples of Aaron — love peace, pursue peace, love your fellows and bring them to Torah.'"

The unknowing reader can easily receive the impression that the *Rav*'s letter was addressed to *Conservative Judaism*; that it cited the passage from tractate *Avot* and that it reflects a clear and conscious effort to deal with Conservative Judaism in the manner recommended by Mr. Helfgot.

In fact, the letter is quite irrelevant to Nathaniel Helfgot's point and should not have been cited in this context.

In 1953, a synagogue in Cincinnati that was officially Orthodox decided to adopt mixed seating. Many members of the synagogue objected, however, and a controversy that spread beyond the confines of the particular synagogue ensued. Both sides attempted to prove the validity of their positions by enlisting the support of rabbis. Prominent Orthodox rabbis such as R. Eliezer Silver were consulted, and the comments of R. Moshe Feinstein concerning *mechitza* were also cited by the parties in dispute. In 1954, in response to a request by Rabbi Benjamin Lapidus of Dayton Ohio, *Maran haRav* Joseph B. Soloveitchik *shlita* wrote a letter which detailed his "precise and unequivocal position" that a house of worship must have a *mechitza*. The language of the *Rav*'s letter was quite strong. He wrote that establishing a house of worship with mixed seating is "tantamount to an attempt of christianization of our ritual. . . ."

In 1956, the editors of the magazine *Conservative Judaism* decided to devote an issue to the controversy, as "It is one of the few times when representatives of the two groups (Orthodox and Conservative) have come to grips publicly over a halakhic dispute, out of which ideological formulations, seldom stated or clarified before, emerged." When the editors presented the Orthodox position, they printed the 1954 letter of the *Rav* and the statement of R. Eliezer Silver, cited the comments of R. Moshe Feinstein, and printed a plea signed by leading rabbis of Eastern Europe and Israel of the previous

generation, all arguing against mixed seating. The *Rav*'s letter was subsequently reprinted in Baruch Litvin's book, *The Sanctity of the Synagogue*.

I have known Nathaniel Helfgot for over eight years, and consider him to be of sterling, indeed, unimpeachable moral and ethical stature. I cannot, however, see how the *Rav*'s letter concerning *mechitza* is at all relevant to any of his arguments.

The *Rav* answered a request for a letter on a halakhic issue, and he did not include an irrelevant *ad hominem* attack upon his opponents. As the *Rav*'s strongly worded letter deals only with *mechitza*, his failure to add gratuitous invective cannot legitimately be cited to support Nathaniel Helfgot's general approach to Orthodox/non-Orthodox relations.

As Mr. Helfgot implies that the imperative to pursue peace would lead one to his conclusions, I would like to take this opportunity to quote the remarks of the *Rav*'s father, R. Moshe Soloveitchik, which I feel are germane. Why, he asked, did the Psalmist write (34:15) "seek peace and run after it"? Why did he simply not write "run after peace"? The answer, he said, is that before one runs after peace, one must first make sure that the peace he will pursue is a "true" peace, not a false peace based upon one's submission to the other party. (Rabbi Aaron Soloveitchik in *Hadarom* (Elul 5746) quoted these remarks.) The debate between those who agree with Mr. Helfgot and those who don't is not between "pro-peace" and "anti-peace" factions but concerns the application of one's definition of peace to particular situations. Mr. Helfgot has not proven that the *Rav* shares his definition of "peace".

The Rambam, at the conclusion of *Hilkhot Meilah* (8:8) discusses the desirability of seeking the reasons for the commandments of the Torah. He opens his remarks, however, with a stern warning not to make hasty, reckless assumptions concerning these reasons, and he utilizes a biblical injunction (Exodus 19:24) concerning those who would "break through" (*haros*) against the Lord.

By the same token, when one argues that remarks of a halakhic authority support a particular point of view, he must be careful not to "break through" and make overhasty claims. Among the members of the Yeshiva

cont. on p.3

# Reviving Zionist Zealotry

## The Essence of Halkar

By SHARON HERZFELD  
and ELI CLARK

"Teshuva Means Aliya." This inflammatory equation was blazoned across newspaper advertisements last October by Halkar, a radical Zionist organization founded by Columbia University students. Since thrusting itself into the public arena a year ago, Halkar has published a lengthy pamphlet, posted leaflets, published ads, antagonized students on several campuses and, most recently, dissolved as quickly and mysteriously as it appeared.

The group originally called itself Kahar, a contraction of *Kotzrei HaRuach* — "the impatient ones." Dedicated to Jewish reunification and mass *aliya*, Kahar began its activities with an early morning learning session at Columbia followed by morning services.

In the spring of last year, Kahar published "Challenge," a polemic decrying the denominationalism afflicting American Jewry. Quoting liberally from midrashic and kabbalistic sources and drawing upon the thought of Peretz Smolenskin, the pamphlet calls for the abolition of labels ("Reform," "Conservative," "Orthodox") and the establishment of genuine dialogue between Jews of disparate theologies. Finally, "Challenge," declares the concept of survival the supreme value to which all Jews must adhere.

This past fall, Kahar changed its name to Halkar, an acronym for *Aliya* (immigration), *Yachad* (unity) and *Kiruv Rechokim* (bringing Jews to Judaism). Membership details are sketchy at best, but prominent members included Ruth Weiss and Karen Zuckerman of Barnard and Zev Maghen, a Columbia graduate student. Many regard Maghen as having been the spiritual and ideological leader of the group, although he denies this.

Weiss defines Halkar's primary concern as Jewish survival, which she believes can only be guaranteed by mass *aliya*. Although they are religious Zionists, Maghen, Zuckerman and Weiss considered Halkar to be a religious and apolitical. They deny that *aliya* assumes a role in the eschatological process; the value of immigration lies in its potential contribution to Jewish survival. For similar reasons, Halkar was vocally anti-cult and antimissionary.

The focus on Zionism reflects Halkar's ideological link to the Bilu movement of the late nineteenth century. Bilu, which stands for "*Beit Yaakov lekhu venelkha* — House of Jacob, come and let us go (Isaiah 2:5)," was a Zionist organization of Russian students. In the wake of the 1881 pogroms in southern Russia, Bilu chose to dedicate itself to settling in Israel (then Palestine). Although Bilu's

# T'SHUVA MEANS ALIYAH

"One should be aware that the word 'T'shuva' means first and foremost the return to the place from which an individual departs, as it is written: 'And his return was to Rama for there was his house,' (I Samuel 7:17). Our Rabbis by way of implication made use of the word to refer to one who returns from his sins. Such a definition is found only in the words of our Rabbis, and because the term was needed and could be applied in all places and at all times, the great sages spoke of it until it became natural and there was no other meaning attached to the word 'T'shuva', its original meaning being all but forgotten. Yet the process referred to by the word 'T'shuva' remains as described in the first definition: a return to the land from which we have left."

—Rabbi Yehudah Shlomo Alkalai  
—*Petach Kichudat Shel Machat (1849)*

Fellow Jews: as we enter the Ten Days of T'shuva, it is abundantly clear that most of us continue to hold to the popular definition of t'shuva, namely "repentance." Very well. Let's start repenting...

For the sin which we have sinned before You by having "outgrown" Zionist idealism, the power that built the State of Israel and the only force which can sustain it.

For the sin which we have sinned before You by treating the struggle for Jewish national existence as a spectator sport.

For the sin which we have sinned before You by praying for two thousand years to return to a restored Zion, and then spinning it.

For the sin which we have sinned before You by loving the Exile.

For the sin which we have sinned before You by offering to the State of Israel everything but that which it absolutely must have to survive and flourish: ourselves.

But remember that in Judaism, repentance involves three actions: recognizing the wrong, asking forgiveness, and rectifying the situation.

## MAY YOUR ALIYAH INSCRIBE THE JEWISH PEOPLE IN THE BOOK OF LIFE.

העיקר

Help us create the Zionist revolution in America.  
Advertisement

Brooklyn: (718) 853-0974

Manhattan: (212) 749-3041

Queens: (718) 520-0411

membership eventually peaked above five hundred, only an estimated fifty-three members actually left Russia for Israel. Many of these returned to Russia or emigrated to the United States. And, as Maghen explains, "the Diaspora Jews needed for the backup did not show, and, amidst economic crises, the idealism died down." Halkar's position was that a similar situation exists today. Maghen says: "Just as nothing could revive the Biluim but the Second Aliya, nothing can revitalize the State of Israel today except a mass emigration from the United States."

To accomplish this, Halkar appropriated classic Zionist thought. "We don't claim to be clever or original," admits Weiss. "We are

reemploying old Zionist ideologies; we want to get people to think."

Rather than joining preexisting Zionist platforms, however, Halkar assumed a gaffly role. For example, Halkar posters which appeared last fall depicted Theodor Herzl in a classic pose with arms folded and a balloon illustrating the impatient question: "Nu?" An earlier poster quoted the final verses of Likhtva, the Israeli national anthem: "*Liyot am chofshi beartzenu, beeretz Zion veYerushalayim* — To be a free nation in our land, the land of Zion and Jerusalem." Underneath, in smaller letters, appeared the message: "Think about it."

If these posters smack of self-righteousness,

Halkar's advertisement approaches sacrilege. Published in the New York *Jewish Week* and Stern College's *Observer*, the full-page ad equates repentance from sins with immigration to Israel. It quotes R. Yehuda Alkalai's definition of repentance: "a return to the land from which we have left." Confession of the following sins appeared underneath:

For the sin which we have sinned before You by having 'outgrown' Zionist idealism...

For the sin which we have sinned before You by treating the struggle for national existence as a spectator sport.

For the sin which we have sinned before You by loving the Exile.

Maghen claims Halkar's radical tactics were justified because "Our State is dying in front of our eyes. . . In any war, soldiers get replacements, but Israel's replacements have never showed. People in quicksand can't pull each other out."

Halkar's enemy, according to Weiss, is "checkbook Judaism." Zuckerman is equally disturbed by "the materialism infesting Israeli society." Maghen wants people to understand that "Judaism is not just a religion," but rather "a nation with a social contract which implies that you must repress and sacrifice certain elements of your own desires and beliefs. Jews must take this seriously. Pluralism does not imply tolerance; it implies sacrifice for the sake of being together, to live in a Jewish system."

How ironic, then, that critics of Halkar point to the group's inflexibility and elitism. While preaching unity and togetherness, Halkar allegedly had a divisive effect on campus. Members of Halkar spurned campus minyanim, preferring to pray as a separate, insular group. Finally, Halkar was accused of displaying a fierce dogmatism, especially with regard to Israel and *aliya*, which offended and antagonized the community of Jewish students.

However suspect Halkar's tactics and activities may have been, they have, apparently, come to an end. Maghen's abrupt and unexplained departure from the group seems to have resulted in the de facto death of Halkar. Almost a hundred years ago, Bilu died when its idealism petered out; with Halkar's members refusing to discuss their leader's desertion, we can only suppose that the apparent discrepancy between Halkar's tactics and its values condemned it to the fate of its forerunners.

## LETTERS

cont. from p.2

University community, this must certainly be the rule with regards to the *Rav*. Moreover, when one cites a source in support of such a claim, he must first make sure that an objective reading of that source will indeed support such a conclusion. Even if one believes his objectives are noble, one nonetheless must never "break through"

David Horowitz YC 1981  
RIETS 1984 BRGS 1986

Nathaniel Helfgot replies:

The points raised in the first part of David Horowitz's letter are dealt with directly in my clarification above.

The second part of the letter, though, leaves me a bit puzzled. It is self-evident that one writing a letter to the editor is advocating a point of view. This is all I was out to do. I did not attempt to present a survey of all the approaches to "peace" in Jewish thought and their application in our context. I simply advocated the approach I believe should be explored and adopted given one understanding of "peace." Anyone is free

to argue with, reject, or dismiss my thesis, use of *Avot*, or any other comments. Clearly, there were and are those who view "peace" in this context in a different light than in my letter. We are dealing here with one of those public-policy issues where clear-cut guidelines are not available. One cannot open up a *Shulchan Arukh* and find a *siman* indicating how to approach conservative Jews. Thus, there is room for legitimate discussion on what the proper posture and tone should be in relation to such people and their movements. Indeed, the author I criticized in my original letter relates a fascinating anecdote about Rabbi Yisrael Salanter: "(Rabbi Yisrael) said that he would have taken a different approach than Rav Moshe Sofer. He would have placed a *mi-*

*nyan* of scholars in a Reform synagogue and they would have been successful in bringing all Jews under the wings of the *shekhina*." (In this context, the reader is encouraged to examine the carefully crafted letter of Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzensky *zt"l* relating to the "Austriit" controversy in Germany printed in the *Memorial Volume for R. Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg zt"l*.)

Milton, in his classic defense of free speech, *Areopagitica*, writes: "Where there is much desire to learn there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions, for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making." I hope our exchange attains the standard.

# Derash vs. Derrida

## Comparing the Rabbis and Deconstructionists

By SHAI SCHMELZER

From Rabbinical Midrash literature it is evident that verses in the Bible do not have monist interpretations. In fact, many meanings can be deduced from one verse. This concept is accepted as reality by our Rabbis who set this forth in their interpretation of the verse: "And like a hammer that shatters the rock — just as each blow of a hammer strikes forth so many sparks, so a single verse unfolds into many senses". In truth, the nature of *machloket* is rooted in this idea of multiple meanings. There is no one way to interpret a verse, but several.

We find room for multiple interpretation especially in the narrative portions of the Bible. Erich Auerbach brings this point home in his book *Mimesis*. Auerbach compares passages from the *Odyssey* with narratives from the Bible. The Greek epic, he claims, is filled with clearly elucidated, broad, and "externalized" passages. The Bible, on the other hand, is filled with cryptic and obscure

Leaving Rabbinical exegesis for the moment, let us examine a form of new literary criticism called deconstructionism. This movement is based primarily on the works of Jacques Derrida who questioned the tenets of classical literary theory. First of all, the deconstructionists doubt the possibility of an author's accurate transmission of his thought into writing. Furthermore, they question *Wissenschaft des Judentums* or the scientific and objective study of Judaism.

Deconstructionists doubt that authors can maintain their pure thoughts when they put them on paper. They base their arguments on two contentions. To begin with, when the author writes his thoughts he uses grammatical technique in his attempt to persuade the reader. The persuasive element in the writing adulterates the pure thought, and consequently distorts the intent of the author. Christopher Norris expresses this clearly when he states that "rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous

literary texts and realize the multiple meanings and intents found in them.

Returning to Rabbinic exegesis, we find that the Rabbis share several methodological and philosophical theories with the deconstructionists. Jose Faur makes the point that the Rabbis were already familiar with the problems presented by the deconstructionists and formed modes of interpretation which circumvented these tensions. *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* sets this forth as follows: "Golden doves we shall make for you with silver dots . . . 'Golden doves we shall make for you' — that is the Torah that the oraculum taught in the mind of the Almighty, 'with silver dots' — R. Abba Bar Kahana said 'These are the letters.'" The Rabbis themselves tell us that the ideal thoughts of God differ from their articulation in the Torah. Rabbinical interpretation relaxes the tension between "ideality" and "articulation", and sheds light on the pure thoughts of God. Because of the problems of language the Rabbis don't attempt to analyze the specific intent of the author; they break from conventional reading and interpret the text on multiple levels.

Even with respect to *peshat*, the Rabbis realized, as do the deconstructionists, that a monist reading of text is not viable. Because of the "silver dots" characteristic of Torah,

the text is open to various interpretations. In fact, it is stated with regard to variant opinions "These and these [represent] the words of the living God."

With regard to the methodology of the *Zohar*, the Rabbis foreshadow the deconstructionists. Because of the written word's ambiguity, Derrida desired to "liberate the word." A structure of reality established around the word would be surrounded by mystical readings. The same principle applies to Kabbalistic interpretation in the *Zohar*: A skeletal framework is established around a word, giving birth to myriads of esoteric meanings. The word *Bereishit* is a clear example of this. Literally meaning "in the beginning," the mystical influences of the word abound. Consequently, hundreds of different meanings were interpreted by the *Zohar*. Obviously, this was based on the premise that the true intent of the author could not be exposed. In short, from Faur's work we see that both the Rabbis and deconstructionists, sensitive to the problem of objectivity, developed forms of exegesis which clearly manifested the realization of these tensions.

Geoffrey Hartman's literary analysis of Jacob's struggle with the angel clearly demonstrates the resemblance of deconstructionism on p. 6



Jacob Wrestling With the Angel

passages which could not be understood without interpretation. Auerbach gives us a comprehensive elaboration of the multilayeredness of the Bible and its ripeness for exegesis.

In lieu of this, the Rabbis established various methods of exegesis, and labeled them *PerDeS*. The letter "P" stands for *peshat*, which is the plain literal reading of the text without the assistance of hermeneutical laws. The root of the word is to spread or stretch out and means figuratively to uncover the meaning of the word. The letter "R" stands for *remez* which is the interpretation of verse through hidden codes. *Remez* does not concern our issue, and therefore, it will not be dealt with. The letter "D" stands for *derash* and is the homiletic expression of Biblical verse, which is arrived at via the use of hermeneutic laws. *Derash* is done on the basis of the cultural and psychological climate of *Klal Yisrael*, and gives the Rabbis power to generate meaning and significance as it reflects Jewish culture and lifestyle. The final letter "S" stands for *sod* and is comprised of the Kabbalistic inferences extracted from verse. The importance of *sod* shall be discussed in detail later.

possibilities of referential aberration."

The second argument, which denies the ability of the author to express his true intent, is philosophical in nature. At times an author will write a sentence with various components, e.g. A,B, and C. For each component the author has a specific meaning. However, he doesn't realize that the whole of the sentence, D, has a different meaning than the sum of the parts.

Another problem regarding extracting the true meaning from the text lies in the psychological makeup of the reader. In the early part of the nineteenth century it was assumed by German scholars that one could study humanities objectively. There are certain universal categories determining the culture of the Jews, and these categories, written into text, could be perceived absolutely. It was also assumed that scholars were free from subjectivity, and could analyze literature empirically. This theory has been dispelled by deconstructionists. They contend that a person's subjective perceptions taint his literary objectivity. Benjamin Lee Whorf states this beautifully when he writes, "No individual is free to describe nature with absolute partiality". Deconstructionists believe in a polysemic study of

Jacob wrestles with God, 1860 woodcut by Junius Schmitt von Carolsfeld  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob\\_wrestling\\_with\\_the\\_angel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob_wrestling_with_the_angel)

By ROBERT KLAPPER

It was a quiet cool Catskill Friday night in July and I was sitting on the lawn outside my camp's *beit midrash* learning *parashat Korach*. Desert rebellion seemed an incongruous thing to be reading about in those pastoral surroundings, in fact it seemed totally unreal, but the art of the dialogue gave the story life nonetheless. The ironic twists in Moshe's speeches to the agitators were simply awesome and the deeper levels of the text equalled the surface. I left my seat and went in search of people to share my thoughts with. The first person I met put a damper on my emotions, though. "I don't like learning that way," he said. "It turns Torah into a book." Another was only slightly less depressing. "I think someone says a little of that," he commented after I had finished. "I don't know the rest."

Two attitudes pervade Orthodox's general response to new methods of Bible study. The first is fear — fear that our sacred texts are not strong enough to withstand the full force of modernity and fear that rabbinic interpretation will fail similarly. The second is disbelief — unwillingness to believe that there can be anything in the Torah and *kai vachomer* any method of learning that has not already been discovered by the rabbinic exegetes of past generations.

Literary criticism, following as it does the deprecation of Wellhausen and his academic descendants, has met unsurprisingly with a frigid reception in the Orthodox world. But the reflex nature of the response should not obscure its raising of serious issues. Daniel Feit, in the December issue of *Hamevaser*, formulated those issues in interesting if somewhat paradoxical fashion. Can literary

criticism analyze the Pentateuch without evaluating God's work and treating Him as just another imperfect author? And does literary criticism really do anything the *Rishonim* didn't?

The first question can be dealt with in a variety of ways. Certain critical theories deny even the possibility of aesthetic evaluation, and there's also the possibility that the Torah conforms to an artistic standard beyond human comprehension. Actually, one may argue that it is the best-written work around on our level. More interesting is the idea that the Torah's perfection need not extend to the artistic realm; art is not the Torah's primary concern, and quite possibly it at times subordinates aesthetics to higher priorities. At some point, however, even this answer must lead to a simple statement of faith, as "higher priorities" are not always in evidence. And the Torah is so well written that artistic concerns seem to have played at least some role in its creation. Among the issues this raises are whether other concerns are ever subordinated to aesthetic ones and whether purely artistic devices, e.g. meaningless puns, exist in the Torah.

It must be noted that literary criticism, particularly when applied to Bible, is more an interpretative tool than an evaluative one. Its discovery, false or true, of certain devices within the biblical text is therefore less important than its reexplanation of various canonical tales. In halakhic sections few problems occur because *midrash halakha* works on an entirely different wavelength, and even in narrative portions, conflicts with rabbinic interpretation can generally be disposed of on the grounds of *shiv'im panim leTorah*. However, in certain instances the

rabbinic interpretation claims exclusivity for itself, and occasionally the disagreements go beyond the meaning of a text to its nature.

The most glaring discrepancies occur when a canonical text bears the literary hallmarks of at least slight fictionalization. Can we deny conclusions reached regarding the canon that we would accept with regard to other texts on the basis of the same methodology and evidence? Perhaps. The implications of human theories can never be more than probabilities, and we can easily reject them owing to the certitude of faith. But on issues not central to Judaism, why should we bother to deny what elsewhere we would accept as the legitimate product of our reason?

In cooperation with Mr. Feit, I have just succeeded in attributing to the *Midrash* some rather controversial ideas. After all, "the *Midrash* employs techniques strikingly similar to those of literary criticism." Perhaps it is time then to deal with Mr. Feit's second question and determine precisely what differentiates the Orthodox critic from the rabbinic *darshan* and what the former has to add to our study of *Tanakh*.

Literary criticism is fundamentally a democratic field; any decent reader can employ its techniques to some extent. And as the Rabbis on the whole were good readers, it follows that they did employ those techniques when interpreting *Tanakh*. Of course, they did not apply them comprehensively, but then neither does any modern critic.

I think the major difference between contemporary and rabbinical modes of interpretation is contained in a single phrase, the title of Meir Sternberg's latest book: *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*. What is dif-

# The Literary Lamdan

## In Praise of the Bible Critic

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ferent about modern criticism is its attempt to develop a poetics, a theory of Torah interpretation. Learning *Tanakh* is becoming a rigorous endeavor rather than a hit-or-miss intuitional enterprise. In some respects this is rather frightening, as it means that we will now have to come out from behind the cloak of traditional authority and defend our interpretation of the canon. But it is also invigorating; we can finally discuss rather than debate the text.

Literary criticism has contributed macrocosmically too, of course; there are tools of analysis available that *Chazal* never heard of. Sternberg's analysis of point-of-view and gap-filling in the Joseph story should be read by those who doubt this, as indeed it should be read by everyone. But the field's major contribution has been its democratization of the canon. The Torah is available to all sophisticated readers now, not just those with *ruach hakodesh*. No doubt many will be frightened by this.

But with Jewish and perhaps even particularly Orthodox youth as dangerously disinterested and unappreciative of *Tanakh* as they are nowadays, I hope more will have the courage to use modern methods to restimulate interest in the texts that are the source of our religion. At times when I discuss *Tanakh* with previously uninterested people the gleam in my eye is returned. I'm waiting for a certain Friday night in July. Maybe someone will come to me with something he has just got to get off his chest about desert rebellion. Maybe he won't even have to rebel to do it.

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# Bilaam Under Attack

## Exegetical Assault On the Gentile Seer

By WENDY ZIERLER

The story of Bilaam, as told in Numbers 22-24, is filled with drama, poetry, and poignant message. But instead of these elements, the traditional exegetes chose to focus on the deprecation of Bilaam, the gentile seer. They link his name with a long chain of epithets — proud, insolent, cunning, hypocritical, false, ungrateful, treacherous, cruel, blasphemous, deceiving, and sanctimonious. These interpretations pose a problem given that the narrative (chapters 22-24) treats Bilaam's involvement with Balak blandly, not angrily. Why do the traditional exegetes view Bilaam so disparagingly?

In the Biblical account, the King of Moab summons Bilaam to curse Israel. God orders Bilaam not to curse Israel for they are blessed. So Bilaam refuses to go with Balak's messengers to Moab. Balak will not take no for an answer. Sending out an even more honorable delegation, he promises Bilaam great rewards if he agrees to damn the Israelites. God concedes and allows Bilaam to join Balak's retinue on the condition that he speak only what God puts in his mouth. So Bilaam sets out on his she-ass. God becomes enraged with him and sends an angel to block his path. Ironically, the seer, Bilaam, fails to see the angel, although his she-ass does. Bilaam strikes the obstinate

donkey for failing to follow the path. But then God opens Bilaam's eyes to the sights of the angel who rebukes him for not realizing that his errand is obnoxious to God. Bilaam admits his sin and offers to return home if God so wishes. But God allows him to continue, on the condition that he pronounce only what God tells him. So three times Bilaam ascends to high points to look down upon the encamped Israelites and receive God's word; three times he is inspired to praise and bless Israel. Balak is incensed. Bilaam claims that he had no choice but to speak God's word, and as a consolation, offers Balak information about Moab's fate at the end of days. He then returns to his country.

This story is rounded out by six referent biblical passages, one in Micah 6:5 and one in Joshua 24:19 which provide the same information as the Numbers 22-24 account, and four others which are as follows:

(1) Deuteronomy 23:4-6, "No Ammonites or Moabites shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord; none of their descendants, even the tenth generation, shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord; because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt, and because they hired Bilaam, the son of Beor, from Pethor of Aram-Naharaim to

curse you. But the Lord, your God, turned the curse into a blessing for you, for the Lord your God loves you."

This passage associates Bilaam with two wicked nations as an accomplice to their crimes.

(2) Joshua 13:22, "Together with others that they slew, the Israelites put Bilaam the son of Beor, the augur, to the sword."

Here, the Bible sets Bilaam apart as a great malefactor who deserves the punishment he receives. Whereas Numbers 22-24 refers to Bilaam as a prophet, this passage considers him a mere augur.

(3) Numbers 31:8, "Along with the other victims, they slew the kings of Midian. They also put Bilaam the son of Beor to the sword."

(4) Numbers 31:15, "You have spared every female! Yet they are the very ones who at the bidding of Bilaam induced the Israelites to trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor, so that the Lord's community was

the words "from Pethor Aram-Naharaim," that Bilaam is the son of Jacob's archenemy, Laban the Aramite; just as Laban sought to ruin Jacob, his son sought to destroy Jacob's children with the power of a curse.

None of them take too kindly to the notion of a gentile prophet, especially a corrupt, evil gentile like Bilaam. Therefore, in their interpretation of the verse in which God speaks to Bilaam, they find every way possible to minimize Bilaam's prophetic powers. The Tannaic sources admit that Bilaam receives prophecies from God but downplay the nature of these prophecies by comparing them to the visions of Israelite prophets. The *Sifre* on Deuteronomy compares Bilaam to Moses; whereas God related to Moses intimately as someone beloved, God related to Bilaam as a household hired hand. The Amoraic writers do not readily accept Bilaam as a prophet; to them, this notion threatened the unique place of Israel in God's affections. Therefore, when *Bamid-*

bar *Rabba* 14:20 makes the same comparison between Moses and Bilaam, it attempts to account for God's granting prophecy to this gentile:

It was taught [of Moses], "And there hath not arisen a prophet since in Israel!" (Deut. 34:10). In Israel there has not arisen one like this, but there has arisen one like this among the nations of the world (Bilaam). This was in order that the nations of the world might have no excuse for saying, "Had we possessed a prophet like Moses, we should have worshipped the Holy One, Blessed Be He."

*Vayikra Rabba* also differentiates between Bilaam and the Jewish prophets; while the latter "retained a compassionate attitude towards both Israel and the idolaters," (Jeremiah moans for Moab and Ezekiel takes up lamentations for Tyre) cruel Bilaam "rose to uproot" the whole Jewish nation "for no crime."

Furthermore, the reason why the story of Bilaam appears in *Tanach* is to make it known why God removed His *shekhinah*

struck with the plague."

These two verses once again associate Bilaam with the Midianite warriors, and go one step further: they inform us that it was Bilaam who advised Balak to lure the Israelites into "profaning themselves by whoring with Moabite women" who invite the people to the sacrifices for their god (Numbers 25:1-2).

Seeing how many times the Bible repeats the Bilaam story we realize how profoundly it impacted on the Israelite consciousness, and the last two passages cited indicate that there is much more to this story than Numbers 22-24 conveys. Based on these passages, the traditional exegetes read into each verse of the Numbers 22-24 evidence of Bilaam's villainy. Words and phrases that would otherwise appear neutral are reinterpreted entirely.

First they look at this gentile seer's name: Bilaam the son of Beor. The Targum of Psuedo-Jonathan breaks the name into two parts, *bala* and *am* to mean "he who swallows up the people of Israel." Tractate *Sanhedrin* provides the alternate etymology, *belo am* — without a people — and explains "son of Beor" to mean Bilaam whose "son is a beast." The Talmud claims further from



The She-ass Of Bilaam Sees the Angel Of God

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# Deconstruction

cont. from p.4

tionist exegesis with Rabbinic exegesis. Like Auerbach, Hartman is first bothered by the iconic obscurity of the passage. The core consists of only six verses and only seventy words, which makes the significance of the passage hard to understand. Hartman is also puzzled with the context of the struggle. Why does the fight begin? What is significant of the outcome? The text beckons interpretation. Placement of the story is also problematic. Why does the struggle take place during his imminent confrontation with Esau? Why does it occur when his family is on the other side of the river and he is all alone? From a broader perspective, the Bible could have omitted this sequence of events, which would allow a smoother narration of the conflict between Esau and him.

Obviously, these verses do not lend themselves to literal interpretation. The obscurity and succinctness of the passage does not allow it. Rather, a homiletic recreation is the only hope, and Hartman proceeds to do this.

As an introduction, Hartman reminds the reader of Jacob's "unadmirable" traits. To begin with, Jacob took Esau's birthright. Furthermore, with regard to labor Jacob is said to have deceived his father-in-law. Hartman contends that Jacob used deceit and theft to remain on top. However, in the struggle with the Angel, Jacob remains alone. He has no invidious advantage with which to conquer the angel, "And Jacob was left alone." It is here that Jacob has the opportunity to prove himself as a Patriarch once and for all. Through this unmediated and pure encounter, Jacob's tainted character is discarded. No longer is Jacob called a "heel" (*yaakov*, from the word *eken*), but *Yisrael* which some scholars claim is derived from the word *yashar*, or upright. This is Hartman's interpretation, which, incredibly, is

almost identical to midrashic interpretation.

In *Midrash Rabbah* it says "The Lord is alone, so too Jacob is alone." Jacob is alone during his encounter with God (i.e.-the Angel). Before this, Jacob's character was tainted and the only thing which can absolve his sins is a confrontation alone with God. The similarities between Hartman and the Midrash are obvious. Both realize that literal reading of this obscure passage is impossible; consequently they construct similar methodologies which make this text intelligible. Hartman's realization of the credibility of Midrashic interpretation is evident from his statement "little is more important today than to remind secular literary studies of the richness and subtlety of those strange Rabbinic conversations which have been disdained for so long in favor of more objective and systematized modes of reading." The necessity for *derash*-type expression is clearly found in Hartman's thoughts. He asks for a reading that would lead to a "symbolic explosion," "to hold its significance fully open."

Above we examined the exegetical methodologies and philosophical theories of both the Rabbis and the deconstructionists. Both schools are aware of problems relating to the transmission of thought into writing, and both interpret text with these problems in mind. It is important to note, however, that Faur, Hartman, and to some extent Derrida assume at least a minimum amount of structural reality regarding text. Without such an assumption, interpretation would be impossible. Radical deconstructionists do not assume this, and do not accept any sort of interpretation as viable. However, if we accept these assumptions we can realize the insight that our Rabbis had in exploring text, insights that weren't developed by literary critics until very recently.

# On Bilaam

cont. from p.5

from the idolatrous nations, "for this man arose from within their midst," and abused his powers.

Later exegetes adopt an even more deprecatory attitude. Ibn Ezra says that God granted Bilaam visions only to prevent him from cursing the Israelites. Therefore, the oracles of Numbers 22-24 are anomalous and represent no actual prophetic ability. Sfor-

no on Numbers 22:6 contends that Bilaam had the power only to curse, and for this reason, Balak asked him to curse the Israelites rather than bless the Moabites with protection. In *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides calls Bilaam a prophet, but relegates him to the second lowest degree of prophecy, a "divine inspiration," in which "a person feels as if something came upon him and as if he received a new power that

encourages him to speak." He adds that Bilaam's tenure as a prophet lasted "only while he was obedient; as soon as he joins efforts with Balak and the Midianites, his powers wane. Malbim goes further and completely denies that Bilaam was a prophet, attributing his so-called oracles to sorcery and augury. Ramban reads the verse, "And the Lord uncovered Bilaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in his way," (Numbers 22:28) and remarks that if Bilaam were a real prophet God would not have needed to open his eyes.

In short, the Rabbis despised Bilaam. They construct lurid accounts of his wicked deeds; some even accuse him of committing bestiality with his donkey. But why? God says to Bilaam in Numbers 23:20, "If these men have come to invite you, you may go with them. But whatever I command you; that you shall do." If he agrees to let Bilaam join Balak's men, why does He thoroughly humiliate Bilaam before the angel. The Rabbis see this incident as proof of Bilaam's wickedness, for only a truly evil man would deserve such punishment. But this reasoning is circular. What heinous crime did Bilaam actually commit within the Numbers narrative?

According to most of the traditional commentators, God disapproved of Bilaam's ardent desire to curse the people. Bilaam seems to think that there are instances in which God does not know the workings of the world. When God comes to Bilaam and asks him who the men were who came to see him, instead of answering, "God, Creator of the Universe, all is known to you, nothing is invisible, and you ask me this," he actually tells God the identity of the men. Avramel also points to the fact that Bilaam neglects to tell Balak's ambassadors that he will not curse the Israelites. Thus he leads them to believe that God approves the cursing scheme.

The problem with all of the aforementioned interpretations is that they consistently read into Bilaam's actions and words malicious intentions that do not exist in the text. The written story suggests that Bilaam consulted with God, complied with His will, and in general behaved very commendably:

But Bilaam said to Balak, "And now I have come to you, have I the power to speak freely? I can utter only the word that God puts in my mouth. . . . And when Bilaam saw that it was good in the eyes of the Lord to bless Israel, he went not as the other times in search of enchantments, but set his face against the wilderness.

Moreover, Bilaam's oracles describe God's relationship with Israel with sensitivity and poignancy unsurpassed by the Jewish prophets. Why do the traditional exegetes feel compelled to say that "as a man puts a bit in the mouth of a beast and makes it go in any direction he pleases, so the Holy One" forced Bilaam to pronounce these blessings?

Geza Vermes, author of a comprehensive work on this topic, points to Numbers 31 and Joshua 13 as the sources for the anti-Bilaam material. Vermes claims that since both of these passages can be attributed to the priestly authors of the Bible, one can conclude that these verses supplement, thus change the original story. But for readers who do not follow this theory of the multi-authorship of the Bible, the discrepancy between the Numbers text and other texts remains problematic.

Judith Baskin in her book, *Pharaoh's Counselors — Job, Jethro, and Bilaam in Rabbinic and Patristic Tradition*, suggests that the nature of diaspora life influenced the

interpreters into taking an anti-gentile slant. Living among hostile peoples, the rabbis refashioned episodes and characters to soothe the pains of the people and to polemicize against the oppressors. Indicative of this tendency is the Talmudic association of Bilaam with the proponents of Christianity.

The myriad interpretations of Bilaam's many sins attest to one fact: in their zeal to condemn the gentile, the exegetes neglect to emphasize the real message of *Parashat Balak* — the magnanimity and great mercy of the God of Israel. Despite Israel's repeated infidelity, God maintains an unwavering commitment to the covenant. Ibn Ezra draws an important parallel between the Bilaam narrative and the story of the *meraglim*, as told in Numbers 13-15. God would have been much happier if the people had trusted in His promises that the land was good and conquerable and had not felt compelled to send the spies. Similarly, God would have preferred it if Bilaam had never embarked on his journey to Moab. Going further, we find that this juxtaposition of stories reveals much more; the two narratives act as each other's complement or foil. The *meraglim* episode begins with the people's preparations to enter Israel. It ends, however, with the tragic sentencing of the entire generation to death in the desert. The Bilaam narrative assumes the same pattern but in reverse; it opens with the tragic threat of a curse upon Israel, and ends in triumph, as Bilaam blesses the people. Whereas the *meraglim* story focuses on God the stern judge, the punisher of the people, the Bilaam story focuses on God the merciful, the protector of a new generation of Israelites that will inherit Canaan.

Certain leading words point to the relationship of these two stories. First we find that the word *efes* signals the turning point from good to bad or bad to good in both stories. In the *meraglim* story this occurs in 13:28, when the spies begin their sedition and thus condemn themselves, saying, "However (*efes*), the people who inhabit the country are powerful and their cities are fortified and very large; moreover, we saw Anakites there." The turning point for Bilaam appears in Numbers 22:35, when God ensures that Bilaam will bless the people. "Go with the people," God says, "(*efes*) but you must say nothing except what I tell you."

The word *vayichar* signposts the various turns in the Bilaam narrative itself. First we find it when God is angry at Bilaam for setting out to Moab: "*Vayichar of Elokim ki halekh hu*," (Numbers 22:22) then when Bilaam gets angry at his she-ass and is forced to apologize before God: "*Vayichar of Bilaam, vayakh et haaton*." As the story turns in favor of the Jews, Balak gets angry at Bilaam for failing to curse the Jews, "*Vayichar of Balak el Bilaam*." After Bilaam finishes his oracles and his parable about the Jewish hegemony at the end of days, the Israelites begin worshipping Baal Peor and we read, "*Vayichar of Elokim beYisrael*." In this scheme, Numbers 25 ends the Bilaam story negatively. It seems from this that the exegetes directed their attack against Bilaam, a gentile character, to offset the shame of the Jews.

In the process, however, they greatly dilute the potent moral of the Bilaam story — the beautiful truth of Bilaam's blessings: No harm is in sight for Jacob No woe in view for Israel The Lord their God is with them, And the King's acclaim in their midst.

(Numbers 23:21)

Despite the many sins committed by the people of Israel in the wilderness and throughout the ages, God continues to love and forgive.

The entire governing board of Hamevaser wishes Adam Ferziger and Naomi Weiss a Mazal Tov on their engagement. May they be *zocheh* to build a *bayit neeman beYisrael*.

# The Historiography of E. E. Urbach

By DAVID ZINBERG

The student of Jewish History interested in the traditional attitude toward the study of philosophy will inevitably encounter arguments based on the Mishna (*Avot* 2:14) "R. Elazar said: Be diligent in the study of Torah and know what to answer the *apikoros*." Is this to be understood as an exhortation in favor of philosophy or admonition against it? Interestingly enough, *Rishonim* summoned this in support of both educational viewpoints. Those in the first camp, R. Bahya ibn Pakuda, Rambam, and Meiri, claim that only someone well-grounded in philosophy can respond to the heretic on his own terms, while the latter school, R. Yonah and Sforno, understand diligence in the study of Torah as the necessary and sufficient preparation for refuting the heretic.

Rabbinic aphorisms have been used not only to validate philosophical questioning, but to substantiate political views as well. However, constantly quoting statements of *Chazal* out of context one may lose the original meaning. At a recent debate between Norman Podhoretz and Alan Dershowitz, reference was made to Hillel's lapidary dictum (*Avot* 1:14) "If I am not for myself who is for me? And being for mine own self what am I?" This was interpreted as enjoining the Jewish community to balance the Neo-Conservative tendency to protect Jewish interests and the Liberal concern for minority rights. The attractiveness or validity of the above views notwithstanding, is there not a simple meaning to these and other Rabbinic sayings, devoid of political or philosophical treatment?

A major contributor to the study of the "peshuta shel aggada" has been Ephraim

E. Urbach, Professor of Jewish History at the Hebrew University. Urbach studied at the Breslau Rabbinical Seminary and the Universities of Breslau and Rome during the 1920's and 30's. The purpose of his *Chazal: Pirkei Emunot VeDeot* (Magnes, 1969 and in English translation as *The Sages — Their Concepts and Beliefs*, 1975) is, in his own words, to examine "the history of the beliefs and concepts of the Sages against the background of the reality of their times and environment." An illustration of Urbach's approach is his explanation of R. Elazar's aforementioned remark. The nature of the heresy of the *apikoros* is reflected in the etymology of that term and in the latter half of the mishna. Epicurus, the third century philosopher, preached that the gods are indifferent to the affairs of men. Urbach claims that R. Elazar intended to contradict this notion by stressing "And know before whom you labor and who is your master who will pay you the reward of your labor (*Ibid.* 2:14)." Thus, the subject of the mishna is really Providence, not Philosophy. This is not to say, however, that a *Rishon's* understanding of this mishna is wrong if it differs from the contextual interpretation. Like a verse, a mishna can be understood on many levels.

In addition to *emunot vedeot*, Urbach has also attempted to show that Halakha has a *peshat*. In his recently published *HaHalakha — Mekoroteha VeHipatchuha* (Yad Latalmud, 1984), he traces the evolution of Jewish Law up to the close of the Talmud, paying careful attention to the historical reality in which the first "Halakhs Men" found themselves. Urbach subjects the interpretations and decisions of the Tosafists to a similar historical analysis in his *Baalei*

*HaTosafot* (Mossad Bialik, 1968). Some may take umbrage at any attempt to analyze Halakha historically, as this seems to remove its special, divine character. Besides, one may ask, now that the Halakha is established, why bother researching its etiology? Urbach is aware of these objections, to which he responds: "History was incorporated into the Halakha, but this did not dethrone it, nor did History make Halakha relativistic. Historical analysis, properly done, helps us understand the deep meaning, and sometimes even the simple meaning of the Halakha, and the degree of its influence."

Urbach's scholarship is impressive and his arguments may be convincing. However, the reader of these and all historical writings must be sensitive to the subjectivity inherent in them and attempt to draw the fine line between fact and interpretation. This is particularly important when studying histories of religious ideas, which are likely to reflect the personal biases of the author. The historian will always approach the facts with an *a priori* "concept of history," be it Marxist theory or, *lehavdil*, Orthodox Judaism. In one extreme form of this phenomenon, the historian may be so rationalistic and anti-religious in outlook as to be totally unsympathetic to the religious sensibilities of the subjects under his study. This was a criticism leveled against Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. By ignoring religion, a real historical factor, he rendered his conclusions inaccurate.

In Urbach's case, we are offered a glimpse of the thinker behind the historian in his most recent book, *Al Tziyonut VeYahadut — Iyurim Umasot* (Hasifriya Hatziyonit, 1985), a collection of essays and lectures. The impression made on this reader was one of a

man who, despite his secular academic position, views both the past and future of Israel in a religious light. He discusses the concepts of *Kedushat Yisrael* and the providential nature of Jewish history with a seriousness not heard from empiricists. More specifically, Urbach calls for the inclusion of Halakha in any new system of Jewish thought. Lest one conceive of Halakha as being purely theocentric (as Y. Leibowitz does) he devotes one lecture to emphasizing its humanistic aspects.

What emerges is a picture of Urbach as an historian with a deep religious sensibility, one that will positively influence — from the perspective of the devout Jew — his interpretation of Jewish religious and legal history. Some may argue, however, that for the *ben Torah* this is not enough; the academic world is an unreliable source of theories on "matters that stand at the zenith of the universe." Although the historian may be personally religious, the argument goes, he is not a "religious persona" — a public role model for the Religious Life. The title "Professor at such-and-such University" often conjures up images of a secular, critical outlook that will surface in the historian's presentation. This may be dangerous for the *ben Torah*, untrained in textual criticism. After all, Conservative Judaism was originally known as Historical Judaism. There is much truth to this claim. Nevertheless, the Torah world, while being ever suspicious of the teachings of academia, can be thankful for the pioneers of the historical study of Halakha and Aggada, and who *do* believe in the divine nature of Torah and *Knesset Yisrael*. Ephraim Urbach should therefore be a most welcome vendor in the marketplace of Jewish ideas.

## The Tu BiShevat Seder

By SHARON HERZFIELD

"When you shall besiege a city . . . you shall not destroy its trees. . . for is the tree of the field a man that it should be besieged by you (*Deut.* 20:19)." In interpreting this passage, the Kabbalists understood trees to be a symbol for man. Trees remain a significant symbol throughout Kabbalistic thought: the Tree of Life, the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Sefirot, an inverted tree-like figure of God's emanations flowing through creation.

Like man, trees are accorded their own time of judgement and rebirth. *Rosh Hashana Lallan* is considered one of the four New Years of the world. The Talmud in *Rosh Hashana* cites a difference of opinion as to the precise date for *Rosh Hashana Lallan*: the first of *Shevat* according to Beit Shammai and the fifteenth of *Shevat* according to Beit Hillel. The Meiri explains that the fifteenth of *Shevat* is the midpoint of the winter season: it falls six weeks after the first of *Tevet*, which is in turn six weeks before *Rosh Chodesh Nissan*. A fascinating story in the Arabic agricultural tradition is told by Rav Hai Gaon. The Arabs believed that during the month of *Shevat* God casts down three burning coals to warm His creations on Earth. The first warms the air as it descends on the seventh, the second falls on the fourteenth, heating the water which enters the trees and the third lands on the twenty-first of *Shevat*, warming the soil as a final preparation for spring. The tradition explains that the arrival of the second coal, which sends the warmed water surging through the trees, proclaims the New Year.

In Halakha, *Tu BiShevat* was designated the day upon which to celebrate the relationship between man and nature. Classified by *Chazal* as a minor festival, fasting is prohibited and *tachanun* is not said. The customs of *Tu BiShevat* link fertility and agriculture; for example, the Jews of Kurdistan would arrange a circle of fruit around a tree and pray for an abundant harvest and a large family. The Kabbalists explained that on the *Rosh Hashana Lallan*, there is re-vegetation of the earthly tree through the flow from the Divine Tree. By eating the fruits and reciting appropriate passages, the divine flow is maintained. According to Lurianic Kabbala, every physical being owes its existence to the sparks of holiness within it. Saying the *berakha* over the fruit releases these holy sparks, thus nourishing the soul.

Sensitive to the correlation between man and tree, the Kabbalists of Safed established an intricate ritual for *Rosh Hashana Lallan*. A special *Amida* was recited in which each *berakha* was preceded by a relevant passage. Rabbi Nathan of Gaza edited a compendium of liturgical readings for the eve of *Tu BiShevat* entitled *Pri Etz Hadar*, which drew upon Tanakh, Midrash, Talmud and Zohar. The Jewish community would gather in the synagogue to recite *piyutim* and celebrate with a special *Tu BiShevat seder*, in which four cups of wine were drunk and fruits of *Eretz Yisrael* were eaten.

R. Chaim Vital, a student of R. Isaac Luria, describes the significance and ceremony of this *seder* in his work, *Etz HaChaim*. He classifies thirty species of fruits, fifteen to be eaten on *Tu BiShevat* The

*Tu BiShevat seder* is an elaborate ritual: each of three groups of fruit contain ten fruits which represent the ten *sefirot* through which God channels creation. Each group corresponds to a level of the creation of the world — a physical representation. The lowest level is *Asiya*, physical creation, a world in desperate need of protection. The fruits which represent this level have an inedible outer shell and include pomegranates, walnuts, almonds, pine-nuts, chestnuts, hazelnuts, coconuts, Brazil nuts, pistachios and pecans.

*Yetzira* is the next level of creation, known as formation. Its fruits, such as olives, dates, jujubes, cherries, apricots, peaches, loquats, plums and hackberries, have protected hearts or inedible pits. According to Kabbalistic symbolism, the edible portion of the fruit represents holiness, while the shell and pit serve to protect the holiness inside and around it.

Whereas *Atzilut*, the highest level of emanation, is beyond any representation by fruit, *Beriah*, the next highest level, includes fruits which are closest to the level of pure emanation and need no inner or outer protection; the entire fruit is edible, as grape, fig, apple, citron, lemon, pear, raspberry, blueberry, carob, and quince.

According to the *Chemdat HaYamim*, the *Tu BiShevat seder* begins with the recitation of *Tefillat HaEz*. White and red wines are used to symbolize nature's cyclical transition of seasons, the deathly paleness of winter awakening into spring, bursting into summer and then into the luscious richness of fall. The white wine represents nature as dormant,

barren, devoid of physical growth. Red wine is nature in bloom, flesh and blood, birth and revival. Neither extreme is wholesome; the ideal is the mixture of both the red and white wines symbolizing the shades between fall and summer.

Each of the four cups is filled before each sequence of fruit and then drunk at the end of each course. The first cup contains pure white wine, the second pink — made with white and a hint of red, the third cup an equal mixture of red and white, producing a deep rose shade, followed by the last cup which contains only red.

A course of fruit is composed of the many different species and levels of creation. Each fruit is accompanied by an appropriate reading from the Talmud, Midrash or Zohar. Upon the completion of the *Tu BiShevat seder*, it was customary to plant a tree. The Talmud (*Gittin* 57a) describes *netia shel simcha* — the planting of a tree on a joyous occasion in the Jewish Life Cycle, such as a cedar sapling at the birth of a son and a cypress sapling at the birth of a daughter. The wood from these trees would then be used as the poles for the bridal canopy at their wedding.

Since the establishment of the state of Israel, it has become customary to plant trees on *Tu BiShevat* and to sound the *shofar* in a park or garden, thanking the trees for providing us with food and shade. Thus, the age-old rituals and customs are renewed and redefined to add a fresh dimension to our celebration.

STUDIES

# The Philosophy of Medicine

## From Hippocrates To Maimonides

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By ALAN TENNENBERG

James Bryce wrote that "medicine is the only profession that labours incessantly to destroy the reason for its own existence." This labor has developed for generations, as the tools and methods steadily advance with increases in Man's technical and scientific knowledge, and it will continue for generations to come, for as much as already has been learned, unimaginably more remains to be discovered.

At the base of modern medical practice lie fundamental precepts that may be traced to the ancient and medieval giants of the discipline. Hippocrates of Cos (460-380 B.C.E.) and Moses Maimonides (1135-1204 C.E.) are regarded as two of the most important figures in the development of the practice of medicine. Both authored extensive treatises on the diagnosis and treatment of illness and proposed guidelines by which the physician should perform his art, all of which are highly regarded to this day. Let us examine the medical philosophies and the clinical know-how of these two physicians and how these shaped their attitudes on the doctor-patient relationship and the physician's role in society.

Both Hippocrates and Maimonides also stressed the importance of close observation of the patient, for through symptomatology the physician can make an accurate diagnosis and administer the appropriate treatment. For Hippocrates, accuracy of observation was a partial compensation for a near total lack of anatomical knowledge. Experience in anatomy was limited to work with animals, and only vague ideas existed about the function of organs. Hippocrates' medical aphorisms consist of concise statements on a variety of illnesses and treatments, but all observations are of an external nature, dealing with emission of body fluids, swelling and pain. There is indication of more detailed anatomical knowledge only in the area of bones, while nerves, tendons and muscles were often confused. The practice of medicine without in-depth knowledge of

on the inner part of the covering of the eyeball, the ciliae, and the two membranes that cover the brain, the pia mater and the dura mater. Although much more about the human body and its illnesses had been studied and documented by this time, Maimonides still encouraged his students to experiment and observe for themselves and to develop an attitude of criticism and skepticism toward accepted medical views. However advanced medical science had become since the time of Hippocrates, its implementation still required precise assessment of the symptomatology and accurate diagnosis.

Aside from these differences in the extent of medical knowledge, Hippocrates and Maimonides had very different ideas about the role of the physician as healer. In the time of Hippocrates, the temples of Aesculapius attracted a particularly strong following. The gods were still believed to produce miraculous cures. Hippocrates totally rejected religion and superstition, not even mentioning them to condemn them. He saw illness as an imbalance of natural origin and perceived the role of the physician to be one of mediator between the patient and nature, promoting the natural healing process. He writes in his treatise "On Epidemics": "It is nature itself that finds the way; though untaught and uninstructed, it does what is proper." And in the book "On Aliment," "Nature acts without masters." Left unattended, the tendency of the natural order is to correct imbalances that arise within the system. Therefore, the role of the physician is to observe the signs and symptoms and to decide the appropriate means and the correct moment of intervention to cooperate with the natural cure which is already operating innately.

Maimonides sees medicine in an entirely different light, strongly emphasizing God and religion in illness and cure. He rejects superstition and mystical cures in favor of observation and deduction, reaffirming Hippocrates' scientific approach, but asserts that this approach to medicine and a divine presence are not mutually exclusive. In fact, Maimonides sees a healthy body as a prerequisite for a healthy soul, making medicine a form of promotion of ethics and religion. It is not, however, irreligious to turn to men for the treatment of illness instead of turning to prayer; the means of curing disease are placed into the hands of man by God, with specific permission for the practice of medicine granted in the Torah. At the same time, Maimonides says, it must not be forgotten that God is the true healer, and the doctor is only the instrument of God. For example, in *Hilkhot Berakhot* 10:21, Maimonides writes that if someone submits himself to a surgical procedure, he should say, "may it be God's will that this should cure me," and upon leaving he should say, "blessed is God who heals the sick." The emphasis in these passages should be placed on the word "God."

The Hippocratic and Maimonidean medical philosophies were particularly well suited to the state of medical science and technology in their respective eras. Students of the Hippocratic school adopted a decidedly laissez-faire attitude toward treatment, the doctor serving as an instrument to promote the natural healing process. Most treatments involved herbal concoctions applied externally as salves or ingested as purgatives. Blood letting was also common.

Such methods of treatment, correctly applied at the appropriate time, were believed to aid the reestablishment of the correct humoral balance. More radical treatment might have been looked upon as an intrusion upon the natural healing process, in violation of the basic tenet of Hippocratic medical philosophy. Conveniently, more advanced

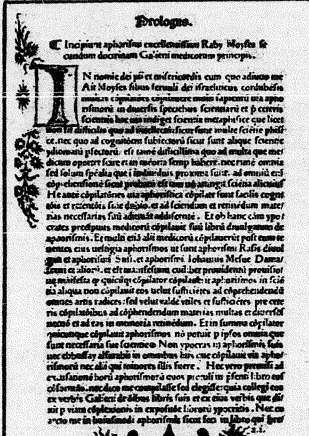
skills in treatment, for they are all God-given. The Maimonidean medical philosophy was thus perfectly suited to its time and actually promoted further advances in medical science.

Despite the differences between Hippocrates and Maimonides, they are both highly concerned with medical ethics, the treatment of patients, and the conduct of the physician. Hippocrates addresses these areas in his various treatises and in the famous Hippocratic Oath. On the subject of medical ethics, the oath stipulates, the physician will abstain from conduct that is "deleterious and mischievous," will give no "deadly medicine," and will abstain from acts of corruption and seduction. In regard to the treatment of patients, Hippocrates writes in his treatise "On Art" that the major goal of the practice of medicine is "to remove the suffering of the patient." In the oath he states that the physician must follow the regimen that will be to the greatest benefit of the patient.

Hippocrates places particular emphasis on what is appropriate conduct for a physician. This is because, as he writes in "On the Law," "The art of medicine is the most beautiful and noble of all the arts, but on account of the inexperience of those who practice it, on the one hand, and the superficiality of those who judge physicians, on the other hand, it is often ranked behind other arts." Doctors must act in a manner befitting the stature of their profession. Therefore, Hippocrates includes in the oath a pledge to protect patients' confidentiality, he writes "On Honorable Conduct" to guide the physician in such matters as how to enter a patient's room, and he states in "On the Physician" that the doctor should always be well groomed and well nourished "because the public believes that those who do not know how to take care of their own bodies are not in a position to think about the care of others."

To illustrate Maimonides' views on medical ethics it is tempting to turn to the famous "Physician's Prayer" attributed to him. In it the doctor entreats, "May the love of my art actuate me at all times; may neither avarice, nor miserliness, nor the thirst for glory or a great reputation engage my mind; for, enemies of truth and philanthropy, they could easily deceive me and make me forgetful of my lofty aim of doing good to Thy children." The authorship of this prayer is, however, highly disputed. Many claim that it is the work of Dr. Marcus Herz of Berlin (1747-1803). Fortunately, even without the prayer there are sources to draw upon. Maimonides writes in the *Mishneh Torah* that even the mere possibility of danger to human life overrides the Sabbath. For example, if one doctor says that violation is necessary but another says that it is not, the Sabbath should be violated. This precedence of the preservation of human life over the observance of certain laws is indicative of the great value placed upon human life in Judaism and the high standard of ethics that the physician is expected to maintain.

The medical philosophies of Hippocrates and Maimonides are in many ways different, as are other philosophies of how medicine should be practiced. There is one theme, though, that remains constant throughout; that is, the treatment of the patient is primary, not the treatment of the illness. Future advances in the field of medicine can be beneficial only if this concept be preserved.



The from page of Maimonides' Aphorisms



A medieval representation of Hippocrates

**Hippocrates wrote  
"Nature acts without  
masters". . .  
Maimonides gave  
medicine a religious  
role**

anatomical and physiological mechanisms necessitated intense scrutiny of the external manifestations of organ dysfunction, this being the only way any sort of treatment could be prescribed.

Maimonides' knowledge of anatomy and physiology was infinitely more precise than that of Hippocrates. In *Pirkei Moshe*, a book of medical aphorisms, Maimonides presents fifteen hundred aphorisms dealing with anatomy, physiology, pathology, symptomatology and diagnosis, surgery, gynecology and other areas of medicine. The first chapter of the work contains aphorisms pertaining to the anatomical features and activities of human organs. They become so specific as to describe the "soft moist hairs"

procedures were technically impossible due to the lack of anatomical and physiological information available to the physician. It seems that the state of medical science and the Hippocratic philosophy may have been mutually supportive. The philosophy was defined by the type of treatment at hand, and once accepted, it retarded the development of new methods of treatment that would be considered intrusive upon the natural healing process.

By the twelfth century, however, a vast amount of knowledge about the human body, its structure, and its function had been amassed, making more technically advanced methods of treatment feasible. Such procedures would not have been contrary to the teachings of Maimonides, because the physician is licensed to use any knowledge and