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IS MODERN ORTHODOX *KIRUV* POSSIBLE?

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...Everyone knows that *Am Yisrael* is in grave danger. There is danger of assimilation, danger of mixed marriages, danger of people losing their way, danger of being cut off from roots and values. Can it be that only you cannot see it? As if this information is hidden somewhere? Is there any difficulty involved in obtaining the statistics on Jewish education in Israel and in the Diaspora? Someone who cares enough can get his hands on the figures: sixty percent of Jews in the Diaspora are being lost ...If you understand the situation - and there is no reason or excuse not to - then you hear the cry that emanates from every part of the country, from every corner of the globe, expressed in the spiritual dangers surrounding and threatening us on every side. Someone who cares knows what is going on, and once he knows he must ask himself: What significance does this knowledge have for me? To what extent does it cause me pain? To what extent do I identify with world Jewry, in fasting and prayer? To what extent is my spiritual world structured such that *Kenesset Yisrael* and its dangers are on one side and I, with my considerations and private plans, am on the other?

-Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, *Zt"l*.¹

During my first week or two at Yeshiva University's Rabbi Issac Elchanan Theological Seminary, my *semikha* cohort had brunch with the university's president, Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman. He told us that within the next half century, the vast majority of Jews in America would be Orthodox, and it would be our responsibility as graduates of Modern Orthodoxy's flagship institution to lead them. While many of my peers smiled and nodded, intending to teach in schools or serve in synagogues that would be bastions of this confident and victorious Orthodoxy, I found myself feeling sick to my stomach. After all, if the vast majority of Jews will be Orthodox in fifty years, that means that a vast majority of today's Jews will be lost in the process! Rather than a victory for Orthodoxy, the result would be exactly what Rav Noah Weinberg of Aish HaTorah described as "a *Chillul Hashem* (desecration of God's name) of historic proportions."² By the time our brunch was over, I had made up my mind to devote my rabbinic future to serving all of *Klal Yisrael* in the form of outreach and engagement rather than follow a more traditional trajectory.

The 2020 Pew Report seems to have confirmed both R. Berman's prediction as well as my own conviction:

The youngest U.S. Jews count among their ranks both a relatively large share of traditionally observant, Orthodox Jews and an even larger group of people who see themselves as Jewish for cultural, ethnic or family reasons but do not identify with Judaism – as a religion – at all. Many people in both groups participate, at least sometimes, in the same cultural activities, such as cooking traditional Jewish foods, visiting Jewish historical sites and listening to Jewish or

Israeli music. Yet the survey finds that most people in the latter group (Jews of no religion) feel they have *not much or nothing at all in common* with the former group (Orthodox Jews).

This state of affairs is nothing short of a travesty. To quote my teacher, Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter's response to the 2013 Pew Report, such a reality only serves to highlight "just how much we have failed to meaningfully engage and impact the broad spectrum of *acheinu Bnei Yisrael* in this country."

But are we without hope? Has the situation passed the point of no return? In this article, I will demonstrate how Modern Orthodoxy is in a unique position to combat this state of affairs as well as articulate the unique pitfalls that would need to be confronted in order to make engagement in such work viable.

Hillel the elder said that one should love every human being and strive to bring them closer to Torah (*Mishnah Avot* 1:12). Similarly, Maimonides (basing himself on *Arakhin* 16b) stated that there is an obligation for every Jew who sees their fellow walking down an improper path to attempt to correct their behavior (*Hilkhot De'ot* 6:7). He goes so far as to say that one who has the opportunity to do this but fails to is equally responsible for that person's sins.

Based on these and other sources,³ it can be compellingly argued that every Torah-observant Jew has an obligation to attempt to bring their non-observant peers closer to embracing a life of *Torah* and *mitzvot*. Practically, this would entail individually reaching out to as many of those peers as possible in an active way and demonstrating how Torah-observant Judaism can speak to them on an intellectual, emotional, and cultural level. Such an attempt would require utilizing the wide spectrum of Torah values and practices to locate those which best resonate with each individual's needs.

In theory, the Modern Orthodox community is in the best possible situation to take on this challenge. No other branch of Judaism is so firmly rooted in Torah and *mitzvot* while simultaneously being full participants in contemporary culture. Many Jews who are not yet observant would likely be able to strongly connect to Modern Orthodox Judaism and find an ideological home within the Modern Orthodox community if such an option were to be presented properly.

In spite of this, much of the *kiruv* (roughly translated as "outreach") world is dominated by those representing various shades of a more right-wing Orthodox Judaism,

including organizations such as Chabad,⁴ Aish HaTorah, Chazaq, Olami, and more.⁵

There are several reasons why Modern Orthodox individuals, particularly those with rabbinical training, often choose to devote their professional time and efforts to those who are already situated within the Orthodox world rather than taking their skills to environments outside of it.⁶

One of the biggest issues that prevents Modern Orthodox *kiruv* from being successful is that Modern Orthodoxy tends to be perceived as unattractive to those who are searching for a legitimate religious outlet. One need only look at the traction of Eitan Gross's now infamous article in which he argues that the Modern Orthodox world is full of "glaring hypocrisy and internal contradiction."⁷ Similarly, Noah Feldman of Harvard Law (who himself left the Modern Orthodox community), assessed the following:

For many [Modern Orthodox Jews], the consilience of faith and modernity that sometimes appears within the reach of modern Orthodoxy is a tantalizing prospect. But it can be undermined by the fragile fault lines between the moral substructures of the two worldviews, which can widen into deep ruptures on important matters of life and love.⁸

Whether true or not, Modern Orthodoxy is often viewed as representing a life full of conflict, contradiction, and compromise with no easy solutions provided. While various thinkers have addressed the dilemma of living a life of *Torah U-Madda*, very few of those approaches have been particularly popular or easy to understand amongst laypeople. Furthermore, such attempts rarely even agree on the full parameters of such a worldview.⁹ To an outsider, Modern Orthodoxy looks like a perpetually unsuccessful game of trying to have one's cake and eat it too.

Additionally, Modern Orthodox individuals can be so intellectually and professionally driven that they often find themselves lacking religious passion. Many go through the motions of religious life but are not themselves passionate about living a life of Torah and bringing others closer to it. Even Rav Aharon Lichtenstein found himself, at least to an extent, agreeing with the contention that "the lack of either passion or spirituality is no accident, but the inevitable result of [the Modern Orthodox Community's] interest in the cultural and political orders."¹⁰ How can the Modern Orthodox community then justify wanting to bring others closer to Torah and *mitzvot* when its own adherents are so far away?¹¹ Many even view the *Haredi* world as more

religiously equipped than themselves. Rabbi Asher Lopatin, then president of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School, noticed this when he asked, “Do we as Modern Orthodox Jews have... religious rigor in our lives? Do we have... passion? I think we see it in the *Haredi* and Yeshivish world, but we need to see it in our world.”¹²

In this regard, Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove of the Conservative Park Avenue Synagogue hit the nail on the head when commenting on the success of Chabad within the American Jewish context:

Come as you are, do whatever you want to do in your private sphere, but when you walk into a Chabad house, we promise you it will be brimming with authenticity. Chabad knows that this world is full of... people who want to make their own choices in the private sphere, but **when they do access religious living, they want it to be Torah-true.** Chabad dresses the part, they claim to be the real deal... and they make no judgments about who you are and where you came from. And you know what? Surprise surprise, they are the fastest growing segment of American Jewish life [emphasis added].¹³

People ultimately want their religious experience to feel legitimate. Legitimacy in this context involves feeling consistent and not as if everything is a constant battle with no clear winner. In order for Modern Orthodoxy to feel this way, it must be firmly and unapologetically defined and internalized in the hearts and minds of its adherents. Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm himself articulated this during his time as president and *Rosh Yeshiva* of Yeshiva University:

Merely to describe what we are is not a sufficiently convincing reason for being what we are or for persuading others to acknowledge our rightness and join our ranks. The greatest problem of modern American Orthodoxy is that it has failed to interpret itself to itself. This failure, which reveals itself in many ways, derives from a remarkable intellectual timidity which we should have long outgrown.¹⁴

One thing that the Modern Orthodox community is certain about is its desire to be intellectually rigorous. A high premium is placed on literacy and fluency within rabbinic texts. Most rabbis who are ordained within Modern Orthodoxy come out wanting, and being prepared, to teach

Talmud at the highest possible level rather than introducing beginners to fundamental Jewish concepts.¹⁵ Thus, someone who was raised without mastery of Hebrew or Aramaic would have a very hard time benefiting from such an educational approach.¹⁶ This is especially true when the rabbis involved with teaching often have no interest in slowing down their pace or “dumbing down” their material for the benefit of those who need to catch up to their peers.

Additionally, many of those who were raised within Modern Orthodoxy and intend to have careers within the rabbinate were likely raised with a certain comfort level. They may have never lived in a community without an *eruv*, easy access to kosher food, several available *minyanim* at any time of day, and a strong group of Orthodox peers.¹⁷ All of these are comforts that many in the *kiruv* business choose to give up for the sake of reaching out to those who otherwise have no hope of being in conversation with a religiosity centered around Torah and *mitzvot*.¹⁸

Even when rabbis raised in such communities do decide to venture out of their comfort zone and attain positions on secular campuses, they often do this through the auspices of The Orthodox Union’s Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus (JLIC). While JLIC is a wonderful and much needed organization, it exists primarily in order to provide kosher food, *minyanim*, *shiurim*, and social events for an already Orthodox constituency. It is not uncommon for students who were not raised Orthodox to come to JLIC events and feel out of place. Though a necessity on secular campuses, and a truly important job for Modern Orthodox rabbis to be involved in, it is not what I am pushing for as it does not necessarily involve outreach to non-Orthodox students.¹⁹

In order to be successful in *kiruv* as well as inspire its own adherents, the Modern Orthodox community has to answer Rabbi Lamm’s now generations-old challenge once and for all by firmly defining itself in a manner that is “Halakhically legitimate, philosophically persuasive, religiously inspiring, and personally convincing.”²⁰ What does Modern Orthodoxy believe in? What does it view as being beyond the pale? How can some level of diversity in practice and thinking be tolerated while still maintaining proper boundaries? Only when the Modern Orthodox community is able to confidently articulate what it really means to live and think as a Modern Orthodox Jew will it be able to authentically attract people to Torah and *mitzvot*.

Such a definition, if internalized within the Modern Orthodox community, would put its adherents on a footing equal to their *Haredi* counterparts and allow them to go into the world of *kiruv* confident in the holiness of their mission. They would not feel the need to have to prove themselves

as legitimate to those on their left, those on their right, or to themselves. In my opinion, such a definition should take into account the words of Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Shagar) in the context of describing an “authentic *Haredi*” approach that could help the Israeli *Dati Leumi* community by being confidently able to

...choose itself without rejecting or delegitimizing other cultures, and without becoming rigid. Such a [religiosity] will excel at creating gaps between various frames of reference in a manner that retains the truth of each, and prevents the distortions that arise from attempted syntheses, while rigorously empowering and maintaining the boundaries of its own truth.²¹

Unfortunately, no such definition of Modern Orthodoxy has been agreed upon as of yet by anything that can be deemed a consensus of Modern Orthodox leaders or institutions. As such, the community remains a mix of many different *hashkafot* (worldviews),²² none of which fully agree or disagree with each other. The closest to an articulation of what it really means to be Modern Orthodox in recent years was a two-part Lehrhaus article by Rabbi Dr. Gil Perl, in which he argued that Modern Orthodoxy’s defining concept should be one of *Or Goyim* (being a light unto the nations). While a good start, I find this suggestion to be too vague to avoid the disagreements in meaning and application that have become so common when discussing Modern Orthodoxy more generally. Furthermore, effective *kiruv* requires a level of theological competence and confidence that a passion for inspiring the world does not necessarily include.

Only once a clear and convincing definition is popularized can the Modern Orthodox community comfortably join our *Haredi* siblings on the “front-lines” of professional *kiruv*. This can be by applying for jobs within established *kiruv* organizations (some of which have indeed been known to hire interested graduates of RIETS), or by creating new organizations in order to develop a distinctly Modern Orthodox style of outreach that its adherents are uniquely qualified to participate in.²³

We are left, then, with three questions:

- 1) What does it truly mean to be a Modern Orthodox Jew?
- 2) What would Modern Orthodox *kiruv* look like in practice?

- 3) What would such an approach add to the *kiruv* community that isn’t already supplied by the current more right-wing Orthodox endeavors?

Though each of these questions deserves an article in itself to answer them, I want to briefly lay out my own suggestions for the latter two. A recent articulation of Modern Orthodoxy, offered by Rabbi Judah Kerbel, can serve as a good working definition for our purposes. For R. Kerbel, we are Modern Orthodox because of our commitment to excellence in *avodat Hashem* and a lifelong pursuit of Torah and *mitzvot*, in addition to:

- Our positive relationships with non-Jews;
- Our willingness to contribute to and learn from broader society in the arts, sciences, and beyond;
- Our acknowledgement of the world’s complexity and refusal to settle for simple answers to contemporary challenges.

When it comes to what Modern Orthodox *kiruv* can and should look like, the truth is that it need not be much different from the current models. To put it simply, nothing in the ways that Chabad or Olami currently handle *kiruv* is broken, so what need is there to fix it? Free food, social events, inspiring speakers, accessible material, intimate discussion with smaller groups, and one-on-one learning combined with competence in marketing and fundraising is wonderful and has proven to at least be successful at reaching large numbers of seekers. On a college campus, it need not look much different than JLIC already does outside of an added care to ensure that students with no religious background can connect to the material and feel welcome to ask any questions that they have.

Substantively, however, Modern Orthodox *kiruv* can fill many gaps that the current popular model has left open for one reason or another. Perhaps the most obvious lacuna that such a presence can fill is the study of *Torah she-ba’al peh* by women. Rav Mordechai Willig’s call for Talmud’s inclusion in the curricula for all women in Modern Orthodox schools to be “reevaluated” notwithstanding,²⁴ the Modern Orthodox community has firmly accepted Rav Soloveitchik and Rav Lichtenstein’s determination that in a world where women receive a broad general education and reach the pinnacle of academic success, “it is desirable and necessary, not only possible, to provide intensive education for women even from [*Torah she-ba’al peh*] sources.”²⁵ Though it is certainly not the case for everyone, I know of many women who were turned off from *kiruv* attempts in college because they were unimpressed with the intellectual rigor of what

they were learning in light of their academic achievements compared to their male peers. Being willing and able to learn *Torah she-ba'al peh* with those women would do much to show all Jews, not just male Jews, that Torah can speak to them intellectually as well as emotionally.

Another thing that Modern Orthodox *kiruv* can add to the current scene is support of a plurality of behavior and thought that most *kiruv* organizations are unable or unwilling to acknowledge. Unlike many Yeshivish and Hasidic communities, Modern Orthodoxy allows for a wide variety of visual self-expression among both laypeople and spiritual leaders. The ability to individualize one's dress may not sound like the biggest deal in the world, but I've known it to make or break some people's experiences in the *frum* community. When it comes to *kiruv*, maintenance of individuality on at least some level is incredibly important for many of today's religious seekers.²⁵

The same is true in the realm of religious thought. Rabbi Efrem Goldberg of the Boca Raton Synagogue articulated this well when he wrote that his *hashkafah* and that of his RIETS *rebbeim* consisted of "drawing from the richness of the Torah world, uncomfortable and unwilling to lock ourselves into a narrow gate, but instead embracing a vast and expansive entrance. We don't alternate between hashkafas or practices, we integrate them."²⁷ Different people have different preferences and learning styles even when it comes to secular subjects. It is incredibly important for them to have the same types of options when it comes to their Torah learning.

Needless to say, Modern Orthodox *kiruv* can also incorporate *Torah U-Madda* into its approach once the term is firmly defined. While Rabbi Lamm himself acknowledged that *Torah U-Madda* is more of a pedagogy than an ideology,²⁸ it is exactly that sort of pedagogy that can best speak to modern spiritual seekers. Under the guidance of a Modern Orthodox *kiruv* professional, university students who are already studying various subjects in-depth as well as professionals who are already engaged in a particular field can both learn how to turn their study and profession into *avodat Hashem* (rather than experience guilt over their academic and professional interests) or feel the need to abandon them entirely in favor of a "Torah-only" approach to Judaism. Finally, *kiruv* professionals who themselves are fully a part of modern society can demonstrate what it looks like to be completely engaged with the world while also completely adherent to *Halakhah* and Torah values. Such an approach can completely vanquish the dichotomy that so many often see between being an Orthodox Jew and living a modern, cultured life.

But can Modern Orthodox *kiruv* really find a place in the world of Jewish outreach? Can it not be said that a plurality of dress and behavior is a sign of inauthentic compromise or that intellectual complexity is unable to inspire the masses? If we truly believe that there are seventy faces of Torah and that *Halakhah* presents a clear guide of where true boundaries are, then these are no worries at all. Supporting intellectual development as a mode of spiritual development without lowering the status of Torah learning should be second nature to anyone familiar with the writings of the late Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm. It was he himself who wrote that "Torah legitimates *Madda*. The pursuit of *Madda* without Torah is devoid of any innate Jewish significance... With Torah, *Madda* has not only instrumental but also intrinsic value, but never without it."²⁹ Whether allowing such intellectual development into one's *avodat Hashem* has led to a lack of passion by default has long been debated. But as Rav Lichtenstein wrote, "While *Torah U-Madda* is not everyone's cup of tea, it certainly deserves a place as part of our collective spiritual fare."³⁰ If even one person would only give Torah and *mitzvot* a chance because of the ability to integrate their secular and religious strivings, then we must keep it in our outreach toolbox while never losing track of the Torah guiding it all.

While Modern Orthodox *kiruv* need not look exactly like the more right-wing Orthodox variety, it must be approached with the same level of confidence in its ability to inspire and demonstrate an ideal way of interacting with the world around us. If it is important for Modern Orthodoxy to play an active role in *kiruv*, it is then equally important for Modern Orthodoxy to fully articulate what it stands for to itself as well as others. Such a definition will not only help attempts to bring Jews closer to Torah, but also to connect with those who are already within the Modern Orthodox community without truly knowing what that means. As stated above, such a definition can be as easy as recognizing what we are passionate about and grounding ourselves in Torah sources within those passions. It does not have to overtly paint other approaches to Orthodoxy as flawed or wrong. But it does require hashkafic, halakhic, and theological confidence. Do we as a community possess such confidence? Do our current institutions help us acquire it?

Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us

and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.

-Deuteronomy 30:11-14

¹ <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/philosophy/great-thinkers/harav-aharon-lichtenstein/if-you-remain-silent-time-concern-jewish-people>.

² <https://www.aish.com/rn/t/48972056.html>.

³ See <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-27-sources-thekiruvobligation>.

⁴ It should be noted that Chabad specifically rejects the term "Orthodox" in favor of espousing a Judaism that is one big spectrum consisting simply of those who are more or less observant of Torah and *mitzvot*.

⁵ One notable exception is the Manhattan Jewish Experience, led by Rabbi Mark Wildes. This organization performs *kiruv* with a firm Modern Orthodox flavor, though it is limited entirely to New York City.

⁶ Those who devote time to NCSY while in undergrad are not included as *kiruv* professionals in this reflection. NCSY advising is a fantastic *kiruv* opportunity and should continue to be encouraged, but it hardly counts as a professional rabbinic career. I have been told that those who do devote their professional lives to NCSY are often not from Modern Orthodox backgrounds. It should also be said that in many regions, NCSY is more "inreach" than outreach.

⁷ <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/modern-orthodoxy-from-a-teenagers-perspective/>. See also my response to Gross: <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/orthodox-and-vs-orthodox-but/>.

⁸ Noah Feldman, "Orthodox Paradox." *The New York Times* (July 22, 2007), <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/22/magazine/22yeshiva-t.html>.

⁹ See, for example, *Torah U-Madda Journal*, vol. 1.

¹⁰ <https://torah.etzion.org.il/en/centrist-orthodoxy-spiritual-accounting>.

¹¹ Relatedly, how can the Modern Orthodox community justify wanting to bring others closer to Torah and *mitzvot* when vocal figures who claim to represent the community voice an apparent lack of confidence in their own position? For example, Rabbi Jeffrey Fox of Yeshivat Maharat wrote a Facebook post in which he stated, "One of the challenges of Jewish life is being able to articulate why your approach is the best and not do so at the expense of another group of people. I believe deeply that my understanding of Torah and what God wants from me is the best approximation that can be made in this world. I also recognize that others have very

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different ways of answering some pretty fundamental questions."

(Quoted with permission.)

¹² <https://jewishjournal.com/uncategorized/71657/>

¹³

https://www.chabaddelray.com/templates/articlecco_cdo/aid/1492638/jewish/The-conservative-Movement-The-Chabad-playbook.htm.

¹⁴ Norman Lamm, *Seventy Faces: Articles of Faith, Volume 1* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 2002), 35.

¹⁵ Adam Ferziger writes that RIETS focuses on educating those who are already within the Orthodox fold by specifically training rabbis to match

...the particular needs of a contemporary Orthodox constituency. That is, when dealing with congregants who are already halakhically observant and Jewishly knowledgeable, expertise in these subjects offers the rabbi the opportunity to present a more sophisticated, culturally contoured side of Judaism. This enables him to better communicate with the many academically educated and highly accomplished Modern Orthodox members of his congregation.

...It has become clear that over the last few decades servicing the broader Jewish community has been relegated to a low position within its list of priorities.

See Adam Ferziger, "Training American Orthodox Rabbis to Play a Role in Confronting Assimilation: Programs, Methodologies and Directions" (The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality at Bar-Ilan University, 2003), 26.

¹⁶ The same is also true involving the inclusion of various *yiddishisms* and Yeshivish terminology. See this thoughtful reflection on the subject by my former study partner at the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education's Collegiate Beit Midrash, Cole Aronson: <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/politics-and-the-yeshivish-language>.

While I would personally argue for a “bi-lingual” approach in which terms are presented alongside their natural English equivalents (as opposed to the erasure of all non-English terminology), multiple conversations as well as my own experiences have shown me that Cole’s initial discomfort is quite common.

¹⁷ This is true even on campuses such as the University of Maryland, University of Michigan, Queens College, Rutgers University, Brandeis University, Binghamton University, Columbia University, and more (rather than Orthodox institutions like Yeshiva University or Lander College for Men/Women).

¹⁸ Certainly, many in the right-wing Orthodox community also prefer having a certain level of comfort in their lives. However, they tend to be more passionate about the mission of *kiruv* and generally more secure in their religiosity than their Modern Orthodox peers. Additionally, they tend to have fewer employment opportunities, which better incentivizes a life in *kiruv*. For various reasons, those within the Yeshivish world have even been choosing to pursue careers in *kiruv* over other options. For more information, see “The Chabadization of Haredi Orthodoxy” in Adam Ferziger’s *Beyond Sectarianism: The Realignment of American Orthodox Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015), 175-194.

Rabbi Ben Greenfield recently pointed out to me as well that *haredim* (even of the *litvish* variety) tend to believe in some form of theurgy accomplished by broader *mitzva* observance that Modern Orthodox Jews often reject, discount, or ignore.

¹⁹ With that said, JLIC couples are often responsible for reaching out to students who grew up in Orthodox communities but have drifted away from traditional observance. The extent to which JLIC couples will actively reach out to those on the fringe of their community varies from campus to campus, but it is certainly akin to the type

of *kiruv* that I am otherwise pushing for, albeit still primarily within an Orthodox context. It should also be said that if JLIC were to begin to prioritize *kiruv* in the way that I am writing about, it would paint a nearly perfect picture of my ideal.

²⁰ Norman Lamm, *Seventy Faces: Articles of Faith, Volume 1* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 2002), 36.

²¹ Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, *Faith Shattered and Restored: Judaism in the Postmodern Age* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2017), 59.

²² See <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/there-is-no-schism-modern-orthodoxy-has-two-fundamentally-separate-sects/>. See my response as well: <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/there-is-no-schism-yet-a-response-to-moshe-kurtz/>.

²³ What this style of *kiruv* may look like will hopefully be the topic of a future article, either by myself or anyone else interested in contributing to this needed conversation.

²⁴

https://www.torahweb.org/torah/2015/parsha/rwil_kev.html

²⁵

https://www.torahmusings.com/wp-content/uploads/2005/08/torah_study_for_women.htm.

²⁶ On another level, many seekers may be more willing to engage with an educator who wears a more relatable style of dress than one whose clothing seems alien to them.

²⁷ <https://rabbieregoldberg.org/i-am-not-a-modern-orthodox-rabbi>.

²⁸ Cited in <https://www.thelehrhaus.com/commentary/a-modern-orthodox-hedgehog-for-a-postmodern-world/>.

²⁹ Norman Lamm, *Torah U'Madda: The Encounter of Religious Learning and Worldly Knowledge in the Jewish Tradition* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2010), 151.

³⁰ Jacob J. Schacter (ed.), *Judaism’s Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration?* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2017), 372.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LO TAHMOD AND LO TIT'AVVEH: AN INSIGHT BASED ON THE HITPA'EL

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The Ten Commandments are found in both *Parashat Yitro* and *Parashat Va'ethanan*, but there are differences between the two versions. One major difference occurs in the tenth commandment. In *Parashat Yitro* (Exodus 20:14), this commandment uses the language of *lo tahmod* throughout the verse, while in *Parashat Va'ethanan* (Deuteronomy 5:18) the phrase *lo tahmod* is used vis-à-vis one's neighbor's wife, but *lo tit'avveh* vis-à-vis the rest (house, field, servants, etc.). What is the difference between these two verbs?

A well-known suggestion for a distinction is found in *Midrash Ha-Gadol to Yitro*. The suggestion there is that *ta'avah* is *be-lev* (with the heart), while *himmud* is *be-ma'aseh* (with deed).¹

This distinction is adopted by Rambam and many others. Regarding Rambam, see, for example, his statements in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, Negative Precept 265: "This means therefore that once you let yourself covet in your mind a desirable object that you have seen in your friend's house you have violated the precept of *lo tit'avveh*. If your passion for the object becomes so intense that you take steps to acquire possession of it, pressing him to sell it and exchange it for something better or more valuable—once you have bought out the unwilling purchaser you have violated both prohibitions."² See also Rambam, *Hilkhot Gezeilah Va-Aveidah* 1:9-10.

But I would like to present a different distinction between *lo tahmod* and *lo tit'avveh*.³ It has been made by several interpreters, but I would like to present it in the name of Benno Jacob, a Reform rabbi and Bible scholar in late nineteenth-early twentieth-century Germany.⁴ He offers it in his article "The Decalogue," in *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 14, New Series (1923).⁵ I present it in his name because, to my knowledge, he is the only one who focuses on the importance of *lo tit'avveh* being in the *hitpa'el* grammatical form.

Jacob observes that the root *h.m.d.* is quite often used in connection with words like *ra'ah*, *mar'eh*, and *ayin*. He cites Genesis 2:9, Joshua 7:21, Isaiah 53:2, I Kings 20:6, Ezekiel 24:16 and 24:25, and Lamentations 2:4. From these verses, we can deduce that in the case of *h.m.d.* the desire for something arises as a result of inspection.

Then he explains that the desire reflected in *a.v.h.* is different. "The difference is this[,] that the occasion for *חמד* is inspection, [but] for *אָוה* imagination, the reference being therefore to imagined estates and pleasures..."⁶ The body part doing the *a.v.h.* is usually the *nefesh*, not the eyes. Here he cites Deuteronomy 12:15, 12:20, 14:26, and 18:6 and many verses from *Nakh*.⁷

Then he makes his crucial observation that *a.v.h.* is often expressed in the *hitpa'el*, as in the tenth commandment.

Why should that be? Many of us have looked at that tenth commandment multiple times and wondered about *h.m.d.* versus *a.v.h.*, but typically we have forgotten to notice that *a.v.h.* is in the *hitpa'el*. The command is not *lo te'avveh* but *lo tit'avveh*. What is the import of this *hitpa'el* form?

One source I have seen counts 984 instances of the *hitpa'el* in *Tanakh*.⁸ A large percentage, perhaps a majority, of these times, the *hitpa'el* is a reflexive form, meaning that it indicates that a person is doing something to himself. Let us make the reasonable assumption that this is its function here.⁹

So what is the import of the *hitpa'el* of *a.v.h.*? Jacob explains. It means "to nourish in one's heart the desire for something, through a vivid presentation in one's fantasy..." Now we understand! *A.v.h.* means you have a desire for something that is not initially based on a visual inspection of it. Rather, **you are actively building up your desire** for something that you have not seen (or at least, it is not in front of you at the time). That is why the *hitpa'el* is used.

A perfect example of *a.v.h.* being used in this manner is found in Numbers 11:4-5. In verse 5, the people cry out: "We remember the fish that we used to eat in Egypt for free..." The previous verse had described the background with the phrase *hit'avvu ta'avah*, and later in verse 11:34 the people are described as *ha-mit'avvim*. The events are alluded to again in Psalms 106:14: *va-yit'avvu ta'avah*.

Another example of *a.v.h.* in the *hitpa'el* is in Amos 5:18. Here the reference is to *ha-mit'avvim et Yom Hashem*. No one has ever seen *Yom Hashem* before. We can understand that this is a dramatic day and something that people would be working themselves up for.

Finally, another example is II Samuel 23:15. Here we have *va-yit'avveh David*, followed by: "Who will give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem which is by the gate?" The well was not in his sight. The comment in the Soncino edition explains that he had "a sudden longing for the water

he used to drink in his boyhood.”¹⁰ David is here using his imagination and conjuring up his fond memories of drinking water from this well.

(The root *a.v.h.* is not always in the *hitpa’el*, but other examples of *a.v.h.* in the *hitpa’el* are found in Psalms 45:12, Jeremiah 17:16, Proverbs 13:4, 21:26, 23:3, 23:6, and 24:1, and Ecclesiastes 6:2. Most of these verses provide too little detail to warrant discussion.)

Jacob concludes by calling *h.m.d.* “the covetous observation” and *a.v.h.* “the imaginary desire.”

Finally, integrally related to the above interpretations of *h.m.d.* and *a.v.h.* is Jacobs’ expansive approach to parallelism. He believes that it is wrong for us to be overly narrow and apply *h.m.d.* only to one’s neighbor’s wife and *a.v.h.* only to the other items listed in the verse. Admittedly, *h.m.d.* is mentioned in *Parashat Va’ethanan* only in connection with the neighbor’s wife, and *a.v.h.* is mentioned only in connection with the other items. But

¹ Rabbi D. Z. Hoffmann included this passage in his edition of *Mekhilta of R. Shimon b. Yohai*, published in 1905. This led Nehama Leibowitz (see next note) to cite the passage as deriving from this work. But *Mekhilta of R. Shimon b. Yohai* is an ancient work that was lost and had to be reconstructed from quotations. Scholars now realize that Hoffmann was overly reliant on *Midrash Ha-Gadol* in his reconstruction. The later and more conservative reconstruction by J. N. Epstein and E. Z. Melamed, published in 1955, did not include the above passage.

The standard *Mekhilta* today is referred to as *Mekhilta of R. Yishmael*. There is a similar but more limited statement there in *Parashat Yitro*, end of section 8.

² Translation taken from Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot (Exodus)*, Part I, trans. Aryeh Newman (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1976), 342-351, at p. 345. The Hebrew edition of this Leibowitz article assigned the passage to *Mekhilta of R. Shimon b. Yohai*. (The English translation merely cited “Mekhilta.”)

³ Of course, some believe no deed is required for *himmud* and view both prohibitions as equivalent. See, e.g., Rashi to Deuteronomy 5:18; *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol*, Negative Precept 158; and Umberto Cassuto to Exodus 20:14. Others view the prohibition of *lo tahmod* as including both one who takes steps to obtain the object and one who merely desires it. See *Da’at Mikra* to Exodus 20:14, n. 3.

⁴ Nehama Leibowitz often quotes Jacob. See Rabbi Hayyim Angel, *Peshat Isn’t So Simple* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2014), 38. Angel writes that Leibowitz appreciated that Jacob and certain other non-Orthodox scholars “were

even if we can suggest a reason for the Torah’s verb choice for each item, he argues for an expansive approach to parallelism which would allow us to apply the prohibition of each verb to *all* items.

I would like to end on a homiletical note. Long ago, at an event sponsored by an organization promoting *aliyah*, I heard the following *Devar Torah*. The land of Israel is called *eretz hemdah* in *birkat ha-mazon*, based on the use of the phrase in Jeremiah 3:19, Zechariah 7:14, and Psalms 106:24. Let us assume that we follow *Midrash Ha-Gadol* and Rambam on the distinction between *lo tahmod* and *lo tit’avveh*, such that one has not violated *lo tahmod* unless one has come into possession of the object. This would imply that the desire alone to live in Israel does not make it *eretz hemdah*. One has to actually live there in order to bring this description to fruition!¹¹

attentive to the finer literary qualities of the biblical text, attributing significance to each word of the Torah.”

⁵ The article spans pages 141-187. His discussion of the tenth commandment starts on p. 166.

⁶ Others who make the distinction that Jacob makes include Malbim (1809-1879) to Exodus 20:13 (and see also his commentary to Genesis 3:6) and R. Solomon Wertheimer. Wertheimer (d. 1935) writes: “*Ta’avah* refers to the human desire without benefit of visual contact. *Himmud* is the stimulation of desire by visual contact...” See his work on biblical synonyms: *Be’ur Shemot Ha-Nirdafim She-Ba-Tanakh* (Jerusalem: Sinai, 1924) (translation taken from the Leibowitz article; see note 2 above). Leibowitz also discusses the similar view of Jacob. But when she does so she greatly shortens his discussion and does not mention his observation about the *hitpa’el*. That is what motivated me to write this article.

⁷ He admits the exception of Genesis 3:6 where *ta’avah* is used in connection with *einayim*. He suggests that the meaning here is that whoever saw or heard about the Tree once would say to himself: I wish I could see it again and again!

⁸ Others count fewer. I have seen references to 946, 780, and “over 825.” Due to the ambiguous nature of certain word forms, counting instances of *hitpa’el* in *Tanakh* is not an exact science.

⁹ Sometimes it has other functions. For example, sometimes *hitpa’el* expresses a continuing action. Other times, it expresses a request for someone else to do something to you. I have discussed the *hitpa’el* extensively

in my article on the word *hitpallel* in my *Roots and Rituals* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2018) and in my earlier article at seforim.blogspot.com on Aug. 29, 2016. In the case of *hitpallel*, I argued that it denotes a request for someone to intervene on your behalf. I disagreed with the common understanding of *hitpallel* as an individual acting upon himself (e.g., judging himself). Another case like *hitpallel* where the *hitpa'el* serves the function of requesting that another act on you is the case of *hithannen*. Here, one is asking another to show favor.

¹⁰ See also the similar comments of Malbim.

¹¹ I would like to thank Rabbi Avrohom Lieberman for reviewing and improving this article.

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