Text and Context: Reflections on Contemporary Orthodoxy

View PDF



Tzvi Zucker lives in Jerusalem with his wife and two children. He received his MSW from Touro College Graduate School of Social Work.

“Home” is a concept not easily put into words. It is our refuge, our sanctum, our institution for the whole. It evokes the pictures of the happy family, of children playing in security, and the nurturing environment in which people grow into themselves. It is the place you go back to, that you belong to.

When home is not where your heart is, and the individuals comprising that home have no cohesive identity, there is no belonging – and sooner or later, those individuals (since, after all, that is all they are) learn that their home is broken, and they therefore run away to the refuge of their castles in the air (of which their psychologists collect the rent).

Today’s times have a need for stable homes, in any form, more than any other. Teens at risk, high school pregnancies, disappearing morals, urban blight, the wonderful statistic that one in four American college students possess an STD, the rise of postmodernism and its moral irreverence and irrelevance, the erosion of what is called “Judeo-Christian values”, the rise in cultural glorification of youthful promiscuous sex and violence (not to mention youth in and of itself)…Even Orthodox Judaism, bastion of the ironclad safety net, has begun cracking at the seams from an internal pressure created by its teenagers and the external pressure of the society described.

Today’s feel good stories which populate the self-help shelves in book stores all over the planet (Chicken Soup for the Soul and its genre) have one amazing quality worth noticing – a brilliant summation, in one moment, where everything comes together. We are inspired by these stories, taking solace in that perfect

moment and its unspoken comfort that perhaps one day we will reach ours...and never think about where it may take us. We watch the poor family get their new house on Extreme Makeover, see their tearful reactions, and never see what happens when they can't make the tax payments on the house, or simply get conceited and entitled with their newfound wealth/status symbol and wind up divorced. Or we see athletes winning the gold medal in the Olympics, shedding tears of joy while basking in the adulation of the crowd in their accomplishment, but do not see them return home broken and lost as to what on earth they should do next, now that the moment they have invested the last four years in has now passed. We all long for a "clockwork universe", a world that responds to us and gives us what we need when we need it; years of watching TV shows and movies that operate on this principle may have something to do with it. Either way, this growing dream of the perfect moment, the clockwork universe striking twelve, is indicative of dreamers who feel their life is coming apart, directionless, and the loosening of bonds of family and friendship that give us the love and nurturing we need.

Listening to mental health professionals and community workers, the fast paced life of the twenty first century has robbed us of our family values, and our lost and confused children are acting out because they need to feel valued and validated; as the family is intended to provide the value and validation of the children as they embark on their quest for self, when it does not, the children look elsewhere – with disastrous results.
This may or may not be true.

The psychological need to be validated, to be valued, is nothing new. Self-help books and parenting manuals (and other such tomes of fiction) all stress the need for validation. This, in and of itself, is harmless at worst. It might carry the strange threat of turning people into hollow shells of themselves because they objectify everything about their own self, but that doesn't really affect people too badly, right?

Living in the age of scientific reason, in which (ridiculously) something being "unscientific" means it cannot possibly be true, we seek validation from what is outside of ourselves; this is perfectly acceptable for investigating worldly phenomena, but comes up woefully inadequate for validating our own existence, and its experiences.
The root that "value" and "validation" share comes from the old French valoir, meaning "be worthy," which itself is originally "be strong," from the Latin valere "be strong, be well, be worth, have power, be able". Notice the difference in the

shades of the meaning, though. It went from something within you, an enabling force of Selfhood, to something outside of you that you need in order to be that very Self in the first place.

Anyone who is a student of the Western zeitgeist's evolution, or was simply alive at the right time, has seen this shift in meaning accelerate in the last fifty years. We live in a society in which people see this need for validation as a fact of life. Were this to just be a fact of Western life, that would be fine. But it has crept into Jewish life in insidious ways, and this has in turn corrupted our life beyond recognition. [1]

Of course, values are what we ourselves hold to be important, whereas validation is what gives us our worth. This is because the definition we give to ourselves (our "values") is what creates our sense of validation.

In the West, the objectifying that people do of themselves is conceptual based – I am a doctor, an athlete, a religious man of faith, or any other such idea. This is who I am, it is what I think is important, and because it is what I hold dear and significant I, too, am significant for being this way.

The problem is when Torah observant Jews, such as many of those today, define themselves as those who do the XYZ of mitzvoth. Because the definition is action based, the value is doing these things (eating the properly baked crackers on Passover, only carrying on Saturdays within a proper string enclosure) – and the validation is their being done. Which has nothing to do with you at all.

Now, I bet you those who already have all the answers are jumping out of their chairs and screaming "of course it's about you doing it – you go to Olam Haba for it!"
And I will answer you that if that is your motivation, you are no different than the four year old who needs a cookie to clean his/her room (or go to the toilet). It isn't the cookie that is important, even if it is the reason the four year old is doing it. [2]
But if that four year old ritualizes cleaning his room for the sake of the cookie, he will never come to value a clean room. Nor will he develop feelings of self worth by having a clean room, because THERE IS NO SELF – only what needs to be done. And so we have adults who treat their marriages as rituals ("but honey, I bought you a nice new dress! See, I love you!" "But you haven't paid any attention to me at all, you do not share your dreams, emotions, your experience of Life with me…"), who engage in magical thinking ("if I give $18 to this charity, then I will succeed in my business), and who have no fulfillment or self-expression

in anything they do.

We naively think that the reasons for doing mitzvoth that we learn when we are four years old hold water when we are 16, or 60…and the consequence of this is the systematic destruction of any kind of self-validation that is predicated on a healthy sense of self, instead of its negation.

It is here, in that ridiculous, unintended, vicious, self-negating definition of value that Torah Observant Jewry finds itself. What is important is the prescribed actions and properly prescribing the proper actions. A self, a “me” with dreams and ambitions, goals and relationships, fears and loves, is at best extraneous and at worst a problem to overcome in the pursuit of perfectly prescribed perfect actions.

This world? Why bother? It’s only a stage – we do our actions and play our parts. Knowledge? What for? It only takes time away from prescribing perfect actions, and doing them. Worldview? Philosophy? Perspective? What do you need any of that for? It’s all simple – do whatever you can while you can for the biggest and best reward in the Next World.

In short, our vision of the ultimate human being is a well informed, perfectly efficient action machine with the worldview of a four year old.

Perhaps the greatest area this has become true is with learning itself. People spend more time learning today than ever before, yet asking them WHAT they learned usually yields a parroting of arcane subjects at best and a puzzled look as they simply say the name of the Masechta or Sefer. Learning has become an action, something you DO, instead of the acquiring of new information to fit into a worldview.

Of course, we make allowances and exceptions for those who want to do things like work. The actions remain paramount, only the focus changes. Instead of learning being the action one should focus on, we have others – tzedaka, for example. But regardless of the prescribed action, it remains the DOING that is important, and importance granting. People’s growth, their self discovery, their level of understanding of the world and of He Who is behind it, their depth, their humanity – it isn’t important.

Small wonder our children are off seeking validation from pop psychology and faceless strangers on internet chatrooms (that they are turning to under their covers on shabbat, perhaps [3]). It’s more than family that creates validation, it is Home. And the Bayit that was supposed to be there to validate and value the

world itself is now a golden onion filled with those who find value in submission and in death, and we console ourselves with some parable about a flask in the sky that collects tears [4].

This worldview has serious historical underpinnings – it did not arise by accident.

Following the Holocaust, people came to the shores of a strange land (whichever strange land that was – America or Israel) to rebuild. As most people react in times of horrible loss, they hunker down defensively and seek to recreate what they had before. In this case it was the Europe of old, with its simple shtetl folk and overall educationless masses.

Judaism is a tradition based movement. Precedent and tradition are the two pillars of all Halakhic debate as well as Friday night conversations. It is no surprise that the ideals of the old world were imported as the pinnacles of achievement to strive for. The model person would be one motivated by faith, not reason, and action, not perspective; their identity would be one set and defined by a marked distance from intellectualism – after all, wasn't that the problem with those Reformniks in Berlin who brought the Holocaust on us in the first place? Oh, no, never. Who needs questions – can anyone answer where God was during the Holocaust? So of what use are questions? Better to do what God told us to do and leave the questions alone.

This idea is said to have appeared in Europe around the time of the Chasam Sofer, who himself was battling those Reformers in their infancy. In an effort to combat their growing appeal and allure to the typical (unlearned) Jew on the street, he created the single most destructive pun in all of history - "haChadash assur min haTorah" [5]. From this nobly intended idea, a branch of arch-conservatism in Halakha was born. Or so goes the narrative.

It isn't true.

Ashkenazi Jewry had this streak in it from the time of the early Acharonim. It is the tendency of exiled people to absorb influences from their host cultures (one only needs to look at our calendar; the names for the months in the Jewish calendar are Babylonian (!) in origin, and so were pretty much half the names of the amoraim living in Bavel - Abaye, Rava, Pappa, Huna, Rabbah, Rami, Rafram, Geviha, to name a few). The predominant influence in the lands of Ashkenaz was the Church. Looking through the Mussar/machshava seforim written in Europe, we find themes of needing to be saved from sin (albeit those of our own doing instead of some original flavor), emphasis on faith as the guiding principle of

worship, a philosophical/ontological worldview based on the soul and a spiritual world in which its actions or beliefs are meaningful, a break from science, a religious worldview predicated on the personal (it is YOU and your being righteous or wicked which counts, as opposed to the Klal), among other examples. These are all Christian themes.

(For those who are going to point to the split between the Vilna Gaon and the Chassidim and say that innovation in Jewish life was alive and well, it is fairly argued that both camps were conservatively based. The Chassidic camp quickly ritualized everything in their way of life, venerating the simple unlearned faith of the farmer and wagon driver as the GOAL of Torah life. The stories passed down to each generation focused on a mystical happiness that could be experienced by those who believed, and denigrated those who learned but did not live their learning. The Litvish camp, while stressing the need to learn and know, valued a disconnected knowledge base that was not tied into experience – learn, but keep it in pilpul which is intellectually dazzling and utterly useless for answering a simple question of what to do. Both sides refused to engage the world around them, or even each other; both approaches preached the “hold on tight and do what you need to do” that we are calling attention to. Their namesakes and descendants still do.)

This cross-evolution is best referenced by the “Judeo-Christian values” the western world continues to use as its moral compass. It isn’t just that the Christian ones are based on the Jewish morals of the Old Testament (though that is true as well) – they work in tandem, are perceived to be the same thing. It is no accident that the support for Israel that is still present in the West is based on ethics, on shared morals, on shared beliefs in the primacy of the “Old Testament God”, a Messiah that will redeem the chosen ones from the Ishmaelite, etc.

This is why Western civilization exerts such a strong pull on Jews – it isn’t just that we are absorbing modern culture from them (hence the black hats, suits, and white shirts from the 1950s, for example) – we subconsciously see ourselves as one of their kind. The typical Ashkenazi looks at himself as a Westerner – not a Middle Easterner! And eventually, the need to be different and distinct begins to fade as the need to be echad min ha’amim takes over. As “enlightened humans”, who are “logical, rational, scientific” beings, why would it matter if I watch some pornography? Or eat only properly slaughtered chickens? Or not use my phone on Saturdays? Indeed, even in Israel, there are those who protest Israel passing a law designating the country to be a Jewish State, instead preferring to be a regular (read: Western) democracy.

Why are we different? Why is God setting us apart – to do the proper rituals? What's the difference? Who wants to believe in an arbitrary God who desires Burger Delights instead of Big Macs? I want to be a person, not an action/ritual machine. A human being.

This, sadly, is what Rav Shimon bar Yochai was alluding to with his derasha of "ki adam atem – atem k'ruyim adam v'hem lo k'ruyim adam" (Yevamot 61a) – what Judaism IS is simply the way to be a human, Adam, the pinnacle of Creation. We all want to be something real, something valuable. And that is what it means to be Adam. To be Man, primal Man. Not a belief machine, not a ritual doer – Man. The human who is where the falling star meets the rising ape (in the words of Terry Pratchett).

And so, in a terrible way, our children are NOT turning to the outside for validation. They are, in their eyes, REturning to what is truly valuable, and valued – themselves – in the only way they know how.

Until we understand that, there is nothing we can do. For them, and for ourselves.

And so we have a generation where ALL are lost, confused, adrift…off course. Those who follow after their hearts and eyes sometimes do not come back to the fold. Some do. Others die inside, leaving the passion and dreams of their youth behind in a maze of socially acceptable ways to numb their pain and disbelief. Some find consolation in highly personal relationships with the Divine, trying to navigate the slippery precipice of insanity and religious devotion.

And all suffer from a broken values system, crying out for God to validate their lives, their selves, their souls.

Now, we all know what you're going to say next. "Is the rest of the world any better? Do they, too, not have this problem of a lack of self value in their lives? Does the rise in teen pregnancies, drug usage, gang participation, crime, and other markers of social deviancy not speak of this problem being present, and much worse, in the outside world?"

You are a hundred percent right.

And that doesn't change a thing about what I said. Just because someone else has a broken nose doesn't mean yours isn't broken too. And if we are to reconnect with what it truly means to be a Jew and if we are to take steps to reach for Tikkun, then we must acknowledge what is broken, regardless of how it compares to others.

Of course, those of you who haven't thrown this essay away in disgust by now are probably saying "but of course, I agree, it is important for our children to experience things, but what of the Torah? If it is assur, then you can't do it! Obviously our children are just baalei taavah and not motivated by any of this higher calling of wanting to be Adam or whatever. You're just making excuses for our kids."

What of the Torah, indeed? What, exactly, IS the Torah? We have touched on this issue, skirted around it, illuminated one facet or another perhaps here and there – but a working definition, or a relatable one at least, is certainly needed. Those who have the answers will not hear or see the question, and those who are not looking for a life of Realness, of Truth, of living as Man (and instead prefer their own interpretations and a life in their own heads) don't care about anything other than their fantasy/simulation based experiences. But those who do care and are searching, looking, seeking a life that is bound within the covenant of living in two worlds and being One with their Creator – they instinctively know the need to understand the Torah that is itself called the Berit (im lo beriti yomam valayla chukot shamayim va'aretz lo samti - Yirmiyahu 36:25).

The long and terrible descent of the Torah from Supernal Wisdom and blueprint of the Universe to antiquated and outdated rulebook has been one with disastrous consequences. Chazal trace the darkness we find ourselves in (and certainly the very same darkness we associate with the "Dark Ages") to the translation of the Torah into Greek (which is altogether odd, as we know that you are allowed write a sefer torah in Greek, as the Mishna in Masechet Megilla states), which theoretically would mean that your Artscroll Chumash just may be a horrific destruction of what Torah was meant to be.

The wonder of what was so bad about the events of Ptolemy requesting a translation of Torah is ongoing. So is the fast day we keep to mourn its taking place (Asarah b'Tevet – though really it is the fast of the 8th of Tevet, which we do not observe; instead we lump the events of the 8th, 9th, and 10th together and fasting on the 10th). It is made especially confounding by our own enthusiastic embracing of the Targumim, which themselves are translations of Torah. So it can't be the act of learning the Torah in another language that is the issue, right?

Perhaps the most innocuous and subtlest problem of translating the Torah is its being turned into a book. Books are dead, they do not speak – they merely record information that you can decode later, perhaps. Torah was meant to be given by speech (hence HaShem trying to give the Aseret HaDibrot by telling them to us

directly!), has an essential component to it that is supposed to be ONLY speech (Torah she'Baal Peh…You know, the one that everyone thinks is written down, fixed and unchanging), and can only be given over by a teacher to a student in the guise of a relationship (gadol shimusho shel torah mi'limudo - Berachot 7b)…through communication.

So it comes as no surprise that the single most destructive element of what passes for Torah Judaism today is the slavish devotion to the rules, the cemented behaviors, and the "always ask someone who knows (because you do not and cannot)" attitude that arises from a text-based Judaism. "Dos shteit!" is the rallying cry of the current generation of teachers, educators, rabbonim and learned men. If it says it in the book, it must be true.

Of course, the CONTEXT you place your text in can possibly make all the difference in the world, but then again, why would we bother with trivial matters like that?
It is no accident that today's communication on all levels has broken down due to contextual wrangling. We consistently worm out of things, or shoehorn them into other things, all while attempting to have our preconceived views win out. Isn't it funny how we all know what the Rabbi is going to say before he says it? Or how we can know what Shas or the Agudah will think and hold of a certain issue – before they say so? We know their agenda, and therefore we know them too. The context they have of the world defines them.

And it defines each person too. We are what we see – the I and the eye are the same. This is so true that Nevuah is influenced by the perceiver [6]! When Yoshiyahu was king, he sent his messengers to ask Chulda HaNeviah for a message regarding the impending doom portended by the Torah scroll that was found in the Beit HaMikdash, bypassing Yirmiyahu. The Gemara (Megillah 14b) asks why he would do this, and answers that he thought that since she was a woman, she would have more rachamim – which is an absurd answer, unless you understand that the Navi shapes his/her Nevuah!
The Torah is no different – it, too, is completely dependent on the context we place it in. Perhaps the greatest disaster facing the Jewish people today is the loss of context to Torah, to Yahadut, to what it means to be Yisrael.

This is something we already touched on earlier – the prevailing context of the Torah lifestyle is one of actions, of doing, of being a vehicle. There is no mental picture, no vision, no overarching and all encompassing idea to what Torah is supposed to be. We take a pasuk here, a gemara there, and make it mean what we want it to mean, or turn it into a stand alone moral lesson, or simply treat it as

a nuclear utterance of the Holy One.

Torah is defined by Halikha/halakha. That is to say (since the words mean practically the same thing) that Torah is meant to be a vehicle in and of itself; it is a path, a book of direction, a roadmap. The only way you can bridge two worlds is by constructing a bridge. And when you realize that Torah only shows up after Adam is thrown out of Paradise, then it makes perfect sense that it is intended to be the way to get back to it.
This is why the favorite simile of Torah is an ocean – it is the yam shel Torah. And it is no accident there that the term for a boat is the term for a Self. For self, boats, perception, eyes and "I"…they are all parts of the same Halikha from here to There.

This idea is made clearer by looking at Moshe's request of HaShem after the sin of the golden calf– of all insanely wild things he asks for, it is the "Halo belechtecha imanu" that he insists on. But of course he does – he is demanding that haShem Himself accompany us along that twisted, winding, journey of Selfhood. And the sin of the golden calf itself is only seen within the context of ma'amid Har Sinai – Torah itself!

This is where the vibrancy, the personal connection, the very dependence of Torah she'Be'al Peh on a person's own experiences, lessons learned, and sense of self comes from – and the ice cold death knell of that same self when it is removed from Torah itself. Do you think there is a list of souls and corresponding letters in Heaven? What do you think the Midrash means when it says each of us is a letter in the Torah? It is our life itself that sheds Light on the Torah – ki heim chayeinu, in the most beautifully obvious understanding of the term (!).

There is an old Greek parable of the ship of Theseus, which set sail over the course of many years. Over time, every one of its parts had been replaced as they had worn down or broke. Yet it is still the same ship of Theseus – for the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Torah is that ship – over the years, each part of Torah has been re-interpreted, revitalized, and relearned by those who delve into it. We add layers of context, meaning, and shed new light and understanding on things not seen before. In fact, the things we add to it are pieces of ourselves, literally – an insight here, a lesson learned there, a painful and delicate balancing act of applying what Life has taught us. But it is still the same Torah given on Sinai! And we sail that ship from shore to shore, from one world to the next, turning our mundane experiences of the world into Light, and Truth.

Yet today our leaders see all of planet Earth and all it has to offer us as some sort of twisted siren's song, luring us to our deaths. "Why bring the ship of Torah into those waters?" they ask. As if there are ANY waters that are not part of that Yam shel Torah in the first place! It is perhaps the saddest thing of all that the very ship of Theseus that was meant to live forever and give life to those who create it anew each generation has been hijacked by those seeking to steer it safely away from any Sirens that would tempt those who sail it; yet it is they who are driving everyone to jump ship and swim for the Sirens – without the benefit of the Ship, which was what would have kept them safe in the first place. For it is Torah that grants us the ultimate Self– with it, we can face anything and emerge victorious. Rav Yosef celebrated each Shavuoth by announcing that the Torah he learned is what made him himself [7] – because, as we've said, the I and the eye are the same. Without it, you're just another puff of stardust adrift in a cosmos with no meaning.

So instead of sailing ships of Selfhood through the world, integrating our experiences and consciousness, and bringing the ideas of Torah to Life, we peer into books of which we decided that we have no right to argue with, and look up our lives in a table of contents that does not have any content of our Soul. We have created a belief system around it that says that the subjugation of oneself to their dicta and rulings is what the Heavenly Court will judge our lives on, and that anything outside the purview of these books is not called life.

This text/sefer based Judaism and its slavery, which itself is the ultimate mockery of the dictum of Chazal which states "ein lecha ben chorin elah mi she'osek baTorah" (Avot 6:2), makes it is obvious that the preconceived notions and givens and agendas of those interpreting the books are alive and well; they govern how things work, invade the space of Halakha, and make a farce of the halikha of that Halakha. It is not a boat of Selfhood in a sea of Existence to these charlatans, but itself the siren's song offering power, connection to God, or perhaps even a cheap way to sell your soul in return for some heaven. But mostly, it offers power – power over others, power over your environment, and most importantly power in the sense being able to define what is True and what is not.

For the ultimate issue we all have with a Torah lifestyle that no amount of cute PR campaigns, Project Inspire shabbatons, and glitzy Gateways seminars can fix is: simply, deep down, we all know that the helm of the ship has been hijacked by those who seek to define their present little worlds as Heaven itself…who seek to be the Arbiters of Truth, according to their understanding of it, and to revel in the power that affords them.

Have you ever noticed the correlation between people's concretizing Truth and their abandonment of a progress-based worldview/narrative? It seems that the more we think the Truth is here, the less there is a need to keep looking for anything else. Again, look at the Church and the Dark Ages, or the fundamentalist Islamists of today – medicine? Faith. Science? God. Rights and Freedom? Submit to God through faith. There is nothing left to do other than believe…right? Or at our current crop of leaders, who hide behind a self-referentially manufactured empowerment called "Daas Torah" while advising other to their doom in the name of the L-rd . [8] And why? To keep their own power, of course .[9]

There is a nagging doubt in everyone's mind that asks in a hushed whisper "But where is this GOING?!" which is beaten down by an enthusiastic, Tertullian-esque "af al pi kein!!!" in frenzied hope that perhaps we can figure out later, without having to change now. We develop a bordering-on-insane hero worship cult for a few great men, and lament what we will do because there is no one who can fill their shoes; and we enthusiastically follow everything the people who use these men as mouthpieces say.

Only we can rent a stadium, pack in 40,000 people, and decide the biggest evil in all of the known universe is cell phones and internet. Then we congratulate ourselves for a Maariv davened by 40,000 people together, while the rest of the world laughs themselves sick over how ridiculous it is to rent the stadium for crying about the internet in the first place. Of course, no one is happy about the night's events, because everyone had a different agenda to advance . [10] But hypocrisy and flattery are alive and well, so everyone says what an unmitigated success this was, because the gedoilim spoke and the oilam listened. Even though there were no gedoilim talking, as they were just being used as mouthpieces for some filter software. Even when the whole world is laughing in our faces, we still hold onto the stupidities of being good sheep and doing what you're told as you're driven to the edge of the cliff by some internet filter selling snake charmer who convinced some people with beards the importance of his product [11,12, 13] . And many, many people shook their heads in disbelief and wondered if this is the vision for the future that we are selling ourselves. Or if we have one at all anymore.
And considering that it is the Torah itself that is meant to give us the Way to the destination, the very Home we have been chasing all this time, this is the saddest thing of all.

So what to do? Is it truly hopeless?

I say not.

Children have what Einstein termed Holy Curiosity; they have an instinctive need to find the Truth, both within themselves and in the world. There is a golden lining to this “calamity” of “teens at risk” – sometimes, the children can remind the parents of what is supposed to be, just the same as parents teach children of what was before – it is no accident that our mevaser ha’geulah, Eliyahu HaNavi, is tasked with “v’heshev lev avot al banim, v’lev banim al avotam” – for both are necessary, both are true, both are part of the ongoing Tikkun.

We, the children of Avraham Avinu, who was enjoined “hit’halech lefanai v’heyei tamim”, must continue to search, to inquire, to reject falsehoods and idols manmade, to be the Man for which the world was created.

If there is something to be done, it is to simply encourage, to engage in meaningful and passionate conversations with passionate people searching for meaning, and to teach Torah to our children in the way that Shelomo HaMelech entreated us to – Chanoch L’Naar al pi darko, gam ki yazkin lo yasur mimenah.

We must remember (and this word means to reconnect – to re-member, to connect to again) the rich tradition, the contextual Judaism of yore, the Torah that demands of us to See and Know (and not simply obey [14] and follow). It is this Judaism, this Yahadut, that our children can thrive in as they become themselves in a world that was made for nothing else.

[1]What once set the Jewish people apart from all others was its Life, its “joie de vivre” for lack of a better way to put it. Jewish people had a cheekiness, a sense of self, an Existential Chein that both proclaimed that Jews were distinct, yet open to all possibilities. “We are not you, but we could be anything…” The youthful abandon of “Lechteich acharai baMidbar”, mixed with the seriousness and self-definition of “Naaseh v’nishma”, is the perfect snapshot of the genetic personality of those descended from Yaakov/Yisrael.
Instead, it is seen today to be a need to be removed from all possibilities, to run away from fundamental science and knowledge, to build fences to keep the world away; we glorify Heaven at the expense of Earth, creating castles in the air of minute distinctions between super-kosher and supersuper¬-kosher so as to say we are better Jews than the person next door (who, nebach, eats that hechsher). We venerate the Gedolim and denigrate ourselves, questioning whether we have a right to our perceptions on the parasha or p’shat in the Gemara. Who are we, after all? They are men, and we are donkeys, and donkeys don’t have the right to have a p’shat in Gemara…

[2] Much like the apocryphal story (attributed to Bertrand Russell, Winston Churchill, and Groucho Marx among others) about a man who asks a girl if she will

sleep with him for a million dollars. Of course, she says yes. He then offers her two dollars and she slaps his face, saying, ‘What do you think I am?’ He answers, ‘I know what you are. We are just haggling over the price.’
So there are those who will only put on black boxes if the price is Heaven (“a million dollars”).
[3]A sarcastic and caustic reference (from pain that it is something these teenagers feel a need to do) to the “half shabbos” phenomenon written about by the OU and others.
[4] The famous medrash (which I do not know its source) about how G-d collects all of our tears and when the flaskis filled, the Messiah will come. Besides the obvious point that this implies that the L-rd is a sadist, it’s also completely ridiculous in the context it is placed in by this understanding.
[5] Taken from the Halachos of grain harvested before and after the Omer, the pun reads to mean “all things new are prohibited by Torah law”.
[6] The prevailing understanding of Nevuah as a phone call from G-d is a mistaken one. The one person whose Nevuah was as such was Shimshon’s mother, whose name is Tzlelponi…which technically MEANS “phone call”.
[7] Pesachim 68b – “chado’i nafsho’i…ki harbei Yosi ika ba’shuka…” One of my favorite lines in Sha”s. There are many Tzvi’s in this world, but there’s only one me.
[8] “College? Feh! Don’t worry about employment prospects. You have a chiyuv to learn.” Or “You’ve been out with her 8 times already. You don’t have a reason to say no, so marry her!” Or, and I am really not making this up, in 1933-1945, “Don’t leave Europe, we are meant to stay here…”
[9] God forbid for you to think I am accusing them of consciously doing this. I am simply saying they are no different than the Miraglim, who made the same mistakes.
[10] Can you imagine the Kiddush HaShem that would have been made had we invited all those (Jewish and not) who suffer from the inadvertent evils the internet provides (community leaders, social workers, school principals, to name a few) to join us in an open dialogue to find a solution, for all the world? What better example of an ohr la’amim than that?
[11] Which, sadly, is not much different than the salmon fishery guy who revived a question of parasites in fish in order to create an in effect rule to buy his product. Although this fish man’s chutzpa was far greater, as his question he raised was already asked by the Gemara and ruled to not be a problem, so he announced that Nature has changed and therefore those very same parasites are now reason to say the fish is assur.
[12]And that doesn’t even hold a candle to the kashrut agencies who publicized their important findings on the status of some bourbon distilleries ownership by

(irreligious) Jews and the subsequent problem of chametz she’avar alav haPesach and their insistence that due to this people should only buy bourbons with an acceptable hechsher…except this SAME AGENCIES ARE PUTTING A HECHSHER ON THOSE SAME DISTILLERIES once their new batches are finished aging.
[13] Not to mention the new push to not drink sherry cask scotches, as it may be a problem of yayin nesach. Except Rav Moshe Feinstein, who is the halachic benchmark for these communities in just about everything else, says it is not a problem at all (and supposedly drank them himself). However, now that you can see kosher symbols on scotches, you can understand the sudden difference in understanding of the halacha…
[14]It is worth noting there is no word in Lashon HaKodesh for “obey”. Modern Hebrew invented one, l’tzayet, as it was necessary for the army…