God Is Relocating: A Critique on Contemporary Orthodoxy—Four Observations

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Lately, a strange feeling has gotten hold of me. I am not yet able to fully articulate it, but something tells me that God is relocating to a different residence. He has hired a moving company, and they are at this time loading all His furniture and possessions into a van and awaiting His instructions as to the destination. The truth is He's been thinking about moving for a long time but has not yet done so because we, in our ignorance, are still busy visiting His old home, completely blind to the fact that the curtains have been taken down, most of His furniture has already been removed, and He is standing in the doorway, dressed in His jacket and ready to go. He nevertheless listens to us, smiling and feeling sorry for us that in our utter blindness we still believe we are sitting comfortably in His living room, chatting, and having coffee with Him, while in fact He is sitting on the edge of His chair, gazing longingly at the door, dreaming of His new home.

Synagogues—whether Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform—are no longer His primary residence. Surely some of the worshippers are pious people who try to communicate with their Creator, but overall, the majority of these places have become religiously sterile and spiritually empty. So God is moving to unconventional minyanim and places such as Israeli cafes, debating clubs, community centers, unaffiliated religious gatherings, and atypical batei midrash. The reason is obvious. In some of those places people are actually looking for Him. And that is what He loves; not those who have already found Him and take Him for granted. He is moving in with the young people who have a sense that He

is there but cannot yet find Him. It gives Him a thrill. In some of these cafes He encounters young men sporting ponytails, without kippot, but with tzitziyot hanging out of their T-shirts, praying in their own words, attempting to find Him. In secular yeshivot, He meets women in trousers and mini-skirts who are earnestly arguing about what it means to be Jewish and who kiss mezuzot when they enter a fashion show. Then there are those who, to His delight, are keen on putting on tefillin once in a while and do this with great excitement; or who enthusiastically light Shabbat candles Friday night and can get into a serious discussion about Buddhism and how to combine some of its wisdom with Kabbalah and incorporate it into Jewish practice.

No, they don't do so because it is tradition, or nostalgia, as their grandparents did, but because they sincerely want to connect, to grow and become better, deeper, and more authentic Jews—but at their own pace and without being told by others what they ought to do. They won't go for the conventional outreach programs, which try to indoctrinate them and are often terribly simplistic. No, they strive to come closer because of an enormous urge and inner explosion of their neshamot. No better place for God to be, even if these attempts may not always achieve the correct goals and are sometimes misdirected.

At these unconventional sites, theological discourses take place over a glass of beer, and the participants talk deep into the night because they can't get enough of this great stuff called Judaism. Many of these people want to study God and understand why He created the world and what the meaning of life is all about. What is the human condition? What is a religious experience? How do we confront death? What is the meaning of halakha? What are we Jews doing here in this strange universe? They realize that life becomes more and more perplexing, and these questions are therefore of radical importance. These are, after all, eternal issues. Who wants to live a life that passes by unnoticed? It is in this mysterious stratosphere that God loves to dwell. He can't get enough of it.

Regrettably, His interest wavers when He enters conventional synagogues. He finds little excitement there. Many of His worshippers seem to go through the motions, activate their automatic pilot, do what they are told, say the words in the prayer book, and go home to make Kiddush. Few are asking questions on how to relate to God, why they are Jewish, or what their lives really are all about. Many do not want to be confronted with these nasty issues. They only disturb their peace of mind. A nice, conventional devar Torah is good enough. After all, everything has already been discussed and resolved. Regular synagogue visitors only speak to Him when they need Him, but almost nobody ever speaks about

Him or hears Him when He calls for help in pursuing the purpose of His creation.

So God is moving to more interesting places. He laughs when He thinks of the old slogan, “God is dead.” It was a childhood disease. He knows we learned our lesson. It is too easy, too simplistic, and has not solved anything. He knows that He has not yet been replaced with something better. Oh yes, there are still run-of-the-mill scientists who believe that they have it all worked out. Some neurologists sincerely believe that “we are our brains” and that our thinking is nothing more than sensory activity. They seem to believe that one can find the essence of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony by analyzing the ink with which the composer wrote this masterpiece. There are even Nobel Prize winners who believe that we will soon enter God’s mind and know it all, no longer needing Him. They are like the man who searches for his watch in the middle of the night. When asked why he is looking under the street lamp, if he lost his watch a block away, he answers: “This is the only place where I can see anything.” These scientists have still not realized that there are more things, on earth and in heaven, than their research will ever grasp. They have convinced themselves that they are merely objective spectators and have not yet understood that they themselves are actors in the mysterious drama of what is called life.

And God simply winks. During the duration of this long-term disease beginning in the nineteenth century, antibodies have been developing to fight against the denial of His very being. Although atheism is still alive and kicking, many have become immune to all these simplistic ideas. Over the years, more and more antitoxins have accumulated, and we are now stunned by the fact that He, after all, may indeed be in our midst. Suddenly, an outdated hypothesis has come to life again. God is a real possibility, and we had better become aware of that.

But here’s the catch: While the religious establishment is now shouting from the rooftops “We told you so,” it has not yet grasped that this is completely untrue. The discovery of God did not happen because of conventional religion but in spite of it.

The truth is that the great shift concerning God took place far away from the official religious establishment. It is in fact a miracle that some people continued believing in God while religion often did everything to make this impossible. For centuries the church blundered time after time. Since the days when Galileo proved the Church wrong, it was constantly forced to change its position. And even then it did so reluctantly. The enormous loss of prestige that religion suffered because of it is beyond description. God was pushed into the corner. Not because He was not there, but because He was constantly misrepresented by

people who spoke in His name. Since the Renaissance, many other great minds have moved the world forward; and although several may have missed the boat, a large number of them introduced radical new perspectives of the greatest importance. Yet, the Church's only response was to fight them tooth and nail until, out of utter necessity, when all its arguments had run out, it had to succumb and apologize once again for its mistakes. Time and again, religion lagged behind in sharing the victory of new scientific and philosophical insights. Ironically, long before the Church officially sanctioned these new discoveries, they were already part and parcel of the new world. As always, the imprimatur came too late.

Thus, religion paid a heavy price. Its territory became smaller and smaller. The constant need for capitulation made many people leave the world of religion and opt for the secular approach. And the story is not over yet. Scientists are now discussing the possibility of creating life forms in the laboratory that do not depend on DNA to survive and evolve. In all likelihood, several religious leaders will fight this again, with force and ferocity, and will probably have to succumb once more when they can no longer deny the hard facts of science.

But what was happening in the Jewish religious world? Although it cannot be denied that Judaism, too, got caught up in all these debates, and quite a few staunch traditionalists were not much better than some of the church fathers, the overall situation within Judaism was much more receptive to scientific developments. Whereas the Church declared in one authoritative voice— often the synod— that these new scientific discoveries were outright heresy, such pronouncements never took place in the synagogue. This is because Judaism is so different from other religions. Positions of unconditional belief were never its main concern. They were always debated, but never finalized, as was the case with the Church. What kept Judaism busy was the question of how to live one's life while living in the presence of God and humanity, as expressed in the all-encompassing halakhic literature. Because of that, it did not see scientific discoveries as much of a challenge. There was also a strong feeling that scientific progress was a God-given blessing. The greatest Jewish religious thinker of the Middle Ages, Maimonides, was even prepared to give up on the concept of creation ex nihilo if it would be proven untrue. [1] Although he was attacked for some of these radical and enlightened ideas, the general attitude was: Let science do its thing, and if we were wrong in the past because we relied on the science of those days, we will now rectify our position. Even when the Talmud made scientific statements, many—although certainly not all—understood them to be the result of scientific knowledge of the day, and not sacrosanct. And even when these debates became

more intensive, it was never argued that opposing views should be absolutely silenced. There was no final authority in matters of belief, no Jewish synod. At the same time, many sages warned against making science into an idol that is all-knowing and can solve life's riddles.

Louis Kronenberger notes that

Nominally a great age of scientific inquiry, ours has actually become an age of superstition about the infallibility of science; of almost mystical faith in its non-mystical methods; above all…of external verities; of traffic-cop morality and rabbit-test truth.[2]

But today all this has changed. In many Orthodox circles, Judaism's beliefs have become more holy than the pope. Suddenly, there is an attempt to outdo old-fashioned Catholicism; to insist that the world is actually nearly 5,800 years old; that the creation chapter must be taken literally; that the seven days of creation consisted of twenty-four hours each and not one minute more; that there is no foundation to the theory of evolution; and that the Talmud's scientific observations came straight from Sinai. That this happened in the past, when there was limited scientific knowledge, is understandable; but that such claims are still made today is downright embarrassing. It makes us blush. We can laugh about it only because the hopelessness of some of these ideas has already passed the point of being disputable. They have faded into flickering embers soon to be extinguished.

Surely it could be argued that possibly science will change its mind. But if the core beliefs of Judaism are not undermined (and they are not!), and as long as there is no indication that science will change its mind in the near future, there is no need to reject these scientific positions. And let us never forget that it is not even completely clear what these core beliefs are! So why fight modern science? [3]

The incredible damage done by doing so is beyond description. It makes Judaism laughable and, in the eyes of many intelligent people, completely outmoded. It makes it impossible to inspire many searching souls who know what science teaches us. If not for this mistaken understanding of Judaism, many people would not have left the fold and could actually have enjoyed Judaism as a major force in their lives.

And it is here that many of us, including myself, are at fault. We blame the Synagogue for this failure, as we blamed the Church hundreds of years ago. Many

of us have said, “Judaism has failed”; “It is outdated”; “I am getting out.” But such statements are as unfair as they are illogical. Judaism is not an institution external to us, which one can abandon as one quits a hockey club. We are the Synagogue, and we are Judaism. When Galileo revolutionized our view concerning the solar system, it was not only the Church that failed; we all failed. Those who from the perspective of Galileo claim that the Church was backward are reasoning post factum.

We must realize that although Judaism consists of core beliefs and values that are eternal and divine, it is also the product of the culture during which time it developed. That, too, is part of God’s plan and has a higher purpose. And when history moves on and God reveals new knowledge, the purpose is to incorporate that into our thinking and religious experience. Ignoring this is silencing God’s voice.

According to Alfred North Whitehead,

Religion will not regain its old power until it can face change in the same spirit as does science. Its principles may be eternal, but the expression of those principles requires continual development.[4]

That is why God is relocating. He doesn’t want to live in a place where His ongoing creation is unappreciated and even denied.

We have replaced God with prayers, no longer realizing to Whom we are praying. We even use halakha as an escape from experiencing Him. We are so busy with creating halakhic problems, and so completely absorbed by trying to solve them, that we are unaware of our hiding behind this practice so as not to deal with His existence. In many ways this is understandable. Since the days of the Holocaust, we have refused to confront the problem of His existence due to the enormity of the evil, which He allowed to happen. So we threw ourselves into halakha to escape the question. But although the problem of God’s involvement in the Holocaust will probably never be solved, we must realize that the purpose of halakha is to have an encounter with Him, not just with the halakha. Halakha is the channel through which we can reach Him, not just laws to live by.

Notwithstanding the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust, we must return to God. It’s high time we realize that His being is of a total different nature than we have ever imagined. God can only be understood in a way that is similar to the relationship between a computer hard disk and what you see on the screen. What you see on the screen is totally different from what is inscribed in the hard disk.

You can examine the inside of the disk using the most powerful microscope, but you will see nothing even slightly resembling pictures, colors, or words. We are mistaken when we picture God based on the world screen. In no way does it reveal the actual contents of the hard disk, God Himself. All we know is that God's ways—which we see only through the external sense of sight—is somehow related to the disk. The problem is that we believe we can have a good look at God by watching the screen. But we haven't the slightest clue of what is actually going on in the disk. The Holocaust will almost certainly remain an enigma, but it can never deny the divine disk.[5]

It is in those who are still uncomfortable with God that new insights about Him are formed. And it will be in those uneasy environments that Judaism will be rediscovered and developed. The need for religious transcendence, and for the spiritual thread that keeps many young people on their toes, is enormous. Numerous secular people are joining a new category of spiritual theologians. Matters of weltanschauung are pivotal to many secular Jews now. The problem is that for them, and for the religious, the Torah is transmitted on a wavelength that is out of range of their spiritual transistors' frequency.

Yes, we turn on the radio, but we hear strange noises and unusual static. There is serious transmission failure. We are no longer sure where the pipelines are. God has relocated.

In the world of physics, matters are becoming increasingly hazy. Our brains are penetrating places where well-established notions, such as matter and substance, have evaporated. They have been transformed to puzzling phenomena. They have moved, and God has moved with them. Science is becoming intangible, and it's happening at a speed that we can't keep up with. It puts us in a difficult position and causes us anxiety. We are all living in exile, within a mystical landscape. Those who are aware of this are alive; those who are not have left this world unwittingly.

The question is whether we move our synagogues to where God is now dwelling. Will we, the religious, live up to the expectations of the young people in cafes and discussions groups who have preceded us? Will we apologize to them and join in their discussions, creating a real religious experience out of our synagogue service? Or will we, as usual, stay put, fight the truth, and then be put to shame?

When will we move Judaism to the front seat so that it once again becomes the leader instead of a follower?

Will we move to God’s new habitat, or are we still drinking coffee in His old home, where the curtains have been removed and He is long gone?

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There is a serious breakdown that has taken place in the Orthodox community worldwide. Today, most of these communities view themselves as observant, not model, communities. An observant community is one that is concerned primarily with religious observance. As such, it views halakha and a proper Orthodox environment to execute its demands as its priority. It sees its main obligation as ensuring that Orthodox Judaism survives the ongoing encroachment of secularism and assimilation. To a certain degree, its interest in halakha comes at the expense of Judaism itself. It lacks the language and spirit necessary to become a model community conveying the great message of Judaism to all other Jews, and even Gentiles.

Basically, it is defensive.

The Orthodox community does not realize that it is not observance that should be its main concern. Its primary goal should be to create a spiritual environment in which Jews, whether religious or not, take part in the great mission called Judaism, driven by a visionary halakha. Because it fails to understand this, it views strangers with suspicion. They are only welcome after a security check. The language spoken in these communities is of right and wrong, good and bad, safe and dangerous. It is a language of survival.

Mainstream Orthodoxy has fallen victim to a false kind of modernity in which flaunting irreverence has become the norm. Debunking is commonly practiced, and at every turn we experience the need to expose the clay feet of even the greatest. Human dignity, a phrase often used, has become a farce in real life. Instead of deliberately looking for opportunities to love our fellow men and women, as required by our holy Torah, many have rewritten this golden rule to read—in the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel—“Distrust your fellow man as you distrust yourself.” People’s lack of belief in themselves has spilled over to their relationships with others. Mediocrity has led them to believe that we are a generation of spiritual orphans. Influenced by materialistic philosophies, many a religious person who once revered his fellows has become part of the problem without even being aware of it.

When observing even those who are fully committed to helping fellow Jews find their way back to Judaism, we see an attitude that is foreign to religious life and thought. We cannot escape the impression that some people, without denying

their love for their brothers and sisters, tend to talk down to “secular” Jews. This has become the norm. Constant emphasis is placed on the need to cure the secular person of his or her mistaken lifestyle. But this is asking for infinite trouble. It is based on arrogance. While religious Jews see themselves as the ideal, they relegate secular Jews to second-class status and decide that it is they who needs to repent for their mistaken ways. Such an attitude is based on the notions of contrast and lack of affinity. The secular Jew will always feel inferior. Therefore, the point of departure from which one reaches out to bring fellow Jews closer to Judaism is, at the same time, its undoing. The suggestion that “One should throw oneself into a burning furnace rather than insult another person publicly” [6] may very well apply, since it is the community of secular Jews that is being shamed and treated as inferior.

For Jews to bring others back to Judaism they need to celebrate the mitzvoth that the secular Jew has been observing for all or part of his life, not condemn his failure to observe some others.

Heschel writes, “The foundation should be humility, not arrogance.” [7] There is little doubt that secular Jews, consciously or unconsciously, keep a large number of commandments. Many of them may not be in the realm of rituals, but there is massive evidence that secular Jews are firmly committed to keeping interpersonal mitzvoth. Beneath the divisiveness of ritualism lie the underpinnings of religion, such as compassion, humility, awe, and even faith. The pledges are different, but the devotions are equal. It may very well be that the meeting of minds is lacking between the religious and non-religious Jews, but their spirits touch. Who will deny that secular Jews have a sense of mystery, forgiveness, beauty, and gentleness? How many do we know who lack inner faith that God cares? And how many will not show great contempt for fraud or double standards? Each of these is the deepest of religious values. We must try and make the so-called non-religious Jews aware of the fact that they are much more religious than they may know; that God’s light shines on their faces just as much, if not more, than on the faces of those we call religious Jews.

This not only calls for celebration but may well become an inspiration for religious Jews—not just by honoring secular Jews for keeping these mitzvoth but by taking an example from their non-observant brothers, by renewing these mitzvoth and good deeds in their own lives.

Just as the non-religious person needs to prove his or her worthiness to be the friend of a religious Jew, so the religious Jew needs to be worthy of the friendship of a secular fellow Jew. It would be a most welcome undertaking if the religious

would call on the non-religious for guidance in mitzvoth in which they, the religious Jews, have been lax, as well as in how to improve themselves.

There is a significant need for calling Jews back to their roots by showing them that they never left. Once religious Jews learn that secular Jews are their equals, not their inferiors, a return to Judaism on the right terms will come about.

Orthodoxy celebrates its massive growth and unprecedented birthrate, but by doing so, it masks the tragedy of the thousands who are never given an opportunity to get in touch with Judaism or are unaware of how Jewish they really are. The language of condemnation and devaluation that permeates Orthodox classrooms not only makes it impossible for many to enter—but also causes numerous young people who were raised in a religious environment to leave the fold and turn their backs on Judaism. Even worse is the fact that Orthodoxy continues to point to this trend as evidence in support of the need for its insularity and separatism, blaming secularity for this tragic state of affairs, while the truth is that to a great extent it is Orthodoxy itself that is to blame.

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The primary concern of Judaism is the art of living. To accomplish this goal it is committed to a strong sense of tradition and a determination to realize certain optimal goals. It is this road which has made Judaism unique and makes it stand out among the community of religions. This unique directness from a historical past into a messianic future; from Mount Sinai to justice for the orphan, widow, and stranger; and the ultimate abolition of war has saved Judaism from death by ice and death by fire, from freezing in awe of a rigid tradition and from evaporating into utopian reverie. [8]

Still, what Jews always looked for in the Torah was not just a way of living, nor the discovery of a truth but—this is scarcely an exaggeration—everything. Their love for the Torah was not just molded by particular teachings but by their conviction that everything could be found within its pages. God is no doubt central to Judaism but because the Jews never lost their intimate awareness of the multifarious colors of the Torah and its tradition, no dogma could ever gain authority. Even after Maimonides attempted, under the influence of Islamic theology, to lay down definite formulations of Jewish belief, Judaism refused to accept them as sacrosanct and did not allow such attempts to come between itself and the inexhaustible Torah text. It is for this reason that the kind of tension between religion and the quest for truth is almost unknown in Judaism. No sacrifice of the intellect is demanded.

One look in the Talmud proves this point beyond doubt. The flow of thoughts, opposing ideas, and the making and rejection of opinions and insights are abundant. The interaction between legality, prose, narrative, illusion, and the hard reality is astonishing. It makes the Talmud into the richest of all literatures; not even Greek philosophy was able to produce such a symphony of ideas in which the waves of the human intellect and divinity move forward and backward. There is an absolute lack of systematization, and it is clear that any such attempt was nipped in the bud. From a modern point of view, one might argue that the search for truth in the Torah was not directed toward proportional truth because such a notion was lacking by definition. The most persistent intellectual energy and analytic efforts were devoted to the continual contrivance of beautiful and profound interpretation to discover the totality of life.

Since the Torah was considered God-given, it might have been logical that fundamentalism would ultimately triumph and lead to conflict with science and other disciplines. But this inference is founded on a major misconception. Precisely because the text is seen as the word of God the essential ambiguity of the text was granted implicitly and every verse by definition has many levels of interpretations, both poetic and legal. There is even the compatibility of playfulness with seriousness since the former is a most important component of human existence as created by God.

Today, the attempt to streamline and straightjacket the Jewish tradition and to create a final Jewish theology is a major mistake and a complete misreading of its very character. Although there is, for practical reasons, a need to put halakhic living into a pragmatic context that requires conformity in action, this should never be the goal when focusing on Judaism’s beliefs. It is the task of the rabbis to do everything in their power to rescue Judaism from dogmatism. Although it can’t be denied that Judaism incorporates certain primary beliefs, these beliefs were always kept to the minimum and were constantly a source of fierce debate. Most important, one must remember that such “dogmas” never turned into a reductio ad absurdum. Freedom in doctrine and conformity in action was the overall policy to which the talmudic rabbis were committed, even when convinced of certain fundamental truths. This is also evident when one studies the relationship between the biblical text and the Oral Torah, where we see a minimum amount of words and maximum amount of interpretation.

It is detrimental to Jewish tradition to transform words into fixed clusters of thought and the storing up of whole theories. The idea is not to become the owner of a mass of information, which is entrusted firmly in one’s memory and

carefully transmitted into notes. Once one does so, one becomes scared and disturbed by new ideas, since the new puts into question the fixed sum of information that one has stored into one's mind. As such, ideas that cannot easily be pinned down are frightening, like everything else that grows and is flexible. Instead of being passive receptacles of words and ideas, the ideal is to hear—and most important to receive and respond—in an active, productive way. It needs to stimulate a thinking process that ultimately leads to the transformation of the student.

The attempt today to halakhalize and legalize Jewish thought is missing the whole message of the talmudic way of thinking. It will undermine the halakha itself since it will kill its underlying spirit. There is little doubt that due to the pan-halakhic attitudes that we now experience in certain rabbinical circles, we see the symptoms through which the halakha becomes suffocated and often rejected by intelligent, broad-thinking people. A plant may continue to stay alive in apparent health after its roots have been cut, but its days are numbered.

If the kind of rabbinical censorship that we have lately encountered in relationship to certain books and ideas on Orthodox Judaism was to be applied to the talmudic text itself, it would mean that the best part of this great compendium on Jewish thought and law would be censored and burned.

Freedom of thought must be guaranteed if we want the Jewish tradition to have a future. This applies in particular to teaching. A man or a woman who holds a teaching post should not be forced to repress his opinions for the sake of upholding popular simplistic opinions or even more sophisticated ones. As long as his or her opinions are rooted in the authentic Jewish tradition, and expressed with the awe of Heaven, it must be encouraged—however much this is disliked by some rabbinic authorities.

Uniformity in the opinions expressed by teachers is not only not to be sought, but is, if possible, to be avoided since diversity of opinion among preceptors is essential to any sound education. No religious Jewish student can pass as educated if he or she has heard only one side of the debates that divided the earlier and later sages. One of the most important things to teach is the power of weighing arguments, and this is the foundation of all talmudic debate. To prevent the teacher from doing do so or to bring this to the attention of his or her students is misplaced rabbinic tyranny and has no place in the Jewish tradition. It is the Christianization of Judaism by rabbis.

As soon as censorship is imposed upon the opinions that teachers may avow, Jewish education ceases to serve its purpose and tends to produce instead a nation of men and women, a herd of fanatical bigots.

Today’s talmudists must realize that they can become imprisoned by their own talmudic knowledge. They may have tremendous talmudic expertise, but they may have forgotten that one needs to know more than only all the intricacies of text. One needs to hear the distinctiveness of its content, the spirit it breathes, the ideological foundations on which it stands. To know the Talmud is to know more than its sum total.

Techniques for dealing with individuals whose opinions are disliked have been well-perfected. Especially so when the condemners are people of power and the accused are young and inexperienced. It is an easy and well-known tactic to accuse the condemned of professional incompetence. Most of the time, the dissident is quietly dropped. In the case of more experienced individuals, public hostility is stirred by means of misrepresentation and character assassination. Since most teachers do not care to expose themselves to these risks, they will avoid giving public expressions to their less “Orthodox” opinions. This is a most dangerous state of affairs. It is a way to muzzle genuine and important knowledge and to deny people insight. But above all it allows obscurantism to triumph.

Certain religious leaders, including rabbis, may believe that such tactics of repression and character assassination work, but they should know that although books can be burned, the ideas expressed in them do not die. No person and no force can put a thought in a concentration camp. Trying to do so is similar to the act of somebody who is so afraid of being murdered and therefore decides to commit suicide so as to avoid assassination.

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Torah study has become nearly impossible, and the problem lies not with the Torah but with people. To read the text requires courage. Not courage to open the Book and start reading, but courage to confront oneself. To learn Torah requires human authenticity; it means standing in front of the mirror and asking oneself the daunting question of who one really is, without masks and artificialities. Unfortunately, that is one of the qualities that modern people have lost. Modern people have convinced themselves to be intellectuals, removed from subjectivity and bowing only to scientific investigation. As such, these people have disconnected from their Self. Because people are a bundle of emotions, passions, and subjectivities, they cannot escape their inner world, much as they would like

to. Still, modern people formulate ideas. They may proclaim the rights of the spirit and even pronounce laws. But these ideas enter only their books and discussions, not their lives.; they hover above their originators' heads, rather than walking with them into the inner chambers of daily existence. These ideas don't enter people's trivial moments but stand as monuments—impressive, but far removed.

People are no longer able to struggle with their inner Self and therefore cannot deal with the biblical text. The text stares them in the face, and people are terrified by the confrontation. All they can do is deny the text, so that they may escape from themselves. Since they know that they must come to terms with themselves before coming to terms with the Book, they cannot negate it or disagree with it, as this requires them to deny something that they don't even know exists.

Does that mean that these modern people are not religious? Not at all. Even the religious person is detached from the spirit. The religious person has elevated religion to such a level that its influence on his or her everyday life, in the here and now, has been lost. It is found on the top floor of his or her spiritual house, with its own very special atmosphere. It has become departmentalized. But the intention of Torah is exactly the reverse. Its words, events, and commandments are placed in the midst of the people, enveloped in history and worldly matters. What happens there does not take place in a vacuum but in the harshness of human reality. Most of the Torah deals with the natural course of a person's life. Only sporadic miracles allow us to hear the murmurs from another world that exists beyond. These moments remind us that God is, after all, the only real Entity in all of existence. But the Torah is the story of how God exists in the midst of mortal human's ordinary troubles and joys. It is not the story of God in heaven, but of God in human history and personal encounter.

The art of biblical interpretation is far more than just knowing how to give expression to the deeper meaning of the text. It is, after all, impossible to treat the biblical text as one would any other classical work. This is because the people of Israel, according to Jewish tradition, are not the authors of this text. Rather, the text is the author of the people. Comprising a covenant between God and humanity, the text is what brought the people into being. Moreover, despite the fact that the people often violated the commanding voice of this text, it created the specific and unique identity of the Jewish nation.

That is precisely why reading the text is not like reading a conventional literary work. It requires a reading-art, which allows the unfolding of the essence and nature of a living people struggling with life and God's commandments.

This calls for a totally different kind of comprehension, one that must reflect a particular thought process and attitude on the part of the student.

George Steiner expressed this well when he wrote:

The script…is a contract with the inevitable. God has, in the dual sense of utterance and of binding affirmation, “given His word,” His Logos and His bond, to Israel. It cannot be broken or refuted.[9]

The text, then, must be approached in a way that reflects a human commitment to ensure that it indeed will not be broken or refuted. This has become a great challenge to modern biblical interpretation. Many scholars and thinkers have been asking whether the unparalleled calamity of the Holocaust did not create a serious existential crisis in which the text by definition has been invalidated. Can we still speak about a working covenant by which God promised to protect His people, now that six million Jews, including more than a million children, lost their lives within a span of five years under the cruelest of circumstances?

The reason for raising this question is not just because the covenant appears to have been broken, but also because history—and specifically Jewish history— was always seen as a living commentary on the biblical text. The text gave significance to history and simultaneously took on its religious meaning.

Can the text still be used in that sense, or has it lost its significance because history violated the criteria for its proper and covenantal elucidation?

Not for nothing have modern scholars suggested that there is a need, post-Holocaust, to liberate ourselves from this covenantal text in favor of shaping our destiny and history in totally secular terms. The Holocaust proved, they believe, that we have only ourselves to rely on, and even the return to Israel is to be understood as a secular liberation of the galut experience.

It is in this context that “commentary” needs to take on a new challenge: to show not only how the covenant, as articulated in the text, is not broken or refuted, but how in fact it is fully capable of dealing with the new post-Holocaust conditions of secularity. Without falling victim to apologetics, biblical interpretation will have to offer a novel approach to dealing with the Holocaust experience in a full religious setting, based on the text and taking it beyond its limits.

It will have to respond to the fact that God is the most tragic figure in all of history, making the life of humanity sometimes sublime while at other times disastrous. The biblical text is there to tell humans how to live with this God and

try to see meaning behind the absurdity of the situation.

But above all, modern commentary must make sure that the Torah speaks to the atheist and the agnostic, for they need to realize that the text is replete with examples of sincere deniers and doubters who struggled all of their lives with great existential questions. The purpose is not to bring the atheists and agnostics back to the faith, but to show that one can be religious while being an atheist; to make people aware that it is impossible to live without embarking on a search for meaning, whether one finds it or not. It is the search that is important, the end result much less so. The art is to refrain from throwing such a pursuit on the dunghill of history throughout the ages. The struggle of homo religiosus is of greatest importance to the atheist.

That most secular people no longer read the Torah is an enormous tragedy. The Torah is too important to be left to the believer. The beauty of day-to-day life takes on a different and higher meaning through the Torah, and that will evoke in atheists a faintly mystical anticipation, which they will experience when they are alone or when they watch a sunset at the beach. A voice is born, and it speaks to them; they feels a melancholy that calls forth something far away and beyond. They happen upon a situation that suddenly throws them over the edge, and they get taken in by the experience of a loftier existence. They realize that the god they were told to believe in is not the God of the Torah. The latter is a God with Whom one argues; a God Who is criticized and Who wants people to search even if it results in the denial of Him.

This issue is related to other critical problems. Surveying Jewish history, we see drastic changes in the ways the biblical text was encountered. In the beginning the Torah was heard and not written. Moshe received the Torah through the spoken Word: “The Word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, for you to carry out.” [10] God may be unimaginably far away, but His voice is heard nearby, and it is the only way to encounter Him.

At a later stage, the Word evolved into a written form. Once this happened, there was a process by which the spoken Word was slowly silenced and gradually replaced by the written form. With the eclipse of prophecy, God’s word was completely silenced and could then only be read. As such, the Word became frozen and ran the risk of becoming stagnant. At that stage it was necessary to unfreeze the Word, which became the great task of the Sages and commentaries throughout the following centuries.

Subsequently, a third element gained dominance. The text must be relevant to the generations that study it, while at the same time remaining eternal. Commentators throughout the ages have struggled with this problem. How does one preserve the eternity of the Word and simultaneously make it relevant to a specific moment in time? Many commentators were children of their time and clearly read the text through the prism of the period in which they lived. This being so, the perspective of eternity became critical. It was often pushed to the background so as to emphasize the great message for the present. Much of the aspect of eternity was thereby compromised, and that caused a few to wonder how eternal this text really is.

Others wrote as if nothing had happened in Jewish history. That reflected the remarkable situation of the Jewish people in galut: its ahistoricity. After the destruction of the Temple, Jewish history came to a standstill. Although much happened, with dire consequences for the Jews, they essentially lived their lives outside the historical framework of natural progress. It became a period of existential waiting, with the Jewish people anticipating the moment when they could once again enter history, which eventually came about with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

Inevitably, then, some commentators wrote their exegeses in a historical vacuum. They hardly emphasized the relevance of biblical texts to a particular generation. Therefore, the student was often confronted with a dual sentiment. While dazzled by a commentator’s brilliant insight, the student was forced to ask: So what? What is the implication of the interpretation for me, at this moment in time? Here we encounter a situation in which relevance is sacrificed for the sake of eternity.

With the return of the Jewish people to their ancestral homeland, Jews are confronted with an unprecedented situation, which has serious consequences for biblical commentary. Due to a very strong trend toward secularism, caused by the Holocaust as well as other factors, the issue of relevance versus eternity has become greatly magnified.

Today, more than ever before, there exists a greater and more pressing need to show the relevance of the text. The radical changes in Jewish history call for a bold and novel way of understanding the text as a living covenant. At the same time, the drastic secularization of world Jewry and Israeli thinking requires a completely new approach on how to present to the reader the possibility of the Torah’s eternity. With minor exceptions, the religious world has not come forward with an adequate response.

Most worrisome is the fact that the majority of Jewish commentary books published today in Orthodox circles comprise compilations and anthologies of earlier authorities without opening any new vistas. It is as if new interpretations are no longer possible. The words of God are treated as if they have been exhausted. It clearly reflects a fear of anything new, or an inability to come up with fresh and far-reaching ideas. This phenomenon has overtaken a good part of the Orthodox scholarly world. Judaism is turning more and more into a religion in which one writes glosses upon glosses, instead of creating new insights into the living covenant with God.

No doubt, not every person is equipped with the knowledge and creativity needed to undertake the task. Years of learning are an absolute requirement before one can make a genuine contribution in this field. Still, one must be aware of the danger of "over-knowledge." When the student is overwhelmed by the interpretations of others, he or she may quite well become imprisoned by them and so lose the art of thinking independently. Instead of becoming a vehicle to look for new ideas, the student's knowledge becomes detrimental. This has happened to many talmidei hakhamim.

What is required is innovation in receptivity, where fresh ideas can grow in the minds of those willing to think creatively about the classical sources, without being hampered by preconceived notions. Only then will we see new approaches to our biblical tradition that will stand up to the challenges of our time.

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We are currently living in a transitional phase of monumental proportions and far-reaching consequences. Our religious beliefs are being challenged as never before. We are forced to our knees due to extreme shifts and radical changes in scientific discoveries; our understanding of the origins of our holy texts; our belief in God; the meaning of our lives; and the historical developments of our tradition. We find ourselves on the precipice, and it is becoming more and more of a balancing act not to fall off the cliff.

We keep asking ourselves: Can we survive and overcome? What are the tools to make that possible? Or, shall we drop our earlier beliefs, give in, and admit our defeat?

In the old religious climate, everything was certain. We knew the truth. Traditional Judaism gave us the foundations, and everything was under control. The tradition was safeguarded behind shatterproof glass, well-protected and unshakable. But now, all certainty is affected by skepticism and the glass has been broken.

Today, faith dangles in the free flow of doubt, and we need to learn how to live in this new stratosphere.

The truth is that Jewish Orthodoxy (from the Greek orthos ("true" or "right") and doxa ("opinion" or 'belief") never existed. Originally, Judaism was highly unorthodox. Although it always believed in God and Torah, it never offered any specifics of what God meant or what Torah consisted of. That was left to speculation, never to be determined. The early Sages, as testified by the Talmud and philosophers, disagreed on some of the most fundamental issues of faith.

But over the years, we wanted more certainty. We wanted it handed to us on a silver platter, so that we could avoid debates and live a life of religious comfort, apathy, and mediocrity. Influenced by other religions, we adopted the need for cast-iron certainty and psychological security. So we began to rewrite Judaism in a way that would fit into the notions of established religions—well-structured, with a good dose of dogma. What we did not realize is that by doing so, we misrepresented Judaism by losing sight of the plot, thus doing it a great disservice.

We need to realize that our epoch of uncertainty is in fact much more conducive to authentic Judaism than all the conviction we've had in previous generations. It forces us to rediscover what Judaism is really about and gives us the opportunity to rebuild where rebuilding is required and leave untouched what should remain untouched.

Because we are compelled to reconsider, we will delve more deeply into the great resources of Judaism and stay away from all superficiality to which Judaism has lately succumbed. The greater the challenge, the more profound are the discoveries. Knowledge is important, but doubt is what gives you an education.

Moreover, we will actually be able to enter the minds of all those biblical figures who lived in constant ambiguity about God and the Torah. Avraham’s great doubts concerning the reliability of God in connection with His request to sacrifice his son Yitzchak was a most traumatic experience. It was the pinnacle of religious uncertainty.

Moshe’s bewilderment at not knowing who God was when he asked to see Him and God’s refusal to reveal Himself are the climax of intense religious struggle. In the desert, the Israelites asked whether God was among them. This came close to pantheism or even atheism. Nadav and Avihu’s unauthorized offering of a "strange fire" in the Tent of Meeting came from a feeling of ambiguity about

whether the only way to serve God was by merely following the strict demands of halakha as given by God, or whether one could explore new avenues to divine service.

On one occasion, the Israelites were not sure whether the Torah was indeed the word of God. Korah challenged this very belief and declared that it was not from heaven and that Moshe and Aaron were not prophets.[11] This must have caused a major crisis among the Israelites.

The Torah gives evidence to a most difficult religious journey traveled by the Israelites, full of doubt, struggle, and trauma. Surely some of these doubts were more existential than intellectual, but the latter cannot be disregarded.

Once we realize that uncertainty was part of the biblical personality, we will have a much better grasp of the text and what Judaism is actually claiming. But this is only possible when we find ourselves challenged by those very existential doubts.

There is nearly nothing greater than the free flow of doubt in today’s society. It offers us unprecedented opportunities to rediscover real religiosity. In contrast, the quest for certitude paralyzes the search for meaning. Uncertainty is the very condition that impels humanity to develop its spiritual and intellectual capacity. Sure, this is a risky undertaking, but there is no authentic life choice that is risk free. Life means constantly moving and growing, whereas organic matter that fails to shift and grow decays and will eventually die. So it is with a person’s religious life. The role of religion is to accommodate the blossoming of the human soul and to prevent one from descending into a place of spiritual stagnation.

Whereas our not-so-distant ancestors in the days of the emancipation walked out and left Judaism behind, declaring it no longer relevant, we know better. We won't take that cheap and easy road. We know that Judaism is much too great to abandon, even if there are obstacles along the way. We are aware that Judaism stands head and shoulders above anything else, and that no philosophy or religious practice can replace it, but we have yet to discover what it is that gives Judaism its unique profundity. We still walk in our childhood shoes, knowing that we have not yet entered the world of adulthood. AusdemKindes—in das Mannesalter.[12] We realize that we must be careful not to obscure the real idea of growth, which is not to leave things behind us, but to leave things inside us.

What we all know deep down is that we have to renew Judaism from within. Not by letting it go, but by raising it up. Not through Reform and Conservative Judaism, or Orthodox dogma, but through a radical purifying process that will take

years. Until now we have been busy digging and have found some very interesting elements, but we have not yet hit rock bottom and our findings have been too superficial and too few to make a breakthrough.

Over the years we have covered Judaism with too many clinging vines, to the point where we can no longer see or even recognize das Ding an sich, "the thing in itself." A thick scab has grown on Judaism, and it needs to be scraped off. We have to expose the founding pillars and build a superstructure. We must recognize that the barer Judaism gets and the more uncertain we become, the closer we get to where we need to be, until we hit the core. It will manifest itself in many opposing colors, creating an enormous, beautiful canvas. In this new setting it will be clear that religious uncertainty is one of the most powerful ideas, which keeps us on our toes. And it will give us great insight into Judaism’s core beliefs.

Beneath the clinging vines are divine words. For too long we have mistakenly believed that Judaism is the clinging vine itself. Yes, it had its purpose, but that is not where we will find divinity. It is deeper down, beneath the layers. The time has come to remove it. But it has to be done slowly and in such a way that we do not harm the core. We must remove outdated ideas, often borrowed from other religions; remove the galut from halakha, which became overly defensive; and have the courage to see a new religious world emerging, which will offer us the authentic meaning of the divine Torah and mitzvoth.

It will be painful for those who are looking for absolute certainty. We understand the anguish it will cause. But there is no turning back, and after a time the joy of uncertainty and of discovering the deeper meaning behind Judaism will be immensely greater than that which certainty could ever offer us.

The goal is not at all to be sure that the Torah was given at Sinai, or that all its stories are true. There are very good reasons to believe it is, but we don't know for sure and we should not know for sure. Is it not marvelous to take a leap of faith and live according to something that one cannot be sure of? Of what value are convictions that are unaccompanied by struggle?

Faith means striving for faith. It is never an arrival. It can only burst forth at singular moments. It does not arise out of logical deduction, but out of uncertainty, which is its natural breeding ground.

To have faith is to live with unresolved doubts, prepared to rise above ourselves and our wisdom. Looking into the Jewish tradition with its many debates, one

clearly understands that those who deny themselves the comfort of certainty are much more authentic than those who are sure.

Faith means that we worship and praise God before we affirm His existence; we respond before we question. Man can die for something even as he is unsure of its true existence, because his inner faith tells him it is right to do so. This honest admission of doubt is not only the very reason why it is possible to be religious in modern times; it is the actual stimulus to do so.

We need to understand that faith is "the art of drawing sufficient conclusions from insufficient premises," [13] and "we can be absolutely certain only about things we do not understand." [14]

To believe is not to prove, not to explain, but to yield to a vision.

Of course belief cannot be credo quia absurdum est. It has to make sense and have a lot to say for itself in terms of knowledge and wisdom. Still, just as no building stands on rock-bottom, but on unsure pillars deeply driven into the ground so as to resist an earthquake, so must belief have enough strength to prove its worth without ever reaching absolute certainty.

Faith is like music. It is true because of its beauty not because of its intellectual certainty. Is it not created from impossible paradoxes, as well as a great deal of imagination that surpasses rationality and scientific or historical facts?

David Weiss Halivni writes,

The truly great need no synthesis. They absorb whatever experience offers them. Their intensely creative personalities act like a fiery furnace, melting away contradictions. What emerges is either a harmonious whole or a creative parallelism with parts that mutually fructify and supplement each other. The truly great do not need to trim edges, as it were, to make genuine experiences fit with each other. They preserve them intact. And if their experiences appear contradictory, they build an emotional bridge spanning them allowing both the landscape and the water to be seen. Lesser mortals resort to logical means of harmonization. [15]

The aim of halakha is to teach us the art of living with uncertainty. Halakha was not meant for those who are sure, because nobody can act out of certainty.

The most challenging question in all of life is what do you do and what do you believe when you are not sure. It is that notion that moves the scientist, the

philosopher, and most of all the religious personality. We must destroy the security of all conventional knowledge and undo the normalcy of all that is ordinary. To be religious is to realize that no final conclusions have ever been reached or can ever be reached.

Halakha is the upshot of un-finalized beliefs, a practical way of living while remaining in theological suspense. In that way, Judaism doesn't turn into a religion that either becomes paralyzed in awe of a rigid tradition, or evaporates into a utopian reverie. This dynamic can only come about when Jewish beliefs consist of fluid matter, which halakha then turns into a solid substance. The purpose of halakha is to chill the heated steel of exalted beliefs and turn them into pragmatic deeds without allowing the inner heat to be cooled off entirely. Jewish beliefs are like arrows, which dart hither and thither, wavering as though shot into the air from a slackened bowstring, while halakha must be straight and unswerving but still adaptable.

Indeed, we should be careful not to make faith into an intellectual issue. It is much more than that. The moment we look down on those who continue to have unshakable faith, considering them primitive in face of the many challenges, we have overlooked an important dimension of real faith. Besides the fact that such an attitude reflects arrogance, it also misses an important point: Faith is always more than just thinking about faith. Yes, those people who have lost their faith yet still hold on to it, honestly attempting by way of discussion and study to give their lost faith a new shape, should be deeply respected. At the same time, we should not forget that they are searching for something that the "simple" believer already has.

When we place the reflection on faith higher than the direct experience of faith, we are involved in a purely intellectual endeavor. The search for faith can only be genuine when it is personal, deep, and emotional, and the intellect only plays a small part. The accompanying qualities must be humility, the notion of inadequacy, and a strong urge to find authentic faith. Genuine belief is a way of living, not an academic undertaking. It is an experience in which the whole of the human being is engaged.

Doubt only appeals to the intellect. The intellectual approach to faith is always a barer form of existence than faith itself. The reason is obvious. Besides our critical assessment, the other human faculties remain idle. Trust, hope, love and the notion that one is part of something bigger no longer play a role. Instead, life becomes nothing more than only itself. When doubt and skepticism are no longer the most important faculties through which one seeks religious faith, only then is

it possible to actually find it. Skepticism, though it has its place, should not be at the center of one's search. In today's climate there is a certain gratification in going to the extremes of genius and brilliance until one nearly loses that which one would like to discover. Intellectual thought and scientific discovery can never cover the sum total of the inner life of man. When one prays, one is involved in something that the intellect can never reach. When one studies Torah and hears its divine voice, it becomes something different than what academic study can ever achieve. It is in a separate category, which is closed to the solely scientific mind.

It is vital that we see these facts for what they are. Only when we realize that intellectual certainty is not the primary path toward finding religious truth, will we be able to deal with our new awareness that the transitional phase we now experience has great purpose and has to be part of our religious struggle and identity. It won't be easy. Novelty, as always, carries with it a sense of violation, a kind of sacrilege. Most people are more at home with that which is common than with that which is different. But go it must.

God has relocated.

[1] Moreh Nevukhim, Part 2, chapter 25.
[2] Louis Kronenberger, Company Manners: A Cultural Inquiry into American Life (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merill Co., 1954), 94.
[3] Regarding the claim that the full text of the Torah is divine, or that miracles are possible, it is a matter of debate whether these are completely denied by scientific knowledge or not. Many of these claims are not solely within the sphere of pure science. They touch on matters related to the philosophy of science or in the case of Bible criticism, to literary interpretation and the reliability of archeological findings.
[4] Alfred North Whitehead, Science and the Modern World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925), 234.
[5] I borrow this comparison from my dear friend Professor Yehudah Gellman of Ben Gurion University. See his God's Kindness Has Overwhelmed Us: A Contemporary Doctrine of the Jews as the Chosen People (Emunot: Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah Series, Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2012).
[6] Berakhot 43b.
[7] See Avraham Joshua Heschel's many essays in his The Insecurity of Freedom, Essays on Human Existence, New York: Schocken Books, 1972.
[8] Walter Kaufmann, Critique of Religion and Philosophy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 268.
[9] George Steiner, "Our Homeland, the Text." Salmagundi No. 66 (Winter–Spring

1985), 12.
[10] Devarim 30:14.
[11] See the Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin, chapter 10.
[12] German for "from childhood to adulthood." Professor G. Heymans, Inleiding in de Metaphysica (Dutch), [Einfuhrung in die Metaphysik in German] (Groningen, the Netherlands: Wereldbiblioteek, 1933), Introduction by Professor Leo Polak.
[13] Samuel Butler and Francis Hackett, The Note-Books of Samuel Butler (Nabu Press, 2010), 27.
[14] Eric Hoffer, The True Believer (Harper Perennial Modern Classics: 2010), 81.
[15] David Weiss Halivni, "Professor Saul Lieberman z.l." Conservative Judaism, vol. 38 (Spring, 1986), 6–7.