Rav Shagar: Navigating Between Relativism and Fundamentalism

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A distinctive feature of modern life is that it brings various groups of people into contact with each other. Each day we encounter religions, cultures, and ideologies different from our own.

The exposure to so much diversity is not without its consequences, and it can radically challenge our most basic assumptions. We may conclude that there are no absolute truths, or instead be provoked to make an even deeper commitment to our beliefs as the exclusive source of truth. In the words of noted sociologist of religion Peter Berger,

Contemporary culture (and by no means only in America) appears to be in the grip of two contradictory forces. One pushes the culture toward relativism, the view that there are no absolutes whatever, that moral or philosophical truth is inaccessible if not illusory. The other pushes toward a militant and uncompromising affirmation of this or that alleged truth.

Both tendencies can have a corrosive effect on society. Berger explains that relativism “precludes the moral condemnation of virtually anything” and fundamentalism “produces irresolvable conflict with those who do not share its beliefs.”[1]

Judaism is far from immune to these tensions, and Modern Orthodoxy often feels the pull between them in dramatic ways. Little-known Israeli thinker, Rav Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, known as Rav Shagar, offers a serious attempt to navigate a middle path between the relativism and fundamentalism so common to contemporary society. He argues for a passionate faith that is rooted in the idea of covenant along with a deep commitment to halakha. Only then will the religious believer not be threatened by different ideologies or alternative ways of life. His writings are made unique by his direct engagement with postmodern thought and creative use of kabbalah and Hassidic texts.[2]

Passion and Covenant

The idea of tolerance is promoted as the antidote to fundamentalism. However, we would deceive ourselves in thinking that tolerance is an easily attained virtue. Unfortunately, it is often purchased at the price of passionate commitment to one's beliefs, and therefore it is a tolerance built upon relativism. To better understand this point, it is helpful to turn to the postmodern philosopher Slavoj Zizek, a frequent reference for Rav Shagar.

Zizek explains that religious beliefs and practices are encouraged in modern multicultural societies, but only when the believer is willing to view their truths as purely subjective. He writes,

Religion is permitted—not as a substantial way of life, but as a particular "culture" or, rather, life-style phenomenon: What legitimizes it is not its immanent truth-claim but the way it allows us to express our innermost feelings and attitudes. We no longer "really believe;" we just follow (some of the) religious rituals and mores as part of the respect for the "life-style" of the community to which we belong.[3]

Rav Shagar would agree with Zizek and argues that most of what passes for tolerance in today's world is nothing more than a relativistic permissiveness. He explains that such an attitude "is the result of weak identity. Because I am not truly connected to anything or anyone, 'Anything goes'; there is nothing that will outrage and arouse within me opposition and passion."[4]

A consequence of this, Zizek argues, is that modern society views any expression of passion as dangerous and therefore must be eliminated in order to prevent violence. He explains that this tendency has spread throughout our culture and sarcastically notes that even consumer products must be "deprived of their malignant property." One can buy "coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol."[5] The result is "a decaffeinated belief: a belief which does not hurt anyone and does not fully commit even ourselves." Rav Shagar's own understanding mirrors that of Zizek. In an essay titled "Passion and Tolerance," he writes that "Passion is today considered to be a negative trait, an expression of narrow mindedness, and related to violence and negating the other…. However in my opinion, passion is an essential and necessary component of human life."[6] He cites a fascinating piece from the Zohar to demonstrate that religiously inspired passion can never be dismissed so easily:

"Passion is as mighty as Sheol" (Song of Songs 8:6). If one loves but without passion, the love is not real love. Only if one has been passionate can the love be complete. From here we learn that a man must be passionate for his wife in order that he can connect to her with complete love, and because of this he will not place his eyes on another woman.[7]

According to the Zohar, love is only granted legitimacy if it is accompanied by passion. A detached or intellectualized love without deep emotion is judged as feeble, unable to endure for any great length of time. Implied within the Zohar is the understanding that human beings make choices primarily for emotional reasons and not intellectual ones. Only a passionate love full of desire and perhaps even jealousy can ensure long-term commitment.

The key to authentic religious passion, Rav Shagar explains, is the concept of covenant. A covenant binds two parties together in an exclusive relationship in which each side makes commitments to the other. While covenants can be purely political and based on self-interest, in their highest form they are an expression of passionate and mutual love. The best example of this can be seen in the covenant made between David and Jonathan. The Bible describes that "Jonathan's soul became bound up with

the soul of David…. Jonathan and David made a covenant because [Jonathan] loved him as himself." [8] In this case, it is Jonathan's love for David that enables the covenantal relationship between them.

The idea of covenant can be further understood through a citation from the Alter Rebbe of Lubavitch, whom Rav Shagar quotes in a slightly different context.

Two individuals who are in love make a covenant between them so their love will not cease. If it was the case that their love was unconditional, it would not be necessary for a covenant to be made between them. Rather, it is because they are afraid that their love will cease… through the making of a covenant their love will be eternal and will never fail. Nothing from the outside or the inside will cause a separation between them, and it will be because they created a mighty and strong connection. They have become unified through their love in a supernal connection that transcends reason…. Why is this? Because they have made a covenant; it is as if they are one flesh, and just as one cannot stop loving themselves, so too they cannot stop loving their covenantal partner….[9]

Covenants create exclusivity and therefore they must be protected. The Hebrew root for passion, *kuf nun alef*, also has the alternative meaning of jealousy. Once we have committed ourselves to a covenant, we must be willing to act passionately in order to safeguard the sanctity of the relationship. When individuals in the Bible are inspired to religious passion it is always associated with the idea of preserving the Jewish people's covenantal relationship with God.[10] In the end, it is our commitment to covenant that defines our identity in relation to others and our very sense of self.

Fundamentalism versus Covenantal Faith

For Rav Shagar, religious passion only becomes problematic when it is not grounded in covenant and instead draws its strength from fundamentalism. Peter Berger's writings on the topic can help illuminate Rav Shagar's own position. In a world full of difference where religious certainty can no longer be assumed, Berger explains that fundamentalism is "the attempt to restore or create anew a taken-for-granted body of beliefs and values." However, fundamentalism is an inherently fragile project and therefore, "Fundamentalists of whatever stripe must suppress doubt." [11] Rav Shagar employs a similar understanding and explains that "The fundamentalist zealot is the one who is afraid that his faith will be taken away from him. His passion is not derived from the excess of faith rather specifically from the doubts that percolate within his heart, and the deeper his doubts, the greater his fanaticism." Fundamentalism creates a further problem by damaging the religious believer's sense of self. In the words of Rav Shagar, "it is violence directed toward the zealot himself, since it is fed by his need to forget his doubts…. Its roots are in the damaged covenant that is lacking the ability for deep connection and responsibility."[12] Therefore, fundamentalist passion can easily turn into violence.

In contrast to fundamentalism, authentic faith is derived from what Rav Shagar calls "preserving the covenant" (*shomer haBerit*). Covenantal faith "is derived from the fact that existence is not conditioned on a specific proof or individual of one kind or another, because its roots are a lot deeper than the consciousness of the one who bears it."[13] It has no need for absolute certainty grounded in proof, for as the Alter Rebbe explained, covenantal love requires no justification.

For Rav Shagar, covenantal faith it brought about through self-acceptance (*kabbalah atzmit*), a recurring idea is his writings rooted in both Kabbalah and Existentialist thought.[14] Self-acceptance is the positive affirmation that faith does not need proofs. It means accepting oneself and the world as it is. He explains that "When I accept myself, I cease to rely on some external framework that is

necessary for my existence; I am I, myself. Anywhere I go, I will be, and the divine will be with me—'the entire world is filled with His glory.'"[15] Self-acceptance comes to define the individual's identity and their relationship with God. By its very nature, it prevents the slide into relativism, for it requires passionate commitment. Even still, covenantal faith is not an easy path, for it can become self-centered. The love at the heart of covenant must always be other directed. Rav Shagar cautions that "Self-acceptance is faith only when it is not infected with hubris, when it arises out of *hitbatlut*: unity with God."[16]

The covenantal faith described by Rav Shagar has important consequences for the way in which the religious believer relates to those who are different. Instead of feeling the need to create barriers between the self and other, Rav Shagar explains that

A consciousness moored in the intimacy of a certain existence needs no walls, definitions, or separations…. This mooring manifests an unpretentious existence, one that does not endeavor to prove itself or surpass itself, but rather is what it is, justified in itself without carrying any banner.[17]

Covenantal faith makes true tolerance possible and enables one to make the important distinction between permissiveness, a form of relativism, and openness. Permissiveness is based on "weak identity" and the notion that "anything goes." Openness

is the result of deep roots. It is rootedness that opens me up to the other. More than once I have been surprised to discover that one who preserves the covenant, the type who is rooted in his land, and in his faith or his culture; it is he who is able to demonstrate open-heartedness toward the other, and he is attentive to the other more than one who is lacking roots; more than one who has damaged the covenant. The reason for this is simple: He is not intimidated. His identity is seen as self-evident from his perspective. His identity is not threatened and it does not need justification. His openness to the other is a result of his confidence in himself and his faith. The paradox is that fundamentalism is an expression of lacking faith and damaging the covenant.[18]

Rav Shagar's words about fundamentalism also echo those of Berger who writes that

In a truly traditional community, those who do not share the prevailing worldview are not necessarily a threat—they are an interesting oddity, perhaps even amusing. In the fundamentalist worldview the unbeliever is a threat; he or she must be converted (the most satisfying option), shunned or eliminated, be it by expulsion or physical liquidation.[19]

For Rav Shagar, it is the passionate religious believer with a strong identity who stands the best chance of building genuine relationships with those who are different, and therefore, they have an important role to play in helping bridge the gaps of multicultural societies.[20]

The Role of Halakhic Commitment

The somewhat abstract notion of "self-acceptance" is not the only way in which Jewish religious life enables one to be open to difference. Rav Shagar also perceives that a deep commitment to halakha can

bring about the same result. He quotes Rebbe Nahman of Breslov's description of halakha as the orderly flow of blood pouring through our veins. Just as blood is the essence of life for a human being, so, too, does halakha provide a living framework for our very existence. Halakha, as a comprehensive way of life, defines proper behavior in every situation and at every moment. In doing so, Rav Shagar argues it "constructs a world through which one can come to know God—faith becomes a concrete fact of one's life. … It is halakha that provides the world with a framework of life, stability, and meaning and, one might add, an acknowledgement of truth: of the existence of God and the religious way of life."[21] In this sense, a commitment to halakha parallels the idea of covenantal faith as self-acceptance. The power of halakha lies in the way it concretizes the experience of God throughout all aspects of one's life without constant need for justification.

Furthermore, the order and meaning created by halakhic observance becomes critical in a world full of difference. The fundamentalist is always concerned that he or she might become corrupted by contact with those who are different. However, an authentic commitment to halakha creates a clear separation between right and wrong, good and evil. Where appropriate, it enables the religious believer to maintain clear distinctions and protective boundaries that are so important for preserving a healthy self-identity. Rav Shagar likens this to Rebbe Nachman's idea that when the tzadik must confront evil, he or she is protected by the commitment to halakha. One must keep in mind that in these circumstances the tzadik's intention is not to eliminate evil but rather to descend to its level in order to uplift it. This is an inherently risky enterprise lest the tzadik become corrupted by engagement with evil. The only way to preserve self-identity is through a deep knowledge and commitment to halakha. In the words of Rebbe Nachman,

One must use Torah and *tefillah* in order to separate and nullify the bad from the good. The study of Torah means dwelling in the depths of halakha and learning the rulings of the halachic authorities. Torah grasps good and evil according to the aspects of forbidden and permitted, impure and pure, kosher and *pasul*. As long as one has not clarified the halakha, one is mixed up with both good and evil.[22]

For Rav Shagar, the rootedness brought about by a life lived in accordance with halakha allows one to maintain a strong identity without feeling threatened by difference. He explains that he has often experienced this in his own life, and writes,

The world of halakha grants me a clear perspective that has a powerful influence—it brings about a sense of inner peace and along with it the ability to confront the other who is different from me without feeling threatened. This is because there exists a specific way of life to which I am connected with any doubt or hesitation."[23]

Treating Difference with the Dignity It Deserves

Rav Shagar makes another point that is worth noting. He cites Rav Kook, who explains that, "When there is fighting between various forces, individuals, nations, and worlds, it is the result of the differences and contradictions at that exist at the heart of life."[24] These differences, however, cannot and must not be erased, for they are part of the divine plan. The temptation to do so, Rav Shagar writes, comes from "the one who violates the covenant [i.e. lives with a fundamentalist faith] who is

also the first to violate the other in the name of universal values." Rather, "Only one who is loyal to one's particular covenant is able at some point to truly honor the unique covenant of another." [25] Rav Shagar's complex writings show that the path between relativism and fundamentalism is not an easy one. It requires a passionate religious faith that is not afraid of the real and profound differences that exist in this world. It may live on a razor's edge, but it is the only place where true tolerance is possible.

[1] Peter Berger, "Between Relativism and Fundamentalism," *The American Interest*, Vol. 2, Number 1, September 1, 2006. These arguments are further developed in the article "Moral Certainty, Theological Doubt," *The American Interest*, Vol. 3, Number 5, May 1, 2008 and in his book *In Praise of Doubt*, HarperOne, 2010.

[2] Though little has been written about Rav Shagar in English, the following articles provide an overview of his thought. See Alan Jotkowitz, "The Post-Modern Theology of Rav Shagar," *Tradition*, 45:2, 2012 and Zachary Truboff, "The Earth-Shattering Faith of Rav Shagar," *The Lehrhaus*, http://www.thelehrhaus.com/culture/2017/7/2/the-earth-shattering-faith-of-rav-shagar.

[3] Slavoj Zizek, "Passion in the Era of Decaffeinated Belief, *Religion and Political Thought*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2006.

[4] Rav Shagar, *Luchot V'Shivrei Luchot, Yidiot Achronot*, 2013, p. 315.

[5] Zizek, *Ibid*.

[6] *Luchot*, p. 304.

[7] *Zohar*, *Parshat Vayechi*, 245a. This is cited as part of the essay *Kanaut V'Savlanut*, p. 305.

[8] Samuel 1, 18:1–3.

[9] *Likkutei Torah, Nitzavim, 2* cited in Rav Shagar, *Panecha Avakesh*, pp. 25–26. Although he doesn't cite the example of David and Yonatan, the Alter Rebbe appears to be drawing upon the notion that Yontan's covenant with David caused him to "love David as himself."

[10] See for example Pinehas, who is given the *berit shalom* as a consequence of his zealous action. In the Book of Maccabees, Matityahu's killing of the Jew who offered an idolatrous sacrifice is described as follows, "And he showed zeal for the law, as Pinehas did by Zimri the son of Salomi. And Mathathias cried out in the city with a loud voice, saying: Every one that has passion for the law, and maintains the covenant, let him follow me. (Book of Maccabees 1, 2:26–27). It should also be noted that Eliyahu, perhaps the most zealous individual in all of the Bible, is invited to be present at every circumcision (*berit milah*).

[11] Berger, "Between Relativism and Fundamentalism."

[12] *Luchot*, p. 315.

[13] Rav Shagar, *L'Hair et HaPetachim*, p. 206.

[14] He cites the German philosopher Johann Fichte's idea of "self-positing" as inspiration for his understanding.

[15] Rav Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, Maggid Books, Jerusalem, 2017, p. 64.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 34.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 64.

[18] *Luchot*, p. 315.

[19] Berger, Ibid. See also a similar notion expressed by Slavoj Zizek in "Isis is a Disgrace to True Frundamentalism," New York Times, September 3, 2014.

[20] For examples of the ways in which Rav Shagar's teaching have influenced contemporary Israel, see Shlomo Fischer, "From Yehuda Etzion to Yehuda Glick: From Redemptive Revolution to Human Rights on the Temple Mount," *Israel Studies Review*, Volume 32, Issue 1, Summer 2017: 67–87.

[21] *Faith Shattered and Restored*, p. 49.

[22] *Likkutei Moharan* 8:6

[23] Rav Shagar, *Shiurim al Likutei Moharan*, Vol. 1, Chapter 8, p. 105.

[24] Rav Kook, *Orot haKodesh*, Vol. 3, p. 323–324.

[25] *Luchot*, p. 316. This idea is similar to that expressed by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his book *The Dignity of Difference*.