Spinoza’s Sub Specie Aeternitatis, Yeshiva Students and the Army

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This article by Rabbi Dr. Nathan Lopes Cardozo is no. 385 in his "Thoughts to Ponder" series. Rabbi Cardozo is Dean of the David Cardozo Academy in Jerusalem.

Whenever I think of the huge demonstration of Hareidi yeshiva students at the beginning of this month, I think of Gateshead Yeshiva in England where I spent many years studying Talmud. It is Europe’s most famous yeshiva and a bastion of Torah study in the Hareidi world. Paradoxically, I also think of Spinoza’s incomparable masterpiece, the Ethics, written in a small room in Voorburg, the Netherlands.

I come from a completely secular background with no Jewish education, but good schooling in secular philosophy where Kant, Hume and Wittgenstein reigned supreme. When I ventured to have a look at Gateshead Yeshiva with the intention of learning Talmud, I did not know what was awaiting me. I expected a Jewish university for talmudic studies where enlightened teachers and students would discuss the latest problems in theology and talmudic historiography. But nothing was further from the truth. This was not even Yeshiva University. It’s not just that there were no secular studies and no talk about Plato’s theory of immortality or Leibniz’s famous theodicy; this was an altogether different planet. There was nothing but one supreme endeavor: learning Talmud, combined with Rabbi Aryeh Leib Heller’s (1) classic Ketzos HaChoshen and Rabbi Yaakov ben Yaakov Moshe Lorberbaum’s (2) Nesivos HaMishpat, two brilliant talmudic works.

There were 300 of us, and we slept in our overcoats in what some people called a bedroom, where the temperature was far below zero. Our neigel vasser (3) was frozen in the morning. There was no lobby in the yeshiva where we could relax,

nor was there a cafeteria. We knew that the food we ate was practically taken from the mouths of our roshei yeshiva. Our menahel ruhani (spiritual mentor), Rabbi Hizkiyahu Eliezer Kahan z”l, was as poor as a church mouse but looked like a king in his spotless frock coat and with his long, carefully combed white beard. He was a “Nevardoker” – a student of the famous Nevardok Yeshiva (called after a city in Lithuania) of pre-Holocaust Europe, which was dedicated to strict discipline and unfailing religious devotion. The non-Jews in Gateshead knew that when Rabbi Kahan, who walked as upright as a soldier, passed by in the afternoon, it was exactly 4:00 p.m. – not a minute later and not a minute earlier. They could not help but take their hats off to this remarkable human being who was a great tzaddik.

When you entered the yeshiva, you were no longer sure in which century you were living – the 5th, 12th, 17th or 20th. This was a world unto itself, made up of singularly focused people. There was no walking out to the street for a few minutes to get some fresh air; no option of going to a kosher restaurant to get a cup of coffee or have a falafel; no chance of meeting a religious girl studying at the famous Gateshead Seminary. Although 150 of them were right around the corner, they were light-years away from our yeshiva. Not only was it dangerous to walk in the streets, since so many drunken people wandered around, but no one even had any interest in doing so. It was considered bitul zman (a waste of time). There was one supreme goal: shtaigen in lernen (excelling in learning).

The roshei yeshiva showed incredible integrity, deep religiosity and a total absence of any personal agenda. There was no competition between them, no scandals and no quarrels. Just Torah in all of its splendor. What counted was the service of God through learning the Talmud, a holy text of infinite sublimity. This monumental text took them back to Mount Sinai, and through its pages they relived the greatest moments in all of Jewish history. There was much naiveté, a withdrawal from the world, which made the rabbis seem like human angels while studying the laws of damages and injuries. There were also mussar shmoozen. These were not intellectual discourses like Kant’s sophisticated insights about ethics; they were emotional, often spontaneous, outbursts of love for God and man. Through the singsong chants, they would lift us up to heaven and ask of us to be supreme human beings and Jews. Nothing in this world comes close to those religious experiences.

I spent 12 years in yeshivot, and then completed my Ph.D. Today, when I speak with many people who reject the yeshiva world and criticize it harshly for its faults, I realize that although I agree with many of their critical assessments, they

fail to understand the inner music of these institutions.

They do not realize that this introverted but remarkable world somehow lifted the Jews out of their misery throughout history and gave them the strength to survive all their enemies under the most intolerable conditions brought on by anti-Semitism. It was this denial of time that made the Jews eternal. The yeshiva world was no doubt very small compared to what it is now, but until the emancipation it was the pride of the entire Jewish world. The Talmud afforded the Jews wings, enabling them to fly to other worlds; to return to the past that no longer existed; and to look toward worlds that were still to come. It became the Jews' portable homeland, and their complete immersion in its texts made them indestructible even as they were tortured and killed. The Talmud became their survival kit, which ultimately empowered their offspring to establish the State of Israel, nearly 2000 years after they were exiled from their land. This is unprecedented in all of the history of mankind.

For nearly 2000 years the yeshiva world made Jews view life sub specie aeternitatis, as Spinoza called it – from the perspective of eternity. Indeed, it allowed them to leave behind ordinary history and become a-historical. Jews stepped out of history because it was the only way to survive in history. And so the yeshiva world gave the Jewish people a tool for survival, which no one could match for the last 2000 years. Had the yeshiva world not done so, the Jewish people would never have endured, the State of Israel would not have been created, and no Jews – neither religious nor secular – would have lived in this wonderful country. All Israelis owe their lives to the wondrous yeshiva world, whether they like it or not.

In some way, Spinoza was a yeshiva student. He lived in his small room in Voorburg, and that was his beit midrash. Like the yeshiva students, he nearly never left it. There he built his universe and wrote his magnum opus. Consistent with his own philosophy, he too lived outside of history. His deep thoughts, insights and noble feelings are not of this world.

They too are the product of sub specie aeternitatis and therefore suspect. In the long run they will break down, because one might be able to escape this world, even for a long time, but ultimately one needs to return. Thoughts that are eternal and untouchable are too beautiful and, for most people, unreachable. And so it is with the yeshiva world. Learning Talmud without being able to put much of its teachings into practice is too abstract and too unworldly.
With the establishment of the State of Israel, Jews were forced to re-enter history. But after 2000 years of living as yeshiva students and followers of Spinoza's

saintly teachings, it is a painful transformation. Most of our leaders, our government, and the roshei yeshiva have not yet realized that we are still hanging in suspense. We live with one foot in the world of the yeshiva and Spinoza, and the other foot on the ground with all its challenges and harsh realities. Our political leaders want us to come down and stand with both feet on the ground, while the yeshiva world wants to stay in the beit midrash of Spinoza, in heaven. Both will have to realize that their goals are unrealistic. It is much too early to decide whether we should come down with both feet on the ground, or continue to stay in heaven with at least one foot. We still find ourselves at a crossroads. One is reminded of the story told about a former premier of China who was asked what the impact of the French Revolution was on modern European history. His reply was, “It’s too early to say.”

What our political leaders have to ask themselves is whether it is already possible to fully return to history. Our enemies surrounding us are getting stronger and stronger. Their hate increases daily. Israel now finds itself in an unprecedented and precarious situation, more and more isolated. We are close to becoming, once again, a nation that “dwells alone,” as our biblical arch-enemy Bil’am stated thousands of years ago. (4) Can we really afford to fully enter into history bound by its normative rules, and be defeated by these very rules because we are not yet strong enough? Wouldn’t it be better to stay with one foot in the world of sub specie aeternitatis, outside of history? In fact, isn’t the very existence of the State of Israel a bit too miraculous to fit the norms of history? Perhaps we should make sure that some of our people, our yeshiva students, continue to live outside of history so that they can rescue our nation if history does not accept us as real players and we would otherwise disappear. Isn’t it true that we are treated as a people with no history, as the United Nations, many European countries, and even the American administration use double standards when judging us, not allowing us to be part of conventional history? We are still living through the birth-pangs, as yet unable to say what the baby will look like.

On the other hand, it is our Hareidi roshei yeshiva and those recognized as the gedolei hador who are guilty of not realizing that we Jews must return to history at some point, and if they don’t want to join us they may lose us altogether and they themselves may not survive. They seem to be completely oblivious to the radical change that has taken place in the Jewish world – including their own yeshiva world – after the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. We have been taught that in the long run it is impossible for all of us to stay outside of history. The Holocaust has taught us that we cannot survive ad infinitum without entering history. We have too much eternity and too little

geography. To argue that our yeshiva students are the ones who really defend us against our enemies, and that we do not need soldiers, is an escape from reality and as anti-halakhic as can be. It is a rewriting of Judaism that the Hareidi leadership cannot even accuse the Reform of doing.

Both the secular and the Hareidi utterly lack historical perspective. The secular have to learn that we may need to keep some people outside of history, and the Hareidi leadership will have to realize that now that we have a state of our own, all of us, without exception, must serve in Tzahal because we are trying to get back into history. In fact, every young Jewish male outside of Israel should feel it his absolute moral obligation to serve for a few months in the Israeli army, because by now world Jewry is depending on the State of Israel, if only so that when it really goes wrong in Europe or the United States there will be a haven for them.

It cannot be denied that the Israeli government made a major blunder in the way it handled the need to draft yeshiva students for army service. Some Knesset members believe that they won, but in reality it was a monumental loss and they became the laughing stock of Israeli society by arguing for equal service by all. Everyone knows that there's no such thing as equality in the army. Some people risk their lives, others do not. If all were equal, the army wouldn't function. We also know that a Jewish State will never be able to put people in jail because they learn Torah.

Both parties should have learned from the great British Jewish philosopher Isaiah Berlin who states that there are no ideal solutions in this world. There are only tradeoffs. "You cannot combine full liberty with full equality… Justice and mercy, knowledge and happiness can collide," says Berlin. It is not that such perfect harmony cannot be created because of practical difficulties. It is that "utopian solutions are in principle incoherent and unimaginable… so there have to be choices." One can only choose how much equality and how much liberty, how much mercy and how much justice. Belief in a perfect world "cannot but lead to suffering, misery, blood, terrible oppression." (5)

The only thing the government can do is suggest that Hareidi yeshiva students go for basic training and build yeshivot in the army. The students would have to walk around in uniform and learn full time, learn with other soldiers, do community service, or something similar. Fair? Certainly not. But fairness is not a value that can always work in the military.

Only a tradeoff can work; there is no other option. And by allowing these students to study while in the army, we at least remind ourselves that we may still have to be an a-historical people and that we cannot yet afford to live solely within history. It is still too dangerous. If some of us are full-time cooks in the army, others can be full time learners in the army. Much too expensive? Sure! But you cannot have your cake and eat it too.

Still, the greatest mistake was not made by the government but by the Hareidi leadership. When it organized a demonstration in which nearly 600,000 black-hatted yeshiva students participated to show their love for Torah, one could hear a pin drop just before the crowd burst out in an unprecedented cry of Shema Yisrael. That was the perfect opportunity to prove their love for our brave soldiers and all of Israeli society by having all 600,000 men and women recite prayers for the welfare of the soldiers and all Jews in Israel. That would not only have been a great kiddush Hashem; it also would have turned Israeli society around and healed much of the animosity between the Hareidi and non-Hareidi communities. Yeshiva students would have been seen in a different light. Instead of having upset hundreds of thousands of Israelis, among whom many have lost their sons and daughters in combat, it would have created an entirely different atmosphere in the country. There is little doubt that most yeshiva students would have done it with great love. The failure to ask them to do so is not just a missed opportunity. It is completely irresponsible and a terrible tragedy. When the world-renowned, Hareidi halakhic authority Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Aurbach z”l was asked to which graves of tzaddikim one should go to pray, he said to go to the military cemeteries. The fact that the Hareidi leadership did not tell 600,000 of their followers to pray for our soldiers proves beyond doubt how small-minded are those who are recognized as gedolei hador.

To paraphrase Spinoza: All noble men are as great as they are rare.

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1. Rabbi, talmudist and halachist in Galicia, 1745-1812.
2. Rabbi and respected posek in Lissa (today known as Leszno), Poland, 1760-1832.
3. Water put near one’s bed at night for washing hands upon arising.
4. Bamidbar 23:9.
5. Ramin Jahanbegloo, Conversations with Isaiah Berlin (London: Halban Publishers, 2007) pp. 142-3.