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## ABOUT KOL HAMEVASER

*Kol Hamevaser*, the Jewish Thought magazine of the Yeshiva University student body, is dedicated to sparking discussion of Jewish issues on the Yeshiva University campus and beyond. The magazine hopes to facilitate the religious and intellectual growth of its readership and serves as a forum for students to express their views on a variety of issues that face the Jewish community. It also provides opportunities for young thinkers to engage Judaism intellectually and creatively, and to mature into confident leaders.

*Kol Hamevaser's* primary contributors are undergraduates, although it includes input from RIETS Roshei Yeshiva, YU professors, and outside figures. In addition to its print magazine, *Kol Hamevaser* also sponsors special events, speakers, discussion groups, conferences, and shabbatonim.

We encourage anyone interested in writing about or discussing Jewish issues to get involved in our community, and to participate in the magazine, the conversation, and our club's events. Find us online at [kolhamevaser.com](http://kolhamevaser.com), or on Facebook.

**KOL HAMEVASER** THE INDIVIDUAL  
THE JEWISH THOUGHT MAGAZINE OF AND COMMUNITY  
THE YESHIVA UNIVERSITY STUDENT BODY

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# Editor's Note: Reimagining Community, Reimagining the Individual

BY SHAYNA HERSZAGE

Many aspects of Judaism rely on the balance between the individual and community. Community elements are evident through the importance of prayer services in a *minyan*, communal structures such as *mikvaot* (ritual immersion pools), and Jewish schools' position as pillars of communities. Meanwhile, the individual is not disregarded, as is clear from individual rituals such as *tefillin*, individual dilemmas of faith and doubt, and developments such as individual *hitbodedut*, a form of Hassidic meditation. Additionally, there is clear interplay between the individual and community as we consider both our obligations to the community and the community's obligations to us.

Many of these diverse topics, as well as others, are explored and addressed by several undergraduate writers in this edition of *Kol Hamevaser*. We, the *Kol Hamevaser* team of editors, layout, and writers, can not help being proud of the effort and research that went into writing, editing, and putting together this enlightening edition focused on such a relevant theme.

Just over a year ago, the concept of a community took on an especially poignant form. When COVID-19 grew into a pandemic, communities urgently needed to adjust. For months, most community developments were either cancelled, postponed, or held virtually. During this time, the individual experience was often more present than that of the communal; holiday meals only with the immediate family and solitary prayers are only a couple of the formerly communal activities that had turned individual. Rather than focusing Jewish cultural and ritual experiences around the community, they took on a more intimate quality. While this often allowed for introspection and individuality, it also frequently contributed a quality of loneliness to these experiences.

Eventually, however, communities began to open up more. Schools and synagogues developed COVID protocols that altered aspects of the experience, but services and education were happening in person once again. As we all adjust along with the changing balance between the individual and community, I urge you to consider your role in the community, and the community's role for you as an individual member.

Additionally, it is worthwhile to consider those who are left out when we discuss the concept of a community. For example, when we discuss the *minyan*, the *Beit Midrash*, and other such community institutions, how do we include — or exclude — women from the conversation and the narrative? When we describe Jewish milestones, are we excluding people with disabilities? As the Jewish and secular worlds alike continue to make strides in LGBTQ+ inclusion, how often are we listening to their voices in the religious dialogue? In considering the relationship between the individual and the community, it will benefit us all to think about the importance of considering how *all individuals* relate to the community. If we can obtain this level of respect and understanding for the diverse individuals around us, our communities as a whole will be stronger.

*Shayna Herszage is a graduating senior from Columbus, Ohio. Following a year at Nishmat in Jerusalem, she has spent the past three years at Stern College for Women studying English (creative writing track) and psychology (neuroscience track).*

# Leadership Models in Tanach: A Case Study on Sefer Yona

BY DAPHNA ZIFFER

Tanach is a great source of inspiration for different models of leadership. There is a plethora of strong and weak leaders, leaders who have sinned and leaders who seem superhuman, leaders who Chazal have praised and leaders who Chazal have extensively criticized. Each model of leadership has a multitude of invaluable lessons. In Tanach there are numerous instances where God appears to a Navi and lets them know that He plans on or will destroy a group of people. The traditional leadership model entails the Navi then advocating for man and attempting to appease God. Yona shatters this model with his own form of leadership. Yona tells God to destroy Ninveh instead of giving them the opportunity to do *teshuvah*, which is exactly the opposite of what the other Nevi'im do. Yona is absent, he is removed from the people, does not seem to value their lives, and disagrees with God's will. Why is this alternative form of leadership canonized into Tanach and what is the purpose of *Sefer Yona*?

When God threatens destruction to different Nevi'im, there is a typical response used by Avraham, Moshe, Yermiyahu and many other leaders. Avraham hears that God plans on destroying Sedom<sup>1</sup>, Moshe is told that God will erase B'nai Yisrael from the Torah after they sinned at *chet ha-egel*<sup>2</sup>, and Yermiyahu is informed of the impending destruction of the Beit Hamikdash as a result of B'nai Yisrael sinning<sup>3</sup>. All of these leaders give similar responses and their results are similar as well. In the traditional leadership model the Navi is first told that people have sinned and destruction is coming as a result of the sins. Avraham is told that Sedom has sinned, so it will be destroyed. "The outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin so grave!:

I will go down to see whether they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has reached Me; if not, I will take note<sup>4</sup>." Similarly when Bnei Yisrael builds and worships the golden calf, God informs Moshe of their sins and then says He will destroy them, "Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely... Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation<sup>5</sup>." The same trend can be observed with regard to Yermiyahu's prophecies of destruction. God says that Bnei Yisrael have sinned and there will be mass destruction as a result, "I am going to bring such disaster upon this place that the ears of all who hear about it will tingle. For they and their fathers and the kings of Judah have forsaken Me, and have made this place alien [to Me]<sup>6</sup>." In all these cases the leader is informed of a sin, and the leader does not act passively.

The traditional leadership model then entails the Navi advocating for the people. Avraham tries negotiating with God to not destroy Sedom based on the amount of righteous people in the city. Avraham says, "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" When there are not fifty righteous inhabitants of Sedom, Avraham continues to advocate for Sedom, although Avraham is ultimately unsuccessful. In a similar sense Moshe negotiates with God to

not erase Bnei Yisrael from the Torah and start anew with Moshe saying, "Let not Your anger, O Lord, blaze forth against Your people, whom You delivered from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand. Let not the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that He delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth.' Turn from Your blazing anger, and renounce the plan to punish Your people. Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel."<sup>8</sup> Although Yermiyahu does not actively negotiate with God to attempt to undo his will, Yermiyahu does work tirelessly to help B'nai Yisrael do *teshuva*. Yermiyahu's prophecy results in imprisonment and serious personal struggles. Yermiyahu even writes about wanting to die as opposed to being a Navi, "Accursed be the day That I was born! Let not the day be blessed When my mother bore me<sup>9</sup>!" Similarly, Moshe tells Hashem to kill him if he does not forgive Bnei Yisrael for their sin, "Now, if You will forgive their sin [well and good]; but if not, erase me from the record which You have written<sup>10</sup>!" Yermiyahu, like Avraham and Moshe, does not simply accept God's plans of destruction.

Yona on the other hand does not argue with God when he is told about God's plan to destroy Ninveh. In fact, Yona does not want to go to Nineveh because he does not want them to do *teshuva*. Yona, "started out to flee to Tarshish from the Lord's service<sup>11</sup>" Yona is ultimately forced to enter Ninveh and then shares his prophecy. When God does not destroy Ninveh, Yona is upset: "God renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out. This displeased Jonah greatly, and he was grieved<sup>12</sup>." Yona, unlike Avraham, Moshe, and Yermiyahu,

wants to be killed because Ninveh was saved. “Please, Lord, take my life, for I would rather die than live.<sup>13</sup>” The desire of Yona compared to those of Avraham, Moshe, and Yermiyahu are completely different.

When comparing Yona’s model of leadership to the traditional leadership model, it seems obvious that Yona is exhibiting a weaker model of leadership. He is not invested in the people doing *teshuva* and he is upset when they are saved. Ultimately Nineveh’s successful *teshuva*, which results in their salvation, would indicate that Yona is the most successful Navi. That is puzzling after comparing his response and reaction to Avraham, Moshe, and Yermiyahu. Avraham does not succeed in convincing God, so Sedom gets destroyed, “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<sup>14</sup>.” Although God does not destroy Bnei Yisrael, God’s original intention, Moshe is not able to return Bnei Yisrael to the place of love and cherishment they had with God before the sin of the *egel ha-zahav*. There is a rift in their relationship with God. Moshe continues to pray for Bnei Yisrael for 40 days, “I threw myself down before the Lord—eating no bread and drinking no water forty days and forty nights, as before—because of the great wrong you had committed, doing what displeased the Lord and vexing Him. For I was in dread of the Lord’s fierce anger against you, which moved Him to wipe you out. And that time, too, the Lord gave heed to me.<sup>15</sup>” His initial attempt towards full *teshuva* is not met with success. Although Yermiyahu tries to get B’nai Yisrael to do *teshuva* they do not. The Beit Hamikdash is destroyed, the *kelim* (holy vessels) are stolen, and many members of B’nai Yisrael are killed. Yona, who does not argue

against God to save Ninveh, is forced to share his prophecy with Ninveh. Upon hearing this prophecy, the citizens of Nineveh enter into a state of mourning and repentance, and they are saved, “they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon them<sup>16</sup>.” The result of Yona’s prophecy is extremely puzzling considering he breaks the traditional leadership model in a seemingly negative way, by running away from giving others the opportunity to repent, but Ninveh ends up doing *teshuva* and being forgiven regardless of Yona’s clear objection.

One significant difference between Yona’s leadership and the traditional leadership model is how the Navi talks to God. Avraham, Moshe, and Yermiyahu are talking, arguing, and negotiating with God. It is a conversation that entails trust and the knowledge that God is all-knowing and correct. Avraham eventually accepts the idea that Sedom is worthy of destruction. Moshe does not force God to ignore the sins from the *egel ha-zahav* and immediately forgive Bnei Yisrael, rather Moshe accepts that it will take multiple attempts, and will never be the same as before. Yermiyahu accepts both the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash and entering into exile. All three leaders are partners with God, but are ultimately subservient to Him. Conversely, Yona’s actions indicate that he believes he knows better. When Ninveh is saved Yona is distraught.

The difference between Yona and the traditional leadership model’s communication with God is indicative of their views on both society and the individual. Avraham, Moshe, and Yermiyahu are focused on guiding a group of people. They understand that the average person is not at the level of communicating with God, but they serve as an intermediary between God and the

people. Their goal is to help elevate the ordinary individuals and enable them to be great. Conversely, Yona is not concerned about the ordinary members of society. When society fails Yona does not feel the need to help them.

Why do we read *Sefer Yona*, why is it part of Tanach, and why was Ninveh successful in doing *teshuva* when their Navi was not helping them? Perhaps *Sefer Yona* is canonized not because of Yona’s leadership, but to teach about the power of the individuals. Radak answers that Yona’s prophecy is canonized as a mode of *teshuva* for future generations. The people of Ninveh do *teshuva* the first time they are told about destruction. The inhabitants of Nineveh realized when they heard Yona’s dramatically short prophecy that he was not going to help them do *teshuva*. He did not say how to do *teshuva* or even that they could do *teshuva*. Instead of the leader helping the individuals reach a great level, Yona abandons the group. *Sefer Yona* is a story for the helpless, when all seems to be lost it is not. Nineveh was promised destruction, but after engaging in deep *teshuva*, they were saved. It is a *sefer* for exile, during a time when there is no leadership that can talk to God, society as a whole possesses the skills to engage in *teshuva*. The leadership is weak, but it is possible to do *teshuva*. Perhaps the real heroes of *Sefer Yona* are the inhabitants of Ninveh. A weak leader means the people need to be strong. A strong leader gives the community the opportunity to relax and not try so hard. In *galut* we identify more with the Yona and Ninveh model. Our leaders, although they are great, cannot solve all our problems, only we can. Having leaders who are not capable of conversing directly with God does not mean that their leadership leaves the community stranded, rather it can empower each individual to grow.

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## Notes:

- 1 *Bereshit* 18:21
- 2 *Shemot* 32:10
- 3 *Yermiyahu* 19:3
- 4 *Bereshit* 18:20-21
- 5 *Shemot* 32:7,10
- 6 *Yermiyahu* 19:3-4
- 7 *Bereshit* 18:23-25
- 8 *Shemot* 32:11-13
- 9 *Yermiyahu* 20:14
- 10 *Shemot* 32:32
- 11 *Yona* 1:3
- 12 *Ibid*, 3:10-4:1
- 13 *Ibid*, 4:3
- 14 *Bereshit* 19:24-25
- 15 *Devarim* 9:18-19
- 16 *Yona* 3:10

## The Duality of Tzedakah

BY CHAIM BOOK

Perhaps the mitzvah that most highlights Judaism's dualistic emphasis of both the individual and the community is the mitzvah of *Tzedakah*. As we will see, the halachic sources employ a careful balance of individual moral duty, as well as a coerced distribution of wealth. There develops a society in which a minimal threshold of distribution is upheld as a right of the poor, while moral duties of giving are strongly encouraged. The ideology is based on an understanding of God as the true proprietor of a world in which man is given commission, joined by an imperative for man to improve character. Society is thereby maintained spiritually and physically.

### The Biblical Sources

The one direct source for charity in the Torah is found in *Devarim*<sup>1</sup>:

"When there is a destitute person among you, any of your brothers, in one of your settlements in your land that the Lord, your God, is giving to you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your destitute brother. Rather, you shall generously open your hand to him, and extend to him any credit necessary for providing that which he lacks.... Make every effort to give to him, and do not feel bad when you give to him, because for this the Lord, your God, will bless you in all of your deeds and in all of your endeavors. For there will never cease to be a destitute person in the land; therefore I am commanding you to open your hand generously to your poor and destitute brother in your land."

Charity is at least an obligatory, basic duty. The commandment is two-fold: a negative commandment to not close one's heart and hand and a positive commandment to give. Specifically, the commandment is to give with an open heart, readily

and without regret. At this level, the commandment is solely voluntary; there is no mention of compulsion to give or a specific punishment for not giving. Instead, there is direct heavenly reward for giving. Also delineated is the amount required, the amount "sufficient to what he needs." Finally, the verse limits the scope of the obligation to a "brother."

There is also a more ambiguous reference to charity in *Vayikra*<sup>2</sup>:

When your brother becomes poor and his ability to support himself fails where he is with you, you shall support him, [even if he is] a stranger or a sojourner, and he shall live with you.

Here even "strangers and sojourners" are included in the obligation to support. Also mentioned is a nebulous reference to an amount, "he shall live with you."

### Charity as a Monetary Right of The Poor

Although the Torah passages imply an obligation to give only out of goodwill, the Gemara in Bava Batra<sup>3</sup> states that charity can be forcibly compelled. As a religious imperative mandated by Halakhah, compulsion can be applied just like with any other commandment in the system. It is not clear to what extent the compulsion discussed in the Gemara applies. Only an obligation on one's property, a *Shibud Nechasim*, in which the obligation is to ensure the reception of the charity, would cause *Beit Din* to forcibly distribute the property. However, it is also possible that charity is only a *Chovat Hagavra*, a religious duty on the benefactor to assume the moral act of giving, in which the outcome is not relevant. In the latter, there would be no right for the system to take property away because doing so will not accomplish the goals of the mitzvah.

The rule of thumb is that any obligation for which the reward

is stated in the Torah cannot be compelled by the courts<sup>4</sup>. The assumption is that the stated reward is enough of an incentive to fulfill the mitzvah without requiring compulsion. As seen in the verse in *Devarim*, the reward of charity is God's blessing. How then can the Gemara call for the compulsion<sup>5</sup> of *Tzedakah*? Some *Rishonim*<sup>6</sup> choose to reinterpret the nature of the coercion mentioned in the Gemara. However, to many commentators, this problem indicates that the compulsion of charity is not based on the standard regulation of religious responsibilities.

The Ketzot Hachoshen<sup>7</sup> understands the court's ability to force one to give *Tzedakah* as a proof that *Tzedakah* is actually a *Shibud Nechasim*, a full monetary right, of the poor. In this view, the commandment was designed based on the distribution of one's money so that the poor have a monetary claim on it. Compulsion can be enforced because it is functioning not as an incentive to fulfill the mitzvah but as a just distribution of rightful property. This is the explanation of the Ritva<sup>8</sup> who mysteriously writes that charity can be compelled because not doing so "will cause a loss to the poor", ostensibly he means to say that the poor have a monetary claim on *Tzedakah* which allows the *Beit Din* to forcibly obtain their *Tzedakah*. The Ketzot furthers this contention with the Gemara in Ketubot<sup>9</sup> which explains that charity can be forcibly distributed from the wealth of one who has gone insane. This is especially significant because such a person is not compelled to fulfill other mitzvot.

Understanding charity as the monetary right to which the needy would have a claim can explain other factors of *Tzedakah* as well. Normally, monetary rights can only be transferred through a *kinyan*, a symbolic and well-defined act of allocation. Nonetheless, the Gemara in *Rosh Hashana*<sup>10</sup> states that just the pledge of *Tzedakah* is considered

given charity in which the poor have a monetary claim. Understanding *Tzedakah* as a monetary right of the poor could explain how *Tzedakah* can be considered given even without the usual rules of acquisition. In fact, the Machane Ephraim<sup>11</sup> writes that if a poor person were to forcibly grab the charity, he may keep it if it is clear that the person that he was taking it from had no intention to give it to anyone else. Again, this can only be justified if the poor person has a monetary right to the charity. Moreover, while children normally would not be responsible for their father's religious laxities, The Beit Yosef<sup>12</sup> rules that children would inherit the obligation of their father's charity pledges. Presumably this too is because they are required to upkeep his monetary obligations, *Tzedakah* included. Finally, as seen in the verse, the halakhic sources require that the amount of charity is "the amount he (poor person) is missing." Although there are suggested amounts, these are only because the donator cannot be forced to impoverish himself. Theoretically, every poor person would seem to have a claim to what he is missing.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the key basis for this facet of *Tzedakah* can be gleaned from The Tur who calms the anxiety of the philanthropist "because he has to know that his money is nothing but a deposit for him to accomplish the will of the Depositor and that is His desire to distribute to the poor from him."<sup>14</sup>

As can be seen from The Tur, the philosophical justification for the distribution of wealth is that individual property rights are merely God commissioned loans. God willed that all people have what is needed for them. Therefore, *Tzedakah* is the right of the poor.

### Charity as a Moral Duty

It would seem that there is another aspect to *Tzedakah*. The Shulchan Aruch<sup>15</sup> writes that one fails to fulfill his obligation if he does not give "with a friendly countenance, with joy and

with a good heart, empathizing with the plight of the poor person and offering words of comfort." *Tzedakah* is not just there to sustain the needy, but to promote moral virtues of compassion and magnanimity. In fact, even the poor are obligated to give *Tzedakah*.

The nature of *Tzedakah* in promoting moral goodwill is especially noticeable in many of Rambam's positions. Rambam<sup>16</sup> famously opines that it is better to repeat the act of giving in smaller amounts many times than to give the same amount in one lump sum. The emphasis is the impact of *Tzedakah* on one's heart and character even if the amount given will have an equal effect on society. Rambam<sup>17</sup> furthers this position in his hierarchical list of levels of charity. If *Tzedakah* was only about maintaining the needs of society, the levels of charity should be measured by effectiveness and quantity. Instead, Rambam prefers charity of insufficient amounts given with kindness over sufficient amounts given resentfully. This can also explain Rambam's subjective definition of the amount of charity required. He understands that for some people, the Torah's requirement of "what is missing" is much more than others.<sup>18</sup> If *Tzedakah* was only about ensuring the bare requirement of living, one cannot be required to give more. However, if the purpose is to develop morals, then it is one's duty to ensure that no one feels lacking.

Finally, this emphasis can explain the various priorities involved for charity. First, there is a priority to spread wealth as far as possible, and not to only give to one person or cause.<sup>19</sup> If *Tzedakah* obligation was just about the poor receiving their personal necessities that would not be necessary. Moreover, the priority of *Tzedakah* to be given to people that are closer to you can be explained by the fact that acts of kindness influence others towards acts of kindness.<sup>20</sup> In order to create a more harmonious

society, the system ensured that people who interact with each other more consistently will be kind to each other more frequently as well. It follows that *Tzedakah* is more about spreading moral virtues than helping the financial position of the poor. If *Tzedakah* was only about the right of the poor, those that need it most would be top priority.

### Charity as Both a Right and a Duty

Many commentators<sup>21</sup> note distinctions within the two biblical sources for *Tzedakah*. First, the reward for giving charity which is incentivized by the verse is only for giving with a goodwill and without regret. In contrast, the act of giving itself is not incentivized, indicating that the two facets of giving and goodwill are distinct ideas. Moreover, the passage in *Devarim* requires giving in a brotherlike fashion, with kindness and friendly temperament. Dissimilarly, the passage in *Vayikra* seems to discuss a more communal obligation which applies not only to brothers but to strangers as well. Finally, the model in *Vayikra* seems to discuss more of a maintenance obligation to provide for community members' basic needs so that they are able to "live with you." The model in *Devarim*, however, extends the priorities of an individual to open his heart and extend his hand to provide for others' needs beyond the bare minimum, even fulfilling the subjective needs of the "amount he is missing." These distinctions within the Torah passages of two aspects of *Tzedakah*, of individual and community and benevolence and provision, provide the framework for a unique understanding of the halakhic formulation of charity.

Rambam, in discussing the importance of charity, associates the mitzvah with the legacy of Abraham. Based on the verses in *Bereishit* 18, Rabbi Binyamin Zimmerman<sup>22</sup> notes that it was Abraham's commitment to righteousness and justice which made

God choose him. However, there is another aspect to Abraham: the Gemara<sup>23</sup> writes that Abraham was the first person to refer to God with the title "Master." The recognition of God's mastery, or proprietorship, of the world, gave Abraham the very wherewithal to commit charitable acts.

It would seem that there are two aspects to the halakhic perspective of charity. One must give because it is God's world, and therefore one has no inherent right to personal property, but one must also give because that is a moral duty. This is the representative feature of Abraham. He is remembered for his righteous kindness and for his justice. Yet, the reason he was able to do so was out of recognition that everything is God's world.

Understanding this dual nature of the *Tzedakah* obligation sheds new light on the earlier discussion of compulsion. Rashba<sup>24</sup> rules that we cannot forcibly distribute a person's wealth. This understanding suggests that *Tzedakah* is only a moral duty of the benefactor. However, as Rabbi Nissim of Gerona (the Ran)<sup>25</sup> asks, this seemingly goes against the Talmud in *Ketubot* mentioned earlier, which clearly writes that one can take away from a person who is insane, a person who cannot be forcibly obligated in moral duties?

Rabbi Nissim answers that forcible distribution would be dependent on whether the person is physically present while *Beit Din* distributes his wealth or not. If he is present, the court would distribute his wealth, but if he is not, which is the narrative in which Rashba is discussing, the court is unable to.

The Ketzot Hachoshen<sup>26</sup> explains the difference between him being physically present or not. When the person is present, we are seizing his possessions as an extension of himself, and it is no different than forcing him to fulfill his moral duty. However, if he is not there and we

cannot force his moral person, then the system would not be able to force his possessions either.

As mentioned earlier, The Ketzot understands that charity is a monetary claim of the poor. The Machane Ephraim<sup>27</sup> asks that if this is true, why is the court unable to distribute his wealth if the benefactor is not present, for instance when he travels overseas?

Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman<sup>28</sup> suggests that it is the very dichotomy of the individual's moral development versus the communal maintenance obligation that is the focus of the tension. Rashba places an emphasis on the moral development achieved by the duty of *Tzedakah*. Therefore, when the individual is faced with that obligation, the court cannot impede that development by forcibly distributing his wealth. If *Beit Din* would give the charity for him, the system would be removing his opportunity of character improvement, which is the religious imperative. However, for one who does not have this moral duty, the court has nothing preventing them from distributing his wealth. The previously mentioned examples which proved that charity was a right of the poor were cases where inculcating the moral virtue would not be applicable, either because it had already been fulfilled because of the pledge or because the person is insane and moral virtue cannot apply. Essentially however, Rashba agrees that *Tzedakah* is a right of the poor.

The differences in opinion amongst the commentators as to the precise definition of the obligation can be explained based on the level of emphasis on each side of this dichotomy. Either the world as God's domain is the primary emphasis and man's becoming a giver is only an extension of that, or there are two separate qualities. In the latter, the idea of becoming a giver is given independent significance, and thus,

by virtue of it being an obligation of virtue, it must be entirely voluntary and cannot be compelled.

### Conclusion

From careful analysis of the sources, it seems that the halakhic framework of determining a system of distributive justice is two-fold. There is a goal of creating a giving society and there is a goal in ensuring that everyone has what they need. These two objectives stem from different passages in the Torah.

The passage in *Vayikra* creates a universal goal but is limited to bare necessity. It grants a communal sustenance so that the poor have fundamental claims to basic necessities. It is based on the principle that everything in the world belongs to God, who wishes everyone to have what they need. However, the purpose of *Tzedakah* does not end there. The passage in *Devarim* extends the notion of charity as a moral duty. It is an individual duty, which is based on the magnanimity of the giver. It hopes to inculcate virtues of brotherly love and kindness.

While the halakhic decisors argue about which aspect is more fundamental, the balance of these two values is what is considered

when determining the framework of distributive justice. Ultimately, the utopian society is one in which a community's needs are sustained but also complete with individuals characterized with giving personalities.

*I would like to extend a personal thanks to Professor Rabbi Itamar*

*Rosensweig for pointing me to many great sources and discussion about this issue in his Philosophy of Law class*

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### Notes:

- 1 *Devarim* 15:7–11
- 2 *Vayikra* 25:35
- 3 8b
- 4 *Chullin* 110b
- 5 Rashi, ad loc. *Chullin*
- 6 For example, see Rabeinu Tam to *Bava Batra* 8b, Tosfos Achfey L'Rav Nosson
- 7 Rabbi Aryeh Leib Heller, *Ketzot Hachoshen* 290, 3
- 8 *Ketubot* 49b
- 9 *Ibid*, 48a
- 10 *Ibid*, 6a
- 11 Rabbi Ephraim Navon, *Zechiya Umatana* 8
- 12 Rabbi Yosef Karo, *Sheilot UTeshuvot Rema*, Siman 47
- 13 See Aruch Hashulchan 249, 2-4, Also Rambam *Matnos Aniyyim* 1, 3
- 14 YD 247
- 15 YD 249:3
- 16 *Avot* 3,15
- 17 *Mattenot Aniyyim* 10:7–14

- 18 *Mattenot Aniyyim* 7:3
- 19 See *Eruvin* 63a, also *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah* 257,9
- 20 See Rabbi David Ariofof, L'reacha Kamocho, also Rabbi Daniel Feldman "Priorities in Tzedaka" <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/734391/rabbi-daniel-z-feldman/priorities-in-tzedaka/>
- 21 See R' Chaim Soloveitchik in *Reshimot Shi'urim Nedarim* 1:208, *Minchas Chinuch Mitzva* 479, 3, also *Rashash Bava Batra* 8b
- 22 Shiur #20:Tzedaka The Heart of the Mitzva. Rav Binyamin Zimmerman <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-20tzedaka-heart-mitzva>
- 23 *Berachot* 7b
- 24 *Ketubot* 49b
- 25 On the Rif, *Ketubot* 49b
- 26 *Ketzot Hachoshen* 290,3
- 27 *Tzedakah* 1
- 28 *Shuirei Rav Elchonon Bava Batra* 5, 2

## The Wisdom of the Community Over the Individual - An Analysis of a Single Halakhic Decision

BY DAVID SCHMIDT

### Introduction

Many routine Pesach-Eve procedures become complicated by the added element of that day landing on Shabbat. Concerns regarding how to eat the three meals required, how to dispose of *chametz*, and how to properly conclude Shabbat and initiate Pesach simultaneously, all remain as present concerns. Additionally, in times when the *mikdash* stood, concerns regarding the bringing of the *korban pesach* loomed over the contemporary Jewish leadership. In

dealing with these issues, a particular problem appeared to the *chachamim* that garnered a peculiar response.

"They said to Hillel: Our teacher, if one forgot and did not bring a knife on the eve of Shabbat and cannot slaughter his Paschal lamb, what is the law? He said to them: I once heard this halacha from my teachers but I have forgotten it. But leave it to the Jewish people; if they are not prophets to whom God has revealed His secrets, they are the sons of prophets, and will certainly do the right thing on their

own."<sup>1</sup>

This response seems to undermine everything we know about traditional problem solving within the *psak halacha* chain of command. The standard procedure starts with the questioner approaching a legal authority, who then passes it up to more established decision makers until nobody knows. Once nobody knows, the decision follows the rules of doubt (or *safek*) and the questioner proceeds accordingly.

This method has been around,

arguably, before the giving of the Torah, as Yitro says in *Shemos*: “Set these over them as chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, and let them judge the people at all times. Have them bring every major dispute to you, but let them decide every minor dispute themselves.”<sup>2</sup> Post-Sinai, the source of absolute Rabbinic authority, elevated to the word of God, was manifested in the negative commandment of “*Lo Tasur*,” to not turn from the words of the sages neither right nor left.<sup>3</sup> In the Gemara in *Psachim* it seems the sages vacated their position of leadership and returned the question to the hands of the general public. This decision did not remain extant exclusively at the time of Hillel but remained canonized in future legal texts, like Maimonides.<sup>4</sup> In this particular case, the community was not even crystalizing the already established *gezeirah* (protective ruling) of the *beis din*<sup>5</sup>, but rather generating a solution of their own to a problem that stumped even the present sages.

What makes this intuition of the community halakhically valid not just for that moment of doubt, but for the future as well?

### Why the Reversal?

Tosafot comments that since the violation would only be one of resting your animals on Shabbat, the use of this leniency is accepted.<sup>6</sup> While this provides validity for the action, what made the proposition of passing the legal authority from individual scholars to communal intuition, viable?

In the *Teshuvot HaRAshba*<sup>7</sup> Rashba brings the idea of accepting the practice of the public as law in terms of procedures regarding excommunication: “In any place, when we do not know the central procedure of the ruling, and we see the public acting in one particular way, we canonize the practice [of the public] as the legal ruling”. This idea comes up additionally earlier on in the *teshuvot*<sup>8</sup> regarding how to secure a mezuzah in the home. Rashba points

to an additional quote in the Talmud Yerushalmi that attributes the law in a similar way to the Bavli.

Understanding this text through the lens of Rashba, we can rely on the more understandable interpretation of the text. It is not that the community’s intuition is trusted, but rather their collective practice, passed down from generation to generation, that gets used as a backup when the individual legal scholar fails to create a usable and true ruling.<sup>9</sup>

### In General Practice

Besides Torah and Halacha, this idea of relying on the public tradition over gaps in scholarly knowledge appears both in History departments as well as in the annals of medicine.

In terms of understanding the past, historians often use mythology, a source credible for little in reflecting reality, to understand the background to some everyday procedures in the lives of ancient peoples and civilizations. Raphael Sealey writes about the ancient Greek court of Areopagus, that: “Ares came to Athens and there the Council of the Areopagus was founded in order to try him. Ares was acquitted and the hill where the Council met derived its name from him. The legend of the trial of Ares is etiological, at least in part, since it explained the name, Areopagus”.<sup>10</sup> Using legends, a collection of tales kept by the masses, to understand particular details of history that may elude historians otherwise.

Within the realm of medicine, there is often a pushback from standard medical research to the belief that any homeopathic or natural remedies have anything to add within the realm of traditional healing. In 2015, Aaron Carroll published an article articulating this debate within the health arena while pointing out: “In 1998, The Journal of the American Medical Association published a theme issue on alternative medicine for common chronic medical conditions. It contained studies that showed that

yoga-based interventions improved carpal tunnel syndrome more than wrist splinting, that the Chinese practice of moxibustion significantly increased fetal activity and fixed breech presentations before delivery, and that Chinese herbal medicine appeared to improve symptoms in some patients with irritable bowel syndrome.”<sup>11</sup>

While it remained unaccepted until proven scientifically, many remedies stemming from traditional healing did prove to have a positive effect in terms of curing and providing wellness to patients.

Whether dealing with medicine, history, or Torah, the practice upheld by the people community lies in the background often dormant. It is when standard individual scholars fall short of the truth they can often count on kernels of actuality wedged in the messy practice of the everyday general public. These kernels can become crucial in times when traditional sources of knowledge have run dry, manifesting a duality between the individual scholar and the communal practice that nurtures the respective fields to which this balance is found.

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### Notes:

- 1 *Psachim* 66a
- 2 *Exodus* 18:22
- 3 *Shabbat* 23a, *Dvarim* 17:11
- 4 Rambam, *Mishna Torah*, Paschal Offerings 1:19.
- 5 *Ibid*, *Hilchos Mamrim* 2:6.
- 6 Tosafot to *Psachim* 66b, s.v.
- 7 *Responsa Teshuvot HaRAshba*, Volume 1, Letter 697.
- 8 *Ibid*, Letter 90.
- 9 This general approach takes on another name in other places in the talmud: “*puk vchazi*.” See *Brachos*

45a; *Eiruv* 14b.

10 Sealey, Raphael. “The Athenian Courts for Homicide.” *Classical Philology*, vol. 78, no. 4, 1983, pp. 275–296. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/269956. Accessed 12 Apr. 2021. [https://yulib002.m.c.yu.edu:3081/stable/269956?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://yulib002.m.c.yu.edu:3081/stable/269956?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)

11 Aaron E. Carroll, “Labels Like ‘Alternative Medicine’ Don’t Matter. The Science Does.”, *The New York Times*, available at: [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

## Poverty, Providence, Perseverance, and Perspective: The Story of Rabbi Elazar ben Pedas

BY YEHUDA DOV REISS

Rabbi Elazar ben Pedas (henceforth Rabbi Elazar) was a prominent amora in Eretz Yisrael who was a close disciple of Rabbi Yochanan after the passing of Reish Lakish. While he was born and raised in Babylonia during a time of great peace and prosperity, his adult life was marked by civil unrest and extreme poverty.<sup>1</sup> It is no surprise then that Rabbi Elazar himself was particularly destitute, nor that he exhibited a particular angst at his condition, considering that he knew what life could be like from his youth. This essay will analyze the *aggadata* in *Taanis* 25a, which tells the story of the time Rabbi Elazar complained about his dire circumstances and his ultimate acceptance of them. An analysis of the story with the aid of classical commentaries, other stories about Rabbi Elazar, other stories with overlapping themes, modern literary methods, and related research, will produce an understanding of what this story is trying to teach as a whole and what all of its symbolism is adding.

Starting with the story:<sup>2</sup>

“Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat was hard-pressed for money. Once an act of bloodletting was performed on him, but he did not have anything to taste afterward. He took a clove of garlic and put it in his mouth. His heart became weak and he fell asleep. The Sages came to inquire about his welfare. They saw him weeping and laughing, and a ray of light was shining from his forehead. When he awoke they said to him: What is the reason that you were laughing and crying? He said to them: That in my dream the Holy One, Blessed be He, was sitting with me, and I said to Him: Until when will I suffer such poverty in this world? And He said to me: Elazar, My son, is it more convenient for you that I return the world to its

very beginning? Perhaps you will be born in an hour of sustenance. I said before Him: All this, and even then is it only a possibility that things will be different? I said to Him: Are the years that I have already lived more, or are that I will live? He said to me: Those years that you have lived are greater. I said before Him: If so, I do not want You to recreate the world. He said to me: As a reward for saying: I do not want, I will give you in the World-to-Come thirteen rivers of pure balsam oil as large as the Euphrates and the Tigris for you to enjoy. I said before Him: This and no more? He said to me: But if I give you more, what will I give to your colleagues? I said to Him: And do I request this from a person, who does not have enough?. He snapped His finger [askutla] on my forehead and said to me: Elazar, my son, My arrows upon you, My arrows.”<sup>3</sup>

There are many aspects of the story that require further explanation. For one thing, what is the significance of Rabbi Elazar’s “weeping and laughing”? Likewise, what is the message of the “ray of light on his forehead” resulting from God’s “snapping His finger” at him, so to speak, and what does it mean that God “snapped His finger” and said “My arrows upon you, My arrows”? What’s the significance of God “sitting with him,” and perhaps most significantly, what is the idea of God’s offer to turn the world back to the beginning and “perhaps” Elazar would be “born in an hour of sustenance”? In addition, how are we to understand Elazar’s reaction, “All this, and (only) maybe? Are the years that I have lived (more numerous), or (the years) that I will live (less numerous)?” Finally, what is the significance of the “thirteen rivers of balsam oil” that are destined for Rabbi Elazar in the World to Come,

and what does it mean that being granted more would take away from Rabbi Elazar's colleagues? Can't God provide infinite reward to everyone? And why does it seem that God doesn't respond to this question when Rabbi Elazar asks it?

The story is clearly about a struggle with suffering. Rabbi Elazar can't stand his dire poverty<sup>4</sup> and asks God how long he must suffer for. Ultimately, Rabbi Elazar accepts his suffering and is rewarded for it. The details of the story seem to shed light on why God can't simply sustain Rabbi Elazar, what made Rabbi Elazar content with his poverty, why this acceptance warranted great reward in the World to Come, and the nature of this reward.

At the beginning of Rabbi Elazar's dream, Rabbi Elazar encounters God sitting next to him; both this imagery and the tone of the encounter suggest an extraordinary intimacy, like a heart-to-heart conversation between a father and son. This follows from a major theme in the thought of Rabbi Yosef B. Soloveitchik<sup>5</sup>, i.e. that one feels a much closer, personal relationship with God in times of distress and suffering, as opposed to the lofty and majestic experience of God that is best facilitated through times of joy and success. When Rabbi Elazar questions God about his suffering, God seems to do two things at once: He informs him that the only way to alleviate his suffering is to start the whole world again and hope Rabbi Elazar would wind up with better circumstances, and He also seems to offer that He is prepared to do this if Rabbi Elazar wants.

Keeping in mind that Rabbi Elazar's story is contextualized among a string of stories that highlight the perseverance of various Amoraim under dire poverty, God's response here sharply differs with what happens shortly before on the same *amud* to Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa. Rabbi Chanina's wife complained to him about their dire poverty and requested

that he pray that something should be given to him from heaven. He prayed, and something like the palm of a hand emerged and gave him a leg of a golden table. That night, his wife had a dream that in the World to Come, the righteous would eat at a golden table with three legs, but she would be eating on a table with two legs. She told her husband, who asked her if she was okay with eating at a defective table while everyone else would be eating at a complete table. She was not, and told him to pray that the table leg should be taken back by heaven, which it was.

Of course, unlike in our story, in this story Rabbi Chanina directly requests that he be given something. It is evident from the above story that while such a request can be granted, it comes at a heavy spiritual cost. It seems that in our story, it was implicitly understood that Rabbi Elazar would reject any such handouts. This is supported by another *sugya* about Rabbi Elazar:<sup>6</sup>

"When they would send Rabbi Elazar some gift from the house of the *Nasi*, he would not take it. And when they would invite him, he would not go there. He said to them: Does Master not desire that I live? As it is written: "He that hates gifts shall live."

Rabbi Elazar was decidedly against handouts. Admittedly, one can make a distinction between the gifts of man and heaven; the phrase "He who hates gifts shall live" is from *Mishlei* 15:27, and the context seems to be how accepting gifts can lead one to act corruptly. One way to understand this is that it will lead to him accepting bribes, which would seem to apply more to human gifts than to divine gifts. However, many of the commentators understand more generally that gaining any gifts that one did not earn with their own labor desensitizes a person to the value of an honest living and will make them more likely to act corruptly. According to this approach, even divine gifts should be an issue for this reason (and may explain why Rabbi Chanina would have lost a leg from his table in the World to Come

for accepting a divine gift, as a table is meant for eating which is necessary to live. Thus Rabbi Chanina would have been damaging his "life", that is, his integrity and/or his life in the World to Come due to his loss of integrity, as a result of taking the gift). Thus, Rabbi Elazar never asked God for a handout and God never offered him one.

So what did God offer Rabbi Elazar instead? He offered to turn the world back and start everything over again. How would this have helped? Perhaps the most straightforward understanding, advanced by several traditional commentators including Rashba<sup>7</sup>, is that many things in life are left up to chance, or *mazal*. If the world was done over again, it's possible Rabbi Elazar would be born under more favorable conditions and would have great wealth. This would not be the result of any supernatural intervention, but due to a chance role of the dice. Perhaps he would have gotten a nice job or perhaps even a large inheritance or a rich wife, which, while not earned, is still different from a gift in the sense that one naturally feels entitled to it and it therefore won't lead to carelessness or corruption. Thus, it would not diminish Rabbi Elazar's merits and it would not be through any handouts.

This approach would seem to be at a tension with popular theological views. Many Jewish texts condone<sup>8</sup> praying for one's financial welfare, despite the fact that this would seem to require divine intervention. If these prayers can take away from one's personal merits or ability to maintain integrity, why would we say them?

In light of the story of Rabbi Chanina, however, and especially in light of Fischer's article<sup>9</sup>, a distinction can be drawn. True, divine *gifts* corrupt, but *providence* doesn't. One should not seek supernatural gifts, but there is seemingly nothing wrong with pursuing God-given circumstances that favor a person better. The trouble with providence is that, as much as prayer helps and

as much as God wants the best for every individual, practically, it is complicated. Many variables go into determining a person's providence: merit and prayer are part of it, but there's also the collective merit of the nation and community, the degree of intervention required to change the circumstances, other short-term and long-term effects of such providence, and so many variables humans cannot begin to fathom. To force providence to supersede its normal calculations is the equivalent of receiving an undeserved divine gift.<sup>10</sup> The fact that Rabbi Elazar lived in a time and place where extreme poverty was rampant supports the idea that it was not so simple for providence to work in his favor.

A variation of this approach would be that God gives people (or at least those people worthy of a great degree of providence) exactly what they need in order to maximize their potential. This fits in line with the rationalist understanding that the vehicle through which prayer activates more blessing for a person is because through prayer, a person ethically develops himself and becomes worthy of greater blessing. Gifts like those given to Rabbi Chanina violate this general rule and are spiritually damaging. Likewise, for reasons unknown, God saw that it was best for Rabbi Elazar to suffer. Only under a completely different set of circumstances would it be appropriate for Rabbi Elazar to be wealthy, requiring the Earth starting over again.

Either way, it is evident that turning the world back and starting over again would have been a considerable task (though it's somewhat ambiguous precisely why), and may have even required using up Rabbi Elazar's merits (if not his character). However, it seems that Rabbi Elazar considered asking God to do it. His question, "all this, and (only) maybe?" seems to emphasize an appreciation for the significance of starting the world over again, but his follow up question made

it clear that he still wasn't ruling it out.<sup>11</sup>

Rabbi Elazar's next question is somewhat cryptic: "I said to Him: Are the years that I have already lived more numerous, or are that I will live more numerous?"

Some<sup>12</sup> understand that Rabbi Elazar was being pragmatic. How much longer would he have to suffer? If it was less than he had already suffered, he was willing to endure it, but otherwise, he'd rather have God go to the trouble of starting the world again so maybe he wouldn't have to suffer at all.

However, the Sefer Ahavas Eitan<sup>13</sup> suggests a more spiritually-oriented approach: Rabbi Elazar was aware of his own righteousness, and he figured that if he lived most of his life even under his current circumstances in righteousness then he was confident in his ability to continue doing so for the remainder of his life. If most of his years were not used up yet, then he would have had no such confidence and seemingly would have requested that God start the world over again for the chance at having better luck.

Perhaps a third approach can be suggested, where "(the years) that I have lived" are referring to his life in the current reality and "that I will live" are referring to the hypothetical number of years he would live if the world was started over again. This is reminiscent of Rabbi Elazar's preoccupation with life in the *sugya* explaining how he would refuse to take gifts.<sup>14</sup> According to this approach, Rabbi Elazar was fairly confident in his spiritual resilience even in his current circumstances, but perhaps he thought that the fact that he couldn't put food on the table meant that he would die before his time due to malnutrition. Accordingly, his question was targeted at whether wealth (together with perhaps any other changes of circumstances resulting from starting fresh) would increase his spiritual potential or decrease it. When he heard that it would decrease it, he

strengthened his resolve and said that he didn't want the world to turn back.

In any event, Rabbi Elazar was clearly struggling to accept his suffering and carefully considered the spiritual and material consequences of requesting that they should be different. While God never explains why Rabbi Elazar must suffer, Rabbi Elazar comes to terms with the fact that it is for the best (or at least, it wouldn't be worth it to try his luck and ask God to redo the world) and resolves to persevere despite his poverty.

God then tells Rabbi Elazar that because he embraced his circumstances, he will be rewarded with thirteen streams of pure balsam oil. There are a few manuscripts that read "twelve" rivers of balsam oil, but the symbolism is still difficult to decipher. Several suggestions have been offered by the traditional commentators, many of them Kabbalistic. One explanation<sup>15</sup> is that the thirteen rivers symbolize the thirteen Attributes of Mercy. In any event, they clearly demonstrate a tremendous reward for his perseverance and it is apropos that the rivers should have great material value, symbolizing that his material deprivation will be compensated for in the World to Come.

Reaching the very end of the story, Rabbi Elazar asks why there's no more reward in store for him, and God replies that it would take away from his colleagues. Rashba<sup>16</sup> seems to explain that even among the righteous, everyone is on a different level, and it wouldn't be fair if Rabbi Elazar got more than he deserved because then people greater than Rabbi Elazar would be cheated out of their well-deserved level by comparison. However, evidently this is not good enough to satisfy Rabbi Elazar, as he points out that a God of infinite capabilities can still make his reward greater and work all the details out.

God does not answer Rabbi Elazar, perhaps because the answer is above the comprehension of mortal man, or because it was a secret that even

Rabbi Elazar could not appreciate.<sup>17</sup> In any event, He does appear to respond favorably to Rabbi Elazar's persistence:

"He playfully snapped His finger [*askutla*] on my forehead and said to me: Elazar, my son, My arrows I cast upon you, My arrows. This touch caused the ray of light to shine from his forehead."<sup>18</sup>

The significance of the "ray of light" that resulted from God's "snap" is evident from a passage in *Baba Basra* 73a, the only other place in the Talmud where the term is used:

Rabba said: Seafarers related to me that when this wave that sinks a ship appears with a ray of white fire at its head, we strike it with clubs that are inscribed with the names of God: I am that I am, *Kah*, the Lord of Hosts, amen amen, Selah. And the wave then abates.

This passage implies that the "ray of light" is some sort of metaphysical destructive force. However, Ben Yehoyada<sup>19</sup> offers an interesting approach to the whole passage, suggesting that the ray of light itself symbolizes the *yetzer tov*, the Good Inclination, and the wave symbolizes the *yetzer hara*, the Evil Inclination, specifically the Evil Inclination to violate Positive Commandments. The ship symbolizes man. The Evil Inclination to violate Positive Commandments appears as if it's the *yetzer tov*, meaning that it traps a person by making him think that he's doing the right thing when he's actually sinning.

According to Ben Yehoyada, a "ray of light" refers to a certain holiness associated with the *yetzer tov*. However, the ray itself is not substantive; it merely implies something about its source. In the *sugya* in *Baba Basra*, the ray misleads sailors to think the wave is good, but in our *sugya*, the more likely interpretation is that it implies a certain goodness emanating from Rabbi Elazar. In Kabbalistic thought, the forehead is seen as a gateway to the soul, implying a certain goodness about Rabbi Elazar's core essence.

It seems from the above analysis that there was something very positive about Rabbi Elazar's persistence regarding his reward in the World to Come. Perhaps his persistence demonstrates his priorities. Out of context, his complaint to God over his material suffering seems to be a very material and unholy attitude, if made somewhat understandable given the direness of his condition. The fact that he was not even satisfied with the tremendous bounty that awaited him in the World to Come, however, highlights that his primary priority was in the spiritual realm. He was not like those that complain about their finances but don't care about their share in the World to Come; on the contrary, while he struggled to, he ultimately accepted the fact that he didn't even have his basic needs in this world, but refused to accept even the finiteness of a wondrous bounty in the Next World.

One final observation is the fact that the story is framed with Rabbi Elazar's students coming to visit him and finding him laughing and crying with the light shining from his forehead, and Rabbi Elazar recounting his dream to them. Perhaps this is at least in part to show right away how Rabbi Elazar emerged shining brighter than ever from the story, lest his initial complaints to God be met with negative reactions from the reader. But in addition to that, perhaps Rabbi Elazar's laughing and crying epitomized the bittersweet nature of his encounter with God. On the one hand, he accepted his fate (at least his material fate), and he emerged shining brighter than ever before. On the other hand, he was left without a hope for a brighter (material) future. He was laughing about his spiritual success in accepting his lot while crying over just how bitter his lot was. This reflects the difference between joy and acceptance; as much as acceptance enables one to persevere with his lot and recognize it for what it is, that doesn't make it any less bitter; on the

contrary, as the reality becomes more real, its full bitterness is only realized in a state of acceptance.

Alternatively, laughing and crying could be seen as a simple expression of extreme joy following an overwhelming experience. Accordingly, Rabbi Elazar was celebrating how his life had come into greater focus than ever before.

In any event, Rabbi Elazar's story is a remarkably rich exposition on dealing with poverty and suffering in general. It teaches that while one may not be able to understand why one must suffer, and prayer and faith will not always work to remove us from suffering, the best attitude one can adopt is one of acceptance and a recognition that God knows what He is doing. In general, one should not seek salvations one does not deserve, whether at the hands of man or God, because even if a person gets it, it can be spiritually damaging. One should take advantage of one's suffering to commune with God to come out with better clarity. But perhaps most importantly, people must have their priorities straight, caring primarily about their spiritual well-being and not settling for anything but the best in that regard, while caring only for their basic material needs in order to properly serve God. If one has this perspective, then one will be able to frame all of his suffering in the right context and deal with it appropriately, ultimately shining more brightly than ever before.

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Notes:

1 See Fischer, Dov and Fischer, Moshe, "Rabbi Elazar Ben Pedat's Quest for a Golden Age" (December

1, 2017). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3081135> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3081135>

2 All translations in this essay are courtesy of Sefaria.

3 As far as we could find, this story appears nowhere else besides *Taanis* 25a

4 This is not the only incident where Rabbi Elazar struggles with accepting suffering. The Talmud (*Berachos* 5b) recounts how when Rabbi Elazar was sick, he chose to be healed by Rabbi Yochanan rather than receive reward for learning Torah while he was in pain.

In this story, Rabbi Elazar is seen as being unable to endure suffering, even when spiritual reward is at stake. This may suggest that in our story, Rabbi Elazar would have been willing to give up some amount of spiritual reward in order to end his poverty, but the sacrifice was simply too great. On the other hand, Matthew B. Schwartz (Schwartz, Matthew B., "The Meaning of Suffering: A Talmudic Response to Theodicy." *Judaism* 32, no. 4 (1983): 444-451) suggests that Rabbi Elazar's suffering in the story in *Berachos* was so acute that in that instance he was willing to give up whatever spiritual reward he would be missing out on (but perhaps in the case in our story the suffering wasn't as acute and so it is incomparable). Schwartz further points out that Maharsha says that Rabbi Elazar wasn't losing anything spiritually, because his acute suffering made him unable to learn Torah thus causing him to lose as much reward as he was gaining for his suffering.

5 For example, see *Lonely Man of Faith* and *Catharsis*.

6 *Chullin* 44b-45a, *Megillah* 28b

7 Rashba on *Aggadta*, ad loc. This is based on a dictum found in *Moed Katan* 28a.

8 For example, the *beracha* of *barech aleinu* in the *Amidah*, as well as posters of *avinu malkeinu* and *birkas hachodesh*, request God to bestow financial success.

9 See footnote 1.

10 While there is Rabbinic literature on the value of seeking even this sort of gift, particularly regarding Moshe, this is seen as an incredibly high level of relating to God and it is arguable that one must be on an incredibly high level in order for such a request to be coming from the right place and thus, meritorious. Thus, we can argue that Rabbi Elazar was not on that level, just like Rabbi Chanina was evidently not either.

11 *Taanis* 25a

12 This explanation is implied by the *Iyun Yaakov*

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Chullin* 44b-45a, cited above

15 Rashba *ibid.* and Eitz Yosef there. The former explains that this illustrates how God will give Rabbi Elazar a full measure of His goodness/mercy, and the latter argues that the rivers correspond to the fact that Rabbi Elazar emulated God in all of His thirteen attributes

16 *Ibid.*

17 Rabbi Elazar refrains from learning divine secrets from a passage in *Chagiga* 13a, where he repeatedly refuses the opportunity to learn about the *Maaseh Merkavah*.

18 *Taanis* 25a

19 *Ibid.*

# The Interplay Between the Individual and Community on Shabbos

BY TANI FINKELSTEIN

The sacred day of Shabbos, on the surface, appears to have both an individual and communal element. On the one hand, it is a day of personal rest and individual obligations. On the other hand, it is a day when throngs of Jews resting in tandem gather for communal prayer and learning. When the Coronavirus first hit our communities last year, and communal services were put on hold for several months, we began thinking more deeply about the communal aspect of Shabbos. More than a year later, as we begin returning to normal life, we are still considering the relationship between the individual and communal components of Shabbos. Is the communal element of Shabbos simply a nice embellishment to the primary individual aspect? Are these two facets of Shabbos separate and of independent value? Might the communal element actually be the climax of the Shabbos experience? A look at Halakhic sources may provide the answer.

Beginning with the matter of the initiation of Shabbos: The Talmud in *Shabbos*<sup>1</sup> teaches that an individual travelling in the wilderness who is unable to ascertain what day Shabbos is must refrain from *melacha* every day to the extent that it does not compromise their survival. Nevertheless, says the Talmud, they should count six days, and then on the seventh, recite *kiddush* and *havdalah* in order to distinguish this day from the rest. How are we to understand the latter obligation if the seventh day of this person's count might not actually be Shabbos? Perhaps the Talmud is introducing the concept of subjective Shabbos, that an individual can actually set the day of Shabbos for themselves in such circumstances. This subjective Shabbos would then entail a normal obligation of *kiddush* and *havdalah*. This, however, would present three

difficulties. First of all, why then would one refrain from *melacha* on the other days of the week? Secondly, Shabbos is generally assumed to be a fixed weekly period imbued with intrinsic sanctity from the time of creation. Thirdly, it seems strange that one person could celebrate Shabbos while it is a normal weekday for the rest of the Jewish people.

Perhaps with these difficulties in mind, Rashi<sup>2</sup> explains that making *kiddush* and *havdala* on the seventh day of one's personal count is merely about performing an act that reminds one of the concept of Shabbos. The idea, in other words, is that one should not go a full week without remembering Shabbos, in order that Shabbos does not fade from one's consciousness. This, however, is by no means considered Shabbos in actuality. Ritva<sup>3</sup>, taking the lead from Rashi, questions whether it is even appropriate to recite a *bracha* in such a case, given that the recitation of *kiddush* or *havdalah* would be a *bracha* in vain if it is not really Shabbos. He concludes, however, that a *bracha* should be recited because a *bracha* in vain is only a Rabbinic prohibition, and the Rabbis would be lenient regarding their words in such a situation. Rambam<sup>4</sup>, however, in spite of his general opinion that a *bracha* in vain is a Torah level prohibition, opines that a *bracha* is necessary. This might suggest a more authentic nature to the obligation of *kiddush* and *havdalah* in these circumstances, implying that there might be a concept of a genuine subjective Shabbos for an individual.

But what about the above difficulties, that one is to refrain from *melacha*, work, throughout the week, that Shabbos is seemingly a set time, and that it is odd that it could be Shabbos for one individual, while *chol*, mundane, for another? Radvaz<sup>5</sup>, in discussing how Shabbos could take

place at different times across the globe, makes an incredible suggestion which highlights the intricate duality of the individual and the communal experience of Shabbos. On the one hand, he explains, the imperative of Shabbos is given to each and every member of the Jewish people to remember creation by resting on what they perceive (to the best of their ability according to Halakha) to be the seventh day of the week. This aspect accounts for the concept of a subjective Shabbos in the dire circumstances laid out above. Be that as it may, even in such circumstances, Radvaz explains that one must still be concerned about violating the Shabbos experienced by one's closest local community, or perhaps of the Jewish people as a whole. It would appear that according to Radvaz's understanding, the individual and communal experience of Shabbos are two independent elements of Shabbos. This is most poignantly highlighted on Shabbos 69b where these two elements are separated in time. It is clear, though, that the two components are ideally observed in tandem. Rashi, however, would appear to reject any such concept of an individual Shabbos experience divorced from that of the community.

This idea can be further explored in the halakha of *Tosefes Shabbos*, adding time to the beginning and end of Shabbos. Despite the fact that an individual can, on his own initiative, initiate *Tosefes Shabbos* (provided it is Friday after *plag hamincha* — the midpoint between the beginning and end of the permitted time for the evening prayers — according to the normative view), the Mordechai<sup>6,7</sup> establishes that if the community accepts Shabbos collectively at a certain time, every individual in that community must abide by this acceptance<sup>8</sup>. This is a parallel conception to that of Radvaz;

although Shabbos can be initiated by an individual at a time when the rest of the community is not observing it, Shabbos is also automatically experienced collectively as a community.

However, is there a qualitative difference between the *Tosefes Shabbos* of the individual and that of the community? In an attempt to reconcile contradictory indications in the *Shulchan Aruch* regarding the application of rabbinic Shabbos prohibitions in the period of *Tosefes*, The *Biur Halakha*<sup>9</sup> cites the suggestion of multiple Achronim that the acceptance of Shabbos by the community creates a stronger obligation than that of an individual. Perhaps one can explain this in light of our above analysis, both from a quantitative and qualitative perspective. Quantitatively, it makes sense that a collective expression of Shabbos is more powerful than that of the individual alone. Qualitatively speaking, the remembrance of creation is certainly more powerfully evoked in a collective public fashion.

The qualitative difference between collective and individual *Tosefes Shabbos* may also be explained by a sharper understanding of what it means to “add to” Shabbos. Is *Tosefes Shabbos* actually a subjective early initiation of the sanctity of Shabbos? How, after all, could a person possibly add to the day of Shabbos which has been set in stone from the time of creation? Perhaps the most minimalist approach would be that of The Levush<sup>10</sup>, who posits that the mechanism by which one can add to Shabbos is merely by way of a *neder*, a vow. In other words, *Tosefes Shabbos* is to take a *neder* to observe Shabbos before/after Shabbos actually begins/ends. Consequently, according to The Levush, one can even retract one’s *Tosefes Shabbos*. On the other side of the spectrum, The Ohr HaChayim<sup>11</sup> expresses the view that *Tosefes Shabbos* is the idea that God has granted the Jewish people the ability to decide to extend the sanctity of

Shabbos.

In light of these two perspectives, it is clear that The Mordechai’s view that the acceptance of the community is binding on the individual cannot be based on the idea that *Tosefes* works through the mechanism of a *neder* — on what basis would a *neder* taken by much of the community affect those who did not express the *neder* themselves? Rather, perhaps one could suggest that whereas *Tosefes* of an individual would work by mechanism of a *neder*, communal *Tosefes* would function as an actual early initiator of the sanctity of Shabbos, thereby binding every individual in that community to this acceptance. According to this view, then, the power to establish the sanctity of Shabbos would be solely invested in the community. According to the approach of The Ohr HaChayim, however, even the individual has this capacity, consistent with the view of Radvaz.

The idea that the communal acceptance of Shabbos would be more effective in establishing the sanctity of Shabbos also finds expression in the mitzvah of *kiddush* on Friday night. There are three different recitations of *kiddush* on Shabbos night: one in *Tefillah* (prayer), one after *Tefillah* at shul over a cup of wine, and one at home at one’s meal also over a cup of wine. What is the nature of all these *kiddushim*? Quite instructive is the Talmud in *Pesachim* 117b, which records that Rava initially suggested that one recite “*Mikadeish Yisrael*” in the *kiddush* in *Tefillah* on Shabbos night, due to its public nature (as *Tefillah* is ideally said in a communal context), while reciting “*Mikadeish haShabbos*” in the *kiddush* recited before one’s meal at home, due to the private setting. The Talmud contrasts this to the position of the Elders of Pumbedisa that “*Mikadeish haShabbos*” is to be recited in both contexts, as Shabbos is set from creation and not sanctified by Israel like the festivals. Although the Talmud reports that

Rava ultimately retracted his position for unspecified reasons, the position nonetheless requires explanation — is the reasoning of<sup>12</sup> the Elders of Pumbedisa not correct? Rashi<sup>13</sup> downplays the novelty somewhat by explaining that this suggestion was merely out of “*kavod rabim*”, respect for the presence of the community. But, it seems a bit odd to change the text of *kiddush* in communal prayer to an ostensibly imprecise expression merely to display honor for the congregation. Maybe the reason behind the suggestion to say “*Mikadeish Yisrael*” in *Tefillah* on Friday night is deeper than just honoring the community, and perhaps is rooted in the idea that a special status is achieved through the communal sanctification of Shabbos.

In fact, it should be noted that Ramban compares *kiddush* on Shabbos to *Beis Din*’s sanctification of the *Yovel* (Jubilee) year.<sup>14</sup> This sanctification, done by the *Beis Din* as representatives of Israel, actually served to establish the *Yovel* year — not merely highlight it. From this perspective, the communal recitation of *kiddush* would likely take on a more significant role.

This view is further accentuated by the custom of reciting *kiddush* over wine at shul. The Talmud in *Pesachim* 101a initially questions this *minhag* in light of the position of Shmuel that *kiddush* over wine must be recited in the context of one’s meal [which is how we assume] -- a factor seemingly lacking in *kiddush* in shul. The Talmud thus explains that this custom was actually developed in order to help those poor guests who were spending the night in the shul fulfill their mitzvah of *kiddush*. Tosafos already points out, however, that since it is for the guests, if there are no guests, it would be a bracha in vain to recite this *kiddush*. This prompted various authorities<sup>15</sup> to call into question the whole custom now that it is uncommon for guests to spend the night in shul. Some<sup>16</sup>, however, defended the custom in

spite of this reality. Among them was The Ohr Zarua, who in a responsa<sup>17</sup> explains that the primary purpose of *kiddush* on wine in shul was not for the guests, but to have a public testimony and sanctification of the day of Shabbos. This view suggests that there is a unique quality of sanctification and testimony of Shabbos in a communal context.

In spite of all of these public expressions of *kiddush*, we still recite *kiddush* at home at our meals to enhance and sanctify our personal Shabbos meals. Both communal and individual sanctification, then, are necessary on Shabbos to some extent.

In a parallel fashion, we also recite “*vayichulu*,” the passage in *Breishis* 2 which testifies to the creation and the resting of God on the seventh day, twice in shul. This is done once in the private *Amidah* and then again out loud together as a congregation. “*Vayichulu*” is also recited once during *kiddush* at home. This custom is in part based on the Talmud in *Shabbos* 119b which says that “*afilu yachid hamispalel berev Shabbos tzarich lomar ‘vayichulu’*,” even an individual must recite “*vayichulu*,” as one who testifies to creation on Shabbos is considered a “*shutaf lihaKadosh Baruch Hu bimaasei Bireishis*,” a junior partner with God in creation. On the one hand, this establishes that even an individual must testify to creation on Shabbos night. But the implication of word “*afilu*” is that this is somewhat of a novelty, indicating that the testimony is fulfilled more fully in a communal context. In fact, The Ohr Zarua<sup>18</sup> writes that “*vayichulu*” is to be recited after the *Amidah* together as a congregation, in a loud chorus, as a form of public testimony to creation and Shabbos. Therefore, he explains, it is to be done standing, just as two witnesses stand in testimony in court. The Taz<sup>19</sup> even explains that this form of public testimony requires not just two people, but a quorum of ten. He therefore notes that if one prays alone, they should not repeat “*vayichulu*” again after the *Amidah*.

This all suggests that there is a unique quality to communal testimony to the Shabbos.

This interplay between the individual and the community on Shabbos is further highlighted in the description of Shabbos [and Festivals] in the Torah as a “*Mikra Kodesh*”.<sup>20</sup> What does this phrase mean? In *midrashei halakha*<sup>21</sup>, this is generally understood as a sanctification of the day through lavish feasts and nice clothing - what we would refer to as *kavod* and *oneg*. These actions are generally associated with the individual. Ramban<sup>22</sup>, however, argues that “*Mikra Kodesh*” actually implies a gathering in shul to publicly sanctify the day through Tefillah while wearing nice clothing. Ultimately, it appears that both of these interpretations reign true. To make Shabbos a special and sacred experience, there must be input on both the individual and communal level.

This relationship between the individual and community on Shabbos is expressed most acutely in the halakha of a “*mumar lichallel es haShabbos bifarhesia*,” an intentional violator of the Shabbos in public. Though the violation of Shabbos, in private or public, incurs a severe punishment of *kareis* or *skila*, spiritual excision or stoning (depending on the presence of two witnesses in the times of the *Mikdash*), when it comes to our halakhic perception of the violator, violating Shabbos publicly is viewed by *Chazal* in a more severe light.

The Talmud in *Chullin* 5a establishes that although we accept sacrificial offerings of repentance from sinners of Israel, we do not accept such offerings from one who consistently worships idols or violates Shabbos in a public setting. The Jerusalem Talmud<sup>23</sup> even goes as far as calling the latter transgressor “*ki’akum lichol davar*,” like a gentile for every matter — the extent to which is debated by the *Rishonim*. What is it about violating Shabbos publicly that warrants such a harsh perspective by Halakha? Rashi<sup>24</sup> explains that

the public violator of Shabbos, who fallaciously and brazenly testifies against creation and God’s resting on the seventh day, has rejected God as an idol worshipper does. Apparently, breaking Shabbos in public serves as a higher quality negative testimony against the Shabbos than when violated in private. In fact, Raavad<sup>25</sup> opines that the definition of public for these purposes is a quorum of ten, a representation of the community of Israel. This all parallels the idea that *kiddush* and “*vayichulu*,” when done in a communal context, are greater forms of testimony (albeit in positive forms).

Rambam,<sup>26</sup> however, provides a different reason for why the public desecration of Shabbos is so much worse. He explains that one who violates Shabbos in public breaks the eternal “*ot*,” sign, between the Jewish people and God. But why is this specifically limited to public desecration of the Shabbos? Perhaps we can understand this in light of what we have developed above. Essentially, there is a special quality to the observance of the “*ot*” of Shabbos specifically in the context of the community. When one publicly desecrates the Shabbos, and takes away from the community’s joint expression of testimony and sanctification of the Shabbos, one negatively affects the whole community’s expression of this “*ot*” between God and the Jewish people. This makes the public desecration of Shabbos particularly egregious.

In sum, it appears that although Shabbos necessitates individual action and can be experienced individually to a certain extent, the pinnacle of the Shabbos experience is really within the context of the community - whether it be in *Tosefes*, *kiddush*, “*vayichulu*,” *tefillah*, or in refraining from work. With this perspective, perhaps we can better understand the Talmud in *Shabbos* 118b which says that “*Imalei mishamrin Yisrael shtei Shabbosos kihilchasan, miyad nigalim* - If Israel were to keep two Sabbaths

according to the laws thereof, they would be redeemed immediately”. It is one thing that individual Jews and even individual communities observe Shabbos across the globe every week. If, however, the whole community of Israel together were to observe Shabbos, the “*ot*” established between God and the Jewish people would reach an even higher level, and this would bring redemption. May we achieve this goal of communal Shabbos observance and bring redemption speedily in our days.

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Notes:

- 1 *Shabbos* 69b
- 2 Rashi to ad loc.
- 3 Ritva to ad loc.
- 4 Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Shabbos 2:22
- 5 Radbaz, Responsa v. 1, 76
- 6 Mordechai to *Shabbos* 297
- 7 Brought in Shulchan Aruch OC 263:12.
- 8 It should be noted that Magen Avraham (ibid) qualifies that this would not apply in a community with multiple shuls.
- 9 Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, *Biur Halacha*, OC 261:4.
- 10 Rabbi Mordechai Jaffe, *Levush Malchus*, OC 263:17
- 11 Chaim ibn Attar, *Ohr Hachaim*, to

- Shemos* 31:16.
- 12 Ramban to *Shemos* 20:8
- 13 Rashi to *Pesachim* 117b.
- 14 *Vayikra* 25:10
- 15 See Tur and Beis Yosef, OC 269.
- 16 See Beis Yosef ibid.
- 17 Responsa *Ohr Zarua*, 752
- 18 Ibid, v2, Erev Shabbos 20
- 19 David ha-Levi Segal, *Taz*, OC 268:5
- 20 *Vayikra* 23:3
- 21 i.e. Sifrei Pinchas 147
- 22 Ramban to *Vayikra* 23:2
- 23 *Yerushalmi Eruvin* 6:2
- 24 Rashi to *Chullin* 5a.
- 25 Raavad on the Rif, *Eruvin* 20a.
- 26 Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Shabbat 30:15.

## Do We Disenfranchise Women by Forbidding Tefillin?

BY YOSEF ROSENFELD

In an ever-changing world of Jewish thought and religious observance, previously established norms are often questioned by contemporary considerations. Traditionally, the mitzvah of *tefillin* is considered a time-bound positive commandment, therefore only required of adult males, since women are exempt from time-bound positive commandments.<sup>1</sup> In his gloss to the Jewish legal work Shulchan Aruch, Rabbi Moses Isserles objects to the practice of women being stringent and wearing *tefillin* even though they are exempt.<sup>2</sup> Women are normally allowed to perform positive time-bound mitzvot if they wish; what separates *tefillin* from all other time-bound positive commandments, however, is that it requires a “clean body” — which Abaye understands to mean that one may not pass gas while wearing *tefillin*, while Rava explains that one may not sleep while wearing *tefillin*.<sup>3</sup> As we will see later on, this law which requires men and women alike to maintain a clean body while wearing *tefillin* poses unique issues for women.

In 2013, Salanter Akiba Riverdale

(SAR) High School began allowing girls to don *tefillin* during morning prayers — following in the footsteps of many women in Reform and Conservative circles who fulfill the laws of *tefillin*.<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun has written that Jewish women nowadays do not belong to the same halachic category as those of earlier times, based on which writer Will Friedman argued in 2014 that women are not only permitted but in fact obligated to don tefillin, given men and women’s equal standing in modern-day society.<sup>5</sup> But this egalitarian approach to gendered obligation does not align with traditional practice of Orthodox Jewish law, which historically has distinguished between men and women by sexual characteristics, not social status.<sup>6</sup> Regardless, many women do wrap *tefillin* as a matter of personal choice and as an enhancement of their religious experience. In light of this recent phenomenon, it behooves one to revisit the halachic complications associated with women wearing *tefillin*; after all, taking such an important commandment off the

table for any Jew is not something that should be done lightly. By addressing the potential issues that arise when women wrap *tefillin*, one can hopefully attain a level of understanding that will produce a more informed outlook on this growing legal debate.

There is a notion in Jewish law that one should not act with excessive piety.<sup>7</sup> This has myriad ramifications across many areas of halakhah, one of them actually relating to *tefillin*. Rabbi Joseph Karo rules that a man should adopt the scrupulous practice of wearing two sets of *tefillin* (to account for differing opinions regarding where to place the scrolls inside) only if he has already established himself as being well-known for his piety.<sup>8</sup> Even though women are normally allowed to perform optional mitzvot, it might be considered excessively pious for women to don *tefillin*, given that they are not obligated, similar to the time-bound positive commandment of *tzitzit*: Rabbi Moses Isserles states that although it is within women’s rights to wear *tzitzit* on a four-cornered garment, this would appear pretentious and they should thus

refrain from doing so.<sup>9</sup> Ostensibly, *tefillin* and *tzitzit* are comparable in that they are both purchased and then worn in fulfillment of a time-bound positive commandment. However, *tzitzit* ultimately cannot offer support for the above claim, since — as Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan explains in his commentary — the mitzvah of *tzitzit* is treated simultaneously as an obligation incumbent upon one's body and as an obligation not incumbent upon one's body, both creating leniencies: it is ruled as a bodily obligation so that someone's *tallit* does not need *tzitzit* when the person is not wearing it, and it is also ruled as not a bodily obligation so that one need not purchase a four-cornered garment in order to attach *tzitzit* to it.<sup>10</sup> This halachic anomaly separates *tzitzit* as a particularly unimposing mitzvah even for men — which could make it seem even more pretentious for women to go out of their way to purchase a *tallit* and tie the appropriate strings to each of the four corners, since this is not even required of men, who are commanded to keep the mitzvah. For this reason, *tzitzit* cannot be likened to *tefillin* in an argument against women wearing the latter, at least not on grounds related to excessive piety.

Women who don *tefillin* are also confronted by the prohibition against crossdressing, found in Deuteronomy 22:5.<sup>11</sup> Classifying *tefillin* as a garment — which, primarily worn by men, would theoretically be forbidden to women — might sound odd, but the Jewish legal concept of “crossdressing” also applies to other actions and behaviors that are typical of a specific gender (e.g., plucking out white hairs among black hairs, considered impermissible for men).<sup>12</sup> In discussion of this potential problem, it is appropriate here to return to the matter of *tzitzit*. A *tallit* with *tzitzit* strings would seem to be more of a garment than *tefillin*, which merely consist of boxes and straps. In truth, however, this is a faulty comparison; for as we have established previously, the actual mitzvah of *tzitzit* lies not

in the four-cornered garment but in the strings themselves. Furthermore, Tractate *Eruvin* actually reports that Michal — King David's first wife and the younger daughter of King Saul — would wrap *tefillin*; not only was Michal apparently unbothered by the issue of crossdressing, the Talmudic discussion surrounding her behavior makes no mention of it either.<sup>13</sup> Now, it must be pointed out that Michal's behavior is debated in the context of whether or not *tefillin* is in fact a time-bound commandment — so it may not have been the place to make tangentially related halachic points — but it is interesting to note that the Sages in Michal's city are still recorded in the Talmud as not having protested her practice of donning *tefillin*.

Contemporarily, it may be that the notion of crossdressing could eventually become inapplicable, if the practice of women donning *tefillin* were to reach a point where it was considered common. However, that would create a separate issue of possibly adding to the number of commandments, which is prohibited by Deuteronomy 4:2. Even though the Talmud limits its discussion of Michal to the times for wearing *tefillin*, tosafists raise the point that Michal arguably came across as adding to the Torah by devotedly performing a mitzvah that did not apply to her.<sup>14</sup> This logic would apply even more strongly nowadays: considering the dramatic increase in women who consistently put on *tefillin* every day, it could appear as though they are permanently accepting upon themselves an additional commandment in which they are not in fact obligated. But concerns regarding perceived additions to the Torah evidently do not hold weight on their own when it comes to practical law, since the general practice of women to observe other time-bound positive commandments — such as reciting the *Shema* and dwelling in the *sukkah* — is extremely widespread and not only allowed by halacha, but often encouraged.

However, as mentioned earlier,

*tefillin* are unlike all other positive time-bound commandments due to their need for bodily cleanliness. It is because of this indispensable requirement that men only make sure to wear *tefillin* during *Shema* and *Shemoneh Esreh* of the morning prayers, even though the mitzvah of *tefillin* is to wear them all day.<sup>15</sup> This is also why, despite the commandment to educate one's children (Deuteronomy 6:7), we make an exception with regard to *tefillin* and do not allow minors to wear them — out of fear that minors do not know how to maintain the purity of the *tefillin*.<sup>16</sup> In fact, a man who is clearly incapable of praying without passing gas is better off not wearing *tefillin* and simply missing the time for *Shemoneh Esreh*.<sup>17</sup> Rabbi Joseph Karo recognizes the value in wearing *tefillin* for the recitation of *Shema* alone, if that is all a man can manage without becoming unclean.<sup>18</sup> We limit the time that a man, who is obligated to wear *tefillin*, is allowed to wear them because we are worried about impurity while wearing them. All the more so, for a woman who is not obligated, we would not want to risk being impure while donning *tefillin*.<sup>19</sup>

While one might not have the necessary authority to reach a halachic conclusion, having explored some of the major issues surrounding this topic, one can at least acknowledge and value the views on both sides. Jewish feminists might correctly point out that women have the right to wear *tefillin* just as they may take part in other time-bound positive commandments, although some halachic considerations — including excessive piety, crossdressing, and bodily purity — do make the matter highly questionable. Jewish law does not categorically prohibit women from fulfilling the laws of *tefillin*; still, the many legalities and conditions that come with this holy mitzvah warrant a uniquely high degree of care, and these criteria make it that much more complicated halachically for women to observe the commandment properly.

While some women may still feel comfortable wrapping *tefillin*, there are nonetheless multiple noteworthy objections to such behavior, which in no way diminish women's role in observance of Jewish law. We can thus reasonably assume that when it comes to women wearing *tefillin*, those who strongly discourage the practice do so not to disenfranchise women, but rather to preserve the holiness of *tefillin*.

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Notes:

- 1 (Tur) *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 37:1
- 2 Rema, *HaMapah, Orach Chaim, Hilchot Tefillin* 38:3
- 3 *Shabbat* 49a
- 4 *The Jewish Press*
- 5 *The Forward*
- 6 *Bikkurim* 4:1-5
- 7 Rema, *Hapah, Orach Chaim, Hilchot Tzitzit* 17:2
- 8 Joseph Karo *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, Hilchot Tefillin* 34:2-3
- 9 Rema, *Hapah, Orach Chaim, Hilchot Tzitzit* 17:2
- 10 *Mishnah Berurah* to *Shulchan*

*Aruch, Hilchot Tzitzit* 17:3

- 11 *Chabad.org*
- 12 Joseph Karo, *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, Hilchot Shabbat* 340:1
- 13 *Eruvin* 96a
- 14 *Tosafot* to *ibid.*, s.v. *Michal bat Kushi haytah manachat tefillin*
- 15 Joseph Karo, *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, Hilchot Tefillin* 37:2
- 16 Rema, *HaMapah, Orach Chaim, Hilchot Tefillin* 37:3
- 17 Joseph Karo, *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, Hilchot Tefillin* 38:2
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid* 38:3

## Community vs The Individual: Do They Really Contradict?

BY SHOSHANA BERGER

Society today is very focused on the individual. Man is constantly told to think about what he wants for himself, to always ask the question, "What is right for me?" As a result, it is sometimes hard to remember that man is part of a community, and it cannot always be all about the individual. The question is how to strike the right balance between focusing on the individual versus the community? Through analyzing Rav Soloveitchik's (the Rav) essay, "The Community<sup>1</sup>," I believe an answer to this question can be found.

The Rav discusses the importance of loneliness, it sounds strange at first because when thinking of loneliness, one usually thinks of extensive social isolation. However, this is not entirely what the Rav is writing about. "What does it mean to be alone? It signifies, not physical distance, but ontological-existential remoteness, or ontological- existential alienation of the I from the thou, regardless of how close the thou and the I may be."<sup>2</sup> The Rav looks at loneliness as something that can be felt even when in the closest of quarters with others. How is this possible? He brings the example of a

married couple that just had a baby: The mother wakes up every couple of hours to feed the crying infant, while the father stays asleep. His wife feels alone, not because she is physically or even emotionally distant from him, but because he cannot understand her experience. This is what he means by ontological or existential loneliness: that individuals are inevitably lonely because each person experiences a different existence, even when they exist next to each other.

This idea is true no matter the circumstance. No matter how close one is to someone else, one will always be existentially lonely because no other individual will ever share the exact same experience. All of this might be true, but loneliness still seems to be a negative concept. The Rav continues to explain, however, that loneliness is what allows man to be creative and to swim against the tide of the status quo. If man were not an individual, if he were not lonely, he would not have the freedom of mind to think and create originally. Someone who is focused on fitting in has little to no space to innovate and change society, but someone who is lonely has all the space in the world.

This perspective helps explain the benefits of loneliness, but it still does not sound like the ideal way to live. Looking at the Rav's position on the idea of community will help shed light on this question.

If individuality is so important, why is a community necessary? Because, says the Rav, without it the purpose of creation cannot be fulfilled. What was the purpose of creation? To answer that, two more aspects of the Rav's perspective on community need to be understood. Firstly, he writes that the reason God said it is not good for man to be alone is because man is a builder.<sup>3</sup> This implies that in order to successfully create, man needs others to support him: a community. Secondly, the Rav discusses the idea of *tzimtzum*, which is the act of retraction that God had to do in order to make room for the world He wanted to create.<sup>4</sup> "*Tzimtzum*<sup>5</sup>," an article by Nissan Dovid Dubov, further explains this concept: in Rav Chaim Vital's *Etz Chaim*<sup>6</sup>, he describes *tzimtzum* using the term *Or Ein Sof*, the infinite light, as a metaphor for God. Within the *Or Ein Sof* there was potential for finitude, but it was concealed by the infinity. Rabbi Dubov gives the analogy of

the sun and a ray of sunlight: while there is technically a single ray of light within the sunlight, it is swallowed by the grandiosity of the entire sunlight. Because the *Or Ein Sof* is infinite, it swallowed finitude. Therefore, in order for finitude to be recognized independently, the *Or Ein Sof* had to pull back to create room. In other words, had God not 'shrunk' Himself there would have been no place for a finite world among His infinity.

This leads into the Rav's second reason for why community is necessary. Humans are supposed to imitate God, and a way to do that is by creating space for others in our lives. The individual must take a step back, give a part of themselves, in order to recognize and make room for other people and create a community. "If [*hakadosh baruch hu*] willed a world to rise from nihility in order to bestow His love upon this world, then lonely man should affirm the existence of somebody else in order to have the opportunity of giving love".<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of creation seems to be one of two things:

Creation's purpose was for man to build and improve the world, and for that he needs community.

Creation's purpose was for man to imitate God, and that means creating community.

Is creation the end or the means to an end? The first option implies that community is a tool for man to fulfill the purpose of creation, while the second seems to imply that community itself is the purpose. Which one is it? I do not believe it matters either way. If the purpose of creation was for man to build and create, for which man needs community, and to create a community is to imitate God, then one fulfills both possible purposes. On the other hand, if the purpose of creation was to create community in order to imitate God, one still fulfills the other possible purpose of building because a community cannot exist without being built. Finally, by building and creating, man imitates God Who is the Creator. Conclusively, whichever was

God's purpose in creating the world, by nature man fulfills both, and in all scenarios community is essential.

Once the importance of the individual and the importance of community is understood, how can the two be combined? They are naturally combined, because one can't survive without the other. As the Rav discusses<sup>8</sup>, an individual feels that he is worthless unless he is recognized by another individual, unless his purpose is validated by someone else. As an individual, he has a unique job to do in this world, but what good is his job without others to benefit from it? The individual needs the community in order to have something to create for, in order to have a society to improve; and the community needs individuals in order to exist and thrive. The question is not how to combine the two but how to make sure each individual is paying appropriate attention to each so that they are appropriately combined. In order to do that, the individual must look within and determine his unique contribution through recognition of his loneliness, and then make that contribution to his community. Take the new mother for example: in the depth of night while feeding her baby, she wallows in her loneliness next to her sleeping husband. From that, her creative mind concludes that her contribution is some kind of project to support new mothers. She then institutes that project, thereby realizing her individuality and contributing to her community. It might not be something this dramatic for every person, but each person has a responsibility to recognize that yes, he or she is an individual, but that individuality is meant to inspire change to better the world. If each person does this, then each has successfully paid the appropriate attention to the individual and community, and helped to fulfill the purpose of creation.

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*is from Teaneck, NJ and loves to write about Torah.*

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Notes:

1 Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Community," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 17.2 (1978): 7-24

2 Ibid 11

3 Ibid 14

4 Ibid 15

5 Nissan Dovid Dubov, "Tzimtzum," available at: [chabad.org](http://chabad.org)

6 Rav Chaim Vital, *Etz Chaim* referenced in *ibid*.

7 Soloveitchik, 16

8 *Ibid*

# Religious Experience Through the Lense of Isaac Bashevis Singer

BY GABRIEL GROSS

In *Torah U' Madda*<sup>1</sup>, Rabbi Norman Lamm sought to bridge a potential gap between secular knowledge and Torah knowledge. While he was able to intellectually describe why the two have a more symbiotic relationship than they might seem, there can often be an experiential dissonance between our idea of religious experience and secular studies. Contemporary Orthodox values should not simply be defined by the fact that we participate in Torah and secular studies, but that we derive inherent religious value from what we learn, thus enabling ourselves to encounter religious experience through our secular studies. As Rav Aharon Lichtenstien once said, "Secular studies possess immense intrinsic value insofar as they generally help to develop our spiritual personality."<sup>2</sup>

The theme of religious experience runs throughout one of Isaac Bashevis Singer's famous collections of short stories, *In my Fathers Court*. A quick introduction to the world of Isaac Bashevis Singer: Singer grew up in Poland in the early 1900's where he observed shtetl life, under the tutelage of his chassidic father, who was the community rabbi, and his extremely rationalist mother. After moving to America, he quickly gained fame as a short story author. His ability to capture moments in history and truly give the reader such a captivating experience led to his receiving the nobel prize in 1978. Being a leader of the Yiddish literary movement and someone my family has loved for generations, I feel that Singer allowed me to expand my own religious experiences to his perspective causing personal reflection and growth.

Isaac Bashevis Singer often uses demons and other metaphysical beings to explore different facets of *shtetl* life. In the short story, "Why the Geese Shrieked"<sup>3</sup> Singer's acute

observations of his parents' reactions to a seemingly supernatural event may reveal two different, yet true, perspectives on religious experience.

The peculiar event starts in the Singer household when a woman walks in with two dead geese. Community members coming in with dead animals was not so uncommon as Singer's father was a chassidic Rabbi and his mother was very knowledgeable in areas of *kashrut*. The strangeness took hold of the house when the woman claimed that the dead geese were shrieking. Once the family hears of this dilemma, Singer comments, "My father turned pale, a dreadful fear befell me too. But my mother came from a family of rationalists and was naturally a skeptic."<sup>4</sup> This simple sentence reveals that Singer is more inclined towards his father's reaction. Singer then illustrates his mother's reaction to actually seeing the geese shrieking: "My mother was no longer smiling, in her eyes there was something like sadness, and also anger."<sup>5</sup> Rationalism is so ingrained in Singer's mother's religious experience that she seems to get emotionally affected by the possibility of this situation. The "sadness" and "anger" that characterize Singer's mother throughout the story highlight the sheer frustration she is experiencing by having some potential hole in her worldview.

In contrast, Singer's father's fear is not because of a rational attack on his Jewish philosophical outlook, but rather because: "this was a sign from the evil one."<sup>6</sup> For his Father, the dependency on mysticism and the lack of rationalism is precisely what he believes gives Judaism its splendor and lets him encounter God. Any lack of belief in God's capability of miracles is almost a blasphemous affront in his eyes. The two parents seem to have mutually exclusive views of religious

experience.

Though Singer clearly identifies more with his father's response to the shrieking geese, other short stories reveal that he has intellectual doubts about his father's relationship to science and logic.<sup>7</sup> The various myths and mysticism behind his father's relationship to Judaism and God seem to be inherent within Singer's own religious experience, be it positive or negative. Despite Singer being more inclined to his fathers mystical perspective, he seems to be stuck within a rational reality. It is almost as if he is a mystic living in a rational world.

The conflict then turns into a formal debate when the dead geese actually shriek. Singer's father says to his wife, "and what do you say now, eh?"<sup>8</sup> Singer relays his mother's response: "I want to hear it again" she says, and Singer notes that "her words were half pleading, half commanding." She then starts to laugh, explaining that they have not removed the windpipes of the geese. As his mother pulls out the windpipes Singer notes that, "On her face could be seen the wrath of the rationalist whom someone tried to frighten in broad daylight."<sup>9</sup> Singer again analyzes his fathers response and writes, "Fathers face turned white, calm, a little disappointed... logic, cold logic, was again tearing down faith."<sup>10</sup> The way Singer concludes the piece particularly highlights the tension: "Everything hung in the balance. If the geese shrieked, mother would have lost all her rationalists daring which she had inherent from her intellectual father. And I? Although, I was afraid, I prayed inwardly that the geese would shriek. But alas, the geese did shriek."<sup>11</sup>

Undeterred by the geese shrieking, Singer and his parents are clearly not changed from the event as their conceptions of miracles do not adapt from the different realities at each

stage. Arguably, the theme of religious experience is not a dynamic factor. Everyone has almost unchangeable perceptions of the world and no intellectual argument will shift that.

This idea appears in the story of Eliyahu in *Melachim Aleph* 18. Eliyahu is confronted with the challenge to prove that the Jewish God is real. He summons fire on a wet altar to consume animal offerings in order to win the battle and prove Hashem is the only God. Nevertheless, *B'nai Yisrael* disobeys God soon after, and falls into one of the Jewish peoples' worst periods in history. Throughout Tanach the relationship between Hashem revealing himself and *B'nai Yisrael* following His decrees is almost completely inverted. The case of the geese almost seems ridiculous as neither parent will give up their conception of the universe. I would argue, that the title asks the question of why the geeses are shrieking, but the point of the story, despite the title, is not the conclusion of the geese shrieking, it is the representation of each parents reflection on how they experience their relationship to the supernatural, or lack thereof.

Singer weaves this battle of ideologies throughout the story. At the end, though, he is left with one question: how do I experience my own Judaism?

Singer's short stories support varied religious experiences, and his life and personality reflect the same idea. The Jewishness of Isaac Bashevis Singer is a topic that literally required an entire book.<sup>12</sup> Academics and close friends have characterized him as a deeply religious person. He did not adhere to Halakha in the standard Orthodox fashion, yet was someone who had a deep relationship with God that runs throughout his stories. One cannot say that he was not spiritually connected. The combination of his mothers rationalism and fear of the unknown in the story, propelled him to rationally explore the world on his own terms. Yet, he could never escape his deep

mystical love for Judaism installed in him by his father. He has adopted the philosophy of "private mysticism: Since God was completely unknown and eternally silent, He could be endowed with whatever traits one elected to hang upon Him".<sup>13</sup> Despite his apparent heretical<sup>14</sup> statement, to dismiss his religious experience would be a refutation of all his writings.

Validating religious experience is not dependent on whether you completely agree or disagree with the other person. Having been a frequent bridge between secular and Orthodox jewry in regards to the formation of the Jewish state, Rav Kook takes a novel approach to the relationship with secularism. Being an Orthodox Rabbi, Rav Kook fundamentally disagreed with many facets of secular zionism. Nevertheless, he saw the inherent value in the perspective of secular Zionism and even argued that they might have more religious fervor than a halakhic Jew at the time.<sup>15</sup> This isn't a call to suddenly agree with a different sect/philosophy of Judaism that someone does not subscribe to, but rather, understand and celebrate that Judaism, much like humans, is like a beautiful painting or poem. It may be viewed within one perspective but in fact, the complexity and possible interpretations is precisely what makes it so beautiful.

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3 Isaac Bashevis Singer, *In My Father's Court*, Translated by Isaac Bashevis Singer

4 Ibid, "Why the Geese Shrieked", p12

5 Ibid, 13

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid, "Miracle".

8 *In My Father's Court*, 14

9 Ibid, 15

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 See "The Jewishness of Isaac Bashevis Singer by Guo Qiang Qiao

13 Grace Farrell, *Isaac Bashevis Singer: Conversations*, p. 236

14 By heretical, the author means that some of Singer's work seems to conflict with *Chazal's* worldview. It is not in any way a statement about whether or not Singer is a heretic.

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Notes:

1 Rabbi Norman Lamm, *Torah U' Madda*

2 Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, "From the Commie Archives (April 27, 1961; Volume 26 Issue 10) — A Consideration of Synthesis from a Torah Point of View", *The Commentator*, available at: [yucommentator.org](http://yucommentator.org).

# Faith and Doubt and Tatty My King

BY ADINA BRUCE

Released in 2018, Waterbury Mesivta's *Tatty My King* is a simple yet poignant song depicting the internal struggle experienced by a person of faith. Hardly a piece of musical high art, *Tatty My King* features a simple chord progression, light harmonies, and repetitive musical lines and lyrics. *Tatty My King's* story of faith depicts a person's complex relationship with God, full of doubt, but ever shifting and developing. An analysis of *Tatty My King* evokes several questions: what is authentic faith? Are there questions and doubts that are deemed too inappropriate to have within the Orthodox definition of faith? And, lastly, what role do doubts have within a relationship with God?

The song follows a character progressing through various stages of faith and doubt, but retaining a constant dialogue with God. Starting with extreme doubt and anxiety, saying, "How am I supposed to see Your path, With so many questions I have to ask, Now I'm standing here alone I'm losing hope"<sup>1</sup>, the narrator reaches out to God and asks to be supported through this difficult time. Slowly the conversation changes, as the narrator shifts to a more comfortable position, "And now I'm walking down Your path, Even with the questions I have to ask." Though still experiencing questions of faith, the narrator is no longer in a position of existential anxiety. Finally, in a last shift of attitude the narrator affirms their confidence in God's continual connection, "I'm starting to realize that you've held me so tight", and requests a continuation of that support.

A traditional approach to defining Jewish faith is through the theological principles laid out in Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Faith. Spanning a wide range of tenets relating to beliefs in God, Moses, and the Bible, Maimonides categorizes these tenets as central to Jewish beliefs in his

commentary on the Mishnah. The Mishnah in question states that there are certain people who do not have a place in the world to come: "One who says: There is no resurrection of the dead derived from the Torah, and one who says: The Torah did not originate from Heaven, and an *epikoros* (heretic), who treats Torah scholars and the Torah that they teach with contempt."<sup>2</sup> As part of his commentary to this section Rambam declares "... that the fundamental beliefs and the foundational principles of our religion are thirteen principles."<sup>3</sup> Emphasizing the importance of these tenets Rambam claims: "But if one of these principles becomes compromised for a person, behold, he exits the category of Israel and denies a fundamental [dogma] and is called an apostate, a heretic and 'someone who cuts the plantings.' And it is a commandment to hate him and to destroy him." Faith is therefore defined in terms of set statements of belief. A rejection or even wavering of certainty about any of these statements is something that puts a person outside of the Jewish community.

In this interpretation of faith it would seem that the narrator's lack of faith alongside their questions, might not be acceptable. With Rambam's formulation there are certain questions and doubts that cross the line such as doubting the existence of God, or the veracity of the divine transmission of the Torah. And indeed in his article in the *Torah U-Madda Journal*<sup>4</sup>, Rabbi Yehuda Parnes posits that an intellectual pursuit of secular studies "can only be viable if it imposes strict limits on freedom of inquiry in areas that may undermine the [13 *ikarai emunah*]." From this perspective there are halachic issues of asking certain questions, and bringing oneself to experience intellectual doubts directed at certain tenets of Judaism.

The definition of unquestionable

creeds within Judaism based on the Rambam's 13 *ikarei emunah* is something that has been disagreed with most recently by Marc B. Shapiro in *Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised*<sup>5</sup> and Menachem Kellner's *Must a Jew Believe Anything*.<sup>6</sup> By looking at the 13 *ikarai emunah* through a wide lens of Jewish thought both Shapiro and Kellner question the assertion that the 13 *ikarim* are the only acceptable creeds which define Judaism. They further question the claim that one is a heretic simply by having doubts or questions about these specific beliefs within Judaism.

In his article *Faith and Doubt* Rabbi Norman Lamm differentiates the definition of faith for the Medieval rationalists such as Rav Saadia HaGaon and Rambam as "faith was defined as it was by Aristotle: a purely epistemological act, the final step in the process of learning or knowing. I am subjected to one of four sources of knowledge... and when I accept as valid what my senses or mind behold, that is faith."<sup>7</sup> Faith is defined in this way as a certainty in the truth of God, similar to the certainty felt about the truth of a fact. A doubt in this context would invalidate the certainty felt about the "fact". Therefore, by questioning certain tenets it is no longer possible to claim that you are a believing Jew. However, Rabbi Lamm states that our formulation of faith has developed: "Today, however, we can no longer uncritically consider religious propositions as no different from either the scientific description of sense=data or logically verifiable statements... the cognition of religion differs from ordinary cognition in the nature of the material cognized."<sup>8</sup> Since a declaration of faith is not defined as a declaration of a fact, having doubts does not then negate statements of faith. With this formulation faith and doubt are no longer binary; instead

of either being a person of faith or a person who experiences doubts, both faith and doubt exist at the same time within a person as parts of the holistic faith experience.

Taking this development even further Rabbi Lamm explores the experience of doubt as an essential and strengthening aspect of faith: “The state of tension between faith and substantive doubt arises from the fact that... faith and doubt presuppose each other. The statement *ani maamin* (“I believe”) is a pious superfluity unless there had existed at least a hypothetical skeptic who questioned or denied what I now affirm.”<sup>9</sup> Without the existence of doubt there would be no meaning to declarations of faith. This process of developing one's faith requires the questioning of one's belief while opening oneself up to the possibility of failing to find answers to those questions. Reflecting on the risk involved with such a process Rabbi Lamm concludes “you cannot open your mind to truth, without risking the entrance of falsehood; and you cannot close your mind to falsehood without risking the exclusion of truth.”<sup>10</sup>

This is seen in the narrator as they develop their relationship with God. The narrator only begins their conversation with God due to the overwhelming anxieties and questions they are troubled with. Without this impetus of doubt it is doubtful if our narrator would have ever reached out to start a process of developing and improving their faith. Furthermore, as the relationship develops, and the narrator becomes less distressed and existentially anxious, questions still remain as an essential part of their religious experience.

Looking at the different approaches to doubt within faith a way to synthesize both the Maimonidian camp, that states the centrality to certain core tenets of faith, and the position of Rabbi Lamm, that maintains the importance of doubt and questioning in developing ones relationship with God, is the position statements of

faith have within a communal context versus an individual one. Looking at the original text in the Mishnah in Sanhedrin, one who forfeits from the world to come is “one who *says* ...” not one who thinks.<sup>11</sup> While an individual might be allowed to harbor doubts as part of a process of developing faith, as a community there are certain tenets which are accepted and cannot be publicly rejected. Having certain beliefs which as a community are accepted are a useful sociological tool to creating cohesion. However in his book *Ani Maamin*, Rabbi Joshua Berman argues that the definition creeds within Judaism are given imprecise definitions within a halachic formulation “[this] provides rabbinic authorities the flexibility they need to deploy the principles in a sensitive and effective manner.”<sup>12</sup> These tenets of Judaism might have sociological implications, in that certain statements of faith are socially expected, but on a halachic level there is flexibility in terms of how much a community enforces and emphasizes outward fealty to these beliefs.

The experience of faith is an inherently isolating one, where one must existentially grapple with developing a relationship to a transcendent and awesome being. However, the faith experience is not completely individual, there are intersections between how a person experiences faith, and how that faith is communicated outwards. Especially in our current society, where questioning, skepticism and empirical proof are seen as the utmost forms of knowledge, doubt is bound to be ever present. Expressions of faith have significance within faith communities. There must be a common worldview that brings a community together, and this worldview is expressed through statements of faith which are communicated by the individuals of the community. However, the extent to which these expressions of faith are enforced is not clear cut. When doubt is such an integral part of faith, and so

intrinsic within our society, how can we as a community create a culture where those doubts are not judged but supported as part of a process of developing belief?

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Notes:

- 1 “Tatty My King”, *Jyrics*, available at: <https://www.jyrics.com>.
- 2 *Sanhedrin* 10:1
- 3 Rambam on *Sanhedrin* ad. Loc.
- 4 Rabbi Yehuda Parnes, “Torah u-Madda and Freedom of Inquiry” *Torah u-Madda Journal*. 1 (1989): 68-71.
- 5 Marc B. Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles Reappraised*, Chapter 1.
- 6 Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything*, Chapter 5
- 7 Norman Lamm, “Faith and Doubt” in Norman Lamm, *Faith and Doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought* (1986), 13.
- 8 *Ibid*, 14.
- 9 *Ibid*, 12.
- 10 *Ibid*, 16.
- 11 See Joshua Berman, *Ani Maamin: Biblical Criticism, Historical Truth, and the Thirteen Principles of Faith* (Maggid Books, 2020), 241-243.
- 12 *Ibid*, 309.

# Review of *The Bible With and Without Jesus*

BY ZACHARY OTTENSTEIN

My first exposure to Christian biblical exegesis ironically happened while I was sitting in *shiur* as a sophomore in TABC, in a one-off lecture dedicated to combating theoretical missionaries who would attempt to use Isaiah 53 and other passages from “my” Bible to convince me that Christianity, not Judaism, was the true faith. Since that point I have attempted to gain more knowledge of how Christians read *Tanakh*, not for the explicit purpose of refuting it, but rather to better understand my own convictions and *why* I disagree with their exegesis. While perusing Amazon I was excited to see that two renowned scholars, Amy-Jill Levine of Vanderbilt University and Marc Zvi Brettler of Duke, had released a book on exactly this theme, subtitled “How Jews and Christians read the same stories differently.” I was convinced that this would serve as one of the most comprehensive attempts at exploring the issues at heart for a scholarly and lay audience. *The Bible With and Without Jesus*, released in October of 2020, is available from HarperOne publishers in hardcover format and runs 426 pages.

Many may be familiar with the work of Brettler from his work on Project Torah and Biblical Scholarship (TABS) and its flagship website TheTorah.com, an ongoing attempt to bridge the latest in modern biblical scholarship with traditional Jewish views regarding the Bible. Much ink has already been spilled, in my opinion correctly so, criticizing Brettler and others from his camp about his unwavering belief in ideas antithetical to Orthodoxy. I will therefore avoid discussing Brettler’s views on the authorship of the Hebrew Bible, which become quite clear from this work, but are less important than the great contribution he and Levine have made to the world of Jewish-Christian tolerance and biblical studies. Before discussing *this*

collaboration between Levine and Brettler, it is worth mentioning the incredible scholarship found in their previous work together: *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*<sup>1</sup>, an edition of the New Testament designed and annotated for students of *Tanakh* looking to understand the origins of Christianity and the Second Temple Period in greater depth.

The introductory chapters are worth noting as they provide an excellent overview of the larger issue that lies at the center of it all- how Jews and Christians have, and continue to, interpret their shared texts. The chapter titled “On Interpretation”<sup>2</sup> is an especially important, albeit brief, section of the book for students of Jewish *parshanut* who may have little to no exposure to Christian exegesis of the Bible. Those familiar with Talmudic and Medieval Jewish exegesis may be familiar with the concept of *ein mikra yotzei midei peshuto* found in BT Shabbat<sup>3</sup> that a biblical verse cannot be fully removed from its original meaning by rabbinic *derashot*; a slightly more advanced student may be familiar with the comments of Rashbam<sup>4</sup>, which speaks of *hapashtut hamitchadshim b'chol yom*- the fact that even the simple meaning of a verse is subject to evolution. Many students who study the Hebrew Bible exclusively do not realize that Christian exegetes also have principles by which they interpret all biblical texts, both from the Old Testament and the New Testament. Brettler and Levine build their discussion of Christian exegetical methods on the verse from 2 Timothy 3:16, a famous New Testament verse, which states, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” Just as Jews seek to reconcile seemingly contradictory verses through rabbinic exegesis and hermeneutics, out of a belief that

the text is a unified divinely revealed one, so too Christians have a similar idea of the unity of the Bible. If both Christians and Jews share this, then it may be possible, as Brettler and Levine claim, to enter into a serious discussion of the Bible with those who “play by the same rules.”

As a student in Yeshiva University who was first exposed to Rav Soloveitchik’s essay “Confrontation”<sup>5</sup> as a high school student, I found the chapter titled “Possibilities”<sup>6</sup> to be both enlightening and troubling. On the one hand I appreciate that the authors openly declare that they are “Jewish by birth and by conviction”<sup>7</sup>, a statement that many in an academic world, hostile to traditional religious commitments, would be afraid to make. However, I object to their quick dismissal of Jacob Neusner’s position, summarized in the quote “My goal is to help Christians become better Christians ... and to help Jews become better Jews, because they will realize- so I hope- that God’s Torah is the way (not only our way, but the way) to love and serve the one God, creator of heaven and earth.”<sup>8</sup> Many, myself included, object to the first part of Neusner’s quote as we do not view it necessary to help Christians improve themselves religiously. However, the second part of the statement is one that is crucial to authentic Judaic theology and practice. Brettler and Levine laude Neusner as one of the “great figures of Jewish Studies in the second half of the twentieth-century,” but fail to refute his more conservative view of how interfaith dialogue ought to be conducted. I have much respect for Neusner, but even his view on cross-religious theological understanding does not compare to those of Rav Soloveitchik’s view as outlined in “Confrontation” and that of Hakham Jose Faur in his book *The Gospel According to the Jews*. It seems almost convenient that the authors set

up Neusner to be a sort of “punching bag” to avoid having to reckon with the approaches of two serious *talmidei hakhamim* and scholars. Brettler and Levine continue the chapter with a discussion of R. Menahem Hameiri and R. Moshe Hadarshan, two medieval Provencal thinkers, who in their own ways, engaged in interfaith dialogue and held somewhat distinctive views as to the status of Christians in halakha. By no means does my knowledge approach that of any of the aforementioned names, but I do believe that the authors should have built a stronger foundation, with more precedent, on which to argue the need to conduct ecumenical exercises such as these. The chapter ends with a quote from the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z”l spoken to Pope Benedict XVI: “We celebrate both our commonalities and differences, because if we had nothing in common we could not communicate, and if we had everything in common, we would have nothing to say.” If a precedent for conducting broad interfaith dialogue does exist, it may be the ideas expressed in this quote that best explain the impetus for discussing the Bible with Christians.

Beyond the introductory chapters, which explain a *hashkafah* of sorts regarding interfaith biblical discussion, the majority of the book is devoted to specific instances of variant readings between Christians and Jews. Obviously this brief review is not the outlet to discuss each one of the topics in all of its complexity, but it is worth mentioning a few of the topics that may be eye-catching to an educated Jewish student. The opening chapters of the Book of Genesis can be studied from many angles using traditional *parshanut* and modern commentaries. I was privileged to have the opportunity to study the ancient Near Eastern underpinnings of these chapters with Professor Barry Eichler in Yeshiva College, which prepared me greatly for Brettler and Levine’s discussion

of how Jews and Christians view creation and the origins of humanity differently, much in the same way that the perspective of *Tanakh* was different from ancient creation myths. Similarly, the discussion of Isaiah 53, the chapter of the “Suffering Servant<sup>9</sup>” is important beyond the point of *da mashetashiv lapikoros*—know what to respond to a heretic when confronting missionaries who seek to create internal tension in an otherwise believing Jew. Brettler and Levine do an excellent job at explaining the Christological symbolism of the Christian perspective in Isaiah, something quite important for a Jew who believes wholeheartedly that the Suffering Servant is a metaphor for *Am Yisrael* as a whole.

Overall, I was pleased with the work of Brettler and Levine and thought that the book was accessible to both a scholar looking to learn through these issues in an organized way and to a young student, like myself, still making headway in the worlds of both academic Judaic studies and traditional Jewish thought. Yes, the discussions of the documentary hypothesis and other theories as to the origins of *Tanakh*, beyond the traditional view of Mosaic authorship, will make many uncomfortable, but these can be overlooked in an effort to glean understanding of the divergence between the Jewish faith, something that the readership of this journal probably hold dearest above all else, and one of the world’s most practiced religions.

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Notes:

1 Levine, Amy-Jill, and Marc Zvi Brettler. *Jewish Annotated New Testament*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

2 Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Bible With and Without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently*, (HarperOne, 2020), 14.

3 63a

4 Genesis 37:2

5 Soloveitchik, Joseph Dov. *Confrontation and Other Essays*. Maggid Books, 2015.

6 Ibid, 60.

7 Ibid, 61.

8 As quoted in Neusner, Jacob. *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007.

9 Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Bible With and Without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently*, (HarperOne, 2020), 285.

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# Behind the Cover Art

BY ILANA AIDMAN

The symbol of the moon is particularly relevant to the discussion of the community and the individual. The first mitzvah the Jewish people as a community were given was Rosh Chodesh. The Sanhedrin set the calendar through individual testimony of sightings of the new moon. To convey the message that the new month had begun, a chain of fires would be lit on top of hills so that far off communities could receive the message. Today, our calendar

is standardized to line up with the phases of the moon, and we have no need to set up massive bonfires to convey information to distant communities. However, even without bonfires, anywhere an individual Jew goes in the world, the timing of Rosh Chodesh and other holidays will be the same. The rhythm of our calendar is still a unifier that connects the individual to the wider community. Further connected is the practice of kiddush levana. A part of this mitzvah

is to say shalom aleichem to three people. While it is permissible to skip this part if one is alone, the mitzvah is enhanced and the experience is more inspiring and poignant if done in the presence of a community.

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