Lonely, But Not Alone

View PDF



Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo heads the David Cardozo Academy in Jerusalem. A prolific author and lecturer, he is one of the most thoughtful and creative thinkers in the contemporary Jewish world. To receive his weekly “Thoughts to Ponder”, please visit www.cardozoacademy.org. This article appears in Issue 16 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Judaism, to me, is not about laws but about music and musical notes. In all of its laws, I hear powerful sonatas that transform my soul: Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 35, with its heights of intensity; Johann Sebastian Bach’s Piano Concerto No. 1 in D Minor, with his iron fist, uncompromising dedication to detail, and strict adherence to rigid rules of composition, resulting in a phenomenal outburst of emotion. When I listen to these masterpieces, I encounter the thunder and lightning experienced by the children of Israel when God revealed His Torah at Mount Sinai. It feels like being hit with an uppercut under the chin and remaining unconscious for the rest of the day.

But I also hear Igor Stravinsky’s recreation of Bach’s cantatas and, even more, his Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rite of Spring). The scandal it caused when it was performed in Paris on May 29, 1913, led to a breakthrough in the world of musical composition. The music never had a chance as the audience erupted in riotous behavior almost from the first sounds. The weird resonance, the odd twists and turns of melody proved disconcerting to many. There were reports of fisticuffs, spitting, slapping and even threats of dueling. Still, Stravinsky won the day. His first performance may have lost the battle, but since then, this masterpiece generates ecstatic reactions among many music lovers.

It brings to mind the great debates of the rabbis in the Talmud who showed unprecedented courage by interpreting Jewish law and philosophy in infinite ways that caused major conflicts, many of which have not been resolved to this day.

The spiritual riots and debates concerning the words of God at Sinai continue to keep Judaism ever fresh.

I think of my non-Jewish friend who came to see me in the renowned Gateshead Yeshiva in England, the “Lakewood of Europe,” where I was studying at the time. He wanted to understand what a talmudic college was all about and wondered what I, once liberal-minded and secular, was doing in this “Jewish monastery.” I brought him into the Beit Midrash, where he expected to find a university-like, mannerly student body, speaking softly, whispering in near silence. What he actually encountered almost made him pass out. Hundreds of young men were nervously walking around, arguing and shouting at each other so that it was nearly impossible to hear one’s own voice. Turning to me in total astonishment, he asked whether this was a demonstration against the Queen of England or the British government. My answer shocked him even more: No, they are actually discussing what, precisely, did God say at Sinai over 3,000 years ago. I will never forget his response: “You still don’t know? “Indeed,” I said, “we still do not know!” Just as one can have major disagreements on how to interpret Bach or Brahms (remember Glenn Gould and Leonard Bernstein?) so it is with Jewish law. There are many possibilities, and all are legitimate! We still argue about the words of God and have therefore outlived all our enemies.

I worry when people, including influential rabbis today, suffocate Judaism by seeing it as nothing more than laws to be observed. Every dispute must be settled; no doubt may prevail; every philosophical disagreement has to be resolved. It seems they are unable to hear its ongoing and astonishing music. They are spiritually tone deaf.
****
I was born by breech delivery, a very painful procedure, which my mother endured with iron strength. We nearly did not make it. It was Friday night, the eve of Shabbat, and I was born to two marvelous people who by Jewish law would not have been allowed to marry. Theirs was a mixed marriage. My father was Jewish, my mother was not.
The physician was a religious Jew, Dr. Herzberger, who had to violate Shabbat to save our lives. It was Amsterdam, the 26th of July, 1946, just after the Holocaust.

In many ways, both these facts—an unusual birth and being the child of a mixed marriage—have set the stage for my life. I often see things from a reverse position. What is normal for others evokes in me feelings of wonder and awe, and what others consider amazing I see as obvious. As the product of a mixed marriage, who converted to Judaism at the age of 16, I became somewhat of an

in-out-sider. I had always seen myself as a “father Jew,” of zera Yisrael (Jewish ancestry) and therefore Jewish, but later on I learned that it did not make me a Jew according to Halakha.

My mother, while still a young woman, came to live with my father’s family once she had lost her Christian parents. So, she grew up in a liberal, socialist, Amsterdam-Jewish cultural milieu, where Friday night dinners were comparable to hatunot (weddings), though my father’s parents were not religious and as poor as church mice, as were most of Amsterdam’s Jews. My mother was completely integrated in this world and while she knew she was not Jewish, she was an integral part of the community, spoke its language and felt totally at home in this strange, secular but deeply Jewish world. It is no surprise, then, that she converted years later, when she was in her fifties, after I convinced her of Judaism’s beauty. After all, she had always been a Jewess.

With the permission of Hakham Shelomo Rodrigues Pereira, Chief Rabbi of the Portuguese Jewish community in Amsterdam, my parents were married kedat u-kedin (according to Halakha) by the same rabbi who married my wife and me three months later. There was, however, a small but crucial difference: my parents had been married for over thirty-five years, while my wife and I were just beginners!

*****

I spent more than 12 years learning in ultra-Orthodox yeshivot and received heter hora’ah (rabbinic ordination) from Rabbi Aryeh Leib Gurwitz who was, in his younger years, the havruta of Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, the most well-known disciple of Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, also known as the Hafetz Hayim. I know this world better than many do, but I am still not fully a part of it. Nor do I belong to the secular Jewish world, and surely not to the gentile world. I continuously struggle with my Jewish identity and religiosity; and now, at the age of 67, I am perhaps more involved in this endeavor than ever before. Day and night, I am busy with my great loves: Judaism, Israel and the Jewish people. Yet, I am unable to feel at home in the world of mainstream Orthodox Judaism. For many years I was a real bahur yeshiva, who had bought into the hareidi philosophy, but much later I realized that it had become too narrow, too insipid, and often trivial. Today, I believe that Modern Orthodoxy, too, has for the most part become tedious. Even the famous Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik, head of the rabbinical school at Yeshiva University in New York, was not able to lift it out of its spiritual malaise. Conservative and Reform Judaism are not options for my soul. They are too easy, too academic and unable to create a spiritual upheaval. My Judaism is one of dissent, protest and spiritual war against too much conformity. Self-critique is the

crucial issue, not self-satisfaction. Not clichés, but insight; not obstinacy, but elasticity; not habit, but spontaneity; these and deep religiosity are for me the great movers behind this magnificent tradition.

My atypical beginnings have influenced my thinking in unconventional ways and to this day get me into trouble with some of my rabbinical colleagues, as well as with religious and non-religious Jews.

****

At the age of 21, I married a Jewish girl from an Orthodox home. We have been blessed with five children, special children-in-law, lots of grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren. All of them are deeply religious, love Torah and excel in a variety of professions. We have children who are rabbis, teachers, businessmen, and one who is an architect with a license in counseling! Some of my grandchildren wear black kippot, and some have pei'ot; others have colored kippot, small and large. Some are closer to ultra-Orthodoxy, others are Modern Orthodox; some fervent Zionists, others not. They all represent parts of my personality and I love the diversity.

My home is in Jerusalem, in an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood where I no longer feel at home. With few exceptions, I pray with people I can't speak with and I speak with people I can't pray with. Still, I love them all. They are Jews, so they are my family. But I do not share with them an intellectual or spiritual-religious language. I have little in common with the Orthodox or the secular Jew in the way I see the world, God and Torah. For some people I am much too religious; for others, something of a heretic.

This is my fate and I can live with it, though it sometimes feels a little, and at other times very lonely.

****

My brother is 64 and although according to Halakha he is not a Jew, he is more Jewish than many Jews I know. For years he ran a kosher home with his non-Jewish wife, to accommodate our family visits. He nearly converted but never took the final step. He wants to be buried in Beth Haim, the Portuguese Jewish Cemetery in Ouderkerk, which is a small town just south of Amsterdam. But he knows that will be impossible.

When I suggested to him that perhaps he should be buried in the Reform community's cemetery in Amsterdam, he told me that he only wants to be buried in the Orthodox cemetery; other streams of Judaism are not on his radar!

Knowing that he will not be buried in Beth Haim, or any other Jewish cemetery, pains me greatly. How will it be possible to bury him among the gentiles when he is one of ours?

****

The Portuguese Jewish cemetery in Ouderkerk is full of contradictions and reflects the turmoil that existed within early Dutch Jewish society, which included many Marranos, also known as Conversos, who fled from the Inquisition and came to Holland but could not fit in. One will find there the extravagant tombstones of some of the most remarkable Jews in all of Jewish history: Don Samuel Palache, the Sultan of Morocco's commercial and diplomatic envoy in the sixteenth century; the famous Doctor Ephraim Bueno, early seventeenth-century Jewish physician and writer, whom Rembrandt used as the subject of one of his paintings; Antonio Lopez Pereira, chief treasurer of the King of Spain; and many other famous Jews.

These remarkable tombstones are outstandingly artistic and somewhat un-Jewish, reminiscent of the Catholic Church whose influence had not yet weakened. They have images of biblical figures and their narratives carved in marble. There is even one with an image of God speaking to the prophet Samuel! This is in total violation of Jewish law and is a clear indication of the spiritual confusion in which these Jews, including my forefathers, lived. I realize that my brother and I are strange by-products of this turmoil.

Even the parents of the most celebrated Jewish apostate and world-class philosopher, Baruch Spinoza, are buried there. But the philosopher himself was laid to rest behind the NieuweKerk (New Church) in The Hague--a sad reflection of what transpired in this unusual Jewish Portuguese community that was teeming with people who had split personalities and tried to reclaim their Judaism after having been forced to live as Catholics for hundreds of years. Paradoxically, while the Inquisition and subsequent expulsion from Spain made these Jews long for Judaism as never before, when they came to Amsterdam many of them could not adjust to mainstream Orthodox Judaism. Some became practicing Jews outwardly but remained Christian in some of their beliefs. They believed Judaism to be a kind of Christianity, but without the cross. Others became secular but outwardly conformed to religious observance so as to remain members of the "Portuguese nation," as they called themselves. They attended the Esnoga, the famous Sefardi Synagogue in Amsterdam, but their hearts were not in it. They had nowhere else to go, and they just wanted to belong. What made it even more critical was that they could not and did not want to be part of the Christian community of Amsterdam. Nor did they want to walk in the footsteps of Spinoza who, though he

never chose baptism, was happy to leave the community and never looked back.
*****

As a child, I was always overwhelmed by the extraordinary, which was seen by others as normal. Wherever I looked, I encountered the miracle of life. Whether it was watching the sun go down, or seeing genetic life under a microscope, I was struck with wonder and amazement. What is life and what is the meaning behind it? How is it that we are able to think? The most incomprehensible fact is that we are able to comprehend at all. Is the world not more a question than an answer? Why was I put on earth at this time and born into this family? Had I been dead for millions of years before entering this world? As Polish-born American theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel put it, “a perpetual murmur from the waves beyond the shore” was my constant companion, and it left me no rest.

I realize today that these questions laid the foundations for my religious and philosophical inquiries.

Our family lived a completely secular life, but within me, unawares, grew a spiritual consciousness that had religious implications.
****
My father was an extremely nice man, always in a good mood and incredibly proud of his Jewishness, particularly of being a Portuguese Jew. I doubt that he could have married a truly non-Jewish woman. He could only have married somebody like my mother who was Jewish without being a Jew. I greatly loved my father. He was a business man but should have been a professor. He was of high intellect and very sharp. Since he was born into a poor, socialistic Jewish family, he was never able to study or attend university. At an early age, he went into business as a sales representative and traveled around Holland. Later, after the Holocaust, he started his own business, in sewing machines, which proved very successful.

Somehow, he discovered Baruch Spinoza who had lived in Amsterdam in the seventeenth century. Spinoza had been a member of the Portuguese community and was put in herem (a ban pronounced by the ma’amad—council of rabbis and lay-leaders—of that community) after he started to express doubts about the truth of the Jewish tradition. It became the most infamous and harshest ban in all of Jewish history: “Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down, and cursed be he when he rises up; cursed be he when he goes out, and cursed be he when he comes in.” In the words of contemporary English Philosopher Simon Critchley: “That’s quite a lot of cursing” (The Book of Dead Philosophers, p. 157). When my father began to study Spinoza’s critique of

Judaism, he became a follower and decided to live a secular life. But, as with many Jews, he did not entirely succeed, for he was too much of a proud Jew and certain taboos remained. He would not eat pork; in fact, it never entered our home. Friday night was as it had always been. On Pessah we ate matzot, and in winter we sometimes had a menora and a Christmas tree lit at the same time. It was clear that what my parents had agreed on—not to allow any religious observance in our home—did not work from day one. No doubt that was partially due to our mother's insistence on having a "Jewish home" and our father's endless discourse about his Jewishness. It was completely impossible to remain neutral in matters of religion!

It took my father many years before he was able to see the beauty of religious Judaism, revealed to him by his son, who was on his way to becoming a full-fledged Jew and who reintroduced him to the Jewish way of living.
*****
Gradually, I took an interest in religion. I asked many questions and could no longer remain indifferent. It had already affected my personality. I doubted whether a secular way of life would still be possible and indeed concluded that such an approach left too many questions unanswered, and that the lifestyle for the most part lacked spiritual depth. To drop religion was no longer an option. But which religion was the crème de la crème?

I started reading anything I could lay my hands on concerning other religions, including Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, but none of them inspired me. Both my Jewish background, which was deeply embedded in my DNA, as well as my father's Jewish pride, had made a profound impression on me. Clearly, I was already under the spell of Judaism and believed that if any religion was close to the truth, this was the one. By that time, I was about 14 years old.

I began visiting bookshops looking for Dutch Jewish books, but there were very few. At home I read books on general philosophy by William Durant, who had written some splendid introductions to secular philosophy for laymen. They had been translated into Dutch and were part of my father's small library on the subject. I was fascinated by many philosophers and found their books very illuminating, though there were parts I could not understand. It was also the first time I was introduced to Spinoza, and later my father told me more about his philosophy. We started reading sections of his works together: a havruta of sorts. Years later, Spinoza would play a big role in my life and, paradoxically, helped me come closer to Judaism.

There was one book I got hold of that completely captivated me. It was a Dutch translation of a Hebrew book, Dorenu Mul She'elot Ha-Netsach (translated to the English The Modern Jew Faces Eternal Problems), by Dr. Aron Barth, general manager of Bank Leumi in the 1950s. Reading this book was somewhat of a breakthrough for me. It introduced me to the world of Jewish religious thought, about which I knew very little. It discussed major theological issues through the prism of Judaism and dealt with many problems I was thinking about. It was deeply rooted in classical Judaism and written in a clear and lucid style. The author displayed much knowledge and wisdom in confronting major issues of the day. Although he was not completely honest when he tried to undermine every form of Bible criticism, he introduced me to some important challenges to Spinoza's claim that the Torah comprised different documents authored by several writers, not by Moses.

****

As I was becoming more and more involved in my journey, my school studies got in the way. They were boring and of little importance compared to endeavors I believed were of much greater value: Judaism and discovering what life was really all about. I began neglecting my secular studies, and my school marks went down the drain. In fact, it got so bad that I failed my tests and was not promoted to the next grade. Understandably, my father was very worried.

Although the gymnasium where I studied was a first-class school, where Latin and Greek were taught, I felt that most of the classes were hopelessly dull and monotonous. What was completely absent was the challenge to discover things on our own. Everything was spoon-fed to the students. The teacher would tell us how to read Shakespeare and how to dissect a fish, instead of letting us find out for ourselves and only giving us advice when we were really on the wrong track. The learning process lacked all creativity and did not speak to our imagination. Instead of sending us home with a question, encouraging us to struggle with it, the teachers felt it was their task to ask the questions and immediately answer them. They did not realize that a question should sometimes remain unanswered, because every answer deals a death blow to further investigation.

I shall never forget that when one of the greatest scientists of our day, Isidore Rabi, was once asked why he became a scientist, he replied that his Jewish mother gets the credit. While other parents would ask their children what they had learned in school that day, she would ask: Izzy, what good question did you ask today? Answers are great, but doubt is what gives you an education.

Another boring aspect of my school education was that we were not allowed to come up with outrageous answers that would challenge the established system. If your answer did not fit the accepted scientific or literary framework, the teacher wouldn't give you a second glance and would sometimes even punish you by sending you out of the room. I cannot remember how many hours I spent outside the classroom.

Years later, I was reminded of this while reading that the famous physicist Wolfgang Pauli once gave a lecture on elementary particle physics at Columbia University. Afterwards he asked Niels Bohr, arguably the greatest physicist of the twentieth century, whether he thought his theories were crazy. I do, replied Bohr. Unfortunately they are not crazy enough.

Encouraging students to be both curious and surprised is one of the great principles of good education. It is a sign of transcendence, the very foundation of authentic religiosity. Most of my teachers did not realize that and failed to adhere to the Greek proverb: Either dance well or quit the ballroom.
****
And so my education at school could not compete with my studies in Judaism. It became clear to me that Judaism is based on the need for constant questioning. I discovered that there are no absolute dogmas in Judaism, at least not in the way they are found within the Catholic Church.

Maimonides' famous Thirteen Principles of Faith, which are sung in nearly every synagogue on Friday nights, were never accepted as the final version of Jewish belief and were in fact heavily attacked and challenged by the greatest rabbinical authorities. Today, I see that Maimonides' thirteen principles caused major damage to Judaism. It was the famous Professor Leon Roth who once remarked: "For this Hebrew of Hebrews had in many respects a Greek mind and through his sense of logic and his passion for precision, he brought Judaism into a doctrinal crisis, the echoes of which are with us yet" (Judaism, A Portrait, 1960 p. 122). How true! Judaism, while surely consisting of certain beliefs, is open to self-critique, debate and ongoing discussions that have almost never been resolved. This spoke to my imagination. A religion with no dogmas, always open to new ideas! What could be better than that!
****

One cannot squeeze Judaism into well-established categories. It's like trying to fit the ocean into a bath tub. Judaism is a way of living, accompanied by deep emotions and a strong religious experience. To argue that there are definite fundamentals of faith is to undermine authentic religious faith. It would be like

arguing that musical notes are the fundamentals of music. They are not; they are only directions for the musician to follow, showing the way, but they are never das ding an sich, the thing itself. There are inexpressible dimensions of religious insights. Doctrines and creeds should never become screens; they can only function as windows into a world that is beyond definition. Faith can only be discovered in the light of one's soul. It is a moment in which all definitions end, and any attempt to come to conclusive articles of faith can only yield stifling trivialities that become suspended in the heart of the man of real faith. Genuine Judaism can only be understood in its natural habitat of deep faith and piety in which the divine reaches all thoughts.

Even if dogma has a purpose, it can never function as a substitute for faith, only as a dry aspect of it, just as music is much more than what a musical note can ever convey. Basically, Judaism offers something that Christianity does not: a religion without a specific theology.

Halakha, while more down to earth—since it first asks for human action—is still open to various possibilities. There are many roads to God, as is abundantly clear after even a glimpse into the Talmud. Opinions abound on how to translate God's commandments into down-to-earth deeds, which must be able to reveal the divine. In truth, we should each have our own individual Halakha, compatible to each soul and connecting it with one of the mitzvot. Mitzvot, after all, are a bridge to God, and since religion must be lived, and not just thought about or felt, it is the task of Halakha to translate belief into action.

Just as important is the need for people to live and worship together. This requires a halakhic framework that ensures a certain level of conformity while simultaneously allowing an act to touch the spirit in each individual. But that can only be done if there are constant attempts to connect with that spirit. Just as the musician needs to repeat a music segment before he feels his soul being touched by the music, so it is with a halakhic act. Like the musician who must know how to position his bow and move his fingers with great precision across the strings of the violin so as to draw the music out of the physical boundaries of the instrument, so the religious person must know how to release the deepest foundations of his soul via the halakhic deed.

****

I bought a German translation of the Talmud and then tried to decipher it. I peered into a world that had its own language, its own strange logic, one that was incompatible with anything the Greeks had offered. I soon learned that the Talmud discusses everything under the sun and is involved in trite trivialities,

turning them into major issues as if life depends on them. Even more surprising was its frank discussion about sexuality. I'll never forget the time I was in the middle of a tractate and the translation continued in Latin instead of German. I wondered why. Knowing some Latin, I tried it out and was totally surprised to discover that these passages advised women on how to seduce their husbands (Shabbat 104b). Where in the world would one find a book that discusses prayer, devotion to God, piety, and the art of sex on the same page? It is positively avant-garde!

Many years later I saw that these matters were openly discussed by yeshiva students and nobody took offense or even realized that if these Aramaic passages were to be translated into English, they would resemble a form of "holy pornography." But the truth is, this is Torah, it is holy, and sex has nothing to do with the vulgar associations conjured up in people's minds. In Judaism, sex is praying with one's body. According to Hassidic teachings, this is clearly shown by the similarity in body movements of human beings when they make love and when they pray. In Ashkenazi circles, the latter is called shuckeling (swaying back and forth). (See Louis Jacobs, Hasidic Prayer, p. 60, and p. 171, note 33, where he brings the following sources: Tzava'at Ha-Ribash [Jerusalem 1948], p. 7b; Likutei Yekarim [Lemberg, 1865], p. 1b; Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov [Sotmar, 1943], vol. 1, p. 145, note 65.)
*****

Looking back at this period of my life, I realize how worried my father was. I was incapable of explaining what was going on, since I myself was too young to fully understand what was happening within me. One thing was clear: my schoolwork went down the drain. And not just a little bit. Although my father was a balanced man with an open mind, he must have panicked. What is my son doing? Not only is he neglecting his secular studies, but it is clear that this Judaism is drawing him to religious fanaticism!

It all came to a head when I expressed my wish to go to synagogue Saturday mornings, instead of going to school. My father, who by now felt that things were getting out of hand, would not hear of it.

I couldn't persuade him to let me off, so I decided to continue going to school while simultaneously observing Shabbat. In Holland, everybody, including the queen would ride a bicycle, and I, being no exception, rode my bike to school every day. At that time we lived in a small town called Aerdenhout, 20 kilometers away from Amsterdam. We had to be in school at eight o'clock in the morning, which on winter days meant that I traveled in total darkness. Though it was

imperative that I ride with my lights on, I decided that since it was forbidden to turn on a light on Shabbat, I would do the 20-minute ride without it. It didn't even last a day. That first Shabbat morning, as I was bicycling to school, a policeman stopped me and asked whether I had lost my mind. Driving without a light on a dark, foggy morning was tantamount to suicide. I was unimpressed with his argument and told him that we Jews are obliged to observe Shabbat and I could therefore not turn on any light. He stared at me in bewilderment, no doubt contemplating sending me to a psychiatrist, and then told me that if I wanted to observe the Jewish day of rest, I should walk to school. And so I did.
Arriving very late, I entered the classroom, explained to the teacher that a policeman had stopped me, and then sat down. Unfortunately, we had a written exam that morning, which I believe was on Dutch literature and which presented me with yet another dilemma. How was I going to write?

This, too, would be a violation of Shabbat! There was only one solution: I wouldn't do it! So I left my pencil untouched. It didn't take long before the teacher noticed and asked me why I was not writing. I explained in clear terms that I was a Jewish boy and could not write, and that I should actually not be in school at all but in synagogue. He looked at me with a big, sympathetic smile and said: Hmm. Okay, see me after class. I expected a really stern rebuke and perhaps a threat that if I would not comply, the school would expel me. I was ready for a fight and determined not to give in. To my utter surprise, the teacher, who was also vice principal, asked me to sit down. Amused, but in no way derisive, he asked me whether I was serious about this. Did I truly want to go to synagogue and no longer attend school on Saturdays, and was I really so interested in Judaism? Or was this just a whim? What was so attractive about Judaism? It was clear that his questions were sincere, so I took the challenge. It was to become my first attempt at explaining to an outsider what this Judaism was all about, although my knowledge at the time was, to say the least, bordering on total ignorance.

To my astonishment, he showed a keen interest in what I had to say and sat a few minutes in total silence. Suddenly, he got up and said: Okay, I hear. I'll speak with your father and tell him that you're exempt from attending school on Saturday mornings. I could not believe my ears and warned the vice principal that it would not be easy to convince my father. Maybe he, the non-Jewish teacher, was convinced that I should go to synagogue, but my father would be an entirely different story! He walked up to me, shook my hand and said: Let me deal with it. But I have one condition. You will miss many important lessons on Saturdays and will have to catch up every Sunday on anything you've missed. I promised to do so and left his room. After doing a small dance of triumph outside, I walked home

to tell my father that the vice principle would like to see him. A good sport as always, my father smiled, gave me a kiss and said he would go. No doubt he knew what was awaiting him, yet he had no option but to comply. Reluctantly, but smiling that his son had defeated him, he gave in. I believe he was actually proud! And that made me love him even more.

And so, I went off to synagogue, but this was no small matter. I had never been there and had no idea what to expect. I had read a book called Yom Yom, by Dutch physician Dr. David Hausdorff. It was written in a very clear style and provided me with some information on synagogue service. I was excited, but also apprehensive. How was I to behave? It was a 50-minute walk to the synagogue, which was located in Haarlem, almost 5 kilometers from our home.

When I entered the synagogue that Shabbat morning, I could not have known that the young girl I noticed, about 14 years old, would one day become my wife. Years later, she told me that I had appeared in my all-white tennis outfit—complete with shorts!—probably because I thought that was the most appropriate way to dress when going to a holy place!

Slowly I got used to it. They had services only on Shabbat mornings, with an average attendance of 25. It soon became clear to me that I could not be counted for a minyan, since I was not halakhically Jewish. Freyda, the girl I had first noticed, took a real interest in me and so did the family of Rabbi/Hazan Michel Philipson who led the services and read the entire Torah portion perfectly and beautifully, in a way I have not heard since. He not only read it flawlessly but actually acted it out in a way that conveyed his emotional connection with the text, as if he were in the story. I found it very moving.

Rabbi Philipson and his wife Eva often invited me for Shabbat, and those visits brought me much joy. To this day, my wife and I are close friends with their daughter and two sons. I also received Shabbat invitations from Freyda’s parents, my future in-laws. It was there that my gastrointestinal tract was challenged when I was offered a piece of galerete, a gelatinous Eastern European dish, made from calf’s feet and considered a delicacy. My Dutch Sefardi stomach was too sensitive for this Ashkenazi cuisine. I was not sure I would survive, but being a good boy I complied. I faced a similar challenge years later when I studied at Gateshead Yeshiva and was served cholent every Shabbat. I solved that one by adding sugar so as to make it edible!

Since there were very few Jewish children in the Haarlem community, Rabbi Philipson tried to arrange a shidduch (marriage arrangement) between his oldest

son and my future wife when they were both still babies. But, to my good fortune, my future parents-in-law declined the offer!

The rabbi had quite a large Judaica library, most of which I was unable to read because the books were in Hebrew. Within a short while, however, I became acquainted with the works of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. This, too, was a major discovery. Rabbi Hirsch was the great champion of Orthodox German Jewry and had in fact created a revolution with his booklet The Nineteen Letters, in which he presented his original view of Judaism in the form of a fictional correspondence between a young rabbi and a secular intellectual. He showed how Judaism was of great importance and relevance to the modern Jew and how it could help create a better world for all of mankind.

Rabbi Hirsch's books were all written in hochdeutsch, a high, cultured German that was popular in the 19th century. The Nineteen Letters, however, was translated into Dutch, and I devoured it. It was just what I was looking for. Although it was nearly 100 years old by the time I read it, the book had not become outmoded; I even read it several times.

Rabbi Philipson owned all the books by Rabbi Hirsch, including his famous five-volume commentary on the Torah and his Gesammelte Schriften (Collected Writings), which covered nearly all the different aspects of Judaism. The problem was that there were no Dutch translations. Not only were they all written in hochdeutsch, they were also printed in Gothic lettering, a difficult typeface to decipher. One sentence could take up a whole page, if not more. By the time you got to the end of the sentence, you had already forgotten the beginning. Fortunately, I was studying German in school and my father—because of his knowledge of the language through business connections in East Germany and the Leipziger Messe (The Leipzig Trade Fair)—had helped me and my brother master it. So I took on Rabbi Hirsch's Commentary on the Torah, his Gesammelte Schriften and his famous Horeb. I read and read, slowly becoming accustomed to the Gothic script. Rabbi Hirsch showed tremendous Jewish knowledge, had the entire Talmud at his fingertips and, above all, was very original. It was music to my ears. Later on, I realized that Rabbi Hirsch was a romantic, very German and basically an ultra-conservative. Still, his works are of great importance, his integrity untainted.

****

My interest increased daily, and I started going to synagogue every Shabbat morning. However, I was still under the sway of Spinoza's philosophy, and though deeply impressed by Judaism I continuously debated with myself on whether or not it was all true. I was definitely not convinced! Never will I forget an incident

that took place in the Haarlem synagogue and opened my eyes to something I had not thought about before. There was a young intellectual who came to synagogue regularly, and before the services began he would loudly declare: You are all sitting here for nothing. There is no God. He would then walk over to his seat, take his tallith out of his small cabinet, say a berakha and wrap it around his shoulders. He would recite all the prayers with great fervor and carefully listen to the reading of the parasha. I could not make heads or tails of it. Why come to synagogue, pray with intense devotion as if life depended on it when you do not even believe in God? This went on week after week, and one day I could no longer control myself. I approached him, asking for an explanation, and will never forget what he said: Indeed I do not believe in God, but I do believe in Judaism. It is the greatest religion ever to appear on earth, it has contributed more to ethics than any other religion or culture, and we owe it to the world to keep it alive. If we Jews abandon it, the world will be so much the poorer. So I will come to synagogue, eat kosher and observe some of the laws of Shabbat. If I don't, I will be guilty of destroying one of the most beautiful things the world has been blessed with. Whether or not it is God-given does not really interest me.

To this day, it sends shivers down my spine to think of these words of truth. I realized that this man's words were also a harsh critique of Spinoza. Why completely reject Judaism, as he did, when it contains such profundity and presents the world with its greatest values, such as Shabbat, a healthy attitude towards sexuality, profound ethics, and so much more. I still wonder why Spinoza refused to make a berakha before eating. How, after all, can one consume tasty food without uttering a deep expression of astonishment at the very existence of food? Does one really have to believe in God to do so? This is not orthopraxis; it is a deeply spiritual experience that someone secular can also encounter.

Even today I have my atheistic moments, especially when I am confronted with the intense suffering of children, such as in the case of terror attacks in and outside Israel, or when I read what happened to more than a million Jewish children in the Holocaust. For days, I can't pray properly and I struggle with my belief in God. To this day, after a devastating terror attack I am astonished that religious Jews go to synagogue and instead of starting a demonstration against God they praise Him for His goodness. When I see a picture of a small black child in Africa who is weak from starvation and unable to move, I want to climb up to the heavens and protest. It is then that my friend's observations in Haarlem's synagogue save me from walking out on Judaism. At still a later stage, I realize that our love for God is tested by the question of whether we seek Him, or His goodness. The bottom line is there is no doubt in my mind that I will remain a

religious Jew even if I were to become an atheist.
****

While growing in my Judaism I was confronted with many problems that led to some of the strangest situations. Today I would call them hilarious, but at the time they were major concerns. When I accompanied my father to the Leipziger Messe, I wanted to eat kosher but there were no kosher restaurants. So I ate fish or other parve foods. I clearly remember one Friday night when we ate in a tavern where the Germans used to drink their large mugs of beer, and some were even drunk. I put my kippah on my head and made kiddush over beer, to the total surprise of all the Germans present. I can still see their bewildered faces! On other occasions, such as our vacations in Italy, I would eat nothing but scrambled eggs for breakfast, lunch and supper, to the point where I could not swallow an egg any longer!
****

Fortunately, I had already been circumcised, though the procedure was not done until I was about 10, and I remember being hospitalized for a few days. My brother, on the other hand, was circumcised as a baby. I think that by the time he was born, my father found it emotionally difficult to have uncircumcised sons. My circumcision was performed by a surgeon, not a mohel, and though I was put under anesthesia, it was quite painful afterwards.

As part of my conversion, I still had to undergo a procedure called hatafat dam b’rit, drawing a drop of blood as a symbolic ritual circumcision. This was done by Dr. Aron Rodrigues Pereira, President of the Portuguese Jewish Community in Amsterdam and brother of the Sefardi Chief Rabbi, Hakham Shelomo Rodrigues Pereira, who had agreed to convert me. Days before, I had to appear before all the chief rabbis in Holland and explain why I had decided to become Jewish. The most prominent among them, Rabbi Aaron Schuster, was the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Amsterdam, a man with an imposing personality, who did not walk but had a long, decisive stride. Though he was very formal, having been educated in Holland, the warmth he exuded pointed to his Eastern European lineage. I found it difficult to answer his question as to why I wanted to become Jewish. And my reply was not completely rational. It had to do with some inner musical notes carrying words that are ineffable. Only many years later did I realize how difficult it is to express in human language a religious upheaval. Rudolf Otto, the great non-Jewish German thinker, tried to make sense of it in his most famous work, Das Heilige (The Idea of the Holy). Renowned American philosopher William James also tried to articulate the meaning of religiosity in his important book The

Varieties of Religious Experience. But above all, it is the Hassidic masters who dealt with this challenge, bringing unusual and original perspectives. Both Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Buber translated some of these ideas into German and English and explained them as best as possible.
****

I remember undressing at the mikvah. I was quite nervous, but my dear father was right by my side, as always. I had learned that by immersing in the mikvah's waters I would be reborn as a full-fledged Jew. Water is the symbol of life and growth, and immersion is like returning to the mother's womb where the fetus is surrounded by fluid. Three rabbis were present: Hakham Rodrigues Pereira, Chief Rabbi Aron Schuster and Rabbi Benjamin Pels, a member of the Amsterdam rabbinate. I had to immerse three times, making sure that the water covered all my hair. When I got out, the Hakham gave me a towel to cover myself and told me to say a berakha. It is perhaps the greatest berakha I have ever said: Blessed is the Lord our God, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us on immersion. Immediately after that, the Hakham recited: May his name in Israel be called Nathan, son of Avraham Avinu. Nathan was my father's youngest brother who was murdered in the Shoah. Later, after my mother converted, I changed this to Nathan, son of Yaakov, my father. I still tremble when I think about it. How many people have merited the opportunity to say this berakha on this particular occasion? I also said the berakha "shehehiyanu," thanking God that I had arrived at this new and special moment in my life. Afterward, I got a kiss from my father, and a big smile. Although he had had reservations about my religiosity, he was pleased that I had now fully joined his beloved people.

Indeed the world looked different. I was delighted and beaming. The question that came to haunt me then, and still haunts me today, is how to keep such an exalted moment alive.
****
Some of my encounters with Judaism's demands were much more radical and sometimes downright problematic, if not unacceptable. Only a short while ago my dear brother, two years my junior, reminded me of an incident that took place while I conducted the Pessah Seder at my parents' home when I was still unmarried and very fresh in my Jewish observance. Having just learned the law about yayin nesekh, more correctly called maga nokhri—forbidding Jews to drink wine moved by a non-Jew once the bottle has been opened—I snatched a bottle of wine off the table, before my brother had the chance to pick it up and fill our glasses. I told my brother that non-Jews were not to move such a bottle, or the

wine would be cursed. (In those days there was no yayin mevushal in Holland.) Nowhere in all of Jewish literature does it say that the wine would be cursed, and this unfortunate event simply reflected my total ignorance about many things I had yet to learn. Only now, nearly 50 years later, did my brother tell me, with tears in his eyes, how much he was offended. This is a typical example of how Jewish law, in my opinion, has stagnated. The law concerning yayin nesekh was enacted at the time when the Jews were in exile and non-Jews were idol-worshipers, often immoral, and frequently anti-Semitic. The rabbis felt it would be inappropriate for Jews to drink wine that was moved by such vile people and forbade its consumption even when the wine was produced by Jews. In this way, they emphasized the need for Jews to distance themselves in general from these depraved people. Since it was primarily wine that was used in worship by Jews and gentiles, that was the only alcoholic drink to which the law applied. This is a typical example of defensive Halakha, which may have been necessary at the time, while living among these gentiles. (It reminds me somewhat of my youth when the Dutch, just after the Holocaust had come to an end, would refuse under any circumstances to buy German products or even have them in their homes. It was completely taboo.) Today, when Jews are living in a totally different society, where most people believe in one God and are civilized, this law has lost much of its purpose. (See Rabbi Menachem Me'iri's (1249-1316) Talmudic commentary, Beit HaBehira, on Sanhedrin 57a, Avoda Zara 11b, 13a, 14b 21a, 42b, although Me'iri himself does not mitigate the severity of the law of yayin nesekh.) When such a law offends another human being, as was the case with my brother, it does only harm and violates the integrity of Halakha and Judaism. This and similar laws need to be carefully reconsidered. After all, rabbinical laws are not categorically sacrosanct, as are biblical laws.

****

Halakha has been in a waiting mode for too long. It has become the "preserver of precepts" and now has to free itself from what was once important. It is imperative to move Halakha forward and respond to a new and different Jewish world, especially because the State of Israel has drastically changed the situation of world Jewry and created a state of affairs never before encountered by Halakha. The incident with my brother is merely a symptom of the major problem with its application today. We are asked to be "a light unto the nations," and it is our duty to inspire them to come closer to God and adopt high standards of morality.

This can be done only if we approach the non-Jewish world in a positive way. The law of yayin nesekh and others like it are not conducive to reaching that goal. It is

high time that our rabbis adopt the approach of Rabbi Menachem Me'iri. Surely we should continue to drink only kosher wine made by Jews, but we should, in my humble opinion, waive the restriction concerning non-Jews moving our wines.

What we are badly in need of is a humane but aggressive, proud and prophetic Halakha that does not look over its shoulder but moves the Jewish tradition to the forefront of the world as a leading guide.

****

My exemption from attending school on Saturdays got me into trouble with one of the teachers. He was a highly frustrated man who taught us Latin and Greek, and nobody liked him, as he would constantly make obnoxious comments about us. He taught us twice a week, and one of those days was Saturday. Since I no longer came on Saturdays, he hated me with a passion. On one occasion, he asked me a question, which he knew I could not answer since it had been discussed on the previous Saturday and was not in any of the books I studied on Sunday. It was a deliberate act to embarrass me. When I could not respond, he was outraged, took the blackboard eraser and threw it at me. I ducked just in time, and the weapon shattered the large window behind me. There was total silence in the classroom, and the teacher turned pale. I got up, walked out of the room without permission and went to see the vice principle who had helped free me from having to attend on Saturdays. I told him exactly what had happened. He got up, walked with me to the scene of the crime, and ordered the teacher to leave on the spot. As far as I remember, he was fired—an act that propelled me to stardom. I became somewhat of a celebrity in school and made many more friends. This was quite remarkable since I was a quiet kid, rather formal and stiff (today, I am much more easygoing), although I was chosen to be the class representative for several years. This meant that I represented my class on various occasions and advocated for my fellow students if they were in trouble with the school administration. Though I had become somewhat of an outsider due to my keen interest in Judaism, I was never asked to step down—even when I told my friends that I would no longer be dancing with the girls at parties that took place in the homes of classmates. I had actually been to dance school and had learned the art! But I had to tell my friends that I would no longer participate since Judaism did not look favorably upon this activity. In all honesty, although I believe that dancing is an art and in fact very beautiful, I must admit that I never really enjoyed it. I also told my classmates that I would not be able to eat anything non-kosher. Yet, instead of excommunicating me, my friends always made sure that there was a fruit available or other article of food that I was permitted to eat. Now, so many years later, I wonder what went through the minds of all these young people who had such a strange bedfellow in their class.

****

One of the most wondrous religious experiences in all of my life happened during my years at the gymnasium. While I walked around bareheaded in the school, I would put a kippa on my head whenever I ate. This was the greatest moment of my day. Covering my head was truly a religious experience; I felt as if I was taken to a higher plane. It was extraordinary. It was not wearing the kippa on my head that did it but actually putting it on. It was a daring act because by doing so I presented myself before God—a declaration that I wanted to live in His presence, not just as a spiritual condition but as an act of elevation, of spiritual grandeur. It was a happening. After all, the main purpose of the kippa, as with all of Halakha, is to disturb. To wake people up and tell them that nothing is to be taken for granted. In my case it worked miracles! It made me wonderfully uneasy. I remember that my hands trembled when I put my kippa on.

But it is this very kippa that now causes me problems. I have a love-hate relationship with it. Now that it's on my head all the time, it has nearly lost all its meaning. It used to excite me; now, 50 years later, it deadens me. It has little to do with my awareness that I live in God's presence and has become an act of mindless self-indulgence, just something to make me feel good.

Deep down I know what to do. In order for my kippa to remind me of God, I need to take it off so that I can occasionally put it on. Hopefully, it would bring back the religious experience and take me out of this dull place called religious observance. But what can I do? What would my grandchildren think? This has become a major challenge in my life, for the problem of the kippa is simply a symptom of something much bigger. I have become so used to living an observant life, by all the requirements of Halakha, that I sincerely wonder whether I am still religious. "Faith is not a state of passivity, of quiet acceptance….Faith requires action….bold initiative rather than continuity. Faith is forever contingent on the courage of the believer" (Heschel, A Passion for Truth, p. 192).
****

Scientific research has often revealed particles of matter in our universe that can stir the heart of man in ways that were not possible in earlier times. Scientists dedicate their lives to the minutest properties of our physical world. They are fascinated by the behavior of cells, the habits of insects and the peculiarities of the DNA code. God is in the details, the saying goes. So, too, halakhic authorities look for the smallest details to make people sensitive to every fine point of life so that one may discover God. By demanding of us meticulousness in how much

matza to eat, what size lulav to use, and to what degree our etrog should be spotless, they create a subconscious awareness in us that the so-called trivialities of life are really opportune moments to meet God. Halakha is meant to be a protest against all forms of spiritual dullness. It is the microscopic search for God. But it only works when you hear the music behind the law. That is art at its ultimate. But do we still listen?

One of the greatest challenges confronting Judaism is behaviorism. People get used to the way Judaism informs them to respond to all of life, and instead of being nothing less than extraordinary, life becomes ordinary and insipid. Halakhic living becomes self-defeating. It actually encourages what it wishes to prevent. In the spirit of Nietzsche's observation of how much wisdom lies in the superficiality of man, I would suggest that one of the great tragedies of today's halakhic man is his obliviousness to the profundity behind his halakhic superficiality.
****

After my conversion, I wanted to study in a yeshiva. I had read about such places and was deeply impressed. It seemed like a dream world to me, although I had little knowledge about it. I believed a yeshiva was a place where all the great questions about life and religiosity were discussed and where the debates were of a theological and philosophical nature—the topics closest to my heart. When I actually entered the famous Gateshead Yeshiva, Europe's largest talmudic college, I was greatly disappointed to learn that most of the studies were about legal discussions in the Talmud. On top of this, I did not have even the most elementary knowledge necessary to participate in such discussions. I lacked all the basic tools. Only later did I realize that I knew many things about Judaism that the yeshiva students and some of their rabbis didn't know. Matters related to the weltanschauung/philosophy of Judaism and the many schools of thought concerning its nature were never studied, or were given so little time that it was meaningless. The classic Kuzari, in which 12th century Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi offered his understanding of Judaism, was not at all discussed. And certainly not Maimonides' Moreh Nevukhim (Guide for the Perplexed) let alone later and modern classics. I was told in yeshiva that these works were of minor importance and what was really essential was the shakla ve-tarya, the give-and-take in talmudic legal discussion. When I asked what the religious and philosophical implications of all these talmudic debates were and how it touched their lives, there was total silence. I remember that when I asked how my fellow students were so sure that God exists, or that the Torah is min ha-shamayim (from heaven), most of them used poor arguments, if any, and were astonished that I dared to ask these questions.

When I approached one of the main rabbis and asked him a question related to the German philosopher Leibniz, who had argued that this world was the best world God could have created, he told me in great humility that he had no idea what I was talking about. It took me a long time to grasp that this was the wrong address for these questions, although I did still realize that the great legal debates made Judaism very special. Unlike other religions, they reflect the need for God to enter the marketplace, the courtroom and all that is mundane. Judaism is pragmatic, realistic and cognizant of the fact that to be a veritable way of spiritual living it needs to be available and attainable.

The rashei yeshiva and other rabbis showed incredible integrity, deep religiosity, and the total absence of any personal agenda. What counted was the service of God through the study of the Talmud. This monumental text took them back to Mount Sinai, and through its pages they relived the greatest moment in all of Jewish history. I have never seen anything like that anywhere else. Paradoxically, there was a certain naiveté, a withdrawal from the rest of the world, which made them seem like human angels while studying the laws of damages and injuries. Much later, I understood that even the brilliant legal discussions had tremendous religious meaning, but this was never discussed in the yeshiva. Once I understood that it was not philosophy but the legal intricacies of Halakha that kept yeshiva students fascinated, I was able to enjoy the studies. To this day, I get excited about Rabbi Aryeh Leib HaCohen Heller's Ketzot HaHoshen and similar works created by other talmudic geniuses.

I spent 12 years in yeshivot, and today when I speak with many people who reject the yeshiva world and criticize it harshly for all 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 up 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 them 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. Regretfully, most

Israelis do not realize this.
****

We can no longer afford to have yeshivot teaching only Talmud, and the manner in which it is taught also needs to be drastically changed. Its many tractates must be made relevant by getting behind the text and understanding its music, poetry and, above all, its religiosity. This requires a radical restructuring of the yeshiva curriculum. We should challenge the more sophisticated students by studying secular texts with them—Spinoza, John Locke and many others—and see how the Talmud, the Midrash and all other classical sources respond to these important writings. In that way, one can reveal the profundity of these Jewish texts. Heschel, Buber, Rosenzweig, Berkovits, the great Hassidic masters such as the Mei HaShiloah by Rabbi Mordechai Yosef of Izbitze, and many others should be carefully read. Students must learn how to convey to others why they are religious, and why Judaism is of vital importance not just for the Jews but for all of mankind. I often wonder: what if Spinoza had met these spiritual giants? Would he have realized that his interpretation of Judaism was based on a very rigid and faulty reading, part of which he adopted from his rabbinical teachers in Amsterdam and part of which was his own often deliberate misreading of the nature of Judaism? Would he have turned into a Sefardi Kotzker Rebbe with his near obsession for the truth and nothing but the truth? Would he have understood that all power corrupts, including the power of using reason exclusively?
****
There was one philosophy text, of several volumes, that was extremely popular in Gateshead Yeshiva: Mikhtav Me-Eliyahu by Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler (1892-1953), one of the most influential mussar teachers in modern times. But unlike other mussar books, this is a rare combination of philosophy, Kabbala, Hassidut, and Mussar. He even borrowed ideas from modern psychology. Its publication caused quite a stir, since the teachings contained therein were drastically different from anything known in the yeshiva world until then. These volumes opened a world well beyond the study halls of Gateshead Yeshiva. In fact, it laid the foundations for some radical thinking, far exceeding what Rabbi Dessler himself wanted to accomplish. It reminded me a bit of how Spinoza, lehavdil, had taken Maimonides' ideas about God and radicalized them to the extent of ending up with a form of pantheism. Spinoza was not the greatest philosopher in history but certainly the most daring one, at least in classical philosophy. In some ways that is true about Rabbi Dessler's writings and several Hassidic texts as well.

Mikhtav Me-Eliyahu triggered some thoughts that would later lead me to form a different approach to Judaism, though still deeply rooted in tradition. A novel

understanding of God, Torah min ha-shamayim, human autonomy, religious wonder, universalism, the problem of halakhic behaviorism and much more were clearly alluded to in Mikhtav Me-Eliyahu. This despite the fact that Rabbi Dessler, an ultra-conformist, never moved away from the official yeshiva world. He never mentioned any of these topics in an unconventional way, but it was all there between the lines.

Interestingly, Rabbi Dessler reminds me of the famous Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaCohen Kook (1865-1935), who was the most powerful and perhaps most controversial Orthodox thinker in Israel. No doubt, Rabbi Kook was much more daring and universalistic than Rabbi Dessler, but one cannot deny the similarity.

While studying in Gateshead, I had never heard about Rabbi Kook; he was a Zionist and considered much too radical. The other great thinker never to be mentioned was Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik, also known as the Rav. He, too, was a Zionist, and he held a doctorate in philosophy! As such, he was persona non grata in Gateshead Yeshiva. I only discovered these great men when I came to live in Israel many years later. They, together with other philosophers such as Will Herberg, Eliezer Berkovits, Heschel, Norman Lamm, Michael Wyschogrod, Arthur Green and even the Israeli rebel Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz, had a great influence on me. Included in this list are many profound non-Jewish thinkers as well, such as Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr.
****
One of the major tasks of Jewish education is to deliberately create an atmosphere of rebellion among its students. Rebellion, after all, is the great emancipator. We owe nearly all of our knowledge and achievements not to those who agreed but to those who differed. It is this virtue that brought Judaism into existence. Avraham was the first rebel, destroying idols; he was followed by his children, then by Moshe, and then by the Jewish people.

What has been entirely forgotten is that the Torah was the first audacious text to appear in world history. Its purpose was to protest. It set in motion a rebel movement of cosmic proportions the likes of which we have never known. The text includes all the radical heresies of the past, present and future. It calls idol-worship an abomination, immorality abhorrent, and the worship of man a catastrophe. It protests against complacency, self-satisfaction, imitation, and negation of the spirit. It calls for radical thinking and drastic action, without compromise, even when it means standing alone, being condemned and ridiculed.

All of this seems to be entirely lost on our religious establishment. We are instructing our students and children to obey, to fit in, to conform and not stand out. We teach them that their religious leaders are great people because they are "all-right-niks" who would never think of disturbing the established religious and social norms. We teach them that they are the ideal to be emulated. By doing so, we turn our backs on authentic Judaism and communicate the very opposite of what Judaism is meant to convey.

By using clichés instead of the language of opposition, we deny our students the excitement of being Jewish: excitement resulting from the realization that one makes a huge difference and takes pride in it, no matter the cost; excitement at the awareness that one is part of a great mission for which one is prepared to die, knowing that it will make the world a better place.

When we tell our children to eat kosher, we need to inform them that this is an act of disobedience against consumerism that encourages human beings to eat anything as long as it tastes good. When we go to synagogue, it is a protest against man's arrogance in thinking that he can do it all himself. When couples observe the laws of family purity, it is a rebellion against the obsession with sex. The celebration of Shabbat must be presented as an enormous challenge to our contemporary world that believes our happiness depends on how much we produce.

As long as our religious teachers continue to teach Jewish texts as models of approval, instead of manifestations of protest against the mediocrity of our world, we will lose more of our young people to that very mediocrity.
Judaism is in its essence an act of dissent, not of consent. Dissent leads to renewal. It creates loyalty. It is the force through which the world is able to grow. To forget this crucial element is to betray Judaism.
****

When my wife and I moved to Israel with our three children, intending to stay for two years so that I could continue to learn in yeshivot, I was approached by the administration of a well-known ba'al teshuva yeshiva in Jerusalem, for non-religious young people interested in learning about Judaism. The ba'al teshuva movement was not as widespread as it is today, and I had never heard about such an institution. The directors asked me whether I was prepared to give some lectures. In response to my inquiry about the nature of the school, they told me it was an institution that functioned as a bridge between Harvard University and Ponevezh Yeshiva in B'nei Brak. The latter was then the most famous yeshiva in Israel. I liked the idea, it seemed to fit my way of thinking, and I started lecturing

there on a daily basis. I had already begun giving daily lectures in a large ba'al teshuva seminary for women and greatly enjoyed it.
****

While teaching in this yeshiva, I began studying more intensively the works of Heschel. His were some of the most remarkable ideas I would ever encounter. Heschel came from a deeply Hassidic family and was surrounded by a great number of authentically religious people including famous Hassidic rebbes. His great-great-grandfather and namesake was Avraham Yehoshua Heschel, the Apter Rav (1755-1825), known as the Ohev Yisrael (lover of Israel) who was an exceptional proponent of the mitzva of loving one's fellow Jew. Heschel spoke their spiritual language but began writing in poetic, sensitive and emotional style once he came to the United States.

There was also Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929), the great German Jewish philosopher who had nearly converted to Christianity, but changed his mind after attending Yom Kippur services at a small Orthodox synagogue in Berlin, which sparked in him a spiritual explosion. He devoted the rest of his life to teaching and writing about Judaism.
These philosophers opened a new world for me, and I began reading very interesting books by Conservative and Reform rabbis and thinkers. Some were outstanding and taught me a lot, although there were areas where I felt they were mistaken. My thoughts on Judaism began to change. I realized that it was actually even more beautiful and that the narrow reading of hareidi Judaism did not tell its entire story and even caused it to stagnate. At the same time, I understood that the existential problems that confronted Judaism and the Jewish people would not be solved by the Reform or Conservative movements. They required authentic, rebellious Orthodox Judaism that would correct its mistakes, stop acting defensively and start being creative and daring.
****

I began to include in my lectures some of the ideas I had read. One of the rabbis at the yeshiva where I was teaching had shown me a Reform rabbi's interpretation of a certain narrative in the Torah. I thought it was good and used it in one of my lectures, mentioning the rabbi's name. The administration heard about it and was very upset that I dared to not only use an interpretation that was "not kosher" but to mention the name of the Reform rabbi as well. They questioned me about it, and I answered them candidly that I did not see anything wrong with the interpretation and that I thought it would be small-minded not to mention the Reforms rabbi's name. This was not taken in good spirit and created

much tension between the yeshiva rabbis and me.

On another occasion, I had defended Rabbi Shlomo Riskin who had published a piece in the Jerusalem Post and had written that Moshe Rabeinu was perhaps not the greatest communicator and teacher. This was anathema to the yeshiva heads. I believed that while one did not have to agree with Rabbi Riskin's approach, he was definitely entitled to his opinion and it did not constitute heresy.
I once published an open letter in The Jerusalem Post to Shulamit Aloni, a secular, left-wing member of the Knesset. She had ridiculed Judaism for its backwardness. I wrote that all her arguments were outdated and irrelevant, and that I hoped she would come up with some substantial criticism that would dare the rabbis to rethink Judaism. My students at the yeshiva were very impressed by my letter and hung it up in the building where I taught. This, too, was not appreciated. I think that my willingness to reassess Judaism was too much for the leadership of the yeshiva to accept. It reached a point when they wanted to place a herem on me, and due to my inexperience I made the mistake of fighting it. Nothing would have been more beneficial to me than to have been put under a ban. Many more of my books would have been sold and my ideas disseminated. But alas, I succeeded in preventing it. Still, all these unfortunate incidents led me to leave the yeshiva. I no longer felt at home, and the directors were uncomfortable with me teaching there. Looking back, I realize what a blessing it was. I was able to develop my ideas independently and felt great relief. It set me on a road that gave me the opportunity to discover new worlds. Most disturbing was the fact that with the exception of one, none of my colleagues at the yeshiva, including a former professor, had the integrity and courage to stay in contact with me. I never heard from them.

Still, I owe the yeshiva and the women's college much gratitude since they gave me the opportunity to teach. Even more important, they sent me on lecture tours to the United States, Canada, England and South Africa, all of which opened new doors for me.
****

One of my daughters asked me whether I ever regretted my decision to become fully Jewish. I consider this a very important question. My answer is unequivocal: I have never regretted it. It's the best decision I've ever made. Furthermore, even had I not been a "father Jew," and of zera Yisrael, and even had I not felt this Jewishness running through my blood, I have not the slightest doubt that I still would have fallen in love with Judaism had I encountered it. Once you discover it,

there is no turning back! But would conversion in that case have been the right step? I have my doubts. What would have stopped me is the overwhelming notion that mankind is urgently in need of a new universal religion. Judaism gave birth to two most important and powerful religions—Christianity and Islam. But both have failed miserably. And now there is a need for Judaism to once again give birth to a new religion for non-Jews. It has a wealth of resources to work with. I wonder whether if I had remained non-Jewish I could have been instrumental in creating such a religion, which would be something similar to Judaism. But today, as an Orthodox Jew, it is much harder to be fully involved in this. It requires a leader, a mover, and that means being fully dedicated to the religion that one has helped create, and living accordingly. That would be impossible for a Jew living by the demands of Halakha. It would involve violating certain commandments that only apply to Jews. Having been born into my family, my only choice was to go all the way and fully integrate into the Jewish people and Judaism. The joy it gives me is ineffable. The task of creating and leading a new religion must be left to others, although I hope to play a role from a distance.
The world is waiting for this. Non-Jews need a Shabbat experience, some degree of kashrut (dietary laws), taharat ha-mishpaha (laws of family purity and sexual intimacy between husband and wife) and even laws such as shemitta (the seventh year of the seven-year agricultural cycle, when one does not work the land). The latter could also be applied to the car and computer industries, as well as other technologies that are overproducing and creating financial instability. This religion would include all halakhic requirements of the Seven Mitzvot B'nei Noah, the commandments that—according to the Talmud—were given by God to Noah as a binding set of laws for all mankind. As in the case of the Ten Commandments, they actually include numerous branches with many more mitzvot. Both these sets of laws are the grundnorm (fundamental norm) from which many other ethical and religious ideas follow.

A religion such as this would also need to build synagogues for non-Jews and create rituals to inspire. Suggestions like how to perform marriages for non-Jews with some kind of Jewish ceremony will be very important. How Jewish should we make burial rituals for non-Jews? Should non-Jews make kiddush, refrain from driving, and limit their use of electricity on their day of rest? Should we introduce Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur into this new religion, for are not all humans judged on these days? One cannot really answer or even contemplate these complex questions without a proper understanding of Talmud and the later authorities.
****

A strong sense of mission overwhelms me. I realize that my life is different from most other people's, including religious Jews. What I experience is the Hand from Above that gives me no rest and humbles me. I'm driven by it but do not always know where I am going. Often, I feel the need to step out of all this and start living a normal life. But, much as I have tried, it just doesn't work. I am convinced that although I may never know what it is, there is great meaning behind this seemingly absurd life of mine. It is beautiful and demanding, yet quite frightening. I often wonder why God chose me to be born into this family, from a Torah-forbidden marriage, and why I had to encounter Judaism in such an unusual way. I realize that by biblical standards I should never have been. Am I the product of a divine comedy? And am I living up to it?

God has blessed me with the ability to inspire, and I try to not just convey my ideas in lectures but to actually live them, like a musician who lives his music. This has a lot to do with my background. There are moments when I feel like a Marrano; other times like a Hassid in a state of d'vekut (religious ecstasy through bonding with God); and sometimes I identify with Spinoza's level-headed sub specie aeternitatis! Inside me lives the arrogant Portuguese Jew with his joie de vivre, extravagant attire, top hat and tailcoat, praying in the Esnoga of Amsterdam and filled with Spanish gravidade (dignity). On some occasions I immerse myself in a mikva, longing for kedusha (holiness), which is nearly impossible to attain. But all these exceptional experiences are not of my making. I did not ask for them, nor did I work to achieve them. They are divine gifts, and I carry them with me. I only pray that all these different dimensions blend well and make me a balanced person.
****

I often wonder whether my non-Jewish grandparents, whom I never knew, have any connection to all this. I do not feel at all affiliated with them. They are complete strangers to me, and my mother never spoke about them. I do not say kaddish for them, nor do I even know when they died or where they are buried. Perhaps their graves have already been removed and I should have prevented it. But there is nothing internal that pulls me to find out or take action. Is this right? After all, am I not of their blood, and are they not part of my strange story? On the other hand, I love to meet my brother's children who, while proud of their Jewish background, live in a non-Jewish world. My children, also, are in regular contact with them, and this gives me great joy. I even have two first cousins from my mother's side with whom I stay in touch. So, why do I feel a kinship to them, but not to my grandparents? Am I the victim of Freud's subconscious repression and denial?

We are all neighbors of ourselves, watching our own lives through a distant window. Do I even know myself? Although we are married more than 45 years, am I a stranger to my dear wife because I was incapable of telling her what was happening in my innermost self since the day I contemplated giyur? For years, my giyur was absent from my conscious life. I had forgotten about it, and even today, when I hear Jews make discriminating remarks about gerim, it never touches me personally. I am a Jew like all others. So why do I suddenly feel a moral obligation to tell my story in order to inspire? And is the good Lord behind this?

My children and grandchildren are all aware of my background and do not seem to be bothered by it. They're actually proud of it. But to what extent does my story play a role, perhaps subconsciously, in their lives? I will never forget when one of my daughters, as a child (now the mother of four), came home one Friday night crying and refusing to look at me. When we asked her what had happened, she said that her best friend had just informed her that her father was a goy! My wife and I then realized that unlike with our other children we had forgotten to tell her about my background. Only after we explained it all did she calm down and allow me to once again be her father!

When each of my children entered the world of shidduchim, I made sure the other party knew about me before the two would meet. When one of my granddaughters was rejected twice for a marriage proposal because of my background, it hit me like a bolt of lightning. I felt very bad for her, but it did not touch me personally. I view the people who rejected her, and those who advised them, as being guilty of violating Halakha and not having a clue as to what Judaism is all about.
****

I often ask myself why I have merited these many blessings: discovering Judaism just at the right time, when I was still young, unmarried and open to new ideas; being married to a wonderful woman; having the opportunity to learn, write and speak about Torah for most of my life; and, of course, living in Israel. It still frightens me when I think of how close I was to marrying a non-Jew. There is not a moment when I take it for granted that I have Jewish children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren who are all deeply religious. Could it be z'khut avot (the merits of our forefathers)? Or perhaps divine intervention? More and more, I believe it is the z'khut of my mother who had the courage to hide my father, his mother, brothers, sister and their wives and husband right under the noses of the Nazis in the center of Amsterdam, and saved all of them from the atrocities of Auschwitz. She risked her life several times, telling the Nazis that her husband

and family had already been taken to the camps while they were actually hiding behind cupboards six feet away from where she stood. The same strength she displayed at my birth.
****

What I've learned over the years from my own story is that I don't believe it's possible to be steadily and persistently religious. One can only be in that state at certain moments, when one experiences a unique, ineffable encounter with God. All we can do is live in a religious context that will constantly remind us to long for that unparalleled moment.

To be a Jew is so much more than just being part of the Jewish people, having a Jewish mother, or even converting. It is living in the spiritual order of Judaism; living through the Jews of the past, the present and the future. One becomes somewhat Jewish when one realizes there cannot be life in the absence of moral conscience and without an often complicated encounter with God. To be a Jew is to challenge the stabilization of accepted values; to live in dissent and protest; to overcome stagnation and move beyond trivialities and clichés; to be involved in radical thinking. It is to dare to stand before God and, if need be, to challenge Him. To be a Jew is to realize that we Jews are either indispensable or superfluous. Only when we comprehend this and live accordingly can we slowly grow into real Jews.

I am still on the road. When will I arrive and be an authentic Jew? Just as Judaism is still in the making, so am I.
****
With thanks to Channa Shapiro, Jerusalem

aking, so am I. **** With thanks to Channa Shapiro, Jerusalem