

LEHRHAUS

Over Shabbos

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THE “BETWEEN-THE-LINES” FAITH OF RABBI HERSHEL SCHACHTER

[ZEV ELEFF](#)

In May 2011, Rabbi Hershel Schachter defended himself against criticism levied in an Orthodox Union quarterly. In the previous issue of the OU magazine, Rabbi Schachter had contributed an [essay](#) in a symposium on *mesorah*, the chain of rabbinic transmission that sits at the core of modern-day Orthodox faith. For him, especially, *mesorah* is most sacred, steered by unimpeachably righteous scholars and helped along by divine intervention. Both are needed to preserve the tradition’s “purity.” No one should have been much surprised by Rabbi Schachter’s article. He had articulated similar points of view in prior writings. Still, one letter-writer, Rabbi Yitzchak Blau, on the grounds of providing “added nuance,” offered a [few critiques](#) for the OU’s readership to consider.

Rabbi Schachter’s view on rabbinic decision making is important, given his station in the Modern Orthodox orbit. He is, by almost all accounts, the leading rabbinic figure at Yeshiva University, within the Rabbinical Council of America, and associated with the Orthodox Union.

His authority cannot be measured by usual ecclesiastical metrics. Unlike his teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the Rav, Rabbi Schachter does not hold any official position within these organizations that would register him with this sort of rabbinic power. At YU, Rabbi Schachter is a ranking *Rosh Kollel*—and one of the [first appointments](#) in a long line of Rav-taught *roshei yeshiva*—but his signature does not appear on the ordination certificates. Nor is he chairman of the RCA’s Halacha Committee.

Rabbi Schachter’s unparalleled and unofficial rank is supported by his [erudition](#), scholarship, charisma, and the [respect accorded to him](#), in the main, by several generations of Yeshiva University students.

All this makes serious study of Rabbi Schachter’s *mesorah* theology that much more compelling. For him, the role of rabbinic authority is not just a matter of keeping social order or maintaining uniformity within Orthodox religious behavior. It’s a theology.

A Theology of Rabbinic Authority

God protects the transmission of His legislation, no matter how far it progresses beyond the pages of the Talmud. Long ago, Nahmanides (Deuteronomy 17:11) affirmed this notion. But it goes much farther for Rabbi Schachter. That *halakhah* has journeyed a sometimes-sinuous path is untroubling. God, Rabbi Schachter would have it, navigated halakhic interpretation that way, beyond the limited comprehension of people.

God steered His faith, hitting human checkpoints we call Maimonides, Rabbi Yosef Caro, the Vilna Gaon, Rabbi Yitzhak Elhanan Spektor, Rabbi Soloveitchik, and Rabbi Moshe Feinstein.

God utilized these deserving men to calibrate the twists and turns that textual study alone cannot anticipate. For Rambam, that might have meant dispatching with scores of rulings previously issued by prior generations in the Gaonic period. Rabbi Yitzhak Elhahan's voluminous writings are filled with pathbreaking decisions informing religious observance in Eretz Yisrael and regarding *agunot*. Of course, the Rav and Reb Moshe instructed their students and followers on a variety of *humras* and *kulas*.

At the end of the day, these individuals and countless others became more than just the sum total of their acumen and training, which are important, too. They learned to read between-the-lines, endowed with a rabbinic intuition. This non-textual, almost-magical sixth sense inspired them to issue courageous decisions to innovate and change, and made clear when to hold a more conservative line.

Rabbi Schachter's students are very familiar with his halakhic theology. We learned more and more about it in his daily lectures, particularly in his Thursday morning discourses on the weekly Torah portion. We encountered it in the stories he [tells](#), and while studying his novellae and reading his various treatments on the Rav.

Now, two recently published authorized books based on Rabbi Schachter's teachings provide a portal of entry for a broader audience. The first work is a collection of Rabbi Schachter's thoughts on the weekly Torah portion, aptly titled [Rav Schachter on the Parsha](#). The second is *Divrei Sofrim*, an eight-chapter primer on the Oral Law, its reception, and bindingness (there was a somewhat slighter earlier edition published in 2013 and a final edition is set to appear in 2018).

In this second work, Rabbi Schachter offers the following sentiment: "There is a letter of the law and there is the spirit of the law. To discern the spirit of the law, one must be expert in the law itself. One who has a sense of the 'big picture' can perceive what direction is pleasing to God" (62). From the other perspective, God ensures that there are big-picture-sensing scholars to move rabbinic tradition forward.

The "spirit of the law" rhetoric had been converted from its Pauline origins to an Orthodox Jewish tagline back in nineteenth century Lithuania to indicate the importance of *humra*, stringency, as that community encountered the modern world. Unlike in those times, Rabbi Schachter gives it the heft of a theological backing.

Rabbinic Intuition

Rabbi Schachter's point of view is far from understudied. Rachel Adler, Adam Ferziger, Lawrence Kaplan, David Landes, and Alan Yuter have all written or presented papers on various aspects of Rabbi Schachter's interpretation of Jewish law and authority. In particular, Yuter and Landes rightly seized upon the importance of "intuition" in Rabbi Schachter's conception of rabbinic decision making.

To my knowledge, though, Rabbi Schachter did not respond to any of these evaluations. Rabbi Blau's 2011 critique, however, elicited a response, one that offered a good description of Rabbi Schachter's notion of rabbinic intuition. One of Rabbi Blau's criticisms harped on Rabbi Schachter's interpretation of two of the twentieth century's leading Orthodox rabbinic luminaries. The latter argued that for Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook and Rabbi Soloveitchik religious change could only be executed by those who display "only the purest of intentions." No matter how cogent, no matter how urgent, any alteration to Jewish law required unquestionable commitment to the halakhic process—above all else.

Both Rav Kook and the Rav had indeed made that point, but in elaborating upon a specific tale in the Talmud. Rabbi Schachter's interlocutor could not accept the broad application to every realm of halakhic decision making. More interesting, still, is that Rabbi Schachter would not consider any alternative:

Rabbi Blau is correct that the Rav and Rav Kook were speaking about a specific innovation, but his implication that other innovations do not require purity of heart is incorrect. People acquire attitudes from a wide variety of sources, many of them antithetical to Torah values. Rashi writes on Shemot 28:4: "And my heart leads me to understand." In Yiddish folklore, they point out that this comment of Rashi is problematic. How is he allowed to follow the dictates of his heart?

In this instance, Rashi found his research inadequate to describe the apron worn by the high priest. Instead, Rashi relied on intuition (לבי אומר לי). He supposed that the garment was something like the kind adorned by French horsebacking noblewomen.

How could Rashi merely proffer a guess? The Yiddish adage and the nineteenth century scholar, Rabbi Yehiel Meir Lifschitz of Gustinin, [offered](#) the very same response. Rashi's lifelong devotion to Torah permitted him to tap into some divine inspiration. Or, as I've heard Rabbi Schachter—who has used Rashi's formulation in his own writing (see *Bi-Ikvei Ha-Tzon*, no. 4)—explain it on different occasions, there are some challenging questions that require "reading between-the-lines," a skill mastered by only the most expert scholars.

The short-lived debate in the pages of OU's *Jewish Action* betokens the central theme in Rabbi Schachter's theology: halakhic intuition. For Rabbi Schachter, halakhic intuition is that God-given ability to read in-between-the-lines of the Talmud, or, as he once put it, to imagine the missing pieces of a halakhic jigsaw puzzle. Both metaphors arrive at the very same point: halakhic intuition is a quality borne out of the humble realization that no amount of Torah knowledge or rabbinic stature suffices to answer the most difficult, sometimes meta-halakhic questions. More important, perhaps, it's a trait scaffolded by faith that God directs the course of halakhic transmission.

The Checkpoints of Tradition

Not everyone can be a checkpoint in the history of *halakhah*, the people Rabbi Schachter calls the *ba'alei ha-mesorah*. Much of it is God's choosing. But, claims Rabbi Schachter, there is some human ingenuity involved.

How does someone become worthy? [According](#) to Rabbi Reuvain Grozovsky, his father-in-law, Rabbi Barukh Ber Lebowitz, liked to speak about *Mesorat Avot* and the scholars who, after apprenticing with a master teacher, knew best “how to ask a questions; how to offer solutions; and to confront cases of doubt (*safek*).” This is an education, contended Reb Barukh Ber, that defied the usual sort of genius training: “Torah, as they say, is acquired by the principles and methods of Torah, not with human logic.”

In other words, to rehearse the metaphors, they read between-the-lines, sorting and prioritizing passages of Talmud and its commentators; intuiting when to negate precedents and introduce new ideas; and whatever else might be needed to see the impossible-to-complete puzzle. The stuff that defies regular, discernible “logic.”

Rabbi Schachter has his favorite rabbinic adages, and Reb Barukh Ber’s is one of them. Of course, deep knowledge of *halakhah* and expert familiarity with an assortment of other realms is a must for deciding matters of Jewish law. More critical, still, Rabbi Schachter would have it, is knowing how to ask the tough questions.

Most important, though, is God. Once asked, however properly, He helps out with the answers. That’s Rabbi Schachter’s faith.

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RACISM REDUX

[CHAIM TRACHTMAN](#)

It is very gratifying to have readers as thoughtful as [Elli Fischer](#). No one wants to write an [essay](#) that falls like the proverbial tree in an uninhabited forest. I am also glad to have the opportunity to respond.

It is worth mentioning at the outset that there are scholars who refute the claim that Rabbinic Judaism is the primary source of anti-Black racism, that the accusation cannot be substantiated based on a close reading of the relevant rabbinic texts. David Goldenberg [marshals](#) considerable support that the Curse of Ham were a later invention of Christian and Muslim scholars, and not the rabbis.

Moreover, it is a mistake to read modern ideas about race into biblical texts. Thus, Fischer's analysis of the *Mishnah* in *Negaim* and his conclusion that the priestly evaluation of a questionable new skin lesion, *tzara'at*, and impure versus non-pathological and clean, was a clinical determination is consistent with the assertion that the rabbis collectively were not inherently racist.

However, as I suggested in my essay, unfortunately, the Torah or the extensive oral tradition is often not the final word on how the community of believers comes to its worldview. People seem to be hardwired to read moral significance into biological difference, the pseudoscience of phrenology being a good example. Genetic studies confirm the overwhelming similarity in DNA between people. A [recent report](#) in *Science* indicates that variation in a handful of genes that control skin color are widely distributed regardless of geographical location and probably were present in species that existed before man first appeared on earth.

Our ancestors had a heterogeneous mixture of genes, some that led to a darker skin and others that resulted in a lighter pigmentation. Differences in the expression of genes regulating pigmentation may then have emerged in response to regional variations in ambient light exposure. The story is clearly complicated but these findings undermine a biological basis for race per se. That being said, I am not expecting this paper to change the agenda on race in short order, among Jews or any other group for that matter.

The fact that people will define themselves based on relatively trivial differences, as Fischer points out, is also undeniably true. Freud recognized this and coined the term "narcissism of minor differences:" the idea that it is precisely the seemingly minor differences between people who are otherwise very much alike that form the basis of feelings of strangeness and hostility between them.

The fact remains that people have no trouble finding those differences and imposing a hierarchy of value on them. Membership in a group implies status and privilege. Being part of the Jewish ethnos enabled inheritance in the land of Israel, reward for good deeds and entry into the world to come.

Woody Allen recognized this when he said he would never want to be a member of a group that would let him in. Most people are not quite as self-effacing (or funny) as him and treat membership as bestowal of rights. The danger is that gaining privilege can easily morph into feelings of superiority and denial of the very same privileges to others.

To be clear, I am not attributing racism to any religious system per se. Judaism is a rich fabric that contains particularist and universalist elements. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik saw the role of the Jewish people as trying to balance their covenantal role with their duty as members of the human race. Christianity at its origin was all about universal access to belief in Jesus. In a recent reading of the Koran, Gary Wills [highlights](#) the openness of Islam to shared monotheistic elements in Judaism and Christianity.

But if biology and minor differences can be used to define superiority, then adding ideas about divine origins of groups only makes the mix more combustible. Conversations that begin innocently with “Jews are obviously unique and special, count the number of Nobel Prize winners, add up their charitable giving” can quickly veer off the tracks into more dangerous territory.

The fault does not lie with the Jewish religion or the rabbis. I am attributing it to the way we are constructed as human beings. Yuval Levin has [observed](#) that the rabbis had a healthy degree of skepticism about the perfectibility of people as individuals or society as a whole. The Torah represents a realistic attempt to bridge the gap between our earthbound human nature and our divine aspirations. Keeping criticism of others to our group is my contribution to this approach to living and my hedge against racism.

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ON SUBJECTIVITY AND PLURALISM: SPARKS OF RAV SHAGAR'S THOUGHT

[YEHUDA \(UDI\) DVORKIN](#)

As a student of Rav Shagar's thought and an instructor at his yeshiva, I read with great interest the various articles published at The Lehrhaus on Rav Shagar's thought. It is impossible to summarize such a complex thinker as Rav Shagar's in one short essay, and I do not think there is need nor interest in my defending his teachings. Still, my sense is that it will still be helpful to share a few thoughts relevant to this ongoing discussion.

Rav Shagar's Thought, Publications, and English Publications

First of all, it is important to note that the publication of Rav Shagar's thought has only just begun. The Institute for the Advancement of Rav Shagar's Writings has published eighteen books, but many more volumes stand to be published, on topics ranging from his lectures on *Moreh Nevukhim* to Hasidut, to *halakhah*, to more Talmud analyses.

The state of publication of his work in English is far behind the Hebrew. Several articles have been translated and/or analyzed at Alan Brill's Kavvanah blog, The Lehrhaus, and on other sites. Most recently and prominently, the recently published translation of several of Rav Shagar's core essays by Maggid Books, *Faith Shattered and Restored: Judaism in the Postmodern Age*, has offered a service to the English-speaking reader, making some of the more important essays available.

I hope that there are both more publications in English of Rav Shagar's work and more discussion of the meaning of Postmodern Orthodox in the future. But we must be clear about the fact that those who have not read his Hebrew publications (and even those who have!) are attempting to understand the man and his approach based on a limited corpus of evidence. This is not to disqualify anyone not familiar with all of Rav Shagar's writings from holding an opinion or participating in the conversation, but it is important to note that many of his teachings are not yet publicly available.

Rav Shagar on Subjectivity

I grew up in Jerusalem, with minimal exposure to postmodernism or the conception of a narrative-based society. I found myself, as did many others of my generation, asking tough questions about Jewish identity and belief, *halakhah*, and gender issues. I sought answers.

This quest led me to move, both geographically and religiously, between communities, denominations, and approaches to Judaism. Wherever I looked, people claimed they had all the answers. Clear answers. Definite answers. They knew precisely the approach to take, the halakhic revolution that would resolve any lingering problems. Some of these approaches were persuasive, authentic, and real. But I found myself always asking another question, raising another reality at odds with this approach.

It is only when I arrived at Yeshivat Siach Yitzchak that I encountered an institution, co-founded by Rav Shagar, that didn't claim to have all the answers. Its current Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Yair Dreifuss, was more focused on listening and asking questions rather than providing answers. Not only were my experiences subjective to him, but his thoughts on them were subjective, as well.

As I invited him to listen to my narrative, He made it clear he can only relate to it from within his narrative and experience and that he cannot give an objective opinion but rather engage in an attempt to understand my narrative.

Subjectivity is dangerous. It is always relative and never definite. It assumes that our narrative is only our narrative, and that it is not necessarily a part of an all-encompassing truth. It allows reality to shift in form, and allows people to view reality through their own eyes. If we believe halakhah and tradition are eternal, then how can we reconcile this with people's divergent realities? More importantly, do we want to reconcile them?

Rav Shagar negated this question entirely. He understood that we must live fully as Jews while remaining within our personal narrative. We live in a world where our freedom to act subjectively is perhaps the last truth. He saw the world as it is, including the impossibility of demanding that anyone give up on their experience or objectify their life.

The condition for a covenant with the Other is my belief in his freedom: that it will not impinge on mine and will truly lead to what is good. Only thus can I recognize the Other as a subject, without objectifying him. That is the deep meaning of recognizing the other's divine image. It requires seeing to the root of the other's soul on high, at the level of consciousness known as *yehida*, above all physical and spiritual garments. (*Faith Shattered*, 84).

Belief, Not Knowledge

In our postmodern world of competing Narratives, *halakhah* is only one of many. It is also true that we are unable to make *halakhah* objective, as we have lost the ability to speak of objectivity. But what if we are not expected to make *halakhah* objective? Maybe our obligation is not to view *halakhah* as the inevitable truth but to choose to remain our tradition. To see *halakhah* as important because it is *our* tradition and *our* truth, based on *our* subjective experiences.

In the postmodern experience, we no longer compete with other religions or denominations for the absolute truth, but struggle internally to determine our personal truth. We thus have the option to choose to live in a narrative where God's word is our Torah, where *halakhah* is our way, and where history was written at Sinai.

We don't know. We believe.

If the modern world asks humanity to choose between faith or knowledge, to build overarching, objective superstructures, the postmodern world rejects this completely. It allows us to believe and to return to a more traditional sense of faith:

My encounters with various believers and nonbelievers will not weaken my belief, but rather strengthen it, for contending with the outside view of my faith has the power to free it of its subjectivity. Moreover, the process of becoming acquainted with alternatives to my own faith, and choosing it anew nonetheless, allows me to form a “face-to-face” bond that is more exalted than the superficial “back-to-back” relationship ... Traditional theological debates that sought absolute, transcendental criteria to determine which belief reigns supreme are meaningless in a postmodern world, but that should not impugn our perseverance in the faith of our fathers (*Faith Shattered*, 117).

Rav Shagar on Pluralism

Rav Shagar was not a pluralist. Pluralism, at its core, attempts to bridge the gap between the objective reality of truth and the possibility or desire to accept multiple objective truths. The pluralist’s solution, asserting the existence of a multiplicity of truths is modern to the core, at least in its original version. Postmodernism, at least for some of its thinkers (and critics), deconstructs the idea of a real, objective truth, thus negating the entire question.

I can live within my narrative where I truly believe my way is right and others are wrong. However, simultaneously, *be-neshimah ahat*, I am not invalidating other narratives. Narratives that believe I am wrong. Yes, this is a paradox. But it is the paradox of our time. In one of Rav Shagar's teachings of the Akedah he writes

A conceited, all-knowing religious stance renders the trial, and with it the entire religious endeavor, a sham. The trial, along with a religious lifestyle and a connection to God, can exist only in the context of a humble personality that is content in not knowing. A conceited stance stems from pride, and it is the voice of Satan. The trial will forever be associated with a subject who by nature is in the dark. The objectivization of the religious trial invalidates it. Hence Abraham’s response to Satan: Although he is aware of the objective truth, he does not allow his knowledge to detract one whit from the gravity of the trial (*Faith Shattered*, 13-14).

In a postmodern era, where we are challenged not to make our awareness become truly objective in our life, our sacred subjectivity is our trial. We ought not to objectify our *dalet amot*, our *halakhah*, but to live humbly within in it. That same humility can also help us see the Divine in everything.

Judging Others Favorably

We live in a world where *limmud zekhut*, finding the merit in others and judging them fairly, is sorely needed.

Some have argued that an approach which sees the Divine in everything is liable to lose its grip on Halakha. However, such a loss of faith is due not to a particular theological or postmodern approach *but* to the very era we are living in. We live in a world where, rather than joining organized, traditional religion, people are either choosing to live without faith or are creating their own personal “faiths.”

Robert Bella and Richard Madsen describe this phenomenon they call "Sheilaism" in their *Habits of the Heart*. One might see this reality as negative, but it is nevertheless our reality. Our only option is to choose our religion from within our narrative. Rav Shagar did not fear this moment in our history but saw it as an opportunity for finding a deeper faith.

In our world, we cannot turn to our students, who live and breathe a world without boundaries, and tell them that there are clear, objective boundaries. We must listen to their experiences, to their narratives and look for the Divine within. The shattering of the modern world into an infinite number of narratives, stories, and opinions—each of which is part of reality, (or maybe of infinite realities)—creates something new. This provides an opportunity, a real possibility for *emunah*, for a deeper faith. Where every human experience becomes a narrative, it is only Hashem that remains certain:

We come to understand that that which exists is the result of one outcome out of millions of possibilities contained in the Infinite, Blessed Be He. Thus relativism leads to a kind of faith on a mystic level: at this level, mysticism is not a game or a pretense, but an expression of the myriad possibilities that are inherent in the Divine. The crisis of postmodernity can thus break idols and statues—for nothing is absolute but God himself—and bring us closer to an unmediated encounter with God (*Luhot ve-Shivrei Luhot*, 401).

Postmodern Messianism?

We live in a complicated time, but also one that allows for optimism, maybe even messianism. This shattering and proliferation of truths can lead us to a reality of a multiplicity of understandings of God, *ka-mayim la-yam mekhasim*, “as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9). Just as no one drop defines the ocean but we know it is a part of the ocean when we see it, we might not see how each narrative comprises the Divine, but viewed holistically it is clear.

Are there risks? Certainly. Do we have all the answers? No. We can only trust and believe. In today’s reality trusting in ourselves is the only option. As Rav Shagar puts it:

Rav Yoelish disqualifies the authoritative, exclusive power of the leading rabbis to determine the ‘true’ Torah path, and instead describes his time as one where “the generation leads its leaders.” Therefore, his personal credo—one that he shares with those who turn to him—is to know how to act according to one’s internal truths of knowledge and righteousness.

This advice seems to me especially pertinent for our chaotic world, in a time when the Jewish world presents so many divergent, conflicting paths. It is then that man is called to act with integrity, following an internally-directed upright Judaism, believing with both humility and certainty that he is doing that which G-d has demanded. There is no requirement for man to ‘cheat’ himself, as it were. At the same time, any ‘truth’ can easily be there one moment and gone the next. But if he acts with integrity and honesty and prays to G-d to protect him from failure and misled beliefs, then even if he has “erred” he is not truly making an error: for that is

what God asks of him in an era when “man does what is right in his eyes” (Lessons on Likutei Moharan, 349-350).

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MIRVIS'S COMPLAINT

[RISA MILLER](#)

The latest addition to the burgeoning subgenre of 'off-the-derekh' memoirs is Tova Mirvis's [The Book of Separation](#). Mirvis's three published novels, which oftentimes [caricature](#) Orthodox Jews and Judaism, turn out to have portended her personal choices.

In her memoir, she sheds her Orthodox skin and leaves her marriage. Mirvis reduces a lifetime of religious observance to a series of 'thou shalt's and 'thou shalt not's, and she finds increasing personal fulfillment in her secular 'coming out.' At last she can use her iPhone on Shabbat, trade services on Rosh Hashanah for a hike in Acadia National Park, and introduce her children to Halloween trick-or-treating and non-kosher pizza.

Mirvis grew up in an Orthodox family in Memphis, Tennessee, where her family has lived comfortably for five generations. Her father is a physician, her mother is an artist, and Mirvis benefited from an Ivy league undergraduate and graduate school education. Thanks to her professionally accomplished husband—whose long hours at his law firm are a sore subject—she doesn't appear to have needed a day job to support her fiction writing. She has three healthy children and supportive, loving parents.

Her first car was a Volvo station wagon; she and her husband bought their first house in Newton, Massachusetts, when the median house price was close to \$800,000. So, unlike some other OTD memoirs, this one does not include social class striving, poverty, deprivation, mental illness, abuse, or xenophobia.

The set piece here is psychic pulse taking: gentle, articulate and adolescent. She juggles the story in several time frames which at least increases the tension. There are three tropes: One, love for her children, eloquently expressed and achingly beautiful. Two, good girl/bad girl: "*Be good*, said this teacher. *Be good*, the community said. *Be good*, my name ('Tova' means 'good' in Hebrew) reminded me ... There was one way to be good and there were infinite ways to be bad." Three, the claustrophobic, 'I can't breathe' trope: "A few minutes before Shabbat officially starts, the air becomes thick with prohibition."

Mirvis contends that she is not obligated to write anything good about Orthodoxy; fair enough. She fulfills the disobligation with an aggregate of seductive insider details and few aspects of traditional Judaism are spared her kvetching: Shabbat cooking, *shul* going, sleeve length, *mikveh* ladies, her son's circumcision. Her hats hurt, her wig hurts, her fall hurts, her curly hair is hard to comb before she immerses in the *mikveh*.

On the same day the *Book of Separation* came through my mail slot, I happened to pull the memoir [Hillbilly Elegy](#) by J. D. Vance off the library shelf. Vance was born into an impoverished, addiction

ridden, often promiscuous Appalachian family, and by dint of his own hard work ended up graduating Yale Law School and learning how to sustain healthy relationships in the workplace as well as in a healthy marriage.

I couldn't help but see how this rags-to-riches story reflected on Mirvis's memoir, making Mirvis's conflicts seem like what a young friend of mine calls 'first world problems'. But what's more of a fair comparison is that Vance, no less embedded in his hillbilly culture than Mirvis was in Orthodoxy, uses the stumbling blocks of his background to—as the saying goes—turn his life into a 'corner stone'. He responds to his very difficult childhood with sincere introspection, focusing on growth, gratitude, and forward movement instead of blame.

The target audience of the *Book of Separation* is a readership that is not literate in Jewish sources or resources and wouldn't know what clarity and depth to demand from Mirvis's narrative or what questions to ask. For example, Mirvis identifies herself as a feminist, and the voices of all those rabbis and teachers she deems misogynist occupy a good deal of space—on the page and in her mind. But Mirvis brushes aside her gap year in Israel and never once pursues the abundant feminist and female leaders and scholars in Israel—and in Boston.

In fact, there's a renowned, feminist institution of Jewish studies for women that gives classes right in her neighborhood. Alternatively, she never reflects on how her yearning for a fully secular life may be a failure of her chosen affiliation, Modern Orthodoxy, as it fails to appropriately balance secular and religious impulses.

Furthermore, Mirvis doesn't even pay lip service to a single core extractable value of Jewish life—not even *tikkun olam* or social justice, to take an overused example—though Mirvis is certainly capable of thinking of many more. We never hear about Mirvis giving, volunteering, donating, or campaigning for the less fortunate. I would have even taken Bernie Sanders, LGBTQ rights, or global warming. Instead, Mirvis remains mired in the solipsism of her own dissatisfaction.

In the end, Mirvis's ingratitude, rationalization, and blaming are just as disconcerting as her inversion of values. Her choices make important things like Shabbat and *kashrut* trivial and disposable, and she creates elaborate, metaphoric, almost apocryphal meaning for that route to non-kosher pizza.

Perhaps the average reader who does not know what questions to ask and what additional information to demand will in fact identify with this memoir, root for her 'liberation', and laud her 'courage'. Others will find it a sad and sobering expression of spiritual affliction, whose cure might just be—to Mirvis's dismay—more of what ails her.

Risa Miller couldn't help thinking that it would be perfect to include the last line of [Portnoy's Complaint](#) in this review: "So, [said the doctor] Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?" Miller is the recipient of the PEN New England Discovery Award and the author of [Welcome to Heavenly Heights](#) and [My Before and After Life](#).

INTRODUCING THE LEHRHAUS 2.0

For the past year, The Lehrhaus has been excited to consistently bring you wide-ranging content on important topics to the Orthodox Jewish community and beyond.

Having just passed our one year anniversary, we are grateful for the overwhelming positive response.

We are reaching more and more unique visitors each month—affirming our belief that there is a strong need for Jewish content that is not rancorous and divisive, but thoughtful and engaging.

In order to better accomplish the mission of The Lehrhaus, we have updated our website so that you can more easily engage the great content we are committed to bring our readership week in and week out. And in addition, we have created new individualized author pages so that you can get to know all the amazing people that have written for the site of the past year.

Check out the new [homepage](#) as well as the individualized [author pages](#) and let us know [what you think](#). We hope you enjoy The Lehrhaus's new look!

To continue on this mission, however, we will need your support.

The Lehrhaus is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt non-profit.

None of the members of the editorial board receive any compensation—all of us working on this project do so because of a commitment to The Lehrhaus mission.

Until now, we have operated The Lehrhaus with generous start-up funding from a couple of foundations. However, now in year two, we are asking our readership to consider supporting

The Lehrhaus in a number of ways:

1. Donations: consider [donating](#) to The Lehrhaus on a one-time or recurring basis. Any amount—from \$10 to \$360—will help support our operating expenses. <https://www.thelehrhaus.com/donate/>
2. Sponsor Lehrhaus Over Shabbos: Consider sponsoring our extremely popular “[Lehrhaus Over Shabbos](#)” packets, maybe in memory or in honor of a loved one. Sponsors will be

recognized on the front page of the packet and sponsorship for one week is \$54; for a month is \$180. <https://www.thelehrhaus.com/sponsor-lehrhaus-shabbos/>

The Lehrhaus also hopes to support operations in two more ways, which you may notice from time to time.

First, The Lehrhaus will also be rolling out some minimal advertising on the site. Our commitment to our readers is that all advertisers will be first-rate Jewish institutions working towards the same objective as The Lehrhaus—promoting engaging and dynamic Jewish content that is meant to both educate and inspire.

As we launch, those advertisers include:

1. [Yeshiva University](#)
2. [Koren Publishers](#)
3. [Shalhevet High School](#) and [Shalhevet Institute](#)
4. [Jewish Review of Books](#)

If your institution fits this same description and is interested in advertising, please do [reach out](#).

The Lehrhaus is also now an [Amazon Affiliate](#) and will be including Amazon links for books, which will provide some additional support if readers purchase books via those links.

All told, we very much hope these changes will enhance your experience on our site and we look forward to continuing to bringing you the thoughtful and engaging content you have come to expect from The Lehrhaus.

Best,
The Lehrhaus Editorial Board