



PANIM • פנים

Confronting Theological and Pedagogical Challenges



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The journal of the Center for Community Education (CCE)
Bi-Cultural Hebrew Academy of Connecticut

Bi-Cultural Hebrew Academy of Connecticut
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The Center for Community Education (CCE) is a new initiative of the Bi-Cultural Hebrew Academy of Connecticut that aims to inspire thoughtful conversation related to the spectrum of Jewish issues.

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Dedication

With gratitude to Hashem for the countless blessings in our lives, we dedicate this first edition of *Panim* in honor of our children, Joshua, Ada, Danielle, and Andrew. We are so proud of the paths they have chosen and the integrity and dignity with which they live their lives every day. They are everything we hoped and prayed to Hashem for, and truly are our blessing.

We would also like to thank all the rabbis, educators, teachers and mentors, who have guided them on their path of learning and growth. A very special thank you to the Heads of Schools they attended, including Walter Shuchatowitz z”l and Jacqueline Herman from Bi-Cultural Hebrew Academy of CT, and Rabbi Tully Harcsztark from SAR High School, who through their vision created institutions of Jewish learning that passed on a love of Torah, of Israel and an insight into the words of Hashem that are the prism through which they live their lives.

May *Panim*, and the work of the Bi-Cultural Hebrew Academy Center for Community Education, be a resource for our entire community to learn and grow together, embracing each other in Torah, *mitzvot* and a lasting legacy of *ahavat yisrael* for all our children and generations that follow.

Cindy and David Pitkoff

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Shlomo Zuckier is a Research Fellow at the Notre Dame Center for Philosophy of Religion. He recently completed a PhD in Religious Studies at Yale University as well as studies in Yeshiva University's Kollel Elyon. Shlomo is a Founder of The Lehrhaus and was formerly Director of OU-JLIC at Yale University. He has taught at Yale Divinity School, Yeshiva University (YC and Revel), Touro's Graduate School of Jewish Studies, Drisha Institute, and Tikvah programs. Shlomo has held the Flegg Postdoctoral Fellowship in Jewish Studies at McGill University, the MFJC Advanced Torah Fellowship, and the Wexner and Tikvah Fellowships. He serves on the Editorial Committee of *Tradition* and has edited two books in contemporary Jewish theology. Shlomo, Chana and their daughters had the distinct pleasure of being a part of the Stamford, CT community a few years ago.

A Message From The Head of School

Longstanding institutions that remain true to their mission can often lose the excitement associated with nascency. However, this has never been the case with Bi-Cultural Hebrew Academy of Connecticut (BCHA), a school that has always been permeated with the spirit of educational innovation and creativity.

Our school, which was founded in 1956 by Walter Shuchatowitz, z"l, has been a place for Jewish children from every point on the religious spectrum to learn the values of the Torah, together with the requirements of a general education that allowed them to pursue their personal and professional goals. As a result, over the past 65 years, our graduates have distinguished themselves as clergy, scientists, mathematicians, educators, business entrepreneurs and Jewish community leaders, worldwide.

The foregoing notwithstanding, our school's current professional and lay leadership cannot deny that establishment of the CCE and publication of its first journal is exhilarating. We are filled with great excitement and anticipation over this new overlay to our core educational program intended to build connections with scholars, teachers, religious philosophers and experts in education, all to the benefit of our school and our community. In this regard, we are extremely fortunate to have Michael Feldstein, who has worked tirelessly on behalf of our community for so many years, navigate this enterprise with the same skillful zeal that he has applied to successful projects of ever-increasing impact.

We also do not take for granted the abundant resources which our CCE committee member, BCHA parent and highly respected academician Dr. Joseph Angel marshalled for this first volume of *Panim*. Great scholars have agreed to participate in this inaugural volume, knowing that under Professor Angel's supervision and participation it would succeed in bringing new and inspiring perspectives on Jewish thought to a fresh audience that is eager to receive them. I am personally very pleased to have my close colleagues, BCHA's Associate Head of School, Rachel Haron, and Director of Judaic Studies, Rabbi Joshua Rosenfeld, share their vast knowledge of Jewish education to convey creative insights to our school community and beyond, in this first volume of *Panim*.

Thank you to everyone who has contributed to this Journal, which we hope

will be the first of many, and special thanks to our past President of the Board, David Pitkoff, for not only having the vision to establish the CCE, but also, together with his wife Cindy, is “throwing out the first pitch” by sponsoring this publication in honor of their wonderful children.

ה' חפץ למען צדקן יגדיל תורה ויאדיר

Kol Hakavod to all those who, through their efforts on behalf of the CCE and the *Panim* journal, support Hashem's desire, for the sake of Israel's merit, to make the Torah great and glorious.

Tzvi Bernstein
Head of School

A Note from the Editors

We are proud to present to you this inaugural issue of *Panim*, a project of the Center for Community Education at the Bi-Cultural Hebrew Academy of Connecticut (BCHA).

The rabbis in *Bamidbar Rabbah* teach us that there are *shiv'im panim la-torah* – the Torah is comprised of seventy facets. Why seventy? Because seventy in the Torah represents diversity, as with the seventy nations and the seventy elders. One can only begin to plumb the depths of Torah after examining it from a diversity of perspectives. In that spirit, we are excited to share with you this first issue, which contains articles on a range of theological and pedagogical challenges now facing the Jewish community. The essays are written by a diverse set of established and rising Jewish thinkers and educators from Stamford and the broader Jewish community. Our hope is that these thoughtful discussions will serve as an invitation to further inquiry and conversation within the community and beyond.

We would like to thank our contributors, who were willing to take a gamble by agreeing to publish their work in our new journal. Special thanks to Miriam Zami for her careful editorial work, and to the administrators at BCHA, who supported our efforts. Finally, a big yasher koach to David Pitkoff, the outgoing President of the BCHA Board of Trustees, who had the vision to create this journal and is sponsoring its publication along with his wife, Cindy.

We hope you enjoy our first issue!

Dr. Joseph Angel, co-editor
Michael Feldstein, co-editor
Dr. Jay Jubas, co-editor

Theological Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic¹

Yitz Greenberg

In addressing theological responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, I would like to begin by listing some of the wrong responses that have been offered by religious leaders and theological respondents. The first is the claim that the pandemic is God's punishment to all of us. Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, the *gadol* (great rabbi) of Benei Berak, said that the sin for which we are being punished is *lashon hara* (negative speech). In fact, he suggested that if the people will stop speaking *lashon hara*, the pandemic would stop.

Of course, each religious leader has their own particular version of what sin has outraged *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu* (The Holy One, Blessed Be He). An evangelical pastor in New Orleans attributed it to the fact that New Orleans held a gay pride parade, and one could go on and on down the list. I was struck by an article in which New Age pagan theologians claimed that it is Gaia, the goddess of nature, who is striking back, because we have abused the natural environment.

My answer to all of the above is that religiously they are in a very wrong place. Covid-19 is a natural phenomenon. In fact, the virus lives very nicely with bats and pangolins. When human beings take wildlife that they shouldn't be killing in the first place, and kill them and eat them, it jumps species. This has unleashed this terrible pandemic on the world.

The main point here is that God created a natural order; it is independent, it is dependable, it is not subject to manipulation and tricks. This is the key rabbinic teaching in terms of explaining the development of the *berit* (covenant) from biblical to rabbinic times. It is simply that God, as the Creator, has established a world *ke-minhago noheg*, one that proceeds along its natural course, in the words of the Gemara (*Avodah Zarah* 54b). And, the Gemara continues, the fact that something is wrong or evil does not mean that the natural order will pursue or punish it. The Gemara explains that a stolen seed may still germinate; an adulterous relationship can still produce offspring just as much as kosher and legitimate intercourse. In short, neither sickness nor pandemics is a statement of some specific punishment from God.

The second example of a mistaken theological explanation is the converse of the above: to assume that because I'm devout, the virus can't hurt me. Rav Kanievsky, for example, had said that students should not stop learning Gemara in the *yeshivot* (religious academies), even though there was a danger of spreading the virus, because the study of Torah protects one forever – in the words of a famous Gemara,

Torah *meginah le'olam* (Sotah 21a). In fact, Rav Kanievsky followed up later with a letter on behalf of the *kupat ha'ir*, his favorite charity collection in Benei Berak, that everybody who gave three thousand *shekalim* would get a blessing from him giving them protection against the pandemic.

And, of course, this is not just prevalent among Jews. President Bolsonaro of Brazil, an evangelical Christian himself, insisted that God is a Brazilian and looks out for those who are faithful to Him, and, therefore, he felt completely safe. He would plunge into crowds and refused to follow the mask protocols and the other kinds of safety behaviors that were expected – and, by the way, he ultimately came down with the disease. These behaviors, as well as the many Hasidic weddings we've seen in the recent period of time, are based on the simple claim that because one is devout and faithful, God will protect that person.

This is nothing short of magical thinking. The Torah, in contrast, is particularly antagonistic towards magic and condemns it unequivocally. The very act of magic claims that if I have a particular formula or, in this case, if I have a particular *emunah* (belief), God must – and indeed, God is *forced* to – protect me. According to the Torah, this is a violation of God as the Creator who has established a natural process that cannot be manipulated or used deceitfully. Furthermore, it is a denial of God's freedom. Nothing can force God to act. This is one of the major points repeatedly stressed by the biblical prophets to those who brought *korbanot* (sacrifices), thinking that with a *korban* they had a magic key. They thought that with their *korban*, they could force God to do what they wanted, even to let them get away with bad behavior or murder. The answer again remains that we have to turn our back on magical thinking in order to be faithful to God.

There is a third theological response, which I believe is the right response, but still inadequate. Leading religious thinkers – particularly Catholic, but others, as well – responded to the pandemic, suffering, and the widespread death by saying: This is a mystery. How can a loving, omnipotent God allow innocent suffering, allow death for people who have done nothing wrong and who are innocent victims of the spread of this pandemic? Their answer, correctly, is that there is no answer. We have no answer for the suffering of the innocent.

But what do we do religiously? The answer is that we accept the suffering in silence. We understand that we are with God, and the victims are with God and, therefore, far from offering shallow explanations, we accept that mystery. What we can do is show solidarity with the sick, with the isolated, with the poor who have no income, with the elderly who need errands – that is the proper religious response.

On the one hand, it is true that in imitating God, we have to embody *noten*

lehem le-re'evim (providing food to the hungry) or *bikur holim* (visiting the sick) or *ozar dalim* (helping the poor) – that is absolutely correct. Still, I think the response is inadequate, because it focuses primarily on the classic trope of religion, that religion exists to console those who cannot help themselves. This is particularly strong in the images of the crucifixion in Christianity: there is innocent suffering in the world, and God simply embraces that suffering or shares it. However, covenantal Judaism teaches that that is not the whole story.

We are, in fact, partners with God; that is the whole point of *berit* (covenant). And God has called humans into partnership for *tikkun olam*, to repair the world. To put it in our terms today, it means that we have to take power as partners to cure disease. To the question, “What’s the most important religious theological response to Covid-19?” my answer is the search for a vaccine and for cures, because God has asked humans to join in the process of making God’s world whole. This is what the prophets described as the messianic vision: we will overcome all the flaws and deficiencies of this world – poverty, which is the enemy of quality of life, hunger, oppression, inequality, injustice, war, and, yes, sickness. Yeshayahu predicts that in the messianic age we will cure sickness so that the deaf will hear, the blind will see, the lame will jump and dance (Isaiah 11). This part of the vision of messianism is to repair all the flaws of the world – and not just simply that God will do it for us, but out of *berit*, the covenant, we will do it together. The first and primary contribution should be that religious people take this responsibility and power.

I would add to this a second dimension, because it is not just the question of the cure. We have the fundamental commandment: *u-baharta bahayyim*, “choose life” (Deut. 30:19). The *halakha* teaches us that every aspect of life involves looking out for our health, looking out for cures; every aspect of life, including little day-to-day behaviors, should be on the side of life. How does this apply to the Covid pandemic? The answer is social distancing and wearing masks, which protect people from the spread.

This is the overriding *halakha* of this moment. For an Orthodox Jew or for a traditionally religious observant Jew, wearing a mask is just as essential as wearing *tzitzit*, as is washing our hands regularly. This is not actual preparation for eating; this is a fundamental act of *nishmartem*, “take care for your life” (Deut. 4:15) – looking out for one’s own wellbeing. This means that one should not go into crowds, be thoughtless in exposure, be indifferent to a responsibility to fight the transmission and spread of Covid in every sort of way. I’m finishing a book about the development of the *berit* (covenant) in which I stress the central point that every *halakha*, every *mitzvah*, boils down to choosing life and maximizing health against death and sickness.

Maimonides puts it best in the classic passage in the *Guide for the Perplexed*. He quotes from Moshe's summary of the Torah in Deuteronomy: *Re'eh natati l'fanekha hayom ha-hayyim ve-et ha-tov et ha-mavet ve-et ha-ra*, "See, I put before you today life and good, death and evil" (Deut. 30:15). Maimonides comments that Moshe places the Torah in between *hayyim* and *tov*, life and good, on one side, and on the other side is *mavet* and *ra*, death and evil. And we must choose between them – *u-baharta bahayyim*, choose life. Maimonides says that every mitzvah, every definition of a good act, every act of commandment, is a choice of life. And every *averah* – every sin, be it ritual or be it ethical – is a choice of death. In our time and in this moment, the *halakha* of *u-baharta bahayyim* is expanded to wearing masks, washing hands, and participating in other behaviors to avoid exposure.

This is our way of fighting sickness and fighting on God's side to fill God's world with life, but that is not enough by itself. One must turn to the other aspect to help the poor, to look after the elderly, to stay in touch with the isolated, to make a phone call, to run errands for those in need. If we do all this together, we have the power to roll it back, to minimize the harm. And we have seen exactly that in the last few months. Countries that were well-led and carried this out were able to reduce the spread of the virus and save lives. And for countries that were poorly led, made the wrong choices, and did not choose life, the spread of the pandemic has been devastating.

This is the major theological response of this moment that we as religious Jews, as covenantal Jews, have to take. I would like to demonstrate the point further with a story. In 1861, Rabbi Yisroel Salanter, the great figure of 19th century Jewry and founder of the modern Mussar movement, wrote a letter to a student during a cholera epidemic. The student had written him initially a heartbreaking letter, in which the student described that he was devastated by the epidemic and, particularly, depressed by the death of his friend who was a righteous person, totally innocent. He couldn't understand how God could let an innocent person like him die from such a terrible disease.

It should be noted that twelve years earlier, in 1848, there was a terrible cholera epidemic in Vilna, where Rabbi Salanter lived. He organized the *yeshiva* service corps, which recruited students from every *yeshiva* to look out for the sick. The students would feed them, help them avoid dehydration, which was fatal during cholera, and take care of them, particularly on Shabbat. This was as an advance signal of how he responded to the student's letter in 1861. He wrote back as follows.

Of course, it's sad to lose such a person, Rabbi Salanter said, but as a human being, you have the choice: do you respond to setback and death by depression and

giving up? Or do you respond as you're supposed to, by asking what the positive spin is – what should be my positive response religiously to this moment? He continued by giving the student the following guidelines.

First, he wrote, at this moment, we should not be intimidated, be afraid, or run for cover. After all, he said, what is a life? The human being, a human life, is vulnerable; even this student who died, this *tzaddik* (righteous person), who knows what else might have gone wrong if he had lived? The approach then is not to be afraid, for God is with us in life. But what do you do instead of being afraid? Carefully follow exactly the *hanhaga*, the proper procedure and behaviors, that the *hakhmei ha-rof'im*, the medical experts, are instructing us to do. Rabbi Salanter explained that in a moment of pandemic, we have to walk in their footsteps and follow the exact medical directions – and this becomes the religious requirement for the religious folk. He continued, you should know from experience in the past that when the epidemic was very widespread, whoever took it upon his shoulders to follow the directions of the doctors in every way, in his eating and daily behaviors – of course, wisely, and not like a fool – most of them escaped without the disease.

All our normal religious behaviors are shifted according to the law of this time, he wrote. In the cholera epidemic of 1848, Rabbi Salanter *paskened* (made an authoritative religious decision) that it was forbidden to fast on Yom Kippur, for the doctors warned that fasting on Yom Kippur would make people vulnerable to the cholera. As the famous story goes, he got up in the Great Synagogue of Vilna and commanded people to make *kiddush* and to break the fast, because their life was at stake.

Secondly, Rabbi Salanter wrote, we should not have sad or extended prayers; this is a time to shorten prayers, to go out and get fresh air. It is a time to cut back on the *piyyutim*, the prayers of sadness and of agony, and instead worship and serve God *be'hedva*, with joy. We must emphasize the gratitude and celebration that we are alive and that God has given us a life to stand before Him at this moment.

This is, essentially, one of the great qualities of the Jewish religion: it puts life first and insists that all of life is a struggle against death. *U-baharta bahayyim*, “choose life,” is the overriding principle.

But it's deeper than that: it proclaims that when there is an outburst of death, one has to increase the outburst of life to match it. In the age of the Holocaust, the most intense outburst of death against Jewry and against humanity in history, the Jewish people responded religiously with an intense outburst of life: the creation of the state of Israel, the reestablishment of *yeshivot* and of the religious life of the Jewish people. In the age of Covid, in this victory for death in which hundreds of thousands of individuals around the world have died, this is a moment when

Jews are called religiously. We are called to increase help and to increase *hessed* (lovingkindness), to support those who are vulnerable, to intensify our love and our responsibility, so that we can literally overcome death. That is the prophecy of Isaiah and the prophets: if we fight on God's side, even if not in our lifetime, eventually we will get the upper hand for life itself.

¹ This essay is an edited transcription of an oral presentation given at the CCE event "Theological Responses to Covid-19" streamed live on the internet on August 23, 2020 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0lB5e9OMHg&t=1551s>).

The Pandemic Theology Dilemma: Preserve Normalcy or Embrace Crisis?¹

Shlomo Zuckier

As we stand now, some 14 months from the outbreak of the COVID pandemic, it is worth reflecting on some of the more salient religious discussions that were taking place in the scary early days of the pandemic. As life was disrupted and people were unsure how to go about their lives, religious and otherwise, many turned to rabbis. Much literature (including several *sefarim*) has been produced on various halakhic issues that emerged at that time. While sophisticated theological discussions have been far less extensive, it is worth reflecting on one discussion, partially exposed and partially beneath the surface, that took place in the months of March and April 2020.

That discussion pertains to the overall religious sensibility with which one is bidden to respond to COVID-19, especially as it was at its height. Aside from taking safety precautions, how should one relate to God in a world of COVID? Should one preserve normalcy to whatever extent possible or should one instead embrace the sense of crisis and channel it in one's religious devotion?

I believe that different religious leaders, some explicitly and some less so, advised the adoption of one or the other of these approaches. This essay will draw both from a programmatic theological essay and from several other treatments of the issue that are less direct in their theological leanings but reveal a clear sensibility in that direction. It will analyze rabbinic approaches from America and Israel that can be categorized as Modern Orthodox, *Dati Leumi* (religious Zionist), and/or moderate Haredi. Furthermore, the period a year ago during which these discussions took place – the abrupt shift from Nissan's celebration to *sefirah*'s mourning – will be especially helpful in bringing to light the practical ramifications of these theologies.

RAV MOSHEH LICHTENSTEIN'S THEOLOGICAL APPROACH

The most explicit treatment of the question of the appropriate theological response to COVID was presented by Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein, Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshivat Har Etzion, on March 27, 2020, during the early days of the pandemic. It was originally sent to Yeshiva students and alumni, and is published at The Lehrhaus for the first time.² The essay is worth reading and analyzing in great detail; for the purposes of this essay, however, we will quickly summarize the essay and turn to one of its larger questions.

R. Mosheh presents a dichotomy between two types of prayer – prayer out of

a sense of normalcy and prayer out of crisis. Drawing upon his grandfather, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's theology,³ R. Mosheh notes the difference between appealing to God in nature and appealing to God against nature. While the first is channeled in the first blessing of *Shemoneh Esrei* and Tractate *Berakhot*, the latter appears in the second blessing of *Shemoneh Esrei* (on revivification of the dead) and Tractate *Ta'anit*. Under normal circumstances (and especially in the modern era), where nature is our friend, it is appropriate to call out to God as functioning within nature. In a pandemic, however, where nature itself is the source of the greatest danger, one must cry out to God out of a sense of crisis. One beseeches God to override the natural order rather than to serve our needs within it.

This approach, R. Mosheh emphasizes, has major ramifications in terms of the way in which people should pray in a situation of acute crisis, as well as for a variety of other ritual issues. On that point he writes as follows:

In light of this analysis, the ramifications on the policy of *psak* [halakhic ruling] must be determined as well. One of the primary approaches to current halakhic questions attempts to maintain a familiar routine to whatever extent possible, and is willing to be lenient to achieve this end... Familiar routine is a comfort; but when the world order has turned upside down, the objective should not be to seek calm or comfort, but rather to face reality, and understand that our relationship with the world around us has shifted. We must recognize the crisis and make the necessary spiritual adjustments... The aspiration to execute a halakhic policy which strives to maintain routine is not a question relating to a specific halakhic detail, nor is it a general question of leniency or stringency in policy, but rather a fundamental question of whether the crisis should be acknowledged, and the aspiration to return to that which is familiar and routine abandoned. The world is changed, and this must be acknowledged.

Halakhic policy must reflect the crisis of the moment, in order that people can “recognize the crisis and make the necessary spiritual adjustments.” Maintaining a familiar routine (absent cases of particular need) should not be the goal. The facts on the ground dictate that the world has changed; it would be an affront to God to ignore this reality in the interests of greater cohesion.

HALAKHIC RAMIFICATIONS

There are several important points in this account of Coronavirus. It insists

on a human reaction that takes the crisis seriously, which will have implications below. It focuses both on the fact that humanity is uncommonly fighting against nature and the phenomenon of greater isolation. It draws on theological views of Rabbi Soloveitchik in insisting that this requires a distinct liturgical response. It points to the risk of overlooking the crisis and cautions against it, as well.

This diagnosis of the spiritual significance of the COVID pandemic is valuable in itself, and worth considering both on its own experiential terms, and also as it relates to Rabbi Soloveitchik's theologies of technology and of prayer. However, it also has more pointed applications in the halakhic realm. Various ritual (and other) matters of Jewish law stand to see a very different application if treated under this theology and its attendant meta-*halakha* rather than an alternate one. Below, we will consider some of these ramifications, both within R. Mosheh's approach and within alternate approaches that preserve a different theological understanding.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RETAINING NORMALCY

The position of R. Mosheh, while well-developed, was not the primary position taken in response to the early stages of COVID. The majority practice, at least among American synagogues, was generally to do whatever possible to retain a sense of spiritual normalcy and routine amid the pandemic. This manifested itself in several different ways. To give perhaps the best example, many synagogues held pseudo-*minyanim* over Zoom, even though they generally did not think this actually counts as a *minyan* (quorum). One of the main benefits of this practice is the sense of consistent synagogue-like interaction in the lives of the congregants.⁴ While there have been calls for increased *tefillah* (prayer) in a general sense, and daily Tehillim recitations, there have not generally been calls to qualitatively rethink the nature of prayer or one's spiritual existence, nor have there been accounts of how this pandemic differs from other crises.

This seems to constitute a position focused on maintaining normalcy in difficult situations. One can note several reasons that underlie or support this position. At one level, there is certainly a value to routine, not only because it provides comfort, but also because it provides structure and aids people's functioning in difficult times. This is noteworthy in itself, but it is especially important against the backdrop of the mental health crisis precipitated by COVID that has affected so many. Additionally, there is the more specific concern about religious experience. While there may be advantages to embracing the isolation of the pandemic and calling out to God from isolation, there is also a logic to maintaining spiritual practices of normalcy and applying them in this difficult time. Furthermore, looking ahead to a

time following the crisis, there is the value of maintaining schedules and commitments going forward, when it comes time to return to the synagogue. We are starting to feel the ramifications of this today, as more and more people are returning to regular prayer. For that reason, there has been a general trend to minimize divergences from standard practice and to make religious life hew to usual structures as much as possible, even as life has become ever so unusual.

To illustrate this point, it is instructive to consider a letter that Rabbi Yaakov Taubes of the Mount Sinai Jewish Center sent to his community on March 27, 2020, less than two weeks before Pesah:

Dear Community,

Over the past few weeks, as the situation in the world has worsened and the extent of our new reality began to set in, many have tried to find meaning in the chaos... For many of us, finding Hashem [in] these extraordinary times has gotten harder not easier. Without our Shul, our friends, indeed without everything that helps [make] a religious life worth pursuing for so many, connecting to Him has [become] more difficult. Davening at home, observing Shabbos without community, not seeing anyone – these can be impediments to achieving and enhancing proper *Yiras Shamayim* [fear of Heaven]... The lack of stability and the unknown about how long this will all last can be so incredibly stressful and... many of us are not looking upward to *Shamayim*, but downward at our phones. This past Thursday was Rosh Chodesh Nissan, the beginning of the month of redemption, and often most importantly for many who are used to being in a rush in the morning, the beginning of a month with no recitation of tachanun. When Rav Hershel Schachter, *Shlita*, was asked about whether we should perhaps say *tachanun* [supplication prayer] during Nissan this year in light of the troubling times in which we find ourselves, he replied that the reason *tachanun* is omitted is that we are commemorating the redemption which our ancestors experienced from Egypt and projecting forward to the future redemption, which Chazal say will also take place in some form at this time. The significance of these ideas remains in place, despite everything going on at present... Our world has been turned upside down, but it nonetheless is time to get ready for Pesach and that is what we are going to do...

The letter notes the challenge of facing a chaotic world lacking structure, which both creates a personal challenge and a difficulty of connecting to God rather than to news and other this-worldly sources. Taubes' solution to this challenge is to focus not on the timely challenge but on the timeless redemption celebrated on Pesah. The ritual marking of Nissan as a time of joyful redemption and thus not a time for the anguish-ridden prayer of *tahanun* should therefore be applied as normal, reaffirming both God's capacity to redeem and the maintaining of ritual matters as per usual.

There are thus two essentially opposite views on how best to respond to the crisis of the pandemic. Should one emphasize the uniqueness of the current moment and look to shift religious practice and experience where possible – a perspective of Coronavirus Exceptionalism? Or should one rather be a Coronavirus Normalizer, seeking to minimize the divergences and emphasize continuity with spiritual life in general? This important debate will have ramifications on several different planes.

THE DEBATE OVER *TAHANUN* IN NISSAN

R. Taubes noted the view of R. Hershel Schachter regarding the skipping of *tahanun* during this year's Nissan, a view that is worth considering more directly. Moreover, the general approach towards Coronavirus Normalization might be seen in a series of halakhic decisions offered by Rabbi Schachter, adopted and applied to the synagogue context by a broad spectrum of American Centrist Orthodox rabbis.

R. Schachter's view not to recite *tahanun* was publicized, along with a directive to cease reciting *Avinu Malkenu* [prayer added during Ten Days of Repentance before Yom Kippur]. With the onset of the crisis, many had called for adding *Avinu Malkenu* to their prayers, either the classical litany of *Avinu Malkenu* requests beseeching redemption from God following the Amidah, or, alternatively, a one-line insertion into the blessing of *Shema Kolenu* requesting an end to the current plague. R. Schachter ruled that these somber additions were all to cease with the onset of the redemptive month of Nissan, as they would in a usual year.

This view was disputed by several others, among them R. Mosheh himself. In a March 29 e-mail, part of a rabbinic discussion as to how to proceed on this issue, he wrote:

I am definitely of the opinion that one should continue to say *Avinu Malkenu* and *Tahanun* in *hodesh* Nissan as well and I personally do so. Although there is a compelling halakhic case for this, that is not the main reason. The real reason is that there is a compelling religious and emotional need to do so. If in times like this we don't cry out to the *KBH*

[*Kadosh Barukh Hu*, the Holy One, Blessed Be He], then when should we do so?

For R. Mosheh, if there is ever a time to call out to God, it is in the midst of a pandemic. Maintaining the usual rules of avoiding mourning during Nissan would be inappropriate in a time of great crisis. He also noted halakhic precedents for this. *Ta'anit* chapter 3 discusses scenarios of national crisis (especially drought) where the community would fast and possibly even blow the *shofar* on Shabbat in order to facilitate the prayer of *et tzarah* (time of suffering) necessitated by the difficulties of the time. If clear expressions of mourning are allowed on Shabbat in times of crisis, that should certainly be allowed for the lesser celebration of the month of Nissan.

Furthermore, he ties some of his theological reflections on the obligation of prayer to this issue, arguing that in times of crisis there is not only the usual obligation of prayer but a special obligation of prayer based on crisis that actually is a higher grade, biblical requirement. One who prays as if all is normal and does not engage with the pathos and crisis of the moment may have fulfilled the usual, rabbinic obligation of prayer but fails to succeed in the biblical requirement of a prayer out of crisis. This approach likely draws upon the theological and halakhic reading of the Rambam and Ramban offered by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, R. Mosheh's grandfather.⁶

R. Mosheh goes a step further, diagnosing and condemning the (unattributed) view of those who believe it is best to not recite *Avinu Malkenu* during Nissan. He even takes on the suggestion of the Israeli Rabbinate to fast a half-day rather than a whole day, seeing it as an attempt to minimize the significance of the moment:⁷

I believe that there is an emotional and religious unwillingness to admit the true extent of the crisis and to behave accordingly and that this creates a very unhealthy disconnect bet[ween] our medical and practical behavior and our religious awareness. All the attempts to seek the positive and to emphasize the normal can only be legitimate if they follow a deep and sincere recognition of our situation as a crisis rather than attempting to ward it off or paper it over. In light of this, I am afraid that fasting half a day, not saying *Avinu Malkenu* in Nissan (if you said it before) etc. may be a form of denial of the extent of the current crisis or may encourage such a denial.

This powerful critique stems directly from R. Mosheh's theological approach to COVID, that the crisis and isolation should be leaned into and taken seriously by

offering prayer born of crisis, rather than minimized by maintaining a business-as-usual attitude. Interestingly, it would seem that the ultra-conservative *Eidah HaHareidit* in Jerusalem agreed with him on this issue, as their guidance, also published early in Nissan 5780, recommended the recitation of *Avinu Malkenu* as well.⁸

It is worth noting that R. Mosheh's position here is consistent with his position on the phenomenon of public prayer and fasting for droughts, rituals which have routinely taken place in Israel in past decades. R. Mosheh has publicized his position in opposition to these fasts, on the grounds that there is no true crisis, as there is full and continuous access to water during the so-called crisis. Viewing his treatment of that issue in light of this one, what emerges is neither a pro-fasting or anti-fasting position, but rather a more nuanced stance: whether or not one declares a state of religious emergency, entailing fasts and special prayer, should rely not on formalized categories of crisis ("the *mishnah* says that one should fast following a drought") but rather on the lived experience of crisis, taking a realist perspective as to what qualifies as danger. If people are actually dying, or lack access to basic goods, that is reason to shift one's mode of prayer. This existentialist position on prayer as part of one's relation to God, extending beyond a formalist halakhic approach and considering the experience of the individual praying, has some deep connections to the philosophy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik.⁹

EMPTY INVITATIONS: THE DEBATE OVER KOL DIKHFİN

This debate over how to experience the joy of Nissan relates to another dispute over how to approach the invitation *kol dikhfin yeitei ve-yeikhol*, "all who are hungry may come and eat," (part of *ha lahma anya*) where the host of the Seder renders an invitation to all wayfarers at the outset of the *Haggadah's* recitation. In a time of social distancing and even lockdown, is there logic to reciting this empty and even false invitation? Rabbis offered divergent views on this issue in advance of Pesach 5780.

R. Hershel Schachter encouraged the recitation of the prayer as usual, applying the following logic:

At the beginning of the Pesach Seder, we invite all impoverished people to join us for the meal (*ha'lachma anya*). Although one would surely not allow guests into his home during this dangerous time, these words should still be recited at the start of the Seder. The reason we announce this invitation is in remembrance of the practice when the Beis HaMikdash stood. Then, Jews would invite anyone to join them in eating the

Korban Pesach. Our recitation of these words today, is not meant as a true invitation, as is clear from the fact that we don't open the doors and announce it in the streets for guests to hear. After the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash, there was an additional prayer added, that we return to the land of Eretz Yisrael. It is recommended to explain this to those at the table before reciting this paragraph.¹⁰

This position makes two assumptions. First is that the invitation rendered by *ha lahma anya* is never a genuine invitation, as is demonstrated by the fact that it is recited as a formula rather than publicized to the relevant parties. Possibly more relevant is the secondary assumption regarding how that formulaic line should be applied, understood, and publicized this year. R. Schachter suggests explaining to *Seder* attendees that this line is a mere artifact, which is reasonable enough, but essentially does not treat this year as differently from any other. In fact, it emphasizes the fact that this year's *kol dikhfin* is no more an empty invitation than any other year.

However, some have suggested that, this year, even as one recites the full text of *ha lahma* including its invitation, there is reason to introduce additional messaging that speaks to the current crisis. Rabbis David Block and Yitzchak Etshalom, both educators at Shalhevet High School in Los Angeles, have suggested additional prayers surrounding *ha lahma anya* that capture the moment and offer a message.¹¹

Block, for example, has offered the following prayer, based on the structure of one composed by several rabbis at Bergen-Belsen, in another scenario that deviated (in that case much more exceptionally and poignantly) from the usual Pesah *Seder*. He notes that his text includes both a sense of mourning what is missing and joy at doing what is appropriate in the situation. The suggested prayer reads as follows:

Our Father in Heaven! It is open and known before You that it is our will to do Your will to celebrate the festival of Pesah with our communities, families, and friends, to pray and recite Your praises together with our communities, to have an intergenerational conversation about the story of the Exodus, to take care of the elderly, to sincerely invite those less fortunate to partake of the *Seder* with us, as the *Haggadah* says, "Anyone who is hungry – come eat, anyone who is needy – come and partake of the Pesah offering." With aching hearts we must realize that the current precautions around the COVID-19 pandemic prevent us from such celebration, since we find ourselves in a situation of *sakkanat nefashot*, of potential danger to our lives. Therefore, we are prepared

and ready to fulfill Your commandment, “And you shall live by them (by the commandments of the Torah), but not die by them,” and we heed Your warning: “Be very careful and guard your life.” Therefore we pray to you that You maintain us in life and hasten to redeem us that we may observe Your statutes and do Your will and serve You with a perfect heart. Amen!

While this approach certainly does not diverge from R. Schachter on the specific halakhic question of whether to recite *ha lahma* and its invitation, it also has a distinct educational message, one that takes seriously the crisis of the moment and applies it to educational effect with this new suggested ritual. What is emphasized is not the similarity to every year’s *kol dikhfin*, but how different the overall experience is.

SEFIRAH AND COVID

We have seen that the question of how to celebrate happy religious occasions during Coronavirus is an important barometer of how one relates to this experience theologically. In parallel, issues relating to traditional religious periods of mourning may be instructive as well. By this I refer to *sefirat ha-omer*, the counting of the days between Pesah and Shavuot, and the traditional practices of mourning that accompany it, including, most notably, the common custom of refraining from listening to music. (That practice has several forms. Some disallow only live music or singing with musical instruments, but not *a capella* music; the details need not detain us now, as we are speaking about a general attitude.)

Some have raised the question as to whether, given both the difficulty of social distancing and the limited options for entertainment and even engagement in the home, there might be a dispensation for listening to music during *sefirah*. As one rabbi put the question (sent out to RCA members on April 13, 2020): “In order to reduce some of the depressing atmosphere can we allow for the dispensation of the *issur* of music, at least the recorded kind, during *sefirah*.” R. Schachter’s response to this query notes that the practice of not listening to music is only a *minhag*, or custom, patterned after the year of mourning following the death of a relative. It originally applied only to music with dancing and was later extended to recorded music. Given the attenuated level of the prohibition and the current moment, R. Schachter ruled as follows:

During this time of global suffering, it would appear that for some individuals, refraining from listening or playing music may leave one in

a state of sadness or emotional distress. This would appear to reach beyond the intent of this restriction. If the motivation to listen to music is not to put oneself in a cheerful mood but rather to ease the tension or pressure in one's home, and to help bring oneself back to a normal disposition, that would be permissible. One should still avoid listening to very cheerful music.¹²

The permissive ruling was not limited to cases where there would be a risk to someone's mental health – those cases are clear and allow for much more extensive leniencies. Rather, this was a case where one would be sad or emotionally distressed as a result of lacking access to music as a comforting activity. In such a case, Rabbi Schachter presumed that the original practice was not intended to cause people sadness, only to avoid excessive happiness, and thus one may listen to music, albeit while still trying to avoid more cheerful music. The basis of the argument is fully halakhic, and based around the goal of maintaining one's usual state of mental well-being.

One might have invoked another factor in this context, that the global pandemic and state of crisis might precisely call for a more somber state of affairs than usual. Rather than being a reason to alleviate the sorrow of *sefirah*, it might be a reason to double down on the sense of isolation and lack of calm precipitated by the prohibition on music (assuming it didn't rise to a level of danger to one's mental health).

In fact, R. Asher Weiss, a leading decisor in Israel, argued in a similar direction in a short Hebrew essay translated here:

In terms of your question, which many are asking – should one be lenient at this time to allow listening to music during *sefirah* given the Coronavirus?

I will express to you my pain. It appears to me to be a tendency in the broader community, and even among many rabbis, to be lenient in a sweeping manner in all areas, given the Coronavirus. Some exempted women from cleaning for Pesah, others permitted eating *kitniyot*, yet others allowed speaking to their distant and isolated relatives using a computer on Yom Tov, some allowed planting flowers on *hol ha-moed*, and many other similar cases. The more lenient, the more praiseworthy! This tendency has no place and no justification. We are in a time of crisis, and in a time of crisis it is incumbent upon each person to strengthen themselves [religiously] and to practice additional stringencies and

to sanctify oneself through [refraining from] what is permitted, not to denigrate what is prohibited.

For this reason it is clear that there is no reason to allow in a sweeping or general fashion playing and listening to music during *sefirah*; rather, each case must be considered on its own. It is clear that if, as a result of social distancing and remaining at home, a man or woman has a psychological difficulty like depression, and listening to music will settle their mind and give a rest to their turbulent soul, there is certainly room to be lenient.

Similarly for parents with large families who have difficulty occupying their children... But there is no room to make a general [lenient] ruling here.

While R. Weiss agreed with R. Schachter about the relatively limited *minhag* of not listening to music (and especially recorded music) during *sefirah*, and he allowed for leniencies in cases of need, he was not willing to offer a sweeping permissive ruling. Instead of formulating this point on purely halakhic grounds, R. Weiss invoked a theological consideration – the fact that our current moment is one of crisis. Rather than the broad tendency to leniency that many have adopted, with the goal of making life easier in these difficult times, R. Weiss insists, it is necessary to seek religious growth, including by pursuing stringency. That is at least part of the reason why R. Weiss was loath to offer a general leniency, and why he only permits music in cases where it is deeply needed.

CONCLUSION

Pandemic cases make for complicated theology. Proper responses to the impetus of a global crisis, and one that entails extreme isolation in practice, might pull in two opposite theological attitudes. At once, there is a goal of preserving a sense of normalcy in order to promote psychological and even spiritual well-being. At the same time, one might see the objective of emphasizing the crisis and its limitations, with the goal of having the appropriate relation to God in prayer and ritual. Both Coronavirus Exceptionalism and Coronavirus Normalization are reasonable positions, given the circumstances.

This tension has been demonstrated by analyzing three cases – the nature of prayer and its application during Nissan; new rituals in *ha lahma anya*; and possible attenuation of *sefirah* mourning rituals—where there have been debates over specific questions that tie in to this broader theological issue. It is no coincidence that each

relates to an event triggered by the Jewish calendar – generally these responses have been formulated piecemeal, responding to specific events and items on the immediate agenda. While it is possible to notice patterns and uncover the implicit theology behind these rulings, these theologies are generally not explicitly formulated as such, with the notable exception of R. Mosheh Lichtenstein’s explicit treatment.

This analysis revealed some patterns as to who comes down on which side of the divide. R. Hershel Schachter, followed by many community rabbis such as R. Yaakov Taubes, emphasized a focus on retaining normalcy as much as possible. That meant retaining the normal calendar of skipping prayers of mourning, retaining the pseudo-invitation of *kol dikhfin* as usual, and trying to avoid some of the difficulties of *sefirah*’s mourning period. On the other hand, a group of rabbis from different sectors of Israel’s halakhic community coalesced around the view of emphasizing the crisis of this moment in their messaging – R. Mosheh Lichtenstein of the *Dati Leumi* community, Hasidic *dayyan* (judge) R. Asher Weiss, and the Lithuanian *Eidah HaHareidit* leadership. Their embrace of a theology of crisis and isolation, of increased prayer even in happy times, and of increased stringency rather than leniency all combine into a coherent theological position.

This pattern reflects a divide between American and Israeli decisors and communities. Part of this may tie in to Israel’s long-standing culture of instituting special days of prayer and fasting in response to current events, which America lacks. Additionally, in Israel the pandemic was seen, on a national level, as a Jewish crisis, while Jews in the United States likely saw it as a more general challenge rather than a particularly Jewish one.

By examining these various theological and meta-halakhic issues, it is possible to attain a view of the theologies in response to this horrific crisis. As the greatest challenges of COVID seem far back in the rear-view mirror, and as things are beginning to return to normal it is worth keeping in mind these divergent theological approaches to crisis taken up by various Jewish communities. And, just as we recently marked the end of the plague in Rabbi Akiva’s time with *Lag ba-Omer*, may this emergence from COVID portend a happier outlook, as well.

¹ This article was originally published at The Lehrhaus, accessible at:

thelehrhaus.com/commentary/the-pandemic-theology-dilemma-preserve-normalcy-or-embrace-crisis.

² R. Mosheh Lichtenstein’s essay is accessible at: <https://www.thelehrhaus.com/coronavirus/a-letter-about-covid>.

³ This relates to both the themes of human and divine majesty and humility and the dichotomy between regular prayer and prayer out of crisis that are prevalent within R. Soloveitchik’s works. See *Lonely Man of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), “Majesty and Humility” in *Confrontation and Other Essays* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2015) and *Worship of the Heart: Essays on Jewish Prayer*, ed. Shalom Carmy (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 2003), at length.

⁴ Another such benefit is offering regular contact with the synagogue and its rabbi at a time when natural interactions are not taking place. Additionally, some communities have used this as an opportunity for expressing prayers for the deceased that

are parallel to *Kaddish*, if not *Kaddish* itself.

⁵ The following message was publicized in one rabbinic group: “Rav Schachter feels that *Avinu Malkeinu* should not be recited during *Chodesh* Nissan as it has always been considered to be a חודש הגאולה [month of redemption]. *Tachanun* is not recited nor should *Avinu Malkeinu*.”

⁶ See his classical account of this distinction between two levels of prayer in the essay “Prayer, Petition, and Crisis,” appearing in R. Soloveitchik’s *Worship of the Heart*, 13-36.

⁷ It is not clear who in particular, other than the Israeli Rabbinat, this critique is aimed at. That being said, it would apply squarely to the position noted above. The statement of the Rabbinat is accessible at: gov.il/he/departments/news/meida_rabanut_korona.

⁸ Accessible at: jdn.co.il/breakingnews/1303715.

⁹ For an analysis of some of these categories, see several relevant essays by Alex Sztuden, especially “Grief and Joy in the Writings of Rabbi Soloveitchik, Part I: Psychological Aspects,” *Tradition* 43, 4 (2010): 37–55.

¹⁰ R. Hershel Schachter, “Piskei Corona #21: Can we say ‘Kol Dichfin’ this year?” Accessible at: yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/951299/rabbi-hershel-schachter/piskei-corona-21-can-we-say-kol-dichfin-this-year.

¹¹ Accessible at

thelehrhaus.com/holidays/a-prayer-for-this-passover, and thelehrhaus.com/coronavirus/our-bread-of-isolation.

¹² R. Hershel Schachter, “Piskei Corona #30: The Aveilus of Sefirah.” Accessible at: yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/952458/rabbi-hershel-schachter/piskei-corona-30-the-aveilus-of-sefirah.

A Modern Orthodox Hedgehog for a Postmodern World

Gil Perl

INTRODUCTION

Modern Orthodoxy is in need of a Hedgehog Concept.

Jim Collins, the best-selling business writer, coined this term almost two decades ago when he looked at companies that made the leap from “good” to “great.”² More often than not, these organizations had something at their core that they passionately believed they did better than anyone else in the world. And their success resulted in large measure from orienting the organization’s “resource engines” toward this singular goal.

While Collins didn’t extend his analysis to the realm of religion, a brief glance at the sub-denominations that constitute contemporary Orthodoxy suggest the same might well be true. That is, each of them seems to have an authentic Torah value at their core, which they believe they do better than anyone else in the world. The Yeshiva world has *talmud Torah* (Torah study). The Hasidic world has *dveykus* (closeness to God). The Dati Leumi (religious Zionist) world had *yishuv Eretz Yisra’el* (settling the Land of Israel). Chabad has *kiruv* (Jewish outreach). Though each community advocates full-fledged adherence to all 613 *mitzvot*, a single value is elevated above the rest. And, more often than not, the community’s schools and shuls, their curricula and customs, their choices of where to live, who to marry and what professions to seek are all oriented towards this particular goal. Like in the business world, this focus becomes a point of pride for members of each community and fuels a passion for their chosen way of life that often translates to the next generation.

American Modern Orthodoxy has no Hedgehog. Whether by design or by default, it emphasizes moderation in all things. A little bit of this and a little bit of that, but not too much of anything. The result has been painfully clear in our schools and our shuls for quite some time now. It’s hard to be passionate about a little bit of anything.

Some might contend that *Torah U-Madda* (Torah and secular knowledge) is Modern Orthodoxy’s Hedgehog. I have argued elsewhere, though, that *Torah U-Madda* is fatally flawed as a Hedgehog Concept because unlike the Torah values at the center of the other sub-denominations, Torah U-Madda can only be actualized by the community’s intellectual elite.³ While the Yeshiva community’s Hedgehog of *Talmud Torah* (Torah study) also falls within the intellectual arena, it can be fulfilled through the study of an Artscroll Mishnah, reviewing Humash with Rashi, or by writing a check to one’s local Yeshiva or Kollel.⁴ It’s a far cry from the academic aptitude and higher order thinking necessary to synthesize the worlds of secular

learning and culture with that of Torah and *mesorah* (tradition), as demanded by the ideology of *Torah U-Madda*. Indeed, one could well argue that on an average day in a Modern Orthodox Yeshiva day school, each student engages in the *mitzvah* of *Talmud Torah* – the Hedgehog Concept of the Yeshiva World – through their study of Humash, Navi, Mishnah, or Gemara. Very few, however, despite the school’s rigorous dual curriculum, engage in the act of *Torah U-Madda*.

When I first presented this idea at the Orthodox Forum in 2010, someone raised this very contention. And, before I could respond, a reply came from a far more qualified authority: Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, who quite literally wrote the book on *Torah U-Madda*. He stated rather emphatically that “*Torah U-Madda* is not an ideology, it’s a pedagogy.” That is, *Torah U-Madda* is a means toward an end. It’s a way of arriving at knowledge of the Creator through the avenues of science and the arts. It’s not an end unto itself nor was it ever intended to be. The goal of *Torah U-Madda* is an intimate knowledge of and relationship with God. The study of Shakespeare and Milton, Kant and Kierkegaard, molecular biology and quantum mechanics, coupled with Rambam and Rav Chaim, Penei Yehoshua and Pitchei Teshuvah, may well be the most sophisticated, nuanced, insightful, and inspiring way to arrive at such. But even the founding fathers of Modern Orthodoxy would agree that there are other paths and other methods for getting there. *Torah U-Madda*, then, becomes a point of privilege for those select few who can achieve it, and is either discarded or distorted by those who cannot.⁵

As such, if Modern Orthodoxy is to succeed in stoking the flames of religious pride and passion so that the next generation is eager to embrace and extend it, the search for a Hedgehog must go on.

IDENTIFYING THE HEDGEHOG

At its most basic level, a Hedgehog Concept for Diaspora Modern Orthodoxy must qualify as an “authentic Torah value.” That is, it must be something that all streams of Orthodoxy recognize as part of the divine will, even if their community chooses not to highlight it. *Kiruv* (Jewish outreach), for example, is recognized as furthering the divine mandate even in the *dati yishuvim* (religious settlements) of Yehuda and Shomron, while *yishuv Eretz Yisrael* (the settling of the Land of Israel) – in some form – is regarded as a Torah value even in the Chabad outposts of Phnom Penh.

In addition, it must be something that capitalizes on Modern Orthodoxy’s unique positioning at the intersection of religious and secular, isolation and immersion, fidelity to the past and faith in the future.

For this Hedgehog Concept to energize movement, it must also be a Torah

value that is, for lack of a better word, transcendent. It must provide fertile ground for intellectual exploration in both the theological and *halakhic* realms; be actionable in a wide array of scenarios and circumstances by different types of people; and must speak both to those steeped in the current intellectual and cultural ethos and those who are not.

Lastly, this value has to hold some degree of preexisting pre-eminence in the minds of Modern Orthodox Jewry. It must be something to which the present and historical culture of Modern Orthodoxy accords particular weight.

In the first half of this essay, I will suggest that a compelling case can be made that the value of *Or Goyim* (light of the nations) fits the above definition remarkably well. In the second half, I will offer a description of how it could look in practice if the Modern Orthodox community were to take this idea to heart.

HISTORICAL ROOTS

Israel was called in His exalted name for His honor and His dominion; in order that His honor and His dominion will be revealed through them across the entire world. And if it is impossible to reveal the honor of His dominion in any way other than this (i.e., through exile), we must not protest, for it is for this purpose that we were created.

And it is like a human king who constantly engages his troops in the labor of war – night and day they know no rest! – and they are put at risk and suffer casualties. They cannot protest even the slightest, for such did not stem, Heaven forbid, from evil intentions of the king. Rather it is because he must expand his kingdom, and his rule in the provinces depends upon it, and they [the troops] enlisted for the express purpose of protecting the kingdom with their bodies and souls.

So it is with the King of Kings, the Holy One Blessed Be He. He created His world for the express purpose of filling all of creation with His honor, as I wrote in Genesis (2:4). And it is for this purpose that we were taken to be His nation and His servants: so that this purpose would come to fruition through our hands. As such, no matter what circumstances are necessary for us to arrive at such, we must not protest even the slightest.⁶

This text is a transcendent call to arms. It identifies *Or Goyim* not merely as another mitzvah, but as the primary task of the Jewish people, the purpose for which they were created, and the singular vehicle through which the world can arrive at God's intended telos. It is both larger than life and the essence of life. It offers

direction, meaning, and mission to a Jew's time upon this earth, not to the exclusion of other *mitzvot*, but as a way of framing and encapsulating them. And, perhaps most radically, it implies that the Torah's loftiest ideal can only be achieved by those who are "expanding His kingdom" beyond the cloisters of the Land of Israel, thereby spreading "His honor and His dominion... across the entire world." In other words, according to this text, the act of winning honor for God amongst societies of the Diaspora ranks amongst the Torah's highest callings; one for which a Jew ought to spare no expense and fear no sacrifice.

If forced to guess, a learned reader might suggest this text has Hasidic roots, due to its vague similarity to the Lurianic idea of uncovering the divine sparks scattered throughout the world. Others might suggest a Western European origin. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch is one of the few Torah luminaries over the past two hundred years who was known to extol the virtue of *Or Goyim* seemingly over and above the Zionist ideal. Given no other context at all, though, it would not be surprising if many well versed *talmidei hakhamim* (Torah scholars) suggested that this passage derives from a work that is not "Orthodox." Roshei Yeshiva don't talk this way. Orthodox communities don't act this way. It's not a *perek* (chapter) in the Rambam or a *siman* (clause) in Shulhan Arukh. It's not what we teach in our schools or preach in our shuls.

It would surprise them, no doubt, to learn that the author of this paragraph was not just *a* Rosh Yeshiva, but *the* Rosh Yeshiva. It was written by Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (known as Netziv), Rosh Yeshiva of the world's largest and most renowned yeshiva for nearly half of the 19th century. And it isn't tucked away in an unpublished manuscript. It is sitting on the shelf of every Yeshiva, in the *Devarim* volume of *Ha'amek Davar* (*perek* 29, *pasuk* 1). Even more surprising, perhaps, is the fact that this passage is not a singular aside or tangential comment by any means. It is but one of many comments running throughout Netziv's Torah commentary that emphasizes the unique and powerful role of *Or Goyim* in Jewish life. For example, Abram has his name changed to Abraham, according to Netziv, not to reflect God's blessing that many nations will descend from him, but to reflect

God's instructions to Avraham that His will is that he [Avraham] share his knowledge in order to be a father to many nations, so that they will come to recognize God. And for this he was called 'av hamon goyim,' like a father who sets his son [on the path] of proper thinking (*Ha'amek Davar* on Genesis 17:4).

In the book of Exodus, this individual instruction to Abraham becomes the

destiny of the entire Jewish people. Neztiv therefore explains that the *sefer* is referred to in the geonic *Halakhot Gedolot* as the “Second Book” not merely because it finishes the story of the Jewish people’s transformation from a family clan into a nation, but because it is part and parcel of the creation story:

Meaning, the purpose of the world as a whole was that there would be one nation, God’s portion, His people. And this was not fulfilled until Israel was taken out of Egypt and arrived at their purpose, to be worthy of becoming a light unto the nations and to strengthen them regarding knowledge of the God of the Universe...this is the purpose of creation which was created for His exalted honor (*Ha’amek Davar*, Introduction to Exodus).

And, if the Jewish people became worthy of this noble task when they stood at the foot of Har Sinai, they further committed themselves to it standing atop of Har Eval:

Just like at Har Sinai there were burnt offerings and peace offerings and rejoicing over having been taken as God’s nation and into His service, so too at Har Eval, which is where we were chosen as a “covenantal people.” Like Isaiah the prophet said (42:6) “I created you and appointed you as a covenantal people, a light of nations.” Meaning, to engage all nations in the covenant (which is faith) so that they abandon paganism and adopt monotheism. And a covenant was already established on this matter with Avraham our forefather, as I wrote in Genesis (17:4), and today it was established with all of Israel. And it started at Har Eval with the writing of the Torah in seventy languages. But this noble purpose would only ultimately be reached through exile and diaspora... And because it is now that they merited this task of the honor of God being revealed through them throughout the world, they therefore were commanded to build altars and to rejoice (*Ha’amek Davar* on Deuteronomy 27:5).

As Netziv was developing, teaching, and writing these ideas in the tiny Lithuanian hamlet of Volozhin, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch was penning very similar sentiments in the enlightened German city of Oldenberg:

Indeed, Yisrael’s loss of its outward glory will appear to you now as being

part and parcel of its destiny through which God's providence was to be manifested. Moreover, Yisrael's mission was not hindered by its exile, nor was its greatness diminished, for it became evident that "greatness" has different meanings and Yisrael's state of dispersion opened a new and unique field for the fulfillment of its mission.

...Is it not the highest level of human greatness to be the bearer of the Almighty's teachings regarding God and man's mission? To teach, by one's destiny and way of life, that there is a higher goal than wealth and pleasure, science and culture, and that all these should serve as a means to the fulfillment of that goal?... After all, Yisrael has no other task than to acknowledge as its God the One Who calls and educates all human beings to His service, and to make Him known as such, through its destiny and way of life!⁷

The notion that Jews are called upon to share the Torah's teachings with the world at large, and that doing so speaks to the very essence of a Jew's mission in this world, was expressed not only in the Yeshiva world of Netziv and the Neo-Orthodox world of Rav Hirsch, but in 19th century Hasidic circles as well. Reb Nosson of Breslov, the great scribe and teacher of the Breslover community following the death of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, records the following in his *Likutei Halakhot*:

Yet, in truth, it is known that all of the worlds were created only in order to recognize and know the Exalted One, as it says in the Zohar (2:42, 2:5) "in order to know Him." Therefore everything was created so that the Jewish people would accept His Torah, which is the holy knowledge with which one recognizes and knows the Exalted One. And therefore all greatness and royalty is reserved for Jews who perform His will, who merit this knowledge for which everything was created. And therefore only they are called "man," as our sages said, because one who doesn't have [proper] knowledge is an animal in the form of a man, as explained in the beginning of the Torah as written above. And for this reason everyone is obligated to engage in settling the world (*yishuv ha-olam*). That is, in bringing true knowledge to others – for this is the essence of settling the world as is explained there and as I mentioned above. And when the Jewish people merit to do His will, they are obligated to try with all of their power to bring this knowledge to the Nations of the World as well, as it is written "tell of his Honor amongst

the nations, etc..” And it is written “proclaim His wonders amongst the nations, etc.,” and likewise in many other verses (*Yoreh De’ah*, Laws of Redeeming the Firstborn, 5:13).

Visionary and creative as Netziv, Rav Hirsch, and Rebbe Nachman were, they certainly did not invent the notion of *Or Goyim*’s pivotal role in the thought and practice of observant Jewry. It is latent in Abaye’s interpretation of the command to love God that we must make God beloved amongst His creatures (Yoma 86a), in R’ Hanina’s homiletic that the windows of the *Bet Hamikdash* (Temple) are narrow on the inside and wide on the outside in order to let the light shine outward onto the world (Leviticus Rabbah 31:7), and in Rashi’s comment that Shabbat is intended as a sign “for the nations” of God’s relationship with the Jewish people (Rashi on Exodus 31:13). It is made explicit when Rambam writes that the essence of the mitzvah of Kiddush Hashem is to “publicize this true faith in the world” and when Seforno interprets the Jewish people’s call to be a “kingdom of priests” as a call “to teach and instruct the entire human race to call in the name of God” (Seforno on Exodus 19:6).

In other words, these 19th century authors inherited a long, though often dormant, *mesorah* (tradition) that stretches back to the concepts of *am segulah* (chosen people) and *mamlekhet kohanim* (kingdom of priests) in Exodus and Deuteronomy. The *mesorah* works its way beyond the iconic verses in Isaiah and the universalist motifs of the book of Psalms, ultimately manifesting itself in eschatological passages of our liturgy and the halakhic and *aggadic* material of Hazal. And as much as we know today of that *mesorah*, there is undoubtedly much more that has yet to be uncovered.

20TH CENTURY AMERICAN MODERN ORTHODOXY

Despite the fact that the American Modern Orthodox community that blossomed in the second half of the 20th century drew heavily on both the Eastern European world of the Yeshiva and the Western European world of *Torah Im Derekh Eretz* (Torah with the ways of life), the concept of *Or Goyim* did not retain the hallowed place it had in the worldviews of Rav Hirsch and Netziv. Instead of focusing on what Judaism could give to society, a niche claimed by and quickly associated with Reform Judaism, American Modern Orthodoxy, under the banner of *Torah U-Madda*, focused on what it could – or should – get from the society around it.

Twentieth century Modern Orthodox thought, therefore, is dominated by the largely unspoken question of how best to navigate and marshal the intellectual and cultural opportunities offered by modernity’s unprecedented advances in

philosophy, science and technology – in a context of unprecedented political freedom and tolerance – in order to strengthen one’s personal *avodat Hashem* (service of God). Thus the central motifs in the writings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Rabbi Norman Lamm, and Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, amongst others, are the development of one’s relationship with God through *teshuva* (repentance), prayer, and Torah study; on finding the proper balance between ethics and law, intellect and experience, autonomy and submission, individual and community; and on which elements of the broader culture to let in and which ones to keep out.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s *Kol Dodi Dofek* offers an illustrative example of the contrast. Much like Netziv, Rabbi Soloveitchik refers to two “covenants” forged by the Jewish people prior to their entry to the Land of Israel. Whereas Netziv locates these covenants at Har Sinai and then Har Eval, Rabbi Soloveitchik locates the first one in Egypt prior to the exodus and the second one at the foot of Har Sinai. Far more important than the location of the covenants, though, is their content.

Netziv sees the covenant at Har Sinai as the Jewish people’s induction ceremony. It was where they were “betrothed” to God and informed of what it looks like to live as God’s people. As described above, though, it was only at Har Eval that they received their “mission.” It was at that second covenant that they were called on to be an Or Goyim.

Rabbi Soloveitchik’s understanding of the pre-conquest covenants, as articulated in *Kol Dodi Dofek*, is quite different. The covenant in Egypt was about national solidarity forged by the shared experience of oppression and hardship. This is where the Jewish people became distinctly aware of their “otherness” and keenly sensitive to the plight of their brethren. This is what Rabbi Soloveitchik calls the Covenant of Fate. Once this covenant was in place, the Jewish people were ready to be elevated through the Covenant of Sinai, which he calls the Covenant of Destiny. And whereas one might have expected a Covenant of Destiny to continue the themes of “Yisrael’s mission” as articulated by Rav Hirsch, or the higher “purpose” as spelled out by Netziv, Rabbi Soloveitchik moves in a different direction completely. The Jewish people’s destiny, according to Rabbi Soloveitchik, is to freely and passionately draw near to God:

How does destiny differ from fate? In two respects: fate means a compelled existence; destiny is existence by volition. Destiny is created by man himself, who chooses and makes his own way in life. Fate is expressed in a teleological sense, in a denuded existence, whereas destiny embodies purpose and objectives. Shared Fate means an inability to rebel against fate. It is, as with the tragedy of Jonah the prophet, about

the lack of alternatives to escape the God of the Jews; “And God hurled a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was about to break apart” (Jonah 1:4). Shared Destiny means having free will to strive for a goal (a decision freely willed to be sanctified to an ideal) and a yearning and longing for the Master of the Universe. Instead of the blind fate that pursued him, Jonah in the end chose the exalted destiny of the God of Israel. “I am a Jew, and I fear the Lord, the God of the heaven” (Jonah 1:9).⁸

This, in a word, has been the project of American Modern Orthodox theology. It has sought to move beyond an existence forged by fate, by actively leveraging the freedoms of modernity in order to construct a life of sanctity and proximity to the Creator of the World. Its focus has been on shaping its own destiny, rather than the destiny of those around them.

Perhaps the most glaring absence of the concept of *Or Goyim* emerges from the pages of “Confrontation,” Rabbi Soloveitchik’s influential essay on interfaith dialogue.⁹ The piece is best known for the restrictions that Rabbi Soloveitchik put, and which the Rabbinical Council of America later adopted, on what subject matter should or should not be engaged in an interfaith context. However, there is no mistaking the fact that Rabbi Soloveitchik, in the same essay, clearly articulates those areas in which we ought to join forces with our non-Jewish peers: “We, created in the image of God, are charged with responsibility for the great confrontation of man and the cosmos. We stand with civilized society shoulder to shoulder over against an order which defies us all.”

This obligation for the betterment of mankind, however, is decidedly universal in Rabbi Soloveitchik’s thinking. That is, our obligation is no different than the obligation of monotheists of other religions, which is precisely why we can band together to carry them out. In areas, though, where Jews differ from Christians, we must, according to Rabbi Soloveitchik, keep to ourselves. In this dichotomy it is hard to find space for the concept of *Or Goyim*; that is, the notion that we, as Jews, are uniquely obligated to bring the core values of Torah Judaism to the world at large. If these are universal values relating to the human condition, then, in Rabbi Soloveitchik’s conception, it would seem that others are as obligated as we are. If they are particular values relating to one’s relationship with God, then, according to Rabbi Soloveitchik, they don’t belong in the public square. In fact, Rabbi Soloveitchik goes so far as to say that the story we must tell the Christian community is less about our sense of duty to “to perfect the world under the Sovereignty of the Almighty,” and more about our need to remain

distant and apart:

As a charismatic faith community, we have to meet the challenge of confronting the general non-Jewish faith community. We are called upon to tell this community not only the story it already knows – that we are human beings, committed to ‘the general welfare and progress of mankind, that we are interested in combating disease, in alleviating human suffering, in protecting man’s rights, in helping the needy, et cetera – but also what is still unknown to it, namely, our otherness as a metaphysical covenantal community (“Confrontation,” 20–21).

It is interesting to note that some forty years after Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote “Confrontation,” his great nephew, Rabbi Dr. Meir Soloveitchik, took up the issue again in an essay entitled “A Nation Under God: Jews, Christians, and the American Public Square.” After building upon the foundations of his uncle in arguing that there is, in fact, a place for Jews to engage Jewishly in the public square, the younger Soloveitchik makes a move his uncle did not: “The Jewish people, as God’s representatives here on earth, are uniquely obligated to ensure that society continues to define itself as one that is under God; but the truth is that the Rav’s writings indicate that this is also a universal obligation incumbent upon all “men of God.”¹⁰

Indeed, the Rav did see it as a “universal obligation.” The time may have come, however, for the Modern Orthodox community to refocus itself on the fact that we “as God’s representatives here on earth, are uniquely obligated” to carry this mission forward.

Some might justifiably argue that the passionate Zionism of American Modern Orthodox communities will create an impenetrable barrier for a Hedgehog Concept that is inherently suited for the Diaspora. Those communities, though, would do well to consider both the paucity of actual *olim* (émigres) from the United States each year and the newly documented ideological frailty of those who stay behind.¹¹

Others may argue that the original vision of *Or Goyim* was an eschatological one. It was offered as a prophetic vision of what God would bring about in the End of Days, not a vision for action in our day. It may be so. But such arguments are at least equally valid, if not more so, regarding the earliest sources for Zionism. If they have been overcome once, they can be overcome again. The most compelling objection, however, might simply be that *Or Goyim* won’t resonate in the minds and souls of today’s youth. A Hedgehog Concept that doesn’t tug at the heartstrings is no Hedgehog Concept at all. We will now turn to how then the Modern Orthodox

community might embrace such an idea in a way that authentically actualizes its ancient ideals while simultaneously appealing to the postmodern sensibilities of Modern Orthodoxy's up and coming generation.

Thus far, we established that the Modern Orthodox community would be well served by identifying its Hedgehog Concept, that is, a transcendent Torah value which the Modern Orthodox community is uniquely positioned to actualize and around which its adherents and institutions can rally. After laying out prerequisite criteria for such a concept, including a rich textual tradition that has yet to be fully explored, we suggested that the concept of *Or Goyim* may well fit the bill.

FROM OR LA-GOYIM TO OR AMIM

As noted, a Hedgehog Concept imbues an organization (or in this case, a denomination) with an additional layer of focus, purpose, and passion. That sense of mission offers every newcomer a lens with which to view the world, and a goal to which they ought to aspire. The Hedgehog Concept is why the young mother raised on the preeminence of *Talmud Torah* willingly holds down a full-time job in addition to caring for her six kids so that her husband can continue to learn in *Kollel* (full-time adult Torah study program). It's why the young father formed from the crucible of Bnei Akiva and Hesder chooses to raise his family within missile range of Gaza. To achieve a status similar to that of *Talmud Torah* in the yeshiva world or *Yishuv Eretz Yisrael* in the *Dati Leumi* world, therefore, a Hedgehog Concept for Modern Orthodoxy must resonate with the community's younger generation.

For young adults steeped in a postmodernist culture, however, the notion of a "light unto the nations" likely strikes a rather dissonant chord. In a world where uncertainty is the only certainty, it is often hard enough to arrive at a set of immutable truths that we, ourselves, hold self-evident. Charging every Jew not only with eking out his or her own path to truth, but with steering others off their chosen paths and onto ours seems likely to cause our young people to recoil rather than to engage. If, as Lyotard would have it, the essence of Postmodernism lies in "incredulity toward metanarratives," then refocusing our Judaism on the story of our selection by God as a "Kingdom of Priests" whose national telos is "to perfect the world under the Sovereignty of the Almighty" seems like a strategy doomed to fail.

The placement of a letter, however, can make all of the difference.

Simply stated, the phrase Or La-Goyim has, at best, tenuous roots in our *mesorah* (tradition). It appears nowhere in Tanakh, nowhere in Talmudic or Midrashic literature, and – save for a single instance in the commentary of the Abravanel (on Isaiah 49:6) – it doesn't appear (as far as I can see) in the literature of the Rishonim

either. The phrase, as it appears in the words of Isaiah, contains the letter *lamed* before the word “*or*,” not before the word “*goyim*.” As such, it signifies possession rather than direction. Its meaning is not “to,” but “of.” God, through His prophet, is calling on the Jewish people to be a “light of the nations,” not a “light to the nations”:

“I the Lord, have summoned you in righteousness, And I have grasped you by the hand. I created you, and appointed you as a covenantal people (*le-berit olam*), as a light of nations (*le-or goyim*)” (Isaiah 42:6).

“He said: It is too light a thing that you should be My servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the offspring of Israel; I will also make you a light of the nations (*u-netatikha le-or goyim*), that My salvation may stretch to the ends of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6).

From this more accurate reading, a softer concept emerges that works quite well with postmodern sensibilities. The resonant call of *Or Goyim* for the 21st century is not to proselytize, but to publicize. It seeks not to convert, but to converse. Rather than take its cue from *Alenu*’s liturgical call to “to perfect the world under the Sovereignty of the Almighty,” as perhaps Rav Hirsch and Netziv did, this softer call emerges from *Hodu*’s introductory instructions to “praise Hashem, call in His name, proclaim His deeds among the nations,” and its closing call to “tell of His glory amongst the nations, His wonders amongst the people.”

It jumps off the page of the siddur just a few paragraphs later when the word *kol* – meaning “all” or “everyone” – is repeated twelve times in the second half of *Ashrei*, beginning with a vision of all of God’s creations and righteous ones thanking and blessing Him by “telling of His kingship” and “speaking of His might” so as “to make known to all of mankind His might and the majestic glory of His kingship.” As Rambam writes in his *Sefer HaMitzvot* with regard to the mitzvah of Kiddush Hashem (Positive Commandment #9), “the essence of this commandment is that we are commanded to publicize (*le-farsem*) this true belief in the world and not to fear any harm that may hurt us [as a result].”

Or Goyim, then, is a charge to take the treasure chest of wisdom, guidance, and instruction that comprises our *mesorah*, proudly place it on the proverbial table of global discussion, and help others, unfamiliar with it, to understand its content. As such, it need not get bogged down in postmodern questions of subjective versus objective truth, rationality versus irrationality, and reality versus unreality or hyper-reality. My *mesorah* is my truth. The rhythms of halakhic life are my reality. My

calling is not to convince you of their certitude, but to humbly offer you a glimpse of their beauty.

Still, the unfortunate reality is that in modern Jewish parlance – both in English and in Hebrew – the word *goyim* has an inescapably pejorative connotation. More than describing those who do not share our faith and beliefs, it all too often conveys a whiff of racial superiority that is anathema to the up-and-coming generation of Modern Orthodox Jews. Therefore, I suggest we look not to Isaiah 42 or 49 for this concept's most effective appellation, but to Isaiah 51:4 instead: "Listen to Me, My people, and lend Me your ear My nation, for teaching shall go forth from Me, in a moment I will bring my justice as a *light of nations (Or Amim)*."

While *Or Amim* cannot survive in a world of radical postmodern pluralism, it is poised to thrive in a deconstructed world of postmodern multiculturalism. Radical pluralism often leaves no space for professions of faith or assertions of truth of any kind, and thus the conversations and exchanges necessary for *Or Amim* to take root and blossom are all too often muted and repressed. In a society, however, which explicitly honors a multiplicity of voices – even if none have privilege over the other – the opportunities to actualize the ideal of *Or Amim* are limitless. Indeed, in a world paradoxically defined by access to infinite information and yet crippled by the confines of echo chambers, *Or Amim* calls on the Jewish people to make sure that their heritage is on full display in this unprecedented marketplace of ideas, and that its reach extends well beyond its local audience.

When actualized in a multicultural world, the ideal of *Or Amim* has the power to energize and inspire the full breadth of the community to view their daily interactions with the world around them as an opportunity to fulfill the divine will. Jewish doctors seek out opportunities to offer uniquely Jewish insight into the dilemmas of end-of-life issues and universal healthcare. Jewish geneticists publicly offer a Torah perspective on the roles of man, God, science, and the act of procreation. Jewish lawyers find forums to infuse a Jewish Law perspective into debates over privacy, intellectual property, and the rehabilitative vs. punitive role of punishment. Jewish artists and musicians infuse their work with an explicitly Jewish spirit and disseminate it well beyond the confines of the Jewish community. Jewish salesclerks and technicians spend less time apologizing for their early departure every Friday afternoon, and more time inviting their associates to join them for a Shabbat meal and experience the joy and serenity of sacred time and space.

And, while there are undoubtedly Jews who do all of the above today, the concept of *Or Amim* transforms the behavior from *de facto* to *de jure*. Much as the Hedgehog Concept of kiruv (outreach) ensures that the Chabad *shaluah* (emissary)

doesn't bemoan his remote outpost thousands of miles from the Jewish vibrancy and vitality of Crown Heights, but relishes it as his or her opportunity to do what he or she was put on earth to do, so the concept of *Or Amim* ought to inspire the Modern Orthodox doctor or cashier, hedge fund manager or plumber, guitarist or marketing associate to see their daily engagement with secular society as a unique opportunity to fulfill the *retzon Hashem* (will of God) in ways that few, if any, others can. In doing so, the bifurcation and duality that so often plagues the Modern Orthodox experience – Judaic Studies and General Studies, *Torah U-Madda*, secular and religious, work and home, personal and professional – begin to melt away. In its place rises a more holistic religious Weltanschauung that encompasses all facets of a Jew's daily life.

EDUCATING AN OR AMIM

If the charge of *Or Amim* is for the Jewish people to offer the rich teachings of Jewish tradition to the wider world, then the Jewish people's knowledge and understanding of its own teachings are a necessary prerequisite. And while such might seem obvious, the reality is that when Judaism does make an appearance in today's American public square, it is often in the form of cultural phenomena that have no real basis in the vast corpus of Jewish law, lore, or literature: bagels, lox, kosher = blessed by a rabbi, Chanukah presents, etc. It also comes in the form of decontextualized platitudes and soundbites that often stray quite far from their original intent (e.g., *mi-dor le-dor*, *tikkun olam*, *tzedek tzedek tirdof*, etc.).

Or Amim aspires to something deeper, more substantive, and more authentic. At the same time, one of Judaism's most salient characteristics is its tolerance, or perhaps even encouragement, of disagreement and debate. Thus, there ought to be no assumption that *Or Amim* plays out in any uniform fashion. Judaism doesn't have one script. Its contributions to the issues of the day will undoubtedly vary depending on the contributor, the context, his or her background, and his or her predilections. Judaism, however, has always insisted on arguments grounded in its texts. As such, *Or Amim* performed *ke-dat u-kedin* (according to Jewish law) ought always to be able to answer the question of *mena hanei milei* or *menalan* – from where in the tomes of our tradition does this teaching, this insight, this argument, or this perspective emerge?

Rigorous Jewish education, therefore, remains as necessary as ever in a community that rallies around *Or Amim*. As much as the internet has brought with it unprecedented access to Jewish texts and Jewish ideas, those who see themselves as called upon to share the Torah's depths with the wider world cannot rely on crowd-sourced translations and summarized approximations to achieve their lofty goals.

Instead, both boys and girls raised in such communities must gain the language and analytical skills necessary to access our texts in their original form. They must also gain familiarity with what type of information one can find where in our massive library, lest Google direct them to *Orhot Hayim* when what they were looking for was to be found in *Orah Hayim*.

The educational demands of *Or Amim*, however, fundamentally differ from that of *Torah U-Madda*. In the former, a student must be able to ground their practice, beliefs, and values in the texts of the *mesorah* (or, at the very least, know where to look in order to find such grounding) and bring such texts to bear on real-world situations. In the latter, knowing those Torah texts is just the beginning. The real work comes in integrating such texts and ideas with those from other cultures and societies. A noble endeavor, for sure, but beyond the reach of way too many. The flexibility of *Or Amim* to be applied in different ways by different people in different circumstances can allow for different students who have mastered such texts with different levels of sophistication, nuance, and breadth to each feel successful in carrying out their community's sacred mission. The rigidity of a *Torah U-Madda* framework, however, sends those who are incapable or uninterested in its lofty intellectual ideals to seek spiritual satisfaction elsewhere.

Although an *Or Amim* framework still demands a high-quality secular education, the primary function of such study is as a portal into broader society, its culture, and mores, rather than as a portal to knowledge of God.¹² We might say that *Torah U-Madda* is, at its core, interdisciplinary, while *Or Amim* is multidisciplinary. The former seeks an often elusive state of harmony and integration, while the latter allows for cacophony and dissonance. And, while the synthesis of Rabbi Belkin and Rabbi Lamm might still be the ideal for those suited to its call, with a refocus on *Or Amim* as Modern Orthodoxy's Hedgehog, unsuitability is no longer a barrier to entry.

That having been said, to take full advantage of *Or Amim*'s power to energize and elevate the Modern Orthodox community, changes to the way in which it educates its youth ought to be made. First of all, it requires what we might call a refinement of its curriculum. For young Jewish adults to become passionate about their unique capacity to fulfill God's mandate to become an *Or Amim*, they must first fully understand that such is His mandate. We must do so in a way that speaks not just to a student's intellect, but to the core of her identity. *Or Amim* can't be taught in a special *shiur*, a high school elective, or even a mandatory yearlong class on the topic. It must be integrated into all aspects of a child's Torah learning throughout his or her educational journey. To do so doesn't require replacing the core Yeshiva Day subjects of Humash, Navi, Mishnah, and Gemara. But it does mean that in select-

ing which *sefarim*, *mesekhtot*, and *perakim* (books, tractates, and chapters) to learn, schools make a point of including the texts upon which this value is based.

Raising a generation on the importance of *Or Amim* means sensitizing teachers and administrators to the importance of delving deeply into the *berakhot* (blessings) of Avraham Avinu, the *Av Hamon Goyim* (father of many nations), and their promise that his descendants will be a blessing to the inhabitants of the earth. It means focusing on the story of the Ten Plagues not only as a means toward achieving freedom from bondage but “so that Egyptians should know that I am the Lord” (Exod. 7:5). It means that in addition to emphasizing the centrality of the *Bet Hamikdash* (Temple) in cultivating the relationship between God and the Jewish People, the secondary role ascribed to it by none other than King Solomon himself, must be duly noted as well:

“Or if a foreigner who is not of Your people Israel comes from a distant land for the sake of Your name – for they shall hear about Your great name and Your mighty hand and Your outstretched arm – when he comes to pray toward this House, hear in Your heavenly abode and grant all that the foreigner asks You for. Thus all the peoples of the earth will know Your name and revere You, as does Your people Israel; and they will recognize that Your name is attached to this House that I have built” (I Kings 8:41–43; NJPS translation).

And it means that when King Solomon concludes his dedication speech by asking God to “be with us as He was with our fathers” and “to incline our hearts to walk in His ways... so that all the nations of the world will know Hashem is God, there is no other” (I Kings 8:57–60), students in a Modern Orthodox school should tingle with a sense of pride and purpose, feeling as if Solomon were talking directly to them and giving them their mission, should they choose to accept it.

Likewise, the curriculum of a Modern Orthodox Day School that wishes to raise a generation passionate about *Or Amim* has to spend time unpacking the concepts of *mamlechet kohanim* (kingdom of priests), *goy kadosh* (holy nation), and *am segula* (chosen people). Rather than avoid the sensitive and complex questions regarding “chosenness” that ought to emerge from rituals like the daily recitation of *birkhot ha-Torah*, teachers in Modern Orthodox day schools ought to engage them and challenge students to consider the question of “‘chosen’ for what?” They ought to explore the *sugyot* (sections) of *kiddush Hashem* (sanctifying God’s name), the contours of *darkei shalom* (laws intended to prevent hostility between Jews and their neighbors),

and the intricacies of *sheva mitzvot benei noah* (the seven Noahide Laws). It should ensure that students recognize the passages in their daily *tefillah*, and throughout the tefillot of the *yamim nora'im* (High Holy Days) that echo this call to arms.

Just as the book of Joshua, with its narrative of Israel's conquest, has a special place in the curriculum of *Dati Leumi* schools, so ought the book of Isaiah to have a special place in the Modern Orthodox curriculum. If a product of a *Dati Leumi* school in Israel ought to take pride in the fact that each and every time we open the Aron Kodesh we say “*ki mi-tzion tetze Torah*,” (Torah shall come forth from Zion) the product of the American Modern Orthodox school ought to be equipped to offer a gentle reminder of how that verse, in its original context, begins:

“And the many nations shall go and say: ‘Come, Let us go up to the Mountain of the Lord, to the House of the God of Jacob; That He may instruct us in His ways, And that we may walk in His paths.’ For instruction shall come forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem” (Isaiah 2:3).

In addition to tweaking the points of emphasis in its curricular content, Modern Orthodox schools would do well to consider the pedagogical implications of engaging kids in the value of *Or Amim*. Critical as it is that the full-fledged pursuit of *Or Amim* take place only after one has “filled their belly” with rigorous Torah learning, in order to truly prepare and excite the next generation about fulfilling their mission as an *Or Amim*, Modern Orthodox Yeshiva high schools could benefit from creating circumscribed yet authentic opportunities for their students to experience the encounter which this mitzvah requires.

To do so, teachers, borrowing from the Project Based Learning playbook, can create learning experiences for students in which they master a small area of Torah content and then share their learning with an authentic audience outside of the Jewish community. Whether it be using social media to share the experience of Shabbat with those debating the merits of powering down, or offering insight into *bal tashhit* (do not waste) to a legislator working on conservation, the merits of such experiences are twofold. Not only will they afford educators the opportunity to guide students in how best to convey Jewish ideas – passionately, respectfully, and humbly – in non-Jewish spaces, but like Project Based Learning in all subject areas, the real-world application and the feedback from authentic audiences will often inspire students across the academic spectrum to put their best foot forward in ways that classroom tests and assessments simply do not.

Lastly, the fulfillment of *Or Amim* would benefit from opportunities for “specialization” within Torah learning as students advance through their undergraduate and graduate years – and beyond. Today, most post-secondary Torah learning opportunities, whether they be in Yeshivot or Seminaries, Jewish colleges, University Hillels, or shul adult-education programs, are designed to promote Torah generalists. All students in a particular yeshiva, in a particular year, learn a particular *mesekhta* (tractate). The staples of shul adult-ed classes are *Daf Yomi* and, more recently, *Tanakh Yomi*, classes on *Parashat Hashavua*, and the like. For the student who has seven to ten years to devote to such study, this is the surest path to producing bona fide *talmidei hakhamim*.

For most of the post-high school population of the Modern Orthodox community, however, for whom Torah learning is either a year or two (at most) full-time engagement, or a part-time avocation that enriches and complements their full-time occupation, this approach may not be the most effective in advancing the aims of *Or Amim*. In addition, then, to the opportunities to expand one’s breadth of Torah knowledge, there ought to be opportunities to strengthen one’s command of particular areas of Torah that are germane to one’s unique position in life. That is, lawyers ought to be able to regularly access in-depth – and in-person – *shiurim* on the conceptual and practical elements of the Torah’s view on tax law, criminal justice, intellectual property, inheritance, and a host of other relevant legal matters. Current or aspiring medical professionals ought to have regular access to accomplished teachers of Torah who can guide them on Jewish medical ethics and the practical *halakhot* of healthcare. Current or aspiring business owners need to learn the intricacies of Jewish labor law, the *halakhot* of finance, the Torah ethics of marketing and competition, to name just a few. Current or aspiring communal professionals ought to deeply understand the Torah’s conception of communal priorities, the obligations of *tzedaka* (charity), and the ethics of agenda-driven fundraising.

All of the above are adjustments, rather than overhauls. Yet, when done in concert with one another and across communities, the long-term impact on developing young men and women who are passionate about their mission as *ovdei Hashem* (servants of God) could be extraordinary.

A HEDGEHOG FOR MODERN ORTHODOXY, NOT FOR THE MODERN ORTHODOX

One final word of caution. Encouraging the cultivation of a Hedgehog Concept for American Modern Orthodoxy runs the very real risk of exacerbating the identity politics rampant in society today. The quest to define what Modern

Orthodoxy is, can quickly become a quest to define who is Modern Orthodox. It can be taken as an opportunity – or as an excuse – by some to sharpen party lines and to further splinter an already fractured global Jewish community.

If understood, and conveyed, properly, however, *Or Amim* ought to have the opposite effect. *Or Amim* is being posited as a defining element of Modern Orthodoxy, not as a means of defining who is Modern Orthodox. That is, the Modern Orthodox community ought to feel no sense of ownership over the concept nor ought it to engender any sense of exclusivity. Rather, the Modern Orthodox community ought to see itself, by virtue of its geographic and socio-economic realities, as particularly well-suited to carry out this vital, ancient charge of the Jewish people. Recognizing such an opportunity ought to energize and excite many in the Modern Orthodox community.

At the same time, the renewed focus by the Modern Orthodox community on this ideal ought to foster a deep sense of connection between self-identified members of the Modern Orthodox community and those Jews who identify differently but who, despite the way they dress, what they eat, the shul in which they do – or don't – *daven*, are similarly engaged in bringing authentic Torah ideas to the larger world. Much as Chabad, as a community, might be uniquely positioned to carry out the Torah ideal of *kiruv*, they don't own it. Their emphasis on *kiruv* stems from a deeply held belief in the theurgic power of mitzvah performance to bring the world closer to redemption. Whether the instigator and inspiration for the performance of a mitzvah comes from within the Chabad community or from without, however, has no bearing on the value of the act itself. As such, Chabad *shluchim* (emissaries) themselves ought to feel a sense of kinship to others in the Jewish world who are similarly engaged in revitalizing traditional Jewish life for Jews. They are both engaged in the – or one of the – most precious of God's commands.

Or Amim ought to be approached from a similar vantage point. A bareheaded Reform Jewish colleague who articulates a well-sourced Jewish view of communal responsibility for the underprivileged, and a Jew with *pe'os* (earlocks) tucked around his ears who can explain to his associates the sanctity that Jewish law accords to physical touch, ought no longer to be seen as just a member of the same people as their Modern Orthodox co-religionists, but as soulmates equally engaged in fulfilling one of life's most noble causes. And those Jews who live cloistered in Jewish enclaves whether in Kiryat Motzkin or Kiryas Joel, and therefore cannot actualize *Or Amim* to the same extent, ought not to be seen as "less than," but as "different from." There are opportunities to fulfill facets of the Divine Will that their particular circumstances offer to them which Jews living in Boca or Bergenfield don't have. And, to return to Collin's terms, they ought to create "resource engines" to drive

their Hedgehog Concept, the same way that Modern Orthodox communities ought to create the infrastructure necessary to drive their own. Instead of exacerbating communal rifts, doing so can serve to heal them while energizing a new generation to passionately pursue a life of Torah learning and Torah living.

¹ This article was originally published in two parts on The Lehrhaus, accessible at: thelehrhaus.com/commentary/a-modern-orthodox-hedgehog-for-a-postmodern-world (Part I), and thelehrhaus.com/commentary/a-modern-orthodox-hedgehog-for-a-postmodern-world-part-2 (Part II). An oral presentation based on these remarks was given at the CCE event “Modern Orthodoxy in a Post-Modern World” streamed live on the internet on December 1, 2020 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3LsxtnYMGWM&t=62s>).

² Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't* (New York: Harper Business, 2001), 90.

³ Gil Perl, “Toward a Passionate Modern Orthodoxy” in *The Next Generation of Modern Orthodoxy*, ed. Shmuel Hain (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2012), 265–277.

⁴ And even so, the extreme emphasis on a value that is ultimately cognitive in nature has disenfranchised its fair share of young people in that community over the years.

⁵ Rav Aharon Lichtenstein famously quipped “In this setting, the Rambam frequently does not so much compete with Michelangelo as with Michael Jordan, or even, lamentably, Michael Jackson.” See *Leaves of Faith, The World of Jewish Learning*, vol. II (New York: KTAV Publishing, 2004), 324.

⁶ All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

⁷ From Joseph Elias, *The Nineteen Letters: The World of Rabbi S.R. Hirsch* (New York: Feldheim, 1995), 198.

⁸ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek: Listen—My Beloved Knocks*, trans. David Z. Gordon (New York: KTAV Publishing, 2006), 86.

⁹ “Confrontation,” *Tradition* 6, 2 (1964): 5–29.

¹⁰ “A Nation Under God: Jews, Christians, and the American Public Square,” *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 14 (2007): 62–83; here 81.

¹¹ On rates of immigration, the Jewish Agency reported that there were 3,052 new olim from the United States in 2018; see archive.jewishagency.org/news/aliyah-statistics-%E2%80%93-2018. According to Brandeis University, the total Jewish population of the United States is 7.5 million; see ajpp.brandeis.edu/map. On the ideology of American Modern Orthodoxy, see Nishma Research, “The Successes, Challenges, and Future of American Modern Orthodoxy,” November 4, 2019, accessible at nishmaresearch.com.

¹² This is to be distinguished, importantly, from secular studies in other communities where its function is solely as a gateway into a profession.

Modern Orthodoxy in a Post-Modern World¹

Tully Harcsztark

Rabbi Dr. Perl has framed the challenge of contemporary Modern Orthodoxy in an interesting and important way by seeking to articulate a “Hedgehog Concept” for our community: a big idea around which we can unite, engage with enthusiasm, and actually be the best. The challenge to formulate a driving concept for Modern Orthodoxy – one that contrasts with Haredi Judaism’s commitment to Talmud Torah, Religious Zionists’ commitment to the State of Israel, or Chabad’s commitment to kiruv (outreach) – is a powerful formulation of the question we must answer for ourselves: What is the driving idea of Modern Orthodoxy?

Implicit, or rather explicit, in this question is a critique of the Modern Orthodox mantra of *Torah U’Madda* (Torah and secular knowledge), a critique which I agree we must take into serious consideration. *Torah U’Madda* is a concept that is aspiring, inspiring, and powerful in its highest form, but is one that is difficult to achieve because it is elitist in the formulations that derive, for example, from the Rambam and Rabbi Soloveitchik’s writings. Reading Aristotle alongside Rambam will attract a number of people, but it is difficult to shape a movement on those grounds. We must acknowledge that if an idea cannot engage the range of its members, the strength and force of the group will decline and its driving idea will become diluted. Professor Alan Brill noted in an essay that in much of American Modern Orthodox suburbia, Modern Orthodoxy means Torah and sports, or Torah and movies, much more than it means Torah and Aristotle.² What, then, should be the driving force of Modern Orthodoxy?

Rabbi Dr. Perl proposes the idea of *Or Amim* (light of the nations) as a response to these questions. By focusing on engaging with the broader society, we can marshal the wide range of our community members, their capacities and interests and passions, to make a Jewish impact on the broader world. I applaud that goal and connect strongly to the centrality of the verse, “for that will demonstrate your wisdom and discernment in the eyes of the nations” (Deut. 4:6); that, as Rambam emphasized, living lives filled with Torah and *mitzvot* should bring Jewish inspiration to the nations around us.

However, in my view, we have skipped a step; or perhaps more precisely, we are mistaking an effect for the goal. To share a *devar Torah* by way of analogy, Rav Shimon Shkop, in his introduction to *Shaarei Yosher*, quotes a *midrash* commenting on our obligation to be *kedoshim*, to be separated or holy. The *midrash* poses a question: perhaps I might think that each of us should aspire to a God-like holiness.

However, the *midrash* responds, God says “because I am holy,” which the midrash explains to mean that God’s sanctity is higher than that of humans. Rav Shimon explains that since God has no personal needs and drives, He can focus solely on others, on giving. But as human beings, each of us must care for our own needs – but always with an understanding that such caring is in the interest of helping others, of creating a better world.

Broadened out, I see the idea of *Or Amim* as a most positive effect of our mission, something that should guide our practical behavior, serve as a barometer to guide our learning and our curriculum design. However, I believe that our primary focus should first be turned inward to our particular community and what it has to offer, to clarify what we are trying to say to ourselves and to other communal conceptions of Judaism. In other words, we need to articulate clearly to our own community where we fit among all the different denominations, sects, and communities that now make up the Jewish community in America in particular, and also the Jewish community worldwide.

Upon examination and reflection, if we look at what the modern observant community has accomplished and how we are positioned, we will find that, although we are a small community and have significant areas for improvement, we have been more successful than we sometimes think and the idea is more successful and accessible than we acknowledge. I suggest that we might not need a new Hedgehog Concept; perhaps what we need to do is double down and express pride in what we have been doing, articulate it with strength and confidence, and sharpen, rather than shift, our focus. In other words, rather than develop a new Hedgehog Concept, we might need to take what we have and strengthen it, make it more accessible, be more passionate, confident, and determined to make it come alive. We need to have a little less hand-wringing and have a leadership that feels confident in what it is that we are trying to achieve. A confident leadership can inspire a more confident and inspired youth. The Modern Orthodox community has a vital role to play in the future of American Judaism in particular and of Judaism worldwide in the 21st century. This is of crucial sociological and demographic importance, and it is of intellectual and *hashkafic* (philosophical) importance as well.

I will begin with sociology and demographics. I mentioned earlier that Modern Orthodoxy in the United States is small in number. The oft-quoted 2013 Pew study had it at 3% of American Jewry. With many moving further to the right on the one hand, and many going “off the *derekh*,” as they say, off the observant path, on the other hand, there is constant anxiety about the future of Modern Orthodoxy because of its small number. However, there is also – and this is very important

to acknowledge – a natural impulse that supports the idea of Modern Orthodoxy. While I know that many do not like labels, the Modern Orthodox label expresses this natural impulse very well. Jews who are able, as in our contemporary American Jewish communities, to integrate and participate in the broader society have a natural impulse to be a part of and integrate into that society.

While there is a substantial number of Jews who believe that we must live in enclaves in the Diaspora, most Jews want to be a part of broader society to some degree. At the same time, many, although currently not most, Jews believe that Orthodox commitment to *halakha* is the authentic collective Jewish expression of serving Hashem and must be maintained. Acknowledging that the desire to be part of modern or contemporary society while *also* living a life of *mitzvot* is a natural impulse can allow us to be less defensive and more assertive of the importance of this claim for the continuity and flourishing of our community. Rather than be anxious about shifting numbers, we should express confidence in that mission. And it is important and necessary for us to be assertive about that impulse, as I will explain.

Over recent years, I have heard a number of Israeli academics describe the future of the Jewish people in the United States in the following similar way: there is a divide that continues to grow in America. In the liberal Jewish community, intermarriage rates have skyrocketed, halakhic observance is limited, and connection to Israel is waning. The ultra-Orthodox and Hasidic communities are demographically growing in leaps and bounds as they develop their enclaves, separated – both in principle and by design – from the rest of much of the Jewish community and the broader society. In fifty years, so the prediction goes, there will be two American Jewish communities: one that is barely recognizable, largely melting into the American populace, Americans who give some cultural and religious nods to their Judaism but are not very Jewishly literate or practicing, and might not even be Jewish according to Orthodox *halakha*, and another Jewish community in ultra-Orthodox enclaves separated off from the rest of society. In this narrative, the American Jewish community is in overall decline and is tearing at the seams.

We must resist this narrative and do all that we can to strengthen American Jewry. The intuition, the impulse to be “modern” – which I don’t mean in a technical sense as opposed to postmodern, but rather modern, meaning contemporary, aware, and connected – and also be Orthodox is a strong intuitive impulse of members of our community, and one that is very important to cultivate for the strength and continuity of Jewish life in America. Perhaps the *Torah u’Maddah* Hedgehog Concept actually has to do with nothing less than survival of the Jewish community in America in a strong and healthy way.

I want to make one more point about the sociological and demographic aspect of Modern Orthodoxy. I do a lot of temperature taking of our school and of our community – probably too much of it and too often. And when I do, I see a lot of weaknesses and failings. We are not spiritual enough, we are not observant enough, we are too materialistic, there is too much college pressure in our high school, we need to experience God more deeply, and so on. I do think there is much for us to improve on. However, I also believe in the “Wisdom of Crowds” idea. Back in 2004, James Surowiecki published a book by that name. In the opening story which took place some hundred years prior, Frances Galton was surprised to find the following at a county fair: The challenge was to guess the weight of a cow with a prize going to the closest guess. What Galton found was that the average of all of the guesses was closer to the actual weight of the cow than the closest individual guess. In other words, while the individual guesses ranged widely – being over or under by large numbers, 100 pounds less or more than the actual weight – the average number of all the guesses combined was closer than the closest individual weight. One hundred years later, Surowiecki did the same experiment with marbles in a jar and discovered the same thing. The average of all the guesses was closer than the closest individual guess.

I use this by way of analogy, not science. This is how I experience Modern Orthodoxy. It is imperfect, it is flawed, but on its simplest, most popular, non-intellectualized level – the *Torah U'Madda* of the broadest community – it expresses an intuitive impulse that will continue. This intuitive impulse is extremely important for the healthy continuity of the Jewish community in America and for its continued healthy interaction with American society, and one that we should express as a version, an aspect, maybe the core, of what that impulse is. It's not only about – although it is also about – an intellectual drive, but at its core it is about a way to be, a way to live, and a way to interact as Jews bringing Jews together, and as Jews connecting to the world around us.

In this sense, Modern Orthodoxy is not just an intellectually elitist concept. It has an important linchpin status for the healthy flourishing of our Jewish community and we should more strongly champion that. I want to emphasize that we need to recognize that when the leadership of our Modern Orthodox community expresses anxiety, worry, and concern, and that becomes the Modern Orthodox conversation, it has an enormous impact on kids and the next generation feeling inspired by the prospects. Instead, if the leadership of the community would say that this is something that is spectacular and crucial for the continuity of our community, then the next generation would feel differently about it. To achieve this, I think

that our *frum* students should be trained to achieve a better understanding of the different kinds of Jews in the United States and how to connect with them. That is very important, and maybe prior, to figuring out how to reach out to the non-Jewish community beyond.

Second, Modern Orthodoxy is, of course, intellectually distinct. *Torah U'Madda* is its mantra. At SAR, we like to refer to the “Grand Conversation between Torah and the world.” That phrase is meant to embrace the fact that the Torah that we learn shapes the way that we see the world, and that the world in which we live, the culture of a specific time and place, shapes the way that we understand the Torah. This framing is meant to acknowledge change, that Jews have lived for centuries in the Middle East, in Africa, in Europe, and in America. Each generation in each location is presented with scientific, philosophical, and cultural challenges. Those challenges and questions are what make our Torah a *Torat Hayyim*, a living Torah, engaging the hard questions of the day with integrity, openness, and commitment to *halakha*. Again, in its most common form, the questions of how we acknowledge changing circumstances and how we balance change and commitment is not just a high-brow idea. It is core to how we live as Jews, and acknowledging both the change and the commitment is what Modern Orthodoxy is all about. It means being constantly countercultural. It means valuing tradition and *halakha* in a postmodern world; and it means valuing science, philosophy, and culture in a traditional world.

Earlier, I echoed Rabbi Perl’s concern that the *Torah U'Madda* ideal is abstract, elitist, difficult to achieve and that if it cannot engage the range of its members, the strength and force of the group will decline and its driving idea will become diluted. In this intellectual realm, the idea is actually more accessible than we think.

When I was growing into adulthood, we defined Modern Orthodoxy through a particular set of issues: the importance of a rigorous secular studies education, view on women learning Torah, and unwavering support of the State of Israel. We certainly support all three. But I think that defining *Torah U'madda* or the Grand Conversation through specific issues is too static. In acknowledging that the world around us is constantly changing, we should define ourselves not by the issues, but by the method. The Torah and the world within which we live must speak to each other. Truth, human dignity, agency and flourishing, and commitment to Torah, *halakha*, and Jewish continuity are all values that should drive the Grand Conversation between Torah and the world. When we confront the change that life brings with a commitment to truth and knowledge, Torah and *halakha*, and with a sense of integrity and moral judgement – that is what makes Modern Orthodoxy powerful.

This has, in fact, really made a difference. If we proudly look back on these issues – secular education, women’s Torah learning, and Israel – not as definitions of Modern Orthodoxy but as examples of the method, we will find these are issues that challenged the observant community’s thinking over the course of the second half of the 20th century. Taken in terms of the “Wisdom of Crowds” idea in the broadest sense, we have actually navigated those issues quite well, although certainly imperfectly and messily. There has been a tremendous evolution in all of those areas, overflowing into and influencing non-Modern Orthodox communities. The Haredi community supports the Jewish State in its own unique form; there are now Haredi colleges, and women’s learning and teaching have grown exponentially. This is not to take away from the frustrations in the arena of Jewish communal leadership for women, but it is to acknowledge that on the three core issues of Modern Orthodoxy of the second half of the 20th century, we’ve actually done very well.

The Modern Orthodox community has had a significant impact on Jewish life. We must realize that in the very daily lives that we lead, slowly, we do effect change, we build communities that can and often do embody “for that will demonstrate your wisdom and discernment in the eyes of the nations” (Deut. 4:6). Through the lives we lead, the schools we build, the synagogues at the center of our communities, we make the claim that Jewish continuity and meaning depends on *mitzvah* observance, and a life of Torah and *mitzvot* that engages the world brings wisdom and goodness to the world.

Each new generation has its own questions and challenges. Today, there are other issues that are pressing: questions of inclusion – sexual orientation, gender diversity, disabilities; theological questions – faith and science, biblical criticism; moral questions – bioethics, immigration, healthcare, poverty. These questions are our job to think about. Engaging these issues deeply is Modern Orthodox work, and it is not simply the work of the rabbis and the professors. The broad education that our children receive empower them to engage those great issues of our day from a place of Jewish practice and caring for humanity. We must embrace those challenges strongly.

By way of example of this idea, two people come to mind. Jack Lew is a Riverdale resident. He is a Modern Orthodox Jew who was Secretary of the Treasury from 2013 until 2017, and the Director of the Office of Management and Budget under President Clinton, among other numerous achievements. He once spoke to the students at SAR about a vote on healthcare that would affect the wellbeing of millions of Americans. The vote was happening on Shabbat, and he described how he managed that, when he was responsible for all those lives. It’s his to tell the story of

how he handled it. I want simply to raise here the education, the values, the religious and ethical commitments that combined on that evening to be able to place him in that role, as a *frum* Jew with that responsibility, with the impact that that could have – it's enormous.

Another example is Dr. Naor Bar-Zeev, a pediatric infectious diseases physician and statistical epidemiologist. His research interest is in understanding how to maximize the benefit of existing and future vaccines in low-resourced, high mortality settings, how best to protect vulnerable groups like newborns and pregnant women, and how to optimize methods to evaluate vaccine impact and effectiveness. He is, in these difficult times of the Coronavirus, a leading epidemiologist whose wisdom is of enormous importance in figuring out how to confront the pandemic. Dr. Naor Bar-Zeev and Jack Lew are people who model a life of what it means to understand Jewish values of Torah, commitment to *mitzvot*, and caring about the world; they think about the world ethically, morally, scientifically, and with care. There are tens of thousands of us doing so every day, and I believe that we should double down on that commitment.

There is no question that we can and we should do better. Our commitment to halakhic observance should be stronger. We should inspire greater passion in our children. We should bring God into our lives in new and different ways. We should learn and know more Torah than we do. But perhaps here is where the Hedgehog Concept can be especially helpful. Too often, we measure our community's success using the Hedgehog Concept of others, and then we consider ourselves too much of a failure. We might, in fact, not be the most spiritual or the most uniformly halakhic. But by educating towards *Torah U'Madda* or the Grand Conversation (or whatever we choose to call it), we will grow as a community that can serve as a linchpin for the American Jewish community, help Judaism respond to life's changes in a halakhic manner, and bring integrity and truth to our community and beyond.

¹ This essay is an edited transcription of an oral presentation given at the CCE event "Modern Orthodoxy in a Post-Modern World" streamed live on the internet on December 1, 2020 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3LsxtnYMGWM&t=62s>).

² Alan Brill, "Judaism in Culture: Beyond the Bifurcation of *Torah and Madda*," *Edah Journal* 4,1 (2004): 1–26.

Modern Orthodoxy and the Consistent Ethic

Malka Z. Simkovich

On December 6, 1983, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin delivered a lecture at Fordham University that catapulted him into the international limelight.¹ Bernardin had come to Fordham to discuss the Consistent Ethic of Life, an abstract topic that was likely unfamiliar to most of the country's fifty-one million Catholics. The phrase had gained traction among Catholic leaders within the context of the Church's public opposition to the United States' nuclear missile projects—and its opposition to contraceptives—in the 1970s. As the Archbishop of Cincinnati, Bernardin spearheaded an effort in 1981 to draft a pastoral letter on behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (then known as the National Council of Catholic Bishops, or NCCB) which articulated formal opposition to the United States' nuclear arsenal.² The document underwent three drafts and met significant resistance from conservative bishops before it was published under the title “The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response.”³ A year later, in the summer of 1982, Pope John Paul II placed Bernardin at the helm of the Archdiocese of Chicago, the largest diocese in United States.⁴ Later that year, *Time Magazine* featured an image of Bernardin on its cover. Dressed in full regalia and wearing a majestic miter embossed with a golden cross, with nuclear warheads flanking him on either side, Bernardin smiled serenely at the reader under the splashing cover line, “God and the Bomb.”⁵ By the time Bernardin delivered his lecture at Fordham, he was well established as a prominent Catholic leader who was working to thwart the left-right divide which had polarized American Catholics.

Bernardin opened his speech at Fordham by noting that modern technology had created an unprecedented reality in which humans threatened life “on a scale previously unimaginable.”⁶ Nuclear war, abortion, capital punishment, and caring for the sick posed substantial moral questions about how to proceed when faced with having to choose some lives over others on a massive scale. A systematic approach to human power over life and death was necessary, and this approach had to be founded on “an attitude or atmosphere in society which is the pre-condition for sustaining a consistent ethic of life.”⁷ For Bernardin, the establishment of a compassionate society, and compassionate relationships, was the foundation upon which any conversation regarding the preservation of life had to be built. The central notion of the ethic insisted that faith communities approach a given ethical dilemma in conversation with other interdependent ethical dilemmas.⁸

In its early stages of development, the Consistent Ethic was applied to eth-

ical challenges regarding the mitigation of death, particularly as they pertained to bioethics, end-of life issues, assisted suicide, abortion, and capital punishment. But Bernardin did not approach the Consistent Ethic solely as an ethical guide regarding how to keep people alive. For Bernardin, the Ethic was a solution for all of the moral inconsistencies which had long plagued the Church. After all, he argued, what good was it to save an innocent fetus from abortion, only to have this same baby die in a nuclear attack after its birth? What good was it to ameliorate some human suffering, only to justify, or even create, other human suffering? The Consistent Ethic provided a broad framework for addressing the complex variety of moral challenges that arose in tandem with the development of modern technology and scientific advances. The equal application of the Consistent Ethic of Life to issues besides nuclear warfare and abortion, Bernardin argued, would transform the Catholic world by bringing it into conversation with modernity while fully preserving its integrity. This approach invited Catholics to regard their personal and communal relationships as interlocking systems which informed one another, and it called upon Catholics to empathize with all people, regardless of whether they lived in one's immediate family, community, or country. Bernardin's ultimate objective was to frustrate political divisions by asserting that every Catholic is obliged to begin with the value of human life, no matter where he or she stands on various social and political issues.

Though Bernardin hoped that the Ethic would serve as a unifying force, critics who spanned the gamut from pro-choice liberals to conservative supporters of nuclear defense programs accused him of fostering moral relativism by suggesting that all manners of suffering had to be taken into equal account.⁹ By the mid-1980s, however, the Ethic was being deployed primarily by conservative activists towards pro-life political and social causes, which ironically resulted in Bernardin mistakenly throwing his lot in with right-wing Republican Catholics, despite his opposition to nuclear warfare.¹⁰ Bernardin spent years trying to rectify his position as a leader who was not committed to one political ideology over another, but his writings ultimately did not bridge the gaps between the liberal and conservative voices which divided the Church. Today, the survival of the Consistent Ethic depends upon the work of Catholic theologians and clergy who continue to debate its applications.¹¹

The moral resonance, religious significance, and exceptionally American perspective of Bernardin's ideas regarding the Consistent Ethic could have been adopted by any religious leader in America seeking to guide their community's encounter with the challenges of modernity in the early 1980s. As far as I know, however, no leader of a non-Catholic faith community, let alone the Orthodox Jewish community, has considered how the Ethic might be deployed towards the construc-

tion of a synthetic way of thinking which derives from its own moral tradition and drives its community towards a set of interlocking social goals. Yet I believe that, as a subdenomination whose members recognize the benefits of actively engaging in their broader societies, Modern Orthodox Judaism is well positioned to nurture and develop a uniquely Jewish expression of the Ethic.¹²

The construction of such an ethic could offer Modern Orthodox Jews a set of social principles which guide the organization of their communities and interactions with those who live outside of them. This Ethic could also impact the process of halakhic decision making. While the early rabbis did not express ideas that are overtly analogous to the Consistent Ethic (in part because the early rabbis did not write texts that were expansively theological), a Jewish development of the Consistent Ethic could ground itself in rabbinic texts which presume organizing principles that cohere with the Ethic. The Ethic, therefore, also bears potential for functioning as a guide in halakhic decision making, particularly in cases of ethical conflict. This article will not attempt to begin the project of putting halakhic texts, or rabbinic texts of any kind, into conversation with the Consistent Ethic. Instead, it will lay the groundwork for this effort by demonstrating how the Ethic might be applied to key relationships which serve to define Modern Orthodox identity in ways which consistently prioritize human dignity.

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND THE FORMATION OF MODERN ORTHODOX IDENTITY

Part of the difficulty in applying the Consistent Ethic to moral challenges is that it offers only a framework for creating solutions, and is not a solution in itself. Nevertheless, it has the potential to introduce a hermeneutic of consistency which can bridge the social and political divisions which are polarizing members of the Modern Orthodox community, and it could serve to harmonize the relationships between Modern Orthodox Jews and people outside of the Modern Orthodox community more broadly. The application of the Ethic to Modern Orthodox Judaism would also help Modern Orthodox Jews to forge a mission-driven community based on a consistent concern for dignity which emerges from the relationships which serve to define it. Such an ethic would subvert the widespread view that Modern Orthodoxy defines itself according to that which it excludes.¹³ Instead, it would adopt a relational model which acknowledges that Modern Orthodox Jews regularly breach communal boundaries and interact with outsiders (or what some sociologists have referred to as “heretics”), and it would affirm the fact that the positive nurturing of these relationships, rather than the act of boundary mainte-

nance, is determinative of the community's self-understanding. Like its application to Catholic moral theology and social ethics, the application of a Consistent Ethic to halakhic life would serve to frame legal questions in a way which prioritizes human dignity, and yet it would also transcend practical legal questions and form the basis of a moral theology.

Three relationships are essential to the formation of American Modern Orthodox identity: the religious-secular relationship, the diaspora-Israel relationship, and the male-female relationship.¹⁴ Attempts to define Modern Orthodoxy consistently reference these relationships, though such attempts do not consider how the relationships interact with one another.¹⁵ In the religious-secular relationship and the male-female relationship, Modern Orthodox men view themselves as “insiders,” that is, conservators and practitioners of an authentic Jewish tradition. But my sense is that in the case of the Israel-diaspora relationship, some Modern Orthodox men living in North America perceive themselves to be outsiders to the authentic practice of Jewish tradition, which takes place in Israel. The fact that in some key relationships, Modern Orthodox men are “insiders” (i.e., self-determining agents), whereas in other key relationships these men view themselves as “outsiders,” suggests that American Modern Orthodoxy participates not so much in a homogenous patriarchy, but in an inconsistent heterarchy, in which the nature of one's person agency depends upon the particular relationship he or she is engaging in at a given time. The perception of these relationships as binaried opposites thus reflects a social construction that suggests a far messier reality.¹⁶

Insiders of the Modern Orthodox community continually reinforce these three relationships, while outsiders who have relationships with the Modern Orthodox community usually acknowledge its boundaries, and sometimes even do the work of boundary reinforcement.¹⁷ At the same time, the “outside” members of these relationships only seem to identify themselves by these identities *in relationship* with the inside community, a fact that compromises the very integrity of these relationships. As far as I know, Jewish communities in the diaspora generally do not identify themselves as “diasporan,” except in direct dialogue with Israeli Jews; women scholars tend not identify themselves as representing a “woman's perspective,” except when invited into male dominated spaces where they are asked to do so; and Christians and other non-Jews do not self-cultivate identities as “Gentiles” except in conversation with Jews. Constructing these categories, however, enables the Modern Orthodox community to establish its identity by engaging in relationships which are not forged within the community, but are forged reactively, to overtures and initiatives taking place outside of it. It is not surprising that the cultivation of

these relationships have been prioritized unsystematically and inconsistently.

It is my sense that Modern Orthodox identity is not formed according to a heresy quotient, as some have argued, but according to what I call a dignity quotient, where the tolerance of dignity lies at one end, and the intolerance of indignity lies at the other. While a heresy quotient depends upon insider thinking which perceives the outside world as a population of heretics who must be kept out of the community, a dignity quotient depends upon relational thinking, which asks each side of a relationship to confer dignity upon the other. Here I define “dignity” as the acknowledgement that an individual or group has the right to choose the expressive mode of its religious service, the acknowledgement that an individual or group has the right to define and understand itself without imposition, and the acknowledgement that an individual or group has the freedom to stake a claim within the realm of Jewish tradition.¹⁸

The conferral of dignity also acknowledges one’s right to cultivate a relationship with God, and thus the denial of dignity denies one the right to cultivate a relationship with God.¹⁹ As Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik has argued, dignity is realized when people come together to share in God’s creative work. Soloveitchik was so concerned about the consistent application of dignity, moreover, that he concluded that theological interreligious dialogue should be avoided, since it risked compromising Jewish dignity. This concern extends into the writings of Rav Soloveitchik’s son-in-law Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, who described in much of his writing how the notion of dignity propels both biblical and rabbinic thinking. For Lichtenstein, the halakhic system which bases itself on the Hebrew Bible demands a conferral of dignity onto all people:

The dignity of man is not the exclusive legacy of Cicero and Pico della Mirandola. It is a central theme in Jewish thought, past and present. Deeply rooted in Scripture, copiously asserted by Hazal, unequivocally assumed by rishonim, religious humanism is a primary and persistent mark of a Torah weltanschauung. Man’s inherent dignity and sanctity, so radically asserted through the concept of *zelem Elokim*; his hegemony and stewardship with respect to nature; concern for his spiritual and physical well-being; faith in his metaphysical freedom and potential - all are cardinal components of traditional Jewish thought.²⁰

For Lichtenstein, if religious humanism is a “persistent mark of a Torah weltanschauung,” then a corrective to apply such humanism (or dignity quotient) must be consistently prioritized. And yet, the inconsistency with which the dignity

quotient has been applied in Modern Orthodox communities is both a cause and a result of the fact that they are inconsistently supported with varying levels of communal embedded infrastructure which foster dialogue. Simply put, this inconsistency is reflective of inconsistent values and priorities, and the absence of a broader driving ideology.²¹

A Consistent Ethic of Life would call upon members of the Modern Orthodox community to engage in the dynamism of relational thinking by viewing its three defining relationships as interconnected. Doing so would yield a new model of self-understanding that would not depend upon the determination of heresy, but upon the consistent application of human dignity concerns at all levels, defining both local, personal relationships and communal political relationships as interlocking and determinant of the community's overall health. The remainder of this paper will consider how a more consistent application of the dignity quotient might serve to redefine Modern Orthodox self-understanding.

THE JEWISH-GENTILE RELATIONSHIP

Modern Orthodox leaders have recently made extraordinary efforts to cultivate interfaith dialogue and friendship, particularly when it comes to the Catholic Church. Why Modern Orthodox leaders have been attracted specifically to dialogue with the Catholic community is beyond the scope of this paper, but the attraction results from a confluence of responses to the Church's overtures to reconcile with the global Jewish community, and to the development of a distinctive ethos of American Modern Orthodoxy in the late 1960s and 1970s which identified with the causes of the civil rights movement.²²

In recent years, the dialogue between Modern Orthodox Jewry and the Catholic Church have culminated in two statements which explore the theological nature of the Jewish-Christian relationship. The first, "To Do The Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership Between Jews and Christians," was written in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, and spearheaded by the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation in Israel, which at the time was directed by Rabbis Shlomo Riskin, David Nekrutman, Pesach Wolicki, and Eugene Korn, all Modern Orthodox rabbis.²³ The second, published just two years later, is entitled "Between Rome and Jerusalem: Reflections on Fifty Years of *Nostra Aetate*," and was produced by the Conference of European Rabbis and the Rabbinical Council of America, two organizations which include Modern Orthodox rabbis as its active members. It was presented to Pope Francis on August 31st, 2017.²⁴

Though Modern Orthodox dialogue with Christian leadership has become increasingly mainstream in the past few years, many Modern Orthodox Jews are suspicious of this dialogue on the basis of an oft-quoted article by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik which was based on a lecture (delivered, it should be noted, to an audience at St. John's Catholic Seminary in Brighton, Massachusetts) which cautioned against Jewish engagement in theological dialogue with an outside community. No religious community, Soloveitchik maintained, can provide a full theological self-description to those outside of their communities, for such dialogue requires the community in question to use a lexicon that is not their own. This dialogue, moreover, would expect transactional adjustments to each community's beliefs.²⁵ A concession made on the part of the Church that the Jews were not guilty of deicide, for instance, would come at the price of the expectation that Jews would make some kind of theological concession on their own side that would compromise the integrity of their community.²⁶ Soloveitchik's position has had outsized influence, and the result is that the Modern Orthodox community seems split down the middle between those who embrace Jewish-Christian dialogue, and those who avoid it.²⁷

An indirect solution to this fissure may have been inadvertently offered by the political philosopher John Rawls, who, like Soloveitchik, notes the difficulties in finding a common language in public discourse which is not privileged by a particular community as an internalized language.²⁸ Rawls suggests that the Consistent Ethic is a potential roadmap for public reasoning which could bring distinct communities into dialogue with one another based on common social and moral interests. Though he seeks to create a boundary between religious thinking and public reasoning, Rawls also admits that the Consistent Ethic of Life offers a way to bridge the gap between the domestic and the public spheres. He notes that Cardinal Bernardin's proposal that the Ethic could be applied in the political sphere presumes common values of "public peace, essential protections of human rights, and the commonly accepted standards of moral behavior in a community law."²⁹ The application of the Consistent Ethic to religious-secular dialogue, both interreligious dialogue and ecumenical, would insist that each member of the relationship be allowed to define itself and its boundaries.³⁰ Were the conferral of dignity a prerequisite to all forms of interreligious and ecumenical dialogue, a conferral which insisted that each party set the terms of self-definition and self-understanding, such dialogue could be embraced by all Modern Orthodox Jews as a foundational element of a driving ideology.³¹

THE ISRAEL-DIASPORA RELATIONSHIP

The Israel-Diaspora relationship has been studied more systematically than the other two relationships which characterize Modern Orthodox self-understanding, and there is a significant amount of published data regarding how American Jews, particularly those who identify with Modern Orthodox Judaism, relate to the State of Israel and to Zionism as an ideology.³² This data suggests that American Modern Orthodox Jews go against the trend of broader secular American Jewry and Haredi American Jewry in its political support for the State of Israel. According to a 2015 Pew Survey of Orthodox Jews in America,

51% of Orthodox Jews say they are very emotionally attached to Israel, whereas 27% of other Jews say the same. And there are significant differences between Modern Orthodox Jews and Haredi Jews on views toward Israel. Broadly speaking, Modern Orthodox Jews display stronger attachment to Israel; they are more likely than Haredi Jews to say that they are very emotionally attached to Israel (77% vs. 55%), that caring about Israel is essential to being Jewish (79% vs. 45 %) and that the U.S. is not supportive enough of Israel (64% vs. 48%).³³

The recently published Pew Research Report, “Jewish Americans in 2020,” corroborates these views, finding that sixty percent of Orthodox Jews identify themselves as “very attached to Israel,” and eighty-two percent identify themselves as “very/somewhat attached to Israel,” by far the highest percentage of support for Israel among Jewish denominations and their subgroups. Nevertheless, this new report does not differentiate between right-wing, centrist, and left-wing branches of Orthodox Judaism, so its usefulness is limited in terms of the distinctive support of Israel present in the Modern Orthodox American community.³⁴

Despite—or perhaps because of—the relationship between Modern Orthodox American Jews and Israeli Jews, the inequity of expectations which characterizes this relationship has not been a source for immediate concern to most Modern Orthodox leaders. This inequity is reflected in a perceptible gap between how American Modern Orthodox Jews in America and how Israeli Jews perceive the legitimacy and authenticity of diasporan Jewish life. It seems to me that an increasing demographic of Modern Orthodox Jews are accepting the notion of *shelilat hagolah*, the negation of exile, and incorporating this idea into their Zionist attitudes.³⁵ This view suggests that living in the diaspora detracts from a Jew’s ability to fully actualize their religious destiny, and that the Land of Israel (and by extension,

its inhabitants) exists in tension with the diaspora (and by extension, its inhabitants). That Israel is in constant competition with the diaspora for Jewish inhabitants is an idea commonly expressed by Israeli politicians, but also by American Jews who have made Aliyah.

As I have mentioned, members of the American Modern Orthodox community have transformed themselves into outsiders who stand outside the realm of the authentic practice of contemporary rabbinic Judaism, which takes place in Israel. It is perhaps for this reason that attacks against diasporan Jewish living have gone unaddressed and are often tolerated, even outside the Orthodox Jewish community. A.B. Yehoshua's shocking attack in 2006 on diasporan Jewish life at an American Jewish Committee event, for instance, resulted in a follow-up event wherein Yehoshua dug in his heels and insisted that "Jewish values are not located in a fancy spice box that is only opened to release its pleasing fragrance on Shabbat and holidays, but in the daily reality of dozens of problems through which Jewish values are shaped and defined, for better or worse."³⁶ Though this incident did not occur in a specifically Orthodox setting, the staunchly Zionist agenda of the Modern Orthodox community makes it particularly vulnerable to Israeli denigration of the American Jewish community.³⁷

I sense that most American Jews tend to tolerate criticism against Israel but most Modern Orthodox Jews are not tolerant of such criticism, whereas most American Jews do not tolerate criticism against American Jewry, but Modern Orthodox are tolerant of criticism of American Jewry. As far as I know, no active Modern Orthodox leader living in North America has made a systematic case for the legitimacy of the diaspora.³⁸ Any such defense would call into question the religious (if not political) loyalty that Jews in the diaspora show for the State of Israel, and the notion of authenticity in the Jewish diaspora is tenuous enough as it is.

The application of a Consistent Ethic of Life to this relationship would not tolerate the negation of the legitimacy of diaspora Judaism. Instead, it would peripheralize discussions of authenticity by arguing for the legitimacy of both Israeli Judaism and diasporan Judaism. As a literary historian, I would suggest going about this by applying a historical approach: since the Babylonian exile in 597-586 BCE, there has been a continuous and robust presence of Jews (in earlier times, Judeans) outside of the Land of Israel. Far from being liminal to the practice of Judaism (or Judean-ism), these diasporan communities actively participated in the process of creating and enforcing normative practices.³⁹ At the same time, there has been a continual Jewish (earlier, Judean) presence in the Land of Israel since the first Temple period, with the exception of a few decades following the first Crusade end-

ed in 1099 CE. To treat either experience as liminal or marginal to the establishment of authentic and normative rabbinic Jewish practice is to deny the historical reality that halakhic authorities have not been bound by such strictures. The Consistent Ethic could guide an Israeli-diasporan relationship towards a partnership based on common values and mutual protection, but not on the notion that diasporan Jews would improve their standing with God by condemning or altering diasporan Jewish identity.

THE MALE-FEMALE RELATIONSHIP

The relationship between men and women, not in the private marital sense but in the communal religious sense, constitutes the most crucial and self-defining relationship within the Modern Orthodox community. I will delve more deeply into this relationship for the following reasons. First, this relationship takes place entirely within the community, and therefore reflects not an optional social or political engagement, but an unavoidable stance which all Modern Orthodox community members take when choosing the synagogues and schools with which they affiliate. Second, this relationship has been presented as most stymied by halakhic limitations in literature which both limits and expands the role of women in observant Judaism. Finally, this relationship has been disproportionately neglected when it comes to the dignity quotient, and thus deserves disproportionate attention.⁴⁰ For these reasons, this relationship is most resistant to modification.

These distinctive characteristics are founded upon the systemic association between the predominance of male participation in communal religious life, as opposed to the predominance of female participation in domestic religious life. Rather than aiming for a balanced religious participation, *halakha* prioritizes communal religious life over the domestic.⁴¹ Liturgy is recited in a male quorum, Torah study is idealized as a dialogical encounter between men sitting in the *beit midrash*, and holiday rituals are conceived of as taking place in public spaces, often, but not always, within the synagogue. Public spaces which are home to these gatherings may be technically accessible to women, but they are, in most observant Jewish communities, primarily occupied by men.

Since the early 1980s, Orthodox women theologians have been asking whether Modern Orthodoxy can accommodate ritual changes which would move towards increased women's participation in the synagogue. These theologians adopt one of two approaches: The first, represented in the writings of Blu Greenberg, argues that the halakhic system bases itself on a flexible infrastructure which accom-

modates changes in society, and that, if the desire exists, rabbinic leaders can make changes to *halakha* which would offer women more active involvement in the public sphere.⁴² The second, represented in the later writings of Rachel Adler, maintains that the problematic attitudes towards women are too fundamental to both *halakha* and Jewish theology for change.⁴³

As Greenberg, Adler, and others were working on these issues, male leaders of the Modern Orthodox community were asking similar questions. In as early as 1973 (one year after the Reform movement ordained its first woman, Sally Priesand), Saul Berman published an article suggesting that women in the Modern Orthodox community should occupy more active roles in synagogue and ritual life.⁴⁴ Shortly afterwards, Eliezer Berkovits made a similar call for increased women's participation in the halakhic community, framing the issue as one concerning biblical justice rather than one of feminism.⁴⁵ And in 1982, the philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz bemoaned that

the question of women and Judaism is more crucial than all the political problems of the people and its state. Failure to deal with it seriously threatens the viability of the Judaism of Torah and *Mitzvot* (commandments) in the contemporary world.⁴⁶

In the 1980s and 1990s, Modern Orthodox rabbis such as Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, Avi Weiss, David Hartman, and Dovid Silber worked to establish educational institutions and programs which offered women learning opportunities that were equal to those enjoyed by men in the Modern Orthodox community.

But even as these establishments gained traction, most of the debate in Modern Orthodox circles regarding the status of women in Judaism continued to focus on matters of *halakha*, particularly the legitimacy of women's *tefillah* groups, an issue which neglected to address the broader theological question of the status of women in observant Judaism.⁴⁷ While the past two decades have seen real changes in the acceptability of women's scholarship and leadership, Modern Orthodox halakhic leaders have resisted discussing the "women" question as a theological problem. Perhaps leaders have avoided this subject because it requires them to take a stance on feminism, which some perceive to be motivated by a political ideology specific to a particular cultural moment and at odds with the transcendent nature of *halakha*, which does not (it is claimed) conform to any particular cultural context.⁴⁸ The issue of women's status in *halakha* (whether perceiving *halakha* as encompassed by a broader theology or equivalent to it) could, however, be informed by a

Consistent Ethic which suggests that decisions regarding how women participate in the community need not be driven by a political ideology, but a by basic concern for human dignity, as Berkovits, Berman, and Greenberg argued forty years ago.

Cardinal Bernardin's development of the Consistent Ethic of Life focuses on relationality, and the inevitability of human conflict. In doing so, it seeks to bridge the right-left divide by arguing that, though some human needs are sometimes accommodated at the expense of others, it is possible to develop to a hermeneutic of consistency which seeks to recognize the dignity of all people.⁴⁹ The Ethic thus provides Modern Orthodox Jews with a model to approach the three relationships which drive their identity formation as interlocking and interdependent. It calls for each relationship to be cultivated in ways which prioritize human dignity and which aim for the most consistency that is most reasonably achievable at a given time, with the expectation that this achievability continue to increase. The Ethic also calls for members of the community to name the ways in which the outside members of these relationships have been denied dignity in the public sphere, and to begin the work of repairing these indignities.⁵⁰ While a Jewish Consistent Ethic may not galvanize an immediate reversal of practices and policies which deprive community outsiders of their right to live a dignified life, it would call upon Modern Orthodox Jews to construct a mission-driven community based on an ethical imperative that mitigates all forms of indignity, wherever they appear. Such a community would more successfully retain its members without becoming excessively insular.

Finally, the application of the Consistent Ethic to a Modern Orthodox Jewish ideology would particularize a universalist self-understanding which is embedded in Catholic moral theology, and would thus initiate a process of reversing two millennia of Church teaching which has aimed to universalize the particular.⁵¹ These winds of change, along with their implications and possible applications, must await a separate study.

¹ I thank Dr. Steven Millies, director of Catholic Theological Union's Joseph Cardinal Bernardin Center, for his support in writing this paper.

² "Chicago's Activist Cardinal," *The New York Times*, May 1st, 1983, accessible at <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/05/01/magazine/chicago-s-activist-cardinal.html>.

³ This document is published in Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, *Consistent Ethic of Life* (Kansas, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1988).

⁴ For a broader sketch of this period of Bernardin's life, see Steven P. Millies, *Joseph Bernardin: Seeking Common Ground* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016).

⁵ *Time Magazine* 120.22 (November 29, 1982).

⁶ Bernardin, *Consistent Ethic of Life*, 6.

⁷ Bernardin, *Consistent Ethic of Life*, 7.

⁸ As a metaphor for a system which perceived all things as interconnected, Bernardin invoked the image of the seamless robe which Jesus wore at his death. Just as Jesus's robe was made as one piece, Bernardin argued, so too was the human family comprised of a single fabric. A rip in the garment, regardless of where it was, rendered the entire garment imperfect and com-

promised its functional integrity. This concept, often referred to as the Seamless Garment, argues that all Christians (or all of humankind, depending on who was invoking the phrase), share a common teleological destiny (John 19:23).

⁹ See, for example, James Gustafson's and Richard McCormick's critiques in Cardinal Bernardin, *Consistent Ethic of Life* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1988) 96–122.

¹⁰ Bernardin's conception of the Consistent Ethic was bolder than other proposals for a Christian ethic that was being proposed at the time. See, for instance, the proposal of the Protestant ethicist H. Richard Niebuhr, who called for an "ethic of responsiveness" in his writings on natural law (H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, *Human Destiny* (New York: 1943).

¹¹ Thomas A. Nairn, ed. *The Consistent Ethic of Life: Assessing Its Reception and Relevance* (Chicago: Joseph Cardinal Bernardin Center for Theology and Ministry, 2008).

¹² I will not consider here how the question of Natural Law might likewise be applied to halakhic thinking, which can be confused with the Consistent Ethic, though see Aharon Lichtenstein, "Does Jewish Tradition Recognize an Ethic Independent of *Halakha*?" in *Modern Jewish Ethics* (ed. Marvin Fox; Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975), 62–88; David Novak, *Natural Law in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). My sense is that Natural Law theory suggests that all people are guided by the same sense of moral justice and injustice which should govern human behaviors, while the Consistent Ethic of Life suggests that all people have a *moral obligation* to act upon their sense of moral justice and injustice.

¹³ Adam S. Ferziger, *Exclusion and Hierarchy: Orthodoxy, Nonobservance, and the Emergence of Modern Jewish Identity* (Jewish Culture and Contexts; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Zev Eleff and Seth Farber, "Antimodernism and Orthodox Judaism's Heretical Imperative: An American Religious Counterpoint," *Journal of Religion and American Culture*, 237–272, which is in conversation with Peter L. Berger's *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (New York: Doubleday, 1979).

¹⁴ On the understudied question of contemporary Orthodox male identity and sexual identity, but see, inter alia, Sylvia Barack Fishman, "Modern Orthodox Responses to the Liberalization of Sexual Mores," in *Yitz Greenberg and Modern Orthodoxy: The Road Not Taken* (ed. Adam S. Ferziger, Miri Freud-Kandel, and Steven Bayme (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018) 224–253; Steven Greenberg, *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005). Though the Modern Orthodox community is becoming increasingly intentional about how it might be inclusive towards members of the LGBTQ community, it nevertheless builds itself around a heterosexual familial structure.

¹⁵ For two examples, see Judah Kerbel's piece, "Why I am a Modern Orthodox Rabbi," *Times of Israel* (April 27, 2021) at <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/why-i-am-a-modern-orthodox-rabbi/>; Saul J. Berman, "The Ideology of Modern Orthodoxy," *Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Ideas*, (February 1, 2001), at <http://shma.com/the-ideology-of-modern-orthodoxy/>.

¹⁶ On the construction of this identity, see Zev Eleff, *Authentically Orthodox: A Tradition-Bound Faith in American Life* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2020); Marc B. Shapiro, *Changing the Immutable: How Orthodox Judaism Rewrites its Own History* (Liverpool, UK: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization in association with Liverpool University Press, 2015); Chaim I. Waxman: *Social Change and Halakhic Evolution in American Orthodoxy* (Liverpool, UK: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization in association with Liverpool University Press, 2017).

¹⁷ In the case of interreligious dialogue, Christians have initiated reconciliation with the Jewish community on an international scale, but particularly in the United States, with the publication of *Nostra Aetate* during the Second Vatican Council of 1965. The Church has made particularly strong ties with Modern Orthodox leaders in the United States. In the case of Israel-diaspora dialogue, moreover, Israeli organizations has expressed continual interest in what it perceives to be the "diaspora." The same goes for Israel-diaspora dialogue, wherein Israel reinforces a relationship with the diaspora, and specifically with the Modern Orthodox community, which invites Israeli youths to teach in their school systems and communities. And when it comes to cultivating an intentional male-female relationship, women have been the primary authors of discourse on the question of how *halakha* interacts with women, though men have taken a front seat in halakhic discussions about female ordination and women's prayer groups. See, for instance, Ferziger, "Feminism and Heresy," 515–529.

¹⁸ The freedom to stake a claim within the realm of Jewish tradition becomes complicated, however, when faith communities who believe in the messiahship of Jesus want to identify as Jews. Here I speak not only of Jews for Jesus, but of other congregations, such as the Black Hebrew Israelites. This subject, too complex to discuss here, is the matter of extensive debate today between Jewish and Christian theologians; see note 30 below.

¹⁹ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, (reprint: New York: Doubleday, 1965), 16–25.

²⁰ Aharon Lichtenstein, "Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict," in *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection of Integration?* (ed. J.J. Schachter; reprint; New Milford, CT: Maggid, 2017), 220–292.

²¹ An early example of such inconsistency occurred, for instance, when Fabian Schonfeld, a noted insider to Jewish-Catholic relations, announced that "there are two major differences [between the Modern Orthodox and Orthodox Right]: one is our total commitment to the State of Israel and the other is the area of the pursuit of secular knowledge which they at best tolerate as a last resort," notably omitting women's issues (Zev Eleff, "The Modern Orthodox Women's Agenda, The Eighties, and Bottom-up Opposition," January 16, 2017, <https://www.thelehrhaus.com/commentary/the-modern-orthodox-women's-agenda>

da-the-eighties-and-bottom-up-opposition/#fnt3). Though the statistical data does not exist, I believe that inconsistencies generally reflect an eager interest on the part of American Modern Orthodox men to engage in interreligious dialogue, which requires no major change to the halakhic system which could be viewed as traumatic or threatening to the community, and an utter disinterest, or obliviousness, to the status of women in their own communities. This inconsistency is most clearly apparent when the same Modern Orthodox men who invoke the notion of dignity in their justifications for engaging in interreligious dialogue show no parallel interest in the nature of women's status in *halakha* and the community more broadly.

²² Perhaps the best example of a Modern Orthodox leader in America who engaged in such work is Irving (Yitz) Greenberg. Of course, this work was not limited to Modern Orthodox Jews, or American Jews; the theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel also wholly committed himself to social justice and interreligious work, and the mantle of interreligious work would later be picked up by the British rabbis David Rosen and Jonathan Sacks; see, for example, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (2nd ed.; London: Continuum, 2003).

²³ *Nostra Aetate* was published in 1965 by the Second Vatican Council and essentially retracted the official accusation against the Jewish people for deicide. *To Do the Will of our Father in Heaven* is accessible at <https://www.cjcuc.org/2015/12/03/orthodox-rabbinic-statement-on-christianity/>.

²⁴ *Between Jerusalem and Rome* is accessible at <https://www.cjcuc.org/2017/08/31/between-jerusalem-and-rome/>.

²⁵ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Confrontation," *Tradition* 6, no. 2 (1964): 5-29.

²⁶ A transactional dynamic which, in the opinion of Marc Shapiro, has already occurred in the assertion that Christians share in God's covenant. Shapiro, "Modern Orthodoxy and Religious Truth," in *Yitz Greenberg and Modern Orthodoxy*, 144.

²⁷ The existence of a Modern Orthodox faction that has resisted Jewish-Christian dialogue, moreover, does not undermine my argument notion that the Jewish-Gentile relationship is a defining one for Modern Orthodox Jews. Instead, it reinforces my sense that this relationship is key to Modern Orthodox self-understanding: the question is not whether Modern Orthodox Jews are pro or against dialogue with Christians, but that they are grapple with the question in the first place, and this grappling is part of a broader struggle for self-understanding and identity formation.

²⁸ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

²⁹ John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," *University of Chicago Law Review* 64, no. 3 (1997): 765-807 at 798, n.82; Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, *The Consistent Ethic: What Sort of Framework? Origins* 16 (October 30, 1986), 245, 247-50.

³⁰ Prominent theologians have recently sought to redefine Judaism in a way which permits believers in Christ to enter the community and identify as Jews; see, for instance, Gavin D'Costa's recent work, *Catholic Doctrines on the Jewish People After Vatican II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

³¹ Again, space considerations prevent me from exploring why Modern Orthodox Jews should engage in this dialogue; on this subject I refer to the work of Yitz Greenberg, Saul Berman, David Rosen. See, for example, Rosen's piece, "Orthodox Judaism and Jewish-Christian Dialogue," at https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/center/conferences/soloveitchik/sol_rosen.htm.

³² See, for example, the 2013 Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews, "A Portrait of Jewish Americans," and its 2015 follow-up report, "A Portrait of American Orthodox Jews," led by Alan Cooperman.

³³ The survey is available for download at <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/08/26/a-portrait-of-american-orthodox-jews/>.

³⁴ See Chapter 7 of the report, at <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/05/11/u-s-jews-connections-with-and-attitudes-toward-israel/>.

³⁵ See, for example, the opening lines of an article by Tully Harczstark on Zionist education in Modern Orthodox American schools: "Camp Moshava and Bnei Akiva of North America have, for many years, delivered a very clear message to their community members regarding the centrality of the State of Israel and the responsibility of Jews in the Diaspora. Simply, the message is: make *aliya*! Israel is the homeland of all Jews and it is where all Jews should live. It is a message delivered with respect - for people and for the complexity of the circumstances in which they find themselves - and it is delivered with unwavering commitment." Harczstark, "Israel, Diaspora, and Religious Zionism Education," *Machon Siach* 2016, accessible at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5907b743e6f2e1e21c72c0b4/t/5a78b19524a6940c047c6d16/1517859221938/Israel%2C+Diaspora+and+Religious+Zionist+Education+in+America+HARCSZTARK.pdf>. Cf. Eliezer Don-Yehiya, "The Negation of the Galut in Religious Zionism," *Modern Judaism* 12 (1992): 129-55.

³⁶ A. B. Yehoshua, "The Meaning of Homeland," in Steven Bayme, Leonard J. Fein, Samuel G. Freedman, and Eric Yoffie, *The A. B. Yehoshua Controversy: An Israel-Diaspora Dialogue on Jewishness, Israeliness, and Identity*, (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2006).

³⁷ The very existence of Israel's Ministry of Diaspora Affairs, for instance, indicates a serious misalignment between Israeli Jews and diasporan Jews regarding the nature of Israel's self-understanding and its protective relationship to Jews outside of Israel, a misalignment confirmed in the opening section of its mission statement which asserts its desire to mitigate "Anti-Semitism" (https://www.gov.il/en/departments/about/about_diaspora).

³⁸ But see Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 19.4 (1993) 693-725; Shaul Magid, "The Necessity of Exile," *Tablet* (November 9, 2020), <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/>

community/articles/necessity-of-exile-hasidic-leaders-diaspora.

³⁹ In fact, the Judean presence outside the Land of Israel precedes 586 BCE: Judean communities in Egypt were established following a series of migrations which began in the late seventh or early sixth century BCE, when Egyptian rulers hired Judean mercenaries to aid them in their campaigns against Kush. More Judeans arrived in the late sixth century or early fifth century BCE, when Persian leaders employed Judean mercenaries in Egypt. Migration to Egypt on the basis of mercenary needs was initiated by Psammetichus I (664–610 BCE) and his son Necho II (610–595 BCE), members of the 26th Pharaonic dynasty. The Letter of Aristeas refers to Judean mercenaries in the armies of Psammetichus and Ptolemy I Soter (305/4–282 BCE, referred to in Aristeas as the “son of Lagos”). Whether Aristeas is referencing Psammetichus I or Psammetichus II (595–589 BCE) is unclear, though Psammetichus I is more likely.

⁴⁰ Of course, the topic of women as it pertains to their halakhic status and various obligations has not been neglected: what has been neglected is the *relationship* between men and women in the Modern Orthodox community.

⁴¹ This prioritization explains both why the Mitnagdim opposed the Hasidic focus on the individual mystical experience, and also why Hasidic teaching has been appealing to women orthodox leadership. Whether there is also a correlation between why some Hasidic sects, such as the Habad movement, have been more open to women’s education than non-Hasidic communities, and the emphasis on the personal and domestic, I cannot say, but see Ferziger, “Feminism and Heresy,” 503; Ariel Evan Mayse, “The Development of Neo-Hasidism: Echoes and Repercussions Part IV: Arthur Green and Conclusion,” February 11, 2019, <https://www.thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/the-development-of-neo-hasidism-echoes-and-repercussions-part-iv-arthur-green-and-conclusion/>.

⁴² Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View From Tradition* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981). Tamar Ross, meanwhile, insisted that a recognition of the particular societies in which the biblical scriptures and rabbinic texts are formulated would advance modern orthodoxy towards a more transcendent and ultimately more inclusive form of practice and theology. Tamar Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism* (HBI Series on Jewish Women; 2nd ed.; Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2021); Tamar Ross, “Modern Theology and the Challenge of Feminism,” in *Jewish Orthodoxy: New Perspectives*, eds. Joseph Salmon, Aviezer Ravitzky, and Adam Ferziger (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes University Press, 2007), 255-94. For an analysis of Ross’s position, cf. Ronit Irshai, “Theology and *Halakha* in Jewish Feminisms,” in Steven Kepnes, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 297-315. Cf. Tova Hartman, *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism: Resistance and Accommodation* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007); Cynthia Ozick, “Notes Toward Finding the Right Question,” *Lilith Magazine* 6 (1979), reprinted in Heschel, *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, (New York: Schocken, 1982) 120-151.

⁴³ Rachel Adler, “In Your Blood, Live: Re-visions of a Theological Purity,” *Tikkun* 8.1 (1993); cf. Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).

⁴⁴ Saul J. Berman, “The Status of Women in Halakhic Judaism,” *Tradition* 14, no. 2 (1973): 5-28.

⁴⁵ See in particular Berkovits’s 1976 essay “A Jewish Sexual Ethics,” reprinted in Eliezer Berkovits, *Essential Essays on Judaism* (ed. David Hazony; Jerusalem: Shalom Center, 2002). As Shalom Carmy has observed, “When codified Halakha inflicts real damage on moral ends, in Berkovits’s opinion, as with numerous rulings on women’s status or when conversion standards ignore non-Orthodox concepts of Jewish identity, Berkovits advocates change... thus Berkovits’s dissatisfaction with mainstream *halakha* regarding women is rooted, not in the pressures of contemporary egalitarianism, but in his judgment about biblical concepts of justice.” Shalom Carmy, “Eliezer Berkovits’s Challenge to Contemporary Orthodoxy,” *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 12, no. 4 (2004): 192–207, at 194, which reviews Eliezer Berkovits’s *Essential Essays on Judaism*.

⁴⁶ Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State* (ed. Eliezer Goldman; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 128.

⁴⁷ Adam Ferziger, “Feminism and Heresy: The Construction of a Jewish Metanarrative,” *Journal of the American Academy Religion* 77, no. 3 (2009): 494-546. Aryeh A. Frimer and Dov I. Frimer, “Women’s Prayer Services – Theory and Practice,” *Tradition* 32, no. 2 (1998) 5-118.

⁴⁸ Though this is, of course, not the case, as famously illuminated in Haym Soloveitchik, “Rupture and Reconstruction,” *Tradition* 28, no. 4 (1994) 64-130.

⁴⁹ In contrast to Pope Francis’s 2015 Encyclical, *Laudato Si’*, which argues for an idealistic harmony and unity between human and creation, but ignoring the world as it is. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care For Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015).

⁵⁰ Examples of such considerations include not having men teaching women-only groups, not having women speakers teach after synagogue services from the women’s side of the room, not having women’s events focusing more on food than on Torah, not having women’s learning being less available and accessible than men’s learning, not having Modern Orthodox leadership organizations excluding women from participation on the basis of their not having ordination, and employing full transparency of financial compensation in all Jewish communal organizations to ensure fair compensation.

⁵¹ For a discussion of such potentialities, see Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).

Modern Orthodoxy in the Renaissance: The Unique History of Italian Judaism

Josh Rosenfeld

Historically, Italian Jewish communities developed what we may reasonably term “modern” ways of life and scholarship much earlier and in a more sustained way than other postexilic Diaspora communities. In this way, we might be able to say that at many points throughout its history, these communities exhibited tendencies and trends that find numerous points of affinity with what we now call Modern Orthodox Judaism in North America.

While other European diaspora communities focused their intellectual output primarily in the halakhic and Talmudic realms, in Italian Judaism, we can discern serious secular engagement and even interfaith exchange with strong cross-cultural ties on both individual and communal levels. This is likely primarily due to the relative lack of persecution and oppression of the Italian Jewish community throughout the centuries. Despite ghettoization and periodic persecution and restrictions on Jewish life, a major factor catalyzing for this development of Italian Jewry was their especially close proximity to the seat of Christianity in the Papal states and the Renaissance.

Relatedly, Italian Rabbis exhibited a unique orientation towards Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah not seen anywhere else in the Diaspora. The many examples of “enlightened” critical responses in certain Italian Rabbinic leaders is a uniquely Italian phenomenon. Many hallmarks of what we later term ‘Modern’ or ‘Maskilic’ Judaism also find expression in earlier Italian context.

Although ‘Modern Orthodoxy’ is a notoriously difficult term to define, for our purposes we will highlight two crucial hallmarks of Modern Orthodox theology that are relevant for the present study. In his essay “The Ideology of Modern Orthodoxy,” Rabbi Saul Berman describes the concept of *Torah u’Madda*:

While the Torah is entirely true, human reason applied to the study of all of reality can also produce truth. We are required to engage with and study both Torah and other knowledge in order to properly achieve love and fear of God. We are permitted to study any aspect of human culture that enriches our intellectual, spiritual, or aesthetic identities...¹

Rabbi Norman Lamm further articulates the meaning of *Torah u’Madda* by framing it as the recognition of the wisdom of the world, and furthermore, ac-

knowledging the way in which Torah benefits from engagement and even synthesis with worldly knowledge and secular disciplines.² As we shall see, this is one the most striking elements of Italian Jewry's literary and creative output.

Additionally, there is the understanding of the relationship between Jew and Gentile. Rabbi Berman writes that the potential for productive and creative inter-faith encounters is predicated on an assumption that

non-Jews are created in the same image of God as Jews. All non-Jews are to be viewed as *gerei toshav* (observers of the Seven Noahide commandments), toward whom our obligations in all economic and ethical matters are the same as those we have toward other Jews.

It is in these two realms that we can observe unique contributions of Italian Jewry to Jewish history and what we might term a proto-Modern Orthodox community. Oftentimes, when we look for historical precedent for what we now call Modern Orthodox Judaism in the American context, we refer to roots in 19th-century Europe, specifically Germany. As Shuli Taubes explains,

There [in Germany], two leading rabbis—Samson Raphael Hirsch and Azriel Hildesheimer—argued that Jews could no longer seclude themselves behind the shtetl walls but instead had to engage with the secular world and embrace modernity, at least to an extent. They wanted to reconcile the secular and the religious without forsaking one or the other.³

Our aim here will be to situate Italian Jewry as yet another locus point for the ideological and historical forbearers of Modern Orthodoxy as it is lived today in America. By introducing some of the major figures in Italian Jewish history and the intellectual trends within which they flourished, we will shed light on communities that exhibited, in the words of Yeshiva University's Rabbi Dr. Bernard Revel, "a harmonious growth in which the bases of modern knowledge and culture in the fields of art, science, and service are blended with the bases of Jewish culture"⁴ well before Yeshiva College opened its doors in 1928.

To be sure, there are broader definitions and understandings of Modern Orthodoxy that have emerged beyond the realm of Yeshiva University proper, and like any sociological construct, what it describes is fluid and changes along with communal norms and perceptions. However, the descriptors quoted here will serve

as a useful framework for understanding the ways in which Italian Jewry presaged modern expressions of faithful Judaism well before modernity.

The Jewish communities of the Italian Peninsula are some of the oldest diaspora communities in the world. In 161 BCE, two envoys of Judah Maccabeus were the first Jews to travel to Rome. This is well before the Second Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by Titus in 70 CE, and the Menorah taken back to Rome. The oldest known synagogue in Western Europe, dating to the first century CE, was discovered in Ostia, a port of Rome which initially served a small Jewish community and transient sailors. It is in these lands that Constantine secured his regime as Emperor and began promoting Christianity. Jews were proselytized and slurred, but tolerated, “so they may witness the return of the Messiah.”⁵ It is in this context that we see a strange blend of tolerance and ostracism toward the Jewish community that became the dominant mode in which they were later dealt with by Italian Christianity.

The Theodosian Code commissioned by Byzantine Emperor Theodosius II in 438 CE outlines various restrictions placed upon the Jews such as restrictions to public office, inability to renovate or build new synagogues, and punishment for those who converted to Judaism.⁶ At the same time, such laws existed which prohibited destruction of Jewish synagogues, respected Shabbat, discouraged violence against Jews, and allowed Jews to practice according to their laws. This relatively liberal and unprejudiced pattern was retained even centuries later, when Holy Roman Emperor Louis (son of Charlemagne) issued a Charter of Protection to Jews, encouraging trade and relaxing restrictions in 825 CE. This was in stark contrast to the ways Jewish communities across Christian Europe were treated from Antiquity through the Middle Ages and Renaissance up to modernity, where antipathy, atrocity, and total separation otherwise were the norm. It would seem that the foundation of the early Church policies toward the Jews of Italy and their proximity to the seat of the papacy allowed for the flourishing of Italian Jewry later on, especially during the Renaissance period.

After the Great Schism of 1054 that divided the Church into East and West under the papacy of Pope Leo IX, the situation for the Jewish communities of Italy deteriorated somewhat. The communities that had developed in Rome, Genoa, Milan and elsewhere had benefited from the benign toleration of the unified church and now experienced expulsion, ghettoization, and religious persecution. Despite this, even with the launching of the first and second Crusades from their own backyard, so to speak, the Jews of Italy did not have the same horrors visited upon them

as their brethren in the Rhine Valley and France. Even uniquely antagonistic Popes such as Pope Innocent III, who promulgated an order that every Jew must always wear a special yellow badge, or Pope John XXII who sought to expel the Jews of Rome, were pushed back by sympathetic rulers like King Robert of Sicily, who favored the Jews and sent an envoy to the pope at Avignon, succeeding in averting this great peril.

We see a similar tension in Italian Jewish history in the Middle Ages with the expulsion of the Jews from Naples in 1288 (Italy's first such expulsion), and the official encouragement of Jewish settlement in Florence in 1397, and again in 1494 when France invaded Italy. The Jews of Florence and Tuscany were expelled when the Medici fell from power and then returned in 1513 with their Medici patrons and protectors. In this same vein, the anti-Jewish preaching of Franciscan monks prompted Jewish delegates to meet with Pope Martin V, who issued two pro-Jewish proclamations, trying to control Franciscan preaching. Later, Pope Martin composed a papal bull providing sweeping protections for the Jews. It is this atmosphere that led to Italy serving as a safe landing place for the Jews expelled from Spain in 1492. Indeed, the legacy of Italian Jewry is still marred by terrible events that track with the experience of their coreligionists throughout Europe. Convinced it attacks Christianity, Pope Julius III burnt thousands of volumes of Talmud in Rome and other cities in 1553, and two years later, Pope Paul IV issued religious and economic restrictions on the Jews in Papal lands, and placed Talmud on the *Index librorum prohibitorum*, a designation not removed until 1948 (!).⁷

Writ large, however, historians have portrayed the Renaissance as a period of unusual toleration for Jews and the Italian principalities as a safe haven for Jewish difference.⁸ In his masterful *History of the Jews of Italy*, Cecil Roth speaks of an idealistic toleration of Jews in 14th century Italy, free from religious and sociopolitical persecution by the Italian princes, prelates, or populace. Roth writes:

This period of expansion was from some points of view the golden age of Italian Jewish history. In the south, the ruined Jewries were being nursed back into life; in the north, there was steady growth, general prosperity and a ferment of intellectual activity. A flow of immigrants arrived from abroad, new centers were established in almost unbroken succession, the older ones constantly expanded...Only in Italy did the Jews enjoy general well-being. A few setbacks are chronicled, but they are isolated and exceptional. If, during civic disturbances, the Jews may sometimes have suffered more than their neighbors, this did not

betoken a persecutory spirit among the people.⁹

Lorenzo Medici, or Lorenzo Il Magnifico (1449-1492) was a statesman, banker, *de facto* ruler of the Florentine Republic and the most powerful and enthusiastic patron of Renaissance culture in Italy. He is famous for having been the benefactor of both Botticelli and Michelangelo, and it was during his time that we witness the beginnings of the “Golden Age of Florence.” The protection and close relationships between the Medici’s and Florence’s Jews certainly rested upon financial and business partnerships, but also led to genuine cultural and literary exchange, as well as protection from some of the baser anti-Jewish elements of Renaissance Italy.¹⁰ When Pope Clement VIII expelled virtually all Jews living in papal states in 1593, Jews settled in *Leghorn*, port of Tuscany, and were granted full civil and religious rights by the Medici family, turning the area into a center of commerce. At the time, it was the only large Italian city without a Ghetto. It is specifically in this context that the unique intellectual figures and traditions we shall discuss emerge.

Jewish intellectual life, as evidenced by both Hebrew manuscript production and intellectual culture, truly began flourishing in the last decades of the 15th century. The first two Hebrew presses were established in Calabria and Pieva de Saca in 1473, with others soon thereafter in Mantua and Naples. Seven years later, the Soncino family began establishing their famous presses in Italy, Constantinople, and Salonika. Strikingly, it was a Christian man named Daniel Bomberg (1483 – 1549) who became one of the most important printers of Hebrew books in history at his Venice publishing house. Employing rabbis, scholars, and apostates, Bomberg printed the first *Mikra’ot Gedolot* in 1517 and the first complete Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds. These editions set standards that are still in use today, in particular the pagination of the Babylonian Talmud and universal layout of the commentaries of Rashi and Tosafot.¹¹ Italy remained a center of Hebrew printing, with first editions of some of the most important Jewish works coming from its many Hebrew publishing houses. For example, Rabbi Yosef Karo’s *Shulhan Arukh* was first printed in Venice in 1565.

The presence of wealthy patrons, most notable among them Yehiel da Pisa (d. 1492), were the engines of this growth. Da Pisa was a remarkable figure in his own right; himself a scholar, he gave vast sums of his wealth to promote Jewish learning as well as supporting refugees from Portugal and Spain. He enjoyed a close friendship with Don Yitzchak Abravanel and the two carried on an extensive correspondence.

Figures such as Rabbi Elijah del Medigo and Rabbi Abraham Farissol were

active in Renaissance Italy, and both can be described as prefiguring a synthesis of *Torah u'Madda* in the modern context by several centuries. Due to their proximity to the seat of both the Renaissance and Christianity, Christian interest in Hebrew and kabbalistic traditions led humanists and church figures to associate with these Jewish scholars and others.

Rabbi del Medigo (1460-1497), was a philosopher and talmudist.¹² Born in Candia, on the island of Crete, del Medigo had a traditional upbringing, and eventually traveled to Padua to study in its university, which was a center of Aristotelian philosophy at the time. Del Medigo earned his fame as translator of and commentator on works by Averroes from Hebrew to Latin. During the last years of his life he composed what would become his most famous work, *Behinat ha-Dat*, which was published posthumously. Much like the Rambam's *Moreh Nevukhim*, perhaps consciously so (interestingly, *Behinat ha-Dat* does not mention the Rambam's work by name), the overarching theme is an attempt to legitimize philosophical practice within the Jewish religious realm. The intended audience of del Medigo's works were people like his friend, student, and patron, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494). Mirandola was a Florentine philosopher, Christian Cabbalist and Renaissance icon who held the chair in Philosophy at the University of Padua. His famous public discourse of 1486, "The Oration on the Dignity of Man," is considered by scholars to be the "manifesto" of the Renaissance.¹³ Rabbi Elijah del Medigo was one of his chief influences, although the two diverged greatly on the matter of rationalism and mysticism. Del Medigo was an avowed rationalist, while Pico della Mirandola became enamored with Jewish Kabbalistic tradition as viewed through a Christian lens.

Rabbi Abraham Farissol (1451-1525) is yet another sui generis figure, the likes of which are hard to imagine elsewhere in European Jewry. Born in Avignon, he was a Hazzan in Ferrara, thereupon immersing himself in Renaissance life revolving around the enlightened court of Ercole d'Este I, Duke of Ferrara. He was also present at the court of Lorenzo de' Medici. A relatively obscure figure, Farissol gained some widespread recognition with two *siddurim* for women that he published which contained a revised, egalitarian version of the *shelo asani isha* ('that God did not make me a woman') blessing in the morning prayers.¹⁴ Farissol published commentaries on Torah, works of interfaith polemic against Christianity and Islam, and even a work of geography called *Iggeret Orhot Olam*. In publishing this work, he was likely the first Hebrew writer to deal in detail with the newly-discovered Americas.

Beyond Rabbis del Medigo and Farissol, Italian Jewry produced other unique

proto-*maskilic* rationalist thinkers, who were directly attacked by traditionalist rabbis both within Italy and beyond. These thinkers utilized critical thinking and the rational philosophical traditions they were steeped in to produce Torah works that could easily be situated in the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* school of late 19th century Berlin. For example, Rabbi Azariah de Rossi (known as *min Adumim*; 1511-1578) was one of the great lights of Italian Jewry. Born in Mantua, he was a scholar and physician as well as a critical analyst of rabbinic Aggadah. In 1573, he published his work *Me'or Einayim*, which was severely criticized by Rabbi Judah Loew, the Maharal of Prague. Similarly, Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh (Leon) of Modena (1571-1648), authored a work called *Ari Nohem*, which was critical of the Zohar, which he considered a pseudepigraphic text, characteristic of his approach to Kabbalah in general. He may have been influenced by del Medigo, who himself doubted the veracity of the Zohar and rejected the validity of mystical trends in Judaism.

By the same token, Italian rabbis also made important and lasting contributions to the study of Jewish mysticism. Rabbi Menahem Azariah of Fano (known as *Rema mi-Fano*; 1548-1640), was a Talmudist and one of the most important Kabbalists of all time. A student of the great Rabbi Moshe Cordevero (*Ramak*), he received a copy of the latter's *Pardes Rimmonim* and spearheaded the dissemination of Lurianic Kabbalah in Italy together with his *rebbe* Rabbi Yisrael Sarug.¹⁶ It was the Rema mi-Fano who was entrusted with the printing of Rabbi Yosef Karo's *Kesef Mishneh* commentary on the Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*. He had many students of his own, and to a certain extent, the Italian school of Kabbalah represents its own unique stream, distinct from Kabbalistic systems and exposition elsewhere in Europe.

Another significant Italian kabbalist is Rabbi Joseph Salomon Delmedigo (*Yashar mi-Kandia*; 1591-1655). Rabbi Delmedigo was a mathematician, scholar, and philosopher born in Candia, Crete and studied in Padua. He later traveled to other countries and visited many Karaite communities. He even referred to the Astronomer Galileo Galilei as "Rabbi Galileo" in his work, *Sefer Elim*. In an interesting twist, this Kabbalist was a descendent of the arch-rationalist R. Elijah del Medigo whom we mentioned earlier.

It would be impossible to write about Italian Jewish history nor the history of Jewish thought without mentioning Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto (*Ramhal*; 1707-1746) who was born and studied in Padua.¹⁷ A Kabbalist, philosopher, moralist, and playwright, Ramhal is one of the highest regarded sages and holy men of post-Talmudic Jewish history and, amazingly, is widely considered to have been the founder of modern Hebrew literature.¹⁸ Ramhal himself skirted the lines of moder-

nity as well. For example, with the publication of his *Hoker u'Mekubal* in 1736, a dialogue between a philosopher and a kabbalist, a ban of excommunication against all of Ramhal's works was publicized by the rabbis of Venice.

Demonstrating the tension and creative intellectual opportunities for Italian Jews, one of Ramhal's descendants, Rabbi Shemuel David Luzzatto (*Shadal*; 1800-1865) was a scholar, poet, and important member of the *Wissenschaft* movement. He was faculty of the Collegio Rabbinico of Padua, where he remained until his death, teaching Bible, philology, philosophy, and Jewish history.¹⁹ His famous bible commentary is something of a modern classic and representative of new paths in Torah commentary that blended both the traditional and modern. Writing about the intellectual context in which Shadal operated, David Rudavsky writes that "Italian Orthodoxy, unlike that of Germany and other parts of Europe, did not have to wrestle with the problem of secular education, for among Italian Jewry worldly knowledge was taken for granted."²⁰

This kind of Torah personality, who seamlessly blended engagement with the world and committed Judaism, followed in the traditions of Italian Jewry and the foundations they set for centuries before. Figures like Rabbi Yitzhak Lampronti (1679-1756), a rabbi and physician in Ferrara, paved the way by publishing works such as his *Pahad Yitzhak*, the first Talmudic encyclopedia. It is in the modern period that we see perhaps the crowning achievements of Judaism's integration into Italian society when Luigi Luzzati (1841-1927) became the 20th Prime Minister of Italy. Astoundingly, he was the second such Jew after the 18th Prime Minister Alessandro Fortis (1842-1909). Centuries of relatively enlightened and tolerant attitudes toward the Jews in Italy came to an end with the passing of the racial laws against the Jews in 1938 by Mussolini's fascist government.

This short precis of Italian Jewish history and some of its important rabbinic and intellectual figures strikingly demonstrates the possibilities for Jewish engagement with the world at large when the surrounding society is tolerant and even open toward cross-cultural interaction that moves beyond simply economic concerns. For centuries, especially during the Renaissance, Italian Jewry was afforded the opportunity to explore ways of expressing Jewish life and learning that was far outside the norm for other diaspora Jewish communities until the modern era. In characterizing Italian Jewish communities as an early example of what "Modern Orthodoxy" might look like, it is instructive to return to the words of the great historian of Italian Jewry, Cecil Roth:

In Renaissance Italy, we have the unique phenomenon of that successful

synthesis which is the unfulfilled hope of many today. The Jews who translated Averroes achieved distinction as physicians, compiled astronomical treatises, wrote plays, directed the theater, composed music and so on, were in almost every case not merely loyal Jews, but actively intellectual Jews, conversant with Hebrew, studying its literature and devoted to talmudic scholarship. The papal physicians who dabbled in Italian letters and were engaged in scientific investigation acted also as rabbis of their communities; the playwright-impresario was at the same time a Hebrew poet who founded a synagogue; the same individual plays a role of major importance in the history of Hebrew and of Italian printing; the financiers who mingled with the Medicen circle in Florence were students, patrons, and sometimes workers in the field of Italian literature. It was perhaps the only period of history, with the exception of that of Arab predominance... *when absorption into the civilization of the environment had no corrosive effect on Jewish intellectual life.*²¹

¹ *Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Ideas* (February 1, 2001), accessible at <http://shma.com/the-ideology-of-modern-orthodoxy/>.

² "Torah and Secular Knowledge: An Interview with Dr. Norman Lamm," *The Jewish Review* 3 no. 5, accessible at <https://jewish.cofc.edu/documents/R.%20Lamm%20-%20Jewish%20Review.pdf>.

³ Shuli Taubes, "The Delicate Power of Modern Orthodox Judaism," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Autumn/Winter 2018. <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/the-delicate-power-of-modern-orthodox-judaism>.

⁴ Quoted in Zev Eleff, *Modern Orthodox Judaism: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2016), 120.

⁵ Elizabeth D. Malissa, "Timeline of Jewish History in Italy," 2000, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/timeline-of-jewish-history-in-italy>.

⁶ *Codex Theodosianus*, 16.8.7–16.10.12. See Rodrigo Laham Cohen, *The Jews in Late Antiquity* (Croydon, UK: Arc Humanities Press, 2018), 16-17.

⁷ Menachem Butler, "The Burning of the Talmud in Rome on Rosh ha-Shana, 1553," *The Talmud Blog*, September 28, 2011. <https://thetalmud.blog/2011/09/28/the-burning-of-the-talmud-in-rome-on-rosh-hashanah-1553-guest-post-by-menachem-butler>.

⁸ See Dana E. Katz, *The Jew in the Art of the Italian Renaissance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press: 2008), 1-15.

⁹ Cecil Roth, *The History of the Jews of Italy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946), 137.

¹⁰ For more on the relationship between the Medici and the Jews see Edward Goldberg, *A Jew at the Medici Court: The Letters of Benedetto Blanis Hebreo* (1615-21) (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011). See also from Medici.org, "The Jews & Medici":

...The Livorno experiment was a triumph of enlightened self-interest for both the Jews and the Medici. Indeed, this thriving commercial hub became so essential to the Tuscan economy that even Cosimo III (1671-1723), the most bigoted of the Medici Grand Dukes, had little choice but to respect Jewish rights there. Vast fortunes were made by an Iberian merchant aristocracy that gave Livorno Jewry its particular culture and character... Livorno was a major center of Jewish commerce, second in Europe only to Amsterdam. It was also a leading center of Jewish study and mysticism... Indeed, business, religion, medicine and science could be complementary enterprises. The medical doctor Mose Cordovero was among the pioneers of banking in Livorno around the year 1600. Elia Montalto di Luna, in the early seventeenth century, practiced medicine at the Medici Court while writing treatises on ophthalmology, astronomy and comparative religion. These fleeting references to people, places and events provide only a glimpse of the extraordinary richness of Jewish history and culture during the two centuries of Medici rule (1537-1743).

¹¹ See Abraham Meir Habermann, "Bomberg, Daniel" in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (2nd ed., vol. 4; Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 52. On the famous "Bomberg Shas," which I was privileged to personally view prior to its auction by Sotheby's in 2015, see Dr. Michelle Chesner, "Printing the Shas," *Jewish Action* Winter

2019, <https://jewishaction.com/cover-story/printing-the-shas/>.

¹² The foregoing biographical sketch is based upon Michael Engel, “Elijah Delmedigo” in ed. Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2019. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/delmedigo/>.

¹³ See the Pico Project here: https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/pico/presentaz/eng.html.

¹⁴ See Chen Malul, “The Feminist Version of the Jewish Morning Blessing,” *Blog of the National Library of Israel*, June 11, 2017, https://blog.nli.org.il/en/first_feminist_siddur/; Amanda Borschel-Dan, “The Jewish Egalitarian Revolution that Almost was in Renaissance Italy,” *The Times of Israel*, March 8, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/the-jewish-egalitarian-revolution-that-almost-was-in-renaissance-italy/>. While the latter article probably overstates the significance of these prayer books, it is certainly fair to say that something of this nature is hard to conceive of outside the Italian Jewish context.

¹⁵ The subsequent list is by no means an exhaustive sketch of important Italian Kabbalists. Other great figures include R. Yosef ben Emanuel Ergas (Florence, 1685-1732), author of the spirited dialogue-style defense of Kabbalah, *Shomer Emunim ha-Kadmon*, and his contemporary R. Immanuel Hai Ricchi (Ferrara, 1688-1743) author of *Mishnat Hassidim*, a very significant Kabbalistic work.

¹⁶ Introduction, *She’elot ve’Teushbot of Rema mi-Fano* (3rd ed.; Jerusalem: Solomon Printing Press, 1963).

¹⁷ My personal interest in Italian Jewish history and specifically the *Ramhal* stems in no small part from the fact that my Savta’s grandmother came from the Luzzatto-Loewy family of Padua. My Savta’s grandmother was born there and lived there a good portion of her life. Her family name was Luzzatto and descended from the *Ramhal*’s brother. Somewhere earlier, as family lore has it, an ancestor was *Av Beit Din* (head of the Jewish court) in Padua. She is buried on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, with a headstone bearing the title אשה חסידה – “a distinguished woman.”

¹⁸ See, for example, Hayyim Nahman Bialik’s ode to the *Ramhal*, “The Lad from Padua” (Hebrew), <https://benyehuda.org/read/2790>.

¹⁹ See “The Luzzatto Papers” in The Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life of the University of California, Berkeley, accessible at <https://magnes.berkeley.edu/collections/archives/global-jewish-diaspora/luzzatto-samuel-david-and-isaia-papers>.

²⁰ David Rudavsky, “Samuel David Luzzatto and Neo-Orthodoxy,” *Tradition* 7, 3 (1965): 21-44; 23.

²¹ Cecil Roth, *The Jews in the Renaissance* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1959), xii-xiii. Quoted in *The Jewish Past Revisited: Reflections on Modern Jewish Historians*, eds. David N. Myers and David B. Ruderman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 129.

Parenting Jewish Teens on Social Media

Pesha Kletenik and Rachel Loike

“Frustrated camp director hires personal photographer for each child” is a new parody that is circulating on social media now. It is accompanied by a satirical article that describes how the “camp office” is continually receiving complaints from parents regarding the lack of pictures of their children on the camp social media pages and other related concerns surrounding the posts. The columnist comically describes how one parent has been phoning in to ask about the child standing next to her son in the photos and wondering if there is a way to have him socialize with another camper.

As a school principal, this post hits close to home. The immediate access and over-involvement of parents in their children’s lives has increased exponentially over the past twenty years. This has been even more exacerbated over the past year and half of remote learning. In conversations with parents who reach out to me with concerns after their child has emailed them from school or called them from a field trip, I have asked them what would have happened when they were students and did not have such quick access to their own parents. One parent reflected, “I would have figured out what to do myself.” This type of conversation often concludes with me imploring the parent to please allow their child the opportunity to resolve issues independently.

This phenomenon is far reaching and extends to times when parents read their children’s texts and panic. Parents have shared with me that they have stumbled upon mean texts sent to their children, which is a very painful thing to read. I sometimes wonder aloud with them what would happen if the exchange had occurred in the bathroom at school. The recipient of the mean comment would have had the autonomy to decide if and when to share the exchange with a parent. In our efforts to protect our children in this digital age, which we must, we have blurred some important lines and infringed on their independence in a way that has removed the opportunity for important milestone developments.

Recently, something notable occurred in our home. My 16-year-old son and a group of his friends interrupted me and a friend as we were sipping coffee and chatting. They wanted to know if the word one of the boys created was a real word and if it should be allowed in their Scrabble game. Let us take note of how unusual it is today for teenage boys to be playing an in-person board game, not have immediate access to Google information and actually ask a parent for their expertise in something. This was only possible because it was Shabbat. Shabbat in some ways

has preserved for our community the in-person gathering that today many individuals lack, but more importantly for our purposes, it creates a space for adults to be viewed as experts.

Social media has helped create two new developments that are impacting parent-child relationships: (1) parents feel a need to be more involved with their kids, and (2) children do not think of their parents as experts and do not naturally turn to them for guidance. This dichotomy – parents being overly enmeshed in their children’s lives and at the same time not revered as authority figures who can guide their children – is at the heart of the struggles our community is experiencing with social media and the information age. In her book about parenting adolescents, Judith Warner describes how social media has joined parents and children to the point that their social lives are overly connected.¹ She notes that in her research, parents of teens have begun to act like teens themselves, creating cliques of those in and out of the group, posting pictures of their teens, with or without the moms, doing fun things. Parents expressed fear of not being cool enough to join the “in” group of families, risking their children losing out on having friends in school. This trend is not only harmful to the children of parents who are not part of the in-group but has robbed children in the in-group of the ability to make friends and navigate social dynamics. Parents have essentially removed this challenge for them. Helicopter parenting has morphed into snowplow parenting, and coupled with instant access to each other, parents and teens occupy the same world. In our effort to stay in tune with our own children, we face the risk of joining them rather than leading them.

Deeply ingrained in Jewish tradition is the importance of the *mesorah*, the legacy passed on from parent to child, from teacher to student. Our Torah is made up of a written and oral tradition. Whereas the written Torah was given by Hashem to Moshe at one point in time, the oral tradition evolves and adapts over time. Both, however, are passed down through our *mesorah*, by teaching it from one generation to the the next. The written Torah commands parents to teach Torah to their children, like the two *shema* passages in Deuteronomy 6:7 and 11:19: “teach them to your children,” and the story of *yetziat mitzrayim* (the Exodus from Egypt), “and you should tell your children...” (Exodus 13:8). The Talmud in Gittin 60b states that Hashem established a covenant with Israel for the purpose of passing down the oral tradition from one generation to the next, and in fact, most *mitzvot* that we keep are from the oral tradition. Throughout Jewish history, groups who rejected the oral law were ostracized because rejection of the oral law is essentially rejection of a Torah lifestyle. It is clear that for the continuity of Judaism, both the written and oral Torah need to be taught by parents and teachers communicating with children. If the bur-

den to pass on the *mesorah* is on the adults, we must inspire the youth, and we must seek to relate to them. Our body of Torah law is set up in such a way that its perpetuity is totally dependent on our success or failure to reach the next generation.

This is no easy task for any generation, but has become more challenging as the information age advances. We may have believed that the gap between immigrant parents from the old country and their children was so wide and difficult to overcome. However, we face new types of challenges. The very skills that we are proficient in can become obsolete at a rapid pace and everyone has direct, increased access to information. In a 2012 IBM Big Data Study tracking the increase in societal knowledge, researchers found that our collective knowledge doubles about every 11 to 12 months, which is quite a feat in the face of history.² In our children's generation, collective knowledge is predicted to double every 11 to 12 hours! Parents may at times feel like they are not equipped to prepare children for their futures. Educators face the daunting task of preparing students for jobs that do not yet exist.

Between advances in technology, in which our children lead us, and the immediate access to any information, what value can we, parents and educators, be to our children? How can we shift from being led by our children into their world to leading and guiding them as wholesome Jews as part of the greater Jewish nation – our charge as the carriers of the *mesorah*? Below I offer some suggestions and a message from one of my own teens who helped me generate ideas for this article. Just as we have, you and your teens may make mistakes and hit some tough terrain, and that is okay. It is part of the messy ordeal of raising children.

Learn about their world as a curious parent. Resist the urge to explain how you do not understand why anyone would like Snapchat, Minecraft, or the newest songs. Ask your children for a tour of a new social media platform, ask them to choose a song in the car. Find out what they like about the media they are into now. Ask them to download the app for you. If there is a fun way to filter photos, ask them to edit a photo of yours. Always be “friends” with your children on as many platforms as you can. Play their video games with them. Try them out, even once, or ask them to show them to you. These are important opportunities to have conversations about what they are up to. Try not to condemn everything that you see, or they may shut you out. Texting with emojis can also be a very effective way to reach out to a teen. Remember, if you are not aware of what is going on in their world, you cannot be a guide to them.

Safety first; communicate this clearly. It is critical to set clear social media safety boundaries with your children. They should know what you see and why you see it. Parents should be able to access their children's phones and social media. This

does not mean that you should indiscriminately read their texts and messages, but they should know that you can. Children appreciate that you are looking out for them, even if this appears to be different from what they say or from their facial expressions. Open communication about this is key; you should not secretly be flipping through their phones. (Of course, if your child or one of their friends is in danger, adults must intervene and this may involve looking at their private information in some circumstances.) Like all charged dialogues with teens surrounding their desire for independence, this will get messy. That is okay. Remember to explain that you are monitoring them because you love them and do not want anything harmful to happen to them. Tell them that it is your job as their parent to keep them safe.

Know with whom your teens are communicating. Walk into their rooms when they are on group calls and lean in, in a fun way, to meet their online friends (“Hi, I’m Hannah’s mom!”). Remember, when we were younger, our parents picked up a house line and knew who called us, and we always make sure to meet the friends our children hang out with in person. Similarly, it is critical that we know who they are talking to online.

Respect their boundaries and teach them about boundaries. We live in a time when boundaries of all kinds have blurred. Our Jewish tradition values boundaries, between family and strangers, parents and children, individuals and the collective. These values are timeless. Tell your children that you will never read texts between them and the friends whom you know. You are looking out for people you do not recognize (and honor this – do not read texts between your kids and their best friends). Teach your teens that boundaries are blurred through digital communication. Facetime in a bedroom can accelerate relationships and make them feel closer to someone at a faster rate. Model boundaries by demonstrating respect for theirs and explaining, openly, why you share some things with certain people in your life, but not others.

Have confidence in what you do offer. Parents offer life experience and model Jewish values. They will not get that from someone else. While you do not know as much as them about the newest social media form of communication, you do know more about friendship, loyalty, and relationships. Though you may not know the very best way to meet people over social media, you, as an adult, understand the danger of engaging with strangers in an intimate way. They need you to help them learn how to navigate relationships. Tell them about your life and struggles, fights you had with friends, ups and downs that you had in romantic situations. Let your teens know that even though the world is different, you know how hard it is to grow up and what it feels like to be a Jewish teen. Most importantly, they should know

that you are there to help them.

Whatever you do not tell them, they will learn elsewhere. Always answer any question that your teens ask you; they should know that you are someone they can come to with problems and questions. Even if the questions are uncomfortable or contain content that you are concerned is not age appropriate, answer them. If they feel that you cannot guide them or that you are not fully disclosing information, they will seek it elsewhere. They will look for answers in places that will not at all be mindful of their age or Jewish values. My own children have asked me very explicit sexual questions from an age that I would never have imagined that they would. While such questions may catch you by surprise, the very best approach is to answer in a matter-of-fact way and then ask them if you fully answered their question or not. Let them ask follow up questions. Though it was uncomfortable to have these conversations with my children, I preferred that they not Google those questions and instead view me as someone they can come to for information. If they did in fact Google the questions anyway, they would learn that I was honest with them and could be trusted to answer questions in the future. If my children had sought out information from Google alone, the answers they would receive would not be accompanied by the values that I want to pass on to them.

Do not be afraid to express your thoughts and concerns. This is tricky, because you do not want to be closed out from their world. However, it is your job as their parent to teach them. If you don't like something they posted, stand your ground in a firm and loving way. Ask them how they'd feel if their school principal saw the post. Teach them that anything posted is public, potentially forever. The lines of public and private have disintegrated. Even though social media is new to you, you know that public and private are different, and your teen needs you to teach them that. They might get mad, but they hear you. Children today may encounter very graphic imagery. You need to guide them and talk to them through these experiences.

We need to prepare our children to make decisions for themselves when they are alone in front of a screen, decisions that are safe, healthy, and align with Jewish values. This can only happen if they receive guidance from us. They should feel comfortable telling a parent that they clicked on something concerning and want to discuss it. Teens should not feel afraid of being punished for disclosing information; it will make them feel uncomfortable to share and then you may not know what they are up to. I have openly explained to my children why watching pornography is addictive and unhealthy. Using the matter-of-fact approach, I explained to my teens that what a person might see online does not represent sex in real life and relationships, and can cause people to have unhealthy expectations or

lead to addiction. As a parent, I cannot rely on firewalls and web restrictions. I know that my children live in a world where they very likely will have access to anything. I need to teach them that they have the power to close out a screen and choose not to look at something.

An important note to keep in mind: While setting boundaries, parents should understand that simply saying “no” will take teens “underground,” and you will not be able to guide them because they will access information and media behind your back. Teens can easily become secretive and not share their world with their parents, so it is critical to walk this line carefully. If your teens do invite you into their space, reserve judgement for serious situations, and not everything that you see and do not like. Remember how much more dangerous social media can be now and how much savvier our children are than when we were teenagers. For instance, when I was younger, my parents would tell me to call them if an R rated movie was put on at a sleepover party. How many times do you think I called them? Although I was breaking a rule they set, the consequences were not as frightening as the ones our own teens may find themselves in by making poor choices.

The level of exposure and their ability to hide contacts and information from you can lead to severe outcomes. Therefore, think carefully about what you object to. If it is not dangerous, but comes from a values-oriented perspective, then have it in a calm, open manner. For instance, if your teen plays a song that discusses sexuality in a form that may not be respectful to women or in line with Jewish values, ask them about it, discuss the values that the song espouses, but it might not be a good idea to ban the song. When it comes to safety, however, be strict about not letting them talk to strangers or post pictures where they are not fully dressed. If you have a few very firm rules, your teen will see you as thoughtful and reasonable and will be more likely to follow the rules without resistance (or with minimal resistance – eye rolling is a win!). Always communicate that you trust your child, but you do not necessarily trust the rest of the world. Let them know that you have faith in them and expect them to make good decisions.

Model for your children. Try not to be looking at your phone all the time. If your teens see you taking incessant photos of yourself and the family, they will follow suit. We live in an increasingly superficial world. As observant Jews, we need to remind our children that the most important things in life are not physical and our deepest feelings are private. Not every family event needs to be a public post. Not every moment should be marked with a photograph. I try to tell my daughter, yes, you look beautiful, and that is not the most important thing about you. The most important things about you cannot be reduced to a post; they are deeper and, yes,

holier. Judaism uses the word *kadosh*, set aside, to describe holy things. There are some things that we set aside only for our family, only for our spouses, and only for ourselves. This separation is what makes them holy.

Communication cannot begin when children hit adolescence. It is critical to cultivate open and healthy relationships with our children from a young age. As children become teenagers, it will be harder to have close relationships with them because they need you less for their physical needs and teens tend to spend more time with peers. Implement set family time from a young age.

Our Jewish tradition has survived many challenges: exile, antisemitism, inquisition, modernity, and enlightenment. We have to rise to the occasion to face the information age and social media. As we are reminded in the Talmud (Bava Metizah 59b), the Torah is not in the heavens; it is entrusted to human beings. This means that passing on our *mesorah* is something that we are equipped for. It may take a fresh approach and entering new platforms, but it is possible. Parents and teachers should confidently know that they can offer their life experience and wisdom, and most importantly, a rich and rooted *mesorah*. Our *mesorah* is designed to withstand the changes we face and we are charged with the responsibility to make that happen – we are the only ones who can!

Message from a teen:

Growing up as a Modern Orthodox Jewish girl, the values that I learn in school and at home are often in conflict with what I experience on social media, on my screen. For instance, there is a lot of pressure to dress and act the way I see celebrities project themselves. There are trends like tennis skirts and crop tops which just don't match my values, the ones I learn from my family. Instead of having restrictions where I'm told I just can't wear something, or I can't be on apps where other people wear certain things, I find it more beneficial when I am given guidance instead of restrictions. If I was just told "no, you can't wear that" rather than given particular reasons and the opportunity to learn, I would not understand why we keep *mitzvot*. I might find myself in a new situation, when I no longer live with my parents and have their input all the time, and I won't know *why* I'm not doing a certain thing, and I won't understand what other things I shouldn't do or should do because I was never taught – I was just told. Having guiding principles over restricted rules is more beneficial to my religious decisions now and in my future

when my parents and teachers aren't with me all the time. I want to be confident that I will know what to do and how to apply Torah values to decisions in my future.

¹ Judith Warner, *And Then They Stopped Talking to Me: Making Sense of Middle School* (New York: Crown, 2020).

² David Russell Schilling, "Knowledge Doubling Every 12 Months, Soon to be Every 12 Hours," *Industry Tap*, April 19, 2013, <https://www.industrytap.com/knowledge-doubling-every-12-months-soon-to-be-every-12-hours/3950>.

The Blessing of the Shabbat Meal: Nurturing Habits of Responsibility

Rachel Haron

Parenting is an overwhelming undertaking. Juggling daily variables involved with work, activities, school, and friendships, while concurrently navigating “real time” technology stressors caused by a constant stream of inbox bombardment – emails, texts, WhatsApp’s, Instagram – is a recipe for “Executive Functioning 101” disaster. As childhood mental health concerns continue to increase at alarming rates, parents are keenly aware of the importance of teaching children how to sort out and make sense of the information that floods their fast-paced lives. With the many challenges that families face in today’s very busy global world, developing executive functions is vital in the lives of 21st century children. Young people are charged with making complex decisions requiring the ability to sift through information logically, shift flexibly, adapt to new situations, and persevere until completion of a goal. Executive functioning skills are essential to forming successful life habits and require direct instruction, support, and modeling.

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University describes executive function and self-regulation skills as “the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully. Just as an air traffic control system at a busy airport safely manages the arrivals and departures of many aircraft on multiple runways, the brain needs this skill set to filter distractions, prioritize tasks, set and achieve goals, and control impulses.”¹ The interplay and coordination of three types of brain function – working memory, mental flexibility, and self-control – are essential elements underlying the science of executive function. The research suggests that humans are born with the potential to develop, practice, and build these foundational core capabilities for life.

The capacity to cultivate human potential is an extraordinary opportunity. Our 2000-year-old compendium of Jewish knowledge, *Pirkei Avot*, pinpoints a specific place to gather, learn, and connect: “Let your home be a meeting place for the sages” (Avot 1:4). The Mishnah recognizes that the first place to learn and cultivate knowledge is in the home. Furthermore, our tradition has even designated a set time for us to fashion our homes into meeting places for learning – and that unique gift of time lies in the blessing of Shabbat.

Each week we have the ability to bring Shabbat into our homes and into our lives. Through cooking and customs, ritual and reflection, and spirit and song, Shabbat offers a designated time to pause: pause and disconnect; pause and unplug;

pause and discuss; pause and enjoy; pause and think; pause and laugh; pause and appreciate; pause and learn; pause and teach; pause and connect. While it is the weekly holiday of Shabbat that ushers in a day of rest, it is the Shabbat meal that serves as the sacred instrument which nourishes the body, mind, and soul of each person.

For this reason, it is worthwhile to consider how the Shabbat meal can serve as a structure to develop key executive functioning skills and how these skills can nurture positive habits of responsibility. An individual with a highly developed sense of personal responsibility is more likely to succeed in school, in the workplace, and in society at large. We will dig deeper to explore how coordinated executive function skills help us instill predictable routines, cultivate mind and manners, nurture problem solving strategies, and promote qualities of independence, all through the forum of the weekly Shabbat meal.

PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE AT THE SHABBAT MEAL

Categories of key executive functions include:

1. Planning and prioritizing: Setting and meeting goals
2. Time management: Having an accurate understanding of time and making decisions to complete tasks in a timely way
3. Organization: Keeping track of everything physically and mentally
4. Self-control: The ability to think about what to do before doing it, with control over the reaction
5. Mental flexibility: Adjusting behavior to unexpected changes and demands
6. Working memory: Keeping key information in mind while using it and applying information to everyday activities

Instilling Predictable Routines at the Shabbat Meal

To instill predictable routines at the Shabbat meal, we will focus on the first three areas of executive functioning: planning and prioritizing, time management, and organization.

Preschoolers: Kids ages three to five can begin to learn chores by cleaning up their toys before guests arrive, putting out the *kiddush* cup and *hallah* plate, and helping to fold napkins. Young children also love to dust and wipe down tables!

Kindergarteners and First Graders: Kids ages five and six can help with cooking, baking, setting and clearing the table, loading and unloading the dishwasher, and

pouring water into pitchers. They can follow simple steps, sort the silverware, and pass out the food.

Elementary School Kids: Kids ages six to eleven can do everything younger children can do, but with little or no supervision. In addition, they can take out the garbage and assume greater responsibility in the kitchen with food preparation. They can greet guests, straighten the house and set the table properly. They can “oversee” and guide the order of ritual elements unique to Shabbat.

Middle and High School Kids: From middle school and beyond, kids are ready to do most things adults do. With proper instruction, they can plan and pace the preparations needed to create the Shabbat menu, buy the ingredients and arrange to have them delivered (or go out to the old-fashioned supermarket!), cook the meal, and serve it. They can invite the guests, map out the flow of the meal, and guide the direction of the table conversation.

Cultivating Mind and Manners at the Shabbat Meal

To cultivate mind and manners at the Shabbat meal, we will look at the next three key executive functions: self-control, mental flexibility, and working memory.

Preschoolers: Kids ages three to five can begin to put executive function strategies into practice by singing songs and playing games that include listening instructions, counting the cutlery, and waiting to be served. By sharing toys with guests and playing in different environments, preschoolers adjust to new experiences.

Kindergarteners and First Graders: Kids ages five and six can play games that use memory, such as Simon Says, which will help them practice remembering rules. Kids can also play games that employ matching and sorting skills and encourage them to adjust flexibly to various scenarios. Listening to stories and retelling them is also something kids can do to encourage these key functions. They can additionally be taught to try new foods! They can say “please and thank you,” exhibit appropriate table manners, and wait their turn to participate in the table conversation.

Elementary School Kids: Kids ages six through eleven can do everything younger children can do, but with more independence. They can do mental math and engage with riddles. They can be taught to “chew and then chat,” display healthy eating habits, and finish the food on their plate. They can listen to adult conversation for

extended periods of time and prepare a topic to discuss at the table. They can learn something new.

Middle and High School Kids: From middle school and beyond, kids are ready to do most things adults do. They can play verbal or board strategy games to train their mind to think of out of the box solutions. They can discuss current events and craft a cohesive argument. They can learn how to converse and apply this skill to the art of respectful debate. They can think critically, analyze, and self-monitor in the moment, being mindful of their dining companions.

Nurturing Problem Solvers at the Shabbat Meal

To nurture problem solving skills at the Shabbat meal, we will explore four key executive functions: organization, self-control, mental flexibility, and working memory.

Preschoolers: Kids ages three to five can begin to put executive function strategies into practice by exploring and discussing items at the table. Why is one kiddush cup so tall and another so short? How are salt and sugar the same? How are they different? Encourage children's suggestions and solutions. Ask open-ended questions, such as "what can you do with a napkin?" and listen carefully to children's responses.

Kindergarteners and First Graders: Kids ages five and six can find their own solutions to problems and should be allowed to explore those possibilities! If the wine spills or the food is not to their liking, encourage them to figure out a solution. Have your children prepare a "*parasha* play" to perform at the meal.

Elementary School Kids: Kids ages six to eleven can do everything younger children can do, but with more independence. They can be presented with a real-world scenario and can offer creative solutions by brainstorming a plan and breaking the solution into discrete steps. They can learn how to make mistakes and move forward. It is within this age range that children begin to explore the weekly *parasha* beyond the storyline and begin to engage with the commentaries on a meaningful level.

Middle and High School Kids: From middle school and beyond, kids are ready to do most things adults do. They can participate in a discussion that has multiple explanations. They can envision ways to solve household problems and be part of the solution. They can explore Torah topics and evaluate ideas and opinions.

Promoting Qualities of Independence at the Shabbat Table

To promote qualities of independence at the Shabbat table, all six of the key executive functions will be relevant.

Preschoolers: In addition to setting predictable Shabbat routines, giving chores, and encouraging kids ages three to five to help, structured choice promotes independent decision making. Should I wear my frilly Shabbat dress or my sparkly one? Kids this age can create projects to enhance the Shabbat table!

Kindergarteners and First Graders: Kids ages five and six can use a “Shabbat checklist” to make sure that everything is ready. They can help younger siblings with tasks such as washing their hands for *netilat yadayim* (ritual hand-washing before the meal), and passing out *kippot* (yarmulkes) to visitors. They can also help older siblings and adults by asking, “how many people want soup?” and “would you like some tea?” If they happen to spill the soup or the tea, five- and six-year-olds can clean up after themselves – and parents should let them!

Elementary School Kids: Kids ages six to eleven should begin to develop hobbies. Hobbies are activities that one finds interesting. Hobbies help keep one busy, relax, and clear the mind. Use the Shabbat table experience to guide your children toward finding a hobby that inspires them and use the weekly discussion to propel hobby development further. For example, parents can ask: “What magic trick did you work on this week? Show us – wow, how did you do that? How many times do you need to practice that trick? What did you find to be most challenging?” Make it fun!

Middle and High School Kids: From middle school and beyond, kids are ready to do most things adults do. They can listen actively and ask questions. They can form opinions about a wide range of issues such as current events, stories and entertainment. As a parent, listen to your child so that they know their ideas and thoughts are valuable. Ask strategic questions that foster debate, reflection and empathy. It is important for young adults to learn the rules of respectful discourse. Use the Shabbat table discussion to guide teenagers on “how” questions. For example, a teen asking “how do I get a job?” will enable them to begin to understand the value of time, develop a work ethic, and earn money. It’s OK if they make some mistakes in the process – the Shabbat meal forum provides a safe platform to understand what might have gone wrong and learn how to redirect moving forward.

Parenting is a tough proposition – no doubt. Each generation faces new challenges while inheriting old problems. Raising responsible children born into a world of instant gratification where smartphones, social media, and the internet have always existed is not easy! It is important to remember that successful parenting is deliberate and intentional. As a parent, you are a leader – know what “successful” toddlers, children, teens and young adults look like, and make a thoughtful plan to help your children develop traits for their individual success. Consider how you will focus on boosting executive function skills in your blueprint for parenting. Be a role model for your children – responsible kids don’t “just happen”!

The blessing of the Shabbat meal is a gift bestowed upon all of us one week at a time, month after month, over an entire year, and throughout the many decades of our lives. As an enduring ritual, it serves as a powerful vehicle to guide our children in navigating mundane and complex issues and to transmit knowledge, traditions, and joy from generation to generation. We can use the firm foundation of the Shabbat meal to lay the building blocks of shaping children into good citizens, who are responsible, attentive, and not only care about the world, but are also equipped with the tools to transform it into a better place.

¹ *Building the Brain’s “Air Traffic Control” System: How Early Experiences Shape the Development of Executive Function: Working Paper No. 11* (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011). Accessible at www.developingchild.harvard.edu.

A License to Lie? Sugarcoating and Censorship in Jewish Education and Outreach¹

Moshe Kurtz

The obligation of truth telling has two purposes, one social and one moral. The former is to ensure the smooth functioning of society, which is possible only when there is complete confidence in communication. The latter is to safeguard one's own moral integrity.
—R. Mark Dratch²

In *Ve-Ha'arev Na* (vol. 1, pp. 346-347), a book that has come to adorn many a Shabbat table, Rabbi Yitzchok Zilberstein shares the following question that was posed to him: A *kiruv* (Jewish outreach) professional wanted to orchestrate a scene which would compel the attendees at his lecture to accept full religious observance. His plan was to plant another observant Jew in the crowd who would pretend to be a secular individual. At some point during the lecture, this individual would get up and argue vehemently against the teacher. However, it would be planned from the beginning that he would lose the argument, concede defeat, and immediately accept upon himself the yoke of Heaven and full commitment to *halakha* (Jewish law). By orchestrating such a spectacle, the *kiruv* professional's hope was that the rest of the attendees would be so inspired by this man's commitment to accept the Torah's laws that they too would elect to become observant. The *kiruv* professional asked R. Zilberstein whether it was permissible to use this form of deception in order to bring his fellow Jews under the wings of the Divine. We will ultimately return to his response, but first we will explore this question and its ramifications in Jewish education and outreach.

In my current rabbinic line of work, I am often confronted with similar quandaries to the one described by Rabbi Zilberstein: Should I teach a topic in tractate *Kiddushin* that contains ideas which seem to contradict contemporary morality, such as an antiquated view of women, and risk alienating students or congregants who may become disillusioned by the material and lose respect for the Torah that they were coming to love? Similarly, when I taught an introductory Jewish philosophy course, I was confronted with this tension: Do I inform my students that some medieval Jewish theologians believed that divine providence is reserved exclusively for the pious elite and not the common man?³ As a child, I believed that God is in-

volved in every aspect of each person's life, and I still recall how jarring it was when my 10th grade rebbe nonchalantly taught me *Or Ha-Hayim's* assertion that one man can kill another even if God had not ordained for him the victim to die.⁴ Would I be better off censoring a philosophical opinion that might cause a student to question his or her faith and relationship with God? And if the topic I am teaching may cause some students to view the Torah as "immoral," should I offer some kind of apologetics that I do not believe, or is it better to let the chips fall where they may?

I ask these questions not only from a pedagogical perspective, but more urgently from an ethical standpoint. When the principles of honesty and Jewish educational outreach are irreconcilably at odds with one another, which value emerges victorious? Is it more important to be one hundred percent transparent and honest, or is it permissible to distort the data in order to develop and retain observant Jews?

To answer this question, we will first examine the halakhic basis for Jewish outreach and responsibility towards other Jews' observance of *mitzvot*. Subsequently, we will explore the parameters for the violation of dishonesty. We will then seek to determine which halakhic principle takes priority: ensuring Jewish observance or maintaining honesty in all matters. Finally, we will delineate a number of overarching concerns and mitigating factors in order to arrive at a practical-pedagogical conclusion.

THE IMPERATIVE OF JEWISH EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH

We are living through a renaissance of Jewish outreach where many well-funded organizations such as Aish, Chabad, and the Orthodox Union's NCSY are all dedicated to the mission of influencing non-observant (or less observant) Jews to accept the yoke of Heaven and practice an observant lifestyle. The question then arises, where is the verse in the Torah which enjoins Jews to be *mekarev* (lit. "bring closer") his or her fellow Jew?

The most likely candidate is the *mitzvah* of *tokhahah*, or rebuke. Rambam, in his *Sefer HaMitzvot* (commandment no. 205), writes:

The 205th mitzvah is that we are commanded to admonish a person who is performing a transgression or who is preparing to do so. One must verbally warn him and admonish him. We are not allowed to say, "I will not sin; and if someone else sins, that is between him and God." This [attitude] is contrary to Torah. Rather, we are commanded not to transgress, nor to allow another Jew to transgress...The source of this commandment is God's statement (exalted be He), "You must admon-

ish your neighbor” (Lev. 19:17).

The Torah, according to Rambam, expects us to act as “guarantors” for our fellow Jews and inform them how to live a Torah-observant lifestyle. As the famous statement in *Sanhedrin* 27b records, “everyone is responsible (*arevin*) for one another.” *Avodah Zarah* 18a records that the wife of R. Hanaya ben Tradyon failed to internalize this principle and care for her husband’s spiritual welfare, and therefore God ordained that she be executed by the Romans for the sins that she could have prevented. As the Talmud there states: “Anyone who has the power to prevent [one from doing wrong] and does not prevent is punished for him.” Since she did not protest her husband’s transgression, she is deemed responsible alongside her husband for his sin.

The imperative of Jewish outreach is not limited to preventing a fellow Jew from violating the Torah’s negative commandments. In fact, Jewish law dictates that we are also obligated to promote observance of positive commandments. At the end of a list of specific imprecations, Moses declares: “Cursed be he who will not *uphold* the terms of this Torah and observe them. And all the people shall say, Amen.” (Deut. 27:26). On that verse, Ramban, based on the Talmud Yerushalmi, analyzes the specific use of the term “uphold”:

Rabbi Asi in the name of Rabbi Tanhum the son of Hiya said, [even if a person] learned and taught [Torah], observed and fulfilled [its commandments], but had the means to enable [others to study the Torah] and did not do so – he is included within the curse. Thus the Rabbis interpreted this “upholding” [of the Torah] as referring to the royal house and that of the Nasi [the head of the Sanhedrin] who have the power to uphold [the authority of] the Torah over those who annul it. And even if he was a perfectly righteous man in his own deeds, but he could have strengthened the Torah against the power of the wicked ones who annul it [but failed to do so], he is accursed. This is close to the subject that we have explained.

Indeed, we are not only charged to tend to our own personal spirituality, but must additionally care for the religiosity of our entire brethren. Along the same line of reasoning, the *Beit Ha-Levi* (*Parashat Mishpatim*) quotes the Midrash Tanhuma which records that God gifted the Jewish people two items: a crown and a weapon. The *Beit Ha-Levi* explains that the crown was presented for every individual’s per-

sonal acceptance of the Torah, whereas the weapon was granted in order to supply each person with the tools to ensure his neighbors' observance as well. Thus it is clear that there is an imperative in Jewish law for one to look after his or her fellow Jews' religious welfare and secure his or her fealty to Jewish law.

THE VIRTUE OF HONESTY

The Torah warns us: “*Keep far from a false matter*; do not bring death on those who are innocent and in the right, for I will not acquit the wrongdoer” (Exod. 23:6-9). Such themes can be found in all sections of the Tanakh, such as in Jeremiah 9:4: “One man cheats the other, they will not speak truth; they have trained their tongues to speak falsely; they wear themselves out working iniquity”; and in Psalms 121:7: “He who deals deceitfully shall not live in my house; he who speaks untruth shall not stand before my eyes.”

Rabban Gamliel in Pirke Avot (1:18) teaches that one of the three things that the world stands on is “truth.” *Shabbat* 55a declares that “the seal of the Holy One, Blessed be He, is truth.” Similarly, *Sotah* 42a denounces dishonesty by proclaiming that the “class [category] of liars” will not greet the Divine Presence in the end of days. Furthermore, *Sanhedrin* 92a records a radical teaching:

Rabbi Elazar says: Anyone who alters [the truth] in his speech, it is as though he worships idols. As it is written here [with regard to Jacob stealing Esau's blessing], “And I shall seem to him a deceiver [*metate'a*]” (Genesis 27:12), and it is written there [with regard to idol worship]: “They are vanity, the work of deception [*tatuim*]” (Jeremiah 10:15).

It is abundantly clear that both the Torah and Talmud condemn dishonesty and deceit; instead, they promote honesty and integrity in one's conduct. Returning to our question: Since both honesty and ensuring fellow Jews' observance are evidently values of the Torah, which one takes priority when they are in conflict? To address this issue, first we will explore cases in which Jewish law permits aberrations from the truth. Once we understand the origin and parameters of halakhic violations of dishonesty, we can then emerge with potential exceptions and dispensations for the scenario at hand.

A DISPENSATION FOR DISHONESTY?

Many Jewish children are raised on the hallowed Marvelous Middos Machine lyrics: *mi-davar sheker tirhak* – “never tell a lie.” Ironically, this very state-

ment may prove untrue. While the Hafetz Hayim⁵ and a number of rabbinic scholars⁶ assume that the prohibition to lie is biblically mandated, halakhic authorities such as Rambam only apply the principle of “keep far from a false matter” within the limited scope of judicial matters.⁷ Even when Rambam does condemn dishonesty, it is only in the context of describing how a Torah scholar – who, according to the rabbinic understanding, is already of a high moral character – is expected to conduct himself.⁸ On the one hand, the Rambam’s position fits well within the context of the Torah’s statement “keep far from a false matter,” as it is commanded in the midst of judicial laws. On the other hand, it is difficult to assume that the Torah permits all forms of dishonesty outside the doors of the *beit din* (Jewish court).

This brings us to the intermediate approach of the *Sefer Yere'im* (no. 205) which posits that dishonesty is only biblically forbidden when it can lead to damage. While judicial matters are the most likely place that falsehoods will lead to harm, lying that will have detrimental consequences is forbidden in any context. Moreover, the *To'afot Re'em* comments there that even words of falsehood which bear no apparent harm are still prohibited at least on a rabbinic level.

What is apparent from all of this is that there are many halakhic authorities who limit the scope of the prohibition of dishonesty from the very outset. Furthermore, even according to the those who believe the prohibition to be both biblical and expansive, there are still indisputable exceptions which are recorded in the Talmud, such as the principle that “it is permitted for a person to depart from the truth in a matter that will bring peace” (*Yevamot* 61b). R. Yehoshua ben Hanaya, for instance, took advantage of this dispensation to avoid insulting the hostess of the inn he was staying at. When she inquired why he did not wish to eat from her beans, instead of telling her that they were over-salted, he responded, “I have already eaten during the daytime” (*Eruvin* 53b).¹⁰ The extent to which we may apply the exemption of “for the sake of peace” is the basis of a dispute between Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel about whether or not to praise the beauty of a less-than-attractive bride (*Ketubot* 17a):

The Sages taught: How does one dance before the bride [i.e., how does one praise her]? Bet Shammai say: Praise of the bride as she is. And Bet Hillel say: “A fair and attractive bride.” Bet Shammai said to Bet Hillel: In a case where the bride was lame or blind, does one say with regard to her: A fair and attractive bride? But the Torah states: “Keep far from a false matter” (Exodus 23:7)?

Bet Hillel’s position, which is ultimately accepted as normative, permits one

to bend the truth to avoid causing another person emotional harm, even if it seems to override the biblical proscription.

In addition to concern for one's emotional wellbeing, other Talmudic sources suggest that one may speak words of falsehood to prevent someone from experiencing spiritual harm as well; that is, to help one avoid transgressions. In *Berakhot* 59a, for instance, Rav Ketina condemns the cogent homiletical interpretations of a necromancer as falsehood. The Talmud explains that "Rav Ketina did not admit that the necromancer was correct so that everyone would not mistakenly follow him." Similarly, in *Avodah Zarah* 59a, R. Yohanan imposed overly stringent rulings as baseline halakhic practice because he was dealing with "people who are not well-versed in Torah."¹¹ In both of these cases, the rabbis deliberately lied or altered the truth in order to preserve the spiritual wellbeing of the less educated masses.¹²

A similar dynamic appears in the discussion of *stam yeinam*, wine that is prohibited due to coming into contact with a non-Jew. The *Shulhan Arukh* (*Orah Hayim* 565:6) writes that "one who fasts and publicizes that he is fasting in order to brag is punished." However, the *Kaf Hachayim* (565:36) comments that this concern of appearing self-righteous is not applicable when one is trying to avoid the rabbinic prohibition of *stam yeinam*, prohibited wine of a non-Jew. Therefore, one may claim *mesaneh ani*, "I am fasting," to avoid being served *stam yeinam* by a host who does not carefully observe Jewish dietary laws. In all of these examples, a person is permitted to tell a lie in order to avoid future, and potentially greater, transgressions.

Not only may one lie to avoid the violation of a negative commandment, but Rabbenu Yonah, in *Sha'are Teshuvah* (3:181), writes that a white lie is permissible even for the sake of fulfilling a *positive* commandment!¹³ Rabbinic commentaries on some of the most pivotal biblical narratives will help us appreciate the application of this position. Unlike the opinions that believe that Isaac willingly marched to be sacrificed at the *akeda* (binding) in Genesis 22, Ibn Ezra (on Gen. 22:5) suggests that Abraham deceived Isaac in order to fulfill God's will, lest his son flee out of fear. Moreover, in the next generation, Jacob deceives his father Isaac into giving him the special blessings by claiming that he was his brother Esau. Commenting on this narrative, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler (*Mikhtav Me-Eliyahu* vol. 1, 94-96) presents a radical reinterpretation of the words *emet* (truth) and *sheker* (falsehood):

What is *emet* (truth) and what is *sheker* (falsehood)? From the beginning of our childhood education, we understand that *emet* is when incidents are reported the way they occurred; *sheker* is when we change [the facts]. However, this is an overly simplistic manner [of under-

standing these terms], as there are many instances in which this is not so. Sometimes it is forbidden to report things as they occurred, such as pointing out a person's deficiencies without cause. And sometimes it is necessary to alter [the facts] when the truth serves no benefit and only causes harm. In such cases, that which seems like *emet* is in fact *sheker*, as it brings about evil results; and that which appears as *sheker* can actually serve the purpose of *emet*... [the definition of] *emet* is that which brings about goodness and the will of God, and *sheker* is that which grants success to the exploits of the Prince of *Sheker*, the *Sitra Ahra*.¹⁴

Rabbi Dessler deemphasizes the significance of reporting absolute facts and avoiding falsities. In what Marc Shapiro terms a "utilitarian approach," Rabbi Dessler is primarily, if not exclusively, concerned with the *results* of telling the truth rather than the actual truth itself.¹⁵ With this framework, Rabbi Dessler easily dismisses Jacob's need to lie to his own father, Isaac. Since Jacob was serving a higher goal, indeed, the Highest goal, his deceit is not only *not* falsehood, *sheker*, but was instead seen as pursuing the virtue of *emet*, truth!

At this juncture, we have established the following points: First, it is a *mitzvah* to facilitate a fellow Jew's growth in their halakhic observance. Second, it is ethical, and perhaps commendable, to alter the truth for the sake of peace, and even more so, to keep someone from sinning or to enable the performance of a *mitzvah*. Thus we may arrive at the conclusion that one may avoid telling the truth if it is necessary for ensuring another Jewish person's commitment to *halakha*. In fact, according to Rabbi Dessler's formulation, it would not even be categorized as a permissible act of *sheker* (falsehood) but a *bona fide* act of *emet* (truth)!

Based on the texts that we have seen until this point, we may now return to the opening scenarios of this essay with the following tentative conclusions:

- 1) A "*kiruv* professional" may stage a dispute for the purpose of inspiring non-religious onlookers to accept halakhic observance.
- 2) If one may lie to ensure observance, it stands to reason that even more so may one omit information to ensure devotion to Jewish faith and law. Therefore, we may assume that a teacher is permitted to omit a jarring theological position (e.g., the limits of divine providence) in order to maintain their students' faith and commitment to Jewish theology.

3) A rabbi may sugarcoat his presentation of Torah laws that would clash with Western sensitivities to avoid scaring off potential *ba'alei teshuva*, individuals who choose to adopt an observant lifestyle.¹⁶

MITIGATING FACTORS AND CONCERNS

In reality, an individual's license to lie may not be as wide-ranging as some of the earlier sources may lead us to believe. In the 20th century, Rabbi Yosef Shalom Eliyashiv wrote a responsum (*Koeveitz Teshuvot*, vol. 3, responsum no. 28) in which he stated that it is inappropriate to fabricate inspirational stories of great rabbinic figures (*gedolim*), however he subsequently indicated that he is comfortable with a little embellishment.¹⁷ Another prominent *posek* (halakhic decisor), Rabbi Yitzchok Yaakov Weiss, forbade individuals from pretending to participate in a charity auction to raise charity in order to encourage others to place a bid (*Minhat Yitzhak*, vol. 3, responsum no. 97). Similarly, Rabbi Shmuel Vosner argued that it is unethical for a charity collector to claim that he is collecting funds for a wedding, which would evoke greater sympathy, while in actuality he is collecting money to support a Torah scholar, as this constitutes *geneivat da'at*, an egregious form of deception (*Shevet HaLevi*, vol. 2, responsum no. 119).

Despite the permissibility to lie which is found in certain earlier sources, many notable halakhic authorities discourage and condemn dishonesty, even when employed in the pursuit of a religious cause. In an attempt to explain their rationale, we will now turn to a number of concerns that would make a halakhic authority reluctant to take advantage of the dispensation for dishonesty.

HILLUL HASHEM

We may now return to Rabbi Zilberstein's case regarding the "kiruv professional" who wished to deceive his audience in order to inspire them to accept halachic observance. Indeed, Rabbi Zilberstein concludes that there is likely no intrinsic problem in terms of dishonesty at all! Rather, there is a significant concern that such a stunt might cause a *Hillul Hashem*, a desecration of God's name), should the audience realize that it was all a ruse. That being said, he concludes:

However, I have heard from one of the great rabbis of our generation that if this could be accomplished with absolutely no concern for causing a *Hillul Hashem*, it is reasonable that it is permissible, and there is no issue of *genevat da'at* (deception). On the contrary, this endeavor will straighten the minds of those who are still muddled and entrenched in

the [material] temptations of this world.

Thus, according to Rabbi Zilberstein, there is no issue with deceiving someone in order to bring them closer to God, as long as one can ensure that they will not be discovered (should that be possible). However, this conclusion itself risks the very same concern for *Hillul Hashem*, as the recognition that deception is a halakhically permitted form of education can create distrust between rabbis and their constituents. Marc Shapiro aptly describes the potential for distrust between congregants and leaders in regard to the aforementioned case of the deceptive collection of charity funds:

It need hardly be said that if rabbis permitted themselves to use the time-honored practice of supporting poor brides in order to raise money for another purpose, then their word will lose all credibility in the eyes of the people. As it is...lay-people would appear to have plenty of justification for doubting the veracity of at least some of what their rabbis tell them¹⁸

Thus the concern for *hillul Hashem* exists on a number of levels, and care must be taken to not jeopardize the trusting relationship between congregants or students and their leaders.

AD HOC VS. INSTITUTIONALIZED DISHONESTY

While *hillul Hashem* is an extrinsic deterrent to dishonesty, there remain a few intrinsically-motivated concerns which limit the extent to which one may lie for the sake of *kiruv* or peace. Earlier, we presented the dispute about whether one may praise a bride for a trait which she does not possess. While Bet Hillel was flexible, Bet Shammai remained resolute and forbade such dishonesty. Explaining Bet Shammai's position, Tosafot suggest that the Sages did not want to institute the necessity to lie on an ongoing basis. In other words, according to Tosafot, even Bet Shammai would concede that one may lie on occasion as necessary, but it would be inappropriate to institutionalize any form of deceptive language ab initio.

Lest one think that only Bet Shammai was concerned for institutionalized dishonesty, *Yevamot* 63a relates the following story:

Rav's wife would constantly aggravate him. When he would say to her: Prepare me lentils, she would prepare him peas; if he asked her for

peas, she would prepare him lentils. When Hiyya, his son, grew up, he would reverse [the requests Rav asked him to convey] to her. Rav said to his son Hiyya: Your mother has improved now that you convey my requests. He said to Rav: It is I who reverse your request to her. Rav said to him: This is [an example of the well-known adage] that people say: He who comes from you shall teach you wisdom. You, however, should not do so, as it is stated: “They have taught their tongue to speak lies, they wear themselves out to commit iniquity” (Jeremiah 9:4).

Why did Rav deem it inappropriate for his son Hiyya to lie for the sake of achieving peace between his parents? The *Yam shel Shlomo* asserts that while one may lie to achieve peace on occasion, it may not be institutionalized as a regular measure.¹⁹ Accordingly, it would not be ethical for a teacher or organization to rely on censorship or diluting information as its standard *modus operandi*, and this should be taken into consideration when a teacher chooses to misrepresent or omit information in his or her teaching.

LYING VS. BENDING THE TRUTH

Even according to Bet Hillel, who took a more permissible stance on lying for a significant cause, there may still remain certain limitations. The understanding of the *Perisha* (*Even Ha-Ezer* 65:1) and other halakhic commentaries (e.g., *Bet Shemuel Even Ha-Ezer* 65:2 and Rashi on *Ketubot* 17a, s.v. *hasudah*) is that Bet Hillel would not permit an explicit lie for the sake of praising the bride. Rather, one may call her “pleasant,” even if she is not physically attractive, since the term “pleasant” could be construed as referring to her deeds instead of her appearance.²⁰ The *Niv Sefataim* (*Biurim* 2:6), a seminal work on the laws of honesty, explains this to mean that the law of honesty is overridden by another value, rather than ceasing to exist altogether in this case; in halakhic parlance, this is known as a *dehuya* (overridden) rather than a *hutra* (permitted). Unlike Rabbi Dessler who does not consider a lie for a Godly cause to be *sheker* (falsehood) at all, many authorities rule that dishonesty, no matter the impetus, remains *sheker*, even if it ultimately overridden. Thus even necessary forms of dishonesty ought to be reduced and mitigated in both frequency and manner.²¹

Ziyuf HaTorah: Distortion of the Torah

Genesis Rabbah 8:8 relates the following about the nature of the Torah:

R. Shemuel b. Nahman said in R. Yehonatan's name: When Moses was engaged in writing the Torah, he had to write the work of each day. When he came to the verse, "And God said: Let *Us* make man," he said: "Sovereign of the Universe! Why do You furnish an excuse to heretics?" "Write," replied He; "And whoever wishes to err will err."

Moses was concerned that an unadulterated presentation of God's Torah may enable individuals to misinterpret its content and be swayed by heretical beliefs of polytheism. However, God did not yield. Rather, the Torah was written in the language that God intended, and whoever wished to misinterpret may erroneously do so.

In *Titen Emet Le-Ya'akov* (responsum no. 101), one of the definitive books dedicated to the laws of truth and dishonesty, R. Yaakov Hizkiyahu Fisch writes that if a teacher is bringing his less-affiliated students closer to Torah observance, it is not permissible to misrepresent some prohibitions as permissible in order that they keep the other commandments in the Torah. However, although this is not typically the case, there are extreme instances in which an individual will feel that certain Torah laws are so "immoral" that if they remain in force, the individual will be averse to observing the entire Torah. Should push come to shove, Rabbi Hershel Schachter writes in *Be-Ikvei HaTzon* (essay no. 5, 35) that it is better to let someone leave Orthodoxy rather than misrepresent a deed that is unequivocally forbidden. He writes that "we are no longer responsible for them" if they demand that we alter the Torah in order to placate their preconceived notions of morality.²²

That being said, it is incumbent upon any caring teacher to remain supportive of their students throughout their philosophical journey. If a student approaches a teacher with a question that is plaguing him, the student is likely looking to maintain his relationship with his teacher and with Judaism – and that teacher should reciprocate by guiding him to the best of his ability. Sensitivity and understanding should not be at odds with an unapologetic promotion of halakhic observance.

We have seen that Jewish education and outreach (*kiruv*) carry significant halakhic weight and are imperative to the extent one may on occasion obfuscate the truth in order to achieve such ends. However, one must be weary of sugarcoating, censoring, or misrepresenting the Torah in order to accomplish such goals. In the end, the integrity and thus the quality of the Torah is more important than the quantity of its adherents. If we alter the Torah to attract more followers, we risk

being *yatza sekharo b'hefseido* – the accomplishment is negated by the greater loss incurred. Educators should be confident in the messages of ethics and morality inherent in the Torah while also being sensitive to potentially upsetting content.

As we saw, there are a number of situations in which harmless deception or omission of certain information is preferable to creating arguments, hurting one's emotional wellbeing, or alienating a student or potential *ba'al teshuva*. At the same time, we saw a number of factors which would limit the cases in which an educator may employ deception, including concerns for *hillul Hashem*, distorting the truth of Torah, or making a habit out of lying. Ultimately, educators must remain cautious not to dilute the Torah, misrepresent any of its crucial principles, or compromise on essential Jewish values to fit the standards of modern society. Ideas in Torah that are prone to controversy should be dealt with sensitivity and care, minimizing the emotional harm while staying true to the Torah's principles and goals. As an educator, I feel the responsibility to instill the feelings of awe, grandeur, and appreciation in my students – the same feelings I have when learning Torah – with the utmost care, honesty, and integrity. Through the adherence to the right principles and sensitivity, I hope to convey to my students my own confidence in the truth of God's Torah and inspire them to feel similarly.

Whenever I teach a controversial topic, I ask my audience: “Would you prefer I sugarcoat it for you or would you like to know what the source actually says?” As of yet, I have never received a request to omit a controversial opinion, even if some find it objectionable. A student or congregant may not always be thrilled about a particular *halakha*, but in the long run, an intellectually honest individual appreciates being exposed to the full range of perspectives and facts. It is only through honesty and trust that we can aspire for our beloved students and fellow Jews to remain committed to a true Torah life. *V'khein yehi ratzon*.²³

¹ I would like to express gratitude to Rabbis Steve Gottlieb and Yair Lichtman for reviewing an earlier draft of this essay. I would also like to thank Miriam Zami for her incisive insights and diligent effort in preparing this piece for publication.

² Mark Dratch, “Nothing but the Truth,” *Judaism* 37 no. 2 (1988): 223.

³ For example, see Ramban on Genesis 18:19 and Seforno on Leviticus 13:47. Cf. R. Eliyahu Dessler (*Michtav M'Eliyahu*, Volume 5, p. 310) who presents a tempered understanding of Ramban's opinion, based on Rabbeinu Behaye (Genesis 18:19).

⁴ On Genesis 37:21.

⁵ Introduction, Positive Commandments, par. 13. See the *Be'er Mayim Hayim* commentary *ad loc*.

⁶ See *Sefer Hasidim* (no. 1060) and *Sefer Hareidim* (Commandments of the Mouth 12:26). See also *Shulhan Arukh* (Y.D. 402:12) who adopts a similarly expansive application of “keep far from a false matter”:

“One who suffered a bereavement and it was not known to him, [the law is that] it is not obligatory that they inform him [thereof], even in [the case of] his father and/or mother [who died], and regarding such a one [i.e., who does inform], it is said, ‘And he that utters a slander is a fool’; and it is permissible to invite him to a feast of betrothal and marriage and [likewise to] every [type of] festivity, since he knows not thereof.

However, if he asks about him, one should not lie and say that he is alive, for it is written, “Keep thee far from a false matter.”

⁷ *Sefer HaMitzvot* (Prohibition no. 281), *Mishneh Torah* (Laws of the Sanhedrin 21:10), 16. *Mishneh Torah* (Laws of the Sanhedrin 22:2-3,10). This is based on the Talmud in *Shevuot* 30b-31a. See also *Ibn Ezra* (on Exod. 23:7).

⁸ *Mishneh Torah* (Laws of Dispositions 5:7). This is likely based on the Talmud in tractate *Bava Metzia* (23b-24a) which states: “With regard to these three matters alone, it is normal for Sages to alter their statements: With regard to a tractate, a bed, and a host.”

⁹ *Ha-Emek Davar* (Exodus 23:7) succinctly disproves the circumscription of dishonesty to judicial matters. Rather, he suggests that the principle of “keep far from a false matter” was only invoked in a judicial context because that is where it is most common for a lie to have catastrophic consequences. However, the prohibition remains in force in all contexts, as Hafetz Hayim et al. believe.

¹⁰ Marc Shapiro makes an amusing observation regarding this passage: “This excuse continues to be used by even the most pious when trying to avoid eating something they do not like. Fortunately for them, they are often able to point to the sumptuous synagogue kiddush to explain why they are not eating more of the Sabbath lunch meal.” See Shapiro, *Changing the Immutable: How Orthodox Judaism Rewrites its History* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2015), 252.

¹¹ This is akin to the legal concept of *halakha v'ein morin ken*, meaning, it is the *halakha* but we do not teach this way. Cf. *Gitin* 62a for a similar example.

¹² See *Titen Emet Le-Ya'akov* (responsum no. 45) in which he discusses whether one may falsely claim that a great sage forbade something in order to distance his family from a particular sin.

¹³ See also *Titen Emet Le-Ya'akov* responsa nos. 4-7.

¹⁴ This assertion is consonant with the Maharal (*Gur Aryeh* 47:29 s.v. *Hesed*) who interprets the term *emet* as a *davar sheraui la'asot*, something that is proper or necessary to perform.

¹⁵ *Changing the Immutable*, 284: “Dessler, a famed musar teacher adopts a utilitarian approach to the entire concept of truth. As he sees it, truth as a value must carry some positive result. Since truth is by definition a good quality. Therefore, ‘truth,’ as understood by the Sages, means that which leads to a good result. When the Sages say that the seal of God is truth and speak of the importance of truth, they are not necessarily speaking of factual or historical truth. According to Dessler, ‘truth’ is not dependent on empirical observation and evidence, but derives from religious considerations. Thus, a historically accurate description that leads to a bad result is, from a religious perspective, ‘false.’ By the same token, that which helps lead people to do God’s will, even if it is factually false, is nevertheless to be regarded as ‘truth.’”

¹⁶ Given that these conclusions may seem uncomfortable, it can serve as an interesting (meta-)example of the entire present discussion. Based on the halakhic literature we surveyed, if one were to feel disillusioned with Jewish law after reading this essay, would it have been better had it not been published? I leave that for thoughtful discussion.

¹⁷ See tractate *Yoma* (23a-23b) for an example in which R. Tzadok misrepresented the law of *egla arufa* (ritual of the breaking of a calf’s neck) in order to embellish his portrayal of an incident.

¹⁸ *Changing the Immutable*, 274.

¹⁹ 6:46 on *Yevamot* 63a.

²⁰ However, see Ritva on *Ketubot* 17a.

²¹ See also, *Titen Emet Le-Ya'akov* (responso no. 14) which seeks to determine a practical conclusion as to whether a noble lie constitutes a *hutra* or *dehuya*.

²² See *Teshuvot Ve-Hanhagot* (vol. 3, responsum no. 314) who makes a similar statement in regards to conversion law.

²³ Subsequent to writing this essay I found another contemporary treatment of the topic by R. Chaim Burman, “Teaching the Whole Truth in the Classroom,” *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society* 73 (2017): 64-86. I encourage the reader to review his analysis of the source material. For further reading see also J. J. Schacter, “Facing the Truths of History,” *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 8, (1998): 200-276.

Educating Towards the Value of Halakha

Adina Cohen

For the past two years, I have been teaching part-time in a seminary in Israel. This has given me the opportunity to interact with, teach, and learn from students who have spent twelve years in the Modern Orthodox education system in America. One of the key characteristics that distinguishes Orthodoxy from other streams of Judaism is its devotion to *halakha* (Jewish law) and the halakhic system. Commitment to Jewish law is a clear message in the Torah and is echoed in the works of *Hazal*, the Sages of the talmudic period, and in the commentaries on the Torah throughout the centuries.¹ In observing my students, however, I realized that many of them, while passionate about Torah study and Judaism, do not share my distinct sense of obligation to *halakha*. Somewhere in the shuffle, *halakha* has taken a back seat for so many students that I have spoken with over the years. Why?

Western society promotes pluralism and multiple truths. Every ideology has its place and no worldview is seen as “more true” than another. Additionally, Western ideals teach that as an individual I have the right to determine what I believe to be true and act accordingly without having to justify my decisions. Placing this as the backdrop of Orthodoxy creates a complicated picture. On the one hand, the Torah is binding and demands adherence to laws that range from large and straightforward to small and extremely detailed, regardless of personal feelings. On the other hand, society declares nothing to be binding. If I throw off the yoke of *halakha* or declare myself an atheist, traditional Judaism will view me as “off the *derekh*” (off the observant path), or worse, a heretic. Contemporary secular society, however, may laud my free thinking and my courage to discover my truth.

As Modern Orthodox Jews, we see value in Western society and believe that our involvement in secular society has the potential to enhance our connection to God and His Torah. But what do we do when the values espoused by those around us, especially when taken to their extreme, threaten the very core of what we hold dear? I find myself with some students who do not feel a sense of obligation to *halakha*, who see no fundamental difference between the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox ideologies. According to this perspective, all three are simply different truths that different individuals may hold. In many ways, how can I blame them? Not only are there many positive outgrowths of accepting multiple truths, whether it be increased dialogue or a greater sense of empowerment, while feeling a true, deep sense of accepting the yoke of God is counter-cultural and requires keeping laws that can be difficult to uphold.

It is this tension that contributes in many ways to the phenomenon that I have witnessed in many of my students. They are children of the 21st century who have two feet firmly planted in the postmodern world and its values. As such, I cannot assume that every or even most of the young women who walk into my classroom will share my convictions regarding *halakha*. What's more, I must be prepared for the reality that their worldview holds little space for a system that demands that all those who are born Jewish are bound by a system of rigorous laws with no option to opt out. As an educator, how do I deal with this challenge? I'd like to suggest two approaches to address this challenge that are championed by educators who have had a profound impact on my life, Simi Peters and Rivka Kahan.

APPROACH ONE: ACKNOWLEDGING ASSUMPTIONS

A few months ago, my students and I read the article “The Common-Sense Rebellion Against Torah Authority” by Rav Soloveitchik.² The article discusses the story of Korah and his arguments against Moshe. Rav Soloveitchik explains Korah's argument as follows:

[I]n judging the utility, relevance, and beneficial effects of mitzvot, all intelligent people are qualified to render judgement on the basis of close and informed observation. For this aspect, he argued, common sense, human experience, and basic judgement are the criteria. And on this basis he challenged the authority of Moses.³

Korah thinks that each person should be able to decide which mitzvot (commandments) make sense for her to keep, and that *mitzvot* which are not logical do not need to be part of a person's lifestyle. The relevance of this message in this day and age is clear, and I was excited to discuss the implications of Korah's approach with my students and explore how it may have crept back into our relationship to Torah and *halakha*.

My students agreed with the arguments laid out by Rav Soloveitchik which delegitimized a “common sense” attitude towards *halakha*. A few moments later, however, a caveat was added that while common sense largely has no place in determining practice, it can be used for the “small things” that are perceived as less important than, say, the more *hamur*, or strict, parts of *halakha*. “Does God really care if someone rips toilet paper or applies makeup on Shabbat?” they asked. Surprised, I took a mental step back and realized that I had taken for granted certain assumptions about my students' views of the *halakhic* system. Instead of continuing to discuss the article, we discussed how we viewed Judaism and *halakha*. In that

moment, the unidentified challenge I had been facing in my teaching was articulated: my students saw the beauty in *halakha* but had a harder time seeing it as the foundation of Judaism. Instead, they saw the goal of Judaism as more universal: to be a good person and connect to God. While they felt that usually *halakha* fits into that ideal, they also were honest about their feeling that for some people, this is not always the case. The conversation was extremely eye-opening for me, and ultimately was what drew me to write about this phenomenon. It also contains the key to the first approach in addressing the issue – acknowledging our assumptions.

In a conversation that I had recently with Simi Peters, a *midrash* expert who was my teacher while studying at Nishmat and the Matan Eshkolot Tanakh program, Simi mentioned that as educators we must be highly aware of our assumptions going into the classroom, and we need to articulate them as we teach. Not only that, but we also must be aware that our students similarly come in with assumptions that they take for granted. In our teaching, therefore, we need to be open and honest about our assumptions and invite our students to do the same. For example, the Torah discusses the theme of reward and punishment in a number of places. Most notably, on two separate occasions the Torah lists *berakhot*, blessings, and *kelalot*, curses, that will come upon the nation if they do or do not keep the Torah.⁴ These chapters provide the perfect springboard to discuss the value of reward and punishment with students. It is all too easy, however, to fail at creating an effective conversation if the educator is not aware of the starting point of her students. For a student who values individualism and autonomy of thought, confronting a system that provides punishments for acts that are not intuitively problematic, such as breaking Shabbat or other ritual laws, can be troubling. If I can choose to opt out of a system because I decide it is not my truth, the student may ask, how can that system hold me accountable for opting out?

It is at this point that acknowledging our assumptions becomes crucial both for the student and the teacher. In order to properly discuss values and goals of reward and punishment within the Torah, the teacher may want to offer, “I assume that the Torah is binding for all Jews equally. Additionally, I believe that humans have free will and therefore a person can choose to not keep the Torah and its laws. At the same time, once there is free will, there are punishments for choosing to act in a way that violates *halakha*.” Once this is established, a discussion can ensue.

In addition to transparency in the assumptions we have regarding reward and punishment, it is important for the teacher to ask her students why they struggle with the concept of reward and punishment. The students should be challenged to think about which of their teacher’s assumptions they are challenged by. Ideally,

the student will then begin to think about what justification she has for her instinctive beliefs.

This is just one example of many, and each educator will face different challenges to her assumptions throughout her teaching. The ability to articulate these assumptions, however, and to create space for our students to articulate their own, is crucial. When done properly, we create a classroom environment where we are able to be honest with our students, and our students feel comfortable being honest in return. At times the openness will simply function as a way for educators to fully convey the messages which we wish to teach. Other times it will create the springboard for meaningful discussions about values and how those values fit in both the Western world and the world of Torah.

APPROACH TWO: CULTIVATING A RELATIONSHIP

There is a second approach to the challenge of teaching towards a sense of obligation. This is an approach that was articulated to me by my high school principal and eleventh grade Tanakh teacher, Rivka Kahan.⁵ When speaking with Mrs. Kahan, I told her about my students and the challenges I was facing. Whereas I had acknowledged the different starting points in the conversations as a potential problem, Mrs. Kahan focused on the specific statement of my students and its implications. My students were willing to differentiate between the “small things” and the “big things.” Mrs. Kahan was quick to point out that it is easy to say that the small things matter less; however, when people are in a relationship, they suddenly become excited by doing those small things that normally would have been ignored. The same can be said for God. It is easy to be part of the *halakhic* system and create a ranking mechanism whereby certain *halakhot* receive less attention. However, if a person cultivates a relationship with God, then those seemingly small *halakhot* will become equally as important. The goal, therefore, is to help our students build a relationship with the *Ribono Shel Olam* (God of the Universe). Through building a relationship, the rest can follow.

As an educator, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to create a relationship between our students and Hashem. We can, however, act as a model and create a space in which such a relationship can develop.

Being a Model

There are a few ways to model a relationship with God. The first is to speak about it, to wear our passion on our sleeve, and be comfortable and confident ex-

pressing our excitement at connecting to God through His Torah. This is done through both the actual material taught and the lived experience outside of the text, like being careful to make *berakhot* (blessings) aloud or expressing gratitude towards others. These actions positively affect those around us – sometimes even more than words.

However, it is not enough to show our love for Judaism. We also need to be honest about our struggles and how we deal with not having the answers to all of our questions. There are parts of Torah, whether it be aspects of *halakha* or *mahshava* (Jewish thought), that raise many questions and struggles for *halakha*-abiding individuals. Allowing students to recognize that observant people, including and sometimes especially *talmidei hakhamim* (Torah scholars), have struggled with these questions for centuries is crucial for creating a foundation on which a relationship can be built.

In a speech given by Rav Soloveitchik to REITS alumni in 1975, the Rav spoke of a case regarding a woman who converted to Judaism, met a Jewish man and helped him reconnect to Judaism. At some point after they were engaged, the man discovered that he was a *kohen*, and realizing the implications, as it is forbidden for a *kohen* to marry a convert, he asked a *halakhic* question. The Rav remarked,

To say that the Halakha is not sensitive to problems and not responsive to the needs of the people is an outright falsehood. The Halakha is responsive to the needs of both the community and the individual. But the Halakha has its own orbit, moves at a certain definitive speed, has its own pattern of responding to a challenge, its own criteria and principles. And I come from a rabbinic house; it is called *beis harav*, the house into which I was born, and believe me, Rav Chaim used to try his best to be a *meikil* [lenient]. However, there were limits even to Rav Chaim's skills. When you reach the boundary line, it is all you can say: "I surrender to the will of the Almighty." There is a sadness in my heart, and I share in the suffering of the poor woman, who was instrumental in bringing him back to the fold, and then she had to lose him. She lost him; she walked away.⁶

Rav Soloveitchik understood that sometimes there is no *halakhic* answer to a situation, and the result is a terribly sad situation. It is not contradictory to see the truth of the Torah, feel connected to God, and to also struggle with certain laws or outcomes of living a lifestyle marked by obligation. As educators, we too must do our part to help our students see that nuance.

Creating Space

In helping our students develop a nuanced relationship with the *Ribono Shel Olam*, we must create a positive and welcoming space in our classroom. It is possible to be both firm about our religious non-negotiables and confident in the truth of the *halakhic* process and system, while also making space for and respecting the questions of our students. In a short video shown at an open house for the girls' day school Ma'ayanot in 2013, Mrs. Kahan spoke about her educational approach and explained, "when a student raises a question about an issue in life that is really on her mind, that's the point at which you close the book and just pursue that conversation."⁷ Such an approach allows students to feel comfortable and cared for. It is no longer simply a class where the teacher is interested in solely conveying material, but a space in which each student feels that her teacher cares about her religious and emotional well-being. Successfully achieving that warm and open space allows students to truly reflect on their values, explore the ideas they take for granted, and identify the struggles they have in their Judaism and relationship with God that they want to examine further.

CONCLUSION

As educators we are given the precious task of cultivating the minds and hearts of children as well as passing the *mesorah* (tradition) on to them. Such a task is extremely difficult and requires sensitivity and attention to the particular needs of each student. Additionally, Western society, specifically its championing of pluralism and the right of each individual to decide which truths speak to her, creates a unique challenge in successfully passing on the values of the *mesorah*. Through creating positive experiences for our students, offering them the space to explore and grow, as well as being extremely honest and upfront with ourselves and our students about the assumptions that we make both as unique individuals and religiously committed Jews, we can begin to tackle the challenge head on. The *mesorah* has been passed down from generation to generation for centuries, and hopefully by using these tools it will continue to be passed down for generations to come.

¹ See Deuteronomy 10:12-13 and Rashi on Numbers 15:41 s.v. *asher hotzeti etkhem*.

² Ed. Abraham R. Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav: Lessons in Jewish Thought Adapted from the Lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1993), 139-149.

³ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁴ See Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26.

⁵ Mrs. Kahan recently made *aliyah* and is now the director of the American post high-school program at Nishmat.

⁶ The full audio lecture can be found at https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/767722/Rabbi_Joseph_B_Soloveitchik/gerus_&_mesorah_-_part_1 and an unofficial transcript can be found at https://www.torahweb.org/torah/special/2019/ryds_rietsalumni.html#_ftn1.

⁷ The full video can be found at <https://vimeo.com/75818726> (4:06 minute mark).

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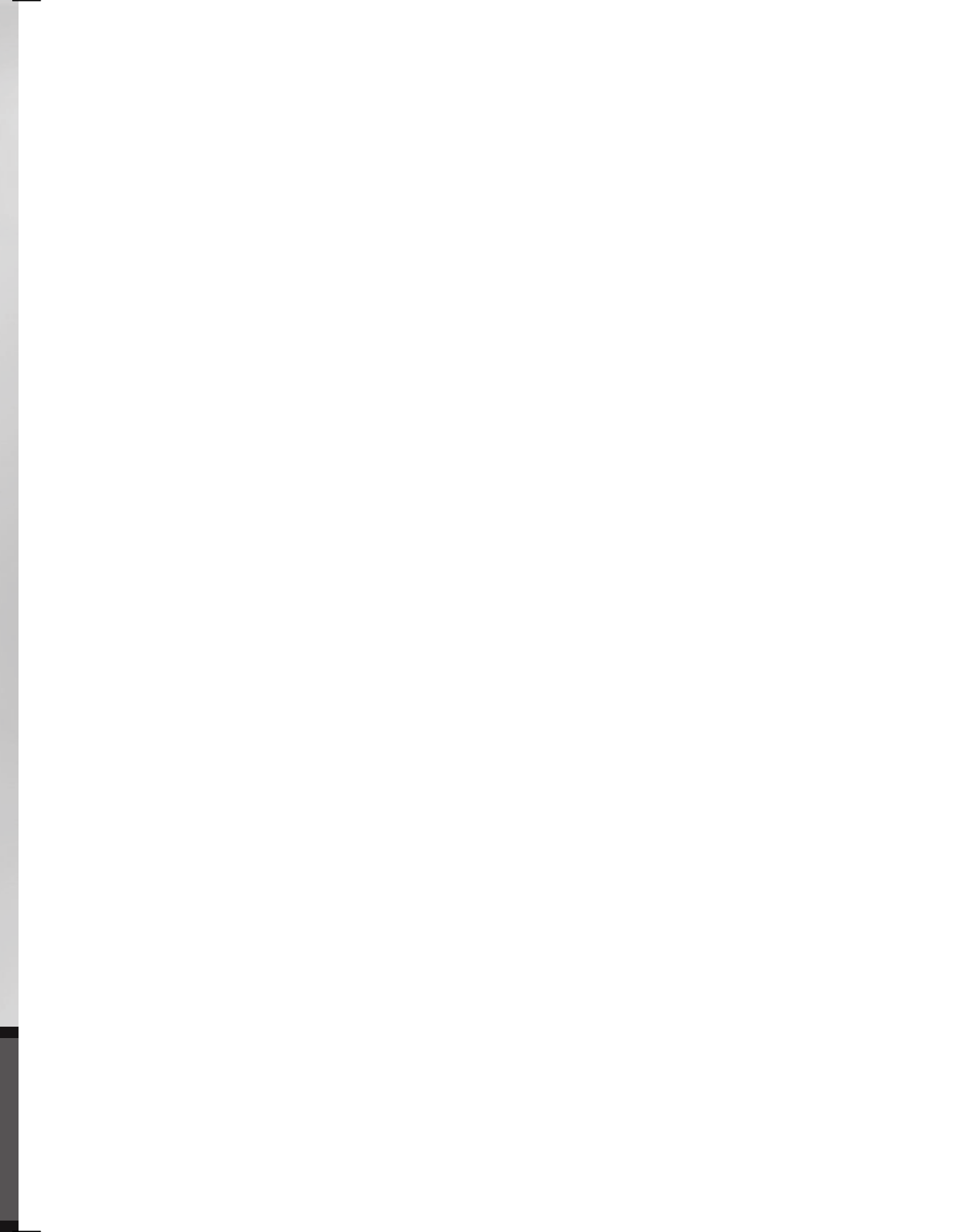
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Bi-Cultural Hebrew Academy of Connecticut is a recipient agency of United Jewish Federation of Greater Stamford, New Canaan and Darien, UJA-JCC of Greenwich, and Federation for Jewish Philanthropy of Upper Fairfield County.