Beyond the Shore: Torah through a Western Lens

View PDF

Alex Behar is a 23-year-old graduate of Yeshiva University. Born and raised in the Sephardic community of Seattle, he plans to pursue a PhD in clinical neuropsychology. This article appears in issue 24 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

June 26th, 2015, marked the triumph of the LGBT community over political detractors in a drawn-out battle for social liberty. This victory was ushered in by what is arguably one of the most consequential decisions of social reform since the Civil Rights Act of 1964. On June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Constitutional right to same-sex marriage. As a 23-year-old observant Jew living in the United States, this ruling has deep ideological implications. A profound paradigmatic conflict has risen to the surface. Torn between two opposing philosophical perspectives, I have become the generational victim of a cognitive dissonance that I cannot simply slough off, and in the absence of an existential ecdysis, I am forced to confront the discord of my beliefs.

As a member of the global community, I support the inherent human right of two consenting adults to concretize a union based on mutual love, unfettered by restrictions imposed by political, legislative, or religious institutions. However, as a member of the observant Jewish community, I fundamentally believe in the restriction of this union, purely on the basis of my acceptance of the didactic value of the Torah. I suspect I am not alone in experiencing this clash of cultural perspectives. This is a dilemma that affects many individuals in the Jewish community; individuals who are caught at the cusp of two conflicting moral codes; one delivered from the firm hands of tradition, and the other by the soft voice of modern culture. This dissonance is by no means a novel phenomenon. In fact, it is a struggle that we as Jews have historically faced throughout the

millennia. It involves the challenge of finding equilibrium between modernity and tradition, between progressivism and halakha.

The very perpetuity of this challenge is a testament to our inability to fully and finally address it. Can the observant Jewish community once and for all reconcile modern-day values with its traditional moral standards? How can we, as a constantly evolving Jewish nation, synthesize the immutable words of our sages with the unrelenting force of social reform? In recent years, it seems the chasm between conventional religious wisdom and modern ideology has expanded into a yawning crevasse. This makes the effort to justify traditional Torah values in an ever-changing Western society increasingly difficult. Now, more than ever, it is important that we hold our beliefs at arm's length and assess them with all the intellectual honesty and objectivity that our age-old value system deserves.

The rift between modern-day values and traditional Jewish beliefs might be far greater than we tend to think. The problem is exemplified by a certain mentality that many modern Jews have adopted. This "pseudo-modernist" worldview is one of shortsightedness that ignores the fundamental issues inherent in seeking harmony between modern and traditional beliefs. In what seems like a desperate effort to find favor in the public eye, pseudo-modernists subscribe to simplistic, short-term solutions to the problem of philosophical dissonance and often skirt tremendous ideological issues that deserve much deeper attention than they are given.

One example of this evasive approach to reconciling philosophical discord pertains to the aforementioned ruling in favor of same-sex marriage. The Supreme Court's decision to sanction same-sex marriage under the Constitution spurred a great deal of unrest within the more right-leaning national community. In an effort to quell this vexation, some Jewish thinkers have championed a modern, and somewhat disingenuous, interpretation of the biblical restriction against homosexuality.

The interpretation to which I refer is based on the existence of two different types of biblical commandments: hukim and mishpatim. Mishpatim are rational laws that are based on clear moral or practical reasoning. These laws include refraining from stealing, murder, and other antisocial acts. Hukim, on the other hand, are laws that transcend rationality. The genealogy of hukim remains hidden from human understanding.[1] Classic examples of hukim are the laws pertaining to the red heifer (parah adumah) and dietary laws (kashrut). It has recently been suggested that the prohibition against homosexuality is mentioned in the Torah as a hok (singular form of hukim), i.e., to be viewed as a law for which there is no

clear moral reasoning presented in the Torah. However, even a cursory glance at the placement and presentation of the Torah prohibition against homosexuality reveals that it is likely not intended to be a hok. It is included among laws against incest, bestiality, and adultery, all of which seem to have clear moral implications. In fact, the inclusion of homosexuality among other capital offenses speaks directly to its status as a morally reprehensible act according to Jewish law. It is a tremendous feat of intellectual self-deception to claim that the Torah presents the restriction against homosexuality as a hok. This type of elusive rhetoric in religious apologetics is found all too frequently today, and it is representative of the disingenuous form of modernism mentioned above.[2]

Pseudo-modernists hope that these tenuous resolutions will endear the disenfranchised and stave off criticisms against traditional Judaism until, one day, Torah values find their home at the forefront of moral philosophy. It is a perspective that touts progressive thinking and denies deeply rooted fundamentalism. Its adherents blindly follow the crowd of progressive thinkers, while holding a philosophical compass that is pointing in the opposite direction. These individuals ignore the fact that, if their position was followed to its logical conclusion, he or she would be exposed for the traditionalist ideologue that popular culture so vehemently condemns. There will inevitably be a point at which the philosophical synthesis they boast will not be sustainable, and a deep divergence will emerge.

So where is this point of divergence? Let us begin with what is possibly the most fundamental divergence, which is political. I do not mean right-wing versus left-wing or liberal versus conservative; these views are far too reductionist (and oversimplify political issues that are vastly more complex than either side acknowledges). Rather, I am asking whether we, as observant Jews, believe in a Constitutional democracy or a biblical theocracy? Furthermore, is the biblical theocracy of the Torah one that is in line with the modern-day values held by many observant Jews? To further explore this question, let us consider a few other examples of philosophical dissonance between Torah and modern values. In order to do so, it may be worthwhile to elucidate the implications of a Messianic age according to Jewish tradition.

A quintessential tenet of Judaism is a belief in the coming of the Messiah. So essential is this belief, in fact, that it is included among the Thirteen Principles of Faith outlined by the Rambam (Maimonides). The relevance of a Messianic age to our conversation is in its far-reaching political implications and its focus, according to Maimonides and many other commentaries, on a restoration of the

full scope of Torah observance (much of which is not currently applicable, in the absence of a Temple in Jerusalem and a theocratic Torah-based dominion in Israel). According to many of our sages, the time of Messiah will be an era that ushers in enlightenment, peace, and a restoration of Torah governance to the world. Based on this view, the reinstatement of Torah law is of cardinal importance to the culmination of the Messianic age. The Rambam writes in chapter eleven of Hilkhot Melakhim in his Mishneh Torah,

The Messianic King will arise in the future and restore the Davidic Kingdom to its former state and original sovereignty. He will build the Sanctuary and gather the dispersed of Israel. All the laws will be re-instituted in his days as they had been before; sacrifices will be offered, and the Sabbatical years and Jubilee years will be observed fully as ordained by the Torah.[3]

In the abstract, and in our time, there is little need to acknowledge the disparity or dissonance between our Messianic vision and contemporary reality. A modern, observant Jew can comfortably believe in a Messianic time and maintain his or her current conceptions of Western morality and democracy—that is until the time of the Messiah actually arrives. The real clash arises in exploring the implications of re-installing a Torah government in the state of Israel and in the world. A Torah-based government is essentially theocratic. The laws have been divinely ordained and are upheld by the Sanhedrin, who are the mandated legal body and earthly arbiters of divine law. This means that observant Jews are fundamentally theocratic, as well. If we explore the various laws of a Torah-based theocracy, we begin to run into a series of ideological and legal principles that seem patently undemocratic and clash with our modern conceptions of morality and social justice.

Let us take, for instance, the laws of Shabbat observance. Many observant Jews relish learning the intricacies and complexities of the laws pertaining to Shabbat. However, seldom do we consider the talmudic law in any realm other than the abstract. I introduced the idea of a Messianic age to illustrate that we cannot simply look at these laws in the abstract, since we as a Jewish community are ultimately expected to reestablish Torah law in the time of the Messiah. Let’s compare the more comprehensive dictates of the Torah to our modern-day values and think critically about what we believe. In Jewish law, as transmitted by the Torah and elaborated upon in talmudic texts, the desecration of Shabbat is punishable by death. Many modern-day rabbis reassure us that the circumstances under which one might receive the death penalty upon breaking Shabbat are very limited. In fact, there is a discussion in the Talmud regarding the frequency of

capital punishment in general, stating that a Sanhedrin that carried out even one death penalty in seven or 70 years, depending on the opinion, was considered “a bloody Sanhedrin.”[4]

This is certainly reassuring, assuming the death penalty is a legitimate reaction to the desecration of Shabbat. But why assume that the death penalty is a justifiable response to the violation of Shabbat at all? Is it reasonable to believe that such a legal stipulation should be reinstated, even if under such rarely occurring circumstances? The rarity of such a penalty perhaps minimizes, but does not eliminate, the issue. Even the restrictions on the application of capital punishment imposed by the rabbis fall short of reconciling the underlying contradiction with modern social norms. This legal stipulation raises a whole catalogue of questions. Would a re-instituted Sanhedrin have the power to further attenuate the severity of such a punishment in response to Shabbat, if not abolish it altogether, or is this an inexorable component of halakhic legislation? How are we expected to take this law, which is stated explicitly in the Torah, and understand it through the lens of a modern Constitutional Democracy and Western moral standards? And, most importantly, could we ever conceive of a time in the future in which this law is reinstated? By today’s standards, this law would be considered draconian and unconscionable. To punish someone who has broken Shabbat by death is a radical departure from our modern-day conception of moral thinking.

This is not the only example of unsettling applications of capital punishment under biblical Jewish law. Another classic example of a violation of the Torah for which one is expected to receive the death penalty is idolatry. In theory, this means that a Jew under a Torah inspired government who experiences a religious transformation and is convinced of the legitimacy of a human god, for instance, is liable to receive the death penalty under certain legal circumstances. Again, I reiterate that the rabbinic authorities of the Mishnah seemed resistant to the very notion of capital punishment as a whole. For this reason, the rabbis of the Mishnah went to great lengths to limit the application of capital punishment, or believed that the law was intended to be interpreted quite differently than it is presented in the text. There are a number of barriers placed by our sages in tractate Sanhedrin between the applicable crime and the execution of capital punishment. First, there have to be two witnesses, who need to fit a very specific legal criteria of competence and objectivity (which happens to include being a male, another point of contention with modern-day beliefs). They need to have warned the guilty party of the consequences of committing the crime, and the guilty party must have committed the offense immediately following the warning.[5] Again, despite the restrictive parameters placed on the practice of

capital punishment, the death penalty imposed by the Torah seems grossly disproportionate to the offense.

We do not need to envisage a Messianic age in order to bring light to the chasm between modern-day beliefs and Torah values. There are many other examples in the Torah of divine mandates and laws that directly conflict with egalitarian and humanistic ideals advanced in Western society. One such example comes from Parashat Matot with regard to vows taken by women. The Parashah discusses the legality of vows and oaths in general, as well as the circumstances under which a vow may be annulled. Oaths taken by a woman are expressly limited to the authority of the men in her immediate life. While a woman retains the right to make a vow, it is at the discretion of her husband or father whether the oath will be legally effective. Over the years I have heard many attempts to rationalize what seems to be patent sexism in the Torah and elsewhere in Judaic literature. However, there is clearly an issue of denying a basic human right based on gender alone.

It seems that an air of misogyny looms over the entire narrative of the Torah, specifically the legal discussions therein. From the sexuality of a woman to her marital status, the Torah often contextualizes women within the parameters of property rights. In fact, one of the Asseret haDiberot, or Ten Commandments, is specifically addressed to men in stating that they may not covet their neighbor's house, wife, manservant, maidservant, ox, donkey, or any other of the neighbor’s belongings.[6] Note the striking placement of the neighbor’s wife after the house in a list of his property. The fact that the manservant is also listed as property does not detract from the patent androcentricity of this excerpt. Even the use of grammatical markers in the Torah most often identifies God in the masculine grammatical form, thus promoting a male-oriented worldview.

Last, I would like to discuss what I believe may be the most glaring example of discordance between contemporary ethical thinking and the values championed by the Torah; the conquest of the land of Canaan. In order to explain this dilemma, I will briefly turn to an eye-opening study on Israeli school children conducted by sociologist George Tamarin in 1963. The study that Professor Tamarin conducted—which ultimately cost him his chair at Tel Aviv University—goes as follows: Two groups of Israeli school children were told to read two separate stories of conquest; one group was given the story of Joshua at the city of Jericho, and the other of General Lin, who established the Chinese Kingdom some 3,000 years ago. The two stories were chosen because the features of both are almost identical. In both stories a leader is impelled by

God—for General Lin the Chinese god of war—to conquer a land and annihilate its unbelieving inhabitants. Both groups of school children were asked to assess the moral judgement of the characters in the story they had been told, and, despite the stories similarities, the responses of the school children were quite dissimilar. For the story of Joshua at the gates of Jericho, about 60 percent of the school children agreed that the plan implemented to overtake the city was justified. However, for the story of General Lin, about 75 percent of students disapproved of the conquest. [7] The controversy that Tamarin's study engendered speaks to a whole constellation of psychological phenomena; the categorization of groups of people, the human propensity to draw moralistic lines, and endemic biases that stem from cultural pressures. But most importantly, this study puts two fundamental beliefs in conflict.

As Jews, we believe strongly in a God of Israel and in the historical, religious, and spiritual importance of a national home. However, as a nation that has been the victim of pogroms, historical democides, and the Holocaust, we bear a deep sensitivity to the concept of a mass execution of an entire people. For this reason, we must be mindful that there are places within the Tanakh that feature divinely mandated national exterminations. Events of this nature, as recorded in our religious history, demand our attention, even if they are beyond our powers of understanding.

In 1944, the term genocide was coined by Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin in a report on Nazi Germany that would later contribute to the prosecution of Nazi's at the Nuremberg Trials. In 1948, Lemkin influenced the United Nations to approve a Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which recognized genocide as a crime for the first time in history.[8] The past century features some of the most cataclysmic acts of horror perpetrated against humanity; from the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide, democides carried out by the Soviet Union and China, to genocides in Bangladesh and Rwanda. More deaths were racked up in the twentieth century than any other epoch of human history. Professor emeritus at the University of Hawaii, Rudolph Rummel, puts the estimate at about 262 million in the twentieth century alone.[9] As a result, the global community has gained a disconcerting insight into the destructive capabilities of humanity. This newly acquired sensitivity forces us to assess our history as a nation and as a people. The conquest of the land of Canaan is replete with instances of communal exterminations. Time and again the Jewish people are commanded to leave no trace of a civilization in cities they overtook. In the book of Joshua, Achan was stoned to death for salvaging any remains of the city of Jericho upon its siege and destruction.[10] The same is true when Shaul spared

King Agag. [11]

Of course, there is no better justification for these events than that they were commanded by God. But this is a post-hoc rationale that belies the implications of an explicit commandment to wipe out an entire nation; from its women and children, all the way to its livestock. Today, we would call this course of action “genocide” or “ethnic cleansing,” and there is no amount of equivocation that could justify such atrocities. Is it good enough to say that God commanded it? Can this excuse allow us to brush off the ashen debris of countless forgotten civilizations and turn a blind eye to history?

Over the centuries, the global evolution of moral philosophy has forced us to reassess parochial notions of mass extermination. The commandment in book one of Samuel to “utterly destroy” the nation of Amalek has been reinterpreted and stripped of its historical teeth by biblical commentaries and thinkers such as the Rambam. [12] Maimonides interprets the commandment allegorically, stating that we are compelled as a nation to extricate the nature of Amalek from humanity.[13] However, one is forced to ask whether this is a modification of the original commandment in light of our inability to identify individual members of the nation of Amalek, making it an alteration based on convenience as opposed to ethics.

The trend of attenuating fire and brimstone moral philosophies of the Torah is not restricted to the case of destroying Amalek. In addition to the aforementioned cases, namely Amalek and various instances of capital punishment, there are many laws mitigated by rabbinic authorities of talmudic literature. One of the best-known instances of this mitigation is the case of the “ben sorer umoreh,” or “the wayward son,” mentioned in Parashat Ki Tetzei in the Torah. The case of the ben sorer umoreh is an adolescent that is so refractory, the court of the city ratifies his public execution. At face value, the resulting law might implicate a good number of teenagers today. However, the interpretive acrobatics performed by the legal authorities in tractate Sanhedrin make it almost impossible to identify an example of such an adolescent. The Sages limit the application of ben sorer umoreh to such an extent that it is understood purely as a theoretical case from which we may derive homiletic value alone. The circumstances necessary for someone to be categorized as a ben sorer umoreh are so numerous and obscure that it leaves the realm of the possible and enters the realm of the mythological. In order for someone to be considered a ben sorer umoreh the child must commit a certain set of crimes within a specific duration of time, he must be warned multiple times by both parents using the same words, and it must be approved by

a governing body.[14]

These instances of rabbinic mitigation display the dynamism of Jewish law and practice. Moreover, they are a demonstration of the great interpretative power granted to the Sages by the Torah.[15] Rabbinic exegesis is encoded into the very DNA of the Pentateuchal genome. Arguably the most fundamental component of Jewish law is human interpretation. Dr. Jose Faur, a prolific writer and Professor of Law at Netanya Academic College in Israel, articulates this point in his essay Law and Hermeneutics in Rabbinic Jurisprudence: A Maimonidean Perspective:

Indeed, Judaism owes its very existence to exegesis. Through exegesis, Judaism was able to grow and develop in the most adverse and diverse circumstances, without having to lose its connection with Scripture...there is purposeful ambiguity in the Law designed to allow for adaptability and development. [16]

The Talmud relates a famous allegory in which Rabbi Eliezer opposed a position held by the majority of other Sages. Rabbi Eliezer attempts to assert the validity of his own position by invoking miraculous events as a form of divine evidence. Despite Rabbi Eliezer's invocations being met with heavenly approbation, the opposing Sages remained assiduous in their position. Rabbi Yehoshua responded to Rabbi Eliezer's dissent by saying that the ruling was "not in heaven." [17] Rabbi Yirmiyahu, a second-generation Babylonian scholar, provides an explanation for this story, stating that we no longer rely on divine providence in order to understand the Torah. Instead, halakha is determined by the majority opinion.[18] The culture fostered by our sages is one that is contingent on the human faculty of interpretation and reason. This is what allows for the fluidity of biblical interpretation, legislation, and the evolution of halakhic practice.

As cultural circumstances change, our Sages are granted the power to deviate from the strict letter of the Law in order to satisfy an evolving social and cultural perspective. An example of this is the Torah principle of ayin tahat ayin, or "an eye for an eye," which the Sages interpreted to mean monetary compensation.[19] This reframing of the classic notion of ayin tahat ayin reflects a changing moral code that renders certain biblical injunctions incompatible with changing beliefs.[20] Built into the very system of Jewish law is a level of philosophical and legal adaptability that accounts for large-scale cultural shifts. In light of the capacity for the Jewish system of exegesis to accommodate these shifts, it seems reasonable to believe that we can always meet the demands of an ever-changing moral environment. Even the 13 rules of hermeneutics outlined in the Talmud itself are broad enough to allow for a whole spectrum of interpretations and semantic connections.[21]

It seems that the Torah has granted our sages an almost infinitely wide berth for scriptural interpretation. However, this raises an issue that is important to consider. Based on the precedence of rabbinic interpretation as a source for understanding biblical texts, Judaism today has become almost unrecognizable as an extension of its Torah origins. Should we be concerned that rabbinic law has taken on a life of its own, far beyond the Scripture from which it was formed?

Let us consider the broader issue of the factors involved in scriptural hermeneutics. Although the following is conjecture, it is a sound basis for understanding the process of interpretation in general. Often times a commentator will identify an inconsistency emerging from external information that stands in conflict with statements presented in the Torah. The commentator is then faced with the challenge of reconciling contravening pieces of information. This means one of three courses of action: 1) reinterpret the biblical statement in order to align it with the external information; 2) reject the external information and preserve the initial interpretation of the Torah; or 3) investigate further in order to find additional information that eliminates the contradiction altogether. In the absence of additional information, our Sages are typically left with the first two choices. Additionally the often indisputable nature of the external information compels us to accept their implications. As we have seen, many commentators are forced to reinterpret Scripture. Note that I have excluded the option of rejecting Scripture, since rendering biblical text null and void as a function of interpretation is one of the few limitations of biblical hermeneutics.[22]

An example to illustrate the foregoing point comes from the Rambam, who opines that the six days of creation described in Genesis do not represent six calendar days, based on the irreconcilability of this information with astrophysical evidence.[23] To an Orthodox Jew, this might seem like a viable approach to many seemingly flagrant deviations from natural law mentioned in the Torah. However, to the unfamiliar, but capable, lay-reader, this statement seems more like an attempt at whitewashing inconsistencies in ancient, sacred texts.

If our Sages can tamper with the word of God wherever it does not reflect demonstrable, conventional wisdom, one might be led to the conclusion that this dampens the authenticity of scriptural texts. Some might attempt to rationalize these instances of contradiction by saying that the Torah did not intend for these contravening statements to be interpreted literally, that they are rather intended to be interpreted metaphorically. This position, however, assumes that we can know the intent of the Author; that an underlying principle is being communicated via metaphorical representations. How can anyone claim to know the intentions of

God, let alone discern between statements that are intended to be taken literally and metaphorically? As Dr. Faur notes, and other scholars agree, this is a patently un-rabbinic approach. Rabbinic interpretation is unconcerned with 'uncovering' the word of God, so to speak. Rabbinic hermeneutics is concerned with drawing contextual connections, which give the text interpretational flexibility. In his essay, Dr. Faur refers to this approach as the "stoic" exegesis found in Jewish literature, which assumes knowledge based on interpretation, as opposed to the "platonic" form of exegesis found in Christian literature, which assumes an ideal that is to be uncovered.[24]

This statement has far reaching implications. We, as Jews, view the Torah as a contractual agreement between two parties. Like any legal document, the stipulations contained therein are subject to interpretation. As is true in any contract, one cannot infer the intention of either party, only interpret what is expressly communicated from one party to the other. This, on a fundamental level, reflects the nature of all communication, interaction, and relationships. As subjective beings, we can do no more than interpret the world around us. The many dimensions that constitute our physical, psychological, and spiritual existence limit us to one locus of perception, beyond which we cannot extend our knowledge. To uncover would imply the ability to remove the curtain between one being and another, and this is fundamentally impossible. Therefore, the Torah was delivered with the built-in assumption that its principles are to be interpreted, not uncovered. It seems that to Rabbi Nathan Lopez Cardozo, this is what is meant by the talmudic dictum "Elu ve-elu divre Elo-him hayim"—"these and those are the words of the living God." [25] As Rabbi Cardozo writes in his article On the Nature of Future Halakha in Relation to Autonomous Religiosity, "Each person receives the Torah individually, according to his or her own personality and exceptional circumstances." [26] The subjectivity of the Torah is undeniable. The Torah, and the statutes contained therein, are as fluid as they are inviolable, molding to the cultural and historical context in which they are expressed, colored by the lens through which they are seen, and understood by each and every mind independently. The continuity of the Torah is a function of its adaptive and fluid nature.

So what about issues of today? Can we no longer make interpretive inroads in order to address contemporary philosophical and moral questions? It seems as though today we have run up against certain unbridgeable gaps. But why must we draw the line here? Despite the immense interpretive power that we have been granted, there are limitations. One such limitation is our inability to reject statements in the Torah, and there are certain implications carried by biblical

assertions that no level of exegetical savvy can ignore. Calling the restriction against homosexuality a hok might assuage our Western conscience, but one would be hard-pressed to find that apologetics such as this do much more than act as a moralistic balm. Rather, the right response to such dissonance is to acknowledge the conflict and accept the facts on the ground. I am inspired by rabbinic leaders who demonstrate an appreciation for the gravity of the issues the Jewish community faces today, while displaying tremendous intellectual honesty. I recall sitting in on the class of a rabbi, for whom I have particularly great respect, and hearing his response to a similar question posed by a student about the struggle of the religious, gay community. He didn't seem to feel the urge to jump through fiery interpretive hoops and walk an apologetic tightrope to save face. Instead, he gave an honest, simple answer. He made it abundantly clear that the Torah, for whatever unknown reason, moral or otherwise, prohibits homosexuality. He then explained that he nevertheless profoundly admired the courage it takes to adhere to religious authority, despite these Jews harboring a deeply human desire for an intimacy that cannot be realized. And this is truly all that can be said. The negative commandment against homosexuality may be built on moral grounds or it may not be. It might be that our modern Western moral intuitions are simply not in line with the ethical principles presented in the Torah, and we may need to simply accept this. It may even be that to view the Torah through a moral lens at all might be illusory, and we must be prepared to accept this, as well.

Although observant Jews may be obligated to accept these principles and injunctions, it is equally as important that we understand the basis of our acceptance. This is the "nishma" in the classic biblical dictum "na'aseh venishma"—"we will do and we will listen" (Exodus, 24:7). I have heard the notion expressed on many occasions that Judaism is a religion of deed not creed. However, we cannot deny that there are fundamental principles upon which we base our lives that deserve to be explored. In this article I attempted to cast many of these fundamental principles into doubt. In so doing, many questions were raised, and many questions remain unanswered. I do not claim the authority to speak decisively or conclusively on any of the issues touched upon in this article. All I can do is raise what I believe are legitimate inquiries about my own religious ideals. The intention of this piece is not to rabble-rouse, but to urge readers to think more objectively about their beliefs. In recent years, I have been exposed to a battery of anti-religious sentiments in literature, social media, and elsewhere. Prominent scholars such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and others have become increasingly vocal about their distaste for religion and the damage they believe it has done to the global community. It is an affront to our

own creed not to take these criticisms seriously. We must weigh the principles of our beliefs on a balanced, objective scale, and draw honest conclusions about our own ideology, whatever they may be.

Having said that, I derive tremendous hope from the fact that every day I see an increasingly inquisitive and thinking Jewish community. There is no doubt that deeply entrenched biases certainly exist among observant Jews, and many choose not to explore their own beliefs with any considerable level of sophistication and impartiality. However, as a whole, the Jewish community seems to be expanding its circle of acceptance, tolerance, and understanding. Although the first half of the twentieth century marked a time of cataclysmic tumult and unrest, the global community has since seen an unprecedented shift in moral, philosophical, and social attitudes; the expansion of human understanding; and an exponential rate of technological advancement. The magnitude of these changes in societal currents has drastic implications for the Jewish community, implications that we perhaps cannot fully fathom. Judaism in 20 years may look very different from the Judaism we know today. However, over the course of history, Judaism has been evolving, branching, and blooming into a variegated panoply of rich approaches to religious life. From Hasidut and Modern Orthodoxy to the Reform and Conservative movements, history has given birth to a diverse spectrum of worldviews rooted in the Jewish tradition. To envisage a practicing and observant branch of Judaism that captures the complexity of modern beliefs seems to be in the foreseeable future. Based on some of the sources cited herein, this evolutionary progress would appear to be a hallmark of the Jewish faith and a testimony to the adaptive powers of our ideology. One of the quintessential tenets of Jewish thought is to challenge the very pillars upon which our belief stands. In this way, we are a people that is ever-engaged in the pursuit of truth. Now it seems appropriate to reiterate our original question: Will we ever reconcile modern beliefs with traditional values? Progress will always present us with novel challenges. The dissonance we feel today is part and parcel of change and the initial tension that accompanies it. To imagine the absence of these challenges is to eradicate the possibility of religious and communal growth.

I do not believe we will ever totally reconcile the age-old principles of the Torah with the ever-changing values of the society around us. However, I do believe a thriving and burgeoning Judaism will only come through critical investigation of our worldviews. Although the Observant Jewish community, by definition, accepts a basic Torah-prescribed structure within which it operates, our approach to religious life must henceforth be objective, critical, and honest. This is no easy feat; it may mean abandoning old ways of thinking that contemporary knowledge

has rendered obsolete, and expunging biases that have been etched into the stones of our beliefs. We should not shun ideological change, but embrace it. There are those who fear that a paradigm shift may cause Judaism to lose its grounding; that adopting an ideology of progressivism places the citadel of Jewish tradition on a foundation of stirring sand. Rabbi Cardozo poetically notes that “one must never forget that one does not discover new lands by losing sight of the shore from which the journey had begun.”[27] The Jewish people are anchored to an historical narrative, a communal memory, a collective thread of consciousness strung through the members of a nation undivided. We are connected by a line that cannot be severed, and it is the rich tradition and culture of our people that has so effectively contributed to our survival. However, while it is our duty to preserve the liturgy of our people, we must not forgot that it is both our strict adherence to tradition as well as our adaptability to a changing milieu that has allowed us to exist over time. Although we must never lose sight of the shore from which our journey began, it is the glimmering sea of progress that draws our gaze in the direction of the future. In this great ocean, bathed by the radiating light of our individual perspective, an eternal truth awaits. We embark on this journey because an indefatigable desire for understanding is woven into the very fabric of our existence, as a Jewish nation and as individuals. In the words of the renowned scholar and philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel, “We sail because our mind is like a fantastic seashell, and when applying our ear to its lips we hear a perpetual murmur from the waves beyond the shore.”[28]

Notes

[1] Haber, Sender. "Rules and Reasons—Understanding The “Chok”.” TorahLab. N.p., 21 Mar. 2014. Web. 16 Sept. 2015.
[2] Boteach, Shmuley. "Gay Marriage and the End of Days." Observer. N.p., 01 July 2015. Web. 16 Sept. 2015.
[3] Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Melakhim, 11:1.
[4] Elon, Menachem. "Encyclopedia Judaica: Capital Punishment." Capital Punishment. The Gale Group, 2008. Web. 16 Sept. 2015.
[5] Sanhedrin 4:5.
[6] Exodus 20:17.
7] Tamarin, Georges R. "The influence of ethnic and religious prejudice on moral judgement." New Outlook 9.1 (1966): 49–58.
[8] Steven Pinker, The Better Angels of Our Nature (USA: Penguin Books, 2011), 335.
[9] Rummel, R.J. 2002. 20th century democide. http://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/20th.htm.
[10] Joshua 7:26.

[11] 1 Samuel 15:10.
[12] 1 Samuel 15:3.
[13] Moreh Nevukhim, 3:41
[14] Sanhedrin 70a
[15] Deuteronomy 17:8–11
[16] Jose Faur, Law and Hermeneutics in Rabbinic Jurisprudence: A Maimonidean Perspective (USA; The Cardozo Law Review, 1993), 8.
[17] Sanhedrin 59b.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Baba Kama 84a.
[20] Jose Faur, Law and Hermeneutics in Rabbinic Jurisprudence: A Maimonidean Perspective (USA; The Cardozo Law Review, 1993), 9.
[21] Ibid., 10.
[22] Ibid., 11.
[23] Moreh Nevukhim, 2:29.
[24] Faur, 9.
[25] "Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Eruvin." Babylonian Talmud: Eruvin 13. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Sept. 2015.
[26] Nathan Lopez Cardozo, On the Nature of Future Halakha in Relation to Autonomous Religiosity (USA, The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2015), 4.
[27] Ibid., 11.
[28] Abraham Joshua Heschel, Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion (USA, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976).