Postmodern Orthodoxy: Spiritual Experience as the Forgotten Source of Truth

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“The seal of the Blessed Holy One is Truth.” As a Modern Orthodox pulpit rabbi, truth— a regular feature of scripture and of daily liturgy, an important benchmark for interpretations of Torah, philosophical truth, scientific truth, psychological truth, a description of the Torah itself— plays an outsized role. Indeed, recent controversies relating to the issue of conversion to Judaism have often hinged on the ability of would-be righteous converts to accept axiomatic truth claims held to be required by the particular court. Converts are often required to affirm the truth of Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles, or to affirm truth claims regarding the age of the universe, evolution, and other issues of perceived tension between religion and science. Simultaneously, the theology and personal beliefs of rabbinic colleagues have been scrutinized by others in the rabbinic community, searching for evidence of insufficient belief in that which our religion presumably holds to be true. In particular, academic study of biblical texts has prompted energetic enforcement of Orthodoxy’s supposed boundaries. Mainly, these uses of the term, “truth” seem to refer to an objective, Platonic sort of truth. They are not dependent on the person or situation, and are held to be either the basis of our faith, or a requirement of its observers, imposed from the outside. In this essay, I aim to describe the role that a very different kind of “truth” has played in my personal faith, and one that I believe deserves more attention and support in observant communities.

Selective Spiritual Autobiography

I grew up in North Bellmore, a small Long Island suburb. The houses on my block were all the same, and the stated life-goals of teachers, guidance counselors, parents, and friends alike remained, to me, monochromatic. What does Hashem, your God, ask of you, but to excel academically, participate in a well-rounded variety of extracurricular activities, gain entry into an elite college, and earn a high salary to pay for your progeny to do the same? Neighbors would casually remark about the importance of earning more money than your parents. Older immigrants would recall how they gave up so much for the sake of economic opportunity. During a regional high school science competition, one teacher encouraged the female students to "show more skin if you need to" in order to subtly influence the predominantly male pool of judges in the hope of earning better results. Proposals to bus in minority students from poorer neighborhoods to our public schools met with widespread protest about the character of the "neighborhood." Often, status was cemented by public displays of wealth, cars, houses, clothes, and handbags. The plights of the environment, the needy, etc. were merely *pro forma* features of our discourse. While it might have looked wholesome from the outside, and indeed the cogs in the wheel were almost always earnest and admirable individuals, Long Island seemed to me a modernized version of society in the *Great Gatsby*.

Religiously, my family belonged to a Conservative synagogue, Temple Beth El of North Bellmore, with a wise spiritual leader, Rabbi Harvey Goldscheider. He was a student of Rabbi Heschel, who often fought against the materialists' status quo, while warmly modeling the depth of Judaism, practiced sincerely and with a Hassidic-style comfort. I recall fondly his brave critiques of opulent *semahot* and his love for tradition, text, and the State of Israel. We attended synagogue on the holidays and for celebratory occasions, but not otherwise, gradually increasing family observance from a mainly secular lifestyle to a marginally more observant one by the time I was about to celebrate my bar mitzvah. As one of the rare children who enjoyed and excelled in the Temple's Hebrew School, I had taken a strong interest in tradition as a source of meaning and connection in a world that seemed too vain; the rabbi learned Talmud privately with me and a few others. He would regularly invite folks for Shabbat meals (always full of songs), lectures of interest, or small study sessions.

Most of my close friends were Jewish. Yet for almost all of them, Jewish practice was peripheral at best, done for the sake of nostalgia, habit, guilt, a requirement of the Hebrew School, or to satisfy grandparents. However, bar and bat mitzvah celebrations were serious business. Regularly costing tens of thousands of dollars (sometimes even more!), children would quietly compete to have the more expensive *simha.* I still recall a friend approaching me and saying, "[m]y parents said that your bar mitzvah only cost x dollars; mine was twice that!" Presumptively, money was the benchmark for the quality of the affair. With a late September birthday, I attended the celebrations of dozens of peers before celebrating my own, affording me the opportunity to gain some perspective. Almost none had kosher receptions, and most occurred with DJ's and scantily clad dancers on the Sabbath day itself. The religious ceremony, as it was called, was mocked and derided by peers and parents alike.

Artificially truncated error-filled renditions of small selections of *haftaroth* were celebrated as monumental accomplishments. I can still hear the generic exaggerated praises, innocently and sweetly proffered by loving parents, permanently colored by my judgmental teenage mind with a cocktail of sarcasm, scorn, and anger. "David, your accomplishments today demonstrate that anything is possible when you put your mind to it. We're so proud of you and the man you've become!" "Susie, that was the most beautiful *haftarah* reading. You've grown up into the proud Jewish woman we knew you could be." Apparently, the parents had not listened to the same three butchered lines of chanted reading from the prophets, the same prophets who happened to shun materialism and rail against insincere religious practice. To me, the lavish excess of celebration was an end in itself, or perhaps a measure of promoting or maintaining societal status. How else can we explain the loans taken out and the homes refinanced for a party in celebration of a Judaism that remained unknown and unexplorable to the celebrants, in ceremonies filled with more shrimp in the cocktails than words in the *divrei Torah*.

I found myself approaching my 13^{th} birthday in a state of dire distress. I was deeply saddened by the monotony of the lifestyle for which I was being implicitly groomed. At each turn its combined lack of self-awareness and purposeful intention left me hopeless. It seemed impossible to me that life was granted for this to be its end, and I knew I wanted something totally other. Increasingly, I turned toward a mix of social action, increased Jewish observance, and the study of the Jewish prophets as avenues of meaning. In my hometown, homophobic attacks on school staff and students led to the adoption of a piloted version of the Anti-Defamation League's World of Difference curriculum. I participated in training and bonding with other students and faculty on a retreat where we

learned and practiced educational tools for tolerance that we later brought back to the entire district. In fact, the techniques learned had demonstrable and obvious positive impact, raising awareness and alleviating the insults and violence that minorities, especially LGBTQ students and staff, were all-to-frequently subjected to. This experience has served me as a regular reminder of how the Divine Spirit urges us to the edge of our own comfort, to listen, to bond, and to serve with love. I also found, for the first time really, a bit of personal authenticity and resonance, pairing a concrete task of empathy with the God of the prophets. Yet the more I reached out to try to discern the boundaries of my life and explore other possibilities, societal cages became surprisingly suffocating. Disapproval and rejection came sweeping in with the volume and subtle force of an ocean at high tide. Attempts at increased Jewish observance and engagement, in particular, were either shunned as being old fashioned, or derided for their interference with those extracurriculars, so important for getting into an Ivy League college.

Transformative Spiritual Experience

I share this background to help explain the foreground for one of the most powerful moments of my life. My turning bar mitzvah was to be celebrated on the first Sabbath after the holiday cycle, my Hebrew birthday falling on *erev Sukkot*. Yom Kippur began on the eve of September 29, 1998, which happened also to be my Gregorian birthdate. Despite the threat of scattered thunderstorms, I decided to up my observance by walking home from synagogue rather than riding in a car following the *Kol Nidrei* services. This prompted rather strong criticism from several synagogue-goers, noting that I lived too far (approximately two miles) and that I might get soaked in the rain. I retorted, with sarcasm, that I was unlikely to melt. The criticism didn't stop, and developed into a full-scale argument. Upset, I stormed off toward home. While clearly of minor importance, this Yom Kippur argument in the lobby of Temple Beth El got my mind racing and stoked a latent teenage anger. "These people spend so much time telling us about the importance of Jewish continuity yet won't let me observe the laws on Yom Kippur by simply walking home after services. Why do they care what I do anyway? It's all for show and appearance. Perhaps I make them feel guilty. It's easier for them to convince themselves that it's not safe or prudent to walk." Harsh, judgmental, and self-righteous as they were, these were the thoughts that filled my mind that Yom Kippur eve.

The exertion, solitude, and fresh air on the walk home provided an opportunity to calm down. Feeling guilty about my self-serving harsh thoughts about others, I retreated to my room. I had to make a decision. My soul cried out for a meaningful expression of a connected, purpose-driven life, in stark contrast to the systemic materialism and egoism I often perceived as immanent all around me. Yet even many of the people at the synagogue, let alone in other walks of my life, were actively and forcefully holding me back. I wanted badly to talk to a friend who would understand, but a mix of shyness, the privacy of faith, and a generalized embarrassment prevented me from doing so. Who would understand, anyway? And so I engaged in the first genuine act of prayer in my life. Emotionally in despair, I started to cry and began to mumble to God Himself. On dramatic cue, thunderstorms rolled in, and the flashes of lightning and rolling rumbles of thunder provided a sense of background comfort.

But then my body was seized. Frozen. Unable to move. Physically palpable, with an electricity that pulsed and tingled, I felt present, absolutely, in a way I never had before. Background noise and sensation faded suddenly to the fore, and the gaze of my mind focused intently, as if quickly adjusting binoculars into clear focus after frustrating blurriness. Still visually observing the wood panel of my bedroom wall, my mind moved beyond the sights to another place, a primordial place, brimming with an infinitely deep-seeming sense of sacred life, shrouded in mystery and permeating all things. Oscillating repeatedly between prominent feelings of intense attraction and dread that made me physically shaky and weak, I knew then as never before the awesome power and comforting touch of the Blessed Holy One. With curiosity and horror, I did not want the experience to end. Moments of indescribable clarity ensued from a non-verbal communication that was clearer than anything I’ve ever been told. Grasping on to the feelings, as if clutching the ankles of someone running away, this presence lifted away just as a powerful tornado ascends into the sky, leaving a misleading calm in its wake. I sat at the foot of my bed, staring out the window, noticing the odd combination of previously unnoticed rapid breathing, yet also a sense of sublime calm. I cried profusely, moved by the intense beauty of the moment, perhaps all moments, pained and stabbed by the tragedy of human existence and inescapable suffering too.

On that night, my life changed. I now had the courage to pursue a purpose-driven life; I could do no other. Change was now easier than stasis and required less bravery. All decisions seemed transformed by the desire to serve a greater Whole, to build bridges or connections, or dismantle old ones for the purpose of rebuilding in a different moment in a more suitable way. Nothing was the same for me, and never would be again. It’s hard (likely impossible) to explain, but I still

know it as the truest thing I have ever experienced.

Spiritual Experience as a Primary Source of Truth in Orthodox Communities

Rav Kook, in the second chapter of *Orot haTeshuva*, describes two types of return to the Blessed Creator: gradual return (*teshuva hadragit*) and sudden return (*teshuva pit'omit*). When I read his description, I recognized my own experience:

> Sudden return comes about as a result of a certain spiritual flash that enters the soul. At once, the person senses all the evil and ugliness of sin and he is converted into a new being; already he experiences inside himself a complete transformation for the better. This form of return dawns on a person through the grace of some inner spiritual force, whose traces point to the depths of the mysterious. . . . The higher expression of penitence comes about as a result of a flash of illumination of the all-good, the divine, the light of Him who abides in eternity. The universal soul, the spiritual essence, is revealed to us in all its majesty and holiness, to the extent that the human heart can absorb it. Indeed, is not the all of existence so good and so noble, and is not the good and the nobility in ourselves but an expression of our relatedness to the all? How then can we allow ourselves to become severed from the all, a strange fragment, detached like tiny grains of sand that are of no value? As a result of this perception, which is truly a divinely inspired perception, comes about return out of love, in the life of the individual and the life of society.[1]

There are a few takeaways worth highlighting in this context. Rav Kook promotes the importance of a thoroughly transformative spiritual experience as a desirable and divinely sanctioned meeting with the divine, through the inner depths of the soul. By delving into the recesses of our souls, we encounter the place where all souls meet, points of increased unity, the divine. Rav Kook also notes that authentic spiritual experience is not primarily isolating but must stem from and ultimately serve at its limit a sense of profound connection. Reading his words provided validation for me through shared experience, and helped me shed some of the insecurity I experienced around admitting, even to myself, that I had been

touched by a soul-awakening experience.

My personal experience, though, touches on a deeper problem for me in the “life of the community.” In the Modern Orthodox communities I have tended to call home for approximately 15 years, spiritual experiences are generally viewed with deep skepticism or shunned altogether. Personal spiritual experiences are entirely subjective, and cannot easily be vetted for veracity, either experientially or morally. They tend to reinforce anti-nomian tendencies in a community that prizes strict observance of a comprehensive legal system. “Rabbi Hiyya bar Ami said in the name of Ulla: Since the day the Temple was destroyed, the Blessed Holy One has only one place in His world, the four cubits of halakha (Jewish law).” [2] Spiritual experiences promote questing and exploring, often raising difficult and agonizing questions for mainstream communities with conservative tendencies. Moreover, sudden and transformative spiritual experiences are unpredictable and relatively rare, making them a challenging source of authority and a difficult technology of religious education. Perhaps most importantly, in communities that prize rational deliberation, words like soul and spiritual are anathema and even embarrassing.

But the times are indeed changing, and for good reasons too. Yes, there are pragmatic reasons for renewed acceptance of spiritual experience as a source of personal truth. Niche communities can ill-afford attrition, and Modern Orthodox communities have experienced the flight of those searching for contemplative and spiritual experience. Since the 1960s and 1970s. Hindu, Buddhist, and other eastern retreat centers across the United States are full of highly educated Jewish participants and teachers. Often, the teachers on silent retreats are all members of the tribe! Last spring, I had the opportunity to give a talk at the Vedanta Society of Providence, a Hindu Temple, on Jewish approaches to spiritual practice, as part of a panel that included a Sufi mystic and a Christian theologian. To my surprise, there were dozens if not hundreds of Jews who populated the audience, singing along to the Bhagavad Gita with knowledge and passion.

Additionally, we live in a society of skyrocketing anxiety, pressure, and insecurity. We have yet to seriously grapple or resolve core questions surrounding the role of an exponentially expansive technological revolution. We are witnessing a dramatic shift in the paradigm that places career and profession as the main or sole source of value for an increasing number of men and women. Many are concerned that humanity doesn’t provide a reasonable response to our own self-destructive environmental time-bomb. Whether we can listen, collaborate, and cooperate with serious effect, even if our own existence might depend on it, is in reasonable doubt.

Against this backdrop, enlightenment notions of Truth are being supplanted by the notion of socially or linguistically agreed upon truths, determined by context and subjective individual and communal experience. Modernism was broadly defined by reason and was ruled by Descartes' notion of individual thought. What is commonly called postmodernism, while loosely defined, has served as a corrective to very real excesses. Rational thought as the primary feature of human living tends to ignore questions of meaning and spirituality that are deeply ingrained human needs. Rationalism exudes a confidence that turns to hubris, ignoring the limitations of rational and critical modes of thinking. Our ability to determine truth based on rationalism alone has been undermined. There is a change in the way we view truth, from objective to subjective; this is a major shift that must be noted and accommodated in Modern Orthodox communities.

Truths have all too often turned out to be influenced by the people and classes of people who impose their authority. They have failed to bring promised riches, be they material or spiritual, in ways that rightfully accommodate principles of justice, fairness, and responsibility to large sections of the populace. In Orthodox communities of all stripes, a daily litany of sexual, financial, and moral scandals have plagued lay and religious leaders of our most venerated institutions. Reality has increasingly confirmed the postmodernist thesis that altruism is often self-serving, and Truth often just a disguise. Once we admit that the identity of the people that make the rules affect, in intrinsic ways, the nature of those rules, feminist and other critiques grow stronger. If women have been excluded from the class of those with agency to design our system of Jewish praxis, halakha is lacking in a fundamental way. Thus, it is no surprise that the inclusion of female clergy has become the issue with generational ground support and the change with the most traction on the ground.

These changes often started as challenges from the laity, but have ascended and gained a compassionate hearing among many leaders, leading to shifts on a variety of planes. No longer is autonomy vested in the hands of the few, and institutions such as Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, JOFA, the International Rabbinic Fellowship, and the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals have served as a communal counterweight. Explicitly, they have stressed the importance of inclusion, particularly of women, and local autonomy, re-offering local autonomy of diverse Jewish communities.

This shift has been much discussed. But there is an equally important spiritual shift occurring right under our noses. Just as classical models of diversity and local autonomy are advocated for, prior models of spiritual experience and truth are resurfacing. Mussar,,[3] the nineteenth-century movement to rigorously apply

Jewish ethics in a lived way, has become pervasively popular, mixed with a tinge of positive psychology and other modern psychological teachings. Hassidut[4] and its profound exploration of the emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs of Jews going through difficult and anxious change resonates once more. Of course, focus has shifted, and certain offensive or untrue elements have been de-emphasized or dropped. Both move out of the head, emphasizing the body, heart, lived experience, and ultimate unity of all things, and are reflections of new senses of human need and of truth.

In an oft-quoted teaching, the Maggid of Mezeritch commented on the talmudic notion of truth. “The seal of the Blessed Holy One is truth. The letters that comprise this word consist of the first, middle, and last letters of the alphabet, alluding to the fact that Blessed Holy One surrounds all worlds, fills all worlds from within, and provides space for all worlds, thus there is no place devoid of his presence.”[5] Yes, this teaching provides support for the notion of transcendent Truth from his perspective. But it also provides the foundation for the immanent truth of the soul. Rav Kook’s notion of sudden spiritual enlightenment is rooted not in reaching above but rather in a deep dive to the depths of the soul, a meeting place of divinity inside each of us, and one that connects us profoundly to all things. This, for him, is the primary way of actually accessing truth. Accessible immanence is only possible if God is immanent. Now, the degree to which the Maggid’s teaching is subversive comes into focus. Truth, often thought of as transcendent and absolute, is brought into our world through immanence and subjectivity; it is inherent in the very spelling of the word!

In the United States, the vast majority of those in positions of Orthodox leadership have chosen, to date, to double down, rejecting and critiquing postmodern notions of truth, usually in unserious and mocking ways. Most often, the critiques have been personal *ad hominem* attacks, rather than substantive discussions. Rabbi Shagar, by contrast, grappled thoughtfully and intentionally with these issues, paving the way for fair and open-minded responses that are not instinctively defensive or dismissive, albeit in an Israeli religious Zionist context. Describing his own faith, he wrote:

> Wittgenstein asserted that “it is not how things are in the world that are mystical, but that it exists.” It is my understanding that his statement refers not to the physical-scientific world, but to a different one. Mysticism is the apprehension of a transcendent reality; it is faith . . . Human consciousness, with its dualism of subject and object, opens up a chasm between the world

> of belief and the outside world. Hence my assertion that faith is presence, activity . . . And truly, my faith is mystical; it is a wordless, letterless faith. It is my lot to believe without telling others (in this context, I am an Other) that I believe, much as the kabbalists cleaved to the Almighty with ovanta deliba, “the understanding of the heart.” This psychological technique or practice precedes language and grants it its vitality. In its second phase, belief manifests as a life of faith. It is compelled to function in a world of duality and if I overlook its origins in the Real (for instance, by trying to demonstrate its objective truth), I destroy it.[6]

Rabbi Shagar’s description evokes the techniques of mindfulness in his use of the terms “real” and “pre-linguistic.”

Modern techniques of mindfulness train the practitioner to compassionately observe the present moment with awareness, rather than through thoughts, emotions, moods. In mindfulness practice, one does not fight with or ignore thoughts, emotions, and the like when they arise. Rather, the practice is to take note, to turn towards what is, and return, again and again, to compassionate awareness of the present moment. Most frequently, the breath (in sitting meditation) or the physical sensations of the body (in walking meditation) are used as objects of intention, as a pragmatic proxy for returning to the present moment with awareness. As Rabbi Jonathan Slater describes:

> This is mindfulness: the capacity to see clearly, with calm and awakened heart, the truth of each moment of our lives . . . When I see my life with the greatest clarity, I experience the presence of God in each moment, even in pain and failure. I feel joy in being an expression of God’s intent in creation. Mindful attention to all life has helped me to know great compassion for other people, for their suffering, and also an expansive love for other people, for their dogged will to make a meaningful life.[7]

In a Jewish context, awareness of the present moment rests its authority in notions of divine immanence central to kabbalastic and Hassidic thought, and to practical notions of spiritual practice prized in the writings of the Maggid of Mezeritch, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, and of Rabbi Kook (as seen above).

Conclusion

For me, a renewed practice of mindfulness meditation and a more meditative prayer practice have become the consistent daily practices to remind me, through experience, of the deep spiritual awareness that once froze my body and transformed my life. I try to live the rest of my life, Jewishly and otherwise, however imperfectly, with this at the core. When I find myself drifting from lived awareness with the capacity for compassion, this practice—one of immanence—is the one best suited to change my reaction, in the short-term and long-term, and to help me live with knowledge and meaning.

As Rabbi Shagar noted, "[p]hilosophies and outlooks are, in this context, nothing but rationalizations—apologetics even—whose sole role is to justify what has been arrived at, and which must thus be regarded with a certain wariness. They are not the substance of faith but explanations for it, thus they are ancillary to it and always involve a degree of duality."[8] True faith, then, is a transformed life that stems from cultivated experiences of awe. It dives not toward isolation but toward unity at the core; it connects people and things in the most real of ways. It is responsive to each moment, latent with divinity, and holds as its motto that which Moses proclaimed to Pharaoh. "Our own livestock, too, shall go along with us—not a hoof shall remain behind: for we must select from it for the worship of our God, and we shall not know with what we are to worship God until we arrive there."[9]

It is incumbent upon the Modern Orthodox community to consider whether or how it can become a postmodern Orthodox community. Failure to do so will result in divergence from both current *mada* (academic thinking) and *amkha* (the expressed needs of so many individuals). Let this essay serve as a vote for spiritual experience as a source of soul-truth, and let us not only welcome but seek to cultivate and share what it means to live these truths together.

[1] Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook, *Orot haTeshuvah* (This translation is from Ben Zion Bokser's translation published in 1978, except for the fact that I have opted to translate the Hebrew word *teshuvah* as "return'' rather than

“penitence.”).

[2] Babylonian Talmud: *Berakhot* 8a.

[3] See, for example, Alan Morinis’ works *Everyday Holiness* and *Every Day, Holy Day* as written works exemplifying the modern rise of Mussar designed specifically to meet the practical lived needs of modern humans.

[4] Indeed, the Neo-Hassidic revolution has manifest, in no particular order, in the expansion of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, Jewish Renewal generally, widespread study in Israeli *Hesder Yeshivot*, new classes, teachers, and *minyanim* at Yeshiva University and RIETS (formerly bastions of a Lithuanian rational approach), and was the subject of the cover story of Jewish Action, the Orthodox Union’s magazine publication. A wave of translation and adaptation of Hassidic sources are common on Jewish bookshelves, and the rise of meditation in Jewish contexts has grown dramatically. At my synagogue, Congregation Beth Sholom in Providence, Rhode Island, for example, interest in meditation and Jewish spiritual practice has grown consistently over the last several years.

[5] Or Torah. S.V. *Hotmo shel HaKadosh Barukh Hu Emet*.

[6] Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, “My Faith” in *Faith Shattered and Restored: Judaism in the Postmodern Age,* pp. 31–33.

[7] Rabbi Jonathan Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*.

[8] Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, “My Faith” in *Faith Shattered and Restored: Judaism in the Postmodern Age*, p. 23

[9] Exodus 12:26.