Expanding Our Religious Vocabulary

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The work of educators in Day Schools is not to be underestimated. The dedicated men and women who work with adolescents are especially worthy of our appreciation. The volatile years of adolescence, times full of excitement and turmoil, present our youth with many challenges—but also harbor tremendous potential for personal growth.

Several factors tend to inhibit the realization of the potential of these formative years. With almost exclusive emphasis on measurable academic achievements, the formal setting of the classroom provides a rather poor setting for fostering inquisitive minds and searching souls. Even the most committed, diligent, and talented educator will find it hard to overcome the disadvantages inherent in the system. He or she is often forced by circumstances to neglect fostering the personal growth of the student as a human being and as a learning and practicing Jew. We should consider seriously revamping our academic goals and significantly changing the structure of our schools. The purpose of this article is to suggest substantial changes in our curriculum that can enrich our students and better equip them for the future.

In my experience, one of the most prominent features of the graduates of Orthodox schools is a lack of sophistication in their religious language. Even the most intelligent student, who has already mastered the rudiments of a liberal arts education, who reads diligently and enthusiastically, is often deprived of any depth or breadth in his thoughts relating to God and God’s relationship with humanity. Although students’ concepts about these issues remain undeveloped,

these same students are expected to deal with a wealth of secular knowledge while being bombarded by criticism of religion. By the time they finish high school, these students quite often have reached the conclusion that religious thought is a sham, and religious experience is, at best, a pleasant illusion. This problem can be alleviated quite easily—although some our educators need some aid in making the transition.

Maimonides expressed criticism of biblical imagery eloquently and at great length in the Guide of the Perplexed and concisely in his Mishne Torah. He was so successful in “cleansing Judaism of vestiges of idolatry” that his approach is viewed by many as the final word on this topic. Maimonides’ interpretation of all anthropomorphic expressions as metaphoric is so obvious to some, that the portion of the Guide that deals with this issue seems to be superfluous, even boring. Yet even one with the most rudimentary knowledge of Jewish Thought after Maimonides will understand that although Maimonides' work was extremely influential, it must be viewed as an opening remark in a multi-generational debate. One important focal point is haRav Shneur Zalman of Ladi’s criticism of the concept of “negative appellations.” He states that even this approach smacks of “reverse anthropomorphism” since God is viewed as the negative of our selves. The discussion has become especially vibrant in the last hundred years. From haRav Kook to Emanuel Levinas, thinkers have dealt with the issue of theological language in very compelling ways. The criticism of such language by Wittgenstein created a great wake of reactions even in the Torah world. Professor Yeshayahu Leibovitz and haRav Professor Eliezar Goldman became exponents of extreme interpretations of Maimonides’ approach.

For high-school students, the issue of religious language is essential. At the turn of the last century, haRav Kook already noticed that the pioneers of the “Second Aliyah” were heretical vis-à-vis the image of God that remained in their mind from the formative years of the heder. Beyond the question of belief lurks the question of religious experience. Religious language affects our ability to interpret universal human experiences in a significant and meaningful fashion—and may add important dimensions to our existence. It is likely that the development of rich and diversified religious vocabulary is a necessary condition for the advent of more intensive explicit experiences. Beyond this, it could be posited that sophisticated religious language actually may be instrumental in the formation of spiritual experience.

Programmatically, the following introduction may be useful to both educators and students to understand where we stand—and to suggest what path we may take

to enrich our lives and energize our commitment. At this point in the progression of Jewish Thought, it is inappropriate to be judgmental or apologetic about any particular imagery. For those who have “Maimonidian” sensitivities, I would suggest using the format used by the mentors of the Mussar Movement. When using biblical imagery, they would simply add the words, “so to speak.” In my mind, even the rationalist approach is a form of human imagery for "silence is your praise." The simple analysis suggested uses three distinct models to delineate the basic imagery employed in Jewish Thought and liturgy up to, but not including, the novel thoughts of Professor Emanuel Levinas. As in all analysis using models as their format, none of these models represents any particular opinion that was expressed historically. They are extreme constructs and lack sophistication, yet I have found that they function as a very useful map as students find their way through our sources and their own experiences.

· God is an omniscient and eternal persona who created the world by decree and intervenes in history when so desired.
· God watches over creation, administering justice.
· God is capable of great wrath, "foaming at the nostrils," and even greater compassion, "hearing their cries."
· God is susceptible to argument and prayer. The imagery is vivid, extremely anthropomorphic—and even includes descriptions of God's thoughts and changes of heart.
· God is the prime mover—an entity beyond our comprehension.
· God is an incorporeal "being," complete and never moved.
· The dichotomy between Creator and creation of Tanakh is reaffirmed and enhanced.
· Theism approaches Deism.
· Divine providence, God’s administration of justice and retribution, the significance of prayer, the appearance of angels, and even revelation are topics that deserve and receive special attention in this approach as they seem to contradict its premises.
· God is both transcendent and imminent. Although God is beyond human conception, God’s essence permeates the cosmos.
· The dichotomy between Creator and creation of Tanakh is broken; Creation is not only a moment in time, but is in some sense an ongoing process.
· Beyond the historical influences on this imagery mystical experiences nourish these thoughts.
· In peak experiences mystics lose their sense of self and become absorbed in the unity of all being. This experience is interpreted as a reflection of the Divine within the material world.

Although these models of talking about God seem mutually exclusive, the approaches in our literature often use them simultaneously. The way these thoughts are combined often creates intriguing results. The models suggested can help us analyze sophisticated religious language used by great thinkers in our tradition.

In our schools and synagogues, biblical and rationalist language are often used simultaneously in very simplistic ways, yet intertwined beyond recognition. Ideas used together seem to contradict one another. Intelligent students are confused. Some blame their confusion on the Torah. Sloppy thought seems to prove that religion is only "opium for the masses." Questions on a particular mode are often confused with questions on the essence of Torah and the halakhic lifestyle.

Very often, systematic justice administered by a “transcendent being” of the rationalist model by some created mechanism is somehow tied to very personal biblical imagery. This is prominent in students' minds and can create an impasse. Although they have many experiences that would be interpreted directly as meaningful meetings of humans with their Creator, these experiences are not recognized as such. The religious language of the student is too narrow to encompass spiritual experience. Since each set of imagery—biblical, rationalistic, and mystical—expresses and nourishes distinctly different religious experiences, some students are left empty handed. They have yet to feel the presence of God in the biblical sense—but they have no words or ways to conceive of God in any other sense. Some feel the presence of God in their lives, but are convinced that their feelings are silly, since their conception of God does not fit the lofty being of the rationalist mode. The rationalist mode and the mystical mode tend to contradict biblical imagery in the mind—and even more so in the heart. Some students manage to live in a dichotomous world. As a brilliant student once told me: "Although I find Maimonides' approach in the Guide very convincing, I live my life with the distinct feeling that God is holding my hand." Another student commented: "Fortunately, I forget the Guide when I pray!"

It is my conviction that more students may remain devout if we enrich their religious language. It is important to note that mystical imagery is very potent for open-minded yeshiva students. Visiting a museum, listening to a concert, reading about the discoveries of contemporary physics, or seeing the smile of a child can be interpreted religiously in all three models. If students acquire a language of transcendence their lives, they may experience these activities as pivotal to the meaning of their lives.