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CONVERSATIONS

Orthodoxy and Spirituality

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SUBMISSION OF ARTICLES

If you wish to submit an article to *Conversations*, please send the editor (mdangel@jewishideas.org) a short description of the essay you plan to write. Articles should be written in a conversational style, without footnotes, and should be submitted typed, double spaced, as word documents.

Articles reflect the views of their authors, and do not represent official positions of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Conversations welcomes "letters to the editor," commenting on articles that appear in its pages. Letters should be emailed to the Editor.

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Editor's Introduction

At the core of Judaism is the desire for a personal relationship with the Almighty. We study Torah, pray, and observe the other mitzvoth as means of coming closer to God—of feeling the divine presence. One would expect that Orthodox Jews—who claim the greatest devotion to Torah and mitzvoth—would be the most spiritual Jews.

Indeed, many Orthodox Jews are spiritually alive. Yet, it would seem that many others are having problems with their spirituality. They might be following halakha; they might be going through the rites and routines of Judaism; and nevertheless, they may feel distant from God. Worse, they may not think too much about God at all!

Different people define "spirituality" in different ways, and indeed the word has a certain vagueness to it. However, we all have a sense of what it is, what it should be, and how it could infuse our lives with deeper meaning.

Some people express their spirituality in silence, privacy, humility. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi used to say the *Shema*—the quintessential unification of God's name—in such an inconspicuous way, that even his closest students weren't aware that he was doing so. Others express their spirituality in song and dance, in meditation, in soulful prayer, in communal religious experiences. Some people find expression of their spirituality primarily through intellectual endeavor; others turn to mysticism; yet others to the arts. There is not one spiritual path that can accommodate all people.

Alan Watts, a popular writer on Eastern religion, offered a keen insight: "The most spiritual people are the most human. They are natural and easy in manner; they give themselves no airs: they interest themselves in ordinary everyday matters, and are not forever talking and thinking about religion. For them, there is no difference between spirituality and usual life…" (*The Supreme Identity*, NY, 1972, p. 128).

We are all seeking to live our mundane lives with heightened spiritual awareness. We come closer to our goal when we learn to integrate our spirituality with our normal everyday activities.

This issue of *Conversations* focuses on Orthodoxy and Spirituality. It brings together an impressive group of authors, who approach the topic from various points of view. Since spirituality is a human phenomenon and not only a Jewish concern, we open with an article by Dr. Howard Wettstein on the significance of religious experience. We then have articles by Rabbi Avraham Weiss, Dr. Steven Kepnes, and Reb Zalman Schacter-Shalomy exploring elements of spirituality—in very different ways.

Dr. Mordechai Luria and Dr. Edward Hoffman offer insights based on their readings of Maimonides. We then have a series of articles on religious experience/spirituality by Erin Leib Smokler, Rabbi Barry Gelman, Rabbi Jeremy Rosen, Tovli Simiryan, and Rabbi Hayyim Angel. Paul Shaviv discusses the dangerous outer boundary of spirituality, as characterized by charismatic teachers who overstep the bounds of propriety. Ariel Evan Mayse suggests how Kabbalah can be more effectively incorporated into Orthodox Jewish life.

What about our synagogues? Do they provide us with the spiritual sustenance that we crave? Daniel B. Schwartz, Dr. Adena Berkowitz, and Maxine Angel offer their views on this topic. Jonathan Kolatch wonders about the terms "Orthodox," "Religious," "Observant"—and how these terms are useful, or not so useful. We close this issue with a review essay by Dr. Maurice Wohlgelernter, who discusses the latest book by Aharon Appelfeld.

This issue of *Conversations* should generate considerable thought, discussion, and soul-searching. Please read the articles slowly and carefully. They are worth reading more than once.

Conversations is the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. The Institute fosters an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, and inclusive Orthodox Judaism—respectful of legitimate diversity of opinion within the boundaries of Torah and halakha. For more information about the Institute, and to help advance its important work, please visit our website: jewishideas.org.

The Significance of Religious Experience

HOWARD WETTSTEIN

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His kind of faith is a gift.
It's like an ear for music or the talent to draw.
— Crimes and Misdemeanors, WOODY ALLEN

I. Introduction: Proofs, Old and New

Occasionally one meets or reads about people who were, as we say, born at the wrong time or place. Their gifts, tendencies, and ways, awkward in the context of their lives, would have seemed natural at some other time or place. The classical proofs for the existence of God suffer a different fate. Born at precisely the right time and place, they now seem out of context, no longer compelling in the way they must have been. At least they seem that way to many of us.

The natural habitat of the proofs was the medieval philosophical world, an intellectual culture in which philosophical justification of the religious fundamentals was just what was needed.[1] If one moves back some centuries to ancient Israel and its Jewish and arguably early Christian aftermath rational justification of religion is not on the horizon. To defend belief in God's existence would have seemed bizarre, like defending belief in the existence of the weather.

Indeed, strange as this seems to our ears, belief itself is never mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. There is talk of believing God, i.e. trusting, relying upon God. But no talk of believing doctrines, believing that something is the case;[2] no commandment—no explicit one at least—to believe anything.[3] However, by the early middle ages in Jewish religious culture—earlier in Christianity—beliefs, thoughts, and the like become very much the center of attention and there is a felt need to justify religious belief.[4]

The medieval attitude to belief's centrality has become the norm. We identify the belief that God exists as a *sine qua non* of religious commitment. The Hebrew Bible's interest is rather in one's overall stance, the essential components of which are rather affective and behavioral, most importantly awe/fear and love of God as realized in lived experience.

But while belief has become central, the proofs of the medievals—the classic philosophic defenses of that belief—have lost their punch. The considerations to which they appeal—like the order and beauty of the universe—have by no means lost their suggestiveness, their relevance to, and significance for religious thought and feeling. But proof is another thing.[5]

My aim here is to reflect on a relatively new style of proof—a distant relative of the classical arguments—current throughout the twentieth century and in recent decades even more vital, the argument from individual religious experience. Here too, or so I will argue, we should distinguish the alleged proof's cogency from the religious significance of the considerations to which the proof appeals.

The focus on individual religious experience brings to mind the Protestant religious orientation. Not that individual religious experience is a mere afterthought in the other monotheisms. Indeed the proof's advocates appeal to religious experiences in a variety of traditions. Likewise, advocates of the argument include philosophers as diverse as William Alston and Richard Swinburne on the Protestant side, Gary Gutting, a Catholic, and Jewish thinker Jerome Gellman.[6] For the most part, howev-

er, contemporary discussions of proofs of God's existence in the Catholic, Jewish, or Muslim traditions—as I say, they are hardly the central topic nowadays—are of the classical arguments.

My aim here is to explore the fundamental ideas of the argument, this as opposed to the numerous sophisticated variations that have emerged. I begin with William James, early in the twentieth century. Whatever the specifics of his religious views, James emerges from the American Protestant world and gives such proofs a great deal of respect. It's good to begin with James, moreover, since he has a gift for raising fundamental questions in an intuitive, technically unencumbered way. In this way he is like later philosophers P. F. Strawson and Harry Frankfurt; penetrating minds whose insights give rise to rather technical literatures.

II. Gifts to the Spirit

James characterizes experiences that purport to be of God—he includes them in the category of mystical experiences—as "gifts to our spirit." "No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these . . . forms of consciousness quite disregarded."

Such experiences for James bespeak quite literally another form of consciousness. It is an open question, he supposes, as to whether such forms reveal worlds, as it were, that are ordinarily beyond our reach. It's difficult to know what to do with James' seemingly extravagant notion of forms of consciousness. This raises issues of the paranormal; James was a founder of the American Society for Psychical Research in 1885.

Whatever one thinks about the paranormal, James' remarks about "gifts to the spirit" are themselves gifts. Here James evinces an appreciation of religion that is nowadays lost to many. John Dewey, a similarly sympathetic critic of religion,[7] writes:

> A writer says: "I broke down from overwork and soon came to the verge of nervous prostration. One morning after a long and sleepless night. . . . I resolved to stop drawing upon myself so continuously and begin drawing upon God. I determined to set apart a quiet time every day in which I could relate my life to its ultimate source, regain the consciousness that in God I live, move and have my being. That was thirty years ago. Since then I have had literally not one hour of darkness or despair."
>
> This [life story constitutes] an impressive record. I do not doubt its

> authenticity nor that of the experience related. It illustrates a religious aspect of experience. But it illustrates also the use of that quality to carry a superimposed load of a particular religion. For having been brought up in the Christian religion, its subject interprets it in the terms of the personal God characteristic of that religion.[8]

Dewey's expression, "a religious aspect of experience" is no throwaway; he emphasizes the reality and significance of such aspects. In this passage he suggests—and in the sequel he greatly expands upon—the power of religion and its potential for influencing positively the course of life. At the same time he much more clearly and forcefully than James rejects the supernaturalist metaphysics associated with traditional religion. Nevertheless I suspect that James' phrase "gifts to the spirit" would sit well for Dewey.[9]

Speaking for myself, I very much like James' characterization. This is in part because I think with Dewey that such peak moments, and religious life more generally, can have a beneficial influence, including one's psychological balance, ability to negotiate life's challenges, the significance one accords to one's life, and the dignity one assigns to others.[10] But there is another and perhaps deeper reason, albeit one that I find difficult to express.

What makes "gifts to the spirit" so difficult to explicate is "spirit." I could explain James' idea if I could explain the concept of the spirit, and related idea of the spiritual. There is significantly more to these ideas than the largely psychological dimension that Dewey emphasizes—the various beneficial effects mentioned above as well as "the unification of the self" of which Dewey speaks.

The quotation from *Crimes and Misdemeanors* at the head of this article suggests that an affinity for things of the spirit is grounded in a natural gift, a human capacity, analogous to, in the aesthetic domain, having an ear for music or the talent to draw. I'll begin with the latter and return to religion shortly. As we will see, there is more to mine here than a mere analogy. The aesthetic dimension has its own ties to matters of the spirit.

One obstacle to establishing the link I am after is that "aesthetic" is often heard in a reductive way; ascriptions of beauty, for example, are sometimes thought of, dismissed as, merely subjective. This is a function, I believe, of thinking too abstractly about this sphere. Consider by contrast actual aesthetic gifts, like musical talent or even having an ear for music.

These abilities are far along the continuum from subjective toward objective, which is not to suggest that this distinction is either sharp or clear. Surely musical talent, an ear for music, and the like are no less aspects of the world than other abilities—including those in the domain of athletics—to perform, to discern and appreciate, etc. The "tone deaf" idiom suggests that one, otherwise sound in auditory capacities, can systematically miss something important.

One who is musically advanced may hear the same performance as the rest of us but may alone penetrate to profound levels of appreciation. Similarly, one advanced in the appreciation of the visual arts may bring something very different to, and take something very different from, a painting, or indeed a natural scene, for example a landscape with its play of light, shadow, color, and the like.

Profound aesthetic experiences, no less than the religious experiences of which James wrote, deserve to be thought of as gifts to the spirit. They may engender a sense of awe and mystery, and of the sublime; they may provoke a feeling of being privileged and so of gratitude. The experience may be at once elevating and humbling. These represent important points of contact with religious moments.

The points of contact are not limited to such reactions. Artistic and religious virtuosity both involve, even begin with, natural aptitude, as noted in the quotation from *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. Some are more given to these things than others. And in both domains, hard work, genuine focus—at times single-minded—is essential if one is to approach one's potential. We are less apt to think this way about the religious domain than the artistic. But a religious giant, a Mozart of the spirit, is a rare find; she is (certainly typically) one who has labored strenuously in pursuit of excellence.[11] And just as one who is tone-deaf can appreciate the musically gifted as responding to something of substance, one who is less able than another in matters of the spirit can recognize the latter's accomplishment. Needless to say, being tone-deaf is a rare condition in either domain. Ordinarily people occupy an intermediate position within a wide spectrum of which being tone-deaf is at one extreme.

I've been emphasizing the analogies between the two domains, and the quasi-religious character of profound aesthetic experience. Now consider one who has undergone considerable development in both domains. A religious orientation—bringing God into the picture—may heighten

and deepen one's reactions to beauty. Explaining this is another matter, and not a trivial one. There may be no single story. God may play the role of an object of gratefulness, someone as it were on whom one bestows one's gratitude. Sometimes the presence of God in the picture links experiences that would otherwise feel discrete; one comes to see an array in place of discrete dots. The points in the array seem to accrue added significance; aesthetic experience can thus partake of something analogous to what is sometimes called intertextuality.[12] Sometimes it may be God's role as a partner and, as it were, a friend with whom to share the wonder. There are no doubt other dimensions, and the experience of several of these at once adds considerable power. One shares the wonders with their source, takes pleasure in their array.

Consideration of the aesthetic domain may be illuminating. Still, in much religious experience the aesthetic dimension is marginal or not present. All sorts of things can stimulate religious reflection and feeling: another's death, or the prospect of death—one's own or that of others, various sorts of horrors or extreme ugliness, witnessing simple acts of particularly touching human kindness, childbirth, the intellectual and/or moral growth of one's child or simply of another person, to name a few. It seems too much of a stretch to assimilate the religious reactions that may be prompted to reactions in the aesthetic domain.

And finally, there are James' favorite examples of gifts of the spirit, quasi-perceptual experiences of God's presence. There is no reason to assimilate these—certainly not all of them—to the aesthetic. They represent a spiritual achievement, the sense of being in God's presence. Of course, many experiences can provoke a sense of the divine presence, for example, some of the aesthetic ones discussed above. But the quasi-perceptual experiences are quite another thing, face to face with God, as James puts it.[13]

To approach religious sensibility with James is to bring to center stage the experiential side of the religious orientation. But what of religious belief? James, while he writes that religion is fundamentally a phenomenon of the gut rather than of the head, argues forcefully that the experiential aspect has important implications for the doxastic side of religion.

III. What If Anything Do Religious Experiences Prove?

James and many of the more recent advocates of the argument from religious experience treat such experiences on the model of perception; James calls them, "face to face presentations." They are, he says, "absolutely authoritative."

> Our own more "rational" beliefs are based on evidence exactly similar in nature to that which mystics quote for theirs. Our senses, namely, have assured us of certain states of fact; but mystical experiences are as direct perceptions of fact for those who have them as any sensations ever were for us.[14]

This powerful "warrant for truth" does not, however, extend to those who have not themselves had such experiences. Testimony about religious experiences, according to James, is vitiated by what would seem to be a very powerful consideration, the great variety of such reports of experiences, testifying as it were to many different gods, non-gods, various metaphysical realities, and the like.[15] Here James sounds a bit like Hume, who famously denies that claims to miraculous experiences have epistemic value for those who merely hear testimony about them. By contrast, some more recent advocates maintain that such "perceptual" experiences constitute objective evidence, evidence for all of us, not only for participants.

By way of reaction to James' "absolutely authoritative" claim, it seems important that the experiences in question are not phenomenally like ordinary sense perception. Consider one of James' examples.

> God is more real to me than any thought of thing or person. I feel his presence positively, and the more as I live in closer harmony with his laws as written in my body and mind. I feel him in the sunshine and rain; and awe mingled with a delicious restfulness most nearly describes my feelings. I talk to him as to a companion in prayer and praise, and our communion is delightful. He answers me again and again, often in words so clearly spoken that it seems my outer ear must have carried the tone, but generally in strong mental impressions. Usually a text of scripture, unfolding some new view of him and his love for me, and care for my safety. I could give hundreds of instances, in school matters, social problems, financial difficulties, etc. That he is mine and I am his never leaves me, it is an abiding joy. Without it life would be a blank, a desert, a shoreless, trackless waste. (p. 81)

For the most part the people James quotes are not claiming literally to see or hear God. Their sense is that they are experiencing God—in some way that is difficult for us (and them) to define. The experiences are to be sure various, ranging from ones that involve a deeply felt sense of God's presence, God's love, etc. to quasi-sensual "almost seeings, almost hearings," and the like. In the quotation just given, there is only one reference to actual hearing, and it may well be that the writer is speaking of an as-if hearing. The closer to claims of actual perceptual experience, the more likely we are to take them to be a bit crazy. Interestingly, St. Teresa of Avila, the sixteenth-century mystic, suggests, according to Rowan Williams,[16] that as a rule of thumb "the closer such perception is to . . . actually supposing the object of vision to be present to the senses . . . the less likely it is to be genuinely of God."

The differences with ordinary perception are not limited to the phenomenal aspects. The religious experiences in question are for most of the subjects once (or at most several) in a lifetime experiences. There are those mystics who more regularly enjoy such privileges but it would be surprising in the extreme if they could call them up at will. Ordinary, everyday perception, by contrast, is reliably repeatable. One can return to a room and typically see exactly what one expects to see.

In addition to the matter of repeatability, there is the question of whether what one perceives—and indeed one's perceiving it—is available to other normal perceivers. The question is not only whether others can have similar experiences, but also whether what one takes in on a particular occasion is open to others' perception. In the example above, the person talks with God and receives answers—in the special "as-if perception" mode. Whatever else one thinks about the give and take, no one takes the interaction to be available to others.

These differences do not themselves imply that anything short of veridical perception is occurring. But they do strain the analogy with ordinary sense perception. While it is less than clear that James' is exactly an argument from analogy, it's worth keeping our eyes upon these differences.

Perhaps more important, though, is James' Hume-like point about testimony, what we might call "the many-gods problem." Indeed it's difficult to understand why James supposes that the agent's "warrant for truth" survives the agent's own knowledge of the many-gods problem. After all, if one were having a notoriously unreliable sort of sense percep-

tion one would do well, despite the appearances, to question what one seems to be seeing. In the case of religious experience, the Jamesian agent would not trust another's testimony. Why then should she not apply this lesson to her own case?

Finally, and perhaps most important of all, these religious experiences do not involve any sensory apparatus. This seems to me—but evidently not to James and his followers—perhaps the most important point of all, one that puts the other points mentioned into proper perspective. I will linger a bit on it.

The accumulated experience of humankind gives much weight to the senses as yielding more or less reliable information about the environment. However this is to be rationalized, understood, theorized, all but the most strident skeptic is on board here. Indeed the rough outline of how this all works is well known. One doesn't need contemporary neuroscience; Locke had something like the basic idea.

So sense perception has for us a privileged epistemic status. But this has everything to do with the idea that our senses are trained on aspects of the environment. There are other experiences that are in a wider sense "perceptual," experiences like the religious ones we are considering, but also mental images, hallucinations, dreams. These are phenomenally more like perception than like, for example, conceptual thinking. But they do not therefore somehow automatically inherit the epistemic credentials of sense perception.

James' contrary contention, apparently, is roughly that any sufficiently vivid (if that's the right word) presentation has as much claim as any other to being veridical, the disclosure of an independent reality. But why should vividness, or the sense that one is making genuine perceptual contact, bridge the gap between actual perception of the environment and these other sorts of "perceptual" experiences?

It is as if, under the influence of the Cartesian tradition, one were working from the inside. Sufficiently vivid perceptual states are on a par unless one can find grounds to distinguish them. And from such a perspective, working one's way from inside to outside—finding such grounds—is the major undertaking. But this is not the only way to approach these matters. It is plausible that as human beings in perceptual touch with our surroundings, we are already outside. We begin, as Quine says, with ordinary things.[17] But such perception of the environment is a very different

business than perceptual experience of the wider variety, including quasi-perceptual religious experience.

Accordingly, a reflective person, privileged to have an intense religious moment of the sort in question, might bracket the epistemology of the experience. It means ever so much, she might well say, but it proves little. My own certainly fit this pattern. They were at once powerfully significant—even if relatively tame—and epistemically inert. The question of what the experience verified never so much as arose.

Here I am not alone. Rowan Williams writes:

> [for Teresa] the mysticism is demystified, and mystical experience *as such* is accorded no particular authority. Its authority . . . has to be displayed in the shape of the vocation of which it is part. [Still, . . .] there is good reason for intensified phenomenological interest in the varieties of preternatural or paranormal occurrence in prayer, especially when (as in Teresa's case) these are to some extent organized as an ascending series. Teresa herself is fascinated by her experiences. . . . (Williams, p. 148)

> Teresa and her contemporaries would have found this [the idea of trying to validate doctrine] in light of such mystical experiences surprising. For all Teresa's interest in the visionary and paranormal, she is not disposed to use it as evidence for the way the universe is. "Do mystical states establish the truth [of religious claims]?," asks William James in the course of a discussion of Teresa. Teresa herself would never have imagined that "mystical states" could do such a job . . . [that they] had any part whatever to play in doctrinal discussion. So far from "mystical states" being a sort of paradigm of certainty, they have authority only within a frame of reference which is believed in on quite other grounds, and are therefore properly to be tested according to their consistency with this. (p. 149)

St. Teresa, then, brackets her experiences in epistemological terms. This does not, in her view, however, militate against their being religiously significant. Indeed she seems to measure spiritual progress, at least of one significant variety, by something like the intensity and perhaps frequency of the experiences.

Such epistemological neutrality does not entail metaphysical neutrality. I'm sure that St. Teresa believed she was making contact with God that in mystical experience. Unlike a Jamesian, however, she didn't presume that one could, from reflecting on the perceptual character of the experience, rationally conclude that it really was contact with God.

Imagine now another grade of removal from the Jamesian picture. One undergoes a powerful religious experience but is less than sure about, even skeptical about, any sort of real contact with the supernatural. "I know," he might say, "that this experience reflects my deep religious involvement, but whether I've actually achieved contact with God is hard to say." Another example is provided by the advocate of a perfect being theology and some associated anti-anthropomorphism. Divinity, on such a view, might be taken to be beyond our perceptual (or even conceptual) reach. But such a theological position historically has not led to giving up prayer.[18] And such a person might indeed be subject to various sorts of religious experiences. Whatever these experiences are, she might reflect, they are powerful, elevating, and humbling; their intensity and regularity a measure of one's spiritual situation. In short, one who departs from metaphysical/epistemological claims about the experiences might still adopt St. Teresa's Jamesian attitude about their religious value.

IV. Interlude: Epistemic Legalism

James' treatment of these phenomena—and even more so later advocates of the argument from religious experience—exhibits what I will call "epistemic legalism." What I have in mind here is analogous to what Bernard Williams and others have called "scientism," roughly the misapplication to philosophy of modes of explanation that have their home in scientific theorizing.

In Charles Griswold's recent book, *Forgiveness*[19] he speaks frequently of *warranted* and *unwarranted* resentment, of the *obligation* to forgive, to forswear *unjustified* resentment, of the question of who has *standing* to forgive. In remarks on Griswold's book in a 2008 Pacific APA symposium,[20] I called attention to what seemed to me like an invasion of legal terminology/conceptualization into the ethical domain. The legalism, or so I argued, does not do justice to our experience of forgiving and being forgiven.

Of course the whole matter is controversial; for deontologists the legalistic terminology is apt. But that it is apt does not go without saying, and it is worth noting that it does not. Here too, in discussions of the epistemology of religion by James and his followers, notions like justification, warrant, and obligation are central. Since we are in the domain of episte-

mology, perhaps you will think that all this indeed goes without saying, that these are inevitably the pivotal notions. But perhaps not.

I spent my college years increasingly engaged with and committed to Orthodox Judaism. Religious practice and the sense of spiritual/intellectual community were extremely compelling. At the same time part and parcel of the life were beliefs: that a supernatural God exists, that God revealed the Torah to Moses on Mt. Sinai, and the like. Given that one could not be sure of such things was there something like evidence or a good reason to think that these things were actually true? Doesn't intellectual responsibility require more than just the powerful feeling that attends to the life? Such were my pangs of intellectual conscience.

One could no doubt put these questions in terms of justification, warrant, intellectual duty/obligation and the like. And surely at the time I was not making distinctions between theoretical approaches in epistemology. But the description in terms of virtues like intellectual honesty, integrity, and responsibility seems more in line with my thinking.

Some years ago I was speaking with my then Notre Dame colleague, Fred Freddoso. We were discussing the attempt by our colleague Alvin Plantinga to show that belief in God was rational. Plantinga once commented there were many good arguments for the existence of God, 32 if I remember correctly. (I quipped that I knew the five famous ones and they didn't do it.) I believe that Plantinga was thinking of a good argument in a different way than I. When he spoke and wrote about the rationality of belief in God, he meant something quite refined, something like—if I have him right—one way one might proceed without irrationality. To establish that belief in God was rational was something like establishing that one had no epistemic duty to reject it. In discussing this, Freddoso, an Aquinas scholar, commented that in St. Thomas's treatment, such a sophisticated (and legalistic) conception of rationality is not at issue. What St. Thomas asks is (something like) "Is belief in God dumb?" The force of that question I can feel.

Thinking in terms of intellectual honesty, integrity, and responsibility may lead in a direction very different from that of the epistemic legalism that's been in vogue for so long.[21] As with other issues in philosophy, switching vocabulary is no guarantee of a substantially different approach. It depends of course on what one makes of the virtue talk. And of course this is a large topic at which I'm merely glancing here.

Justification is the concept from the legalistic framework that I'm most concerned with at present. Justification often has a defensive flavor, in philosophy and more generally.[22] In philosophy it's as if a Pyrrhonian homunculus were perched on one's shoulder, repeatedly whispering in one's ear, "How do you know; are you certain?" And providing a non-question-begging answer is a very difficult business even for the most pedestrian beliefs; witness Descartes. This is of course not to say that one can't theorize about justification without the skeptic in mind. But there is often the scent of skepticism in the air, perhaps especially in discussions of justifying religious belief.[23]

V. Swinburne et al.

I propose that we characterize the religious experiences we have been exploring, neutrally as possible (with respect to what they indicate about God's existence), as experiences "as of God." This lacks poetry; but not to worry, it won't come up much in conversation. Richard Swinburne, also in search of a non-question-begging description, proposes that we speak of them as "epistemic seemings."[24] For Swinburne, apparently following Chisholm, "seems epistemically that x is present" means roughly that the agent believes (or is inclined to believe) that x is present on the basis of the experience.

There is one respect in which Swinburne's terminology seemingly fails to achieve the non-question begging character he seeks. For it presupposes that to have such an experience is to believe (or be inclined to believe) that God exists on the basis of the experience. But as we have seen, on St. Teresa's approach the experience fails to provide a ground for the belief. The agent's belief is grounded elsewhere. And on the alternative I mentioned above—a further grade of removal from James—the agent can take the experience to be religiously momentous without believing that he is making perceptual contact with God. Again, the experience will hardly provide a ground for his belief.

Still, surely some people do experience such "epistemic seemings," religious experiences on the basis of which they ground their religious beliefs. Swinburne, a super-Jamesian, attempts to extend their justification to the rest of us: given the religious experiences of some people, rationality requires that we all believe that God exists.[25] The following "principle

of credulity"[26] is at the heart of his argument:

> It is a principle of rationality that (in the absence of special considerations) if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that x is present, then probably x is present; what one seems to perceive is probably so. (p. 254)

Swinburne argues for this principle on grounds that denying it would "land one in a skeptical bog" about ordinary perception. Here we have not just the scent of skepticism, detected in the emphasis on justification. Skepticism constitutes a crucial link in the argument.

Swinburne's approach to the epistemology of individual religious experience represents an important trend in twentieth-century Christian philosophy. Respect for skepticism is one important aspect of the trend, but it's not the only one or the deepest.[27] That honor belongs to an idea to which I now turn.

My first encounter with the idea was as a college freshman, overhearing a conversation in a coffee shop. "We all have premises," offered a defender of religion. "These are mine." I didn't know a lot of philosophy at the time, but even then this sort of defense had very little appeal for me. Surely, I thought, we want more than that from philosophy. In such a fashion, one could defend just about anything one felt strongly enough about.

There is another way to take this sort of defense of religious belief. Perhaps the idea is that religious belief does not stand in need of philosophical justification; that religious belief is something with which one comes to philosophy. I myself, while I do not so approach religious belief (at least as it's usually construed—see later), I very much do so approach other matters, for example, our common sense beliefs about the world: that my dog is lying at my feet as I write these words, that he is a dog and I'm human, and the like. As I've said, we start with ordinary things; we start out in and with the world.

To maintain that religious belief is something that one brings to philosophy is to give religious belief the status of common sense. But this is to deny a striking intuitive gap between ordinary and religious beliefs; between on one hand the belief that I'm a human being and on the other that a supernatural God exists outside of time and space. With respect to the former, it takes some sort of philosophical skepticism to generate concern. Not so for the latter. A normally reflective person, religious or not, will recognize that there is an issue here. Or so we often suppose.

The denial of the intuitive gap is at the heart of the trend represented by Swinburne's approach. It is the meeting ground for James and his contemporary followers. Various philosophic strategies have been utilized to eliminate the gap. The freshman—post-Philosophy 1—comment above was one way. Closely related is the idea that religious belief is in effect (or can have the status of) common sense. Then there is James': to grant the special "as of God" experiences the epistemic status of sense perception. Still another way to eliminate the gap is by way of skepticism.

Here the idea is to place great weight on the skeptic's claims. One begins with the idea that some ordinary belief is in epistemological trouble given the weight of the skeptic's claims. Early along Alvin Plantinga emphasized belief in other minds.[28] Swinburne, in the work cited, speaks more generally of beliefs based on ordinary sense perception. How are we to deal with the skeptic? How might we, in the face of the skeptic's good questions, account for our everyday knowledge? Only by adopting a very strong epistemic principle—for example Swinburne's principle of credulity. But then, strong epistemic principle in hand, religious belief is no worse off than the most ordinary, pedestrian beliefs. Skepticism levels the playing field.

To the extent that one is moved by the skeptical starting point one will want to scrutinize the idea that something like the principle of credulity is the only way to rescue ordinary beliefs. From my perspective, while I worry about my beliefs being responsible, as discussed above, that constitutes no problem for ordinary beliefs and remains an issue for the religious beliefs in question.

I have explored a number of attempts to eliminate the intuitive epistemic gap I've been discussing. And of course one needs to have a look at each such proposal in detail. But something seems questionable with the general idea, with the very attempt to eliminate the gap.

Philosophy is notorious for solutions the brilliance of which outshines their contact with good sense. Russell reminded us to maintain our sense of reality "even in the most abstract studies." The intuitive gap I've been discussing is one that presents itself to many religious and non-religious people. Some of our forbears who produced elaborate rational proofs for the existence of God were presumably moved to do so by the sense that their passionately held convictions were indeed controversial, and not only in the sense that some people believed otherwise. Surely a reasonable

defense would reveal good reasons to believe without suggesting that the gap was illusory.

VI. Conclusion: Making Sense of Religion

Our modern sensibilities distance us from the ancients for whom God, like the weather, was hardly optional. We have well-known options. And even if one's own way is to take God for granted almost like the weather, the question of whether this makes sense almost inevitably arises at some point in one's life, certainly in the lives of those around one. In what follows I'll sketch an alternative to the approach taken in so much twentieth and twenty-first century work, by defenders of religion as well as by critics.

One thing that is striking—and new—in the Jamesian arguments we have been exploring is the idea that the experiential side of religion can serve as the foundation, specifically the epistemic foundation, of religious belief. At the same time, James is hardly interested in religious experience only for its epistemic implications. James called his book and the varieties and their meanings—meanings in the broadest sense—are its main focus.

To thus emphasize the experiential side is to make contact with the mystical tradition, and to diverge from the spirit of medieval rationalist theology.[29] It is also to converge with the approach of the Hebrew Bible with its emphasis on what Buber calls faith, a matter of living a life characterized by an intimacy with God.[30]

The ancients lived their faith without the help of our concept of belief. But this is not to say that there is something illegitimate about the use of our notion to characterize them, although it does require a certain delicacy. Surely there were things in the religious domain that they took to be true: the historical events described in the Bible for example, with God's role in them, as well as that God is good, forgiving, at times angry, and the like.[31] There is no harm in the cautious ascription of belief here.

Here's one reason for caution: The language in which many of these beliefs are expressed is poetically infused, the way of the Bible. And where not poetic, the language is often anthropomorphic, and so problematic as to its ultimate import. We may speak of belief here, but we are quite far from the philosophers' conception of assent to a well-defined propositional content. Max Kadushin, reflecting on such belief, refers to it as "uncrystallized," an arresting image.[32]

Religious belief can engender philosophical pique from another direction as well, the not inconsiderable inconsistency in the biblical characterization of God, an inconsistency that reflects our own sense of these things. To focus on our own case, we believe passionately in how much He cares—we feel or almost feel His touch—and then, turning a corner, we feel His absence acutely, sometimes almost a sense of cruelty. Or for another dimension of inconsistency, our experience of God, as just described, essentially involves God's feelings, thoughts, and the like. At the same time, we experience God as somehow beyond all that.[33]

The lack of clarity, the anthropomorphism, the inconsistency, these are things that while smoothly accommodated within religious life drive the philosophic mind to drink. Or to purify. When Greek philosophy enters into contact with the Israelite religious tradition there ensues a rationalizing of these earlier modes of religious thought. The literary rendering, so apt for the religious life as it was (and largely still is) lived, is seen as inadequate, as in need of translation into a non-poetic idiom, as in need of a metaphysical foundation and attendant epistemological support. And making sense of religious life comes to be seen as defending the religious metaphysics, in part by supplying a supporting epistemology. Which brings us to proofs of the existence of a God.

What, though, if we maintain our focus on lived experience rather than on any allegedly necessary metaphysical underpinning? Without a religious metaphysics and epistemology we may well be accused of not knowing of what we speak. But is it not a genuinely religious intuition that with respect to understanding God we are over our heads, that central to religious life is an intimacy, the other party to which is as it were seen through a glass darkly?

Making sense of one's commitment to a religious life is not and should not be a trivial matter. But there is a world of difference between defending supernaturalist metaphysics and making sense of the form of life. That the life genuinely speaks to one is, for example, germane to the latter project. An aspect of this, stronger for some participants than others, is a sense of God's presence. And one may reflect that one has more confidence in the wisdom of the life than in any philosophical interpretation of what it all comes to.

The effect of my approach is to reduce substantially the gap between ordinary and religious belief. The gap upon which I've insisted earlier, the

gap that we ordinarily feel, is the product of a philosophical interpretation of religion, a metaphysics that we have come to think of as at the heart of a religious orientation. But this is not to suggest that there is no gap, that religious belief is somehow just common sense.

To proceed in this direction is to dethrone philosophy as the provider of foundations in this domain. This is not, however, to deny philosophy the exploration of fundamentals. Here religion provides a rich field. To provide one example, I spoke above of the ancients' (and our) religious beliefs that, I said, drive a philosopher to drink. At the same time, the religious utility of such uncrystallized beliefs is enormous; in that regard we couldn't ask any more of them. Uncrystallized belief is an idea that cries out for philosophical clarification.[34]

We are not the ancients, and philosophy has made its mark on us, one that we don't wish to eschew. But it is one thing to see religious life as riding on a metaphysical picture, quite another to view the life as fundamental and the doctrinal side of one's tradition as more like the furniture in the living room, importantly expressive of the specifics of the tradition's sensibility, rather than the foundations of the edifice.[35, 36]

NOTES

1. The motivation for the production of the proofs seems mixed. For some, e.g. in the tenth century, Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), Introduction, pp. 6–9, part of the motivation seems to have been to assist those in doubt and to defeat heresies. The proofs were also thought (by various medieval philosophers and theologians) to help purify the opinions of the masses by providing insight and understanding, to supply intellectual foundations for opinions that were otherwise held on faith or on the basis of revelation, to provide the sort of foundations that intellectual virtue requires of a reputable theology.
2. It does not follow that the ascription of belief—utilizing *our* notion—to the ancients is illegitimate. But the matter is delicate. I return to it in Section VI.
3. Medieval interpretations are another thing. Maimonides, for example, hears a commandment to believe in the first of the Ten Commandments (more literally and correctly, the ten statements or pronouncements): "I am the Lord, your God, who . . . ." Similarly with respect to the prohibition to worship other gods; for Maimonides this concerns certain false beliefs. Cf. Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry* (Harvard University Press, 1998). The Bible's preferred

approach is in terms of illicit intimacy, adultery as it were. For an almost overdramatized biblical example, see the Book of Hosea.

4. Robert Bellah, in *Beyond Belief* (University of California Press, 1991), Chapter 13, "Religion and Belief: The Historical Background of "Non-Belief" argues—and I have thought this for some time—that the emphasis on *belief that*, as opposed to *belief in*, is a function of the influence of Greek philosophical thought. I argue for this in "Against Theology," in *Philosophers and the Jewish Bible,* Robert Eisen and Charles Menekin (eds.) *Philosophers and the Bible: General and Jewish Perspectives* (University Press of Maryland, 2008); available also on my website: http://www.philosophy.ucr.edu/people/faculty/wettstein/index.html.

   My focus in "Against Theology" is the Hebrew Bible, but Bellah speaks more generally: even in the New Testament the dominant notion of belief is *belief in.* At the conclusion of the present paper, I quote Buber in *Two Types of Faith* (Macmillan Publishing Company, 1951), according to whom *belief in* is indeed the dominant notion until the Gospel of John.
5. It has been suggested that perhaps the proofs were an intellectualized (and historically conditioned) mode of expressing religious affect. For example, one could see the argument from design as the intellectualized expression of awe toward God concerning the order of the universe. It is plausible that propounders of the proofs were in part expressing such things, but one does not want to minimize the intellectual work that the proofs attempt to do on the face of it.
6. William Alston, *Perceiving God* (Cornell University Press, 1991); Gary Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Jerome Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* (Cornell University Press, 1997), and *Mystical Experience of God, a Philosophical Enquiry* (Ashgate Publishers, 2001); Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford University Press, 2004).
7. As opposed to a flurry of recent books by Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchins, and Richard Dawkins that are critical of religion in a more wholesale fashion.
8. *A Common Faith* (Yale University Press), 1934, pp. 11–12.
9. And, perhaps surprisingly, even for Nietzsche who, in *Human, All Too Human* (Prometheus Books, 2009), p. 40, refers to religion as among "the blossoms of the world." This does not mean, he adds, that this blossom is close to the root of the world, that through religion one can better understand the nature of things.
10. This is not to deny the awfulness unleashed in human history by the religions. Religion represents and unleashes powerful forces, potentially and actually in many directions.
11. Occasionally one finds an individual whose natural gifts seem to emerge virtually whole (although I suspect this is often apocryphal or at least exaggerated). Perhaps Mozart himself; perhaps some of the religious giants. And John McEnroe practiced his tennis serve very little, or so I seem to remem-

ber. Nevertheless, typically, almost essentially, one's initial gifts await focused development. It is particularly inspiring to read of strenuous labor in the pursuit of excellence. See Bill Russell's autobiographical *Second Wind* (Random House, 1979) for an account of extreme devotion in just such service. Russell's book articulates the spiritual heights that such devotion makes possible, perhaps surprisingly in the context of sport. See esp. pp. 155–158.

12. A religious orientation may help to create this sense of significant array. This is not to say, however, that such a sense is not available otherwise.
13. The Bible suggests that only Moses spoke with God "face to face." At the same time, when Moses asks to see God's face, his request is unceremoniously denied; it's not possible, he is told, for a human being. But there are moments at which one feels that one has come close.
14. *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Lecture XVII, p. 382 in *William James' Writings: 1902–1910*.
15. On the face of it, or so it seems to me, James' point has great power. This matter has received considerable attention in the literature, some defending, some criticizing, James' contention concerning the epistemic significance of such varied, often competing, pieces of testimony.
16. Williams is the Archbishop of Canterbury. The quote is from his *Teresa of Avila* (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000), p. 147 ff.
17. What Quine means by this phrase—it is the title of the first section of *Word and Object*—is another matter. Without prejudice, I like the phrase.
18. How to work out the theory is another question. But certainly some philosophers, from medieval times to the present, have held extreme anti-anthropomorphic views about God without abandoning traditional religious practice.
19. Cambridge University Press, 2008.
20. For a later reflection on those comments, see my paper, "Forgiveness: Virtue and Happening" forthcoming in a symposium on Griswold's *Forgiveness* in *Philosophia,* and available on my website: http://www.philosophy.ucr.edu/people/faculty/wettstein/index.html
21. See especially Lorraine Code, *Epistemic Responsibility.* My sense is that the recent "virtue epistemology" literature would be a rich source for thinking through these matters. Here I am grateful to a discussion with Linda Zabzebski.
22. Think about interpersonal strife, or strife between nations or peoples; when a focus on justification becomes paramount, attention wanes about one's opponent's point of view or interests. The idea of justification feels overworked, overemphasized, and overvalued quite generally.
23. To call attention to this scent is not to say that all attempts to provide arguments for God's existence are responsive to skepticism. See footnote 1 above.
24. In *The Existence of God*, Revised Edition (Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 254.
25. This formulation needs qualifications that I ignore here: needless to say, if the percipient in question was notably unreliable, etc. then her testimony could well be ignored.
26. At first it seemed to me that Swinburne's use of "credulity" was very strange

since it suggests credulousness. But Nick Wolterstorff pointed out that there is an older usage—one finds it in Reid—in which credulity refers to a natural tendency to believe in certain circumstances.

27. In James' discussion in *Varieties of Religious Experience,* skepticism does not play any sort of central role in the argument from religious experience.
28. See his *God and other Minds,* (Cornell University Press, 1968).
29. With its emphasis on philosophically refined doctrine, and the sometime tendency to deemphasize the experiential side. In my own tradition, for example, Maimonides (in *Guide of the Perplexed,* see esp. Book 3, Chapter 51 and the following chapters) sees the philosophic contemplation of God as the highest form of worship and sees the more ordinary aspects of religious life as clearly inferior even if having their own sort of practical utility.
30. A crucial component of Buber's "faith"—here the emphasis is different than the Jamesians—is the realization of the intimacy with God in all one's relationships and projects. Buber emphasizes aspects of faith like "walking in God's tempo" and "standing firm in one's commitment to God"—is to distinguish this notion of faith, which he attributes to the Israelites and early Christians, from the later Christian, Muslim, and eventually Jewish notion of belief in the doxastic sense. See C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* (Simon and Schuster, 1980 reprint), Book III, "Christian Behavior," Chapters 11 and 12, both entitled "Faith," for what is in some ways a complementary conception.
31. I steer clear here of attributions that don't seem obviously biblical—at least not when we are discussing the Hebrew Bible—like that of the various perfections or omni-properties that later come to be seen as essential.
32. See *The Rabbinic Mind* (Jewish Theological Seminary, 1952) for an illuminating treatment of religious belief and related matters, including those I discuss in the next paragraph of the text. See esp. Chapters VI and VII.
33. I don't mean that we believe, on philosophical grounds, that God is, in principle, beyond anthropomorphic description, that such description belies God's nature. Some of us think such things, but the Rabbis of the Talmud, as Max Kadushin points out, had no such in principle objection to anthropomorphic description. But their experience of God had the two-fold character. They experienced God's touch and the like, and at the same time it was part of their experience of God that God was beyond all that.
34. Religious belief, on my conception, may not be as different from some other central beliefs as one might have supposed e.g., political beliefs, like "All people are created equal," or various beliefs about political rights. In such cases beliefs clearly set out a path for one's life, but what the belief comes to in theoretical terms may be entirely up for grabs. I discuss this matter further in "Against Theology," mentioned in footnote 4 above.

    A related topic—I explore it in my book, *The Magic Prism* (Oxford University Press, 2004)—is the adequacy of the philosophical notion of "propositional content." It may be that "uncrystallized belief" has a more general application, although surely the religious examples as well as the political one just mentioned are special and in some ways extreme cases.

35. Joseph Almog has made parallel remarks about "the foundations of mathematics." While this latter domain includes topics that are of the first importance, this is not to say, suggests Almog, that the area somehow constitutes or even explores the epistemic underpinnings of mathematics.
36. This paper is based on my comments on a paper by Yehudah (Jerome) Gellman at the 2008 Henle Conference at St. Louis University. I am grateful to Gellman for virtually introducing me to the topic, and to continued discussions with Jeff Helmreich. Helmreich remarked that in his parents' home talk about God was as easy and uncontroversial as talk about the weather. This proved very suggestive, perhaps especially as an entry point into early Israelite modes of thought. I owe the furniture analogy to one among many helpful conversations with Jack Miles. Finally, I wish to thank Joseph Almog, Yehudah Gellman, John Greco, Charles Griswold, Paul Hoffman, Richie Lewis, Richard Mendelsohn, Calvin Normore, David Shatz, and Nicolas Wolterstorff for comments on an earlier draft.

Spirituality of the Moment

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The Midrash describes the Torah as black fire on white fire (*Midrash Tanhuma*, *Bereishith* 1). On its simplest level, the black fire represents the letters of the Torah, while the white fire is the space between the letters. On a deeper level, the black fire may be compared to the halakha, the formal, clear-cut law that emerges from the Torah. Parallel to the halakha is the white fire, which may represent the spiritual element of the law. Spirituality is to halakha as heaven is to earth; as soul is to body—giving that which is anchored the ability to soar.

This is not always the case. Halakha is a complex system of law that can sometimes become a barrier rather than a conduit to feeling God's presence. Our essential teaching is that halakha ought to interface with spirituality.

This essay is an abridged version of part of a chapter of my upcoming book, *Spiritual Encounters: Searching for Meaning in Prayer,* scheduled to be published by Toby press in the spring of 2011. Our goal here will be to define spirituality and then show how it forms an integral part of the halakhic system. The particular ways in which spirituality interfaces with tefillah (prayer), particularly with *kavanah* (proper concentration) is left for a larger discussion in the book.

In Life

My working definition of spirituality is rather simple. *Spirituality means encountering the moment, being conscious of the moment, while recognizing God's role in that moment.*

Consciousness of Moment

One of the most important concepts of the Torah is found at the end of *Devarim*, when God declares: "I call heaven and earth as witnesses *today*, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore *choose life*, that you may live, you and your seed" (*Devarim*, 30:19).

For other faith communities, this is a radical idea. In these belief systems, death is venerated. The goal in this world is to limit physical pleasure, to limit living life so that one can merit true life, life in the next world. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik makes this point in his *Ish haHalakhah* when describing the *homo religiosus*, the universal religious person.

Judaism declares—no. What counts most is this world is life as we know it. The next world is one of eternal reward. This world is one of doing, acting, fixing, repairing, redeeming; it is one of choosing life. For Rabbi Soloveitchik, this is the credo of "halakhic man."

The sentence from *Devarim* that implores us to choose life includes the mandate that we do so *haYom*—today. The portion in which the word *haYom* appears in this sentence is generally read on the Sabbath between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Indeed, on the High Holy Days, we end the |service with the prayer *haYom*, repeating that refrain over and over. On these awesome days, we remind ourselves that the challenge of life is to live *haYom*, every day—fully—to be conscious of every moment being experienced.

We live in a world of memory and anticipation. So absorbed are human beings in remembering the past and being concerned about the future that the moment is fleeting and rarely experienced. We sing about "Yesterday" and "Tomorrow" but rarely about "Today." Even when we are experiencing important events, we are often too excited or worried about what is yet to happen; in the process of waiting for the next moment we fail to experience the power of what is before us in the very present.

The importance of today is underscored in the Talmud, which records Alexander the Great asking the sages of Israel the following question: "What should a person do to live?" The sages respond: "Let him mortify himself [i.e., "kill himself" with study and hard work]" (*Tamid* 32a). On a deeper level, Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik suggests Alexander Macedon was asking "What shall a person do to live," i.e., what is the secret to life? The sages respond: "Let every individual imagine that death is imminent," that the moment being experienced is one's last. Such thinking, the sages believe, will inspire people to live life more fully.

It is nothing less than the story of the rabbi who turns to one of his students who has strayed and says, "Fear not. If you repent, even at the last moment of life, all is forgiven." The student was at first relieved. After thinking about it, however, he became alarmed, and asked his teacher, "But how do you know which moment is the last you will live?" "That's my point" the rabbi said. "Live every moment as if it's your last." Here, the rabbi's intent is not that his student be burdened with fear of death; rather it was a teaching to inspire his student to live every moment in a qualitative way—never taking life for granted. To paraphrase Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra: "A person is concerned about the loss of money and not the loss of days. Money can be replenished; days cannot."

The idea that spirituality is attained by living every moment, every instant of life is hinted in the very first question God asked Adam. Adam had just disobeyed God and eaten from the forbidden tree. God appears and asks, *ayeka*—"Where are you?" (*Bereishith* 3:9).

It has been noted that God obviously knew where Adam was. *Ayeka*, however, may be an existential question, one that God is constantly asking not only Adam but all of his descendants. "Where are you," God asks all of us. Have you done your share in fixing and perfecting and making this world a better one?

Perhaps even more, *ayeka* is a kind of mystical question, in which God encourages all of humankind to be aware of their surroundings, to be fully appreciative of all that we are experiencing, to be absolutely immersed in every nuance of life.

Thus, the first step in spirituality is choosing life in all its minutiae. It is becoming fully conscious of the I, and, by extension, the moment the I is experiencing. Yes, there are many who believe spirituality is the escape from the real world. But for Judaism, spirituality emerges from fully encountering and being completely involved in the moment.

Judaism is not unique in this formulation of spirituality. In some eastern religions, for example, the moment being experienced is so overpowering, one feels a sense of nothingness, a negation of being. Total consciousness of moment can yield a sense of worthlessness in the face of all that is unfolding.

The opposite feeling can also take place. Consciousness of moment can elevate one to feel a sense of self-importance, to be totally self-absorbed. Spirituality from this perspective yields an approach to life

that is anthropocentric, narcissistic, revolving completely around the human being.

In Judaism, we find echoes of these positions, from Chabad's *bitul haYesh*—nullification of self—to Slobodka's *vaTehasreihu me'at meElohim*—the human being is just a little less than angels (Psalms 8:6). However, our critical contribution is that consciousness of moment can be a synthesis of these positions. It is the dialectic of humility and self-confidence; of the two notes carried by Reb Simcha Bunim of Peshischa. One read *veAnohi afar v'efer*—"I am but dust and ashes." The other read, *bishvili nivra haOlam*—"the world was created for me."

Recognizing God's Role

Most important, spirituality is inextricably linked with God and God's role in the moment being experienced. In the Torah framework, consciousness of moment should lead to an encounter with God—i.e., an awareness of the presence of God and God's role in bringing about, nurturing, and giving meaning to the particular experience.

Awareness of God is a central element of the Jewish concept of *kedushah*—commonly translated as holiness. While most faiths see holiness as an out-of-body experience, distinct and apart from the physical every day, Judaism sees holiness as an in-body experience where the everyday is sanctified by being open to God.

The biblical source for *kedushah* is found in *vaYikra* where God mandates the human being to be holy (19:2). One wonders why there needs to be a specific command to be holy. Shouldn't the sum total of observance of the whole of the Torah by definition lead one to a holy life?

It is here that Nachmanides puts forth a startling concept. He suggests that one can, in fact, keep the minutia of Torah law, and at the same time live an unholy life. One could keep the details of the law, and yet, in Nachmanides' words, still "be an abomination with the permission of the Torah." (Nachmanides, *vaYikra* 19:2).

For this reason, the Torah says: be holy. *Kedushah* teaches the critical importance of infusing the letter of the law with the spirit of the law—with meaning, with purpose, with holiness, with *kedushah*, yes—with Godliness.

Could it be that the word (*k-d-sh*) *kadosh* is a compound of *k* and *d-sh*? The *k*, which begins the word, represents the Name of God. In fact, the very word *kadosh* is an abbreviated form of God's name, the Holy One, Blessed

Be He. *D-sh* means to thresh. *Kadosh* therefore means to bring God into everything, to have God as a threshing force, omnipresent in all that we do.

Martin Buber in *Hasidism and Modern Man* approaches *kedushah* in this way.

> "God dwells where man lets Him in!" The hallowing of man means this "letting in." Basically the holy in our world is what is open to God, as the profane is what is closed off from Him, and hallowing is the event of opening out. . . .

In this spirit, the students of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak haCohen Kook have quoted their teacher as saying, "There is no such thing as the unholy. There is only the holy and the not yet holy." For Rabbi Kook, the way one eats, engages in business, or makes love is no less holy than fasting, meditation, or prayer. Every act of life has the potential to be suffused with *kedushah*—with Godly spirituality.

A story: A Hassid living in Minsk decided to seek the heavenly world, which he had been told was in Pinsk. Overnight, he slept in an open field, having carefully left his shoes pointed in the direction of Pinsk. As he slept, a scoundrel came by and turned his shoes around. The next morning, the Hassid continued on in the direction that he found his shoes to be pointing. When he reached his destination, he noticed landscape, streets, homes and people that all seemed familiar. He was puzzled, but delighted to have found heavenly bliss. Heaven on earth.

Kedushah is finding spirituality in earthliness. In a broader sense, it is the bringing of God into the world. Hence, my definition: Spirituality means being conscious of the moment while recognizing God's role in that moment.

In Ritual

Rituals, especially rituals associated with life's rites of passage, are examples of how spirituality can be experienced by encountering and taking cognizance of the moment while feeling God's nearness. A good idea is to have those directly involved, together with family and friends, offer personal reflections about what this experience means to them. Although the ritual is a rite of *passage,* the challenge is to have time stand still, to ponder the religious significance and spiritual power of the moment.

Consider the ritual on our most joyous and mournful occasions—marriage and death. Some may find it spiritually uplifting to read under the *huppah* (wedding canopy) words of blessing that bride and groom have written to each other. The rabbi can then ask for a moment of introspection wherein all present offer their blessings to bride and groom. Or, during *shiva* and especially as it ends, it can be meaningful for the mourner to offer a personal reflection about the deceased. Such moments of personal introspection are similarly meaningful when concluding the month or year of mourning, or when reciting the last *kaddish* or during a memorial service.

It is here that spirituality faces a formidable challenge. The idea that the foundation of spirituality involves living in the moment makes many people uncomfortable. We are, by and large, not happy coming face to face with who we are: our physical beings, our emotions, our relationships, our inner essence. When challenged to encounter our inner "I," we often feel vulnerable; it is a place at which we often do not want to be.

For example, a wedding of spiritual meaning, where aspects of love are touched upon, may conjure up for many in attendance matters related to the inadequacies of their own marriages. Or personal reflections from a mourner can stir deep feelings, positive or negative, within the mourner or among those in attendance about their own relationships.

Virtually nothing of meaning comes easily. Because spirituality is potentially exhilarating, it is equally daunting. All we can do is be sensitive to the challenges of consciousness of moment while carefully forging ahead.

In fact, halakha may show the way by introducing laws that encourage and sometimes compel one to fully experience the moment. For example, the Mishnah which declares that a groom should not recite *Shema* on his wedding night is based on the principle of *haOsek beMitzvah patur min haMitzvah*. Bride and groom should be so immersed in the moment that even if they could find time to say *Shema*, they should not. (The normative halakha today does not follow this Mishnah.) The Mishnah is insisting that bride and groom not be distracted from full concentration on each other. Similarly, during *shiva*, the mourner may be prohibited from learning Torah so that he or she fully feels the emotions of *shiva* and does not escape into deep Torah study.

Not coincidentally, the ritual at both ends of the spectrum—the exhilaration of marriage and emotional pain of mourning—is suffused with symbols and words that mirror the constant presence of God.

The *huppah* can be viewed as a covering symbolizing the heavens, the abode of God. It is suspended over the heads of bride and groom much like the imagery of God hovering over His people like a mother bird gently protecting its fledglings (*Devarim* 32:11). God hovers but doesn't press down, giving a sense of infinite care while allowing bride and groom the space to be themselves.

And at the *shiva*, visitors (according to Ashkenazic practice) recite the words, "May God comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." The Hebrew term for God used here is unusual—*haMakom*. But *haMakom* literally means "the Place," in this case referring to God's omnipresence. In other words, even in a house of mourning, where the bereaved may feel God has abandoned them—even there, God is present.

As taught by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik,

> The Name . . . haMakom, the Omnipresent, suggests that God is indeed everywhere, even in those places and at those times when we may not readily sense His presence.
>
> We thus find, for example, that a mourner, who certainly feels as though God has turned away from him, is to be consoled with a phrase that uses this Name, May the Omnipresent console you. . .). (See Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Yom Kippur Mahzor*)

Thus, the halakha serves as a foundation for spirituality. Often, it is seen as constricting, limiting one's spirituality; we become so involved in the minutiae of halakha that it blocks our connection to God. It should not be this way. Halakha is the base, giving wings to the spiritual moment, helping us encounter God Himself.

Holiness: The Unique Form of Jewish Spirituality

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In a list of new developments in Judaism in the twenty-first century, one would have to include the search for Jewish spirituality. This includes the discovery of spiritual practices such as meditation, yoga, and prayer—often adapted from Eastern religions. In this essay, I will examine this phenomenon by employing a method of investigation that attempts to address contemporary issues through textual study called "Textual Reasoning" (http://etext.virginia.edu/journals/tr/). Textual Reasoning proceeds by identifying an important contemporary problem and engaging traditional methods of Talmud Torah—including text study in "havrutot," small discussion groups—to find creative ways of addressing the problem

In a number of Textual Reasoning sessions that I ran in Jerusalem this past summer (2010) we looked at issues of spirituality by relating them to notions of *kedushah,* or holiness. I am currently writing a Jewish theology of holiness (Blackwell Press, forthcoming), so I saw these Textual Reasoning sessions as a way to help me with this project. The word spiri-

tuality, "*ruhaniut*" does not exist in the Torah. There is, of course, *ruah*, "wind" or "spirit," which seems to represent a vitalizing life force, and *ruah Elohim*, or *ruah Adonai*, the spirit of God, which represents the power, wisdom, and light of God. But there is far more attention given to the term "*kodesh*" and this term seems to be the closest Jewish parallel to what is meant by spirituality in the contemporary world.

We know, of course, that the term "Holy Spirit" was most significantly developed by Christianity as it became the third figure in the Christian Trinity and the continuingly available power of new life that is active in the Church and in the Christian community. Indeed, it may very well be that the interest in spirituality in the West began as an offshoot of a Christian concern, and then came to include elements from Eastern religions. However, our focus here is not Christianity but Judaism and its relation to contemporary forms of spirituality. As I said, in our Textual Reasoning study group, we decided to address this relationship by comparing notions of spirituality with *kedushah*.

To provide a focus for our text study, we looked at one of the central expressions of the nature of *kedushah* in the Torah, *vaYikrah* 19, which Rashi, following *Sifra Kedoshim*, says contains the essence of the Torah (*rov gufei haTorah*). Our initial discussion of contemporary spirituality included a rather vague sense that spirituality involves a search of the individual for a religious experience, a mystical oneness with nature and/or God, or a special encounter with nature or humans that gives life meaning. These experiences are often presented as occurring outside of religious tradition. And thus we have the oft-heard phrase, "I am spiritual, but not religious." I offered my sense that the "spiritual" included a large range of experiences from the unplanned spontaneous "peak experiences" that one might have in a visit to the Grand Canyon, to a more disciplined attempt to achieve "enlightenment" through meditation or yoga. In our first study session, a member mentioned that there was an "Institute for Jewish Spirituality" and that we ought to consult its website to get a more in depth sense of what Jewish spirituality is about. We did this and the reader will see that I include quotations from this website in this essay.

Our Textual Reasoning study sessions began by asking the following questions.

> ⁓ Is spiritual practice based on meditation congenial with traditional forms of Torah study and halakhic practice?

- How is holiness like and unlike notions of spirituality?
- Does Judaism have its own unique forms of spirituality? Is spirituality implicit in rabbinic holiness or must it be added to it from the outside?

In making this investigation, we acknowledged that the focus on *vaYikra* and its rabbinic commentaries might limit our ability to answer our questions about the relation of holiness to contemporary spirituality. We noted that a fuller study would require looking at other texts, most notably Kabbalah and Hassidut. But we began with the hypothesis that by looking at *vaYikra* some important insights and distinctions between Jewish notions of holiness and contemporary notions of spirituality could be found.

Textual Reasoning, in general, likes to function, somewhat like empirical science, with a hunch or hypothesis or intuition that is then subjected to experiment and deliberation through textual study to see if the hunch or hypothesis can be confirmed or disconfirmed. In this case, the hypothesis was that there is an important difference between holiness and spirituality and that holiness offers a unique form of Jewish religiosity that is often insufficiently articulated and appreciated by both Jews and non-Jews. Our text study involved looking at *vaYikra* 19 first, on its own, and then with a range of commentaries from Rashi, Ramban, to *haKetav ve-haKabalah*, Israel Salanter, and Hatam Sofer.

Spirituality: What Is It?

A quick and easy way to access what contemporary Jewish spirituality is concerned with is to look at the website of the "Institute for Jewish Spirituality." The website describes its objectives in the following way.

> The work of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality is the work of spiritual renewal and rejuvenation. It is the work of making the concepts, teachings and practices of Judaism lively, meaningful, and transformative for individuals and communities. It is a mode of careful attentiveness to the whole of one's experience. It is a process of peacemaking and a path of justice making. It emphasizes telling the truth, respecting one's experience, responding rather than reacting, and gently returning one's attention again and again to the initial intention of the practice. It involves an awareness of impermanence, and the interconnection of all that is and a deep appreciа-

> tion of the fact that every act has an intention and a consequence. We can use a variety of Jewish concepts to describe this work: healing the self and the world; bringing the light of the infinite into the finite; actualizing the divine qualities of wisdom and compassion; restoring a sense of wholeness to the fragmented.

From this quotation, we can see that the founders of the movement see spirituality in the context of an American Judaism that needs renewal and rejuvenation. As such, it is part of a larger movement sometimes referred to as "Jewish Renewal" that finds its origin in the "Havurah movement" of the 1960s and produced the rather well known "Jewish Catalogue" series of books. That movement began as a return to traditional aspects of Judaism mixed with elements of the 1960s counter-culture such as anti-war activism, freer sexual exploration, and openness to Jewish and Eastern forms of mysticism and meditation. The website goes on to describe meditation as the "core practice of Jewish spirituality" and it tells us how meditation came to occupy such a central place in its activities.

Meditation is a practice that entered the cultural vocabulary of the latter half of the twentieth century, a time of investigation of Eastern religions and philosophies. In one respect, the turn East epitomized for many the expression of a set of values opposed to American materialism, acquisitiveness, and busyness. In another respect, and perhaps particularly today, it represents a method of slowing down, of calming the mind, of relaxing the body in the face of our culture's unrelenting pressure to "do." If meditation were only to afford its practitioners that brief respite, the gift of just "being" as opposed to "doing," it would be enough.

It is noteworthy that the Institute for Jewish Spirituality does not mention Torah or the God of Israel in its opening statement of its mission of Jewish rejuvenation. It is also noteworthy that it identifies the central problem that it is addressing as "American materialism, acquisitiveness, and busyness." These are problems of the wealthy and the satisfied, and although the movement talks about a path of "justice making" there is no mention of actual problems of injustice or poverty in the Jewish or larger world. Since meditation is identified as the movement's "core practice," spirituality seems to be mainly an issue of self-healing and therapy for the individual and not the larger Jewish community. The Institute speaks of its particular type of meditation as "mindfulness meditation" and describes this as follows. "In this process we observe or witness the nature of mind,

we see how conflict occurs, how illusion is born and grows, how connected each moment is to the next and how transient is every thought, experience, conclusion." The goal of noticing these things is to learn how to "let go" of attachments to things, feelings, and thoughts that control us and thereby to open a sphere of tranquility, calmness, and equanimity. Thus, we are talking about an inward process of reflection and mind control. Those who want to practice meditation are encouraged to go to retreat centers away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life in which participants experience significant periods of silence. The Institute makes it clear that its meditation practice is an import from Eastern religions (most notably Tibetan Buddhism). Thus, the spirituality that is to cure what ails American Jews, finds its source outside of Jewish religious texts and culture in an inward individual practice outside of Jewish communal centers.

We will now juxtapose the goals and practices of the Institute of Jewish Spirituality with the rules of the life of holiness as we have them in *vaYikra* 19. For brevity's sake, we will end at verse 18.

vaYikra 19:1–18

Chapter 19

1. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying,
2. Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them, You shall be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.
3. Every man shall fear his mother and his father, and you shall observe My Sabbaths. I am the Lord, your God.
4. You shall not turn to the worthless idols, nor shall you make molten deities for yourselves. I am the Lord, your God.
5. When you slaughter a peace offering to the Lord, you shall slaughter it for your acceptance.
6. It may be eaten on the day you slaughter it and on the morrow, but anything left over until the third day, shall be burned in fire.
7. And if it would be eaten on the third day, it is abominable; it shall not be accepted.
8. And whoever eats it shall bear his sin, because he has profaned what is holy to the Lord, and that person shall be cut off from his people.
9. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not fully reap

the corner of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest.
10. And you shall not glean your vineyard, nor shall you collect the [fallen] individual grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger. I am the Lord, your God.
11. You shall not steal. You shall not deny falsely. You shall not lie, one man to his fellow.
12. You shall not swear falsely by My Name, thereby profaning the Name of your God. I am the Lord.
13. You shall not oppress your fellow. You shall not rob. The hired worker's wage shall not remain with you overnight until morning.
14. You shall not curse a deaf person. You shall not place a stumbling block before a blind person, and you shall fear your God. I am the Lord.
15. You shall commit no injustice in judgment; you shall not favor a poor person or respect a great man; you shall judge your fellow with righteousness.
16. You shall not go around as a gossipmonger amidst your people. You shall not stand by [the shedding of] your fellow's blood. I am the Lord.
17. You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your fellow, but you shall not bear a sin on his account.
18. You shall neither take revenge from nor bear a grudge against the members of your people; you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

In reading this text, one could say that it might be hard to find a text that is more different from the description of mindfulness meditation and the goals of the Institute of Jewish Spirituality. From the beginning "And the Lord Spoke to Moses" to the frequent refrain and last words quoted "I am the Lord," the transcendent God of Israel makes the divine will known. Holiness begins with God and is brought to the people in the form of commands. It is issued from the outside, from the transcendent God in commandments that also stand outside the individual and are not found in his or her inner mind or soul. What the text suggests, is that holiness, in essence, is found in God and that humans can become holy, not by looking within, but by looking without to God. The statement "You shall be Holy, for I am Holy" suggests that being holy involves a process of imi-

tatio Dei, of imitating God. And some rabbinic commentators (*Sifra Kadoshim* on 1:1) have made this explicit.

A significant contrast with spirituality is that holiness, as we find it in *vaYikra*, is not a matter for the individual alone. Indeed, *vaYikra* suggests quite the opposite; as Moses is instructed "Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel." Being holy is then, in the main, a communal issue. Or perhaps, we can say it this way: Holiness requires a community in order to be achieved. From this text, we can also say that being holy is not a matter of contemplation; it is to be found as a result of actions, actions that take place in a social context. Respecting mother and father, observing Shabbat, properly bringing sacrifices, leaving gleanings for the poor, paying workers promptly, treating the deaf and blind rightly, rendering fair judgment in court, and finally living alongside the fellow-person without hatred or grudge, and, indeed, with love; these are the things that make one holy.

Comparing the practice of mindfulness meditation to the rule of holiness in *vaYikra* 19, one might rightly ask: Where is the self in all this? Indeed, instead of focusing on the "nature of mind," instead of observing "how illusion is born and grows, how connected each moment is to the next and how transient is every thought, experience, conclusion," *vaYikra* tells us that we are only holy when we focus on others.

Textual Reasoning with vaYikra *19*

When we began to study *vaYikra* 19 in our Textual Reasoning group, we noted one thing that was omitted. The holy act par excellence for Judaism is to study Torah. Thus, one of us said, that meditation, for the Torah, is first an act of textual study rather than a study of one's mind. *VaYikra* 19:17–18 suggests that it is proper for the holy person to meditate on his relations with others. For example, figuring out how we are to rebuke a sinning friend might, indeed, require meditation. But it very well might be that in inserting the Torah text on rebuking a friend into our meditation we make that very act of meditation holy and we are then assisted by holy love when we carry out the act of rebuking.

One of our members suggested that we could take from Jewish spirituality the lesson of meditation and learn how to relate to our friends by meditating long and hard on these verses from *vaYikra*.

You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your fellow, but you shall not bear a sin on his account. You shall neither take revenge from nor bear a grudge against the members of your people; you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

Having studied these verses before our session, I remarked how they display an exquisite balance and deep psychological insight. The verses suggest the situation in which a brother or cousin or neighbor is committing a moral offense. What is your obligation here? Do you ignore it? Do you intervene? Should you be angry with him or her? If you must intervene, how do you do so? This is obviously a complex issue, and to assist you the Torah offers some guidelines. Do not hate your sinning brother, but still, you must rebuke him, for if not, you will incur the guilt of his sin. But when you rebuke him, do so not out of hate or revenge but only out of love.

The comment that one should meditate on verses 17 and 18 to learn how to relate to a sinning sibling or friend reminded another of us of an additional series of verses that we are commanded to meditate on—day and night, when we lie down and rise up, when we sit at home and when we walk along the way. These are the words of the Shema: *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad*, Hear O Israel, The Lord our God the Lord is One. As we considered the meditation that we are commanded to do on the words of the Shema, we discussed the extent to which meditation is part of the Jewish tradition or added to it from the outside. At this point someone recalled Isaac going out to the field to meditate (*lasuah*, see *Bereshith* 24:63) before meeting Rebecca. Another recalled Hanna's prayers to God and her silent prayers before Eli (*Shemuel* 1: 2,1:10). Still others mentioned the Psalms as a series of long meditations on the trials and joys of the spiritual life, and finally another person spoke of the Lurianic Kabbalistic practice of meditating on God's many names. At this point, some of us thought that meditation as a practice was both implicit in the Torah and further developed in Kabbalah. Yet others thought that meditation, particularly mindfulness meditation, was different from Jewish forms of meditation because the goal was to learn how to detach oneself from the worries of the world; Judaism seeks the opposite, to attach oneself to the world and to worry about its redemption at every moment. Thus, we had no definite conclusion on whether or not mindfulness meditation offers something of value to contemporary Jews that is not already available in Judaism.

The Commentary Material

In our next sessions, our Textual Reasoning group wanted to more deeply engage the text of *vaYikra* in the rabbinic tradition. We therefore focused on rabbinic commentaries. Here, we used commentary texts from a theological commentary on the Bible, "Reading the Bible for Meaning" that I am working on with Walter Herzberg, Professor of Bible and Parshanut at Jewish Theological Seminary. As we explored the commentary material, we found a wealth of interpretations that caused us to dwell on the meaning of verse 2: "You Shall be Holy, for I the Lord Your God am Holy." When we studied the commentaries, we followed a suggestion Herzberg had made to me that they could be divided into two basic groups, one led by Rashi and Ramban and another rooted in early midrashic literature, but best represented by Israel Salanter.

Commentators: Group I—Rashi, Ramban, and Meklenburg

Rashi's comment on the verse, "You Shall be Holy" took the discussion of holiness in a direction that most of us did not expect, especially as we were looking for a connection to spirituality. He inserts an element of self-restriction, especially in the area of sexual desire. His comments on this verse are as follows. To be holy, "separate yourselves from sexual immorality and from sin. For wherever you find restriction of sexual immorality [mentioned in the Torah], you find holiness [juxtaposed with it]." Rashi's interpretation follows one of his typical interpretive moves—to place the verse in its textual context. His interpretation is then based on juxtaposing the commandment to be holy with the multiple restrictions on incest and other prohibited sexual relations in the chapter (18) that immediately precedes our chapter. Rashi seems to reason that since the previous chapter deals with prohibited sexual relations and the injunction to be holy follows immediately thereafter, holiness must have something to do with sexual restrictions.

As we discussed Rashi, I brought up the issue of purity in relation to holiness. Rashi brings up sexual purity laws related to permissible partners and appropriate times for sexual relations, *taharat mishpaha*. But we could also speak of all the laws of purity and impurity—those related to dietary practices, avoidance of blood and dead bodies, and the prohibi-

tions and practices related to the bringing of sacrifices. This brought us to the recognition that holiness in Torah is a broader category than spirituality, including the distinction pure and impure and encompassing the larger categorizations of animals, rules of purification from sin, and whole series of practices that regulate marriage, sex, diet, and death. Unlike spirituality, which might come and go and can be limited to certain special practices, the holy must be inserted into all aspects of life. When placed in the larger context of the whole book of *vaYikra* and the larger system of halakha that emerges from the Torah, becoming holy can be seen as the goal of all of Judaism!

Ramban, indeed, sees the larger meaning of holiness, and he specifically takes on Rashi's discussion of holiness relating to sexual prohibitions and radically expands it so that holiness comes to take on a kind of ascetic quality:

> In my opinion, this abstinence does not refer only to restraint from acts of [sexual] immorality as the Rabbi [Rashi] wrote. . . The meaning is as follows: The Torah has admonished us against immorality and forbidden foods, but permitted sexual intercourse between man and his wife, and the eating of meat and wine. If so, a man of desire could consider this to be a permission to be passionately addicted to sexual intercourse with his wife or many wives, and be among winebibbers, among gluttonous eaters of flesh, and speak freely all profanities. This is so because these prohibitions have not been [expressly] mentioned in the Torah. Given this, a man could become *a sordid person with the permission of the Torah* (*naval birshut haTorah*)! Therefore, after having listed the matters that He prohibited altogether, the Torah followed them up by a general command that we practice moderation even in matters which are permitted. . . . [Ramban Commentary on *vaYikra* 19, Chavel translation, emphasis mine]

This comment of Ramban indicates that he agrees with Rashi on two counts—that our understanding of holiness is based on the juxtaposition to the previous chapter, and that holiness itself is a matter of separation, restraint, abstinence. However, the type of restraint or separation that Ramban suggests is very different from Rashi. For Rashi, holiness is attained by separating oneself from that which is explicitly forbidden by the Torah. According to Ramban, holiness involves going one step further—separating oneself from that which is permitted, and not indulging in excesses. For as Ramban states, the person who overindulges in techni-

cally permitted behavior is a *naval birshut haTorah*, a "sordid person with the permission of the Torah." Ramban appears to get this ascetic view of holiness from the Talmud (*Yebamoth* 20a). He also mentions that we have a model of ascetic holiness in the figure of the Nazir in the Torah. For the Nazir is separated from the general population and takes on ascetic practices such as refusing alcoholic drink, not cutting his hair, and avoiding contact with the dead.

One of us noted that Ramban's notion of holiness suggests that *vaYikra* 19:2 "You shall be holy" is not the preface to the series of commands that follow it (i.e., to respect parents, observe Shabbat, and so forth) but a separate commandment on its own that can be summarized as "separate yourself not only from what is prohibited, but also from what is permitted!" This means that holiness requires Israel to go beyond the letter of the law to understand its deeper purposes. This deeper purpose is to refine and elevate Jews, to free them from sordid obedience to physical desires of all sorts so that they approach the spiritual holiness of God. With his remarks, Ramban seems to be inserting an element of elitism along with asceticism to the understanding of holiness. He suggests that being holy requires one to rise above what the laws require by restricting oneself even in the realm of what is permitted by God.

Rabbi Jacob Zvi Meklenburg (1785–1865), the author of the commentary called the *haKetav ve-haKabbalah*, takes matters even further. He suggests that restraint from that which is permitted is not truly holiness, but is rather one level lower. True holiness is attained by an element of *perishut* described in the classic midrashic commentary on *vaYikra* called the Sifra. Here, one achieves holiness by separating oneself emotionally when performing commandments that involve physical pleasure. Meklenburg describes the ideal of these holy people as follows. They "indulge in sex exclusively for the purpose of procreation; they eat well on Shabbat only to fulfill the commandment of honoring the Sabbath. They do not indulge in pleasures per se but only as a product of activities designed for a loftier purpose (*haKetav ve-haKabbalah* on *vaYikra* 19:2 v.4, Eliahu Munk translation). Therefore, Meklenburg speaks of a level of intellectual or emotional discipline that leads to a form of restraint and separation not explicitly mentioned by Ramban.

As we discussed the positions of Rashi, Ramban, and Meklenburg on holiness, which include some obvious ascetic dimensions, a division

developed in our group on whether this was closer or further from notions of contemporary spirituality. On the one hand, Eastern spiritual disciplines and values of non-materialism have some resonance with the ascetic interpretation of holiness of our commentators. Meklenburg's sense that one should "separate oneself from physical pleasure" even when doing a mitzvah suggested to some that one needs to develop a form of self-control of the type that meditation could help cultivate. We know that there are ascetic values of Buddhist monks, and these very well might have parallels to rabbinic asceticism and to its further developments in Kabbalistic practices.

For others in our group, learning to do mitzvoth solely to "fulfill the commandment of the Creator" is a different form of discipline than the one suggested by Eastern meditation since rabbinic practice requires the acknowledgement of God as creator and commander. Doing a mitzvah for the sake of God alone or because God commanded it is different from meditating for the sake of release from all attachments to physical realities.

Commentators: Group II: Israel Salanter, Hatam Sofer, Haim Benattar

While the commentators above all link the interpretation of "holiness" to the verses in *vaYikra* 18, which precede the exhortation to be holy, another group of commentators base their interpretations on the verses that follow the exhortation to be holy. These are the verses with laws to respect parents, observe the Sabbath, care for the poor and the handicapped, and so forth. The view that all of the commandments in *vaYikra* 19 supply something of a rule for the holy life is also found among the various midrashim in Sifra (10:2); but Israel Salanter (1810–1883), the great Lithuanian Mussar scholar, expands this position. He explicitly rejects the position of Rashi and Ramban. He admits that it is commonly "accepted in the [Jewish] world to associate the holy person with one who is great in Torah and Fear (of God)." However, he argues "that according to *hazal* there is another aspect to holiness—how one deals in money matters." Referring to *vaYikra* 19 he says, it "establishes that the conditions for holiness are: Do not steal, do not lie, you shall not do an injustice in judgment." He emphasizes that these are laws related to daily interaction in "commerce, work, and interpersonal relations."[1] He sup-

ports his reading by noting that verse 2 links the command to be holy to God's being holy: "You shall be holy for I, the Lord, your God, am holy." But in his interpretation, this is done to make a distinction and not a connection between God and humans. "I God am holy, so to speak, in heaven, so if I require holiness of you, my intent is that you be holy in earthly, material matters." Thus, Rabbi Salanter engages a polemic against a notion of holiness that is oriented solely toward heaven in favor of an earthly holiness that is oriented to relations between human and fellow human.

Hatam Sofer (1762–1839, Moses [Schreiber] Sofer) takes a similar approach to R. Salanter, highlighting the importance of involvement with people to holiness. He, however, takes the exhortation to be holy in a somewhat different direction by emphasizing the importance of communal involvement. He states that the holiness in our verse is "not holiness of separation and the Nazirite, but rather . . . holiness within the community and involvement with people."[2] He derives this interpretation from the important phrase in *vaYikra* 19:1 (which, by the way, occurs only once is the entire book of *vaYikra*). "Speak to the *entire community* of the children of Israel." He believes that the words "entire community" signal that holiness must be sought in and through relations in the community and not outside it in some act of separation from the community.

The Hatam Sofer is not the only commentator who wonders why Moses is commanded to speak to the "entire community." R. Haim Benattar (1696–1743) in his *Ohr haHayyim* comments on this as well. However, he sees the fact that Moses addresses the entire community as a specific challenge to some of the elitist notions of holiness. He says that the Torah includes the words "the entire community" in order to teach us that "this commandment that He commanded 'you shall be holy' is a commandment that can be attained by each and every person . . . for there is no radical distinction among the people Israel that would preclude one from this achievement." (*Ohr haHayyim*, my translation).

In this second group of commentators, our study group agreed that we see a real distinction between the search for spirituality and the search for holiness. Rabbi Salanter stresses that holiness is not really about the spiritual but the material dimension of life. For him, holiness is about how we deal with money! We see this theme carried forward in the comments of Hatam Sofer.

One of our members summarized this second group of commentators as saying something like this. "It is easy to be holy if you excuse yourself from the community, retreat from humanity, and remain silent. The real challenge is to be holy within the community, to preserve your holiness through relations with others and within the social world."

I noted that if we put together the positions of the first and second groups of commentators, we actually have the traditional view that holiness requires both good relations of humans to God, *bein adam laMakom* and good relations of humans to humans, *bein adam leHaveiro*. As Jacob Milgram has argued in his great three-volume Anchor commentary on the book of *vaYikra*, holiness is a complex goal that includes both proper ritual and ethical practices that might take a lifetime to achieve. As our group ended our discussions, a number of participants reiterated that it was not really fair to just focus on *vaYikra* as the point of comparison to the statements of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. They noted that Judaism has a well established spiritual tradition grounded in the texts of the Kabbalah and of the various sects of the Hassidim. Had we chosen a text from the Zohar, or a Hassidic text such as the *Sefat Emet* or the *Tanya* or, even better, had we looked for manuals of Hassidic prayer and meditation practices, we would find far more points of contact.

Yet others in the group noted Rashi's words that, in *vaYikra* 19, we had most of the "essence of the Torah" and that therefore *vaYikra* provides the foundations of the Jewish holy life that must be established first before Kabbalistic or Hassidic spiritual practices are developed. Where the Institute of Jewish Spirituality mentions that meditation is their "core practice," it could never be seen as the core practice of Judaism. Instead, what we did together, study Torah, and what the text we studied suggested, fulfilling the will of God in doing mitzvoth, are the core practices of Judaism. Also, I said that the essentially communal nature of holiness, that holiness is constituted in a community, within a communal context and requires a community, is another vital point of difference with the quest for spirituality which seems to be a mainly individual search. Perhaps, we should consider meditation, like the tradition of Kabbalah in Judaism, as something that can be added to the life of mitzvoth to enhance and develop its spiritual dimensions more explicitly. But this would mean that meditation could never become a core practice to replace mitzvoth.

Another participant wanted to insist, before we closed our study session, that there seems to be a form of Jewish spirituality that specifically fulfills one of the Institute of Jewish Spirituality's main stated goals: the goal of relaxing the body and concentrating the mind on the present so that one can just "be" in the face of our culture's unrelenting pressure to "do." This goal, she suggested, was the exact objective of Shabbat! What better way to "be" and not "do" than enjoying an afternoon of Shabbat rest? Indeed, there is perhaps no better way to slow time down than by being in a community where everyone stops working, stops driving cars, stops turning on and off electrical devices, and attends only to God, family, friends, Torah, and tefilla. This is a kind of joint communal holy practice that represents the unique spirituality of Judaism—a combination of bodily and spiritual revitalization where an entire community works together to create an ideal time and space where the community is allowed to "taste" and "glimpse" life redeemed.

It might very well be that contemporary spiritual practices have something to contribute to Judaism by helping remind us of what we already have. The contemporary search for spirituality recalls the old Jewish story of the man who searched long and far to find a treasure of riches only to discover that the treasure was there all along buried under his own house.

NOTES

1. Rabbi Salanter's comments on *vaYikra* 19 are included in the collection *Itorei Torah*, edited by Aharon Greenberg (Tel Aviv: Yavneh). The translation is by Walter Herzberg.
2. Hatam Sofer, *Torat Moshe* on *vaYikra* 19:2 in *Itorei Torah*, translation by Walter Herzberg.

Thoughts on Spirituality, Prayer, Life and Death

Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomy

(Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, born in Poland in 1924, arrived in New York in 1941 when his family fled Nazi Europe. He studied in New York and was ordained by the Lubavich Hassidic yeshiva. As he pursued his studies in psychology, religion, and spirituality, he broke away from Lubavich and ultimately became the father of the Jewish Renewal movement.)

What is the most significant thing that ever happened to you, and what did it teach you?

It doesn't work that way, because there are moments when one thing is significant and moments when something else is significant. For a man to be present at the birth of a child is an overwhelming thing. I've been present at the birth of my children, and it's really amazing. I think that's the greatest, deepest miracle because all other things have their space. . . . Yet when I look back, every once in a while I make a list of high moments and start saying, "There were moments of love; there were moments of insight; there were moments of prayer." There were even moments of terror, almost like facing death, which made me say, "Aha! Now I understand what it's all about." But I'm still learning about spiritual and holy eldering. Most people don't know how to live the holy life after retirement. You see, popes have remained in the saddle and rabbis have remained in the saddle until they die. I would like to learn how to withdraw gradually from the active life and to spend the last years furthering my solitude with God.

That's what I feel life has to teach me. I'm learning to let go of things that are not in my hands to change, learning to live with what, otherwise, would be increasing frustration when I get older.

Life is my teacher. Artificial intelligence is trying to do what natural intelligence is doing. Natural intelligence means that a naturally intelligent organism continues to learn throughout life. Each situation provides a deeper learning, greater learning, a more profound learning. We're all going through a learning, so if I had to pick out one learning as the most significant, I'd say, "I can't; it's constant. The learning that is happening in life is constant because life is a teaching machine." From whom did I learn about life? I learned from life about life, by living life.

Socialized Meditation

Meditation is usually a solitary task. At times one feels that it may only be a solipsistic preoccupation. Much growth happens when meditation is socialized.

We learn from teachers. Here is an example from the Hassidic master, Reb Moshe Kobriner in a little town in Lithuania. People would come to him from all sides asking all sorts of questions. One day he was having his breakfast and all he has is some *kasha* (buckwheat cereal), and another man comes in and says,

> "Master, I have so many troubles."
>
> "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, King of the Universe Who has made everything by Thy Word," said Reb Moshe Kobriner (and this was the proper blessing to make before one eats *kasha*.)
>
> And the man said, "Master, didn't you hear me? I have so many troubles."
>
> And Reb Moshe said, "You know, your father once came to me with the same situation, and he heard me give this blessing that everything comes by His Word and he stopped complaining. Don't you hear?"

Not only with teachers can one enter into such shared meditation. When Buber taught us of the I–Thou relationship, he spoke of healing through meeting. From my experiences in "socialized meditation" I am convinced that we need to move beyond transpersonal psychology to transpersonal sociology.

All of our conflict resolution efforts not yet managed to turn a recalci-

trant person into a collaborating member of global society. The research in this area is vital to our survival. Look at the extremely sophisticated teamwork in technology that can produce a stealth bomber—and compare this to the primitive state of correcting societal dysfunction.

Cycles and Cycles

Prior to this cycle of world creation, there were other cycles of world creation. Holy sparks from those other cycles of world creation, when they were broken, lodged here. Our task is to find those sparks, gather them and bring them together, and restore the balance in the cosmos—to enthrone God again. The Divine Crown, as it were, has gems missing, and in each physical act, we pick up a spark here, a spark there, and bring them together. When all sparks have been gathered, our tradition speaks about the coming of the Messiah. To me, this means something like global oneness, peace, and harmony.

When we become more conscious of the physical and at the same time aware of the highest spirituality, we'll have what I would call the Resurrection of the Dead. This resurrection happens together on a physical and spiritual level. The physical plane is our plane of observation, though everything that happens on a physical plane is not open to our observing. We don't see with our eyes what is happening between atoms, but if we were on the atomic level we would say, "Ah, this oxygen atom got married to two hydrogen atoms, and they made a water molecule!" We don't operate on that level of awareness. When I put a pot of water on the stove to cook, a lot of weddings take place between the oxygen from the air and the hydrogen that's in the gas, so water gets created. That's a level of observation, the sub-molecular level,that we don't see.

Now in our personal drama, on another level of observation, higher things are happening. Ultimately it takes a meditative leap into other dimensions to be able to see. There is a Latin phrase *sub specie aeternitatis,* under the aspect of eternity. It means to look down, to see what is happening in the temporal realm. Then we begin to see what Earth is about, what the planet is about, and what history is about from a much higher level. I believe we are just learning the beginnings of the holy psychotechnology, a spiritual psychotechnology that will allow us to get to such places as observing fine moments—or larger ones. Some people have had the larger experiences. Geniuses have had profound mountaintop experiences. I

would say, "If they can see the Infinite, they can see the infinitesimal also, because awareness is up and down the scale." By and large, people haven't bothered to look at the infinitesimal. Now, with nanotechnologies becoming important, people are beginning to concentrate on those things.

Care Packages to Eternity

If you see yourself bound by your skin, then you would ask, "How would something I do help the deceased?" When you recognize that half of your chromosomes are your father's, half are your mother's, and a quarter of them are your grandfather's, you realize that your grandfather is still alive in you, in a quarter of your chromosomes. So if you say a prayer, it is almost as if a portion of him is still available to help that other part of him that is beyond. That's why the disciples of a Master get together at the anniversary of his death to celebrate. There is a feeling that there is so much more of the Master available at that moment.

How does one attain the ideal relationship of body and soul?

First of all, just simply be "you." Feel the earth beneath you; feel the chair; feel how gravity upholds you. Gravity is the way earth loves us and attracts us. We should allow ourselves to be supported by that. Second, do one thing at a time; be totally in that thing you're doing. That's a way to be grounded! The next way to be grounded is to realize that there is stuff above that the groundedness has to support. The point isn't just to be flat on the ground. The point is to be firm enough on the ground so that the rest of you can go up.

What is the greatest obstacle to obtaining new levels?

"The sin that is the hardest to atone for is habit." That is the biggest obstacle to reaching new levels, as one rabbi put it. The more we're in a habitual state, the more unlikely it is that we'll go beyond. We won't be in the moment; we won't be in the here and now. We will hear the routine rather than the challenge that comes at this moment.

Will people eventually reach this ideal?

I believe that all people will reach what they have to reach. I'm a universalist, in that sense. That they will reach the same state is not likely. It is enough for a toe to be the toe of a realized person. If I could be the toe, as it were, of realized humanity, that's fine. Not everybody is going to be the brain cell that fires off a great realization. Still, we'll all be organically connected with that, and the organic connection is what fires, just as an organism has a connection with the toe. So the final enlightenment will have a connection with that concept. It's not likely that there is going to be a final enlightenment. I don't like the word "final" either, because enlightenment continues to the next level and the next level, and it's infinite in God. We no longer have the Temple in Jerusalem, but when it existed, the holiest person on the holiest day at the holiest time in the holiest place would pronounce the holiest word. There would be a kind of implosion of all the Onenesses. That name is a connection, and each year on Yom Kippur, the old connection goes away and the new connection starts coming in. Sins interfere, spoil, and ruin the old connection.

You can't attune to what you merely read.

When we learn how to pray, we learn not just how to recite words, but how to open the heart. It's like biofeedback: When we are with a person who is opening the heart, we can feel attuned to it. "Ah, now it feels right in my heart!" But if somebody says, "Open your heart," and you've never had that "thing," how do you know you've done it correctly? If you're in a larger group where all the people are doing this, and there is a liturgy being celebrated, you get to feel at one with the people who are in this elated place. That's how you attune to it.

Total realization can happen anywhere. It can happen spontaneously, and it can happen under direction. Very often, even that which is under direction requires the moment of grace, of spontaneity. But there are people who can achieve attunement in synagogue but not in the marketplace, for instance.

What are the greatest problems in life?

The main problems in life are making a living, making a loving, and making a dying. Making a living is a big problem for many, many people. When that's together, then there's the question of making a loving—how to have good relationships and to receive and to give love. People who don't have that can have all the money in the world, but it's no good! For people who've had a good life and a good loving and a good living, when the time comes to leave that life, the problem is how to do that gently and gratefully.

Why is there suffering in the world?

That's a question that gets us into trouble! One could say that the greatest education we get is through suffering. Consciousness is being raised through deprivation. I will never know what it means to give people food when they're hungry unless I have experienced hunger myself. I will not know how to help somebody who is in pain unless I have experienced pain myself. One could say suffering is the school for empathy. It creates that, but that's only one element of suffering.

Sometimes suffering exists in order to bring us to our senses. Sometimes suffering exists in order to show us that there are tragedies we can't overcome with our childish omnipotence in the world. We begin to see that every choice we make has its consequences. Suffering is the way in which we learn, after the fact, the consequences of our moves.

Then there are some people who suffer and can't identify this reason or that reason. It's just one of those things. "Why do bad things happen to good people?" is the question behind all that, and I haven't yet found a convincing answer. Sometimes no matter what we do, we get clobbered! On a lower level of preparation and understanding we would say, "If we do only the good and the true all the time, we're going to be okay." On a higher level being good doesn't help. The biggest ethical questions are based on just that point.

From Religion to Spirituality

Despite the pessimistic outlook on the whole, there are here and there signs of positive breakthroughs. Meditation is embraced by many people who have no other religious commitment. It has now gone beyond the mere "relaxation response" that meditation can provide. It has led people to greater spiritual growth and awareness. While it seems that religion is "out" for many, spirituality is "in." People want to learn how to experience the sacred not just talk *about* it. There is real interest in how adepts do what they do. This interest is not mere curiosity. It is an inquiry into the *how* that allows for emulation. We have entered into what I have called the dialogue of devoutness. There is a great comparing of notes, of insight and understanding to be shared by those who reverence the name of God and love Him. God listens, hears, and records these things (Mal. 3:16). Such dialogue concerns souls, their journey to God, the difficulties they encounter on the path.

Dialogue of this sort is between the soul and her God. A person who is too busy to live in a state of vulnerability vis-à-vis God has no way to enter into this dialogue. Such a person can say "I believe this" or "I believe that"—and still be spiritually inactive. Religion to such persons is only the things they give verbal assent to, not the things they *experience*, not the way they face God. They are registered as a Jew or a Protestant or a Catholic like they register as a Republican or Democrat. The function of a creed is to give people a program for life, not just a list of things to be asserted.

What about death and what happens after death?

I do believe that death is only part of the connection between the physical and the inner. It's like pulling the plug. Most people know enough to get their inner out of the way. Let's say you drive in your car and it's rattling; it's in bad shape. Finally, it's all over. You drive it to the junkyard. You get out of the car, and then a crusher comes and crushes it down. You'd be a fool to sit in it after the car is dead. I have the same attitude toward the body. Bodies wear out, and it's a wonderful thing that they wear out. They

get recycled, which gives the passenger a chance to get out and pick another car, another vehicle or to decide not to walk the earth for awhile.

Our tradition teaches that a whole series of things happens after death. A soul has to go through purification because of the contamination of being on this level and the habits that are acquired on this level. After purification come other things that are delightful, ecstatic, and marvelous. Some of them have to do with the realm of feeling. That is one Heaven. Others have to do with the realm of knowing. That's another Heaven. Then there is the Heaven in which we know intuitively and are known by God.

What is most important to you?

I can't say. It varies and changes. If I can't take a breath of air, then the most important thing is to take another breath of air. Imagine: I'm diving underwater and can't get to the surface. How important a breath of air is then! When I have the breath of air, then what's important is how I reach the shore. I don't believe these things are static. There is a dynamic element that's always before us. Right now what I want is to finish the week. Then, to come to a Sabbath rest is the most important thing. It will keep changing all the time.

I do what I do out of concern. My sense is that the more life, the better education, and the more tools that are made available for people to manage their physical and spiritual life, the better off the planet is going to be. And that's what I'm most concerned about.

What is the highest ideal a person can reach?

There is no general statement one can make, because if I say "X or Y is the highest ideal," then we think everybody has to achieve that. But if you achieve what I have to achieve and I achieve what you have to achieve, then I haven't gotten my realization and you haven't gotten your realization. There are individual differences. The Universe is made up of so many individual bits. Each one has to achieve what it is meant to achieve. For someone who is a dancer, the ideal may be the ideal leap. For another per-

son, it may be the ideal meditation. For another, the ideal act of love, kindness, or charity. You have to specialize in your own thing. One Hassidic Master said it very beautifully: "I'm not afraid that God will ask me, 'Zusha, why have you not become an Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob?' But I am afraid that God will ask me, 'Zusha, why have you not become what Zusha was intended to be?'"

What makes you happy? sad? angry?

I'm happy when I have contentment and moments of no conflict. I'm happy when I feel love coming and going from my heart to those who are around me, when I feel integrated with the Universe and at peace with God. The opposite makes me sad. To see people suffering and not to be able to help makes me sad. The child has an earache, and there's nothing at this point that can be done. I can hold a child, but it's not going to make the earache go away. To be powerless over pain that others experience is sad. What makes me angry is willful malicious obstruction of the common good.

If you could meet anyone throughout history, whom would you want to meet and what would you ask that person?

I would like to meet myself at the moment after enlightenment. Then I would like to ask, "How did you do it?" All the other people would just satisfy a kind of curiosity, but it wouldn't help me in my stuff, so I wouldn't want to go into the past so much as into the future. But you want me to name somebody in the past I would want to connect with. There are many Hassidic Masters, but I would like to go to the founder of the Hassidic movement, Ba'al Shem Tov, and just be with him and not ask him any questions. I would want to look at him, to have him look at me, and then to pray in such a way that I could learn something from him. I would want to attune to his spirituality. That's all. It's not words I would want.

Notes on Spirituality, Halakha, and *The Guide of the Perplexed*

Mordechai Luria

(For many years, Dr. Luria taught medieval European literature and religion at Temple University in Philadelphia, later also teaching in Tokyo. He wrote an article on the teachings of Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh, which appeared in issue 2 of Conversations *[Autumn 2008]. He has been living in Jerusalem since 2002.)*

Neither of the Torahs, Written or Oral, seems to have anything to say about "spirituality" as such. The concept, like the Hebrew word for it, *ruhaniut,* is evidently much later, perhaps medieval. Yet anyone who has even a passing familiarity with Tanakh, Talmud, Midrash, and the later rabbis, knows that many of these texts and sages (among whom we may wish to count the masters of the Kabbalah) embrace the *substance* of what we now often call spirituality: that is, a personal, meditative encounter with the Transcendent or Holy, which is essentially individual and autonomous. They also include moral, ethical, and metaphysical *perceptions* (as distinct from halakhic mandates) that may seem to come to our mind directly from a transcendent Source, or (in the wonderful expression of the Quakers) as from an "inner voice." We may think also of the self-generated *kavanah* of passionate prayer, and the spiritually elevating joy of song and dance, much beloved among Hassidic and "Carlebachian" devotees. Maimonides believed the essential part of our human, and thus of our Jewish, vocation to be something profoundly personal—our "knowledge" and "intellectual apprehension" of a Primary Reality, *Matsui Rishon.*

Alongside this personal *experience* that many of us think of as spirituality, there is the elaborate fabric of halakhically prescribed *behavior*, which is regarded as being divinely mandated. Something like a universal consensus of Torah sages holds, I think, that the two—the experience and the behavior—are inseparably linked, mutually animating, equally necessary, equally obligatory. Though we may distinguish them analytically, we may not dispense with either.

Though late in coming—to speculate why would be an intriguing temptation—awareness of "spirituality" has, thus, long since arrived in Jewish life, and indeed (as the subject of this issue of *Conversations* amply testifies) in *Orthodox* Jewish life (even though in Orthodoxy the halakhot of prescribed Jewish *behavior* are given particular emphasis, and "observant" is the most usual epithet of approval). But as with the other touchstones of Torah and Jewish culture, including halakhic observance itself, the actuality of Orthodox spirituality never quite catches up with the ideal, and for us to contemplate our tradition's *ruhaniut* may be to deplore what can often seem its elusiveness, to bridle at the challenges it encounters from time to time in our individual and communal lives. The problem is substantial and (pending messianic fulfillment) ongoing, and defies easy solution, or even easy description. What I hope to do here is to consider several aspects of the matter from contemporary perspectives, and then to invoke a few potent rabbinical ideas that, I believe, may help us address the specific "perplexities" at issue.

Halakha and Moral/Ethical Sensitivity

Let us proceed, in the conversational spirit of *Conversations,* by recalling two articles that appeared in the Spring 2010/5770 issue.

In "Sounds of Silence," Pinchas Landau deplored that (as he sees it) American Orthodox Jews, and most egregiously their rabbinical leaders, generally failed to express moral indignation at the ongoing financial corruptions and distortions of principle that harmed so many people during the recent, and continuing, economic crisis. In what he perceives as this dereliction, Landau finds evidence of a larger, more sinister problem: "Many people, including—or perhaps especially—rabbis and educators actually have no clear idea what ethical and moral issues are. More precisely, they have great difficulty distinguishing between legal/halakhic and

moral/ethical treatments of issues, preferring to subsume the latter in theological, or even mystical, conceptual frameworks." His conclusion is a severe indictment: "Orthodox Judaism, as currently conceived and practiced, is morally challenged." Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits had put the matter even more provocatively: "Orthodoxy is, in a sense, halakha in a straitjacket" (*Essential Essays on Judaism,* p. 101).

Halakha and Autonomous Spiritual Experience

In the same issue of *Conversations,* a daring and original article by Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo addressed other dimensions of the problem ("On the Nature and Future of Halakha in Relation to Autonomous Religiosity"). From his perspective as a teacher of Jewish philosophy, R. Cardozo has encountered a frustrated craving for "spiritual satisfaction" among "countless young Jews who search for an authentic Jewish religious way of life, but are unable to find spiritual satisfaction in the prevalent halakhic system as practiced today in most Ultra- or Modern Orthodox communities." These students seek "to experience the presence of God on a day-to-day basis. Beyond 'observance,' they look for holiness and meaning."

Concluding that "we need to find new paths to Jewish spirituality," R. Cardozo affirms provocatively a principle that, by logical necessity, one should expect to be axiomatic in Orthodoxy, but that appears to be often ignored: that "Judaism is an autonomous way of life" that expects us "to respond *as an individual* to the Torah's demands."

Defectors from Judaism in Search of Spirituality

Contemplating Rabbi Cardozo's Orthodox Israeli students and their failure to find "spiritual satisfaction" in the Judaism of their experience calls to mind the quite different, yet in a sense parallel, constituency of spiritually dissatisfied young *American* Jews of whom Professor Rodger Kamenetz had written over 15 years earlier in his notable and well-remembered *The Jew in the Lotus* (1994). Though few of them seem to have had an Orthodox background comparable to that which had probably nourished (but nevertheless dissatisfied) R. Cardozo's students, they too—most significantly—used the word "spiritual" to denote what they

missed in the Judaism *they* knew. Less committed to their formal Jewish identities by family and social bonds, they eventually sought "spiritual" satisfaction in the Asian religions of Hinduism and (especially) Buddhism.

A few Jews are known to have embraced Buddhism more than a century ago, but it was in the 1950s and later—the period of the "beat generation" and its aftermath—that the Asian religions came to exert a strong attractive power on significant numbers of young Americans inclined to religious or cultural experiment, who happened to be, for a variety of reasons, disenchanted with their family's Christianity or Judaism. In the latter half of the twentieth century, this became one of the conspicuous features of "hippie culture"; and the greatly disproportionate number of young Jews who adopted Buddhism (either in place of, or in addition to, their religion of birth) was widely noted.

It was also, of course, profoundly deplored in traditional Jewish circles, and the "cults," as Buddhism and Hinduism were often derogatorily called, have been perceived by some as a major menace to the stability and continuity of Jewish life in America. The matter is complex, and has been much studied and discussed.

Writing in 1994, Kamenetz reveals (pp. 7–9) how important had been (and we may presume still is) the Jewish presence among recently fledged American Buddhists:

> In the past twenty years, [Jewish Buddhists] have played a significant and disproportionate role in the development of this second form of American Buddhism. Various surveys show Jewish participation in such groups ranging from 6 percent to 30 percent. This is up to twelve times the Jewish proportion of the American population, which is 2 ½ percent. In these same twenty years, American Jews have founded Buddhist meditation centers and acted as administrators, publishers, translators, and interpreters. They have been particularly prominent teachers and publicizers. . . . Today in American universities there is an impressive roster of Buddhist scholars with Jewish backgrounds, perhaps up to 30 percent of the total faculty in Buddhist Studies.

Kamenetz's book provides copious examples of the Jewish experiences and perceptions that underlie these figures. He tells, for instance, of a friend of his, Marc, who described his religious position with metaphors Kamenetz found both eloquent and depressing: "I have Jewish roots and Buddhist wings." He comments: "I knew what Marc meant by wings.

Buddhism had gotten him somewhere spiritually in a way Judaism never had" (pp. 12–13). For some of the Buddhist-oriented Jews he met and talked with, their Buddhism complemented but did not wholly replace their Judaism. Others, like the poet Allen Ginsberg, seemed to have discovered, or retained, nothing of spiritual substance in their Jewish experience, which they rejected with scorn.

As a sophisticated, synagogue-bred Jew who, despite his spiritual dissatisfaction, always rejected categorically the notion of tampering with his Jewish identity and commitment, Kamenetz himself seems to embody in an accessible and understandable form the syndrome he discusses in others. Though writing from a quite different perspective with respect to education and commitment, his critical survey of Orthodoxy can be regarded as complementing those of Pinchas Landau (Orthodoxy is "morally challenged") and Rabbi Cardozo (Orthodox students are "unable to find spiritual satisfaction in the prevalent halakhic system"):

> I recall an evening in Jerusalem with a group of *baalei teshuvah*, Jews who had converted to Orthodoxy. To them it all boiled down to one proposition: either God had given Jews the Torah on Mt. Sinai or had not. And they asked me to choose. I felt like I was being grilled. The emotional undertone of today's Orthodoxy, at least as I'd encountered it, seemed excessively self-righteous and self-isolating. It came down to little things, customs, such as the refusal of Orthodox men to shake a woman's hand. I knew there were reasons for it: if she were menstruating they could not touch her, nor could they ask her point blank. But it seemed to symbolize a self-enclosure, another barrier or boundary between men and women, and also between Jews and contemporary life. I had imagined that someone obeying God's law would feel more joy. I didn't always feel that joy. There often seemed a neurotic quality to the obedience, a Judaism by the numbers that I couldn't relate to. (p. 22)

This two-level manifestation of spiritual dissatisfaction with their Jewish experience—with Orthodox experience, in the case of R. Cardozo's students, with an experience more diverse (rarely Orthodox, often synagogue-based, sometimes secular), in the case of Professor Kamenetz and the Jewish Buddhists—strongly suggests that the problem is not exclusive to one level or another of Jewish religious life, but may be endemic. Those of us who are most particularly concerned with the challenge to Orthodoxy may be disposed to find R. Cardozo's dissatisfied

students more disturbing than Professor Kamenetz's Jewish Buddhists. But we would be unwise to dismiss with a cynical shrug the religious frustrations of those other young Jews who, having found their own Jewish experience spiritually impoverished, have turned to Asian religion to try to acquire "wings."

I think of a line of Chaucer's that expresses what I should consider an enlightened Orthodox perspective on the matter: "If gold can rust, then what should iron do?" What seems evident is that both the "gold" and the "iron" are suffering today from the same "rust." But it is precisely because of the unique role that Orthodoxy inevitably plays in the whole of Jewish religious life that the Orthodox problem that R. Cardozo has identified is by no means an exclusively Orthodox problem.

We like to hope that problems of this importance have solutions. I pray that this one does, and that such solutions can be speedily discovered and effected. However, I have no intention (nor authority or knowledge) to propose them. What I want to do in the remainder of this article is to touch upon a few of the relevant insights in rabbinic thought, as I understand them—chiefly those of Maimonides—which may help us toward understanding and solution.

Maimonides and Halakha

We have noted the broad rabbinical consensus that the Torah is as concerned with our religious *experience* (our understanding, feelings, perceptions, intentions) as with our *behavior* (our fulfillment of the mizvoth and halakhot). The discussions and citations above with respect to the perception of frustrated spirituality in contemporary Orthodoxy and in Judaism more generally have all implied that in contemporary Orthodoxy, there has come to be an imbalance (if indeed there was ever an authentic as distinct from a theoretical *balance*) between these two essential elements of our *avodah*—that the dominating focus upon behavior or halakha has tended to diminish the role of experience or spirituality (to oversimplify a complex subject).

By virtue of his range and penetration, Maimonides (better known in the Orthodox world as the Rambam) has long enjoyed a unique eminence as both rabbi and philosopher. This notwithstanding, he remains controversial as he was in his own day and after. I would like to recall some of

his ideas here not to suggest that they should be regarded as sacrosanct, but rather to propose that they offer valuable points of departure for anyone who wishes to address the issue of spirituality vis-à-vis the contemporary halakhic dominance in Orthodoxy.

Maimonides, as befits an intellect of his stature, seems to embrace both "sides" of the issue—or, better, to acknowledge the danger of a simplistic commitment to either. His *Mishneh Torah* is, of course, our premier codification of biblical mitzvoth and rabbinical halakhot—and yet, as we shall point out presently, he has harsh words in his other masterpiece, the *Guide of the Perplexed (Moreh Nevukhim),* for halakhic devotion that is unleavened by spiritual (his term is "intellectual") "apprehension."

Sacrifice, Prayer, and Meditation

A substantial portion of the Written Torah addresses the system of *korbanot,* or sacrifices, which is the Torah's most conspicuous prescription of service (*avodah*) to God. In the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides organizes and elaborates the sacrificial laws in several extensive sections. In Jerusalem today, some rabbis and other devotees are even now preparing to resume the sacrifices when the Temple will be restored.

However, when Maimonides turns to this matter in the *Guide* (III.32), he implies unmistakably that the sacrificial system was not in fact God's first "wish" for Israelite *avodah,* but rather a concession to human weakness, specifically the human reluctance to give up familiar ways. (Maimonides' translator, Professor Shlomo Pines, renders the author's Arabic for this divine accommodation with the arresting expression "wily graciousness.") After citing examples of God's accommodating the limitations of the human body, he addresses the subject of sacrifices:

> Many things in our Law are due to something similar ery governance. . . . For a sudden transition from one opposite to another is impossible. And therefore man, according to his nature, is not capable of abandoning suddenly all to which he was accustomed . . . and as at that time the way of life generally accepted and customary in the whole world and the universal service to which we were brought up consisted in offering various species of living beings in the temples in which images were set up. . . . His wisdom did not require that he give us a Law prescribing the rejection, abandonment, and abolition of all these kinds of worship. For one could not then

> conceive the acceptance of [such a Law], considering the nature of man, which always likes that to which it is accustomed.

If this were not sufficiently jarring to conventional assumptions, Maimonides immediately follows it with an observation perhaps more startling:

> At that time this would have been similar to the appearance of a prophet in these times [i.e., *Maimonides' own times*] who, calling upon the people to worship God, would say, "God has given you a law forbidding you to pray to Him, to fast, to call upon Him for help in misfortune. Your worship should consist solely in meditation. . . ." Therefore He . . . suffered the abovementioned kinds of worship to remain.

Professor Pines cites the eleventh-century Arab philosopher Avicenna as Maimonides' probable source or influence with respect to meditation, and believes that Maimonides not only regarded prayer as superior to animal sacrifice, which seems likely enough, but that he indeed agreed with Avicenna that meditation was a superior form of worship to verbal prayer (p. cii). (Cf. *Guide,* III.51: "the worship peculiar to those who have apprehended the true realities" is "to set their thought to work on God alone, after they have achieved knowledge of Him.") Maimonides' text is subtle and is no doubt susceptible to multiple interpretations. What I suggest may be most relevant to us, if we address the matter cautiously, is this: in comparing kinds of *avodah*, of divine service or worship, Maimonides seems unmistakably to find *least* attractive—thus least "pleasing" to God— the kind of sacrifice that employs mainly human *behavior,* by contrast with those that invoke human understanding, intellect, mind, speech, and spirit, "that intellectual worship consisting in nearness to God and being in His presence."

Halakhic Observance and "Apprehending" God

We find the same principle, expanded to the scale of a human typology, at the beginning of that quartet of magisterial chapters which form the climax of the *Guide*. Maimonides calls this now-famous text a parable. It is a parable of man in search of God. In order to understand its relevance to our subject, we must recall all of it.

> The ruler is in his palace, and all his subjects are partly within the city and partly outside the city. Of those who are within the city, some have turned their backs upon the ruler's habitation, their faces being turned another way. Others seek to reach the ruler's habitation, turn toward it, and desire to enter it and to stand before him, but up to now they have not yet seen the wall of the habitation. Some of those who seek to reach it have come up to the habitation and walk around it searching for its gate. Some of them have entered the gate and walk about in the antechambers. Some of them have entered the inner court of the habitation and have come to be with the king, in one and the same place with him, namely, in the ruler's habitation. But their having come into the inner part of the habitation does not mean that they see the ruler or speak to him. For after their having come into the inner part of the habitation, it is indispensable that they should make another effort; then, they will be in the presence of the ruler, and see him from afar or nearby, or hear the ruler's speech or speak to him. (III.51)

Part of this unforgettable parable is quite transparent. Those outside the city are barbarians "without the law," who neither adhere to a religious tradition nor speculate for themselves. The city of God is not even a rumor to them. Lacking even a suspicion of the transcendent order, they lack authentic human identity—they are "lower than the rank of man but higher than the rank of the apes." They are, we may suppose, akin in a way to the *apikorsim* of rabbinic typology. By contrast, all those within the city walls acknowledge and seek God, in one way or another, though some of these are fatally corrupted with error, and cannot even approach, let alone see, his habitation.

The final three classes of seekers are the ones who embody definitively Maimonides' conceptions of *avodah*. First are those who are eager to encounter God but can't even see the walls of his habitation. These are "the multitude of the adherents of the Law, I refer to the ignoramuses who observe the commandments."

Next are those seekers who can indeed perceive the habitation but cannot find its gate, and so are condemned to walk around it. These are the masters of tradition who know what is considered to be correct but do not think for themselves. As Maimonides puts it: They "believe true opinions on the basis of traditional authority and study the law concerning the practices of divine service, but do not engage in speculation concerning the fundamental principles of religion and make no inquiry whatever regarding the rectification of belief."

Those who succeed in gaining access to the ruler's habitation, though they are lodged in rooms of varying nearness to the ruler himself, are Maimonides' ideal of the autonomous seekers, who alone can approach the ruler though with an intimacy commensurate with the acuteness of their "apprehension." Maimonides has encapsulated their search at the beginning of this chapter, where he promises that the chapter will explain

> the worship as practiced by one who has apprehended the true realities peculiar only to Him after he has obtained an apprehension of what He is; and [this chapter] also guides him toward achieving this worship, which is the end of man, and makes known to him how providence watches over him in this habitation until he is brought over to the *bundle of life*.

If Maimonides had earlier been relatively circumspect in depreciating sacrifice by comparison with prayer and meditation as expressions of *avodah* (III.32), here he is startlingly forthright with respect to "observance" without intellectual-spiritual content, and declares categorically that these "ignoramuses who observe the commandments" but will never even glimpse God's "habitation" constitute the mass of those who adhere to the Law. And the conformists who are content to think the approved thoughts get off only little better.

"Intellectual Apprehension" of God, and "Knowledge" of His Existence

That which both classes of earnest but defective worshippers lack—the robotic observers of the Law and the merely conforming traditionalists—is what Maimonides often, in many places in the *Guide*, speaks of as our necessary, unending attempt at "intellectual apprehension" of God. We must not, I think, mistake what he means by "intellectual." Maimonides is often called a "rationalist," at times somewhat dismissively. But there is certainly nothing *merely* ratiocinative about his use of this word and the concept behind it. They appear throughout the *Guide,* from beginning to end. Thus in the first chapter, we learn that the human capacity for "intellectual apprehension" is nothing less than that "divine image" in which man was created. It is not a faculty simply for reasoning, in a narrow sense, but for perceiving, grasping, or apprehending, in a comprehensive sense. Maimonides' own intellectual or spiritual "apprehensions" throughout the

Guide—certainly not least in these final chapters—are dense, subtle, often mystical (however one understands that term), and they unfold at a very high level of intellectual and spiritual sophistication.

His peerless final chapter (III.54), in which the idea receives its apotheosis, gives us what are perhaps his ripest reflections on "spirituality" as autonomous seeking for apprehension of the Transcendent. The chapter is a kind of peroration, and at its climax is a celebrated text from Jeremiah (9:22–23):

> Thus saith the Lord: Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me.

As Maimonides paraphrases these verses, even the wisdom of the moral virtues in which the wise man glories—along, of course, with lesser goods—stands below the highest and only unqualified *hokhmah*, which is "apprehension of Him." But the same is true, he contends, of the mizvoth and halakhot themselves—thus ringing a significant variation on what we have found him affirming in his parable of the seekers, regarding the "multitude of the adherents of the Law":

> [A]ll the actions prescribed by the Law—I refer to the various species of worship and also the moral habits that are useful to all people in their mutual dealings— . . . all this is not to be compared with this ultimate end and does not equal it, being but preparations made for sake of this end.

This Maimonidean bombshell is bound to dismay at least as many as it thrills. But coming from so authentic a "halakhic man" as Rambam, who was also Maimonides the philosopher, it may help to illuminate the link between spirituality and halakha. In the last sentence of his book, Maimonides (alluding to the text from Jeremiah that he has just quoted) points the direction:

> It is clear that the perfection of man that may truly be gloried in is the one acquired by him who has achieved, in a measure corresponding to his capacity, apprehension of Him. . . . The way of life of such an individual, *after he has achieved this apprehension* [italics mine], will always have in view l*oving-kindness, righteousness,* and judgment, through assimilation to His actions, may He be exalted. . . .

But according to Maimonides, I take it, we cannot "apprehend" that of whose existence we are not convinced. If the *avodah* of "apprehension"

of God is the way to our own perfection, and in fact (as he implies elsewhere) to that intersection with the Eternal we call *olam haBa*, then a prior "knowledge" of the necessity of God's existence or being is its cognitive *sine qua non,* the cornerstone of our understanding, the foundation of our *hokhmah*. (Maimonides, like Rav Abraham Isaac Kook centuries later, is reluctant even to ascribe so abstract but, in his view, mundane an attribute as *existence* to God.) In his articulation of the 613 mizvoth, Maimonides starts by affirming: "The first of the positive commandments is to know that there is a God." We must know that there is *a* God before we can apprehend *the* God.

The first page of the *Mishneh Torah* addresses our relation to God with a philosophically austere expression of this same cognitive formula: "The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdom is to know (*leida'*) that there is a Primary Reality (*Matsui Rishon)* who brought into being all existence"(*Yesodei haTorah* I.1).

How to try to fulfill this primary Torah mitzvah to *know* of God's being, and then the corollary obligation (in Maimonides' terms) to *apprehend* God, is not self-evident. We look to the Torah as God's revealed Truth; but like our ancestors of the twelfth century, when we do this we cannot be sure of either comprehension or agreement.

I suggest that Maimonides' insights into these vitally important matters have not lost their usefulness.

Maimonides on Man, God, and Torah

Three of these insights in particular seem to me immensely relevant to the challenges, both moral and spiritual, that we have seen imputed to contemporary Orthodoxy. First, there are the individual, autonomous "intellectual" ways we should, according to Maimonides, try to relate to God. The unquestioned importance of observing the formal halakhic requirements of the Law notwithstanding, fulfillment of our lives as humans and Jews requires that we personally *know the existence of* (not only believe in), and then *apprehend* (not only obey), God. Without this our devotion to halakha is fatally incomplete. No idea in the *Guide of the Perplexed* is more central or more pervasive. It is, I think, at the core of what we now mean by spirituality. In this context, Maimonides' evident preference for prayer and meditation as expressions of *avodah* is altogether comprehensible.

Then, too, there is Maimonides' very conception (or conceptions) of God. Some of his most provocative and demanding chapters are about the divine nature. For his own reasons, he himself almost invariably uses the Torah's imagery and language of super-monarchical personification, although he explains at length that God's nature and attributes are altogether beyond human comprehension. He reminds us many times that the Torah's personifications of God are instances of its "speaking in the language of men," for the benefit of those whose thinking cannot rise above this language. He himself quite decisively (and possibly a little ironically) puts aside the conventional imagery in that extraordinarily interesting opening of the *Mishneh Torah,* which we have already quoted, where he invokes the "Primary Reality (*Matsui Rishon*) that brought into being all existence." He thus seems to distance himself at a critical moment from the familiar encrustation of personifications, images, and metaphors, numinous and venerated and usually conceived literally, which in his day, for at least a few, had evidently already become encumbrances (and have certainly, in our own day, become so for many more, as Rav Kook acknowledges in some of his most luminous pages). Perhaps it is not too much to say that Maimonides thus assists—even authorizes—our individual cognitive capability, our "intellectual apprehension," our meditative faculty, to lead our individual sensibilities toward those personal intimations of Transcendent Reality in which he believes our fullest humanity and our most authentic Torah devotion lies.

Finally, there is Torah itself, the ordained source—more precisely, the *register*—of God's mizvoth and halakhot, and thus at the core of historic Judaism, most assuredly of Orthodox Judaism. Maimonides devotes over a third of the *Guide* to explaining that the Torah's innumerable ascriptions to God of "corporeality," of a formal constitution parallel to the human, are not to be understood literally, that they are concessions, in "the language of men," to the needs of those who cannot otherwise conceive of "Primary Reality." Although the traditional divine personification remains for many a stumbling block and a perplexity, Maimonides and like-minded thinkers did eventually win their battle against divine corporeality.

For contemporary seekers of spirituality, however, Torah perplexities are at least as likely to be related to crime and punishment—to the range of approved human behavior and prescribed penalties for infraction. What are we to do when the Written Torah authorizes or forbids behavior in

ways that our moral apprehension—our "inner voice"—rejects? Especially when the Written Torah prescribes the punishment of death in contexts which may seem to us morally unacceptable—when, in short, halakha seems at odds with morality?

We have already encountered Maimonides' original, if somewhat equivocal, attitude toward animal sacrifice: that its authorization may have been from the start a divine concession to our human weakness for the familiar, and thus in itself "less pleasing" to God than prayer and meditation. But never, I believe, in either the *Guide* or the *Mishneh Torah,* does Maimonides hint that he deplores its original institution, whether for reasons of spiritual or aesthetic fitness, cruelty, or any other, nor that he would deplore its eventual restoration. Though the sacrifices may be a concession, they are also a mitzvah, a law. (Nevertheless, most contemporary Jews, including I suspect large numbers of Modern Orthodox, would be unenthusiastic for their return.) But still, Maimonides' unmistakable preference for prayer and meditation—a preference that he in effect also ascribes to God—seems to me evidence of a critical attitude toward the Written Law, founded, one may surmise, upon his own moral and aesthetic perceptions, his personal "intellectual apprehension."

If there is no unequivocally moral component in Maimonides' apparent misgivings about *korbanot*, this may not be the case with respect to his rejection of the Torah's unqualified command that when they are able, the Israelites must exterminate without exception, and irrespective of age, all the Canaanites (Deut. 7:1–2, 7:16, 20:15–18) and all the Amalekites (Deut. 25:19). Though hedged with a multitude of qualifications, his contrary conclusion is clear enough: if these arch-enemies should accept "a peaceful settlement" (however ungentle), even the Amalekites and Canaanites may live. (Cf. *Hilkhot Melakhim* 6:4–6.)

In thus nullifying the Written Torah's demand for total proscription of these peoples, on account of their exceptionally destructive offenses and presumed mortal dangers, Maimonides is following in part a certain few midrashic and talmudic texts. "*Sifrei* and other halakhic sources reason that since the express purpose of the law is to prevent the Canaanites from influencing the Israelites. . .if they abandoned their paganism and accepted the moral standards of the Noahide laws they were to be spared" (Jeffrey Tigay, *JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy,* 472). Like Maimonides' apparent discomfort with animal sacrifice, the Oral Torah's finding

such a way to save Canaanite lives seems to suggest a critique (to which Maimonides adheres) of the Written text's plain sense. "[I]t is clear . . . that Deuteronomy's demand for proscription of the Canaanites is indeed unconditional. The rabbis' rejection of this view is a reflection of their own sensibilities" (*Ibid.*, 472).

Tigay's explanation appears to contradict the usual rabbinical principle that the Oral Torah's role vis-à-vis the Written is to amplify and clarify. What of the Amalekites? I know of no text in the Oral Torah which extends to *them* the option to save their lives by accepting a "peaceful settlement," with all that is thus entailed. Among the later rabbis, Maimonides seems unique in so extending it. I suggest that to have done so, to have once again revealed (and this time without a midrashic source) a critical attitude toward the Written Law, Maimonides has given us another reflection of his own moral sensibility.

Dynamic Halakha and Ethical Insights

When, a number of years ago, I first encountered Rabbi Robert Gordis' well-known article "A Dynamic Halakhah: Principles and Procedures of Jewish Law" (*Judaism*, Summer 1979), I was excited by what it suggested about the complex relation between Written Torah and Oral Torah. ("Dynamic" seems to me an excellent epithet.) Some years later, I found Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits equally suggestive, and for the same reason. (In particular, see his article, "The Nature and Function of Jewish Law," reprinted in his *Essential Essays on Judaism*.). Other writers in these 30 years have developed the same theme, which is precisely relevant to the imputed confrontation of the Written Law with spirituality. The theme is this: Despite assertions that it is "unchanging," rabbinical interpretation of Torah Law has always been dynamic and responsive to rabbinical moral sensibilities.

> [There is] clear evidence of growth and development in the Halakha because of *new ethical insights and attitudes that represent movement beyond earlier positions*. In these instances the Halakha did not hesitate to establish new legal norms, not local or temporary in character, but universally and permanently binding. (Gordis, 270; italics in the original)

Rabbi Gordis writes of "the dynamic character of the ethical consciousness of the Sages and . . . their unremitting effort to interpret the Torah in the

light of their ethical insights" (*Idem.)*. Rabbis Gordis and Berkovits, as well as others, have presented evidence that the sages of the Oral Torah regularly interpreted the Written Law so as to diminish judicial execution. Everyone knows about their institution of the requirement for witnesses and warnings. The reluctance of Rabbi Akiva to countenance any executions at all is well known. Equally familiar are the halakhic stratagems that in effect nullified the biblical mizvoth to execute the "stubborn and rebellious son" and to exterminate the "city led astray to idol worship." There was, says Rabbi Berkovits, among the rabbis of the halakha a prevailing "tension between the written law and the living conscience" (73). "Obviously," notes Rabbi Gordis, "the Law of God could not be inferior to the conscience of men" (272).

If we accept this reasoning, it would seem to follow, then, that when the rabbis of the Mishna find ways to void (in effect) the unqualified Scriptural proscription of the Canaanites, and when Maimonides does the same with regard to the Amalekites, they are invoking their own consciences, and implying thereby that these "inner voices" too are in their own way *miSinai*.

The Semantic Model

There may seem to be a contradiction between this concept of a progressively unfolding halakha and the axiomatic rabbinical principle, enshrined in the Torah itself, that the Torah is definitive and unchanging. We read in Maimonides' own *Principles of Faith*:

> *The Ninth Fundamental Principle* is the authenticity of the Torah, i.e., that this Torah was precisely transcribed from God and no one else. To the Torah, Oral and Written, nothing must be added nor anything taken from it, as it is said, "You must neither add nor detract" (Deut. 13:1).

What role in such a Torah is there for personal sensibilities, consciences, and inner voices? Extrapolating a little, what place is there for "spirituality" in a religion founded upon Law? Fortunately, the rabbinical concept of the Oral Law is wondrously flexible and sensitive to disagreement among qualified disputants. (Cf. Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader*, 13–14.) The functions of rabbinical amplification and clarification embrace a wider range of possibilities than we might expect from

Maimonides' categorical Ninth Principle—but for which his own practice, as we have seen, might well have prepared us. And we have observed that among Maimonides' dominating themes is his insistence that our individual understanding and apprehension of Transcendent Truth takes precedence for us over halakhic observance *per se,* and indeed over halakha itself, though these remain altogether essential. In this way he may have provided us with tools for helping resolve the conflicts in Modern Orthodox life between Law and spirituality.

And in the same spirit, I suggest a conceptual analogy for helping clarify how we can reconcile our "unchanging" Law with the autonomy and spontaneity of our experiences and apprehensions.

One of the basic principles of semantics is *semantic contamination.* According to this principle, a "message" sent by *A* to *B* is almost always vulnerable to errors of one kind or another between leaving *A* and arriving at *B*. There might, for instance, be static in a radio transmission; a paper message might be damaged by the elements; an email message might be distorted by a computer glitch; and so forth. More germane would be a situation in which the recipient failed to understand the message correctly because of intellectual or cultural limitations, and was obliged therefore to guess at some of its content. (We may also imagine a situation, less likely perhaps, where the recipient, for reasons of intellect, culture, or even perceived self-interest, willfully distorted the message.) And if the transmission of the message occurs not only in space but in time, we can easily imagine another range of potential dangers to accuracy of reception and comprehension. These matters are well-known to the historian, and especially to the philologist; such sciences as textual criticism are founded upon them.

Without being drawn too near the quicksand of divisive theological speculation, let us think of the truths of Torah as messages, in this semantic sense—in the language of Torah itself, messages from God, through Moses, to us. An essential corollary of any such conception is, of course, as Maimonides registers in his Ninth Principle, that "messages" coming from Transcendent Reality are true and definitive. Yet by the time, so to say, that they have reached *us* (for the reasons I've sketched out, and for others that will readily come to mind) many or most of them may have been "contaminated," or may have reached us incomplete. It may even be that *no one's* "hearing," even that of the most eminent prophets, is ever

quite up to comprehending the Transcendent message. Thus the Written Torah required, and requires, to be supplemented by the Oral, and the Oral by the most eminent sages of the generations. Emphasizing one aspect of this requirement, Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits addresses the matter with exceptional eloquence:

> Thus, the Oral Torah as halakha redeems the Written Torah from the prison of its generality and "humanizes" it. The written law longs for this, its redemption, by the Oral Torah. That is why God rejoices when he is defeated by his children. Such defeat is his victory. (p. 97)

May we imagine, extending Rabbi Berkovits' celebrated talmudic allusion, that God also rejoices whenever his children use their unique faculties of conscience and perception, of instinct and conviction, to reach beyond halakha, beyond even our only partially understood Torah, to that direct and personal "intellectual apprehension" of *Matsui Rishon* in which Maimonides finds our human fulfillment?

Maimonides: Pioneer of Positive Psychology

EDWARD HOFFMAN

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For more than 800 years, Moses Maimonides has been a towering figure in Judaism. Not only did he become the leader of world Jewry in a tumultuous era, but his religious works, including the monumental *Mishneh Torah* and the *Introduction to the Mishnah,* remain avidly studied today. His *Guide of the Perplexed,* seeking to integrate classic Greek thought with Hebraic monotheism, has exerted an enduring influence on Western philosophy. And yet, Maimonides' extensive writings are both important and relevant for another, rapidly growing field of knowledge: namely, positive psychology. Why? Many people are seeking to gain a greater sense of spirituality in their lives by applying its seemingly contemporary insights. In this article, I'd like to highlight Maimonides' teachings related to this important new specialty, what its originators have called "the study of character strengths and virtues."

The Science of Positive Psychology

The mental health field today is rightfully accepting "character strengths and virtues" as vital to understanding human nature. This development is long overdue; more than a century ago, the founding American psychologist William James urged that the new science of psychology explore the

heights of human attainment, including altruism and transcendental experience, rather than focus on laboratory studies involving the sensory sensations of average people. Unfortunately, James' declaration was largely ignored for nearly a half-century, until Abraham Maslow in the 1950s and 1960s co-founded the field of humanistic psychology. Maslow's 25-year emphasis on studying emotionally healthy and high-achieving persons—those whom he termed *self-actualizing*—had great impact on academia and popular culture, but lessened significantly after his death in 1970.

About a decade ago, Martin Seligman and his American colleagues launched the field of positive psychology, drawing partly upon growth-oriented conceptions of personality—but stressing empirical research to validate their viewpoint. Since then, positive psychology has grown tremendously around the world, with courses offered at more than 200 American universities, several new academic journals established, including *The Journal of Happiness Studies* and *The Journal of Positive Psychology,* and popular books such as Seligman's *Authentic Happiness* and *Happier* by Israeli psychologist Tal Ben-Shahar gaining wide media attention.

Central to such works has been a focus on such topics as hope and optimism, flourishing, gratitude and wisdom, love of learning, friendship and harmonious marriage, the mind-body relationship, courage, resilience, and happiness. Though the leaders of positive psychology are generally secularists from both Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds, they have recently—and astutely—turned their attention to the writings of history's great religious thinkers for insights into character-building and the attainment of life-meaning and direction.

In this regard, a major figure in Judaism is highly relevant: Moses Maimonides. Though he lived long ago, Maimonides can be viewed as a pioneer in this domain—as both a brilliant rabbinic thinker and esteemed physician. Throughout his voluminous writings, Maimonides highlighted the importance of emotional and physical wellness for leading an upright, spiritual life. Let me highlight five aspects of Maimonides' teachings that are especially relevant to positive psychology today.

Human Beings Are Creatures of Habit

The notion that habit plays a key role in molding personality was first advanced by William James in the 1890s. He famously described habit as

"the enormous fly-wheel of society"—propelling our lives in ways that lie outside our conscious awareness. Consistent with this longstanding view, positive psychology today has affirmed the utility of making habitual various forms of character-building activity, such as daily writing in a *gratitude journal* to "count one's blessings" or maintaining a diary to strengthen "learned optimism."

Maimonides repeatedly stressed the importance of habit in fostering ethical and altruistic behavior. It's fascinating to note that he specifically highlighted the importance of repetition in building positive habits. For example, in his influential formulation on charity, he observed that performing many small acts over time is more conductive to building character than if we perform one tremendous act with the same philanthropic value. Why? Because we are inwardly changed by our own behavior and thereby become more compassionate.

Maimonides' emphasis on the psychological significance of "small-act repetition" is precisely consistent with recent research in marriage and couples counseling—revealing that marriages collapse mainly due to many small acts of hurtfulness or neglect between spouses, not one huge calamitous event.

We Are Powerfully Affected by Our Social Milieu

Since Alfred Bandura advanced social learning theory in the 1970s, developmental psychologists have known that in childhood our attitudes and behaviors are shaped by our social milieu: specifically, by those with power to dispense rewards and punishments, namely our parents. We imitate what they *do,* not what they *say,* in order to gain their approval and affection.

Based on this viewpoint, positive psychology has begun to unravel how desirable behaviors of kindness, altruism, and empathy arise in certain social settings but rarely so in others.

Consistent with talmudic thought, Maimonides stressed the role of social surroundings in affecting individual behavior. Though readily acknowledging the influence of heredity, he contended that its impact on human conduct was much less than our daily social milieu. Maimonides recommended that we seek teachers, mentors, and friends in order to uplift our daily conduct—even paying for the opportunity, if necessary, to be positively influenced by moral exemplars.

Conversely, he repeatedly warned against associating with unethical companions due to their harmful impact on our character. If there are no ethical people with whom to associate, Maimonides advised, then dwell alone in a cave rather than succumb to bad social influence.

Develop Good Social Skills

Among the main interests of positive psychology today is the development of what are known as social competencies, or collectively, as social intelligence. Recent research in organizational psychology has shown that socially oriented traits such as conscientiousness and extroversion are predictive of workplace achievement as well as job satisfaction. Clinical studies, too, have revealed a strong relationship between mental health and the presence of friends and confidants in one's life. Conversely, social isolation is an important indicator of depression at virtually all ages. In Maimonides' relevant view, the cultivation of such social attributes as cheerfulness, friendliness, helpfulness, generosity, and kindness is not only ethically important, but also represents a true path for success in life. Thus, Maimonides endorsed the teachings of *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) that positive social relations are the hallmark of the sage.

Avoid Negative Emotions, Especially Anger

To maximize mental health, positive psychology is concerned with strengthening such life-enhancing emotions as optimism, gratitude, and admiration—and lessening the force of our negative emotions. This view is consistent with increasing evidence from behavioral medicine that chronic anger exerts severe strain on the body and causes premature aging and reduced longevity. Here, too, Maimonides was a pioneering thinker, for throughout his Judaic and medical writings, he repeated warned against negative emotions for their destructive effects.

For example, in the *Mishneh Torah* (Book II, chapter 3), Maimonides asserted that "Anger is a most evil quality. One should keep aloof from it to the opposite extreme, and train oneself not to be upset even by a thing over which it would be legitimate to be annoyed." In the same volume, he stated that "The life of an angry person is not truly life. The sages have therefore advised that one keep far from anger until being accustomed not to take notice even of things that provoke annoyance. This is a good way."

Cultivate Mindfulness

The fields of positive psychology and behavioral medicine today are increasingly recommending mindfulness training (that is, learning to stay focused in the present moment) for its therapeutic value. The scientific evidence is clear that such training is effective not only in reducing harmful emotions like anger and fear, but also in strengthening the body—by lowering blood pressure and heart-rate, for example. In this regard, it's fascinating to learn that Maimonides addressed this topic in his influential *Guide of the Perplexed* (volume 1, chapter 60): "If we pray with the motion of our lips and our face toward the wall, but simultaneously think of business; if we read the Torah with our tongue while our heart is occupied with the building of our house, and we do not think of what we are reading; if we perform the commandments only with our limbs; then we are like those who are engaged in digging the ground or hewing wood in the forest without reflecting on the nature of those acts, or by whom they are commanded, or what is their purpose."

Indeed, Maimonides attributed so much importance to mindfulness for establishing a healthful lifestyle that he even provided specific advice on how his fellow Jews could cultivate this trait: "The first thing you must do is turn your thoughts away from everything while you say the *Shema* or other daily prayers. Do not content yourself with being pious when you read merely the first verse of *Shema* or the first paragraph of the *Amidah* prayer. When you have successfully practiced this for many years, try when reading or listening to the Torah to have all your heart and thoughts occupied with understanding what you read or hear… After some time, when you have mastered this, accustom yourself to have your mind free from all other thoughts when you read any portion of the other books of the prophets, or when you say any blessing…direct your mind exclusively to what you are doing."

Maimonides' career as a rabbinic scholar, communal leader, and physician spanned decades. His legacy has been profound and enduring. His psychological insights can enrich the new scientific specialty known as positive psychology with its important emphasis on fostering individual character strengths and virtues. In this regard, Maimonides' teachings also provide specific ways to advance Jewish spirituality in everyday life.

Zeh Keili V'Anveihu: Reclaiming a Personal God

Erin Leib Smokler

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I'd like to begin by quoting to you a passage from Rabbi David Hartman, from his book, *The Living Covenant*. He writes:

> Traditional Judaism has always contained a vital dialectic between ["*Zeh Keili v'anveihu*"] "This is my God and I will adore Him" and ["*Elokei avi va'aromemenhu*"] "The God of my father and I will exalt Him" (Exodus 15:2). Loyalty to the God about Whom our fathers told us does not exclude the discovery of new insights and experiences that lead one to say, "This is my God." The past does not exhaust all that is possible within one's covenantal relationship with God. When Moses asks God how he should announce God's "name" to the community, he is told to say that he was sent by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but also the God Who is worshipped through the new possibilities that the future may uncover: "I will be what I will be" ["*Eheyeh asher eheyeh*"]. One loyal to Sinai does not only look backward. (*Living Covenant*, 8–9)

In the past year and years, members of the JOFA community and its sympathizers have made great strides taking ownership over and elevating

"*elokei avinu*." We have appropriated the Torah of our fathers into our own *batei midrash,* adding the Torah of our mothers. We've gotten to know the God mediated through Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaacov—and countless other men—as we shared our own voices, and those of our matriarchs, through learning and through ritual. We have faithfully inherited our tradition, struggled with it where necessary, and have—to a large degree—rendered it accessible to girls and women everywhere. Although there is certainly work yet to be done, we have widened the halakhic path, so that all members of the Jewish community who want to can participate in the ongoing journey from Sinai. In so doing, we have certainly exalted God.

Yet, with gratitude for all that we have accomplished and with a strong awareness for the battles that remain, I would like to pose a different question: Have we taken sufficient time or made sufficient space for "*Ze keili*"? Has all the permission and all the inclusion helped us in the project of identifying and reifying a personal God? With all our holy and rightful reverence for our past, are we any more capable of opening ourselves to the unfolding of *Eheyeh*, of a self and a God in the process of becoming? To what might we point and say, "This is *my* God"?

Hartman's concern accents the temporal—Can the God of our past be made present? My concern accents the spiritual—Can God, as mediated through our tradition, be made personal?

I am charged with the task today of addressing the nexus of spirituality and Orthodox feminism. I come to you not as a guru or even as an enlightened practitioner; not as a rabbi nor as a rabbah, but simply as a woman, Jewish educator, and seeker eminently committed to expanding the possibilities for religious life in the Modern Orthodox community. I want to enlarge the sphere of our religious concern, to place at the center of our religious discourse and our religious experience the cultivation of spirit.

To give shape to this call, I'd like to sketch for you two entry-points to spirituality—two among many, no doubt—that are captured by the phrase, "*Zeh keili*," "This is my God." Recall that these words are part of *shirat haYam,* the song sung after the splitting of the Red Sea, in celebration of the miraculous liberation from Egypt. Rashi, quoting the Mehilta, famously writes on these words:

> God revealed Godself in His glory to [the Israelites], and they pointed at God with their finger. By the sea, [even] a maidservant perceived what prophets did not perceive.

What was available to all of *Benei Yisrael*—and *Benot Yisrael*—at the moment of great salvation was the gift of transparency: *Zeh keili.* They could point to their immediate experience and say, "*This* is the hand of God." After years of toil in the land of Egypt, after generations in which God was eclipsed from their lives, they were blessed with a moment of absolute clarity. They could perceive with certainty the urgent, unmistakable presence of a God who heard their cries and who delivered.

I submit to you that one central impulse in the spiritual quest is the longing to be able to say "*Zeh,*"—that is, to encounter God in ways that are immediate, powerful, palpable; to invite experiences of *kedusha,* or of *devekut,* that fill a person with awareness of transcendence. The spirituality of "*ze keili*" demands a relationship with the divine that is intense, real, urgent. It asserts that there is a live Other to whom one can point.

How? In the absence of sea-splitting pyrotechnics that testify to God's *power*, we might yearn in our times for more subtle moments that testify to God's *presence*. "*Ahat sha'alti me'et Hashem ota avakesh: Shivti beVeit Hashem kol yemei hayyay, lahazot beNoam Hashem u'levaker beHe-khalo,*" says the Psalmist, a seeker of God if ever there was one. "I ask one thing of God: Let me sit in Your home all the days of my life, to see your glory and to visit your inner sanctum" (Psalm 27:4). We cannot hope for supernatural miracles that will lift the veil of the world. That is not the reality in which we live. We can, however, try to sit quietly with sanctity and even to encounter deep holiness from time to time. The cry of "*shivti beBeit Hashem*" reminds us that spirituality—so often associated with experiences of ecstasy—can also just be found in the simplicity of everyday living, of sitting with what comes our way and dwelling with God there. Only then might we be blessed with a visit to the *heikhal,* to the place of innermost depths.

This is one way that we might reclaim "*zeh keili*"—through the cultivation of a compelling relationship with God. Just as our ancestors could see God at the sea, so our generation is charged to figure out, where is it that *we* see God? As individuals and as a community, what might we do—

- what spiritual practices might we adopt?
- what intentions might we set?
- what spaces might we share?
- what texts might we learn and *how* might we learn them?
- what prayers might we pray?

– what goals might we privilege?

—that will allow us best to dwell in the house of God? What are the religious pathways that will speak to our souls? What will be *our* avenues to the *heikhal*?

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Beyond the explicitly spiritual agenda of getting to know a God to whom one can point, there is a second dimension to "*zeh keili*" spirituality. Experiences like the kind at the Red Sea rarely last, of course. It is not the nature of the divine mystery to remain disclosed. The moment that *Benei Yisrael* exit the miraculous space—literally and figuratively—they are struck with fear, with a lack of trust in their future. They worry about whether the God who just dramatically and spectacularly saved them from their enemies can also sustain their humdrum, everyday needs. "*Ma nishteh*?" they ask (Exodus 15:24). What will we drink in the desert? What will we eat? In other words, what will nourish us now? No amount of spiritual enlightenment could save them from the vulnerability of being human.

A second impulse in the spiritual life can be located here, not in the ascent to the divine, but in the descent to all that is inescapably human. In those moments when life—in all of its complexity—intrudes and awakens and unsettles, *those* are the moments when we might open to a world beyond—beyond self, beyond what we thought, maybe beyond words. It is a strange truth that when we feel most raw and vulnerable, when our skin is thinned by the wild unpredictability of the world, we are that much more available to the touch of the other. Like a body burned by the sun, we *feel* more—more fear, but also more tenderness. "*MiMa'amakim keratikha yah,*" "From the depths, I call out to You, God"—not just from the place of despair, but from within the arresting grip of life laid bare.

Joy *and* pain, fulfillment *and* disappointment, compel the deepest, hardest, most fundamental existential questions:

– In what can I trust?
– For what am I grateful?
– How can I cope with loss?
– How can I honor love?
– What is intimacy?
– For whom or what shall I sacrifice?

- Where does my integrity lay?
- How can I live in the face of fear, uncertainty, and doubt?

Like *Benei Yisrael* thirsting for water in the desert, we too might wonder: What will nourish me?

I submit, it is the task of spirituality to take on these challenges too, not to answer them, but to help us live *without* answers; to help us cope with and embrace mystery; to live in the world as it really is. A Jewish path that accents these questions seeks to reframe the stories we tell ourselves. It seeks to help us make meaning out the mess of our colorful, wonderful, unpredictable, uneven existence. It seeks to help each and every one of us to find our way toward a God that is truly our own. *Ze Keili.* This is *my* God—a God who speaks to *my* personal issues, *my* deepest needs, the cravings and confusions of *my* own soul.

For this task, the language of halakha alone won't do. Seekers of these forms of spirituality need a wider, more varied pathway—through Aggadah, Midrash, Mussar, Hassidut; through prayer, meditation, song, and silence; through modalities of religious engagement that are neither systematic nor systematizing in their nature. To meet the cries of our explosive, expressive souls, we're going to need to privilege those texts, those teachers, and those techniques that help reify God in the world, and in the core of our beings.

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Is this a project for Orthodox feminists? Absolutely. As a community that has valiantly fought to expand ritual access, leadership roles, learning opportunities, and social justice, it is our *duty* to clarify what it is that animates these struggles altogether, what mission under girds the religious life, and what makes the effort worth it. It is also our *privilege*—the privilege won from years on the periphery—to speak to the core and to enlarge and elevate the conversation, to expand the possibilities for a spiritually vibrant existence for all Jews.

Let us be not just inheritors of tradition, but active shapers of it. As we honor *Elokei avinu veImenu,* let us commit—today and always—to cultivating lives full of a profoundly present and personally meaningful God, so that each one of us might be blessed to say, "*Zeh keili veAnveihu.*"

No Wonder

Barry Gelman

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"The central thought of Judaism is the living God.
It is the perspective from which all other issues are seen.
And the supreme problem in any philosophy of Judaism is:
What are grounds for man's believing in the realness of the living God?"
—*God in Search of Man*, pp. 25–26

These words, penned by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, summarize one of the great challenges facing contemporary Jews. How can one achieve spirituality? Of course, there is the problem of how to properly define spirituality. Heschel does an excellent job when he considers the "realness of the living God." The essential problem is the difficulty in feeling the proximity of God in our lives.

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972) was born in Warsaw, Poland, in 1907 to a family of Hassidic rabbis. Following a traditional Jewish education in Warsaw, Heschel went to Berlin, where he studied at the university. He earned his PhD degree in 1933.

In 1938, Heschel arrived in Cincinnati, Ohio, where he joined the faculty of Hebrew Union College in 1940. He later became professor of Jewish ethics and mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York City. Heschel was married to concert pianist Sylvia Straus, and they had one daughter, Hannah (Susannah). Heschel remained at the Jewish Theological Seminary until his death in New York City on December 23, 1972.

Heschel was a pioneer of Jewish involvement in the civil rights demonstrations of the 1960s and early 1970s to end discrimination against African Americans. He spoke out against the war in Vietnam.

Heschel met with Pope Paul VI at the Vatican to discuss Jewish feelings concerning Vatican Council II.

Rabbi Heschel presents a blueprint of how to live a life feeling the realness of God. It is a program that is simple to understand, and, at the same time, is quite profound. It is not a simplistic program, as it grapples with serious theological questions and requires considerable thought. It may best be described as "the longer shorter way" based on a story in the Talmud (*Eruvin* 53b) and popularized by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyadi in the Introduction to his classic work, *Tanya*. The phrase "the longer shorter way" represents an approach that requires hard work, but will, in the long run, lead to success in helping individuals develop a relationship with God, as opposed to a quick fix that is short-lived.

Immediately upon attempting to offer a way to God, Heschel first stops to consider, and then rejects, the possibility that feeling the realness of God is based solely on belief in events of the past. For Heschel, such an approach is too distant and does not reveal the "realness of the living God."

Heschel asks:

> Is it true that Judaism derived its religious vitality exclusively from loyalty to events that occurred in the days of Moses and from obedience to Scripture in which those events occurred? Such an assumption seems to overlook the nature of man and faith. A great event, miraculous as it may be, if it happened only once, will hardly be able to dominate forever a mind of man." (*God in Search of Man*, p. 26)

Heschel distinguishes between memory and personal insight in terms of ways of religious thinking. Both, says Heschel, are required modes for religious development. Heschel does distinguish and even prioritize, when he suggests that first comes the personal insight, helping a person arrive at "This is my God" (personal insight), which subsequently leads to: "He is the God of my father" (memory).

Heschel's approach to spirituality can be contrasted to the approach presented by his contemporary, Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits. According to Berkovits, while the prophets were able to personally encounter God, non-prophets are left with the memory of those encounters as recorded in our sacred literature. Those encounters and their records are powerful enough to craft faith. (It is interesting to note that they both speak of the "Paradox" of the encounter with God as described in the Bible and won-

der how it is possible for a human being to survive such an encounter. Their answers are remarkably similar as well).

Heschel was not satisfied with a faith based on someone else's encounter with God, and he goes to great lengths to devise a system in which a direct encounter with the divine is available to all. In trying to define real faith, Heschel notes:

> What does having faith mean? To follow the path of your ancestors? To carry out what is contained in a creed? Such simple faith is the backbone of all religions. After all, hundreds of generations of Jews have borne testimony to the existence of God. So one may accept their words, their beliefs. Yet the Kotzker refused to be a follower, living on spiritual crumbs left by the princes of the past. . . . (*A Passion for Truth*, pp. 187–188)

According to Heschel, faith could not be inherited; every person has to earn it. He warns against settling even on our own ideas and conceptions. Not only must we be original, our very originality must be challenged and fine-tuned.

> It is impossible to be at ease and to repose on ideas which have turned into habits, on canned theories in which our own or other people's insights are preserved. We can never leave behind our concern in the safe-deposit of opinions, nor delegate its force to others and so attain vicarious insights. We must keep our own amazement, our own eagerness alive. (*Man Is Not Alone*, p. 14)

It is often the case that educators and rabbis direct students to focus on the approaches and insights of others in terms of forming the basis of faith and closeness to God. Heschel is suggesting that in order to experience closeness to God one must be empowered and encouraged to find one's unique and specialized path.

This may be true in the realm of Torah study as well. Perhaps more time can be spent on developing the personal interpretations of Jewish texts, not as a means of supplanting traditional interpretation, but as a means toward greater connection to the text.

The idea that each person has a unique connection to Torah is expressed in the law that mandates a teacher go with his students to an *Ir Miklat*—a city of refuge—when the student kills inadvertently. This is precisely because once the student has found a teacher he can successfully learn from, the halakha is hesitant to separate them.

A similar idea may be behind the prayer "grant us our share in your Torah" that is part of the concluding supplication of the *amidah*, among other prayers. It also expresses that individuals have a specific "share" or portion in Torah.

In the realm of spirituality, individuals can be given license to develop their unique route to feeling the realness of God. Once that is accomplished, connection via prayer and study may be attainable. Often the reverse method is used, in that individuals are expected to initially connect to God via prayer and study. This is not to suggest that people should not be taught how to pray until they acknowledge a connection to God. Rather, it can serve as a reminder that prayer may not serve the purpose of connecting a person to God. Once a person has developed a relationship to God based on personal insight, meaningful prayer may simply be the symptom of that relationship or a means to rekindle it after a period of diminution.

In focusing on the importance of individual and unique spiritual development, Heschel is echoing a classic Hassidic approach made popular by Shneuer Zalman of Lyadi in *Tanya*. In the introduction to that work, Rav Shneuer Zalman explains that one of the shortcomings of the written word is that people have different approaches to spirituality and will thereby not necessarily find inspiration in a book written for a general audience. He points out that the challenge of a leader is to be able to relate to the unique personality of each individual. He also notes that the blessing said upon seeing a group of 600,000 people—"knower of secrets"—points to idea that every person is distinctive. All of this boils down to the need for individuals to develop their own spiritual path.

It is important to point out that although Heschel saw the development of the personal God ("This is my God") as coming before other's appreciation of God, ("The God of my fathers"), he very much considered the mitzvoth and Torah study as the path to a personal relationship with God.

> A heretic, the Talmud reports, chided the Jews for the rashness in which he claimed they persisted. "First you should have listened; if the commandments were within your power of fulfillment, you should have accepted them; if beyond your power, rejected them." . . . Do we not always maintain that we must first explore a system before we decide to accept it? This order of inquiry is valid in regard to pure theory…but it has limitations when applied to realms where thought and fact...theory and experience are inseparable. It would be futile, for example, to explore the meaning of

> music and abstain for listening to music. It would be just as futile to explore Jewish thought from a distance, in self-detachment. Jewish thought is disclosed in Jewish living. (*God in Search of Man*, p. 282)

Wonder and Radical Amazement

Heschel's key idea in terms of a relationship with God built on personal insight is the notion of wonder or radical amazement. Personal insight as far a feeling God's realness is dependent on wonder.

Rabbi Heschel uses a familiar Midrash as a means to understanding wonder.

> How did Abraham arrive at his certainty that there is God who is concerned with the world? According to the Rabbis, Abraham may be "compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw *a palace full of light* (*birah ahat doleket*). "Is it possible that there is no one who cares for the palace?" he wondered. Until the owner of the palace looked at him and said, "I am the owner of the palace." Similarly, Abraham our father wondered, "Is it conceivable that the world is without a guide?" The Holy One, blessed be He, looked out and said. "I am the guide, the sovereign of the world." It was in wonder that Abraham's quest for God began. (*God in Search of Man*, p. 112)

Lift up your eyes on high. Religion is the result of what man does with his ultimate wonder, with moments of awe, with the sense of mystery. Heschel warns us not to waste moments of wonder.

It is interesting to note that elsewhere Rabbi Heschel uses this very same Midrash to deal with the problem of evil. He does so by changing his interpretation of the phrase *birah ahat doleket,* from a "palace full of light," to a "palace in flames."

In many ways, Heschel's response to the problem of Evil is the flip side of the coin of his doctrine of wonder. For Heschel, the existence of evil in the world, "living as we do in a civilization where factories were established in order to exterminate millions of men, women and children..." is the result of what can be termed the absence of negative wonder, or what Heschel refers to as "the loss of our sense of horror." Heschel lays the blame for the Shoah squarely at the feet of humanity when he notes in his rewording of the above Midrash: "The world is in flames, consumed by evil. Is it possible that there is no one who cares?" It is God who declares: "I am the Guide, the sovereign of the world" (*God in Search of Man*, p. 367).

Divine Care and the Human Encounter

All of reality was a source of amazement for Heschel as every encounter with the world was by definition an encounter with God. "Awe is a way of being in rapport with the mystery of all reality" (*God in Search of Man*, p. 74).

This is especially true when it comes to the encounter with human beings. Heschel demonstrates exceptional spiritual sensitivity when he depicts the nature of human encounter.

> The awe that we sense or ought to sense when standing in the presence of a human being is a moment of intuition for the likeness of God which is concealed in his essence. . . . The secret of every being is the Divine care and concern that are invested in it. Something sacred is at stake in every event. (*Ibid.*, p.74).

Wonder and Science

Heschel is quick to remind us that he is not referring to the well-known argument from design. "Depth-Theology" is the term he uses to hone in on the distinction between wonder and science. In explaining "Depth-Theology" Heschel writes: "To apprehend the depth of religious faith we will try to ascertain not so much what the person is able to express as that which he is unable to express, the insights that no language can declare." Heschel quotes F. P. Ramsey and notes that: "We must keep in mind that 'the chief danger to philosophy, apart from laziness and woolliness, is scholasticism, the essence of which is treating what is vague as if it were precise and trying to fit it into an exact logical category.'"

The difference between science and wonder is that for the prophets "wonder is a form of thinking" and that "the fact that there are facts at all" creates a sense of "perpetual surprise."

Petition and Thanksgiving in Prayer: Rabbi Heschel and Rabbi Soloveitichik

The central place of wonder in the thought of Rabbi Heschel is made clear when considering his focus on praise and thanksgiving as the central motif of prayer. The importance of praise and thanksgiving in the prayer scheme of Rabbi Heschel is illuminated when contrasted with the

approach of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik.

Rabbi Soloveitchik sees petition as the foundation of prayer. He makes this point with great clarity and force in his essay, "Prayer, Redemption and Talmud Torah." In this essay Rabbi Soloveitchik defines the ability to cry out to God as a medium toward redemption as well as being a symbol of a free existence.

Related to the centrality of petitional prayer, Rabbi Soloveitchik remarks:

> Therefore, prayer in Judaism, unlike the prayer of classical mysticism, is bound up with the human needs, wants, drives and urges, which make man suffer. Prayer is the doctrine of human needs. Prayer tells the individual, as well as the community, what his, or its, genuine needs are, what he should, or should not, petition God about. Of the nineteen benedictions in our Amidah, thirteen are concerned with basic human needs, individual as well as social-national. Even two of the last three benedictions are of a petitional nature. The person in need is summoned to pray. Prayer and Tsa'ar (trouble) are inseparably linked. Who prays? Only the sufferer prays. If man does not find himself in narrow straits, if he is not troubled by anything, if he knows not what Tsara is, then he need not pray. To a happy man, to contented man, the secret of prayer was not revealed. God needs neither thanks nor hymns. He wants to hear the outcry of man, confronted with a ruthless reality. (Rabbi Joseph B. Solovetichik, "Prayer, Redemption and Talmud Torah")

Rabbi Heschel offers a different focus of prayer.

> To worship God means to forget the self; an extremely difficult, though possible, act. What takes place in a moment of prayer may be described as a shift of the center of living—from self-consciousness to self-surrender. This implies, I believe, an important indication of the nature of man. Prayer begins as an "it-He" relationship. I am not ready to accept the ancient concept of prayer as dialogue. Who are we to enter a dialogue with God?" ("Prayer as Discipline" in *The Insecurity of Freedom*, pp. 255–256)

This conception of humanity in relation to God leads Rabbi Heschel to conclude that priority in prayer must be given to praise.

> This is why in Jewish liturgy primacy is given to prayer of praise. One must never begin with supplication. One begins with praise because praise is the prerequisite and essence of prayer. To praise means to make Him present. . . . (*Ibid.*)

Heschel strengthens his point when he argues that not only is wonder the central religious mood of a Jew, it also requires daily maintenance.

> The profound and personal awareness of the wonder of being has become a part of the religious consciousness of the Jew. Three times a day we pray:
>
> We thank thee . . .
> For thy miracles which are daily with us,
> For thy continual marvels. . . .
>
> Every evening we recite: "He creates light and makes dark." Twice a day we say: "He is one." What is the meaning of such repetition? A scientific theory, once it is announced and accepted, does not have to be repeated twice a day. The insights of wonder must be constantly kept alive. Since there is a need for daily wonder, there is need for daily worship." (*God in Search of Man*, pp. 48–49)

How Do We Know?

One of the basic issues Rabbi Heschel deals with in terms of wonder is the question of how do we know we have experienced it. Interestingly, for Rabbi Heschel, the characteristic of a spiritually developed person is the ability to "draw a distinction between the utterable and the unutterable, to be stunned by that which is but cannot be put into words" (*Man is Not Alone*, p. 4).

We are often taught that one can only claim to understand something when it can be put into words. This may be true of knowledge; it is not so, according to Rabbi Heschel when it comes to experiences. "Always we are chasing words, and always words recede. But the greatest experiences are those for which we have no expression. . . . To become aware of the ineffable is to part company with words" (*Ibid.*, pp. 15–16).

Our Challenges

For Heschel there are two fundamental reasons why it is so hard for human beings to experience the "realness of God." He first turns his attention to the "Dogma of Man's Self Sufficiency." He views both social reforms and technological advance as having failed to replace belief in revelation of God's will. The development of human power and social awareness are not enough to pacify the human drive to cruelty. We need God, argues Heschel,

because we are not great and because God is great. The Dogma of Man's Self Sufficiency in not only based on the overestimation of humanity's greatness, but on the underestimation of God's greatness. For the so-called self-sufficient man, the only thing not known is when all will be known. Ultimately, all mysteries will be solved and all obscurities made apparent.

Heschel refers to the perception of humanity's unworthiness to be in a relationship with God. Referencing the Shoah, Heschel argues that it seems impossible that God wishes any relationship with a species capable of such fantastic horrors. It is the very physical strength of humanity that calls for a spiritual response. In fact, the one being powerful enough to respond to the destructive power of humanity is God. In short, although humanity may not be worthy of a relationship with God, God imposes it, in order to save humanity from itself.

Here too, humanity's distance from God is based on an inability to recognize greatness. This time, however, it is not God's greatness that is overlooked, but human greatness in the guise of potential, and in Heschel's lifetime, realized destructiveness.

In Heschel's comments on wonder and the problem of evil, one can sense a concern for the general inability to experience strong passion. Underlying both radical amazement and the loss of the sense of horror is a generic "Hardness of Heart" as Heschel calls it. For Heschel, it is impossible to ignore a world so full of the magnificence of God and the dreadfulness of humanity.

Seeing the Ultimate

Heschel uses a powerful illustration in regard to living in radical amazement.

> Let us take a loaf of bread. It is the product of climate, soil and the work of the farmer, merchant and baker. If it were our intention to extol the forces that concurred in producing a loaf of bread, we would have to give praise to the sun and the rain, to the soil and the intelligence of man. However, it is not these we praise before breaking bread. We say, "Blessed be Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth." Empirically speaking, would it not be more correct to give credit to the farmer, the merchant and the baker? To our eyes, it is they who bring forth the bread. . . . It is not possible to dwell each time on what bread is empirically. It is important to dwell each time on what bread is ultimately. (*God in Search of Man*, p. 63)

Who Moved?

Paradoxically, although God desires to be in relationship with the world, humanity's refusal to reciprocate causes God to depart.

> Man was the first to hide himself from God, after having eaten of the forbidden fruit. The will of God is to be here, manifest and near; but when the doors of the world are slammed on Him, His truth betrayed, His will defied, He withdraws, leaving man to himself. God did not depart of his own volition; He was expelled. God is in exile. (*Man Is Not Alone*, p. 153)

The real God is not the hiding God, but the discovered God. Humanity has worked itself into a terrible problem. The challenge for humanity is how to reintroduce God to the world. Heschel offers an important understanding of God's place in the world: God's place in the world depends on humanity—not God. He begins with the radical statement that God is lost in His world.

> God who created the world is not at home in the world. . . . Of Noah it is said, Noah walked with God, and to Abraham the Lord said Walk before Me. Said the midrash: 'Noah might be compared to a king's friend who was plunging about in the dark alleys, and when the king looked out and saw him, he said to him, Instead of plunging about in dark alleys, come and walk with me. But Abraham's case is rather to be compared to that of a king who was sinking in dark alleys, and when his friend saw him he shone a light from him through the window. Said he to him, Instead of lighting me through the window, come and show a light before me. (*God in Search of Man*, p.156)

The dilemma is summed up well in the following analysis of the approaches of the Baal Shem Tov and Rav Menachem Mendl of Kotzk.

> The Baal Shem constantly reminds us how close God is to man and all things. Reb Mendl perennially recalls how alienated, how estranged man is from truth, from God. The Baal Shem discloses the presence of God, the Creator of the Universe, within the world; he brings heaven nearer to man. But for what purpose; says Reb Mendl, since man's corruption spurns the Divine. . . . When asked where God dwelt, the Baal Shem answered, everywhere, the Kotzker, where he is allowed to enter. . . . (*A Passion for Truth*, pp. 32–33)

Heschel desired to help the world realize the contemporary existence of these two paths. God so very much desires to be in the world and for

all intents and purposes God is close to man, but humanity has spurned God's advances so we must light the path for Him to return.

God and Torah

Heschel points to another potential pitfall in one's quest to feel the realness of God—halakha.

> Through sheer punctiliousness in observing the law one may become oblivious of the living presence and forget that the law is not for its own sake, but for the sake of God. Indeed, the essence of observance has, at ties, become encrusted with so many customs and conventions that the Jewel was lost in the setting. Outward compliance with externalities of the law took the place of the engagement of the whole person to the living God. What is the ultimate purpose of observance if not to become sensitive to the spirit of Him, in whose ways the mitzvoth are signposts? (*God in Search of Man*, p. 326)

In this passage, Heschel enters into the debate surrounding the telos of the mitzvoth and he comes down clearly on the side of those who believe that the telos of the commandments can be ascertained.

As an antidote to this potential problem, Heschel offers the study of aggada. For Heschel, aggada can save God from halakha.

> The preciousness and fundamental importance of aggada is categorically set forth in the following statements of the ancient Rabbis: 'If you desire to know Him at whose word the universe came into being, study aggada for thereby will you recognize the Holy One and cleave unto his ways'. . . . The collections of aggada that have been preserved contain an almost inexhaustible wealth of religious insight and feeling, for in the aggada the religious consciousness with its motivations, difficulties, perplexities and longings came to immediate and imaginative expression. (*God in Search of Man*, p.324)

The study of aggada, then, becomes another way to achieve wonder.

Heschel goes so far as to identify an "anti-aggadic" strain within Jewish teaching.

> The outstanding expression of the anti-aggadic attitude is contained in a classical rabbinic question with which Rashi opens his famous commentary on the Book of Genesis. "Rabbi Isaac said: The Torah should have com-

> menced with chapter 12 of Exodus, since prior to that chapter hardly any laws are set forth." The premise and implications of this question are staggering. The Bible should have omitted such non-legal chapters as those on creation, the sins of Adam and Cain, the flood, the Tower of Babel, the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the lives of the twelve tribes, the suffering and miracles in Egypt." (*God in Search of Man*, p. 328)

In a fascinating modification of the positive notion of "*lifnim mishurat haDin*" generally understood as a legalistic term encouraging additional stricture than those minimally required by law, Heschel writes that this dictum is referring to an aggadic approach to Torah—to not just fulfilling the mitzvoth, but fulfilling them with God in mind.

Is It Possible?

How is wonder supposed to help us overcome the decisive religious and theological questions that we often grapple with? For Heschel, the sense of wonder is so overwhelming that it conquers our doubts and questions about evil and meaning in a world that often seems absurd. Significantly, Heschel is not on a quest to ultimate solutions, but rather "to find ourselves as part of a context of meaning."

Heschel is willing to let absurdity and wonder go head to head.

> We do not need to drink the whole ocean to know what kind of water it contains. One drop yields its salty flavor. Our very existence exposes us to the challenge of wonder and radical amazement at the universe despite the absurdities we encounter. It is possible on the basis of personal experience to arrive at the conclusion that the human situation as far as one can see is absurd. However, to stand face to face with the infinite world of stars and galaxies and to declare all of this absurd would be idiotic. (*A Passion for Truth*, pp. 294–295)

Potential for All

According to Heschel perceiving God is a phenomenon, "of which all men are at all times capable." Feeling the realness of God is not something reserved for the religious genius. In fact, he argues that the absence of radical amazement represents a shortcoming and lack of effort. Subjectivity is the absence, not the presence, of radical amazement. Such lack or absence

is a sign of a half-hearted, listless mind, of an undeveloped sense for the depth of things" (*Man Is Not Alone*, p. 21).

It is important for Heschel to make this point as he is attempting to construct a theology and approach to God that can be implemented. He is concerned with the spirit of humanity and the dangers faced by a society that does not live in the presence of God. In a way, Heshcel suggests that his program is quite simple for those who are willing to be open to a relationship with God as such a relationship is available to us in "every perception, every act of thinking and every enjoyment of valuation of reality" (*Ibid.*, p. 20).

Partial Reading List of Works by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

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The Earth Is The Lord's, Jewish Lights Publishing, 1995
The Ineffable Name of God: Man: Poems, Morton M. Leifman (Translator) Continuum; Bilingual edition, 2005
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Spirituality

Jeremy Rosen

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The very term "Spirituality" has in recent years acquired negative connotations. In Judaism, it is often associated with an expression of religious fervor devoid of halakhic content or commitment. It conjures up New Age pseudo-religion, unreliable, inconsistent, flaky sentimentality. To borrow a Christian bon mot, "Mysticism," it is often asserted, "starts in a mist and ends in a schism." Nevertheless both rationalism and mysticism are equally integral elements in Jewish, indeed all, religious life. It is the relationship between them that I want to explore in this essay.

It is probably true to say we can all distinguish between someone we consider religiously observant (perhaps the correct Hebrew term is "*Aduk*" or perhaps "*Shomer Mitzvot*") and one we consider to be a person "of Spirit," someone with "*Ruhniut*." Some might even want to use this as a way of differentiating the Lithuanian tradition from the Hassidic. Yet that would not be completely fair. And both may be combined in the same person.

On the one hand, we may point to the rigorous, Germanic approach of the late Professor Yeshayahu Leibovitz, who considered religion a matter of duty, a commitment to fulfill obligations, a purely rational phenomenon. And on the other hand, we may consider the late Nazir of Jerusalem who was lost in an ethereal world of "*deveikut*." Halakha is clearly defined and empirically verifiable. The test for a witness in a Jewish Court of Law

is not theology, but whether one adheres to the laws of Shabbat in public. The personal encounter with God—*deveikut*—is the essential element in any mystical tradition. *Deveikut* is not something anyone else can verify. What is its origin?

In the Bible

The biblical narratives distinguish between those personalities who have a reciprocal relationship with God and those who are loyal to the traditions of the tribe and the people but whose engagement with a divine supernatural force is their defining characteristic. Aharon, the functionary, with his emphasis on inter human relations is an example of the first. The second was initiated by Avraham. Moshe is the archetype of a person who encounters God face to face. Only "The Fathers" and Moshe are described as struggling to "know" who and what God was and to feel God's presence on a personal level.

The Torah itself allows for different paradigms, the priest and the judge (Deut. 18:8 and 19:18) and the prophet and the king (Deut. 18:14,18 and Deut. 17:14) one might also add "the elders" both national (Num. 11:16) and local (Deut. 21:4). All are overshadowed by the unique leadership of Moshe and then certain Judges. After Samuel, the king emerges as the typical leader. Only in the unique cases of both David and Shelomo can one say that the political and the spiritual were combined. Otherwise it seems throughout the first commonwealth it was the prophet who preserved the mystical tradition. Often he was in conflict with the monarch. The priesthood usually allied itself with the ruling power, what we would call the establishment. Its primary role was to make sure the National Sanctuary ran according to its rules. I cannot think of one example in the Bible of a priest communing or pouring his heart out to God in the way for example that David does. And this is precisely why it is Eliyahu the Prophet and his Chariot of Fire that is seen as the forerunner of the great mystical tradition. It is fire throughout the Bible that is used as the dominant (though not exclusive) symbol of the divine presence. What better metaphor for passion could there be?

Furthermore the Bible, being a pre-philosophical text, is not concerned with the rational arguments for faith. There is no explicit command to believe. The first of the Ten Commandments is phrased as a

given, not as something one needs to find proofs of. Rather it is an assumption of involvement and commitment. Indeed the biblical use of the word *emunah,* faith, is quite removed from the Aristotelian idea of intellectual belief. It is more a matter of being convinced, firm, secure, like the arms of Moses during the battle at Rephidim against Amalek.

In the Talmud

The Talmud continues this distinction of approaches, most obviously in the persona of Honi HaMa'agel (*Mishna Taanit* 3:2 and Gemara). His intimate relationship with God is recognized and yet challenged by Shimon Ben Shetah, the leader of the mainstream Pharisaic community. Shimon can recognize the unique contribution of Honi and his ability to go beyond the normal constraints of public religion. And yet he also recognizes the danger of what he sees as "Lese Majesty." That particular talmudic passage goes on to give examples of the dangers of "wonder rabbis" using mystical powers in ways that normative halakha would not approve, as in the case of R.Yosi Ben Yokeret (*Taanit* 23b).

The ambiguity is there. One might think that the talmudic opposition to Greek culture and thought would place the whole of the rabbinic world firmly in the non-rational, mystical camp. The highlighting of Elisha Ben Abuya's apostasy, only hinted at as being because of his following Greek rational thought, might lead one to think that rationalism was simply not a talmudic value. Yet those rabbis who follow in the Honi tradition are not always regarded as being correct. Hanina (*Berakhot* 17b), who sustains the whole world, is contrasted with the Gabeans, who might not be as mystically advanced but produced no heretics. The hint is clear. Similarly it is precisely the strange exceptions such as Shimon bar Yohai, who is valued for his obvious spiritual greatness, nevertheless is implicitly criticized for going beyond the boundaries of halakha when he puts working men to death for not spending their time in study (*Shabbat* 33b). It is the very objection to Shimon Bar Yohai's absolutism that highlights the difference between an exceptional degree of spirituality that is inevitably the realm of a few, as opposed to the normative, if less exciting Judaism of the masses. Still Shimon Bar Yohai, Pinehas Ben Yair, Hanina, and the others are regarded as being exceptional precisely because of their spiritual relationship with God rather than as being in the first rank of scholars. They con-

trast with such personalities as Shimon Ben Gamliel as a man of authority rather than spirit.

In Medieval Theology

It was the dominance of theology in first millennial Christianity and Islam that exercised such a powerful influence on Jewish thought. The Aristotelian bifurcation between spirit and matter led almost inevitably to the distinction taken for granted until the late nineteenth century. It was precisely against this over emphasis on rationalism that Kabbalah emerged as such a potent force at the very time when mysticism in Christianity began to challenge established norms, and similarly Sufism in Islam. Kabbalah's creation of the system of *sefirot* integrated all "parts of the human, from the creative, reproductive *sefira* of *yesod*, to the intellectual *sefira* of *hokhma* and the intuitive of *bina* that challenged a rational world view. The human was a holistic reflection of God beyond. Nevertheless the distinction remained deeply rooted as evidenced in the persistence in some circles of the "*gartel,*" which divided the holier upper body from the more suspect lower regions.

The Ghost in the Machine, Arthur Koestler's 1967 book, was based on the work of English philosopher Gilbert Ryle. It illustrated the fallacy of how we had all come to think of the mind as good and the body as bad. Since Aristotle, we in the West have seen the intellect as the purest expression of humanity. In the world of ideas that Judaism lived, *mind* was good, *body* was bad.

It is possible that Maimonides himself understood the problem of the distinction between the "rationalism" of which he was a devotee, and the "emotion of mysticism" in his subtle distinction between the expression "to believe in," a process more dependent on intuition and feeling, rather than the more rational "to believe that." In *Sefer HaMitzvot* and *The Yad*, describing the command to believe in God, he uses the words "*SheNa'amin sheYesh,*" "we should believe *that* there is," as opposed to "*LeHa'amin Be-*" 'to believe *in*.' But when it comes to his *Ikkarim*, his principles of faith, there is no command to believe that God exists. The usage of belief there, is *"in"* and the principle is that God is the creator and director of the Universe. Perhaps Maimonides intentionally allowed for a different way of encountering the divine.

Mysticism has always been an antidote to intellectualism. And yet it would be inaccurate to transpose the rational and the mystical in Judaism too rigidly. The greatest of Lithuanian rabbis, such as the Vilna Gaon, studied the *Zohar*, and even the Mussar Movement took its main text, *The Paths of the Righteous*, from a Kabbalist. Perhaps it was no different from the Talmud referring to those who specialized in Aggada as opposed to Talmud (*Hagigah* 14a). Still, there is a difference because the personality that devotes itself to one is usually very different from the one who gives himself to the other.

In Current Times

And so it seems that the choices of rational or mystical depend more on personal preference than some intrinsic bias within Judaism. The modern quandary stems from the inescapable fact that formal, behavioral religion and its commitment to strict practice of the minutiae of halakha can be arid without the passion that mysticism can bring to it. This explains why a diet of Western religion that emerged with the Enlightenment has left so many people feeling uninspired and alienated. It explains why the mysticism of the orient has found such fertile ground in alienated Jews and Israelis. Jewish mysticism was until recently locked away in a well-guarded world where established rabbis held the keys and made sure only suitable initiates were permitted in.

The reaction to this in our free and open world has been the popular appeal of an ersatz Kabbalah that is hardly distinguishable from self-help panaceas but bears little resemblance to the high degree of devotion, commitment, and religious observance that genuine Kabbalah requires. Judaism, I would argue, in its ideal form requires the holistic combination of all aspects of the human being. It should not be a matter of deciding whether at the Shabbat table one sings *zemirot* or tells *divrei Torah*. One should do both. It is just that some people are tone deaf just as others are intellectually challenged.

So if some of us are drawn to one and others to the other, how can one explain the obvious preferences that some of us have? In recent years a lot has been written about the physiological aspects of religion. One of the pioneers in the new field of neurotheology is Andrew Newberg, a physician at the University of Pennsylvania and director of the Center for Spirituality

and the Mind. He has published a book, *Why We Believe What We Believe: Uncovering Our Biological Need for Meaning, Spirituality, and Truth*, written with his colleague Mark Robert Waldman.[1] Carl Zimmer's research[2] and Dean Hamer's book[3] have both highlighted the genetic basis for spirituality. *Psychology Today* has published articles linking spiritual experiences to serotonin.[4] The NPR website has an article on research showing the changes in the brain of those who meditate and pray, as does *Wired Science*.[5] Of course none of this tells us anything about God. But it does tell us something about ourselves. It does confirm what we see with our own eyes, that some people seem more naturally spiritual and conversely many people who are outwardly religious seem to show little interest in or propensity for spirituality. Clearly there is a need to encounter the divine as much as there is to express other parts of our intellectual and emotional makeup and some human brains seem to have a greater need than others.

The genius of our religion is that it provides for the very wide spectrum of human needs in terms of experience and intellect. The fact that it insists on behavioral detail while leaving the theological requirements loosely defined, enables the range of human minds to find their places within the religious spectrum. Provided one adheres to the common denominator of halakhic behavior, the room for individual spiritual experience is left up to each one of us to either indulge or neglect. Maimonides thought that through neglect we could totally eradicate the soul gene, or the soul element within us (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 8:5). Mysticism on the other hand regards the souls as eternal, transcendental, indestructible. So long as you and I both keep Shabbat, what we think about our soul is, is subjective.

The sad fact is that in too many parts of the Jewish world such freedom of thought is too rarely accorded.

NOTES

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2. Zimmer, Carl (October 2004). "Faith-Boosting Genes: A search for the genetic basis of spirituality". *Scientific American*. http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?articleID=000AD4E7-6290-1150-902F83414B7F4945.
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Melodies from Old Women

Tovli Simiryan

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"*Behold, he stands behind our wall,*
he looks in from the windows;
he peers through the lattice."
—Song of Songs, 2:9

Early in our marriage, my husband and I shopped for groceries every Sunday—not a simple event. Mama went with us. Each week we guided my husband's eighty-some year old mother to the car. She took tiny steps and held her son's arm as though she was walking a tight-rope. I took her opposite elbow, and between the two of us, we placed her gently in the back seat and buckled her in. She would nod a thank you to her son and motion her daughter-in-law to stop fussing and get in the car. She was safe, thanks to family and God.

As we pulled away from our home, a soft, whispering breath would seep through the air. It was barely audible, yet persistent. The further we traveled, the stronger it became—not in volume, but in strength. Mama was talking to herself. Her mouth moved and soft hissing noises were all I could make out.

"She's frightened," I would announce to my husband. "Maybe we should stop the car and tell her everything is fine and not to worry."

"She's not frightened. She's talking under her nose to God. She never travels anywhere without talking to God."

I can't count the times I turned in my seat to observe Mama, praying in her home language of Yiddish. She was in a special world, just her and God. As she prayed beneath her nose, her facial expressions changed as if she was having a conversation with someone next to her.

"She's really talking to God." I surmised every time we traveled with her.

"Of course she is. Don't disturb her." My husband would answer with a serious tone. "She thinks she's alone and no one can hear what they're talking about."

For 12 years, I was privileged to listen to this old woman's prayers. In the early years, I was overly conscious of keeping a kosher kitchen that would meet Mama's expectations. Was I putting everything in the right place; was this spoon now non-kosher because I dropped it in the "red" sink instead of the "blue"? How many mistakes could I make before my mother-in-law would not accept me as 100 percent Jewish? She was such a holy lady. She'd survived Nazis, Stalin, and the KGB, and during these times of oppression, she had never compromised on her halakhic responsibilities. She had learned religious boundaries from her parents and grandparents. My husband and his family had paid a handsome price for the privilege of living and remaining Jewish in the former Soviet Union.

Friday evenings, Mama carefully lit her candles, then scurried to each room announcing, "Shabbas. Gut Shabbas." My husband explained she needed to bless every piece of space in the house with Gut Shabbas! Every religious thought, each action was as natural to her as breathing. She gave it no thought and, I am certain, had no idea I watched and admired her every move.

Mama traveled from Moldova to America as a refugee in the early 1990s with her son and husband to be able to live as a Jew without being afraid. Now, she had an insecure, *ba'alat teshuvah* daughter-in-law who could not speak any of her languages and spent more time worrying about process than how the food tasted. No matter. All was solved one afternoon. Late one summer, Mama became ill and had to be hospitalized. She improved quickly, and while her son was at work, I sat by her bedside. The day before she was able to return home, a cheerful, Orthodox rabbi stopped by to wish her well. He spoke Yiddish and the two of them talked and laughed while I sat mesmerized, wishing I could understand at least every other word.

Finally, Mama fell asleep. The rabbi had pity on me and gently asked, "Did you understand what she was saying?"

"Not a word." I admitted.

"She was talking about you."

Oh, great, I immediately thought. Now the entire community will know what a Jewish failure I am. I waited, precariously for the rabbi to continue.

"She says you're a good girl. You keep a kosher home. You chant the blessing over Shabbat candles with a melody she's never heard before. It's a melody that touches her heart. You take good care of her son. She likes you. But she'd like you to be a bit more modest."

Modest? In a nano-second panic, I quickly checked my skirt and touched my head to see if I forgot to cover my hair that morning. Here was an opportunity for failure I had not counted on.

"No. That's not what your mother-in-law means." The rabbi interrupted as if reading my mind. "She wants to remind you that our people learned modesty from the cat. Everything a cat does is seemingly without effort. When a cat runs, it's as though they will never tire. They move effortlessly. When a dog runs, they labor, they pant and they call attention to themselves. She's overjoyed her son married an Orthodox, religious girl. But, she worries that you are becoming obsessed with right and wrong. You think too much. Rules are important, but if you don't have time to talk with God, what's the point? There is no shame in making a mistake—correct it and move on. She doesn't want you to exchange the spirituality she hears in your melodies for rules and build an empty shell for the sake of being an Orthodox Jew who lives only to recognize the right butcher."

It was a good lesson. But it was just one of many I'd collected long before I'd met Mama. I've been fortunate to have met excellent and balanced teachers over the years. I've sought out rabbis who I believed were respected, and who touched my heart in some way and were kind, compassionate and honest community leaders. I attended their lectures when I could, bought their books and listened to their tapes. I read and accepted the teachings of scholars and leaders they admired. Every year, I balanced the spiritual with the religious and became a bit more observant and "Orthodox."

Many years ago, a good friend had recently married and moved to the upper midwest. She was newly observant and had married a man who

came from an observant Orthodox family. I'd been invited to their new home for Pesah. I arrived early to assist my friend with cleaning and other preparations. Everybody knows it's exhausting to prepare for Pesah. But this was different. My friend was frightened. She feared shame. She was worried she would make a mistake, not make the grade, or that she would say the wrong thing to the right person.

We cleaned and scoured, making sure we had the right food and the right utensils and plates unpacked. Together we worked from sunup until well past midnight. We slept a few hours and were at it again early each morning. Finally, we were close to finishing. As we sat in the kitchen, I observed how tired my friend looked. She could barely hold a conversation. Normally, her eyes sparkled with joy and energy, but on this day they were dull and mirrored defeat. That afternoon, her husband asked a question about the Pesah silverware. As we soon realized, we'd forgotten to unpack them. My friend immediately sprang to her feet and rummaged frantically through boxes she'd carefully labeled. I watched her body stiffen. She turned to her husband and announced the silverware was misplaced and had been packed with the hametz dishes.

Her husband, a kind person, offered a joke to break the gruesome tension that had entered the room. It was the worst thing he could have done. My friend burst into tears of exhaustion and shame, sobbing, "I am just not a good enough Jew. I'm not Orthodox enough. I'll never fit in."

I decided it would be a good time to take a walk around the lake and give my friends some privacy to reignite shalom bayyit into the world. While walking, I had a conversation with myself that has continued on and off until this day: What are we doing to ourselves? Is our pursuit of halakhic perfection taking the place of the oppressors that plagued my husband and his family in the former Soviet Union? After all, a Torah observant life should be joyful and balanced with spirituality, connecting us to the source of our purpose and beginnings.

Another story—this one is about a woman who'd lived longer than anyone I'd known. Her name was Sophie. I met Sophie on her 90th birthday. She lived in a community that had once had an active Orthodox presence, but had succumbed to in-fighting and assimilation. Only a few Jewish families remained, and those who had not intermarried had moved to communities with stronger Orthodox lifestyles. Sophie refused to move. She was responsible for the Hevrah Kadisha, the religious burial

society. It became her responsibility to teach the non-religious to bury their dead in the proper manner.

"Just because Jews aren't acting like Jews, doesn't mean they aren't Jews. It's my job to teach them how to do a taharah, a purification. My purpose in life is to teach how to sew *takhrikhim* (shrouds). If the young ones want to buy them from New York, fine. But they still need to learn how to take care of our dead and our cemeteries."

The only services that continued after this century-old community began to dwindle were Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Shabbat services had long since ended. Every Shabbat, I walked to Sophie's home, and we prayed together, silently—each at our own pace. Sophie fixed an elaborate Shabbat lunch and we talked about Israel and Judaism in general. Sometimes, I'd bring a friend along.

One Shabbat a young woman I'd met at a Women's Study Group in Winnipeg called and asked for Shabbat hospitality. I obliged and arranged to take her to Sophie's house to pray and enjoy Shabbat with this elder, who had joyfully become my best friend. My visitor asked many questions about kashruth and whether or not Sophie was "Orthodox." She didn't ask if the old woman was Jewish, just Orthodox. I began to regret inviting this young woman to spend Shabbat with us. I could just imagine her telling Sophie the recipe for mock-liver passed down to her from her great-grandmother who was not really Jewish. Silly, I finally decided. Why worry about Sophie? Now 95, she could take care of herself.

We arrived and were welcomed into Sophie's modest home. Sophie made sure we were comfortable before suggesting we join her while she finished her Shabbat prayers. Our visitor began swaying and shuckling; bowing, sitting, and standing. Our elder hostess sat on a kitchen chair she always placed in her living room for prayer purposes. Whether she stood or sat, the only discernable movement was in her lips. They moved, continuously without uttering a word. I'd become focused on my own religious expression and upon completing the service, I noticed our visitor had closed her siddur and sat motionless as she listened to Sophie complete her prayers by chanting a soft, haunting melody.

"That was beautiful." Our guest complimented. "Where is that niggun from? Is it Hassidic? Is it Mitnaged? It sounds German. Which rebbe is it from?"

Sophie placed her siddur on her table and smiled, pleased with the attention. "It's from Sophie. My great-grandmother told us when we were little girls that if a woman doesn't have her own melody, she's destined to be in exile all her life—God forbid."

We chatted and then found our way to Sophie's kitchen where a meal was about to unfold, layer by layer. It was a particularly dark, winter day and Sophie had forgotten to leave the light in the kitchen on. It was like entering a dark cave.

"Oy. The light." Sophie clasped her hands together. "I forgot the light."

This revelation began a halakhic discussion about turning lights on and off on Shabbat. Sophie's two young guests began to discuss ways we could turn the light on. Is there a neighbor we can call, a non-Jew? We talked on and on. This rabbi said that, and that rabbi said this—it went on until Sophie decided to take the matter into her own hands.

"Girls. You rely too much on rabbis. Here's the solution." Sophie, who was all of four feet eight inches tall and almost as wide, reached behind our visitor and switched on the light. "There. Now, that wasn't too much work—was it? You two talk too much and you both take yourselves too seriously."

Did Sophie violate the laws of Shabbat that afternoon? Yes, she did. A few years later I received a call from my visiting friend. She began, "I was wondering. Is Sophie still alive?"

"No, she left the world well after her 100th year."

"Ah, I thought she'd probably passed away. Surely she is in the highest heaven. Do you know there is not a week that goes by I don't think of the Shabbat I spent with you and her. Remember her story about melody? It has taken me 10 years to find my own melody. I appreciate our teachers, but I've learned to celebrate my own actions and opinions. I am not so afraid to make an error. I have a little girl now. Her middle name is Sophie and I teach her that if she makes a mistake, instead of feeling ashamed or less than Jewish, she should celebrate by singing in a voice only God can hear. If I'd never heard Sophie pray, or if she'd never teased us about our seriousness by switching on that light on Shabbat, I'd never have understood our rules and laws are meant to be borders that form a vessel for spirituality."

Many years have passed since I last saw Sophie. Not so long ago, I realized when I speak of my beloved and respected teachers, they are all rab-

bis—all men. Sometimes, the strongest influences in one's life are so subtle, it's easy to forget that much of who I've become spiritually is because of the inspiration I've received from the gentle and quiet elder women I've known. Each one had a personal understanding of God. Their faith was solid, whole, and beyond words or explanation. They had strong boundaries and mischievous smiles. They were not talkers, but celebrated their private affairs with God, stretching their arms to ensure boundaries were far enough apart that the vessel of spiritual, holy expression could hold all it needed to say. They had such wealthy souls, their hearts and homes were open to anyone regardless of the spiritual level they were on, or followed. The old women who took time with me knew who they were, where they belonged and their purpose in our world became little seeds I carried with me and watched bloom no matter where I ended up. Their secret, private melodies were so obviously from the heart that strangers fortunate enough to overhear them were certain they were listening to remnants as old as our days in the wilderness.

I have built friendships with Jewish sisters who have roots many believe are traceable to David haMelekh. Their faith and knowledge of Judaism and its practices are beyond reproach. Many of my contemporary sisters are recent returnees, or converts to Judaism in search of understanding and balance in their religious expression. Besides being Jewish, all of us have a common thread: the quest to express an individual spirituality within the boundaries of halakha fully, without fear, shame or censorship. Many rabbis teach the story of the Baal Shem Tov where some 200 years ago, the BeSht predicted, in the days just before Mashiah, all things spiritual will be in the hands of women.

I don't know if Mashiah has signed a lease, or invested in Israeli real estate to date, but I feel a tension in the Jewish world. It's a tension like the one that invaded my newly wedded friends' home on Pesah long ago. Some Orthodox Jewish leaders are saying assimilation of American Jews is like a holocaust—worse than the Nazis (God forbid). Some of our most learned, *hessed*-focused and grass-roots rabbis are compromising. In order to keep their communities alive, strong, and financially viable, they sanction eating in restaurants that are not kosher. They dismiss our Shabbat laws as optional and pen sermons that rationalize intermarriage and call our Torah a series of harmless myths. They are angry their conversions are not recognized, and they contend Orthodoxy is marginalizing their ideas

and input. They announce that the most Torah observant among the Jewish people have lost spirituality. They too are ashamed that maybe they are not able to fit within Jewish Orthodox boundaries. They find solace and understanding in the more dominant, Christian culture of America, calling themselves bridge-builders. Instead of modeling Jewish spirituality and ethics, they are eager to blend into the greater society, to be accepted and taken seriously.

Have we become our own oppressors? Have the melodies of Orthodoxy become so haughty and superior that we've created a hierarchy of snobs who can't appreciate new songs? Has it become too difficult for the common Jew to adhere to halakha without losing the deep, inner spirituality and faith our ancestors celebrated and expressed so naturally?

I'm a simple, humble Jewish woman. I don't pretend to understand the complicated factions that are rising within and beyond Orthodox Judaism. I worry that our communities are assimilating and our community leaders often times are more interested in baseball scores than studying Torah or finding deeper understanding of our beautiful religion and spiritual path. I cry because we are learning to fear and mistrust each other instead of teaching strength, tolerance, and compassion to the non-Jewish world. I am concerned that the most learned among us are forgetting how to balance strength with compassion. Their creative spirits have been overshadowed by an interpretation of laws and rules that offer such a narrow space, there is little room to celebrate shalom veShalvah in our communities, let alone the world. It is tragic that many of us have lost our taste for creating haunting, beautiful melodies that are new, yet feel old, because we fear that sharing our souls with our own people may prove we don't really belong, or were never wanted in the first place.

I am saddened that many traditional Jews spend so much effort making what they perceive as gray into black or white; they have forgotten the world is actually in color. It is equally worrisome our more liberal, grassroots community leaders have deep souls, yet do not think it worthy to tame and groom their spiritual selves with strong boundaries and observance that connect us to our past, eventually influencing our future and current state of spiritual health.

But, I know my limits. Not long ago, I admitted to myself that it is easier to leave the intellectual parsing and dissection of complex Jewish religious dogma versus spirituality to my teachers, more learned brothers and

sisters, or better yet, to haShem. I've become a victim of my own oppression and am afraid my opinion will not only be unwanted in Orthodox circles, but someone will ask me to leave, suggesting I never belonged in the first place. I have also learned that liberal Jewish communities are just as likely to exclude those with an opinion that differs from the majority.

Last Shavuoth I could not stop thinking of Mama, Sophie, and all the elders who have helped shape my soul. I decided I am no longer a child with ears and no voice. I have learned from others and have perfected my practice of Judaism while finding my spiritual center. The elders I cherished over the years have passed on, leaving behind pieces of their souls and an abundant inheritance. Over the years, Orthodox rabbis and teachers have taught me boundaries. They've provided a map that guides me even in the driest, flattest desert. In between these boundaries are memories of Mama blessing the air with Shabbat, teaching me simplicity and the importance of sincere expression of spirituality within our traditions. The sound of Sophie's melody fills this space as well. I sit shoulder to shoulder with women my age who are just one step away from assuming the responsibility of becoming community elders themselves. They've found their spiritual voice and pray to God beneath their noses when no one is the wiser.

In traditional Judaism, our Rebbetzins often appear silent. One must listen closely to hear their voices. They sing strong melodies with silent words. Many have such vast roots it is as though they have no beginning or end. Others come from secular homes, families who have intermarried or have conversions in their histories. But, all sing new songs that may as well be from old voices. They sing of compliance, borders, and rules. They cover their hair and tell stories no one has heard before, because these stories come from their paths and are filled with their spirituality. They have discovered that our Torah is the source of our being. They seek out each other and the men relax, grow quiet in their presence and have more time to pray and strengthen their boundaries as Jews. These holy women exhale belonging while nurturing and encouraging everyone, no matter what sound another person's prayer makes.

These holy Rebbetzins have learned not to operate from anger. They teach that where there is anger, there is no possibility of sustaining a relationship or communication. They teach about the great sin; a sin that can never be excused. What action, speech, or behavior among Jews could be

so unforgivable? They answer with a softness one cannot ignore: When human beings offers you their special gift, something only they can see or teach the world, and we refuse to listen to their contribution and celebrate their presence, there is no way this kind of arrogance can be forgiven. It is bad enough for relationships between Jews and the non-Jewish world to experience this kind of impasse—but for such sadness to exist between Jews is enough to break the heart of the whole world.

Perhaps our collective concern should not be the assimilation of Jewish culture as our great rabbis and thinkers suggest. It might be as important to worry about our individual and collective character traits. If you are standing in the place where you belong, and a family shows up on Shabbat by car because they live too far to walk, why not welcome them? Maybe next year they will buy a home in the neighborhood. If a member of the community is seen buying shrimp at Sam's Club—assume it is a special gift for their non-Jewish neighbor. Isn't it a mitzvah to always assume and think the best of each other? If as an individual, you keep your heart open; your community will reflect this. Kind, sweet communities attract special people-Jew and non-Jew alike. Conversely, if you draw your boundaries, or speak out about a subject in your "kind and sweet community" and find you are a minority, don't let fear or anger consume or affect you negatively—move on. Keep speaking, keep listening and stay balanced with a little compassion, a little kindness and a lot of strength. It's a privilege to sing an old melody, but the world and haShem are hungry for new songs that have the exact same notes that old voices have already sung.

My great grandmother taught, there are two ways to do things—the right way and the wrong way. The wrong way is telling everyone how to do it the right way. Every Jew is connected to the other—be they Orthodox or Reform; ger, frum or *ba'al teshuvah*; Sephardic or Ashkenazic. Each Jew has a special song, a special melody—and the whole world enjoys a good tune—one that reflects the past, present, and future. We should fix our ears and eyes to be able to hear, see, and share our own holiness in the world we live in. We should be blessed with the knowledge to know where our boundaries begin and end, and when we take a big breath we should not fear our own healthy expansion.

I was visiting a synagogue earlier this year and a heavy-set woman sitting next to me placed her hands in her lap, turned her palms upward and began to sob. Little tears ran down a face that suggested the woman had

aged beyond her years. She wept because she had something to say; she prayed because she believed God was lonely for her voice. She came to the synagogue and sat in the women's section because that is where she belonged. An affinity grew between us in the short time we sat together. It was a beautiful moment of belonging and loneliness, and instead of a transient moment one might attribute to chance, something magical made us look at each other as though we were related. The stranger dropped her gaze to the floor and spoke, "Sorry, my prayers sound like little tears. My grandmother taught me to talk to God with tears. I usually stay home so as not to upset anyone."

I answered, "No problem. God and the world need every tear and every Jew. Did you ever hear the story that one day all things spiritual will be in the hands of women?"

The holy stranger laughed. "I'm just a convert. My husband and I are on vacation. He thinks I'm too emotional. I need to learn more rules. Maybe I'll fit in with time."

And with that parting comment, she stood and disappeared into the crowd. If it had not been Shabbat, I'd have found a pen, written her name down and never lost track of her. This special soul had the capacity to bless the whole world with strong vessels and demand we fill ourselves with tears of sason veSimha. These are the kind of people whose melodies sound old, but are really as new as the morning sun. May our people be blessed to find their special melodies and may we never become so afraid of each other that we fail to sing and share our special songs.

The End of Prophecy: Malachi's Position in the Spiritual Development of Israel

Hayyim Angel

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Introduction

God communicated to people through prophecy for nearly the entire biblical period, from Adam until Malachi. According to a prevalent Jewish tradition, prophecy ceased with Malachi, not to be renewed until the messianic age. In this article, we will consider a few traditional explanations of why prophecy ceased and some spiritual implications for Judaism over the ensuing 2,500 years and counting.

Overview of Malachi

Unlike Haggai and Zechariah, whose prophecies pulsated with messianic potential, Malachi lived a generation or two later—a generation in which that messianic potential appears to have been lost. At that time, the people's political and economic suffering contributed to:

- their feelings of rejection by God (1:2–5),
- corruption of the priesthood (1:6–2:9),
- rampant intermarriage (2:10–16), and
- laxity in tithing (3:8–12).

God-fearing people were losing heart as well. Why remain righteous? Their sinful compatriots were successful, while God-fearing people suffered (2:17; 3:13–21)! All Malachi could answer was that for now, the mere fact of Israel's continued existence proved that God still loved them (1:2–5). Only in some unspecified future would God bring complete justice (3:13–24).

According to a prevalent Jewish tradition, Malachi was the last prophet (see, for example, Tosefta *Sotah* 13:3; *Yoma* 9b; *Sanhedrin* 11a). That his book is positioned last in the Twelve Prophets does not prove he was the last prophet, since the book is not arranged in chronological order. However, it seems from textual evidence that he likely was the last of the Twelve. Radak and Abarbanel observe that unlike Haggai and Zechariah, Malachi does not mention the Temple construction; it was in use already. Malachi also condemns intermarriage (Mal. 2:10–16), a shared concern of Ezra and Nehemiah (458–432 B.C.E., see Ezra 9–10; Neh. 13:23–28). The widespread laxity in tithing (Mal. 3:8–12) also likely dates to Nehemiah's time (Neh. 10:35–40; 12:44; 13:5, 10–12).

Even if Malachi were the last of the biblical prophets, there is no statement at the end of his book or anywhere else in the Bible stating categorically that prophecy had ceased. For example, Nehemiah battled false prophets (Neh. 6:5–7, 11–13) but did not negate the existence of prophecy in principle.

Nevertheless, the tradition that Malachi was the last prophet opened the interpretive possibility that Malachi was *conscious* of the impending end of prophecy.

> A pronouncement (*massa*): The word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi (Mal. 1:1).

Most commentators understand the book's opening word *massa* as another generic term for "prophecy." However, Abarbanel notes that the term could also mean "burden." One Midrash similarly understands *massa* in this vein:

> [Prophecy] is expressed by ten designations. . . . And which is the severest form? . . . The Rabbis said: Burden (*massa*), as it says, As a heavy burden (Ps. 138:5). (Gen. Rabbah 44:6)

Within this interpretation, it is possible that Malachi viewed his mission with additional weight, conscious of his being the last of the prophets.

Similarly, several interpreters understand the book's closing verses as a self-conscious expression that prophecy was about to end:

> Be mindful of the Teaching of My servant Moses, whom I charged at Horeb with laws and rules for all Israel. Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the Lord. He shall reconcile parents with children and children with their parents, so that, when I come, I do not strike the whole land with utter destruction. (Mal. 3:22–24)

Kara (on 3:22), Ibn Ezra (on 1:1), Abarbanel (on 1:1), and Malbim (on 3:22) explain that Malachi was aware that prophecy would stop with him. The word of God would henceforth be available only through the written word of the Bible. Malbim links the exhortation to observe the Torah to the prediction of Elijah's coming. With the end of prophecy, the Torah would sustain the people of Israel until the messianic era, at which point prophecy will resume.

Why Prophecy Stopped

We now turn to three leading trends in traditional Jewish thought as to why prophecy ceased: sin, the destruction of the Temple, or a metaphysical spiritual transition.

Sin

Some sources suggest that the loss of prophecy was punishment for sin. Over 200 years before Malachi, the prophet Amos predicted the cessation of prophecy:

> A time is coming—declares my Lord God—when I will send a famine upon the land: not a hunger for bread or a thirst for water, but for hearing the words of the Lord. Men shall wander from sea to sea and from north to east to seek the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it. (Amos 8:11–12)

Avot D'Rabbi Nathan B:47 explains that prophecy ceased as a consequence of people mocking the prophets.

Radak (on Hag. 2:5) suggests more generally that lack of fidelity to the Torah resulted in the loss of prophecy. A Midrash (*Pesikta Rabbati* 35) states that many Jews failed to return to Israel after Cyrus gave them permission, and therefore prophecy ceased. Commenting on *Yoma* 9b, which blames the lack of redemption in the Second Temple period on the fact that many Jews did not return, Maharsha similarly states that prophecy ceased as punishment for the non-return from exile.

Destruction of the Temple

Ezekiel chapters 8–10 describe a vision wherein God shows the prophet the rampant idolatry in Jerusalem. God's Presence abandons the Temple and goes into exile. Radak (on Ezek. 9:3) explains that the absence of God's Presence ultimately contributed to the disappearance of prophecy.

Although Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi prophesied after the destruction of the First Temple, a number of sources consider the destruction to have dealt a fatal blow to prophecy.

> In five things the first Sanctuary differed from the second: in the ark, the ark-cover, the Cherubim, the fire, the Shekhinah, the Holy Spirit [of Prophecy], and the Urim ve-Thummim [the Oracle Plate]. (*Yoma* 21b)
>
> As Benjamin is the last tribe, so Jeremiah is the last prophet. But did not Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi prophesy after him? R. Lazar says: they had limited prophecy. R. Samuel b. Nahman says: [Jeremiah's] prophecy already was given to Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. (*Pesikta D'Rav Kahana* 13)

The last prophets were diminished or, alternatively, were mere transmitters of Jeremiah's message. Malbim (on Zech. 1:5–6) presents a more benign form of this approach:

> I will not send new prophets, since there is no longer any need for prophets as you have seen all the prophecies of doom fulfilled against you . . . there is no longer any need for prophecy since you already understand God's hand in history.

According to Malbim, there no longer was any need for prophecy since the message had already been given through earlier prophets.

Metaphysical Transition

Seder Olam Rabbah 30 states that prophecy ceased in the time of Alexander the Great. Based on the rabbinic chronology, the Greek Empire began immediately following the end of the biblical period, so

this time frame would synchronize with Malachi. Following this chronological assumption, R. Zadok HaKohen of Lublin observed that a metaphysical transition to an age of reason occurred in Israel and in Greece at the same time:

> The proliferation of idolatry and sorcery in the gentile world paralleled divine revelation and prophecy in Israel. When prophecy ceased and the era of the Oral Law commenced, there appeared Greek Philosophy, which is to say, mortal wisdom. (*Resisei Laylah*, 81b, Bezalel Naor translation)

This idea meshes with a talmudic statement that at the beginning of the Second Temple period, the temptation for idolatry ceased being the force it had been during the First Temple period (*Yoma* 69b). R. Yehudah HeHasid argued that once the urge for idolatry vanished there no longer existed the need for prophecy to counterbalance magic (*Sefer Hasidim*, Wistenetzky ed., p. 544; cf. R. Elijah of Vilna, commentary on *Seder Olam Rabbah* 30; R. Zadok, *Divrei Soferim*, 21b).

Similarly, a certain spiritual intensity was lost. Once the urge to idolatry had declined, prophetic revelation would have too much power if left unchecked. To preserve free will, prophecy had to cease as well (R. Eliyahu Dessler, *Mikhtav me-Eliyahu* III, pp. 277–278).

Religious Implications

According to the sin approach, the deprivation of the supreme gift of prophecy was a devastating punishment that has diminished the connection between God and humanity for the past 2,500 years since Malachi. Within the destruction of the Temple approach, the disappearance of prophecy was a necessary corollary of that cataclysmic event.

Although the loss of prophecy was a spiritual catastrophe, there still are some spiritual benefits to its suspension particularly within the approach that there was a divinely ordained metaphysical shift from prophecy-idolatry to human reason. In 1985, Professor Yaakov Elman published two articles analyzing the position of R. Zadok HaKohen of Lublin in reference to the transition from the age of prophecy to the age of Oral Law. According to R. Zadok, the end of prophecy facilitated a flourishing of the development of the Oral Law, a step impossible as long as people could turn to the prophets for absolute religious guidance and knowledge of God's Will. Sages needed to interpret texts and traditions to

arrive at rulings, enabling them to develop axioms that could keep the eternal Torah relevant as society changed.

Although the decline of revelation distanced people from ascertaining God's Will, it simultaneously enabled mature human participation in the mutual covenant between God and humanity. This religious struggle is captured poignantly by the talmudic passage:

> And they stood under the mount: R. Abdimi b. Hama b. Hasa said: This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, and said to them, 'If you accept the Torah, it is well; if not, there shall be your burial.' R. Aha b. Jacob observed: This furnishes a strong protest against the Torah. Said Rava, Yet even so, they reaccepted it in the days of Ahasuerus, for it is written, [the Jews] confirmed, and took upon them [etc.]: [i.e.,] they confirmed what they had accepted long before. (*Shabbat* 88)

Rather than explaining R. Aha's question away, Rava understood that revelation in fact crippled an aspect of free will. He proposed Purim as the antidote, since that represents the age when revelation ceased.

Although prophecy was the ideal state—and we pray for its return—its absence enables the flourishing of human reason, as we no longer have access to absolute divine knowledge. We must take initiative in our relationship with God or else the relationship suffers. R. Zadok applied this human endeavor to the realm of Torah study. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik understood prayer as replacing prophecy, precisely with the imperative of our responsibility to keep the lines of communication between God and humanity open:

> In short, prayer and prophecy are two synonymous designations of the covenantal God-man colloquy. Indeed, the prayer community was born the very instant the prophetic community expired and, when it did come into the spiritual world of the Jew of old, it did not supersede the prophetic community but rather perpetuated it. . . . If God had stopped calling man, they urged, let man call God. (*The Lonely Man of Faith* [New York: Doubleday, 1992], pp. 57–58)

Institutionalizing prayer rescued intimacy with God by creating a new framework for this sacred dialogue.

Although prophecy disappeared some 2,500 years ago, the underlying spiritual struggle continues to be manifest in contemporary society. Many people long for absolute knowledge of God's Will. Consequently, there

exists a compelling pull toward holy men (*rebbes*, kabbalists) or the over-extension of a *da'at Torah* concept that accords near-infallibility to Torah scholars. Though that appeal may be understandable, it must be remembered that (a) these individuals are not prophets and therefore do not have the certain divine knowledge that many accord to them; and (b) in an age lacking prophecy we have a far greater responsibility to learn Torah and pray, and to take that spiritual energy to infuse every aspect of our lives with sanctity. This requires a healthy dose of human reason and effort, coupled with an ongoing consultation with spiritual guides who can help us grow.

For further study, see:

- Hayyim Angel, "The First Modern-Day Rabbi: A Midrashic Reading of Ezra," in *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2009), pp. 217–226.
- Hayyim Angel, "The Theological Significance of the *Urim VeThummim*," in *Through an Opaque Lens* (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), pp. 195–214.
- Gerald Blidstein, "In the Shadow of the Mountain: Consent and Coercion at Sinai," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 4:1 (1992), pp. 41–53.
- Yaakov Elman, "R. Zadok HaKohen on the History of Halakha," *Tradition* 21:4 (Fall 1985), pp. 1–26.
- Yaakov Elman, "Reb Zadok HaKohen of Lublin on Prophecy in the Halakhic Process," in *Jewish Law Association Studies I: Touro Conference Volume*, ed. B. S. Jackson (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), pp. 1–16.
- Lawrence Kaplan, "*Daas Torah*: A Modern Conception of Rabbinic Authority," in *Rabbinic Authority and Personal Autonomy*, ed. Moshe Sokol (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1992), pp. 1–60.
- Bezalel Naor, *Lights of Prophecy* (New York: Union of Orthodox Congregations, 1990).

Charisma: A Note on the Dangerous Outer Boundary of Spirituality

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For the past several years, I have contributed postings to a number of websites on the subject of the dangerously charismatic teacher in schools. The material was based on my book on Jewish school management that was published at the beginning of 2010. The section on the charismatic teacher was entitled "The Pied Piper."[1]

Tragically, between the time that the section was originally written (in 2007) and the time the book was published, a former Jewish Studies teacher at our school was arrested on very serious charges of sexual molestation and assault. His alleged offenses were committed in Israel. Following his arrest, an investigation in Toronto unearthed many issues of concern. He had exemplified many of the good and many of the bad characteristics of the charismatic teacher, especially one active in the religious life of the school. While in Toronto (as a *shaliah*) he had been immensely popular; had been idolized by students and by some staff; was a talented musician, much in demand locally as a singer at weddings and other community celebrations; and was also used by NCSY as a youth leader and

resource. Many former students testified to the profound religious influence he had on their lives. Others—as it emerged—had far darker, tragic, and damaging memories.

The whole episode and its aftermath caused me many hours of reflection, and made me reconsider fundamentally many other encounters throughout my life with charismatic rabbis and teachers—in both personal and professional capacities. I concluded that although many good teachers and rabbis have elements of charisma in their personalities and style, the overtly charismatic personality almost always masks far more sinister agendas, and must be treated and managed with the utmost caution. The tipping point is where *the personality of the teacher/rabbi is more important than the content of his message or teaching*. Sadly, most readers of this article will be familiar with examples from within our own community, let alone examples from other educational and religious communities.

Where, though, are the boundaries? At what point does charisma become dangerous? In a community (and a wider world) where an elusive quality called "spirituality" is constantly sought as representing the "authentic" in the religious quest, how can the individual, or the community, or the responsible leader, distinguish the teacher with integrity from the predator?

It can be difficult; but there are some obvious danger signs. They may be present in different combinations, and seem to have some degree of overlap with recognized patterns of cult behavior, although they are rarely so blatant. They may include, but are not limited to:

- The personality of the rabbi/teacher becomes the most important part of his presence, rather than the content of what he is teaching. When people go to a *shiur*, or a workshop, or a lesson, to see what "X" is doing or saying—rather than what "X" is teaching—a personality cult is in the making. The same applies when their conversation is about X's latest action, or remark, or appearance—rather than X's "Torah." A truly spiritual personality, in a Jewish context, is concerned to bring people to God, not to himself (more rarely—herself).

- Extreme emotional or pseudo-intellectual manipulations are being used to demonstrate that X, and only X, has "the answer." A spiritually and intellectually honest teacher will rarely deal in absolutes.

- The teachings and views of others—particularly rivals for the charismatic teacher's popularity—are openly disparaged or undermined.

- In an institutional or community setting, the followers of the charismatic rabbi/teacher become a group within a group. They do not mix with others, and see themselves as an elite.

- Individuals or small groups regard themselves as favored protégés of the teacher. When they no longer uncritically accept the teacher's philosophy or Torah, they are quickly dropped; disillusion—often accompanied by feelings of betrayal—sets in.

- Counseling, advice and guidance are being given on deeply personal, perhaps intimate matters, far beyond the training and competence of the rabbi/teacher. The personalities we are describing will often invite such disclosures.

There is one clear sign that should immediately raise red flags:

- The rabbi/teacher teaches, or shows by behavior, that he or she is exempt from the rules that apply to others. Mesmerized followers accept that "it"—whatever "it" is—is permissible or not problematic because the rabbi/teacher has special reasons, or a special argument, or special circumstances, or special authority, to justify the behavior. Often, there is an accompanying condition:

  Don't tell anyone about this, because no one else can understand.

  This is most obvious in a sexual context, but any and every such instance is suspect. Are meetings and encounters taking place at times, places, and in circumstances that violate accepted norms and practices? Are improper communications passed between individuals? Are money, gifts, favors, special treatment being exchanged?

The sad list goes on. Unfortunately, in our community context, too many people who should know better willfully ignore such danger signs, arguing that the ends justify the means. The word *"kiruv"* frequently figures in such discussions. It takes a great deal of courage, and a great deal of conviction, to stand up against this type of activity.

We live in a time of extremes. Some of the religious leaders of our age have embarked on a battle against the world we live in. The argument that to be a loyal Jew (a "Torah Jew") involves rejection of science and culture has to involve an emotional, not an intellectual position, and *ipso facto* it has to involve rejection—usually vehement rejection—of others. Parallel or analogous political positions and beliefs will generate similar behaviors. They all encourage extreme personalities. Tolerating, let alone encouraging, extreme personalities makes the group vulnerable to unhealthy influence and behavior.

We need charisma—it has an honorable history in leadership, certainly including models of Jewish leadership—but we need it to be combined with uncompromising, uncompromised, and comprehensive integrity. That integrity has to be religious, emotional, behavioral, and intellectual. But it is very difficult to be a charismatic moderate!

NOTES

1. The character of the Pied Piper remains a seductive and sinister figure in folklore. According to legend, in 1284 130 children mysteriously disappeared from the medieval German city of Hamelin (Hameln). A man dressed in colorful ("pied") clothing, and playing a pipe mesmerized the city's children with his music. Bewitched, and entirely under his control, they blindly followed him out of the city to an unknown destination, and were never seen again. (Also by playing his pipe, he had lured the rats that plagued the city to their deaths by drowning in the local river. The town council refused to pay him for his services. In an act of revenge, he worked his magic on the children.) The poet Robert Browning (1812–1889) immortalized the story in verse (*The Pied Piper of Hamelin*).

The Role of Kabbalah in Revitalizing Modern Orthodoxy

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The term "Modern Orthodoxy" is a broad label applied to a wide spectrum of religious observance and a variety of philosophical stances. Yet despite this inclusivity, Modern Orthodoxy currently finds itself at a crossroads in which its borders and central message are being reconsidered and redefined. Leaders are reexamining the boundaries of what is deemed permissible by halakha in realms such as conversion, kashruth, and rabbinic ordination. Furthermore, both clergy and laypeople alike are looking for innovative ways to re-imagine Modern Orthodoxy from the inside through new approaches to prayer and spirituality, while at the same time maintaining their scholarly commitment. My purpose in writing this article is relatively simple: I hope to spark an ongoing conversation that focuses upon the question of how Jewish mysticism may aid in revitalizing Modern Orthodoxy. Or, to reframe the question in terms of a hypothesis: Although facets of the classical Jewish philosophical tradition have already been chosen as a banner for the re-invigoration of contemporary Orthodoxy, I intend to demonstrate that our kabbalistic and mystical literature will be an equally rich source for this process of intellectual and spiritual rebirth.

It cannot easily be denied that an overwhelming number of the great Jewish spiritual leaders of the twentieth century have used mystical thought in their quest to make religious life meaningful for a modern Jewish community. Among these are influential traditional thinkers such as Abraham Isaac Kook, Hillel Zeitlin, and Menachem Mendel Schneerson, as well as Shlomo Carlebach, Michael Fishbane, and Abraham Joshua Heschel. The broad list includes many leaders outside of the Orthodox world as well, for other Jewish movements have also embraced mystical ideas as a compelling and additive component of modern religious thought. More liberal thinkers such as Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Arthur Green have sought to bring the study of mysticism to the front of a vibrant contemporary Jewish theology. Over the past hundred years leaders across nearly all sectors of modern Jewish life have promoted Kabbalah to the foreground as a potent catalyst for spiritual renewal.

Despite this increase in popularity, Kabbalah has a somewhat besmirched and Janus-faced reputation. On one hand, many contend even now that Kabbalah is intellectually flaccid, conceptually irresponsible, and even quite dangerous to conventional notions of God and Torah. Kabbalah's prominent position is undoubtedly in some part due to an approach favored by some contemporary institutions that warp the tradition by de-contextualizing its teachings and projecting them through a business model using post-modern philosophy. These facile portrayals of mysticism should not be conflated with the authentic Kabbalah as taught by the traditional leaders mentioned above.

There is no reason to assume that immersion in Kabbalah necessarily makes one more likely drift into antinomianism and heresy. While it is true that some Jewish mystics such as the infamous Shabbatai Tzvi have indeed done so, a great number of our outstanding talmudists and halakhic commentators—from Ramban to the Vilna Gaon—were undeniably steeped in the language of Kabbalah as well. Surely for them mysticism and law were not two competitive modes of thought, with the latter precipitously seeking to mitigate the anarchical hazards of the former. In their eyes halakha and Kabbalah were fused in an organic and complementary system that simultaneously ensures ritual observance while promoting spiritual engagement. Indeed, mystical texts often display a strong legal conservatism, and their authors are so preoccupied with cultivating inner piety by providing halakha with infinitely deeper shades of meaning.

Kabbalah is only truly dangerous when heedlessly removed from the framework of tradition.

On the other hand, Jewish mysticism is sometimes criticized for being xenophobic, or esoteric to the point of obscurity. However, nuanced and careful readings of mystical texts will prove that much of Kabbalah's wisdom is neither arcane nor antiquated, but must simply be framed in such a way that allows it to be a relevant resource for contemporary Jewish thought. Another often-levied charge against the study of mysticism is that although Kabbalah is true and authentic (at least in some way), we are a generation of such low stature that we lack the spiritual fortitude, and even the permission, to involve ourselves with its ideas. I believe that we who straddle the worlds of modernity and tradition cannot afford to maintain this position, for it will totally preclude drawing religious inspiration from any part of our mystical tradition. In sum, regardless of the accusations of its detractors, the study of Kabbalah may indeed be a potent force in the revitalization of Modern Orthodoxy, for it will only foster rigorous intellectual engagement, further strengthen traditional halakhic commitment, and profoundly broaden our own religious experience.

The Mandate for Intellectual Creativity

Modern Orthodoxy historically has prided itself on demanding a relatively high level of intellectual engagement of its adherents. In order to retain the vibrancy of this tradition, we must continue to originate new works of scholarship that are both spiritually meaningful and intellectually compelling. If this creative flexibility and openness is not sustained, even Modern Orthodoxy will not remain immune from lapsing into blind reliance upon routinized dogma. An ossified and formulaic ideology will not captivate the minds and hearts of the next generation, nor will it strengthen their resolve to commit themselves to a system of life founded in observance of halakha and mitzvoth while surrounded by a society that does not require this of them *a priori*. We must not only reiterate the wisdom of the sages who came before us, but continuously seek new ways to refine and rearticulate our intellectual heritage in a manner that speaks to our own contemporary experience.

Kabbalistic literature demonstrates a bold interpretive approach that is intrinsically creative. The mystical exegete has license to break open

scriptural texts and recombine them in such a way that they reveal new religious messages, a method very much akin to that of the ancient *ba'alei haMidrash*. Verses are scrutinized on a microcosmic level for the tiniest inconsistency or ambiguity, which the kabbalist then uses to elucidate a point regarding a spiritual truth that may be either cosmic or personal. The paradigm of scriptural interpretation qua dramatic act of innovation is repeatedly exemplified in *Sefer haZohar*, the foundational text of Jewish mysticism. As the chronicle unfolds, R. Shimon bar Yohai and his compatriots interpret verse after verse in the manner mentioned above, and through their homilies it becomes clear that they believe all existence is sustained through the efforts of the *talmidei hakhamim* who ceaselessly engage in Torah study. However, in order to re-infuse the world with vitality, their learning cannot be simple repetition or rote memorization of pre-existing texts or concepts. Scholars must rather constantly offer fresh and dynamic interpretations of biblical passages. The Zohar even expresses creative engagement with Torah as the ultimate act of *imitatio dei*: God's creation of the world through speech is mirrored by a scholar's innovative exegesis of the words of the divine text.[1]

The early Hassidic masters were also keenly attuned to this need for constant and creative reengagement with the traditional corpus. Their teachings are vibrant and daring, and perhaps even more importantly, their interpretive process itself often demonstrates the supple flexibility with which they treat our textual canon. Early Hassidic works generally present multiple, and at times even contradictory, explanations for the same verse, each one of them targeted to articulate a unique spiritual point. In this exegetical method, and in the teachings generated through it, the overarching rule is clear: There exists an unending obligation for individuals to constantly plumb the depths of Torah and bring out ideas that have hitherto remained unexpressed, and that address the particular needs of that generation. We shall find this mandate for interpretive innovation clearly elucidated in the following passage from *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*, an important collection of homilies attributed to the R. Moshe Haim Ephraim of Sudilkov (d. 1800):[2]

> "This is the book of the descendents of man."[3] Let us begin with what I have said about the verse "Moses diligently inquired about the goat of the sin-offering."[4] There is a tradition that "diligently inquired" (*darosh darash*) is the halfway point in the words of the Torah,[5] but the significance of this is not yet clear.

> In answer we can say that the Written Torah and the Oral Torah are one, as is known. They are totally indivisible from each other, for one cannot exist without the other. This means that the Written Torah reveals its hidden mysteries through the Oral Torah; the Written Torah without the Oral Torah is incomplete. It was only half of a book until the Sages came and expounded (*darshu*) the Torah and revealed things that had previously been sealed. At times they even uprooted something in the Torah, as in the case of lashes, where the Torah assigns the number forty but the Sages subtracted one.[6] All of this was made possible because of their divine inspiration, which gave them the ability [to interpret it in this manner]. The completion of the Written Torah depends entirely on the Oral Torah. Therefore one who denies that the principle *kal veHomer* is from the Torah, or disagrees with a statement of the Sages is like one who denies the Torah of Moses itself.[7] All depends on the interpretations (*derashot*) of the Sages, and they are the essence of the completion of the Torah . . .
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> . . . and so it must be in every age that the interpreters complete the Torah, for the Torah is expounded in each generation corresponding to the needs of that particular time, according to the root of the soul of that generation. The Blessed One will enlighten the eyes of the sages of the generation with His holy Torah, and one who denies this is also likened to one who repudiates the Torah.

The nature of the "descendents" mentioned in the original verse, although not explicitly identified in this passage, is unmistakable: they are the novel reinterpretations brought forth in each generation. It is our obligation to complete the Torah anew in every age by means of our creative engagement with the text, and the R. Moshe Haim Ephraim demands that the sages of each and every age make the biblical text eternally relevant through their innovative interpretations. In other words, they must offer some sort of new spiritual message that speaks to each generation beyond the strictures of its literal interpretation. This creativity is the lasting intellectual progeny of mankind, which complements and even completes the Divine component of our inherited wisdom.

As if to preempt the assumption that we share the same unlimited freedom as the early Sages, he cautions us against this by condemning any and all dissent from their rulings. Creative interpretations of Torah are necessary, but they do have limits. However, he levies this warning against the other extreme as well, saying that one who challenges the need for reinterpretation and the authority of each new generation is equally guilty of denying the validity of Torah itself. It is clear that a balance must be

struck between these poles—but if we becomes paralyzed with fear and refuse to reinterpret the Torah, our reticence will prevent us from fulfilling what R. Moshe Haim Ephraim argues is among the central precepts of our faith.

Recognizing this approach to interpretation will be essential for Modern Orthodoxy in the years to come, since it will allow us to respond with great flexibility to the challenges of modernity, searching within our canon for ways to rearticulate its core ideas in a manner both intelligible and relevant to our lives. Furthermore, this passage does not suggest that we simply have the freedom to reexamine if, and only if, the spirit so moves us. Rather, it spells out an unceasing obligation that *demands* that we maximize our creative potential by constantly reinterpreting the Torah in a manner that is specifically applicable to our day.

The Question of Gender

It is clear that the question of gender roles will remain a central issue for Modern Orthodoxy in the coming decades. The recent controversies over new possibilities in female religious leadership only confirm this fact. Noting this, I submit that the literature of our mystical tradition has much wisdom to bring to the discussion as well. There are important trends in Kabbalah that present a finely balanced approach to the relationship between male and female, in both cosmic/symbolic and personal/physical terms. This fact should not be overshadowed by other mystical elements that display pre-modern conceptions of gender bordering on what we might today call misogyny, for such a pejorative reading would be obtusely anachronistic. Furthermore, these same ideas are found within core rabbinic and halakhic literature as well, and they must equally be dealt with by any member of Modern Orthodoxy committed to our textual canon. In the following example, taken from the Hassidic classic *Avodat Yisrael* by the Maggid of Kozhnitz (d. 1814), we shall see that mystical texts may indeed have salient voice in the reexamining of gender roles as Modern Orthodoxy continues to evolve:[8]

> There are times when a woman has no desire to adorn herself and unite with her beloved. And yet, because of her profound understanding of her husband and her deep longing to bring him happiness, she dresses herself up and smiles at him, to the extent that it seems to him as if she is beckon-

> ing. Her true intention in this is not for herself, but rather to gladden the heart of her husband.
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> In these moments she feels awful and upset on account of some external difficulties or frustrating events. If only her husband understood the entirety of what lies within her heart and the greatness of the love hidden within her bosom, demonstrated in concealing her anguish and resolving to bring happiness to her husband. Certainly because of this, his love for her will be increased a thousand times! If it were within his power to put all to right and sweep away her suffering and the worries of her soul, in an instant her husband would do all that he could.
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> The same dynamic holds true with *Keneset Yisrael* and her Beloved. If she suffers for any reason, or is afflicted by some evil decree, she nonetheless gathers her strength and adorns herself, doing what her Husband asks of her by rejoicing with him on Shabbat and holidays, and during the time of prayer or the performance of a mitzvah. When the blessed Creator, who knows and understands all thoughts, sees that she has turned aside from the sorrows of her heart, His love burns within Him like the pillars of fire. He understands the embitterment of her soul, and is infinitely capable of triumphing over and subduing all of her enemies. This is the meaning of: "Who is a proper woman? The one [who] does the will of her husband!"[9] In other words, she brings the will of her Husband into reality.

This passage rearticulates familiar categories of male and female in a tremendously innovative way, suggesting a conception of gender in which the relationship between the two is nuanced, balanced, and in many ways equal. While there are other excurses within kabbalistic literature that invert or challenge notions of gender more fundamentally, I have nevertheless selected this text precisely because it does invoke traditional imagery to convey a spiritual message of both personal and national relevance. It will be impossible for Modern Orthodoxy to fully shed the gender distinctions codified by our rabbinic heritage, and although sufficient reinterpretation will allow women an increasingly active role in public religious life, completely eradicating the differences between male and female would run contrary to how Modern Orthodoxy understands its connection to tradition. This excerpt thus demonstrates a way in which traditional allegories may be reread in such a way that they speak to our present generation.

The passage is interesting because of its implicit approach to reading rabbinic texts as well as its explicit content. The Maggid of Kozhnitz has presented us with a brilliant reinterpretation of a dictum that seems to

praise women for pure obedience. He universalizes and expands the phrase away from its literal meaning by invoking the well-known allegory of man and wife as stand-in for the relationship between God and Israel, thereby reading the original statement against the grain. The power dynamic between male and female has still not been completely leveled, since it is the husband alone who seems capable of easing the sorrows of his wife. However, the radical core of the Maggid's teaching only becomes truly clear from the model relationship in the final lines: through her reflexive ability to overcome her own grief and then take active steps to reconnect to her beloved, "a female" (which after the metaphor cannot refer only to physical woman) is able to spark her "husband" (which must also be understood non-literally) into realizing his potential love and compassion. The reader is left with the conclusion that any relationship, both *bein adam leHaveiro* and *bein adam laMakom,* of real depth and lasting connection demands of one an extraordinarily high degree of selflessness.

It is not impossible to view even the Maggid's reading of the text as another negatively charged expression of passive power, in which the female is forced by her lack of agency to use coercion in order to accomplish her desires. Yet had he wished to convey this, the author would simply have stayed much closer to the original midrashic statement. I would argue that the thrust of the Maggid's message, as well his innovative exegetical maneuver, represent a manner of forging a new conception of gender in which old categories are retained, but the nature of the dynamic between the two has been creatively updated and entirely reframed.

The Wisdom of Hakhamei Sepharad

Revisiting the kabbalistic tradition as a source for contemporary spiritual renewal will also help to broaden the intellectual spectrum of Modern Orthodoxy by including and reintroducing forgotten works of Sephardic sages. Books of non-Ashkenazic provenance do enjoy a higher status within Modern Orthodox circles than they do in the Hareidi world, which to a large degree has continued the tradition of Eastern European *yeshivot* that decries the study of any non-halakhic texts altogether (both Sephardic and Ashkenazic alike). However, it is my contention that much of the vast literature of the Sephardim, and especially those works which deal explicitly with kabbalastic themes, has been quite underrepresented

in the general Modern Orthodox canon. Though the legal works of such classical Iberian *Rishonim* as the Ramban, Rashba, Ritva, Ran, and the great Rambam are accorded a high degree honor, the insightful and variegated treatises of a great many other important Sephardic authorities continue to lie fallow.

Within this oft-overlooked corpus I would include the works of R. Meir ibn Gabbai, Moshe Alsheikh, Haim Yosef David Azulai (the *Hida*), and Hakham Yosef Haim (the *Ben Ish Hai*), to name only a few. All of these important writers and leaders are united by their central focus on Kabbalah as a meaningful and spiritually powerful system of religious experience and discourse, and I suggest that the seeds for spiritual revitalization may yet be found within their fertile yet neglected pages. Let us turn to a selection from Ibn Gabbai's sixteenth-century magnum opus *Avodat haKodesh* to illustrate this point:[10]

> The highest wisdom [the *sophia* of God, which is the second *sefirah*] contains as the foundation of all emanations pouring forth out of the hidden Eden the true fountain from which the Written and the Oral Torah emanate and are impressed [upon the forms of the celestial letters and signatures]. This fountain is never interrupted; it gushes forth in constant production. Were it to be interrupted for even a moment, all creatures would sink back into their non being . . . that great voice sounds forth without interruption; it calls with the eternal duration that is its nature; whatever the prophets and scholars of all generations have taught, proclaimed, and produced, they have received precisely out of that voice which never ceases, in which regulations, determinations, and decisions are implicitly contained, as well as everything new that may ever be said in any future. In all generations, these men stand in the same relationship to that voice as a trumpet to the mouth of a man who blows into it and brings forth a sound. In that process, there is no production from their own sense and understanding. Instead, they bring out of potentiality that which they received from that voice when they stood at Sinai.

This text provides a more nuanced counterpoint to the broad interpretive dynamism found in the passage from *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim*. Like his Hassidic counterpart who was to write nearly four centuries later, Ibn Gabbai declares that interpretation of Torah is no stagnant act of dry repetition, but a flexible process that remains necessarily fluid because the Torah itself is constantly evolving. However, Ibn Gabbai carefully qualifies this seemingly unbounded interpretive license by explaining that a

talmid hakham is not the originator of even the most innovative reapplications of Torah, since all interpretation has its source in an all-encompassing but unarticulated potential revealed at Sinai. The role of scholars across generations is rather to select which of these teachings must be actualized at any given moment. In other words, it is our task to reify, not to invent *ex nihilo*.

Despite relocating the origin of all interpretive innovation back to the Divine, Ibn Gabbai is not arguing a conservative position in which creative exegesis is forbidden. Human scholars have a clear responsibility to reengage with the ever-expanding font of Torah and breathe new life into it by rearticulating its teachings in a perpetually relevant manner. His qualification that all later interpretation has its source in God's revelation therefore does not *preclude* our efforts at innovation, but rather *reinforces* our gift (and perhaps even mandate) of creative license: the boundaries of authoritative interpretation have been greatly expanded to include even novel ideas not explicitly included amongst the traditions specifically enumerated at Sinai.

The Gift of Religious Language

Fostering spirituality is another prominent concern of Modern Orthodoxy. While this particular mode of religious thought is not necessary (or even compelling) for all, I believe that imbuing the next generation with a strong sense of traditional spirituality is now essential for ensuring the continuity of Modern Orthodoxy. Gentile philosophy is no longer the greatest menace to religious commitment, as it was in the first half of the twentieth century. The newest existential threat facing Modern Orthodoxy is that ours is a generation of individualistic seekers driven to find personal spiritual expression in their religious lives. Without the flexibility to do this within the pale of Orthodox Judaism, these individuals will necessarily explore options outside the framework of our tradition.

Kabbalistic writings can give us an authentic Jewish spiritual vocabulary for articulating an entire type of religious awareness with God that simply cannot be adequately expressed in halakhic terminology. These mystical texts often delve into the personal spiritual experience of individuals who sought to articulate an extra-legal experience of the divine, grappling with the almost impossible task of siphoning their encounter into the written word, and drawing upon these works will certainly

enrich our own ability to discuss this rather sublime kind of piety. Examining the following excerpt from the Zohar, and a medieval commentary that builds upon the ideas within it, will be helpful in illustrating this point:

> Rabbi Yehuda opened: "*Her husband is known throughout the gates, as he sits among the elders of the Land*."[11] Come and see! The Holy Blessed One withdrew in His glory, for He is hidden away and sealed far above. No one who has since entered the world, nor anyone who has been here since the day of its creation, is able to grasp His wisdom; no one is able to comprehend Him.
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> Since He is hidden and sealed away, and He withdrew higher and higher, none of those above or below are able to cleave to him, until they say: "*Blessed is the Glory of the Lord from His place*."[12] The ones below say that he is above, as it is written: "*His glory is upon the heavens*."[13] The ones above say that he is below, as it is written: "*Your glory is upon the entire earth*."[14] Until all those who are above and below say: "*Blessed is the Glory of the Lord from His place*." He is unknown, and there are none able to grasp Him, and yet you say, "*Her Husband is known throughout the gates*"?!
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> Certainly "*Her Husband is known throughout the gates* (*she'arim*)!" This refers to the Holy Blessed One, for He is known and may be cleaved to according to the extent that one imagines (*mesha'er*) Him within the heart, each according to his ability to cleave to the spirit of wisdom. He is known in the heart to the extent that He is imagined there. In this way "*He is known throughout the gates*"—in these contemplative reflections. Yet for Him to be known as is fitting [is impossible]—nobody is able to cleave to Him or to know Him.[15]

In his monumental commentary to the Zohar entitled *Ketem Paz*, R. Shimon ibn Lavi (North Africa, sixteenth century) explores the implications, both cosmological and personal, of this remarkable passage:

> Rabbi Yehuda explains that no being has ever been created that is able to understand His wisdom, nor did the Holy Blessed One ever bring such a one into this world. Certainly not one who is able to grasp His essence! He is deep beyond all depth, and who is able to find Him? [Succeeding in] the quest for Him is impossible for the created beings, both upper and lower, until all exclaim, "*Blessed is the glory of the Lord from His place!*" . . .
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> . . . Perhaps Rabbi Yehuda holds that their quest spurs onward the movement of all the heavenly arrays, cycling around and around. To seek and never apprehend seems to the creations like utter foolishness, as one who says that if the intent of their rotation was [solely] to succeed, after the first or the second time that they are unable reach it they will believe that the quest will always be in vain.

> Yet those who truly experience longing never refrain from the search even if they do not succeed. This is like the desire of the lover for her Beloved, as it says, "*I will arise and circle about, in the town, in the markets and the streets. I shall seek the One whom my soul loves; I have searched and not found.*"[16] Notice that the verse speaks in future tense, "*I shall arise and circle about . . . I shall seek*"—this means that she will not hold back from the seeking Him, for the journey is her life. Such is the longing of the supernal beings and their eternal search, for it is their sustenance and their very existence. Even if they cannot succeed in apprehending Him, through their quest itself [to gaze upon] the face of the Master they offer praise, greatness and glory to the One for whom they searching. He is [the source of] their existence, and that of all the created beings below.
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> In explaining this matter well, one may raise the question: if it is not within the power of any who seek God to comprehend even His place, how then could Solomon, who was the seeker and the quester par excellence, as well as the wisest of all men, write "*Her husband is known throughout the gates*" about the Woman of Valor, who alludes to the upper Assembly of Israel? Rather, certainly "*Her Husband is known throughout the gates* (*she'arim*)!" This refers to the Holy Blessed One, for He is known and may be cleaved to according to the extent that one imagines (*mesha'er*) Him within the heart. One must say that although achieving [the quest] is inherently withheld from them, He can indeed be comprehended by His creations, each according to their understanding and contemplative imagining of Him.[17]

The text of the Zohar is struggling with the seeming contraction between a scriptural verse and our own religious experience. When read in the symbolic manner of the Zohar, Proverbs 31:23 implies that an imminent God (the divine Husband) may be known and understood, but in reality all of creation encounters Him only as a transcendent Being completely removed from the worlds He has formed. Even the angels are unable to find Him or grasp His magnitude. In an attempt to solve this paradox, Rabbi Yehuda explains that while God cannot be restricted to a specific location, He may be known through (and only through) our mystical contemplation and reflection.

This Zoharic passage is a relatively clear articulation of our inability to comprehend the divine. In his commentary to our text, however, R. Shimon ibn Lavi deepens R. Yehuda's homily by explaining that it is this permanent and eternal quest to apprehend God that sustains the universe. The endless journey is only possible because of the aforementioned para-

dox, since if we were truly able to grasp God, the search would immediately terminate and creation would lose its source of constant renewal. Yet neither are we allowed to desist from the journey to find Him simply because it can never be successfully completed; the greatest of value lies in the perpetual quest itself. A profound message of cosmic significance about the personal religious experience of a mystic search for God has thus been built upon an ostensible paradox between a biblical verse that suggests divine immanence, and the experiential truth of His total transcendence.

Without becoming too embroiled in the discussion of the relationship between linguistics and cognition, it is even possible that the very absence of such mystical language effectively precludes many spiritual experiences *ab initio*. More specifically, the inability to articulate or describe a particular concept in words may mean that one simply cannot experience it. If access to authentic Jewish mysticism is denied to those individuals who do not view halakhic study and philosophical rationality as the only modes of fulfilling religious practice, our numbers will necessarily hemorrhage to any and all other movements that have chosen to include Kabbalah within their curricula.

Conclusion

The argument put forward in the preceding pages, and the conversation for which I've implicitly and explicitly called, are not intended to be directives mandating a programmatic restructuring of Modern Orthodoxy along mystical and kabbalistic principles. Such an ill-advised reform would surely be unsuccessful, nor would it be necessarily desirable even if it were tenable. Indeed, in order to embrace elements of the mystical tradition, Modern Orthodoxy need not renounce the flagship ideology of synthesizing the benefits of modern intellectual thought with the rich wisdom of our heritage. Nor do I intend to make it seem as if Modern Orthodoxy has systematically or intentionally purged mysticism and mystics from amidst its ranks. Yet to ignore completely the wisdom of this spiritually compelling and perpetually relevant literature will risk alienating a valuable segment of the committed religious population. We should make a place for individuals who do not wish to join a particular Hassidic group, believing instead in a broader spiritual application for mystical teachings, but who hold this ideal in tandem (and not necessarily in ten-

sion) with an unwavering fidelity to halakha. In doing so we may even attract people dissatisfied with their present communities by providing a unique fusion of openness to modern philosophy and scholarship with a commitment to traditional spirituality.

I do share the trepidation of many about indiscriminately bringing kabbalistic praxis into Modern Orthodox ritual life. Promoting the recitation of esoteric mystical formulae will not likely accomplish any of these goals, nor would kabbalistic asceticism integrate well into contemporary society. However, I suggest that our times necessitate the bringing of the study of mystical texts into the curricula of our institutions across the board. Introducing these works will give us the vocabulary to open up and express an entire category religious experiences that had been previously sealed. Courses in pastoral care and public speaking have been adopted by many Modern Orthodox seminaries in an attempt to answer the need for a new model of religious leadership. In this vein, we must also train teachers and rabbis who can read kabbalistic and Hassidic texts with the same fluency that they tackle medieval or modern philosophy.

Though pietistic works like *Nefesh haHaim* and the existentialist-philosophical treatises of Rav Soloveitchik do certainly cover similar ground, our rich kabbalistic heritage has a wealth of material that only a literature composed over the span of a millennium can offer. Jewish high school students should also be offered courses in classical mystical thought, at least as an elective. Young adults of this age certainly have the maturity to begin addressing issues such the approach to prayer, gender roles, personal religious experience, and the dialectic between tradition and innovation, from a mystical perspective, provided that the texts are carefully chosen and taught.

It is true that many kabbalistic and Hassidic books are written in a terse and complicated style of Hebrew, employing symbolic language that can be quite difficult to decipher. However, this should not deter anyone for whom reading them in the original might present a problem from exploring these texts; over the past several decades an increasing number of mystical books have become available in English. These translations, which are often accompanied by a helpful commentary and explanatory notes, are an indispensible resource for any leaders wishing to teach kabbalistic texts in their synagogues or schools to an audience whose command of Hebrew may not otherwise be sufficient. However, selecting the

right translation (and the right primary source) must be done carefully, since the quality of the work can vary widely. Some tend to be over-literal to the point of unintelligibility, while others are clearly literary recasting or summaries only loosely based on the original text. Yet a substantial number of the contemporary translations strike a careful balance between these poles, and are extremely valuable for the English-reading sector of our religious community.

Many literary treasures of the Hassidic library have been translated, at least in part, although there are still many others waiting to be rendered into English. Scholars such as Louis Jacobs,[18] Norman Lamm,[19] and Joseph Dan[20] have collected and translated anthologies of Hassidic thought along with their own commentary and analysis, and the great variety of the selections in these books demonstrates the thematic and conceptual breadth of Hassidic literature. In addition to a smaller collection of Hassidic sources on the subject of prayer, Arthur Green has published several volumes of English translations that are each taken entirely from the works of a single Hassidic master.[21] Similarly, many important teachings from the mystically infused works of Rav Kook have been rendered into an aesthetically pleasing English that authentically reflects the original writings.[22] It is interesting to note that the Chabad and Breslov Hassidic groups have both undertaken the task of creating bilingual editions of their own mystical works clearly intended for a broader audience; though certainly not unbiased, the translations are often very helpful.[23] Finally, Daniel Matt is in the process of translating the entire Zohar, and while even in English this text remains difficult to study without a teacher, Matt's poetic translation grants the reader access to much of the linguistic beauty and interpretive creativity that characterize the original Aramaic.[24, 25]

Mystical literature has much wisdom to offer that will neither threaten nor supersede faithfulness to halakhic study. Indeed, Kabbalah will compliment this by providing us access to an altogether different mode of religious experience and discourse. Let us make room within the variegated spectrum of Modern Orthodoxy for individuals devoted to both halakhic observance and the earnest quest to encounter God's presence in this world. These are, after all, the core values to which we are committed.

NOTES

1. Yehuda Liebes, "Zohar and Eros." *Alpayim*—A Multidisciplinary Publication for Contemporary Thought and Literature 9 (1994), pp. 67–119, esp. the section "Zohar and Creativity."
2. Moshe Haim Ephraim, *Degel Mahaneh Ephraim* (Jerusalem, 1976) p. 5.
3. Genesis 5:1.
4. Leviticus 10:16.
5. *Kiddushin* 30a.
6. *Makkot* 22b.
7. *Sanhedrin* 99a.
8. Israel Hapstein, *Avodat Yisrael* (Jerusalem, 1995) p. 102.
9. *Tanna deVei Eliyahu*, Chapter 10.
10. Gershom Scholem, "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), pp. 298–299.
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I Dread Going to *Shul*

Daniel B. Schwartz

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I dread going to *shul*. The services are both uninspired and uninspiring. Nothing about what goes on there speaks to me spiritually or on any other level. Quite frankly, I find the entire process of sitting through seemingly interminable and boring services to be an exercise in tedium and futility. Whenever I attend services at my local synagogue, I dread it. From the time I wake up, get dressed and go, until it is blessedly over, I feel angry that I have to be there and frustrated that my precious free time has been wasted. I feel this way 52 weekends a year and on the holidays as well.

I am not a disaffected Jew who feels estranged from Judaism. Quite the contrary, I was born into an Orthodox family, and my wife and I are raising our children to be Orthodox Jews. To look at me is to see a mainstream modern Ashkenazic Orthodox Jew; a product of the Day School and yeshiva high school and post-high school yeshiva learning movement. I've served on the boards of the last two *shul*s to which I've belonged. I regularly enjoy opening a folio of the Talmud and studying its wisdom. My greatest joy would be to see my children grow up to be even more religiously committed than I am. And yet, I loathe going to *shul* each Shabbat morning. My disdain for the services in my *shul* has nothing at all to do with my love for my religion. Indeed my ambivalence about going to *shul* is a function of my attachment to Judaism; both its religious and cultural components.

In 1912 a group of committed young Jewish men and women turned to the dynamic and popular Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan to help them form a society that they hoped would reinvigorate American Orthodoxy. That group, Young Israel, has become one of the most potent and important institutions on the American Orthodox Jewish scene. From the time those young men and women first met in the vestry room of Congregation Kahal Adath Yeshurun on Eldridge Street, in New York City, they began to reshape the way we pray. They felt a need to render synagogue services more relevant to the contemporary worshipper. Young Israel did not edit the prayer book. To their great credit, they appreciated the value of the traditional rite of prayer. Rather, those men and women sought to strip away the "high church" trappings that were popular in those days. In order to increase member participation, they did away with the professional cantor and choir, substituting them with lay prayer leaders and congregational singing. The pilpulistic learned rabbinic address, which focused on the minutiae of Jewish law and was delivered in Yiddish, was replaced by the sermon rendered in English about issues of contemporary interest. In doing all that, the founders of the Young Israel movement sought to render traditional Orthodoxy more relevant and appealing to their generation. To a large degree, they succeeded. The Young Israel movement, coupled with the efforts of other communal institutions, advanced the cause of Orthodoxy in America. But in doing so, the newly minted American synagogues they created placed communal prayer on the slippery slope toward perdition.

The first members of the Young Israel were well acquainted with traditional synagogue music. It was the traditional prayer modes and the grand liturgical settings of Sulzer, Lewandowski, Gerowitsch, along with East European modal chant that they brought into their *shul*s; just without the professional cantor to lead it. When some of the repertoire proved unworkable in the new setting they sought to create, masters of liturgy such as Max Wohlberg, Israel Goldfarb, or Macy Nulman supplied easy-to-learn, pleasant melodies based upon the traditional Ashkenazic prayer modes. While this new music was far simpler and lacked musical flourish, at the very least it was steeped in the traditional prayer modes and in its own way conveyed the meaning of the prayers and the essence of the liturgy. Services lacked much of the pomp and circumstance of the statelier synagogues. They lacked the cultural trappings of the *shul* of a bygone era.

People did not attend these *shul*s to be culturally enriched, as occurred in the synagogues that maintained the office of the cantor. Rather, these *shul*s were for serious dedicated prayer. But the camaraderie and renewed sense of purpose replaced and more than compensated for the ceremonious proceedings of the old-style synagogues.

But time ticks by, and with each passing generation the artistry of prayer was continually downplayed; that culture of artistic and ceremonious services disappeared. As Orthodoxy began its ascendancy in post-WWII America, as yeshivot and Day Schools sprang up in communities all over the country, an emphasis on personal *kavanah*, individual concentration and introspection during prayer, began to replace the time-honored tradition that the hazzan should both interpret the meaning of the prayers and inspire the congregation collectively to spiritual heights. Communal prayer became less of a group effort and more an amalgamation of individuals gathered to do the same thing in technical fulfillment of the requirement that one pray with a minyan. The older members of the *shul*s passed away, and the alumni of the yeshivot began to ascend to the *bimah*. The vacuum created by their ignorance of the traditional music of prayer was filled with modified Hassidic melodies and the occasional Israeli folk melody, in keeping with the new ethos of communal prayer. The music became a way to move the individual alone in his particularistic quest for spiritual succor, and not to unite the *tsibbur*, the congregation as a whole, in the divine worship that can only come from a communal framework, *berov am hadrat Melekh*. As popular Jewish music assumed a decided rock-and-roll beat and feel, in slavish imitation of the world around us, our sacred liturgy now sounds no different from the sounds one might hear on a popular radio station.

It was not callous disregard for the music of old; rather it was a combination of ignorance and the desire to do precisely that which their forebears had done, to render prayer "relevant" that held sway. Curiously, one can observe the indirect proportion between observance and fealty to halakha on the Orthodox scene along with the concomitant emphasis on praying with *kavanah*, and the aesthetic present in their synagogues.

It is against the historical backdrop and because of what has become of our prayers that I dread going to *shul*. I despise following the prayers of someone who has never bothered to translate and seriously ponder the meaning of the prayers he supposedly intones on my behalf. I loathe hear-

ing tunes applied to the davening simply because they "fit" the text rhythmically but do nothing to convey the meaning of the text. I bemoan the lack of dignity that pervades the public presentation of our prayers. I resent the fact that the public worship of the denomination that lays claim to having the most educated and committed Jews has become little more than a "Romper Room"-style singalong. I yearn for the "high church" atmosphere of a bygone era.

My disdain for the current state of prayer is about more than my offended aesthetic sensibilities, and it's about more than my fear that traditional prayer modes and old fashioned hazzanut stand on the brink of extinction; although those both weigh heavily upon me. I am genuinely dissatisfied and spiritually unfulfilled by those services that I attend week in and week out. Part of why we pray is to be enriched. Part of why we pray publicly is to be enriched aesthetically. The Temple in Jerusalem included a conservatory to train the Levites in the singing that had to accompany the daily offerings. The purpose of that conservatory was to insure that the music of the Temple was every bit as impressive as befits God's house. (Don't our synagogues, our *mikdeshei me'at*, deserve no less?) The sages who arranged the order of our prayers did so with a purpose. The text of the siddur is supposed to speak to the worshipper, to remind him/her of his/her place in God's creation, remind us of what is truly important, to celebrate the occasions that bring us to synagogue. The music of prayer is supposed to elucidate and clarify the meaning of prayer. There are reasons why certain prayers are traditionally chanted one way and others differently. Those modes were assigned to assist us in our understanding of the liturgy. It saddens me every time I witness the complete disregard for this most powerful and potentially uplifting experience.

I truly think that the founders of the Young Israel movement and all those who came after truly believed in the truth of their mission. But I also believe that they did not understand the role of the *shaliah tsibbur*, the cantor.

A hazzan, be he professionally trained or not, must assume a role similar to that of a modern-day rabbi. A rabbi is a teacher. He teaches his congregation how to live as good Jews. He does so by personal example and via his spoken word. A rabbi teaches Torah; he interprets the words of our sacred literature and renders them relevant and meaningful to his congregation. He does that publicly in classes and via his sermons. Should a rabbi

content himself to simply present that which is easy for his flock to understand and digest? Should he simply say that which is popular? Such a course of action, while convenient at first, is a sign that the rabbi truly does not understand his function. No good teacher wants his/her students to be the same people at the end of the term that they were at its beginning. The act of teaching is to foster intellectual growth and curiosity along with imparting information. A rabbi must foster growth in his congregation; both intellectual and spiritual growth. He must challenge his congregation to think about what he says; he must make them struggle with the texts of the Torah and the Talmud; he must make them ponder issues deeply, even at the risk of causing them temporary intellectual pain and spiritual distress. For only in those times of challenge will the congregation grow under the rabbi's dedicated tutelage. For the rabbi to be a true teacher, he too must struggle with the issues, wrestle with the text and experience the same "pain" and "strife" he inflicts upon his devotees. The same holds true for a hazzan.

A hazzan is not merely a precentor of the liturgy. He is a teacher of prayer. He interprets the mahzor or the siddur and renders it relevant and meaningful to his congregation. The prayer modes are the hermeneutics he employs. If all a hazzan does is sing some popular tunes for the entertainment of the congregation, or if all he does is sing big pieces to impress the congregation with his vocal abilities and musicianship, he is an abject failure, much like the rabbi who fills his sermons with jokes and teaches little about Jewish life and values. Leading prayer is not about timing the service so it ends before the cholent burns, nor is it about entertainment. It's not even about artistry for its own sake. It is about teaching the congregation what the prayers are, and what they mean. To do that a hazzan must wrestle with the text of the siddur. He has to ponder the depths of his soul and make the liturgy meaningful and relevant to himself. He must lead and teach both by exposition and by example (thus the halakhic requirement that a communal cantor must be known for his personal piety). If the cantor is unclear as to what prayer means to him, his message to the congregants will likewise be unclear. Once a cantor understands what the liturgy means to him, he must then go about presenting it, teaching that meaning to his students within the confines of accepted exposition of the text (with the liturgical hermeneutics, the *nusah*). Sometimes that meaning will be challenging to the congregation. It may

make them tremble or weep. Sometimes it may be whimsical or entertaining. But the message notwithstanding, the cantor MUST always be interpreting the text of the siddur and teaching the interpretation to his students (i.e., the congregation). That is what the incomparable Cantor Moshe Koussevitzky meant when he stated "I daven with the *peirush*," I pray according to the meaning of the words.

Sadly, so very few people today, cantors and congregants alike, understand this basic concept. But imagine what it would be like if those who ascended the reader's desks in our *shul*s aspired to that ethic. How much more meaningful would services be if those who lead them seek to musically impart the meaning of the siddur to the rest of the congregation? How enlightening would it be if the melodies we sang actually served to illuminate and interpret the liturgy? Imagine the sense of awe and majesty that might fill our sanctuaries and our hearts as a result of well thought out, meaningfully presented public prayer. Consider the new sense of communal unity that might arise out of such an endeavor. Think for a moment how well received such prayers might be before God.

We in the Orthodox community have attained higher levels of Torah scholarship. Never before have there been as many opportunities for Torah learning in as many media as we have before us now. A good portion of that material rightly focuses on improving our praying. But all of it is about the individual's relationship to the praying. Nothing (to my knowledge) focuses on enhancing communal prayer. Both the great Hassidic masters and even the Gaon of Vilna, the very symbol of non-Hassidism, taught that God gave us the gift of music to reveal the hidden secrets of His creation. Prayer, that which codifies our affirmation of the creation, deserves to have its secrets revealed. The key to that revelation is in our hands.

American Orthodoxy has come a long way. It was not long ago that one had to search high and low for a complete set of the Talmud in this country. In barely a century, we have standardized kashruth, created fine institutions of Torah learning on the elementary and high school levels and beyond. In the wake of the Shoah, we have experienced a renaissance. When others were convinced we would disappear as an anachronism, we thrived. But in the process we abandoned and forgot about a sacred tradition; that of the music of prayer. The Maharil referred to certain synagogue melodies as coming from Sinai. Indeed he attached such great importance to the preservation of the *nusah* that he recounted his belief he was pun-

ished with his daughter's death because he once departed from the traditional melodies when he was a *shaliah tsibbur* on the Yamim Noraim. Yet despite the significance historically placed upon *nusah*, we sloughed it off and never looked back. The pathetic state of our prayers is the natural consequence of what began in 1912 as a noble experiment to render Orthodoxy more accessible to the masses.

But it doesn't have to remain this way. All is not yet lost. All it takes is for people to make the effort. If our Day Schools and yeshivot taught our children *nusah* as part of their already existing music programs, and integrated that tutelage into the praying in school, *nusah* might be saved. If rabbis devoted a small percentage of their oratory to preaching about the importance of our musical heritage, and the need to maintain it in the synagogue, people would take the issue more seriously. If synagogues utilized a small portion of their programming budgets to occasionally engage real cantors at Shabbat or festival services, our sacred song would again return to the synagogue sanctuary, where it belongs, and not remain consigned to the concert stage. If people simply stopped to consider the music to which they pray and insure it comports with the historical *nusah*, if people started to consider how to convey the meaning of the liturgy when they lead in prayer, if people began to take the music with which they pray as seriously as the atmosphere they seek to create for their Torah learning, prayer can be saved. At the very least, if we as a community make this small change, we would all once again love to going to *shul*.

The Fire in our Souls, Heads, and Hearts

Adena K. Berkowitz

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Not too long ago, I opened up an email that contained the following riddle: What's the difference between a religious Jew and a spiritual Jew? The answer: A spiritual Jew goes off to the forest to commune with God. A religious Jew goes off and worries if there will be money to pay the oil company for the synagogue's boiler.

Although clearly tongue in cheek, this quip got me thinking: Is that how we would distinguish a "religious" Jew from a "spiritual" Jew? Is one just wrapped up with the bottom line material concerns, while the spirit is ceded to others? If we think about it, this is a question that in many ways Orthodox Jews now have the luxury of asking. Until the third quarter of the twentieth century, it was an open question whether there would be a place for Orthodox Jews, be they of the modern, centrist, or Hareidi variety. Happily, all realms of Orthodoxy are thriving. Whether we look at the study halls in Lakewood, the Bet Midrash at Yeshiva University, the establishment of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the surge in *daf yomi* learning in synagogues, offices, or even in a Long Island Railroad car, things have never appeared brighter. Add to that mix the unprecedented explosion in

opportunities for women to learn Torah in secondary schools, post-high school yeshivot, general Torah study; or the communal conversation focusing on fashioning professional roles for Orthodox women within the framework of synagogues and yeshivot. On the surface, things have never appeared better. And yet I am reminded of the old joke of two men sitting on the park bench. One turns to his friend and says, Chaim are you an optimist or a pessimist? An optimist, Chaim answers. If so, asks his friend, why then do you look so troubled? To which Chaim answers—who says it is easy to be an optimist!

We have a lot to be optimistic about—but at times it is not so easy, as we confront some of the challenges that our community faces. There are too many stories of young Orthodox Jews who are leaving the world of religiosity behind them. Even within the world of Hassidism, we hear of "reverse Marranos": those who retain their Hassidic garb on the outside but have become non-believers on the inside, struggling with belief and identity. And too many people who attend school or synagogue engage in what I call "deposit the body" syndrome. They are present but not present. In essence they have spiritually checked out.

What can we do to stem this phenomenon? Is it just an inevitable consequence of living in a modern world, hemmed in by time and financial pressures? After all, who has the luxury of looking at our spiritual ledger when we are too engrossed in balancing our financial one? What can we do to reach out to those who are not finding spiritual satisfaction through study and engagement with Jewish texts? Is there something we can do to fill in the missing links that will enrich and enliven everyone's spiritual lives, despite the pressured lives we lead?

As we know, this is not a new conversation. If we look back for a moment at the rise of the Hassidic movement we are confronted by a very similar conversation.

One of the often cited polemics by the Hassidic movement against their Misnaged opponents was that Misnagdim were missing the fire in their souls. Referencing the verse in *Devarim* 5:5, where Moshe criticizes the Israelites, "you did not come near the fire," the nascent Hassidic movement said: You are too staid! You don't know how to engage in *Avodat haShem* (service of God). We have the *hitlahavut* (enthusiasm). We have *Ahavat haShem* (love of God). We have the joy that allows us to move from a mere intellectual approach and take it to a higher spiritual level.

The Misnagdim answered: You are ignorant. You only focus on the ecstasy; you forsake the deep learning that can bring you closer to *Avodat haShem*. Where is your *Yir'at Shamayim* (fear of Heaven)?

When we look at the contemporary Orthodox religious scene, are we still mired in a conflict between those who emphasize learning as a means to a closer relationship with God and those who believe ecstatic prayer and service can bring us closer. To address this conflict, I think we need to examine the kind of spiritual communities we are creating in the lives of our children in school; in particular during the high school years. In addition, I think we need to examine the kind of spiritual atmosphere we are building in our synagogues. And last but not least we have to consider the spiritual values we are emphasizing in our homes.

Not too long ago, I was speaking to the principal of a Modern Orthodox coeducational high school. I asked this educator's advice on how to create a more meaningful prayer atmosphere for the students. The principal's reply to me was "the best type of praying is the quickest." I could not believe my ears. There is no question that the time scheduling pressures for high school students are extraordinary. How do you fit into each day all the *limudei kodesh*, have gym and lunch, and integrate the *limudei hol*? So "davening" then becomes the perfect foil, it's the perfect expendable item. Get it over with and then the kids can move on to what is *really* important. Think about it. We are squandering the opportunity to start the day with wrapping these young minds with an understanding of how we should begin our day, in a passionate dance with the Almighty. As the Zohar teaches, the fire that was on the altar went into the hearts of the kohanim and the worshippers so that their song was full of passion and the immense power of prayer filled their beings. Is this too much for a 16 year old to absorb? Assuredly not. Even if only offered once or twice a week, a longer davening filled with melodies and time to explain the words and concepts, a prayer service filled with *devekkut* will not cause the students' SAT scores to suffer. We have to set the example as to what is not only of academic importance but of supreme importance. We need to reintegrate the spiritual with the intellectual. We have to reclaim the fire. Otherwise the die is cast. We will create the next generation of daveners who think that the best davening is the one that is quickest. As much as we think the students will absorb the spirit from the texts of Torah and Talmud, we have to help them absorb the spiritual from the words of tefillah, our prayers.

And regarding our synagogues?

Perhaps a facet of synagogue life that we might prefer not to confront is what are people gaining spiritually from their synagogue experiences? No matter how long or short, do worshippers feel bored? Do they approach their prayers like the principal of the school, that the best davening is the quickest davening? Now here, let me be the realist and distinguish between a daily minyan (not in a school context) and Shabbat morning. In the world of the early morning minyan, where everybody is rushing off to work, every minute counts. Pity the poor prayer leader who on Rosh Hodesh drags out Hallel too long! The morning minyan is generally quite happy if an excuse can be found to skip the "*Tahanun*" prayers and thereby save a few minutes.

But what of Shabbat morning? With a whole day ahead of us to eat and sleep and spend time with family and friends, what's the rush? And yet the flag of reality has to be waved every week—go too long and it's considered *tirha d'tzibbura*, a discomforting of the congregation. But is it the length of the service that really bothers people, or rather is it the aura that surrounds the prayers? What is going through the minds of the average person in synagogue? Are people focused during Shaharit? Attentive during the Torah reading? Awake and engaged during the rabbi's sermon?

Perhaps one way of raising the level of connectedness is for more synagogues to integrate more of the practices often found outside of a main minyan. For example, in many synagogues that offer Beginners', Intermediate, or Learners' minyanim, I have noticed that many of the people who attend these services are actually very knowledgeable. I would not classify these people as being on a "beginner" or "intermediate" level. So when I have asked them why they attend these minyanim, they answer: We like the discussion that surrounds the Torah reading. It makes the text come alive. We enjoy the periodic explanations. We enjoy the warmth and camaraderie.

It should give pause to consider introducing some of these elements into the main synagogue service, even at the risk of a service running a bit longer, as a way of enhancing the experience of those in a main minyan.

Another factor toward raising the spiritual experience for synagogue goers is the overall figure of the *Shaliah Tsibbur* (prayer leader). There is no question that overall, there has been an evolving relationship around the role of the professional cantor in the world of so many Orthodox syn-

agogues. What was once a central figure of the synagogue service has now been downplayed or outright replaced by volunteer prayer leaders. Yet, while this may be helpful to the bottom line synagogue budget, thought must be given to this decision. Unless the volunteer prayer leaders are truly adept at the art of *nusah*, often we get exposed to a hodgepodge of styles and melodies, not to mention a variety of singing skills. There is no question that the embracing of the *nusah* of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach has led to a greater means of capturing a sense of spirituality. But that too must be executed properly, because otherwise it is a *tirha d'tzibbura*, no less that a hazzan who in the old days dragged out services. For example, at the services that take place at *Kol HaNeshamah* (the organization that I co-founded with Cantor Ari Klein), we have worked very hard to create an atmosphere of engaged daveners, including explanations at certain places, as well as highlighting congregational singing by combining traditional *nusah* with Carlebach niggunim, an atmosphere of *hitlahavut* (fervor) while being led by a hazzan and an a cappella group. The fervor I witnessed this past year on the *Yamim Noraim*, of hundreds of members of the kahal davening, singing, and dancing—men on the men's side of the *mehitsa*, women on the women's side of the *mehitsa*, made me realize that davening and *devekut*, *Yir'at Shamayim* and *Ahavat haShem* can go hand in hand. If executed correctly by the *Shaliah tsibbur*/hazzan (as I noted above, Carlebach *nusah* requires as great agility as the standard *nusah*), it will elevate our experience to a level that recognizes the importance of engaging the soul and the mind, the heart and the head.

The good news is that more and more synagogues are aware of this and are creating a more spiritual experience within the construct of a traditional service. The challenge is to get even more congregations on board, realizing how high the stakes truly are. When we think about it then, how to meld the intellectual with the spiritual is not merely a theoretical question harking back to the Hassidic-Misnagdic fight of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is necessary in our times to bring the fervor back into our schools, our synagogues, and our homes. It also means that we can't just cede it to the professionals. It isn't just up to the rabbis, the principals, the teachers. It is incumbent upon each of us in our homes to set an example of working on both our dedication to Jewish daily practice, to Jewish knowledge and daily study of and dedication to Jewish texts but especially to our religious fervor.

A Tribute to Daily Minyan: From the Other Side of the *Mehitsa*

Maxine O. Angel

(Maxine Angel is married to Rabbi Hayyim Angel, the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York. In addition to participating in the community, she works for AHAVA selling skincare products on the Home Shopping Network)

I first started going to daily minyan for one selfish reason. I simply wanted to be with my husband. Three days after getting married, we were in our new home, and my husband awoke early for minyan. He was getting up, so I got up too. I certainly wasn't ready to be apart from him, so I accompanied him to the synagogue. It was my first early morning weekday minyan. Prior to our marriage, it never occurred to me to attend daily minyan in a synagogue. Why on earth would I schlep to a synagogue for morning services when I could say Shaharit at home amidst the whirlwind of bathing, blow-drying, breakfast, and then the mad dash to work?

That was 11 months ago. Surprisingly, I quickly became hooked. I continued to attend daily minyan, going morning and evening almost every single day. The biggest surprise of all, however, was witnessing the quiet beauty that exists when men pray together on a regular basis. This beauty continues to unfold before me and perpetually takes my breath away: I was totally unprepared. Unfortunately, words are hopelessly inadequate tools for capturing the intricacies and undulations of the beauty of daily minyan. The ability to appreciate the wonderment comes only from

experiencing the subtleties of daily minyan, from glimpsing the deep relationships that exist with God. Given the limitations of language, I will still do my best to relate what daily minyan feels like at Shearith Israel. Keep in mind, my perspective is from the other side of the *mehitsa*, where I have the wonderful freedom to inhale all of it.

I am blessed to belong to Congregation Shearith Israel, also known as the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York. Founded in 1654, we are the first and oldest Jewish Congregation in North America. I am infinitely blessed to be married to the rabbi of the community. I am also a member of the community, something that brings me immeasurable pride and delight. My understanding of daily minyan is limited my experiences at Shearith Israel. I hope, however, that every member of every daily minyan team feels so passionately about their home synagogue and the people with whom they pray.

My husband refers to the daily minyan team as the "spiritual backbone of Shearith Israel." Not only are they the backbone; they are the heart, the soul, the spirit, and the sense of humor too. These men believe in regular communal prayer, and their commitment to it is inspiring. These are the men who brave snow, rain, heat, and power outages to make minyan. These men will give up the Superbowl or take a cab straight from the early arrival gate at the airport to make sure they pray in a minyan. These are the men who believe it is important for every person saying *kaddish* to be able to do so in a minyan, whether it is a member of Shearith Israel or someone who walks in only once to honor the memory of a loved one. These men will stay on a Sunday morning to ensure that a couple from another country can fulfill their dream of getting married according to Jewish Law. These men will become worried if a "regular" misses just once, because everyone notices and everyone matters. These are the first people who knew I was pregnant because I stopped attending morning minyan, and they got concerned. They all figured out what was up, and smiled without saying a word, because that is just how they are.

Many people talk about spirituality as if it is the latest fashion or diet craze. Like true style and good nutrition, spirituality is not something that just comes and goes. It is a constant pursuit. It is lived every single day. It is in every breath, in every blink. Often times it is so subtle that many easily miss it or mistake it for something else. Just as it is easy to walk into a fancy store and spend a lot of money on something the salesperson says is

the hot new item of the season, so too it is easy to find a "spiritual" workshop or retreat and have a powerful experience. The expensive outfit will be the wrong color next season and, if not internalized and integrated into daily life, the intense spiritual experience remains a distant memory, a snapshot posted on a wall next to a concert ticket.

We recently returned from a visit to Israel. We went to the Kotel a couple of times for Minha. I am always amazed at the scene at the Kotel. Here is a religious treasure, a jewel in the crown of the Jewish people and an important religious site for people of many other religions too. People are having mind-blowing spiritual experiences left and right. Women are crying, pleading, kissing the wall, posing for pictures, stuffing notes into every nook and cranny, taking photos of others praying. It is indeed beautiful, but I wonder how lasting this experience will be for many. Will it leave these visitors changed? Will it foster a new relationship with God? Will it lead to a commitment to prayer? A commitment to community? What happens when everyone goes home?

As one woman at the Kotel backed into me and then another ran over my foot with her stroller without acknowledging my presence, I was discouraged. How can each individual have such a "spiritual" experience while totally disregarding those around them? I longed for daily minyan, I ached for community.

One of the many things I love so much about Judaism is that religion does not happen in a vacuum. From the revelation at Sinai to the daily prayer services, it is about community. We have the siddur to formalize the prayer services and to allow for everyone to pray together. Certainly we can talk with God whenever we want, but when it comes to weekday Shaharit, Minha, and Arvit, we recite what is written and that links all of us. During Shabbat and the Haggim, we are connected by the words we all say, words written long ago by brilliant rabbis who understood the importance of bringing people together to thank God for our infinite blessings. We recite the same words our ancestors recited. Not only do we link to those in the room with us, but we are bound to those that stood before us and to those who will one day stand after we are long gone. Daily minyan exemplifies community.

Spirituality is a daily pursuit. It is not found in one visit to a holy site. It is not an amulet you buy in some far-off town. It is not practiced alone on a mountain top. It is a relationship based on commitment and trust and

vulnerability. It is letting others see you during prayer, whether you are crying, or trying not to space out, or lost in the siddur, or in the deepest recesses of standing before the Almighty, thanking God for countless blessing and praying that your children will be healthy or that God will protect the loved one you just lost. Spirituality is waking up early in the morning or rushing to minyan after a long and tiring day to pray as a community because people depend on you and because you are part of something bigger than yourself. Daily minyan exemplifies spirituality.

Now that my husband and I know we are expecting twins, I realize that my days of regular attendance at daily minyan are numbered. I am grateful beyond words to have such reasons to keep me from being able to attend minyan, but I will miss praying daily with my community. I will miss being part of the daily minyan team. My debt of gratitude to them will never be paid. They provide to the Shearith Israel community the most important thing of all: the ability for people to pray in a minyan. Yes, we have many wonderful programs. We have amazing classes and lovely celebrations. Yes, the beauty of our historic building is without parallel. Yet, none of this matters if someone can't come and pray in a minyan. The daily minyan team is the axis on which the whole community of Shearith Israel spins. It is the foundation on which all else rests. I wish more people would be part of this special team, because there is plenty of space for everyone. The more people praying together, devoted to the tefillot, the stronger the backbone and the stronger the community. All anyone has to do is show up.

I am so happy I followed my husband to Shaharit after we got married. It is one of the best gifts he has given me.

Who is "Orthodox"? Who is "Religious"? Who is Just "Observant"?

Jonathan Kolatch

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Before questioning the usefulness of the word "Orthodox," let's first acknowledge the need that this term serves. Congregations, like individuals, find benefit in affiliating with congregations of similar direction. Such affiliation provides the weight of numbers when larger issues, such as intermarriage and conversion, separation of church and state, recognition of homosexuals as congregants, and political positions on national and international issues, need to be addressed. Umbrella organizations also facilitate the establishment of religious standards for prayer, the ordination of rabbis, and the certification of teachers. They streamline fundraising. So, inevitably, groups such as the Orthodox Union, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, and the Union for Reform Judaism have come into being. The assumption that all individuals whose congregations are served by one of these umbrella organizations subscribe to the general standards of that organization is false.

That said, when used to categorize individuals, the word "Orthodox" (and its cognate, "religious"), its flavor of piety notwithstanding, is often a troublemaker: In the misconceptions it generates, in the provocation and

divisiveness it engenders. In English or in its Hebrew equivalent, *dati*, it often conveys unintended meanings.

The term Orthodox is misleading because it hints at a uniform standard of religious conduct that, in reality, does not exist. When used to enforce exclusivity—the holier-than-thou phenomenon—it can become haughty, condescending, downright mean: 'I am more Jewish than you.'

My brother, who is not at all ignorant when it comes to things Jewish, but who grew up in a Conservative home, with somewhat limited contact with Orthodox Jews, asks frequently if A or B is Orthodox, citing some degree of observance or dress. I, who belong to an Orthodox synagogue and have more extensive contact with Orthodox Jews—both in the United States and in Israel—am hard pressed to provide a sharp answer.

Outer appearance parameters vary too greatly to be instructive: head covered or not (yarmulke in all its forms or black hat for men; kerchief, hat, or wig for women); beard or clean shaven; *tsitsith* (prayer fringes) for men (worn inside one's pants, outside, or not at all); slacks or floor-sweeping dress; how much of a woman's arms are covered.

Is a man with an untrimmed, straggly beard more Orthodox than one who keeps his beard well groomed? What about a woman who doesn't cover her head, who wears pants, who exposes her shoulders? Can she still be considered "Orthodox"?

Over the past winter, I spent a few days at Kibbutz S'de Eliyahu, an established Orthodox kibbutz in Israel's Jordan Valley. Confused by the menagerie of women's attire at the kibbutz, I put this question to Beni Gavrieli, a transplanted American, with Conservative roots, who has lived at the kibbutz for two decades and has adapted to the Orthodox way of life. He proved sensitive to the question.

Beni told me that at S'de Eliyahu you find four types of women: those who cover their heads and wear long skirts, those who don't cover their heads and wear long skirts, those who cover their heads and wear pants, and those who don't cover their heads and wear pants. What is the conclusion? That women who don't cover their heads and wear pants are not Orthodox? That S'de Eliyahu is not a religious kibbutz? That, when it comes to dress, Orthodoxy has no definable criteria? Nadia Matar, the noted Israeli activist and founder of Women in Green, an observant Jew by all standards, keeps her head uncovered at home, and, perhaps in deference to others, dons a baseball cap when she leaves the house.

An Israeli cousin with an Orthodox pedigree (graduate of Netiv Meir Yeshiva High School in Jerusalem and the *hesder* religious study-army service program), told me that the kerchief that Orthodox women wear on their heads "looks like a rag." A year later, he got married. And what does his wife wear on her head? Right.

The unattractive (some call "dumpy") dress of religious women, as much as anything, molds the negative image that the non-Orthodox (Jew and Gentile) carry of Orthodox Jews. Before meeting my cousin's wife, from her picture alone, I had this same gut feeling of unworldliness. It turns out that she has two university degrees and is well traveled. I wonder whether her dress is out of choice or out of a need to meet standards of family and friends.

Whether or not one wears a yarmulke at all times is one of the most reliable outer dress indicators of whether a man is Orthodox. And if you are a perceptive observer, you can draw useful conclusions about the religious inclinations of the wearer by what sits on his head (broadcloth yarmulke, knitted yarmulke with bobby pins or clips, large knitted yarmulke, black yarmulke without pins, hats—black and otherwise).

But all who tend toward an observant lifestyle do not wear yarmulkes full time. Many take their skull caps off when not praying. Orthodox lawyers sometimes go bareheaded in court so that their religious preference does not influence the proceedings. Other times, people are just inconsistent. Some eat with their heads covered on the Sabbath, but not on weekdays or when eating out. A Reconstructionist rabbi I know puts on a yarmulke whenever he goes into a kosher restaurant, but not when he goes into a non-kosher restaurant. If at my Orthodox synagogue all who removed their yarmulkes after prayers (and by common perception are not Orthodox) were disqualified, there would be no *minyan* (quorum) at many weekday services.

Nowadays, particularly among rabbinical students, there are Conservative Jews who walk around with knitted yarmulkes on their heads all the time. They would bridle at being described as Orthodox. Yet, in behavior, if not in philosophy, they differ little if at all from Orthodox Jews.

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The degree of Sabbath observance is usually very predictive of whether or not one is Orthodox. Those who call themselves Orthodox Jews do not

use electricity on the Sabbath; they don't answer the phone, watch television, or listen to the radio; they don't write or use computers. But you don't know what they do in their own homes when no one is watching. The wife of a cousin in Israel once told me that occasionally her husband, who prayed daily, and was very careful with what he ate when traveling overseas for his work, would flip on the light by his bed on Friday night to read. Is he alone among those who call themselves Orthodox?

And there are practical considerations. My late uncle, an Orthodox Jew, who at the most inopportune moments could be seen drifting into a corner to pray and kept his head covered at all times, routinely returned home after dark on Friday afternoon in the winter. He ran a small business and could find no alternative. Many religious Jews fit into that category.

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With Sabbath observance, eating kosher food is certainly the most instructive parameter of being a religious Jew. But what does keeping kosher mean?

Even if you were given free access to poke around in someone's kitchen and cupboards, you might come away with the wrong conclusion.

Orthodox kitchens customarily have two sinks, to maximally separate meat and dairy. But some families who live in small spaces suffice with one sink and separate sink boards. Others use one sink and two drainboards. Some don't worry about sinks and drainboards.

It is usually permissible for drinking glasses to be used interchangeably for meat and dairy. But what about glass plates, which are no more absorbent?

Some of the food in the pantry or refrigerator you are exploring might lack kosher certification, but be perfectly kosher. The manufacturer might not be willing to pay the high fees of the certification agency. Or the foods—tea, coffee, spices, pasta, oils, sugar, salt, frozen vegetables—might be intrinsically kosher and the household unwilling to submit to nonsensical certification, which stretches to aluminum foil, wax paper, and plastic bags. And then there is the concept of *glatt* kosher, which has no logical basis. You cannot be more kosher than kosher.

Where and what Orthodox Jews eat outside of their homes often tells little about their Orthodoxy. There are those who will not eat in a kosher

certified restaurant that is not Sabbath-observant, oblivious to the fact that it is the food that is being certified, not the restaurant or its workers. Some religious Jews will eat cold food in a restaurant serving non-kosher food; some will only eat salads; others will eat fish. Some will have a cup of coffee and no more. An Orthodox lawyer friend of mine, the former president of a prominent Orthodox congregation, will not eat in Fine & Schapiro, a noted kosher restaurant in Manhattan with a letter of certification in the window, because the restaurant is open on Saturday. But he will order a tuna fish sandwich in a non-kosher restaurant. The patterns of compromise and inconsistency are endless.

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Understanding the wide variation of Orthodox practice is crucial because the larger American Jewish population, not to speak of non-Jews, cannot differentiate between shades of Orthodoxy. The image that they carry of Orthodox Jews is of the narrow, judgmental, uncompromising, holier-than-thou segment that sees itself as the savior of the Jewish people.

No one knows what percentage of Orthodox Jews falls into this "holier-than-thou" category. But they are sufficient to blur the image of observant Jews. Such holier-than-thous will take pains to straighten the tefillin on the head of a visiting parishioner, claiming that it does not meet the hairline criteria; remove the light bulb from the refrigerator of a home that they are visiting before the onset of the Sabbath; scrutinize the *mezuzot* on doorposts and comment if they do not contain real parchment; turn an upward pointing *etrog* (citron) downward just as someone is reciting the *lulav* benediction on Sukkot. They are boorish, intolerant, unable to look you in the eye as equal Jews. Their way is the only way.

In our family, my father, whose name is known to many of all religious stripes for his best-selling, non-judgmental books on Judaism, was uninvited from taking part in the wedding ceremony of his niece at the last moment because, as a Conservative rabbi, he was deemed "insufficiently Jewish."

Surprisingly, in my experience, the holier-than-thou attitude is more common among a segment of the American Orthodox population than among those who call themselves religious in Israel (and know on average a great deal more about Jewish religious practice than their American

cousins). Perhaps it is the siege mentality of being a remnant minority in a sea of non-Jews.

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You can't delve very far into a discussion of religious practice without confronting the question of consistency. Few Orthodox Jews fulfill all of the religious duties they think they should all the time. Inconsistency is what makes Orthodoxy such an elusive concept.

If a practicing Jew expects others to be tolerant of his religious customs, which are not adhered to by most Jews, he cannot refuse to eat in a friend's home because it is not kosher while routinely eating a dairy sandwich in a non-kosher coffee shop. He cannot be absent from work on religious grounds one Sabbath and show up for work on the next. Onlookers get confused. Jews are as susceptible to this confusion as non-Jews.

My frequent trips to China and Japan over many years put me face-to-face with this dilemma. My travel purpose is to mix with the people and see how they live. No daily activity is more important to Chinese than eating. Whether at home or in a restaurant, you can't interact with Chinese very long without eating. I have explained hundreds of times what "kosher" means, without using the word. Often, that leads to differentiating between kosher and Muslim halal practices. Asians have a hard time understanding all these distinctions, but go a long way toward accommodating them. When the chief chef at a Chinese sports camp heard that potatoes were okay, potatoes baked in their jackets appeared every night at the table. A Tibetan woman made me a special cornmeal cake that she had milled herself.

From time to time, I meet up with some of these Chinese friends in larger Chinese cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, which have safer eating alternatives: vegetarian restaurants, which are close to 100 percent kosher without the certification. Why I eat vegetables and noodles at a sports camp in Kunming but would prefer a vegetarian restaurant in Beijing often confuses them.

My uncle, who has read my writings, asks with more than a little annoyance why, if I eat vegetables at a non-kosher restaurant in China or Japan, I insist on kosher or vegetarian restaurants back home. My answer is that here I have a choice.

There are two active Jewish concepts embedded in inconsistency that merit attention: *mar'it ayin* (The Appearance Principle), how things appear to an outside observer; and *b'farhesia*, in the public domain.

Invoking *mar'it ayin*, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein ruled that a Harvard student could not participate in his graduation exercises on Shavuot because, although walking to the ceremony incurred no desecration of the holiday, it might appear to others that he drove to the ceremony. Rabbi Joseph Caro, the compiler of the *Shulhan Arukh*, ruled that "milk" made from almonds could not be served at a meat meal, because it might be misconstrued as mixing dairy with meat. Walking in the street in work clothes on the Sabbath, though no work is being done, would fall into this category. The implication is that behavior which with certainty will go unobserved is less objectionable according to Jewish law than public actions.

B'farhesia refers to actions performed in the public domain. Though the opposite may be expected, transgressions, Sabbath or otherwise, that are committed in one's own domain, out of public view, and thus shameproof, are no less contrary to Jewish law than the same prohibitions performed in public. Nevertheless, many religious Jews continue to make the distinction between private and public domain.

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The argument here is that if the word Orthodox were to be purged from the lexicon, and every person stood tall beside his own persona, we would have a more cohesive Judaism. That is why, when asked if I am Orthodox, I respond that I am *observant*, which allows for more differences, without a need to specify them. When they prospect over-intrusively for details, I paraphrase in Hebrew from the words of the *havdalah* prayer that ends the Sabbath: "*Ani mavdil bayn kodesh leHol*, I differentiate between the sacred Sabbath and the secular workweek." That usually quiets them.

Of Bloom and Doom

MAURICE WOHLGELERNTER

(Dr. Maurice Wohlgelernter taught as Professor of English, first at Yeshiva College, and, thereafter, at Baruch College, CUNY. He also served as Visiting Professor at New York University, New York Institute of Technology, City College, and Bar Ilan University. He was simultaneously active, during those years, as a practicing rabbi.)

With the recent publication of Aharon Appelfeld's newest novel *Blooms of Darkness*[1] engagingly translated from the Hebrew by Jeffrey M. Green, one is initially motivated to agree with Philip Roth, the eminent American novelist, who adorned the author as fiction's foremost chronicler of the Holocaust. Roth observed that the stories herein are "small, intimate, and quietly narrated, and yet are transformed into a soaring work of art . . . with a profound understanding of loss, pain, cruelty and grief." Additionally, one is equally moved to add, in the words of Primo Levi, the Italian novelist and critic, that Appelfeld's voice "has a unique, unmistakable tone which strikes the reader with awe and admiration." And one is further tempted to agree with Honoré de Balzac, the French nineteenth-century novelist, who declared, on an entirely different occasion, that "the novel is really the private history of nations."

Part of the pleasure in reading Appelfeld's "history of his nation" in this novel, and others, is the brevity of its presentation. For example, many initial conversations between a mother and son, who are hounded by a Nazi killer, are uttered in half-sentences. For Holocaust-era conversations had to be brief, lest the savages discern any moves and motifs deserving liquidation. Under those circumstances, one hardly speaks in fluid sentences. Everything is secretive, for life depends more on silence than on speech: a look here, a motion there, or an eyebrow raised, often ends most conversa-

tions. To capture these sensations, Appelfeld actually tells this entire story in some *68 chapters,* each one of them no more than four pages, which add up to a unique, sad, and captivating experience for the reader.

Appelfeld has dedicated his creative life to the literature and history of his own people, beginning, of course, with the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and proceeding, most often, in agony—murder, extortion, banishment, vilification, and exile—throughout the ancient, medieval, and modern periods of his national history. Ultimately, of course, he devoted—attached—himself to the bitter, brutal, murderous, forlorn, and unforgettable years of the Holocaust, all replete, needless to say, with "loss, pain, cruelty, and grief."

Julia

But first, the story. Told almost in a whisper, it takes place in an unnamed Ukrainian city not far from the Carpathian Mountains. Among its citizens, we find Julia and Hans Mansfeld and their three children, Otto, Anna, and young Hugo. The parents were pharmacists by profession, who, during their years of dispensing pharmaceuticals and prescriptions, were heralded not only for their professionalism, but also for equally delivering those items and food, without cost, to those unable to pay. Hans, alas, was the first to be "transferred" to a secret place, near the mountains, followed sometime later by Otto and Anna; leaving Julia and 11-year-old Hugo to navigate for themselves in that chaos.

We find mother and son, first, standing on the street, anxiously beleaguered, waiting for the arrival of one of the notorious "peasants," who operate by snatching children "for fees," to deposit them eventually in some "hiding places" near the mountains. Fortunately for Julia and Hugo the peasant fails to appear. Determined that at least Hugo would survive, mother and son quickly lower themselves through the half-dry public sewers of the city, until they reach its outskirts. There by the grace of good fortune, Julia chances to meet up with an old grammar school classmate, one Mariana Podgorsky, a non-Jew, and by profession a "madam," who lives in a place called the "Residence," together with a string of other harlots, catering exclusively to the German soldiers who visit there nightly.

Julia shares her tale of woe with her friend of grammar school years, who graciously consents to care for the innocent youngster until the

war's end. Mercifully relieved, and filled with unending gratitude, Julia surrenders young Hugo to Mariana, while handing her son his personal knapsack, filled with "a Bible, games of chess and dominoes, plus some reading and writing material." Shortly thereafter, Julia is herself "deported."

Hugo accompanies Mariana to her own room in the "Residence," which is lavishly filled with all sorts of perfumes, bottles of brandy, which she imbibes frequently, as well as a "personal closet," stocked with all sorts of lavish attire. Next to her "boudoir" rests another closet, bereft of any and all human necessities. She assigns that closet to Hugo, in order that he be hidden from all human contact while staying there. She immediately warns him that, should she be out at times, for whatever reason, he must never answer the door, nor leave his closet except when in her presence. As one of her first gifts, she hands him a crucifix which she then gingerly places on his neck.

After about three months, everything in Hugo's life changes. How much has changed, he obviously doesn't know. "His young heart," we learn, "began to torment him because he hasn't kept his promises to his mother. He doesn't read the Bible, he doesn't write, and he doesn't do his arithmetic problems." Worse still is the fleeting thought that his mother may have actually "passed away."

In the loneliness of his "closet," where, during the wintry nights he almost freezes to death while lying scantily dressed on his temporary couch, Hugo finds solace in an occasional dream. One night, in fact, his mother appears to him, checking on how well he is managing, and whether Mariana is treating him well. Hugo begs her not to leave him. Before going, however, she confesses to him: "You know very well that I didn't observe our religion, but we never denied our Jewishness. The cross you're wearing is just camouflage, not faith. If Mariana—or I don't know whoever—tries to make you convert, don't say anything to them. Do what they tell you to do, but in your heart, you have to know: Your mother and father, your grandfather and grandmother, were all Jews, and you're a Jew, too. It's not easy to be a Jew. Everybody persecutes you. But that doesn't make us an inferior people. To be a Jew is a mark of excellence, but it's also not shameful . . . I wanted to say all this to you, so that your spirits won't fall . . . Read a chapter or two of the Bible every day . . . . Reading it will strengthen you . . . . I can go away in peace . . . ."

She leaves Hugo.

Mariana

And who, indeed, is this Mariana, the "savior"?

She started her career as a madam, we are told, at the tender age of 16, mainly because of her "disgruntled and abusive" parents. But somewhere within herself, we are led to believe, is a "soul." When untrammeled, she finds herself believing, despite her profession, in a Christian God, to whom at times, and to the surprise even of her friends, she addresses directly. Consider, for example, this confessional: "Dear God: you understand my heart better than any person. You know that my pleasures in this world were few and bad, my humiliations were many and bitter. I don't say I'm a righteous woman worthy to get to heaven. I bear the burden of shame, and that's why I'll pay a forfeit when the day comes. Even when in the depths of hell, You are my beloved."

Needless to say, while serving in a house of sin, she claims that young Hugo is a "symbol of a greater nation." Citing an example of her generosity, Mariana recalls that his mother, Julia, during their youth, had been very kind to her, bringing her, despite her poverty, "clothes, fruit, and cheese." And during those very years, she never chastised Mariana by asking, "Why don't you do respectable work?" And that is why as Hugo begins to mature, Mariana entices him, "suggesting that he enjoy her physical delight which a woman needs, for the rest is only dessert." Since he makes no demands on her, she continues to compliment him: "You love Mariana and make no conditions or demands on her . . . you're beautiful." Which leads Hugo to entertain the illusion that Mariana "really doesn't belong to those in the Residence . . . that even in her profession one can maintain manners and respect," that is, if one possesses "backbone." Thus to no one's surprise, Hugo could, and did, follow her warning that, whenever questioned, he should always answer by saying he is her "son."

Not only would he agree to call himself her "son," but also because, as he matured, he actually became in pleasure, at least, her "lover." So that whenever Mariana asks him to sleep with her, he always answers her call. For she assures him, he is "good and sweet and doesn't want anything from her." So that even in her drunken stupor he believes "she is really delicious."

One morning sometime later, Hugo, reaching for his knapsack, finds a long letter from his mother, in which she again extols Mariana as "one

who will surely take care of him all the time," adding, mournfully, that she herself may never return, and that he dare "never to despair, for despair is surrender." And even in these dark times, "she remains optimistic . . . and that he, too, must believe in his future freedom."

Whatever optimism he may have felt at the time, all of it disappears when Mariana absented herself from the Residence, for a short time, in order to bury her mother. Her death, Hugo learns, was due to Mariana's neglectful failure to purchase the medicine her mother needed. On her return home, Mariana readily admits to that failure, which draws Hugo's strange reaction: "Circumstances are guilty." To neither of their surprise, Mariana, relieved, "fell on her knees, hugged and kissed him," which helped Hugo forget his short loneliness and the awful fears that surrounded him during her absence. Rather than bemoan her loss, Mariana, instead of even a brief mourning, continues to speak solely of her sad status as a madam, due, as she often repeated, to her own parents' neglect. Always, apparently, conscious of her plight, Hugo comments further: "Behind her suffering lies a good and lovely woman." To which Mariana adds only more kisses and pampering arms.

Despite all of Mariana's reliable availability, the Germans continued their unabated search for strangers, even at the Residence. Fearing the inevitability of yet another series of searches, especially since the Germans seemed less certain of winning the war, the "madam-in-charge" of the Residence orders Mariana and Hugo to leave at once. Advised hurriedly to look everywhere for any and all resting places or homes for shelter, sleep and hiding, lest they be recognized, Hugo feels self-assured because of the crucifix he wears at all times. Mariana, on the other hand, engages, as usual, in a solemn prayer to God: "I don't say I'm a righteous woman, worthy to go to heaven. . . . I bear a burden of shame. . . . But I never stopped longing for you, God. . . . You are my beloved."

Because of his love for her, Hugo is enraptured with her confessional, to a point where he actually invokes his parents, saying aloud: "Papa, Mama, where are you?" No answer. They seem no longer to be with him, nor does a memory search seem to help, for they have apparently parted even from his dreams, now enshrined in Mariana.

Hugo then opens his Bible to read the story of Joseph, whose brothers, at first, planned to kill him, only to witness his revival, in the end, and to recognize his political, and national prominence. Hugo now finds hope and inspiration in one of his ancestors' life.

As they proceed, rumors spread everywhere that although the Germans are actually losing the war, they will never end their violence, they still believe, until all the Jews are destroyed. The Russians, on the other hand, will surely decimate anyone who has ever cooperated, in any capacity, with the Germans. Mariana and Hugo decide to flee toward the Carpathian Mountains. Along the way, Hugo has another vision of his mother and is moved to frantic tears. As he weeps uncontrollably, Mariana suddenly criticizes him, arguing that "a person who cries announces to the world that he's lost and needs pity," adding that "Jews spoil their children, and they don't prepare them properly for life." All of which moves Hugo to wonder, "When will the tears freeze in me?"

As they proceed further, Mariana keeps sharing her thoughts: "I'm amazed at the Jews. An intelligent people, everyone agrees, yet most of them don't believe in God. I asked your mother, 'How is it that you don't believe in God? After all, you see His deeds every day, every hour.'" Answering her own questions, Mariana tells Hugo that his mother "lost her faith at the Gymnasium and since then, religion hasn't returned to her. I'm sorry for your mother."

Of a far more immediate crisis, Mariana turns to Hugo, saying, because the Russians are rapidly approaching, they will kill her, as well as all those who worked in whatever capacity with and for the Germans and should save himself. "You are still young. Every time I remember that, I choke with pain. . . . And because I slept with Germans, my blood is on my head." Now she believes God won't stand by her. Except Hugo, who, when asked when he wants to do in the future, replies, "To be with you." That, she adds, "would be impossible."

In a final farewell, she asks Hugo to take care of himself. "When the informers come, don't go after me. They'll take me straight to the gallows, or who knows what. You may not be religious, but since you've been with Mariana, you've changed a little. . . . Just promise me, you'll read a chapter or two of the Bible every day. That will strengthen you and give you power and courage to overcome evildoers." Hugo promises.

While Mariana and Hugo happen to be resting one day under a tree, three men suddenly appear and announce that they have strict orders "to bring Mariana in, dead or alive." Hugo is not to be taken, because he speaks Ukrainian, not the official language of any enemy. Remaining behind, Hugo is crushed emotionally. He stands watch, at the center of the square, near a large barrel of soup provided by the Russians, where all

enemy suspects stand shivering, to await their inevitable fate. When one of the guards happens to ask Hugo whom he is waiting for, he answers, "My mother." While there, Hugo learns from another prisoner that Mariana was actually sentenced to die. Crushed by that terrifying news, Hugo recalls one of Mariana's final and fateful pleas to him: "If they kill me, don't forget me. You're the only person whom I trust. I buried some of my soul in you. I don't want to depart from the world without leaving something. I have no gold or silver. So take my love and place it in your heart, and from time to time, say to yourself: 'Once there was a Mariana. She was a mortally wounded woman, but she never lost faith in God.'"

Desolation

Roaming the streets of his native city in the Carpathian Mountains, Hugo reaches the square, where a woman approaches him to inquire, "What's your name?"

"Hugo," he answers.

"Ah," she says, "so you're Hans and Julia's son, right?"

"Right."

"They were wonderful people. There wasn't a person in the city who they didn't always give something of their generosity."

Hugo is momentarily gladdened, but simultaneously saddened, because of all the townspeople he chanced to meet, not one ever disclosed the news of the well-known bestial Nazi concentration "camp thirty-three," where his parents were incarcerated and, apparently, finally liquidated.

However bitter and frustrated at not having heard any formal news of his parents' demise, Hugo still continues to walk fitfully, stopping at all those places that never seem to leave his memory, especially those homes of the Jews, who once lived above the many shops, now entirely occupied by strangers. And at the windows and balconies were women and children standing, chatting, and laughing. Hugo instinctively feels that a "different wind seems to be blowing in the air," which he attempts to identify but fails. Worst of all is the sight of the pharmacy building, which has now become a grocery store.

While visiting these places, Hugo suddenly recalls an incident that occurred one late Friday afternoon, while on a leisurely walk, oft taken with his father, during which they meet some bearded Jews on their way to the synagogue. Seeing those Jews, his father fell silent. While answer-

ing his young son's question whether those Jews were "real Jews," he offered a long reply that "would confuse things rather than clarify them." Hugo also remembered his father's "embarrassment at such unexpected meetings and the silence that accompanied them."

Even more staggering for Hugo was his heartbreaking ultimate experience during these local reminiscences. He enters his own home, and is greeted by an old man, a possible Ukrainian, who calls out to him loudly and gruffly:

"Who are you?"

"My name is Hugo Mansfeld."

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to *our* house."

"Get out of here. I don't want ever to see you again," said the old man, waving his cane.

Hugo leaves, disturbed and shaken.

II.

This reader's first "meeting" with Aharon Appelfeld actually occurred some ten years ago, in an extended review of his 12th novel, *The Conversion,* which, incidentally, appeared in an issue of *Tradition* quarterly.[2] Both that work and the current *Blooms of Darkness,* also published by Schocken Books, reflect much that has made his fictional creativity a mark of distinction. And in this current work, there linger echoes and themes of such topics as "assimilation, disorientation, alienation and accommodation, weakening of faith, apostasy, physical and emotional dislocation, the Bible and secular studies." All of which give his fiction a strong following on both sides of the Atlantic. He has certainly proved himself an engaging author.

But, occasionally, one is motivated, as in this particular work, to approach this piece of fiction with an impersonal voice that does not sound like the product of some professional or academic training but rather from a very personal point of view in a voice that does not necessarily include a complete identification with the main character but, rather, with an understanding of its idiosyncratic nature.

Since Mariana is the major, if not the only significant character in this novel, and has achieved—by saving a young, innocent child from annihilation, the incredible honor, tradition teaches, of a "share in the world to come"—why, pray tell, does Appelfeld assign this honor, however deserved, to a prostitute? There were, we know, hundreds, if not thou-

sands, of simple or selected non-Jews during the Holocaust who saved children, and even adults, at their own risk from violent execution, all accomplished, we know, in a total silence, without rewards, including sexual, of any kind.

And however much one admires Mariana's constant supplications to her God, as recorded here, why has she still committed herself to satisfy her "three" or more "visitors" every night, in her perfumed salon? What changes did all those extended prayers have on her personal life, if any? Prayers hardly substitute for vagrancy, or worse.

Furthermore, from the author's brief references to Hugo's parents, one is led to believe that in their lives they were lost not only for being Jewish, but also because they neglected their simple Jewishness; and, in Julia's case, because, in her youth, she attended Gymnasium, a nomenclature for a secular education, rather than a totally Jewish one, to become a stranger to her past. As for Hans, what, pray tell, does our author imply, almost casually, to be so destructive in a secular education, when, in a multitude of cases, it is accompanied by a study and practice of classic Jewish faith and practice?

Frankly, however much Hugo, Julia, and Mariana are encouraged, or self-inspired, to read the Bible, one still insists on inquiring, for what real purpose? How would such a reading have possibly changed their daily lives? In which way? Would it strongly influence, for example, their practice of Judaism? A mere reading? How? For himself, Appelfeld relates, it helped him fully appreciate the beauty of its language. And, he adds, importantly, a better understanding of Jewish *myth.* And eventually, its practice, and "its beliefs from the Bible to Agnon."

What Appelfeld must remember, as he must surely appreciate, is that without the daily *practice,* and/or *study*, of the *content* of the Bible and Talmud, their linguistics, however inspiring, motivating, and enthralling, are ultimately meaningless. Language alone is a sort of serious and fascinating identification but not necessarily a religious guide to its practice, or the saving of lives, of whatever kind, in distress.

Otherwise, doom would surpass bloom.

NOTES

1. Aharon Appelfeld, *Blooms of Darkness,* Schocken Books, 2010.
2. *Tradition* 35:3, Fall 2001, pp. 6–19.