

[Bridges Across the Divide](#)



As a child, in my formative years, I grew up on New York's Lower East Side. I attended Mesivta Tifereth Jerusalem and was privileged to know Rav Moshe Feinstein. My grandfather was the b'al koreh at the Yeshiva and a close friend of Rav Moshe, so I was blessed to have visited the Feinstein home on numerous occasions. Rav Moshe had a great influence on me. It was he who taught me how to interact with Jews of a wide range of observance, especially in the way he modeled Torah as an expression of love, patience, tolerance, and universal respect (b'sever panim yafot).

I used to watch Rav Moshe daven, for he sat just a few rows ahead of me in shul. His discipline was amazing. Between each aliya of the Keriat haTorah, he would lift a book of mishnayot and go through the text, not wasting a moment's time to study. While this strict discipline was regular practice for Rav Moshe, he would override it and interrupt his study when the virtue of kindness was necessary. His spontaneous hessed was strikingly incorporated within his discipline, so it was evident that this hessed was a well thought out, integrated trait that came from his perception that this is what Torah required, and this surpassed everything else.

I vividly remember when on one Shabbat morning, during Keriat haTorah, an elderly woman with a handbag and purse barged into the shul's Bet haMidrash men's section, and cried out, "I must speak to Rav Moshe." The kehillah was in a bit of a shock, and several men rose up to escort the lady out of the synagogue. But before they could do so, Rav Moshe ran over to her and asked what was wrong. She said that her husband was on his death bed in the hospital, and he wanted to speak to him before he died. Without a moment's hesitation, Rav Moshe threw on his coat and ran out of shul with the lady. From all appearances she was not an observant Jew; she was carrying a purse on Shabbat, and ignoring the prohibition of entering the men's section and breaching the mehitsa. Rav Moshe's essence was hessed, and being interrupted even in Torah study, or not fulfilling the obligation of hearing the Torah reading was secondary to an act of kindness and respect toward this woman. It did not matter in the least whether she was observant or not. This was his Torah mandate.

Another vivid memory was the way he interacted with the young children in the Synagogue. My friends and I were a bit rude and rowdy during Keriat haTorah. Many of the congregants unsuccessfully tried to silence us during the Torah reading, but our passion to discuss the baseball scores outweighed our desire to hear every word of the Torah reading. Rav Moshe never chastised us, and often smiled warmly at me. Reflecting on it now, I realize that he understood how strongly disposed to sports fifth-grade students were, more keenly felt by us than our obligation to keep decorum, not to disturb others and listen to the Torah reading. I was always embarrassed about the noise level, but the far greater imprint was the impression that I culled that treating others with love and respect was Judaism's supreme value.

As I grew older, I was drawn to the many teachings in our tradition that supported my earliest

experience with this Gadol haDor. I was instantly drawn to the teachings in the Gemara and Midrash that emphasized the notion of *Imitatio Dei*, “Just as God is loving and patient, so must we act with these qualities in this world.” As Ben Azzai says (J.T. Nedarim 9:4), the most important verse in the Torah is that every human being is created in the image of God (Bereishith 5:1), and thus must be treated thusly, as the Mishna in Sanhedrin (4:5) affirms. (A human being is created alone, to teach us that every human being has absolute value, embodies uniqueness, and thus deserves to be treated with equality and respect as befitting one who is created in the image of God.) This was a continuation of what we began learning as children about the laws of damages/nezikin in our earliest exposure to Gemara; the main emphasis was always on how we were to treat other human beings and their property, which included even the property of our enemies.

Later on I discovered the Mussar movement, and R. Yisrael Salanter who said, “The Torah came to create a Mensch; the more human you are, the more Jewish you are.” He captured a most profound dictum that always stayed with me, “Rather than worry about another person’s spiritual level and your own physical needs, worry about your own spiritual level and another person’s physical needs.” (Dov Katz, *T’nuat Hamussar*, p. 304). This is exactly what I observed in Rav Moshe. As I listened to Mussar lectures and learned Torah, I became convinced in my heart that the prime teaching of the Torah is “*olam hessed yibaneh*,” the world was created for the sake of the kindness we are able to bestow upon others. As the quaint Hassidic teaching captures it, the Torah begins with a bet and ends with a lamed; lamed bet spells lev, heart, and thus the whole Torah is a heart book, opening our hearts to be kind to others, who are created in the image of God.

These teachings were supported by a whole slew of Torah teachings from various sources. Famously, we learn that among the reasons for the destruction of the Second Temple, the Talmud states, that the Jews did not know how to rebuke each other lovingly, nor did they know how to accept rebuke (Vayikra 19:17-18); moreover, the Talmud (Yoma 9b) teaches that the destruction of the second Bet haMikdash was due to baseless hatred of one Jew toward another. Rav Abraham Isaac Kook says that the third Temple will be built only through the antidote, “baseless love toward our fellow Jew.” Rav Moshe added an important principle in our interaction with those whom we perceive “as in error,” for he placed those in our contemporary generation who do not observe the mitzvot in the category of *tinok sheNishba*—they simply have not been educated religiously; they are not willful “sinners.” Thus, the antidote is to educate them with a welcoming presence, and with passion for the beauty of Torah. As the Talmud says, we are to “hate the sin, but not the sinner” (Berakhot 10a).

The Hafetz Hayyim urges us not to say anything bad about our fellow Jew, to be flowing with loving words toward others. That would even apply to governments and political discussions, where we tend to demonize the other. This is not the way of *Torat Hessed*. Furthermore, it is taught that the Jewish people were worthy to receive the Torah at Mt. Sinai because they were in a state of harmony, “And they encamped as one in front of the mountain” (Shemoth 19:2). It is only when a spirit of love emanates from us that we are worthy of the highest blessing, and it is in this spirit that we truly carry out the mandate of the Torah. The Maharsha, at the end of *Yebamoth*, similarly states that any halakha that does not lead to peace and harmony is questionable in its veracity, quoting the verse: “Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace” (Mishlei 3:17).

The Kabbalists suggest that it is incumbent to include sinners as well as the righteous in our communities in order for Kelal Yisrael to reach its Messianic destiny of growth and wholeness. For it is only in the encounter with darkness that we grow fully; only when we face the darkness within and without do we have a chance to overcome obstacles and complacency which inhibit growth. Any closed system that attempts to remain insulated and pure reaches a state of entropy, self-righteousness, and blindness to its own inner failings. It took a Yitro, an outsider, to awaken Moshe

to some flaws within his community and the way in which he was leading it. A closed community reaches a state of entropy, and misses the opportunity for growth that an open system, which welcomes outsiders, experiences.

Thus the Kabbalists explain why the ketoret (incense) offering includes a putrid smelling spice, called helbena, with all the other sweet-smelling spices. The letter het of the helbena symbolizes hoshekh (darkness), and het (sinfulness) that is necessary in a holistic community promoting growth, and the mystics urge us to remember that the letter het includes the important concept that “hasdei Hashem kee lo tamnu,” the kindness of the Lord never ceases, and includes the kindness to sinners and those who are in the “dark.” Moreover, each of us needs to face the shadow, the darkness within ourselves as well as in the other, the outsider, in order to achieve full growth, the fulfillment of our destiny, and the actualization of wholeness.

The Talmud suggests the same idea when it states that any minyan that does not include a sinner is not a successful prayer gathering. It is lacking in loving-kindness through its insulation, and cannot reach the heights of a group that is engaged in the potentially transformative struggle with its shadow. We learn this intimately from King David, who repents from his sins and is lauded for his growth. As the Gemara states, “A perfect tsadik cannot measure up to one who has done teshuvah” (Berakhot 34b). And the very term for a member of the Jewish people, an Israelite, is one who struggles, who wrestles with God. Remember, it is always easier to love one who is like you; but the challenge is to also learn to love difference. Hence, it is Ben Azzai’s view, suggesting a universal verse that is the most important verse in the Torah and is even preferable to Rabbi Akiva’s more limited view that “Loving your neighbor as yourself” (which suggests only your neighbor) is the most important. Of course, this does not obviate the importance of loving those who are like us, a particularistic demand; we must always begin with ourselves. However, the goal is to build on that and reach out to those who are different from us as well. Indeed, this is the “messianic consciousness” found throughout the tradition where we reach the perception that all of us are children of God, all distinct aspects of the total unity, and our task is to act to bring this about, by acting with hessed and the 13 attributes of God. But the journey toward the messianic era necessitates the facing of dualities along the way, in order to achieve a conscious unity. As the Sefat Emet says at the end of Vayhi, our world is not a world of unity and truth, but a world of duality that necessitates faith; in a world where we journey toward truth, facing the darkness and extracting the light, we strengthen our faith in the face of uncertainty, until we reach our dying days and enter the world of truth. At that point there is no more growth, there is certainty.

Growth comes about in facing the darkness that develops and necessitates faith along the journey.

So, armed with the blessed example of Rav Moshe, and the inspirational teachings of the Torah, I felt within that part of my challenge and destiny in life would be to engage with peers and contemporaries who had not had the same exposure to Torah that I did. And my first experience with working with Jews of other denominations was when I worked with Jacob Birnbaum and others for SSSJ (Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry). This cause involved the plight of thousands of Soviet Jews, and the success of its efforts depended on our ability to engage as large a group of student activists possible. That meant their denominational affiliations were irrelevant. Even though for me, SSSJ started out in the dorms of Yeshiva University with Jacob’s prophetic visits and exhortations, it soon began to involve students from the Jewish Theological Seminary and other schools. United by a common cause, we each gained greater respect for, as well as greater understanding of both the differences and the similarities in our Jewish practice. The common goal for us all was a cause that was important to the Jewish people. Also at that time, Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik allowed YU students to March in protest for the cause of those suffering in Biafra. This permitted us to do our work with the confidence that we were in no way compromising any halakhic dicta; on the contrary, we were participating in activities that promoted peace among Jews, and contributed to the

elevation of justice in the world.

Some time after that, when I was in the semikha program at YU, students from JTS called our dorm and asked if some students would be interested in co-creating a strategic plan with them. The primary goal was to influence the Jewish Federation to alter its budget prioritization in a way that would include more funds for Soviet Jewry and Jewish education. They asked for a student representative to participate in regular meetings, with the intent of being present at the annual General Assembly meeting in Boston. The vision was for us to mix with the delegates and explain to them that the current Federation budgetary allocations neglected the dire crisis prevalent in the life of Soviet Jews, and also ignored the escalating cost of Jewish education that needed to be supported in a greater way by the Jewish community's largest resource.

What we learned from our experience at the G.A. was that funds were raised through local Federations which then bestowed them upon their local communities; so we needed to go back to New York, and convince the New York Federation to reprioritize. So a group of students from various rabbinical schools in New York began meeting on a bi-monthly basis to initiate a dialogue with Federation. This led to a planned protest at the Federation building, because our dialogue did not lead to the results that we had sought. In the process, I learned to understand the sincerity and the idealistic principles of fellow Jews who came from different backgrounds than I did, who held different philosophical beliefs than my own, exquisite fellow Jews who cared about the future of the Jewish people and were willing to sacrifice many days and nights to improve the educational quality of the Jewish community, to take risks in order to ameliorate the plight of Soviet Jews robbed of their heritage in the Soviet Union. Here I was touched by the teaching of the Kotzker Rebbe, "Any way can be a way, as long as you MAKE it a way."

When I graduated the semikha program at YU and received an MSW from YU's Wurzweiler School of Social Work, my first job was as Hillel Director at MIT. The task of the Hillel Director was (and still is) to engage with the wide variety of Jewish students and faculty who make up the university community. The challenge was to bring tolerance and respect to the various members and unique practices of different communities of Jews, while maintaining one's own principles, convictions, and practices. As long as one respects oneself, has a desire to share what she or he knows in Torah, and is willing to be respectfully open to the beliefs and practices of others, a natural interaction takes place where people are learning from each other, and stereotypes and fears are attenuated. It is a wonderful opportunity to promote unity within the Jewish people while acknowledging the diversity of our multi-faceted community. Just as the 12 tribes lived under their own flags, but were committed to the welfare of the entire community and the glory of God, Hillel honors the very different backgrounds of the groups of students attending the university while providing them with Jewish education and communal ritual services throughout their stay at the university.

There are, of course, many challenges facing an observant Jew who engages with modern, humanistic, and secular Jewish students. The main requirement for successful connection, though, is the ability to truly listen, to understand the other's doubts, and to respect and honor each person and group with whom one is interacting. As a Hillel Director and an ordained Orthodox rabbi, I attempted to serve and unite a Jewish community by promoting respect among the different groups and members while honoring the different practices of each tradition. One major obstacle for non-Orthodox students entering an Orthodox setting (if they chose to daven with an Orthodox minyan) is the lack of familiarity with traditional practices and customs, and also with the Hebrew language, all of which makes newcomers feel like inadequate beginners.

Fortunately, most of my students had strong memories and a loving connection to the way of worship with which they were raised. This early path was their sincere and connective way to relating to God and Jewish practice and their earliest memories made a deep imprint on their souls.

At that point, I could either attempt to encourage them to stick with and try to master this new form of service, which was alien to them, or encourage their sincere, powerful experience in their familiar prayer mode, and appreciate the depth of their service. I chose the latter, without judgment (following the dictums of R. Yisrael Salanter and the Kotzker) and expanded my appreciation of the depth of the different traditions within Judaism. I found that once they had the choice to say “no” to something they were not comfortable with and did not feel coerced in any way, they were more comfortable in choosing a new form of prayer service if they wanted to. Thus each of the denominational services was given utmost respect, without any attempt to make any group or individual fit into the proscribed halakhic norm.

Another major challenge was engaging with students who did not accept the traditional belief in Divine Providence, as a result of having experienced in their own lives, and in recent history, the “eclipse of God” (Hester Panim), and they could not overcome this authentic feeling. The contemporary experience of the prevalence of evil and injustice in the world, not only between human beings, but also in the natural world of natural disasters, earthquakes, tsunamis, famines, tornadoes, and so forth, made them wonder about the lack of God’s intervention in the world. Moreover, they saw no apparent distinction in this world being made between people who kept the commandments and behaved ethically and those who did not.

In this area, I made philosophical attempts to expose students to the Jewish classical interpreters and some modern theologians. For example, ideas such as those contained in Paul Tillich’s “Faith and Doubt,” the teaching of the Sefat Emet to proceed even with doubt, because doubt is inherent in encountering the “Great Mystery” from a rational perspective, and Isaiah Leibowitz’s approach to just do the mitzvah without having to understand the intellectual meaning of the deed, for through the deed itself comes the connection. Although the Rambam requires 13 certain categories of belief in order to be acceptable within the boundaries of tradition, and although the Vilna Gaon asserts that people sin only after they wish to follow their impulses and then rationalize their behavior, I found, on the contrary, that many students genuinely struggled with belief and faith as an obstacle to taking on a traditional lifestyle. They had sincere intellectual doubts and could not take the “leap of faith.” But they were not opposed to participating in the communal experience, engaging in the rituals comfortably, and feeling some spark of connection to their soul as a result.

Despite this approach, the battle was a losing one; some students were won over by intellectual persuasion and contact, but the majority remained skeptical of the traditional worldview found in mainstream Orthodoxy. The most effective way of engaging with all students was to embrace them with love and acceptance, acknowledging their doubts, and inviting them in for practical celebratory rituals such as holy days and Shabbat. Having them experience the warmth of each particular denominational community allowed them to become more accustomed to its practices, despite their reservations about its belief system. But the impact of the “spread of Amalek,” how evil triumphs in the world, was a very powerful catalyst to their doubts. In gematria, Amalek (240) equals Safek (doubt, also 240), and when evil triumphs in the world, the glory of God is reduced, and faith impaired.

There were certain areas that became very stressful for students and faculty to accept when they read the Torah literally, without the inclusion of Oral traditions and commentaries. One prevalent difficulty for them was the literal description of God’s behavior, especially God’s jealousy and retaliation for the Israelites’ not keeping the commandments. They also had challenges with biblical criticism, differentiations between the rights of men and women, attitudes and statements toward gentiles and homosexuals, and so forth. The basic perception of the modern world as evil did not fit into their psychic framework either, having been raised in a post-enlightenment open society and having imbibed the cultural values of humanism, the lure of freedom and choice, materialism, hedonism, and secularism. They sometimes perceived Orthodox Judaism as a cult—tribal,

fundamentalist, insular, and not welcoming to outsiders.

I think that this was partially a result of a lack of confidence on their part, not feeling competent because of their ignorance of tradition, so they projected some of their feelings of inadequacy in a hostile fashion toward outsiders. They believed they were being devalued, when in actuality it was their own feeling of inferiority that was creating anxiety, and they dealt with it by blaming those around them who were more learned.

So the antidote to this reaction was to lovingly educate in the depth and beauty of Torah, to respond non-judgmentally to their doubts, and to transparently reveal that I as an authority figure had questions as well (the question is often more important than the answer and can lead to greater depth, according to the Kotzker). But most important of all, it was the working to make our community welcoming, respectful, and warm toward those less religiously educated that drew people in—those individuals from all denominations as well as those not affiliated with Jewish life at home. Furthermore, we worked to make sure that our whole educational staff was comfortable in accepting that beliefs and doubts of others are part of the human condition in the modern world, and to allow for their honesty, to accept and not judge. The dictum of allowing God to be the Judge, and the staff to be welcomers and educators, was our prime guiding principle.

Some of our luminaries, such as the Mei Hashiloah (“The Ishbitzer”) have utilized the concept of “eit la’asot lashem, heifeiru et toratekha” (Psalm 119:126), to expand boundaries in certain areas so as to create openings for those who cannot make full commitments to an observant, Orthodox way of life, and to allow for different philosophical beliefs, even while adhering to many traditions. Following this path our entire Hillel staff attempted to translate the elevated values of Judaism into a modern context, showing how Judaism fits into many of the best values of Western society, and yet rejects some of the excesses that a narcissistic and materialistic culture embodies. An example would be clarifying for some students the misperception that Judaism considers wealth itself to be inherently evil, and articulating how Judaism actually teaches that it is how you utilize your blessing of wealth in a just and generous way that matters. A helpful idea to some students who noticed attitudes in tradition that were at odds with their beliefs was Rav Kook’s statement that along our journey through history as a result of oppression and hostility from others, Jews became reactive and fearful at times, and attitudes crept into the tradition, “jagged cliffs,” that would be removed as we approach the messianic era, but they were not inherent to the core of Judaism. It was thinkers such as R. Emanuel Rackman, R. Eliezer Berkovitz, R. David Hartman, R. Yitz Greenberg, R. Shlomo Riskin, R. Saul Berman, Rav Kook, Martin Buber, and A.J. Heschel, to name a few, that appealed to their modern consciousness.

Although both study and practice were essential, I found that the experiential dimension of Shabbat and the holy days left a far greater imprint than learning about them as “concepts.” Even if students began to take on practices for social reasons, they began to slowly develop an appreciation of the deep spiritual foundation of Judaism.

After some years at MIT Hillel and a year at Princeton Hillel, then completing my studies in the doctoral program at Columbia University School of Social Work, my family moved to Los Angeles so that I could accept a teaching position at USC School of Social Work. In 2000, I received a PhD from Pacifica Graduate Institute in Depth Psychology/Mythology.

At that time a new Rabbinical/Chaplaincy/Cantorial school called the Academy for Jewish Religion, California was being established in Los Angeles. I was asked to join the endeavor, and take on a leadership role. The pioneering concept of this seminary was not to identify with one specific denomination, but to form a faculty with clergy and academicians from Orthodox and non-Orthodox backgrounds. The school would teach Judaic courses found in the denominational seminaries, and add some courses in Hassidut, Mussar, and Pastoral Counseling, with the goal of promoting psycho/spiritual growth in the students. AJRCA’s founders felt that allegiance to the denominations

had become more important than the welfare of the Jewish people as a whole; it was becoming widely known that the majority of the Jewish community was not affiliated with any of the denominations. There was a strong desire on the part of mature rabbinical students at existing seminaries for greater cultivation of spirituality to be partnered with an academic curriculum. The charge in establishing AJRCA was to integrate a group of disparate students, honor their individuality, and unite them in a common vision of Jewish peoplehood, love of Torah, and the depth and breadth of great rabbinic teachers throughout the generations. The challenges: Could the halakhic needs of the Orthodox students be satisfied in a mixed group of individuals from different backgrounds with different levels of education and practices? Would the non-Orthodox students feel comfortable with more traditional students? We felt it would be possible for the classes to succeed, but the major challenge was for the form of the prayer services. We settled on a formula, that there would be different styles of services, and that Orthodox students would pray privately or with a traditional minyan, if they so chose, and the non-Orthodox students would pray in mixed services, and everyone would respect the needs and integrity of those who had different practices. Quite miraculously, through this idealistic vision, a faculty of Orthodox and non-Orthodox teachers emerged who respected each other, got along with each other, and were moved in their souls to educate and train a group of idealistic students to the knowledge that touched their souls. The school attracted more students than we could have imagined, and within just 10 years (a remarkably swift achievement) was granted accreditation by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), which attested to the quality education that the students received. As the Mishna states: "Every assembly that is dedicated to the sake of heaven will have an enduring effect"(Avot 4:11).

Of course, at first, different segments of each of the denominations directed strong criticism toward this "transdenominational" endeavor. These objections manifested fears on the part of each side that are rarely dealt with. The Orthodox worried that contact with the other, or knowledge of the other, might create flexibility within, which could lead to too great a compromise and loss of tradition. The non-Orthodox worried that contact might expose insecurities and anxieties about legitimacy. It became clear that part of the problem was that when groups only talk to themselves, and exclude the other, prejudices and stereotypes grow rather than diminish. Although each side preached love of the other, the behavior of each side did not always reach this ideal. Part of the challenge became how to disagree with the other and still see him or her as human.

The rigidity that was manifest on each side stemmed from fear, from a feeling of weakness rather than strength. I suggested that if each side would look at its own failings, rather than blaming the other, the other side would be disarmed and a fruitful dialogue could begin. There would evolve an appreciation of the positive contributions of each of the different communities. Of course, this would mean some legitimization of the other, a step heretofore opposed by some, but each side would have to yield something, without compromising integrity, or bear the brunt of the continuing schism that is certainly harmful to Kelal Yisrael. I felt that if we had courage, and proceeded carefully, we would find the way with God's help. As the Mishna in Avot states, "It is not for us to complete the work, but neither are we free to desist from beginning it"(Avot 2:16). So we began this endeavor, and every year since then, thank God, AJRCA has graduated rabbis, cantors, and chaplains who have influenced many communities and educated many Jews who would not have otherwise been reached. What has made this possible is the deep feeling of responsibility for fellow Jews these students carried, embodied in their incredible gifts of relational hessed, the school's emphasis on values of respect for each human being created in the image of God, and the students' confidence in the truth and beauty of Torah.

This experience of respecting difference while maintaining one's own values, and working together on projects that affect the welfare and unity of the Jewish people, while promoting the elevation of

peace and justice in the world, led AJRCA to join in a new project in 2011 that would expand our graduates' potential to be effective clergy leaders in the twenty-first century. We joined in the founding of Claremont Lincoln University, the first graduate program to offer courses to students in different seminaries interested in studying world religions, in addition to their own, so they could be better prepared to understand other religions, rather than living with stereotypes, or relying on the limited perspectives that journalistic expositions promote. The idea was that each seminary, Jewish (AJRCA), Christian (Claremont School of Theology), and Islamic (Islamic Center of Southern California), would train its students in their own religious traditions within their full curricula, but that students would have the additional opportunity to take courses in other religions as well, leading to a master's degree in Interfaith Studies. There would also be some social action projects as part of the curriculum, and students and faculty would have the opportunity to develop trust and friendships with others who were interested in the same ideal of promoting peace and justice in the outer society, and knowledge of the other, so they would feel more comfortable in their desire to engage in interfaith work that is meaningful and that fits into the value framework of their traditions. The program started out with the three Abrahamic religions, and has now expanded to include courses in Eastern and Dharmic religions as well.

Since the world has become so interdependent in the twenty-first century, it seems necessary to educate ourselves to world religions, that may have different cultural and historical frameworks, different forms of worship, but agree on the fundamental teaching of all religions, the golden rule, to treat others with respect and kindness, just as they would like to be treated.

All these institutions and projects, Hillel, AJRCA, and Claremont Lincoln University (CLU), continue to grow as they meet an important need in a new world of intercommunication and encounters with others. If we each remain true to our principles, while remaining respectful of the unique, distinctive practices of others all aiming toward the same goal of a peaceful, just, "messianic" era, we will all be the better for it, and the spirit of God will become manifest palpably as our Sages predict at the "end of the days." May that day come soon, as we continue to build bridges across the divide.

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