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LEKH LEKHA

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MY "CHAVRUSA" RAV TENDLER

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The Talmud records an opinion that *Moshe Rabbeinu* wrote the final words of the Torah in tears (*Menahot* 30a and *Bava Batra* 15a). And while only *Moshe Rabbeinu* could have the benefit of God dictating the words to him when he lacked composure, I pray that God will help guide my hand to eulogize my rebbe, Rabbi Dr. Moshe Dovid Tendler *zt"l*.

I always advise my congregants when they lose a loved one that during *sha'at himum* (when the pain is fresh) it is nearly impossible to adequately eulogize their dearly departed. Nonetheless, there is a value in sharing what we can muster with the short notice that we are granted.

Rav Tendler, thank God, lived a long and fulfilling life. One might even say that now is actually a time to *celebrate* his legacy and impact. However, it still remains challenging for me to internalize that reality because I was granted merely the last three years with him - and so, for completely selfish reasons, I have a difficult time coming to terms with his loss. Nevertheless we spent considerable time together during this final chapter of his life. In fact, I spent one of those years learning with Rav Tendler in what could be best termed a one-to-one "*chavrusa*" experience, despite the unfathomable disparity between us in Torah and general erudition. During these moments, I had the immense privilege of a sustained private interaction with Rav Tendler. Thus, while I am certainly not an authority on Rav Tendler's Halakhah and philosophy, I did have access to some exclusive insights and experiences.

Many have already summarized the Torah and academic achievements of Rav Tendler, in which they highlight his most well-known positions such as his opposition to the *kashrut* of swordfish, his insistence upon the rediscovery of *tekhelet*, and, of course, defining brain death as synonymous with the moment of halakhic death. In addition to Rav Tendler's personal positions, he offered unique glimpses into the mind of his esteemed father-in-law Rav Moshe Feinstein. In some instances, Rav Tendler wrote these insights publicly, such as his article in the Mesivta Tifereth Jerusalem's publication *Le-Torah Ve-Hora'ah: Sefer Zikaron Le-Maran Ha-Gaon Rav Moshe Feinstein*, where he delves into the halakhic analysis behind Rav Moshe's landmark decision to proceed with separating conjoined twins.

Yet being a student also gave me a unique glimpse into issues that were never published. For instance, I once inquired why Rav Moshe did not accept his own rationale to drink *halav Stam* as recorded in *Igrot Moshe (Yoreh De'ah 1:47)*. Rav Tendler replied that of course Rav Moshe believed in his own *heter*; in fact, many of the members of his own household relied upon it! Rather, Rav Tendler explained, Rav Moshe's true concern was that before he moved to America he had maintained the *minhag* to avoid *halav Stam*, and he would never annul a *minhag* if possible. This position was based on the Talmudic account (*Ketubot* 77b) of R. Yehoshua ben Levi defying the Angel of Death and being permitted to remain alive in The Garden of Eden because he never annulled a vow. (This explanation is novel and perplexing, as it does not seem to comport with the end of the responsum where Rav Moshe advises conscientious individuals to continue avoiding *halav Stam*. R. Shimshon Nadel told me that Rav Tendler believed that Rav Moshe was motivated to add this qualification out of sensitivity and concern for those in the industry who sacrificed and made

it their livelihood to provide *halav yisrael* for the Jewish people.)

Another edifying experience took place about two years ago when I began my rabbinic job search. At the time, Rav Tendler and I were learning "*bechavrusa*." When I told Rav Tendler that I would soon be entering the rabbinate, he strongly recommended that we study what he considered to be the most critical responsa of *Igrot Moshe* to prepare me for the practical issues I would face in the pulpit. Unfortunately, we never made it through all the responsa that Rav Tendler had planned, but he was kind enough to write them down and have his aide scan them for me.



Rav Tendler and the author learning together at Yeshiva University's Glueck Beit Midrash. (Photo Credit: R. Noah Marlowe)

While Rav Tendler had the utmost reverence for his father-in-law, he did not let that get in the way of his unquenchable quest for truth. And so, on the rare occasion that he disagreed with Rav Moshe, he did so respectfully and with little equivocation. For instance, Rav Tendler thought that Rav Moshe (*Igrot Moshe, Orah Hayyim* 1:99) took it a step too far when he classified those who keep their *shul* parking lots open and encourage people who will inevitably drive on Shabbat to attend as being a *meisit* (inciter, generally of idolatry) - far worse than the standard violation of *lifnei iver*. I remarked that I was glad to hear that Rebbe thought that, because my current *shul* has an open parking lot! (See Responsa *Minhat Shlomo* 1:31:1 and *Be-Ohalah Shel Torah, Orah Hayyim* 5:22 for justifications.)

After I had developed sufficient rapport with Rav Tendler, I wanted to find out how he met his wife Shifra, daughter of Rav Moshe Feinstein. But I was still a little bashful, so I phrased it as, "How did Rebbe become connected with Rav Moshe?" Rav Tendler immediately intuited what I was asking and related to me the following story: Apparently, back in the day, there was a library in the Lower East Side where all the Jewish kids would go to hang out. One day, when Rav Tendler was studying biology, a young woman

approached him to ask a "*shaylah*" in what she was studying. This woman was none other than Shifra Feinstein.

Now, Rav Moshe and Rav Tendler's father were both colleagues, and in some instances they even sat together on the same *beit din*. Some time in the future Rav Moshe inquired of Rav Tendler's father whether there was an interest to make a *shiddukh* between their children. When Rav Tendler was asked by his father if he would be amenable to such an arrangement, Rav Tendler replied that he appreciated the suggestion but he had already begun to pursue the idea on his own!

On a more poignant note, at the funeral, a number of the family members noted that Rav Tendler passed away on Shemini Atzeret, the very same day as his wife's birthday. They pointed out that while *tzadikim* are known to die on the same day they are born, perhaps God had arranged that Rav Tendler and his rebbetzin should be appropriately reunited as the ultimate birthday present for their *savta*. Indeed, he was reunited with the second half of his *neshamah* that had been born on that very day.

Rebbe was well known for his firmness and resolute nature. Even at age 93 he was working with a group of rabbis to combat liberal movements and ensure that the State of Israel retained some form of Orthodox halakhic family and identity standards. This was not, however, a contradiction to his gentleness and humility.



Rav Tendler dissecting a cow's udder during a Yoreh De'ah shiur at Yeshiva University.

In preparation for my pulpit interviews, I prepared a class on the topic *ha-hakham she-asar ein haveiro rashai le-hatir* (see *Niddah* 20b and *Avodah Zarah* 7a), which is essentially the Talmudic principle against “shopping for a *heter*.” Rav Tendler apparently adopted the opinion that the issue of a second rabbi contradicting the first rabbi’s *pesak* was due to the affront caused to the initial rabbi’s dignity (see Rashi, *Niddah* 20b s.v. “*mei-ikarah*”; Rosh, *Avodah Zarah* 1:3 for an opposing view). It would follow accordingly that the first rabbi may grant permission to the enquirer to seek a second opinion.

For example, when I brought up Rav Moshe’s hardline responsum on abortion (*Igrot Moshe, Hoshen Mishpat* 2:69), Rav Tendler told me that it might be best if I don’t come to him if I want a more lenient *pesak*. He did not back down on his beliefs, but he indicated that if needed I may seek recourse for my future congregants elsewhere. This demonstrated to me that the source of Rav Tendler’s forceful nature came not from a place of pride, God forbid, but from a passion for seeking and propounding what he understood to be the truth. However, Rav Tendler once remarked to me that he feared that he had been too harsh with some people and perhaps that is why Hashem sent him certain *yisurin* (tribulations). He would always say in Yiddish, “*es zel zayn a kaparah*” - whatever challenge God sends my way should serve as an atonement for my transgressions.

The importance of developing a well-grounded and sensitive outlook did not merely manifest in deed, but in Rav Tendler’s choice of study as well. Even though our primary *sefarim* were the Gemara, *Shulhan Arukh*, and *Eglei Tal*, Rav Tendler always consecrated time to teach *Midrash Rabbah* on Thursdays. He lamented how this *magnum opus* of our tradition’s wisdom had become mostly neglected. He stressed the importance of internalizing both the Halakhah as well as the ethics that our Sages offer us.

Indeed, while Rav Tendler was very conscientious about making the most of our time during *shiur*, he would answer the phone if there was a matter that he suspected to be urgent. On one occasion, Rav Tendler had just been informed that one of the RIETS staff members had a grandchild who was in the NICU at Hadassah Hospital in Israel. Upon hearing this, he immediately got on the phone with his granddaughter who works as a doctor there and had her check in on the family to offer support. This act of kindness gave the family back in America a measure of hope and reassurance.

Due to the need for me to balance my other responsibilities with my “*chavrusa*” with Rav Tendler there were days that I had no lunch break. Thankfully, Rebbe was very

understanding of my schedule and was amenable to my bringing lunch to our learning sessions. Every day I came with my Tupperware box of Honey Bunches of Oats and a thermos of milk packed from home. One time, I could not open the thermos, and noticing my struggles, Rav Tendler (who was 93 years old!) reached over and began to loosen the thermos open for me. And while he did not succeed, he had loosened it just enough that I was able to do the *makeh be-patish!* How many elderly *roshei yeshiva* would do that? It was the small moments like these that made Rav Tendler feel less like an imposing *Rosh Yeshiva* and more like a grandfatherly figure.

That same year, the university staff moved Rav Tendler’s *sefarim* to his new office and simply left them in huge boxes blocking off most of the room. I offered to help him sort the *sefarim* during my limited breaktime, but he was adamant that it would not be right for me to perform labor if YU would not compensate me for my time. I was deeply impressed with Rebbe’s principle and integrity. He did not want to come anywhere close to taking advantage of a willing helper.



The author and his wife make a socially-distanced visit to Rav Tendler during COVID-19.

After the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States, there was about a month when Rav Tendler did not yet have access to Zoom as he needed help setting up his computer (he was then 94 years old!) and instead called me on the phone. During this interim Zoom-less period, Rav Tendler shared with me the halakhic and communal challenges that he was attempting to navigate. He very badly wanted to reopen his *shul*, but the current public health guidance was to remain home. And while, of course, he complied, it still proved to be a heart-wrenching decision for him. Before the first Pesah of COVID-19, Rav Tendler reached out to bounce an idea off me. As is the custom, community members who

wish to sell their *hametz* will designate their rabbi via a *shtar harsha'ah*, a document that grants the rabbi power of attorney. Generally, the congregant concretizes this appointment by lifting the rabbi's handkerchief or pen. However, in order to prevent unnecessary interactions, Rav Tendler asked me if I thought that having his congregants drop off the document in his mailbox would be acceptable under the circumstances. While Rav Tendler clearly knew what he was doing, I was delighted and impressed that he double-checked his ideas with me, his student! This demonstrated a clear act of humility and willingness to seek the truth, regardless of the source.

My wife Marisa also had the opportunity to meet Rav Tendler. In 2019, we both learned together with Rav Tendler in his office at YU. And it was one of my most treasured moments. When we had finished our learning for the day, I asked if I could take a photo of the three of us. Before I could press the button on my phone, Rav Tendler interjected and instructed Marisa to keep her Gemara open. He explained that when people see this photo they should know that women can learn Gemara too!



Rav Tendler learning together with the author and his wife.

Rav Tendler was very forthright about what he believed to be the Torah's view on women, people who identify as LGBT, and a host of social matters. For instance, he often asked me, "*nu*, what is your wife cooking for you this Shabbos?" (One time he even chided Marisa for making chicken for Pesah - he exclaimed that such a holiday deserves meat!) Nonetheless, like his Rebbe Rav Soloveitchik, he propounded that women should also learn Gemara in order to appreciate the depth and sophistication that our rabbinic tradition has to offer. This, in his view, was not at odds with the gender norms that he saw as an

obvious part of Judaism (no different than how Rav Moshe addressed the matter in *Igrot Moshe, Orah Hayyim 4:49*).

Indeed, Rav Tendler did not see the differentiation of roles as an excuse to disrespect women. Rather, he argued that a man is supposed to give due honor to his wife. One time, in the middle of our Zoom learning, he noticed that I was suddenly distracted and inquired if everything was alright. I told him that Marisa had just come home from running errands and that I had given her a quick greeting. Rav Tendler responded to me, "That's it? When your wife comes in the door you are obligated to stand up for her!" Marisa still doesn't let me do that for her, but I try to take the moral of Rav Tendler's point to heart.



Rav Tendler persisting to give shiur shortly following a significant surgery.

R. Akiva once lamented to his student, R. Shimon bar Yohai, "More than the calf wants to suckle, the cow desires to nurse [its calf]" (*Pesahim 112a*). During Rav Tendler's final months in this world, he was constantly being discharged and then returned to the hospital for surgeries and long visits to the ICU. There was a significant lapse since I had last been able to speak to him, until one night, when I was at a close friend's wedding, I received a call. "It's Rebbe!" I exclaimed, and I ran outside the hall immediately to take the call. Everyone else at the table could not understand what had come over me, but it didn't matter. It had been so long since I last heard my Rebbe's voice, and I was eager to speak to him once more. But, to my great dismay, it was a very challenging conversation and I struggled exceedingly to make out the words that Rav Tendler was attempting to articulate. However, there was one sentence that I could fully understand - the one that he kept repeating over and over again: "The *seder ha-limmud*...Moshe, what's going to be with our *seder ha-limmud*?" And those were the final words I remember him uttering to me. Even in our final

conversation, all Rav Tendler could focus on was getting back to our regular learning as if nothing had changed. “What’s going to be with our *seder ha-limmud*?”

Alas, our *seder ha-limmud* has come to a solemn end. But I am left with the indelible impression that rebbe gave me. In

his final days all he could think about was how he could continue to teach and nurture his students. As his family remarked to me after his passing, that is what made him persist for as long as he did. יותר ממה שנהגל רוצה לינק פרה רוצה להניק

LEONARD COHEN FIVE YEARS ON: DEATH OF A LADIES’ KOHEN

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It is now Leonard Cohen’s fifth *yahrzeit*¹ and, though there has been a myriad of commemorative articles since “closing time,” as he would have referred to it, there is always room for another look at his Jewish legacy. Just as the ending of one cycle of Torah readings marks the beginning of the next, Cohen understood the blurring of beginnings and endings—*Closing time / Every new beginning / Comes from some other beginning's end*.

Yet, when remembering the ‘Jewish’ Leonard Cohen it would be a disservice to simply co-opt him and his poetry into any kind of conventional framework, let alone that of Judaism. Judging from all the tributes emanating from the religiously doctrinal members of his tribe that inundated the media since his death, one gets the impression that Cohen was an Orthodox, God-fearing man – a *shomer mitzvot*. For anyone who truly heard Cohen’s words, these platitudes are mouthed by those wholly unfamiliar with his oeuvre, desperately trying to claim a celebrity as one of their own. That would be bad enough. However, they also blaspheme the poet by molding him in their own image. To bend poetry to your will is already to drain it of its vitality. Leonard Cohen was all of the things these dilettantes wanted him to be, but he was also none of them. His entire career can be framed in a sense by his poetic improvisations on the *Kaddish*. Coupled with the fact that the prayer itself was the pretext for my personal encounters with him, that mournful veneration of God and His name animates my present *yahrzeit* tribute to him. In doing so I hope to restore in some small measure the elusiveness he and his work deserves, to indeterminately recall the artist he declared can only be known evanescently as *the distance you put between all the moments that we will be*.²

Cohen’s Amen to Kaddish:

I met Cohen nearly two decades ago at an annual Jewish Studies academic conference in Los Angeles where I had organized a panel dedicated to Leon Wieseltier’s *Kaddish*. To my mind *Kaddish* was and remains the most profound extended rumination on what has become the traditional doxology recited by mourners following the loss of an immediate family member. It deserved the attention of scholars across the spectrum of Jewish Studies. The discussants, coupled with Wieseltier’s response, measured up to the title of the session—*Kaddish: Mourning as a Delirium of Study*—presenting eclectic learned reflections on what is an active mourner’s sweeping engagement with *kaddish* and the gamut of its ramifications. What made this experience particularly delirious for me was that we were on the stage performing for Leonard Cohen who was silently and attentively sitting in the front row. He was *listening so hard that it hurts*, bearing a smile that gestured an *Amen*, as the track off his album released later at the age of 77 expressed—the track itself a meditation on mortality anticipating his own *kaddish*.³

The conference took place shortly after the release of Cohen’s album *Ten New Songs*, which included the track “Love Itself” dedicated to LW, or Leon Wieseltier. In light of the timing, location, and that, like his poem, the session was dedicated to his friend, I contacted his agent, inviting Cohen to attend. Instead of an expected brush off, I received a gracious response directly from Cohen expressing his thanks, interest, and hopeful intention to come should his schedule allow. What a *mentsch*, though I felt like those ephemeral flecks summoned in that track—*All busy in the sunlight / The flecks did float and dance / And I was tumbled up with them / In formless circumstance*—wrapped by their instantaneously dissipating joy and vitality. Thrilled by a direct communication from an iconic balladeer, revered

since adolescence, I was still skeptical that Cohen would actually show up. However, that *tumbling, dancing, and floating* took hold once again when he appeared just before the session convened, and discreetly took his seat, focused intensely for the duration of nearly two hours of presentations and question period.

Cohen's life and poetry mirror in some sense the profound struggle that fueled Wieseltier's delirious engagement with kaddish. A halakhic issue that so preoccupies the book offers a clue to it—the question of whether one can recite the *kaddish* for a sinner or heretic parent. Wieseltier's *Kaddish* addresses the exact converse: can one who was schooled in the strictures of tradition, but having become alienated from its statutory confines, return to its regulated patterns of conduct, and yet remain true both to his reasoned alienation (*apikorsus*), and love for Judaism's theoretical underpinnings? Cohen could only be “free” of his Jewishness *in his own way*, like that bird landing on those telephone wires he fixated on while secluded on an isolated Greek island, constraining his sought-after escape from civilization— *Like a bird on the wire / Like a drunk in a midnight choir / I have tried in my way to be free*. Cohen was preceded by a long line of Jewish iconoclasts who might have severed their Jewish cord but for the sounds of the *secret chord* of those Hallelujahs originally composed by King David. The chord's pitch still resonated harmoniously behind the apparent discordance of their lives, *pleasing the Lord*.

Escape and Return

Heinrich Heine, the greatest of German Jewish poets, who chose baptism as his “ticket of admission into European culture,”⁴ ultimately realized what King David surely did some two millennia before him when David himself thought he could blend in with his Philistine hosts seeking refuge from King Saul's murderous intent.⁵ Despite the high price of admission to his new club, Heine acknowledged he could never escape the anti-Semitism endemic to “the lower and higher rabble”⁶ of his fellow citizens. Whether it was the push of non-Jewish society or the pull of heritage, Jewish rebels over the millennia often could not break free, always returning to that *lover, lover, lover*, who beckons over and over *Come back to me*, in the song Cohen himself composed when pulled to visit the Israeli troops during the Yom Kippur war. The return to his ancient family overcame the allure of escape driven by the plea to his Jewish roots voiced in that same song—*Father, change my name / The one I'm using now / It's covered up with fear and filth / And cowardice and shame*.⁷ As Wieseltier ironically notes in his *Kaddish*, Harry Houdini himself, a Hungarian Jew born Erik Weisz, despite the subterfuge of the moniker, could not avoid being straitjacketed by the Jewish prayer shawl (*tallit*) on the

annual commemoration of his father's death (*yahrzeit*). Wieseltier wryly and brilliantly glossed, “Some escape artist!”

Though the trajectory of Cohen's life and art culminating in his deep engagement with, and years of fealty to, a Buddhist master appears superficially to reflect estrangement from his Jewish roots, nothing could be further from the truth. Cohen never canceled his membership in that club founded by the *little Jew who wrote the Bible*, and pushed back forcefully when interviewers assumed he did. The following encapsulates his response to what he considered an affront to his identity:

“I bumped into a man many years ago who happened to be a Zen master. I wasn't looking for a religion. I had a perfectly good religion. I certainly wasn't looking for a new series of rituals or new scriptures or dogmas. I wasn't looking for that. I wasn't looking for anything exalted or spiritual. I had a great sense of disorder in my life of chaos, of depression, of distress. And I had no idea where this came from. And the prevailing psychoanalytic explanations at the time didn't seem to address the things I felt. So I had to look elsewhere. And I bumped into someone who seemed to be at ease with himself...it was the man himself that attracted me.”

In good rabbinic form, Cohen indentured himself as a *shammes* (beadle) sitting at the feet of a sage named Roshi whose “ease” mirrored what rabbinic sages considered the most pious of all temperaments,⁸ although Cohen surely never laid any claim to piety. Cohen's ‘attraction’ to a spiritual master, graduating toward abject servility, was in effect a fulfillment of a core *mitzvah* of Torah study, a component of which is to cleave to sages and serve them, absorbing their conduct as well as their teachings.⁹ Indeed, Moses Maimonides, the greatest of all rabbinic masters in the history of Jewish thought, both theology and law, considered the aim of the entire framework of Jewish law and ritual to be its calming effect (*yishuv da'at*), inculcating the existential composure necessary for the welfare of the body and the soul.¹⁰ Already in the Middle Ages, as a doctor of both the body and the soul, he presciently diagnosed the deep chaos and distress caused by the apparent dichotomy between science and religious teachings, or what has been coined the conflict between “Athens and Jerusalem.”¹¹ The treatment Maimonides, the jurist, philosopher, and physician prescribed for this malaise was his magisterial *Guide of the Perplexed*, a philosophical primer intended to synthesize the overwhelming forces wrenching his disciples in entirely opposite directions—those of tradition

embracing them and those of progress that would uproot the legacy of their forefathers.

Cohen considered perplexity to be the engine driving people toward religion, what he termed “the unavoidable presence of the Other.” But for Cohen it was art that expressed, perhaps even heightened, those perplexities, while for Maimonides it was philosophy that resolved them. Whereas for Maimonides, the divine image (*tzelem elokim*), or what constitutes the very essence of human existence, is intellect, for Cohen it is perplexity itself, declaring during his spartan Buddhist inspired existence on Mount Baldy, “That’s what a human is: a gathering around a perplexity.” That perplexity and ascetic lifestyle never stopped him and his Zen master however from staying up at night enjoying the contemplative effects of single malt scotch. Cohen thus introduced into a Zen retreat what has become a ritualistic facet of the *kiddush* that follows Shabbat prayers in many synagogues. The sacred and the profane can in fact complement each other.

Devotional Estrangement

Cohen felt most comfortable abundantly referencing his own biblical heritage, but decidedly not for parochial reasons. He drew on that spiritual storehouse of wisdom for those messages that transcend the narrow confines of one’s own tribe. In one of his last interviews, he voiced his relationship with his people’s foundational scriptures best:

“This biblical landscape is very familiar to me, and it’s natural that I use those landmarks as references. Once they were universal references, and everybody understood and knew them. That’s no longer the case today, but it is still my landscape. I try to make those references. I try to make sure they’re not too obscure. But outside of that, I can’t – I dare not – claim anything in the spiritual realm for my own.”

While Leonard Cohen’s oeuvre is saturated with his Jewishness, it is paradoxically rife with devotional estrangement, always with a twist, often secularizing or eroticizing its sacred dimensions. Though *Who By Fire* is one of his most intensely Jewish compositions playing off a central prayer of the *Yamim Noraim* (Days of Awe), it could not be further from the pure submission of one’s fate to divine will that the original exudes. Supplementing the litany of terminal misfortunes to which human beings are exposed, “who by water and who by fire,” among others, Cohen adds for example, *Who by his lady’s command / Who by his own hand*¹² Cohen positions God, the original prayer’s sole consummate authority over all human destiny, in partnership or in competition with two other powers—an

individual’s ultimate autonomy over his own life and a lover’s dominance over the beloved. That lady’s command overpowers all others, even God’s *mitzvot*. After all, Cohen once declared, *If you want a lover / I’ll do anything you ask me to... / And I’d howl at your beauty / Like a dog in heat / And I’d claw at your heart / And I’d tear at your sheet.*¹³

Indeed, Cohen’s “Hallelujah” portrays a King David as a composite of those whose lives were devastated by their lovers—*You saw her bathing on the roof / Her beauty and the moonlight overthrew her / She tied you to a kitchen chair / She broke your throne, and she cut your hair.* Its melodious beauty obfuscates its pessimistically melancholic view of love which *is not some kind of victory march, no / It’s a cold and it’s a broken Hallelujah.* Surely the King David of Cohen’s lyrics is the last one any couple would want shadowing them as they march down the aisle to the *chuppah*! That men often disastrously succumb to the allure of passionate love is a theme that recurs throughout his poetry and his life. In that sense he is more of a rabbinic acolyte of David’s, sharing an obliviousness to Jewish law that the ancient rabbis startlingly attributed to him: “A Halakhah escaped David: man has a small limb and the more he satiates it the more it is starved while the more he starves it the more satiated it is” (*Sanhedrin* 107a). As his name reflects, while proud of his priestly Jewish heritage, always signing off his emails to me with the insignia of a kohen’s fingers in blessing mode, Cohen also offered sacrifices at the altar of Eros, his poetry brimming with carnal and spiritual love as two sides of the same coin. When we lament the death of the *kohen* we also lament the *Death of a Ladies’ Man*.

Who by Fire’s refrain further deepens his subversion of the prayer’s categorical recognition of God’s supreme control—what it declares as the “truths” (*emet*) of God’s kingship and judgeship. Cohen assails these truths which relegate all other sources of authority to the chimera of human imagination, with the tension and ambiguity that are the hallmarks of spiritual struggle—*Who shall I say is calling.* Doubt and anxiety, the staples of artistic invention, rooted in the soul of the poet, undermine the secure certainty of faith – or does it perhaps fortify it? The consummately submissive Abraham of the *akeidah*, whose loyalty included unwavering willingness to slaughter his son at God’s command, was the same Abraham who challenged God’s justice when God sentenced Sodom to indiscriminate destruction. Authentic relationship between beloved and lover, both earthly and spiritual, often demands a complex amalgam of resignation and defiance.

Unifying the Name

In fact, Cohen’s relationship with the *unavoidable presence of the Other*, can be traced between two such antithetical

responses to the *akeidah* that bookmark his career. At its very beginning in his second release in 1969, there is the resistance called for by his *Story of Isaac*, when God the Father becomes emblematic of all those fathers who would send their children out to war—*You who build these altars now / To sacrifice these children / You must not do it anymore*. And at the other end, *You Want it Darker*, his final release just weeks before his death in October of 2016, composed knowing his own end was imminent, adapts Abraham’s *hineni* proclaiming, *I’m ready my Lord*. Yet even at the very end Cohen goes down swinging at the Other who *wants it darker*: in the same breath of a preemptive *kaddish*, *Magnified, sanctified Be the holy name*, he conjures the million murdered children of the *Shoah*, the stark horror of *A million candles burning / For the love that never came*. That crime is the apex of a litany of atrocities that have *vilified, crucified the Name in the human frame*. Neither God nor humankind is relieved of their shared responsibility for the evil that has so pervaded human history. Yet that does not preclude for Cohen the *hope* of a magnification of the Name on a vertical plane that has been so soiled by humanity on a horizontal one.

Cohen’s farewell then echoes a profound midrashic lament that as long as evil men do persist, signified by Amalek as the national incarnation of evil, God’s great name remains incomplete.¹⁴ This notion too resounds in the rabbinic call of the *kaddish* for the diminished name *yah (yehei shem yah rabbah)* to be amplified into its full four letter form of the *shem hameforash* or Tetragrammaton.¹⁵

But Cohen the impassioned bard, who, unlike the philosopher or rabbi, revels in the dichotomies of life rather than resolving them, elsewhere offers another possibility for mending a fragmented name. The ‘name’ is the pivotal theme that pulsates throughout his song, originally titled *Taken Out of Egypt* but released as *Born in Chains*, another intensely Jewish engagement with God, suffering, loss, and liberation, whose repeated refrain is *Blessed is the name, the name be blessed*.¹⁶ There Cohen evokes a ‘wounded’ fragmented name—*In every atom broken is the name*. In that unique blend of the erotic and the spiritual, harmony can be achieved in the confusion and anxiety that regularly accompanies love *But in the grip of sensual illusion / The sweet unknowing unifies the name*. It is precisely the humility of ‘unknowing’ provoked by the brokenness of the sensual that might prompt a heightened perception beyond the sensual toward an underlying unity that grounds all existence. That awareness is itself a unification of the Name.

R. Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (*Netziv*), one of the greatest rabbinic sages of the 19th century, claimed that poetry captures the nature of the Torah in its covert allusiveness,

metaphor, symbolism, and acrostic clues that disclose meaning far beyond the simplicity and overt message of prose.¹⁷ Thus, the profound discoveries and *hidushim* of the sage, of the *talmid hakham*, are poetic expressions of keen listening to the tone and rhythm of the sacred texts. As such, though Leonard Cohen would not fit the sage R. Berlin envisioned, nor would he ever claim to be, his poetry and melodies resound with subversively devout and impishly serious Jewish rhythms. Nothing I can say captures his entire body of work and art better than his own title to the 1995 release *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*—Cohen’s fingertips played the chords of an “old ceremony” out of which emerges a “new skin,” preserving the ancient Jewish covenant, the *brit*, by reinventing it. Cohen is the irreverent traditionalist. He was the consummate poet, the artist who deals in the contradictions and paradoxes that mirror life. In that same album he confessed that *A singer must die / For the lie in his voice*. While Socrates the philosopher died for the truth of reason, Cohen the troubadour would die for the fabricated truths of love and art.

As I write this paean to his memory in Tel Aviv, I hear his music played quite often in cafes and on the streets. Cohen’s music has always resonated here and God seems to have responded positively to Cohen’s petitionary prayer for incessant encores even after his passing:

*If it be your will, that a voice be true
From this broken hill, I will sing to you
From this broken hill
All your praises they shall ring
If it be your will, to let me sing*

A central protagonist of the novel *Beautiful Losers* of 1966, one of his earliest literary creations, pens a letter to a friend that is to be opened five years after his death:

*My Dear Friend,
Five years with the length of five years. I do not
know exactly where this letter finds you.*

Cohen’s legacy, the “letter” of his poetry, music, and life, finds us five years later at a very different time, yet always enchanted, perplexed, comforted, and troubled by it. Cohen wrote, *For the holy one dreams of a letter / Dreams of a letter’s death*.¹⁸ R. Hisda, one of the ancient Talmudic rabbis, opined that “a dream which is not interpreted is like a letter which is not read.”¹⁹ Cohen’s letters will not die. His dreams that materialized in that long letter of song and poetry he left us will surely continue to be read and interpreted, offering us the *helping hand* he extended, in his cover of another Jewish lyricist sage known by the name Berlin, one of the greatest of all American songwriters,²⁰

*Not for just an hour / Not for just a day / Not for just a year, but always.*²¹

¹ *Death of a Ladies' Man* is the title of his 1977 album which included the song of the same title

² From the track "You Know Who I Am" off his second album *Songs From a Room* released in 1969.

³ "Amen" is a track on his album *Old Ideas* released in 2012.

⁴ "Der Taufzettel ist das Entre Billet zur Europäischen Kultur." See Heine, *Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke*, band 10, S. 313.

⁵ See 1 Samuel 21:11 and the remaining narrative in the first book of Samuel related to David's seeking asylum in the Philistine camp.

⁶ Heinrich Heine, "Shylock (Jessica)," trans. F. Ewen, in *Jewish Stories and Hebrew Melodies* (New York: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1987), 83. German original in Heinrich Heine, *Werke und Briefe in zehn Bänden*, Band 5 (Berlin and Weimar, 1972), 543.

⁷ From his fourth studio release of 1974, *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*.

⁸ See for example *Avot* 6:4 that lists "ease" (*yishuv*) as one of the ways Torah is acquired, and Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines (University of Chicago Press, 1963)

1:34, p.77, who considers "tranquility and quiet" to be essential for ultimate perfection.

⁹ See *Avot* 1:4, "let thy house be a house of meeting for the Sages and sit in the very dust of their feet, and drink in their words with thirst." As Ovadiah Bartenura comments "that one should sit on the ground at the feet of sages."

¹⁰ *Mishneh Torah, Yesodei HaTorah* 4:13

¹¹ See Introduction to *Guide of the Perplexed*, pp.5-6.

¹² "Who by Fire" appears on the same release as "Lover, Lover, Lover" referenced above.

¹³ "I'm Your Man" on the album of the same title of 1988.

¹⁴ *Tanhuma, Ki Tetzei* 11, cited prominently by Rashi on Exodus 17:16.

¹⁵ See Tosafot, *Berakhot* 3a, s.v. "ve-onin."

¹⁶ A track on the 2014 album *Popular Problems*.

¹⁷ *Ha'amek Davar* (Jerusalem: Yeshivat Volozhin, 2005), Volume 1, p. 2.

¹⁸ From the song "The Window" on his album of 1979, *Recent Songs*.

¹⁹ Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 55a.

²⁰ Irving Berlin, born Beilin.

²¹ *The Future*, 1992.

RETHINKING JUDAISM IN EARLY AMERICA

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Ogren, Brian. *Kabbalah and the Founding of America: The Early Influence of Jewish Thought in the New World*. New York: New York University Press, 2021. (All page numbers in the article refer to this work.)

In 1790, Isaac Pinto of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York, translator of the first English *siddur* in America, wrote a letter to Rev. Ezra Stiles, president of Yale College. Evidently, Stiles's Hebraic acumen had impressed this Jew, who addressed his recipient with the delightful neologism "*Rosh ha-Yeshiva ha-Yalensi*"—head of the Yale Yeshiva (185)! This remarkable anecdote highlights the synergy between Judaism and Protestantism in early America. Brian Ogren's fascinating new study *Kabbalah and the Founding of America* argues that Jewish mysticism significantly influenced early American Protestant theology. While the notion of colonial Kabbalah seems strange and

implausible, Ogren has unearthed a treasure trove of neglected sources to reconstruct a forgotten intellectual tradition. These findings, situated at the crossroads of Jewish studies and early American history, should be of great interest to Jewish readers.

Having written and edited several books on Kabbalah, Ogren is uniquely qualified to assess the complex and varied usages of Kabbalah by early American thinkers. Yet despite his background in Jewish studies, Ogren makes an important caveat: "This is not a book about Jews; it is a book about Protestant American colonial and revolutionary uses of Jewish texts and thought, and their resultant impact on views of Judaism and on the shaping of wider American religious sensibilities" (2). Indeed, these intellectual activities occurred despite the overwhelmingly small Jewish

population in early America (at most three thousand out of nearly four million people by 1790).¹

Nevertheless, Jews do appear throughout the book. One significant character is Judah Monis (1683-1763), who converted to Christianity in 1722 and subsequently taught Hebrew at Harvard for several decades. Other examples include several visiting rabbis in Newport, Rhode Island befriended by Ezra Stiles, such as R. Raphael Hayyim Isaac Karigal (1733-1777) of Hebron. Additionally, the book draws heavily on Hebrew and Aramaic sources, translating and citing from the original language. Such analysis can only be properly appreciated by people deeply proficient in rabbinic literature. The resulting product, like some of its characters, is a liminal book that may alternately alienate, captivate, or confound both Christian and Jewish audiences.²

The book is structured both chronologically and biographically. In his first two chapters, Ogren considers Kabbalah as a point of contact between Quaker and mainstream Protestant thought. He identifies and analyzes a hitherto unstudied manuscript that he attributes to George Keith, a Scottish missionary who fashioned a unique strand of Christian Quakerism. The text, which draws heavily upon a variety of kabbalistic ideas, made its way from Pennsylvania to the library of the famed Mather family in Massachusetts. Rev. Cotton Mather (1663-1728), son of Rev. Increase Mather (1639-1723) and scion of American Puritan colonists, engaged in an intellectual exchange with Keith. This debate “brings into focus some of the contrasts but also some of the commonalities between Jewish Kabbalah, Keithian Christian Quakerism, and the Puritan Congregationalism represented by Cotton Mather” (56-57). The finer points of this discussion will likely elude most readers who do not have an advanced background in kabbalistic texts; however, the overarching intellectual significance of Kabbalah for these thinkers emerges clearly. While Keith deviated from mainstream Quaker thought, Mather arguably represented the center of New England’s religious culture.

The subsequent two chapters, focusing on the conversion and kabbalistic writings of Judah Monis, constitute the most fruitful part of the book. Ogren segues from Cotton Mather to Monis via the former’s father, who was deeply fascinated by Sabbateanism. In colonial New England, Protestants believed fervently in the imminence of Jesus’s second coming, a precondition of which included the mass conversion of the Jews. The Sabbatian messianic movement inspired Increase Mather to write a great deal about conversion. Thus, Monis’s decision to join the Protestant fold engendered a great deal of excitement among the clergy. Ogren deepens our understanding of this episode in

two ways: first, by discovering new information on Monis’s early life; and secondly, by providing a close reading of Monis’s polemical use of Kabbalah.

Born in 1683, Monis’s early life remains largely unknown. Most available records begin after he immigrated to New York in 1715, where he lived before moving to Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1720. A newspaper report on his conversion two years later described Monis as a *maskil* (a Sephardic term for a lower-level rabbinic ordination below the status of *hakham*) who studied in Livorno (Italy) and Amsterdam. In his own writings, Monis referred to the prominent anti-Sabbatian R. Jacob Sasportas (1610-1698) as his teacher. Ogren has unearthed new evidence that this assertion was more than merely rhetorical: a *ketubah* of David and Rachel Monis, dated 1679 in Livorno, with R. Sasportas as an official witness. Given the uniqueness of the surname, David and Rachel Monis were most likely parents or close relatives of Judah Monis. R. Sasportas served as *rosh yeshiva* in Livorno before assuming the leadership of Yeshiva Etz Hayyim in Amsterdam in 1680. Monis would have been sixteen years old when R. Sasportas died in 1698. Thus, a real-life connection seems more plausible than previously considered.

However, we should be careful not to overemphasize Monis’s rabbinic training. Sixteen is still a rather young age to study Kabbalah, a subject traditionally reserved for advanced students—and Monis was certainly not an *ilui* (prodigy). Ogren argues that if Monis had lied about his status, he would have assumed the title *hakham* rather than *maskil* as reported in the newspaper. Yet scholars of Monis’s Hebrew writings have found a great deal of errors and oddities, suggesting a lower level of expertise than what he claimed.³ Perhaps, then, we should not view Monis, per Ogren’s suggestion, as a serious student and teacher “tapped into a kabbalistic network moored in textual learning before arriving in North America” (113).

A lack of expertise may have also played a role in Monis’s problematic treatment of Kabbalistic sources. Following his conversion, Monis published three pamphlets asserting his sincerity and the supremacy of Christianity over Judaism, cleverly entitled *The Truth, The Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth*. The latter text argued that Jewish Kabbalists believed in the doctrine of the Christian Trinity. Ogren provides a novel analysis of *Nothing but the Truth*, showing how Monis employed his sources inaccurately and selectively. Jewish readers may find some of the proof texts amusing if not perplexing. Monis mistranslated Rambam’s article of faith that God is *ehad be-ahdut she-ein kemotah ahdut* as “*He is One, and not One like his Unity,*” thus purportedly supporting the Christian position that “*God is*

One and Three, and not Three, but One” (121; italics in original). This misreading gravely misrepresents Rambam’s clearly anti-Trinitarian view, as the beginning of the *yesod* explicitly states that God is not one of a pair or group or divisible into parts; elsewhere, Rambam explicitly rejects a Trinitarian read of the *Shema Yisrael* verse.

Similarly, Monis cited a tradition attributed to Rav Hai Gaon, recorded by Rabbeinu Bahya ben Asher, that reconciles the ten *sefirot* with the thirteen divine attributes of mercy by identifying three unified supernal divine lights. Yet not every triad refers to the Christian [upper case] Trinity; Ogren, drawing upon Gershom Scholem, clarifies that although the “message is clearly [lower case] trinitarian . . . Correlation of trinitaries does not imply identity” (126). Indeed, a grouping of three divine attributes illuminating the ten *sefirot* does not logically lead to a tripartite divinity of God, Jesus, and Holy Ghost, though it makes sense that Christians have used this text for polemical purposes. Monis also misappropriated the Zohar’s comment on the *Shema Yisrael* verse, which insists on the unity of the three appearances of God’s name; Ogren shows how Monis took the passage out of its context regarding *ta’amei ha-mitzvot* (reasons for the commandments) and distorted its meaning by Christianizing the Aramaic term *ruah kudsha* as “Holy Ghost” (131). Of course, one may add that the multiple iterations of God’s name do not imply a multifaceted identity, especially as the very end of the verse clearly negates such a possibility.

Monis’s intellectual influences remain somewhat enigmatic. Interestingly, he did not draw upon Lurianic texts in *Nothing but the Truth*, but elsewhere he compiled a compendium of such sources in a manuscript now housed at Harvard University Archives. Additionally, neither he nor the other thinkers in this book seem to have engaged with the kabbalistic studies of Renaissance Christian Hebraists. Given the host of inaccuracies in *Nothing but the Truth*, Ogren poses a provocative question: “How much of that, if anything, remains ‘Jewish,’ whatever this multifaceted term of identity may mean?” The answer, despite Monis’s claims to the contrary, resoundingly negates such a characterization. “Monis is clearly drawing from those texts in a cherry-picking manner,” Ogren concludes. He translates his sources “into a language of Protestant cultural faith, and in doing so he transforms both the texts and the theology contained within” (146).

Ogren does not take a firm stance on the vexed question of the sincerity of Monis’s conversion, which has received a great deal of attention. Some have speculated that pragmatic considerations—to receive a teaching position at Harvard—may have motivated his conversion, and that he remained merely a nominal Christian. Others have

suggested that Kabbalah may have led him to genuinely believe in Christianity. This book follows the lead of Michael Hoberman and other scholars, who avoid the issue in favor of a contextual approach and instead focus on how contemporary Protestants viewed the meaning and significance of his conversion.⁴ Ogren compellingly illustrates the paradoxical nature of Monis’s identity, in which his very affirmation of Christianity hinges on his prior Jewishness.

In his final chapter, Ogren takes his story to the revolutionary period, focusing on the kabbalistic writings of Ezra Stiles, a polymath scholar who achieved a stunning mastery of Hebraic material. Stiles apparently once met with Monis, and he also had intellectually fruitful relations with the Jewish community in Newport (especially R. Karigal, with whom he was particularly close and had a remarkable correspondence in Hebrew). Once again, Ogren brings to bear characteristically deep archival research. Though he unfortunately could not locate Stiles’s annotated copy of the Zohar, he analyzes and reproduces Stiles’s “Oration Upon the Hebrew Literature” delivered at Yale’s commencement in 1781, which strikingly called for more Hebraic learning at early American colleges.

Stiles’s place in the founding generation inevitably leads to larger questions about the role of Jews in America’s origins. Ogren’s conclusion challenges the assertions of twentieth-century Jewish historians Jacob Rader Marcus and Arthur Hertzberg that Judaism remained disconnected from Protestantism in colonial America. On the other hand, Ogren is careful not to take his findings too far, tempering the anachronistic projections of postwar scholars of Puritan Hebraism such as Lee M. Friedman, who invoked ideas of the melting pot and cultural pluralism. Ogren also rejects the old thesis of intellectual historian Perry Miller, who argued that the Puritans founded New England as part of a world-historical mission to serve as a model for a new age of Reformation in Europe. Building on other scholars who have problematized this notion of Puritan New England as an experiment upon a blank slate, Ogren argues that his findings demonstrate “a greater continuity with Europe and the rest of the world . . . beyond Puritanism” (198).

This historiographical levelheadedness is laudable, but one may nevertheless quibble with the title and framing of the book. The phrase “founding of America,” reinforced in the introduction by citing Thomas Jefferson’s and John Adams’s remarks on Jewish thought, belies the book’s heavy focus on New England. It implicitly reflects the outmoded tendency to view that region as the origin story of the United States.⁵ In truth, however, New England constituted merely one quirky corner of a decidedly vast early America

that transcended the boundaries of the original thirteen colonies. Except for Ezra Stiles, most of the thinkers surveyed in this book did not anticipate the founding of the United States. This handful of New Englanders might suffice for larger claims about the region's intellectual and religious history, but they fall short as a founding narrative of America.

As an intellectual history of Jewish thought, the book does not fully address the kinds of questions that might animate early Americanists. Scholars of colonial New England would want to better understand how Kabbalah fit into the broader framework of Protestant theology and how it connected to internal theological developments in the period. For example, it would be instructive to situate discussions on the kabbalistic idea of *Adam Kadmon* (primordial man) within the rich Puritan literature on Genesis;⁶ similarly, Monis's polemical appropriation of Kabbalah might shed additional light on contemporary anxieties about conversion, theology, and religious identity.⁷

Nevertheless, it is a testament to Ogren's research that it raises questions beyond the scope of its analysis. His findings make a valuable contribution to the field, and future scholars who grapple with the historical relationship between Judaism and Christianity will undoubtedly cite this work. While the opacity and complexity of Kabbalah may continue to stymie scholarly inquiry, it behooves us to understand how Hebraic ideas have influenced major early American thinkers.

¹ William Pencak, *Jews and Gentiles in Early America, 1654-1800* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 1; see also the estimates here compared to national census data since 1790.

² For a book focused on Jewish perspectives, see Laura Arnold Leibman, *Messianism, Secrecy, & Mysticism: A New Interpretation of Early American Jewish Life* (Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2013). Notably, Leibman does not include Monis in her book, reflecting the tensions surrounding his Jewish identity.

³ See, e.g., Eisig Silberschlag, "Judah Monis in Light of an Unpublished Manuscript," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 46/47, Part II (1979-1980): 495-529; Rachel Wamsley, "Teaching Hebrew to the Puritans" (adapted from her 2018 article).

⁴ See, e.g., Shalom Goldman, *God's Sacred Tongue: Hebrew and the American Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of

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North Carolina Press, 2004), 31-51; Michael Hoberman, *New Israel/New England: Jews and Puritans in Early America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 86-120.

⁵ Abram C. Van Engen has ably deconstructed this myth in *City on a Hill: A History of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

⁶ See, e.g., Philip C. Almond, *Adam and Eve in Seventeenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Zachary McLeod Hutchins, *Inventing Eden: Primitivism, Millennialism, and the Making of New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁷ See, e.g., Thomas Kidd, *The Protestant Interest: New England after Puritanism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Douglas L. Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light: Experiencing Religious Awakenings in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).