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## AHAREI MOT

### LOYAL AS A DOG: HOW TO READ “JEWISH ART”

**MARC MICHAEL EPSTEIN** is a professor and the **Mattie M. Paschall (1899) & Norman Davis Chair in Religion and Visual Culture at Vassar College.**

“There’s nothing that you see that can’t be shown.” – Beatles,  
*All you need is love*

We fight all manner of battles in the course of our careers.<sup>1</sup> While things have changed in the field of Jewish visual culture since I began writing and publishing, there was a time when my struggle was simply to claim some uniquely Jewish meaning in the iconography of manuscripts made for Jews—an idea that sounds patently obvious today, but which, in all modesty, might have not been so entirely self-evident without my struggle.

There I was, at age seventeen, in the inner sanctum, the book and artifact-lined Mount Scopus office of Professor Bezalel Narkiss, the doyen of the study of art—and in particular, illuminated manuscripts, made for (and sometimes by) Jews—my academic idol, the man I hoped would be my mentor. He was speaking English, but the words just weren’t registering. “Mr. Epstein, I have been studying Hebrew illuminated manuscripts for over fifty years, and I can assure you that no image of any animal in these works has any significance beyond the decorative.” “Then, Professor Narkiss,” I piped up, my barely post-adolescent voice cracking, “does this mean you won’t support my research?” “On the contrary,” intoned the great man, “I will oppose it!”

A longtime art lover, I’d been particularly fascinated with medieval art that depicted animals ever since I could toddle. And I had come to the Hebrew University as a visiting student during my junior year of college intending to study what medieval Jews had done with animal symbolism. In my beloved [Unicorn Tapestries at the Cloisters](#), for instance, I knew that scholars had asserted that for medieval Christians the unicorn represented Jesus, and the hunt represented his Passion. And I suspected that medieval Jews found animals equally significant and meaningful, but in a different way.

In fact, immediately before my fateful visit with Professor Bezalel Narkiss, I had visited the Israel Museum. There I saw a magnificent 15th-century Ashkenazi *siddur* open to the folio containing the powerful first phrase of Tractate *Avot* (“The Chapters of the Fathers”): “Moses received the Torah [from God] at Sinai, and

transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua [transmitted it] to the Elders and the Elders to the Men of the Great Assembly.” The word “*Moshe* (Moses)” was elaborately illuminated, and above it stood a black dog, relatively large given to the size of the page (Fig. 1).



The initial word of the *Chapters of the Fathers* seemed to me to be a manifestly inappropriate venue for a canine romping ground, either in the fifteenth century when this book was illuminated, or in the nineteenth, when it was given as a gift to a Hasidic rebbe, Rabbi Israel Friedman of Ruzhyn. My second question to Narkiss would have concerned the meaning of such a prominent and yet incongruous image. What would its medieval authors and its Hasidic audience have thought of it? But now, it seemed, I would be banned from exploring the role of animal symbolism in medieval Jewish illuminated manuscripts. Which was frustrating, because I suspected that animals in Jewish visual tradition had profound and interesting meanings that went “beyond the decorative.” They simply had to.

How did I know? Well, besides my intellectual hunch that medieval Jews must have shared with their Christian neighbors a love of animals and their depictions, but expressed it in a different “key” as it were, I had concrete confirmation—through actions, rather than theory—about the connection of (at least some) Jews with (at least some) animals from my other great hero. My *Zayde* (grandfather), Harry Epstein, was a junk dealer who lived in New Haven, Connecticut, quite the opposite—in all ways—of my mentor, Professor Narkiss, the urbane academic. From my *Zayde*, I learned the relevance of animals—even animals like dogs, which I had been told were despised by Jews for being the agents of their persecutors. Jews—I’d heard growing up—regarded dogs as weapons to be set against them, not as pets. But *Zayde* had a dog, and it was his encounter with a member of the local religious establishment that clarified for me that traditionally observant Jews might, in fact, think differently about animals.

<sup>1</sup> This article is Adapted from *People of the Image: Jews & Art*, forthcoming from Penn State University Press

Once, when he was quite old, I sat with him as he prayed the morning prayer on the couch, arrayed in *tallit* and *tefillin*. *Zayde's* faithful canine companion Mutik ("Sweetie")—a compact mutt of ambiguous origins—literally rested his head on *Zayde's* feet. Into this scene of blissful domestic piety walked the community rabbi who had come to visit. Seeing my *Zayde* with the dog at his feet, he did a double-take. I could read his thoughts in his eyes: "Wearing *tefillin*, which require a *guf naki* (a clean body) and touching a dog?" "*Passt nisht!* (Unacceptable!)" he hissed aloud, gesturing at Mutik as if he were some unclean cur and not *Zayde's* best friend.

*Zayde*, who knew Jewish law as well as anyone, and could not interrupt his prayers to engage the rabbi in a response, was unfazed. He simply turned around his *siddur* and pointed to the verse he had just been chanting, "*Kol Ha-Neshamah sehallel Yah—* Let everything that breathes praise the Lord." (Psalms 150:6). The rabbi had to smile. And my *Zayde* smiled back. "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord".

The medieval Jews who created or commissioned illuminated manuscripts, like the Christians among whom they lived, regarded nature and her creatures to be a book that the Creator had given humans to read and in which they were invited to discern a myriad of ways of understanding God, divine providence and mercy, and the lessons that God sought to transmit to human beings: "Lazybones, go to the ant; Study its ways and learn," admonishes the author of Proverbs (6:6). The Talmud, in Tractate *Eruvin* even tells us that "If the Torah had not been given, we could learn modesty from the cat . . ." (100b).

I knew that that the dog in the *siddur* I'd seen had to mean something. Manuscripts were expensive. Every brushstroke cost time and money. A tiny dog in the margin might have been "merely decorative," but what Jewish patron would tolerate the image of a large black dog directly over the name of Moses without at least considering its meaning or its reception?

Dogs abound in medieval Jewish manuscripts. Lapdogs accompany Pharaoh and the Egyptians in the *Rylands Haggadah* (Iberia, Catalonia, c. 1330–1340, Manchester, John Rylands Library Ms. Heb 6, fol. 17r). In the *Kaufmann Haggadah* (Iberia, Catalonia, second half of the fourteenth century, Budapest, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Kaufmann collection, MS A 422, Kaufmann Haggadah, I fol. 39r), a tongueless dog barks representing the effects of God's redeeming power at the Exodus when "not a dog shall whet his tongue at the Children of Israel" (Exodus 11:6–7). A dog chases a hare in another example, right under the rubric, "And the Egyptians pressured us" (*Sarajevo Haggadah*, Aragon, c. 1320–1335, Sarajevo, National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, fol. 47v.) In all these cases, the dog is clearly a symbol for the Egyptians, or the enemies of the Jews more generally.

This is particularly evident in the famous *Jage den hasen* (hare hunt) illustrations in Ashkenazi manuscripts and printed *haggadot*, and their Sephardic parallels in depictions of the hunt of Esau, where hares are pursued by dogs (and by hunters). It is corroborated, for instance, by illustrations such as the ones in the 14th-century *Barcelona Haggadah* where dogs are hunted by, and serve hares, rather than hunting and pursuing them. While it should be clear to anyone with eyes that dogs are significant here, Narkiss insisted that these hunt scenes were decorative or playful and had no symbolic (and certainly no political) meaning. They were merely "adapted" from art made for Christians. Certainly some might have been

"merely decorative" or thoughtlessly adapted (thoughtlessness, however, being unlikely in a commodity as expensive as an illuminated manuscript). But others could represent a range of meanings, slightly different in each manuscript, as each manuscript represents a particular constellation of the patrons, the artists, and the rabbinic advisers (who scholars assume to have assisted some manuscript patrons on depictions that would accord with Jewish traditions—narrative and legal). The afterlives of any given manuscript—the opinions and attitudes of subsequent owners, to the extent that they can be known— must also, of course, be taken into consideration.

The typical range of meanings for dogs—hunters, pursuers, enemies—is corroborated in Jewish texts. There, dogs represent, for the most part, the pursuing, rapacious enemies of the Jews. "Dogs surround me; a pack of evil ones closes in on me" (Psalms 22:17). How are we, then, to understand a black dog atop the word "Moses" in the opening of the text of *Pirkei Avot* in our manuscript? The image of a dog as a symbol for Moses seems disrespectful at best and blasphemous at worse. But on the other hand, if this particular dog is "read" according to the traditions of medieval animal lore and of common wisdom, what better metaphor could we have for the loyal transmission of the divine mandate from generation to generation than the loyal and obedient dog? And what better symbol for Moses himself, called by God "faithful throughout My household" (Numbers 12:7)?

Of course, this thesis was unverifiable, just a hunch. But it was a hunch that began with the image and worked outward to the wider circle of associations—first to the context of Jewish collective consciousness, where dogs might have been *passt nisht*, then to the broader, more general context, in which certain positive values and valences (loyalty, for instance) were ascribed to dogs. The question that interested—and still interests—me most was whether such values and valences— because they were such a pervasive part of general culture—somehow rubbed off on the Jewish context and caused a softening of the negativity towards dogs that was traditionally found in "internal" Jewish collective consciousness. The image of the dog in this medieval Jewish manuscript, right above the name of Moses, God's faithful servant, would seem to indicate that this is the case.

These were the sorts of arguments for general meaningfulness and particular meaning I advanced over the years above the objections of multiple Narkissians in various settings. Eventually, I was able to recalibrate the assumptions art historians made when looking at art made by or for Jews in the Middle Ages: Symbols had previously been thought of as "universal"—as meaning roughly the same thing in all cultures. When a symbol appeared in art made for Jews that did not seem to "fit" a Jewish agenda, the consensus was to treat it as "unthinkingly adopted" or as "merely decorative." The idea was that Jews so desired to be like everyone else so they unthoughtfully and uncritically adopted symbols. My work insisted that when Jews adopted symbols they also *adapted* them— or more accurately, they adapted the symbols to their Jewish mindset. Sometimes the symbols gained meanings that directly contravened those they bore in art made for Christians. The messianic content of the symbol of the unicorn, for instance, pointed unequivocally to Jesus in Christian art. It could not do so in art made for Jews. Yet the unicorn was a messianic symbol in Jewish texts—the *re'em*, the symbol of the tribe of Ephraim, generally translated as "wild ox," was understood by some to be a unicorn. And so in art, the unicorn became a symbol of the Messiah the Son of Joseph, the warrior Messiah, who would wage war on the enemies of Israel in order to prepare the world for the

peaceful and eternal reign of the Messiah Son of David. Adopted from Christianity, the unicorn was adapted to become a messianic symbol, but not a Christian one. And—in symbolizing the Jewish messiah, the descendent of Joseph the son of Jacob, opposed to the adopted son of Joseph the husband of Mary—the unicorn, while still messianic, was a very Jewish symbol indeed. It was, moreover, a polemic response to the figure of Jesus in that it asserted that the Messiah was not Jesus, indeed, he had not come and waged war with the enemies of Israel.

In the case of our dog—the Jews who commissioned this particular manuscript were seeking an appropriate symbol for Moses. The most conventional iconography of the dog was, as I've said, as hunter and enemy. But in this context, the quality of loyalty, another aspect of canine symbolism from the wider culture, was called into play, because the association of the dog with loyal transmission felt more urgent and more present and necessary.

So sometimes a given symbol—like the dog—might seem to have a particular connotation in Jewish context, but if that connotation doesn't seem to fit the art or the context, it is then incumbent upon the researcher to search for a potential way in which meaning was applied in a new and creative way. Expensive, symbolically dense works of art should in general be assumed to require forethought and consideration, not to unthinkingly adopt symbols, pile on motifs that were "merely decorative," or to mean nothing.

Still, I did not get the chance to prove my thesis about the particular image I've been discussing here until many decades later; the truth is, I would still not claim to have proved it. But I did have an experience that made me think I just might stand a chance of being correct.

About thirty years after I'd met with Narkiss and begun to formulate my thesis, I was waiting for my flight to New York to depart from Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, and, working on an essay, I happened to have my laptop open to the image of the very dog in the *siddur* formerly belonging to the Rebbe of Ruzhyn I had wanted to discuss with Narkiss, but never got to. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a group of five Hasidim coming from the direction of the incoming Antwerp flight, all carrying the sturdy black hard-sided briefcases that marked them as diamond dealers. Perhaps I was inspired by the Hasidic provenance of the manuscript, but somehow, something just clicked, and I knew in that moment what I must do.

Quickly removing my *yarmulkeh* from my head before they could see I was an observant Jew, I waited a decent interval and approached the group. "Excuse me, gentlemen:" In my broadest and most neutral mid-Atlantic tones, I addressed the fellow who seemed to be the eldest and most respected—who knows, perhaps he himself was a *rebbe*. "I'm an art historian—" and in response to their puzzled looks, "I study pictures." This was quickly translated by an acolyte and transmitted to the man I was addressing. He raised an eyebrow and nodded, cocking his amply-bearded chin in my direction to encourage me to continue. "Well, the thing is, I've come across this picture. I think it's Jewish, and I wonder what you gentlemen, (here, I indicated with a sweep of my hand the sartorial evidence for their Jewishness,) might think of it." I turned the screen towards them. "Yah, Jewish," replied my interlocutor. "What you want to know about it?" "Well, this dog, here, sir, I was wondering what it means?" Flatly and without irony: "It's a dog." "I know that, but I mean, I can't read the words here, and I thought they might have something to do with the picture."

Although polite, none of the five had evinced any real interest in the image. But here was a text—something they could get into. They all crowded in around my screen and I could hear them debating—but only very briefly—in Yiddish. "*S'iz Pirkei Avos*" ("It's Tractate *Avot*, the *Chapters of the Fathers*,") one said. My informant read aloud: "*Moyshe kibbel Toyrah, umassroi...*" ("Moses received the Torah [from God] at Sinai, and transmitted it...") "*Der hundt s'iz Moyshe*," "The dog, it's Moses," he concluded authoritatively. "*Moyshe?*" "Moses?" asked his companion. "*Moyshe! 'Eyved neyman—pushut!*" "Moses!: 'The faithful servant'—simple!" was the kurt reply. "Ah!" ("Oh!") was the response all around.

The translator turned to me, first tendering a respectful nod in the direction of the elder who made the determination, as if to say, "this is his observation": "This dog, it is *Moyshe*—Moses, Moses who was called loyal, like a dog is loyal. An *eyved neyman*—a loyal servant—of God." "Thank you!" I answered.

And I was thankful. In fact, I was grateful in particular for one small word that had passed between these men and which had not been translated. As I say, it was a brief debate. And the word that had been used to describe the solution was almost dismissive: "*pushut*"—"simple," "clear," or "elementary."

To be clear: this conversation did not "solve" the image. How could it? Despite what the general public may think, the distance that separates twenty-first century Hasidim from the medieval creators of the image is vast. But here's the thing: these are people who are living in a society that is, counter-intuitively, quite postmodern—it is very connected with the world around it, at least from the perspective of business, and politics, and many aspects of technology—yet it is also, or course, highly traditional, relentlessly hierarchical, and deeply steeped in a pervasive and inescapable Jewish collective consciousness. Although Hasidim are thoroughly postmodern, this *dynamic* of simultaneous immersion in, and separation from, the larger society, undergirded with a strongly traditional world-view is a configuration that would have been familiar to medieval Jews and has not changed significantly since the Middle Ages—and even less since the time of the Ruzhyner Rebbe. If for these men—with little debate and no dissension—it was "*pushut*"—"simple," that "*Der hundt s'iz Moyshe...eyved neyman*,"—the dog represents Moses, God's faithful servant, would it not be unreasonable to hope that it was perhaps equally self-evident for the authorship of this image in the fifteenth century, and for its nineteenth century Hasidic audience?

So did this encounter get us closer to understanding the image? Short of exhuming witnesses "no longer available to interrogate," I believe it got us as close as we can get. We must, of course, always maintain a healthy skepticism with regard to "universal meanings" of symbols. Some seem to have a universal meaning but may, in fact, have particular microcontextual meanings that have been lost to history and which must, thus, continue to elude us.

When I examine animal motifs in seventeenth-century Polish synagogue ceilings, for instance, I am always acutely conscious that even as I interpret a hare hunt as an allegory for the persecution of Israel by the nations, in a particular synagogue, a specific hare may have been depicted as being attacked by an eagle because the artist or patron was named Haas (Yiddish: hare), and was involved in a personal conflict with a landlord (Yiddish: *poynets*; Hebrew: eagle/vulture=*peynets*)! Such a meaning, deeply enmeshed in a particular microcontext—the social universe in which the art was created—is lost, and thus unrecoverable. Still, I hope I have

demonstrated that the method of working outward from the image can serve us reasonably well in the example of the dog in the *sidur* of the Ruzhyner Rebbe.

May our travels on the road from servitude to Egypt's Pharaoh to service to Sinai's God always be accompanied by an openness and nuance that allow us to see beyond our present moment, with its prejudices and preconceptions, towards a world in which we judge all persons and all creatures—even dogs—*'al kaf zkhus*: in the most positive and edifying of ways.

## HEADLINES: A COMMON SENSE HAREDI APPROACH

**SHLOMO ZUCKIER is a PhD candidate in Ancient Judaism at Yale University, a member of Yeshiva University's Kollel Elyon, and a Founder and Editor of The Lehrhaus.**

### Haredim and Technology

Recent articles touting the [top Jewish podcasts](#) leave the impression that the podcast genre is the exclusive domain of liberal Judaism. But members of the American Haredi (a.k.a. Yeshiva) community will likely have heard about the extremely successful weekly podcast (including radio and dial-in options for those without the most up to date technology) run by Dovid Lichtenstein, entitled [Headlines](#). In fact, this podcast ranks among the most listened-to Jewish podcasts, with nearly 650,000 episode downloads since its inception and approximately 20,000 subscribers. Despite its absence from these listicles, and indeed from just about any discussion of media outside the Orthodox community, *Headlines* is thriving.

### What is Headlines?

The podcast, which [debuted](#) in late 2014, describes itself as “the most popular English halacha radio program in the world,” one that “tackles the most controversial and pressing issues affecting the Orthodox Jewish community” by inviting “distinguished figures... to discuss hot-button... topics,” as it explores a host of issues relating to Halakha and *hashkafah*, Jewish law and thought. It often draws upon timely issues in the news (hence “Headlines”) that affect either the Jewish or the broader community. A wide range of (primarily, but not exclusively, Haredi and male) guests are hosted on the show to discuss various topics with the host. The podcast runs for a minimum of an hour, but more lengthy discussions of certain topics can last several weeks and/or stretch the length of the podcast to two hours.

The weekly show opens with a *devar Torah* on the Parsha, at times also including some notes or clarifications about previous discussions. Then it jumps into the topic *du jour*. Episodes have featured exciting topics across a fairly wide range of hot-button issues for the Haredi listener: [feminism](#), [day school education](#), [pastoral training in rabbinical schools](#), and [brain death](#).

*Headlines* does not offer a straightforward *shiur* or lecture. It is designed not only to inform, which it certainly does, but also to entertain. The range of speakers chosen is meant to reflect a variety of viewpoints, and the host plays the role of sparring partner or devil's advocate in order to push the speaker to defend their view and to represent alternative perspectives. At times the topics are chosen not (only) for novel halakhic content but to tie in to exciting, even outrageous headlines that have appeared in the Haredi press. For example, one episode on “the [Thousand Dollar Sandwich](#)” yielded

minimal halakhic discussion, although it integrated well with a hot issue that was “trending” in the [Haredi media](#).

These discussions do not remain merely in the ethereal realm of cyberspace. Lichtenstein has authored [two books](#) based on the various topics discussed on *Headlines*, published by [OU Press](#). These volumes treat the issues covered in Lichtenstein's own voice, although they often include extensive quotes from guests who appeared on the show. [Additionally, he has published several works of halakhic writing in Hebrew.]

### Controversial Topics and Positions

Given the paucity of podcasts available on halakhic matters, a program endeavoring to cover these issues would likely not lack for listeners even if it hewed to traditional positions. But, as *Headlines* has demonstrated throughout its existence, it is not interested in simply rehashing classic topics or hewing to a party line. Time and time again Lichtenstein engages new topics and adopts uncommon or controversial positions for his listeners.

One article published in [Headlines 2: Halachic Debates of Current Events](#) (“Is Artificial Insemination an Option for Unmarried Women?”) discusses the prospect of single women choosing to become pregnant through In Vitro Fertilization in an effort to become a single mother by choice, an [increasingly popular](#) phenomenon in the Orthodox world. The article surveys the various potential halakhic and *hashkafic* issues in favor of and in opposition to such a prospect, and cites several views of rabbinic podcast guests—Rabbis Dovid Cohen and Mendel Shafran of the Yeshiva world and Rav Herschel Schachter of the YU world who are univocally opposed to the practice. They cite a variety of meta-halakhic reasons, including the appearance of impropriety in bringing into the world a child who is an orphan from birth, and conclude it is “not at all recommended,” “absolutely prohibited,” and “not the way to solve a problem.”

Nevertheless, Lichtenstein's voice concludes that since no purely halakhic prohibition is at stake, and since having a child would fill a deep void for the mother and offer her a fundamental sense of fulfillment, there should be room to permit this. “While these concerns are certainly valid, it is doubtful whether they suffice to forever deny a woman the joy and privilege of having a child” (p. 229). He invokes the Midrashic theme, “plight of childless women,” as a basis on which to be as lenient as possible, within halakhic constraints. While some of the more left-wing Dati rabbis in Israel have [come](#) out in support of this practice, and [some](#) in America have done the same more quietly, this remains a radical position to take, certainly for someone in the Haredi community.

Another [podcast](#) challenged a different taboo, this one more cultural than (meta-)halakhic. Overwhelmingly, Haredi men and women meet one another to marry through a *shidduch* matchmaking system. This has given rise to a phenomenon of *shidduch* resumes, where the two prospective daters (or their mothers) evaluate one another on paper before agreeing to date, a process that has rendered any facts about family members fair game, including health issues, with an unfortunate particular focus on mental health. This, among other factors, has contributed to a deep taboo surrounding mental health in the Haredi community. Many in the Haredi world often avoid seeing psychologists, or at least publicly admitting that they do so, in the interest of protecting family members of marriageable age.

In an [episode](#) on mental health and *shidduchim*, Lichtenstein came out with a radically different attitude towards mental health. He very openly described the assistance that psychologists provided him

during a particularly difficult time in his life, challenging the taboo outright. Why wouldn't all people meet with a psychologist, in order to be in touch with their inner selves and maximize their productivity? Some of Lichtenstein's guests—rabbis, psychologists, and mental health counselors—were pleasantly surprised with his uncommon perspective towards mental health in the Haredi world, and praised his unusually open perspective.

Other episodes have revealed Lichtenstein's position on several other unorthodox (although not necessarily un-Orthodox) positions. His came out bearish on the practice of [flying the deceased to Israel](#) for burial, despite the practice's [increasing prevalence](#) of late. He engaged in a lengthy debate on the question of organ donation after brain death, a [consistently contentious issue](#) over the past decade. While he did not reveal his own opinion, the presentation expressed great sympathy to those allowing organ donation, and certainly a strong antipathy to the view allowing one to receive organs but not to donate them. While some, including many on the Orthodox left, have staked out positions similar to Lichtenstein's, the pro-donation view remains (at least in America) outside the mainstream for Center and Right Orthodox *posekim*. In fact, the main proponent of the brain-death-as-death position that Lichtenstein hosted on the podcast was not a *posek* or halakhist but an [activist](#).

In each of these cases, and they can be multiplied, the positions—although uncommon—remain within the range of halakhic opinion, and thus the lines that are crossed are primarily social rather than halakhic. As *Headlines* is a strictly Orthodox podcast, antinomian approaches are not countenanced, let alone adopted. But there are a number of cases, such as those noted above, in which Lichtenstein deviates from the sociological “party line” of the Haredi community on these issues. As the host makes very clear, while he is loyal and submissive to Halakha, he is by no means compliant with these social considerations.

### A Broader Perspective

Another important feature of the podcast is the *devar Torah* offered at the outset of each program. These homilies, often tied to the *parsha*, current holidays, recent events and/or the podcast's topic, are Lichtenstein's chance for unmediated contact with the listener. Rather than exhorting the listener to learn Torah and follow *mitzvot* with greater alacrity, as is often the message of a more traditional Yeshiva *devar Torah*, these messages aim at different goals. Some advocate compassion for the weak; others encourage the listener to persevere in the face of difficulties; or to take pride in the Jewish people. These personal messages often draw upon Hasidic teachings, looking closely at the Torah's narratives and characters rather than at its legal principles. This provides a counterbalance to what is often a more legalistic and impersonal presentation in the rest of the show.

A notable point about the podcast is the range of speakers and issues with which it engages. Despite speaking largely to a Haredi audience, *Headlines* has proven itself fairly open to the broader Modern Orthodox community. Lichtenstein often hosts Rabbi Herschel Schachter, who is widely respected in the American Yeshiva world as a leading Torah scholar but is often seen as outside the mainstream due to his associations with Yeshiva University. Lichtenstein has also hosted a number of other YU faculty and administrators, including several on a [discussion](#) as to whether rabbinical schools should offer pastoral training, which is not formally offered in any American yeshiva to the “right” of YU. *Headlines* even featured an [episode](#) discussing the legitimacy of Open Orthodoxy, a conversation usually presumed to be unnecessary for a more Haredi audience that sees their exclusion as [already decided](#) over a decade ago.

Lichtenstein has at times hosted women, both those hailing from the Modern Orthodox and the Haredi worlds, in his podcast, which defies the trend of minimizing visual and audio representations of women in Haredi media. In multiple ways, then, the podcast serves both as a way of exposing the Haredi world to phenomena and thinkers in the Modern Orthodox world and as a moderating force of sorts.

### Common Sense Haredism

What is the show's overall worldview? Among the multiple voices presented in the dialogue format, a certain *hashkafah*, primarily following the attitude of its host, does shine through. *Headlines* can best be seen as reflecting a “common sense Haredi” approach. It assumes extensive background knowledge on the part of its presumed yeshiva-trained, male listener, as well as knowledge about trends in the Haredi world. Relatedly, it presumes proficiency in halakhic reasoning; one who never studied Talmud post-high school would likely have trouble following the give and take of many of the episodes.

But there is also no presumption that the listener should accept what is done in the community if it lacks a halakhic or reasoned basis, especially if it seems unreasonable. Instead, common sense—within the frame of Halakha—is often used to support alternatives to the standard path. Several of these were noted earlier, as Lichtenstein has supported positions that are non-standard for the Haredi community.

The factors that comprise this “common sense” include a deep sense of pragmatism, a pride in the observant lifestyle, a commitment to reason, and a commitment to the unity of the Jewish people.

The pragmatism expresses itself clearly in opposition to high schools that provide only minimal [secular education](#). Lichtenstein materially supports programs meant to train post-yeshiva men to enter the workforce though, in his view, this remedial training should be unnecessary. Parents should ensure that their children will be able to support themselves as adults rather than rely on miracles to pay their way without making any efforts whatsoever.

Despite whatever critiques Lichtenstein might have of some of the institutions of the Yeshiva world, he has an abiding pride in Judaism, regarding both the Haredi lifestyle and Jewish peoplehood. Often, Lichtenstein will invoke Jewish genius and the many Jewish Nobel Prize winners to support this pride. His *divrei Torah* often critique general society as compared to a traditional, religious Jewish household, and charge the listeners to take pride in their traditional Judaism and to see how it is manifestly superior to the secular lifestyle.

Related to this is a strong commitment to Jewish unity, the oft-invoked catchword of *ahdut*. Lichtenstein will frequently assert pride in the fact that his listeners span from Yeshivish to Hasidic, and “even the modern [Orthodox],” or how efforts to free [Sholom Rubashkin](#) unified parts of the Jewish community that previously had been at loggerheads. Furthermore, he takes umbrage at cases where these divisions persist. A [discussion](#) with Professor David Berger on Berger's book critiquing parts of Chabad's ideology got heated, with Lichtenstein criticizing Berger for impugning an entire stream of Judaism.

### Who is Dovid Lichtenstein?

Such an interesting podcast stemming from the Haredi world might arouse curiosity about its creator. Who *is* Dovid Lichtenstein? (In



order to dispel any confusion, let me note here that he is not related to R. Aharon Lichtenstein, my beloved teacher of blessed memory.)

By day, Dovid—or rather David—Lichtenstein operates the eponymous Lightstone Group, a [large](#) national real estate company holding properties across 20 states that he founded in 1988. A native of Brooklyn, Dovid spent several years in various yeshivot, including Beth Medrash Govoha of Lakewood, from which he launched his business. [Very successful](#) in his business ventures, he is a donor to many Jewish organizations and causes, and resides in Monsey, where he also operates a *minyán* on Shabbat. Although his own family lacks particular *yichus* of note, he is married to the granddaughter of Rav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, the famed Rosh Yeshiva of Torah Vodaath.

It may very well be that this varied background—yeshiva training, self-made businessman, with some (acquired) *yichus*—was indispensable for “Lichtenstein,” as he is affectionately known by many of his listeners, allowing him to succeed in promoting his program as he has. His bona fides as knowledgeable in Torah may not qualify him as a leading decisor, but they give him access (or “make him a *bar hakhi*”) to participate in the conversation. His financial standing allows him to run the podcast without being beholden to anyone and, in fact, his significant material support of institutions within the Orthodox and Yeshiva world may incentivize others to support him and appear on his podcast. His *yichus* grants him additional connections to Torah scholars who might join his program, and over the years he has hosted a blockbuster lineup including Chief Rabbi of Israel R. Yitzchak Yosef, Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky, Rav Moshe Sternbuch, and Rav Dovid Cohen, among others. Most of all, the communal stature he has earned serves to protect him from backlash among those who might see his podcast as too controversial. All of these factors work together to accord Lichtenstein a widely disseminated voice in the American Yeshiva world.

The nature of an authority-centric community like the Haredi community is that there is a set of officially sanctioned *gedolim*, *askanim* and *mosdos* (great scholars, community organizers, and institutions) who define, and hold, the party line. Generally, those who fall outside this class lack the capacity for promoting their message, especially if it does not map neatly onto the official policy. Lichtenstein represents a rare case in which he can maintain widespread influence despite lack of any formal position and especially in the face of some of his unorthodox positions.

Lichtenstein is not alone. There are several others in the Haredi world who manage to exert influence, even against the party line, despite a lack of formal position. The cases of Shlomo Yehuda Rechnitz and Lipa Schmeltzer serve as two relevant models, although they diverge significantly from one another. The former has a biography very similar to Lichtenstein—self-made magnate and son-in-law of a great rabbinic personality (the recently passed R. Yisroel Belsky). Less successful in his yeshiva studies, Rechnitz primarily projects his power on social issues, such as his campaigns to [resolve the Shidduch crisis](#) and an [attempted intervention](#) into a Lakewood schooling crisis.

In a very different vein, Lipa uses his [widespread popularity](#) across the Haredi world to promote himself as a sort of nouveau rebbe. For several years he had his own [shul](#); offered biweekly divrei Torah [sheni va-hamishi](#); and generally comported himself in a manner unlike his Haredi compadres, studying for a [degree](#) at Columbia University. (In recent months, Lipa has pulled back from some of his more novel moves, such that this depiction may reflect his past more than his present state.)

Although these characters have somewhat distinct models for success, they may have been created by a similar phenomenon. When there is so much influence centralized among a particular elite group, a vacuum is created among those yearning for something different. In such cases, those who are protected—due to their fame or finances—from possible backlash are in a position to set up shop and promote alternate views on a variety of issues.

### Signs of Success

There are several reasons why *Headlines* has been so successful. The most straightforward reason is that it monopolizes the Haredi market, not just the podcast market, but a good chunk of the entertainment market overall. There are not that many outlets of Kosher fun, especially of the cerebrally adventurous variety, and *Headlines* is not only entertaining but intellectually stimulating as well. The knowledgeable host, impressive guests, and engaging interface, of course, do not hurt either, and the caliber of discourse on halakhic and *hashkafic* matters are on a very high level.

Furthermore, listeners need not remain passive—they have the opportunity to write emails or leave phone messages with Lichtenstein, which often get posted to the *Headlines* website. The listeners are thus brought in to join the discourse as well.

The ideology of the host, with its common-sense Haredi approach, likely appeals to the average listener. While it takes Haredi culture and basic halakhic norms for granted, it also allows room to explore and even adopt positions beyond the party line. In a sense, Lichtenstein stands in and speaks for the “enlightened” Haredi listener, one who feels sufficiently educated to have an opinion and wants his thoughts and opinions to be affirmed in a public forum.

While listening to the show, the listener is presumably meant to identify, in some form, with its host, Dovid Lichtenstein. He’s not an expert, but he does know how to learn, is aware of problems facing the Haredi and Orthodox world, and has a good dose of common sense that has served him well in life. When Lichtenstein debates with great experts in Halakha and leaders of the Jewish world, he represents his listeners, injecting common sense and fundamental sources to discussions that often focus on minutiae and may seem (at least to him) to veer beyond the reasonable.

### Conclusion

The *Headlines* show takes full advantage of the technological developments of recent years. It reaches listeners on a wide variety of frequencies, from old technology radio and phone to contemporary trending tech podcasts. By discussing matters of great import—Halakha and *hashkafah*—but doing so in a somewhat different way than usual, the podcast distinguishes itself and becomes attractive. And its host, drawing upon his cachet and his (Yeshiva) everyman appeal, manages to draw the listeners to him.

Whatever the future holds in store for technology and the Haredi community, let the record reflect that *Headlines* has broken new ground as an early, massively successful, Orthodox podcast.

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LEHRHAUS EDITORS:  
YEHUDA FOGEL - LEAH KLAHR -  
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