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VAYIGASH

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THIS WEEK'S LEHRHAUS OVER SHABBOS IS SPONSORED BY  
**HINDY AND REUBEN TAUB**  
IN MEMORY OF THE 25<sup>TH</sup> YARZHEIT OF HIS FATHER GERSHON BEN YECHIEL

## RUDOLPH KASTNER AND HOW HISTORY BECOMES MIDRASH

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**S**eventy-five years ago, 1,354 Jews arrived safely in Switzerland, following a harrowing journey from Nazi-occupied Hungary. The circumstances of their rescue would soon become one of the most contested and politicized topics in popular commemoration of the Holocaust. The pain and confusion endure to this day.

The agreement reached by their rescuer, Rudolf Kastner, with Nazi leadership in Budapest has been repeatedly re-examined, re-framed, and re-weaponized in the arenas of Israeli politics and the courts of Jewish collective memory. Kastner himself, the survivors, and the victims who perished all deserve an accounting of this episode on its own terms, as a true story and not simply a projection of larger cultural conflicts. It is not clear that we will ever be able to deliver one.

The Kastner story is now told primarily through a contemporary form of *midrash agada*, the genre of non-legal rabbinic glosses on Tanakh. Indeed, the most influential account of Kastner's negotiations, a 1961 polemic called *Perfidy* by Jewish American playwright Ben Hecht, places the author's assumptions about Kastner's inner thoughts alongside primary historical sources. For example, when Hecht quotes testimony given by Kastner, he adds: "[Kastner] tries to look like a man searching for the exact truth. But the caution suddenly in his eyes reveals his problem. He is trying to figure out quickly how much [the opposing attorney] can possibly know."<sup>1</sup> In his description of the night of Kastner's death, Hecht prefaces, "There is no report of his mood and manner in this vital hour, so I must imagine them."<sup>2</sup>

This approach mimics a pervasive feature of *midrash agada*. As Jeffrey Rubenstein has explained, while Tanakh itself rarely spells out the thoughts of its characters, *midrashim* routinely fill this gap,

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<sup>1</sup> See Ben Hecht, *Perfidy* (New York: Julian Messner, Inc., 1961), 46–47.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

communicating "the theological concerns of the Sages [as] interior monologues of the biblical characters."<sup>3</sup> Ben Hecht, writing just fifteen years after the events, presents the story as a kind of Biblical history, not constrained by empirical evidence.

For a more precise assessment of the history, we ought to return to the provable facts<sup>4</sup>. In the early years of the Nazi conquest of Europe, Kastner, a Jewish lawyer and journalist in Hungary, became active in communal efforts to rescue Jewish refugees. In 1943, the Jewish Agency for Palestine, which later evolved into Israel's founding government, formed its Aid and Rescue Committee in Budapest and placed it under Kastner's leadership. When, in March 1944, Germany carried out its long-expected occupation of Hungary, the country's 800,000 Jews were suddenly in grave danger. At this late stage of the war, the Nazi SS was prepared to immediately begin transporting these Jews to death camps, unlike in other European countries, where Jews were more gradually disenfranchised, concentrated, and dispossessed while the Nazi machinery of death developed. But first, for reasons still unclear, the Nazis decided to negotiate with the Jewish Agency.

In the spring of 1944, Eichmann and Kastner reached an agreement whereby 1,684 Jews would be dispatched on a train to safety in neutral Switzerland. The list of 1,684 assembled by Kastner included 388 Jews from his small hometown Cluj, among them members of his family and prominent members of the Hungarian Jewish community. Kastner and his colleagues allowed representatives of various Jewish organizations to submit lists of names for inclusion on the train, resulting in a complete list that included Satmar Rebbe Joel Teitelbaum and his students alongside leaders of secular Zionist youth groups. 150 passengers bought their way onto the train, and the Aid and Rescue Committee used these funds to cover the Nazi ransom for all 1,684 Jews.

The rescue train departed from Budapest on June 30, 1944, and Kastner himself did not board. The SS forced the passengers to

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<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, "The Exegetical Narrative: New Directions," *Review of Ha-Sipur she-lo' supar: Omanut ha-sipur ha-mikra'i ha-murhav be-midreshe hazal*, by Joshua Levinson, *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 99, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 103.

<sup>4</sup> See Yehuda Bauer, *Jews for Sale?: Nazi-Jewish Negotiations, 1933–1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 145–221.

disembark in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp on July 9, 1944. 318 passengers were allowed to continue to Switzerland in August, and the remaining survivors arrived in December. A list of those who arrived safely in Switzerland was recently discovered in the archives of the National Library of Israel and was [publicized for the first time in April 2019](#). It includes 1,672 names, among them the name of my great uncle, the man for whom I am named. He was among the lucky few. By the end of the war, 565,000 Hungarian Jews were murdered by the Nazi regime.

In 1947, Kastner emigrated to Palestine with his family, and he soon entered the inner circle of Israel's founding Mapai Party, the predecessor of today's Labor Party. One so-called Revisionist critic of the Jewish Agency/Mapai, a Hungarian *oleh*, hotel proprietor, and pamphleteer named Malchiel Gruenwald, was the first to shine a spotlight on Kastner's wartime decisions. In a 1953 pamphlet, hand-distributed for no cost in Jerusalem cafes, Gruenwald accused Kastner, then spokesman for the Ministry of Trade and Industry, of knowingly collaborating with Eichmann to conceal the death camp plot from the masses of Hungarian Jews in exchange for the lives of 1,684 handpicked, elite people.

The Israeli government, seeking to protect the reputation of its officials, sued Gruenwald for defaming Kastner, and the resulting trial became a national spectacle, in essence a trial of Kastner for his wartime conduct. Evidence emerged at trial that Kastner submitted an affidavit in defense of SS leader Kurt Becher to the Nuremberg tribunal organized by Allied powers to try Nazi criminals, and that the Allies acquitted Becher on the strength of Kastner's testimony. In a June 1955 ruling, Judge Benjamin Halevi ruled in Gruenwald's favor, finding in Faustian fashion that Kastner "sold his soul to the Satan." The Supreme Court of Israel overturned most of Halevi's ruling in 1958 and criticized the judge's biased reading of historical sources, but it was too late to save Kastner. He was assassinated in front of his Tel Aviv home on March 3, 1957 by right-wing extremist (and former Shin Bet informant) Ze'ev Eckstein. Eckstein and his accomplices were sentenced to life in prison but received a pardon from President Zalman Shazar in May 1963.

In the eyes of Gruenwald and his supporters, the scandal did not begin or end with Kastner. They charged, and many on the right-wing of Israeli politics continue to charge, that the Jewish Agency *chose* not to intervene to save European Jewry from the Nazis. This theory achieved international prominence with *Perfidy's* publication in 1961. Hecht's book, a work of stunning prose and righteous anger, places Kastner at the center of a vast Jewish Agency conspiracy to abet the destruction of European Jewry in exchange for international acceptance of a Zionist state. This account depends on ignoring inconvenient facts about the Jewish Agency's illegal refugee ships that ran the British blockade of Palestine's coasts. Holocaust historian Deborah Lipstadt has spoken about *Perfidy's* shoddiness as a work of history.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, *Perfidy* remains the best known book on the subject. Kastner was cast as a villain in late-twentieth century Israel as well; for decades, Yad Vashem declined to memorialize the work of the Aid and Rescue Committee, and Kastner's few supporters could not prevail over the uproar to name even a single Haifa street for him.

The slow effort to rehabilitate Kastner went mainstream only in the twenty-first century, largely thanks to two high-profile journalists-

turned-politicians: Tommy Lapid (father of Knesset member Yair Lapid), a Holocaust survivor, writer, founder of the secular libertarian Shinui Party, Deputy Prime Minister, Chairman of Yad Vashem's advisory board, and Kastner's close friend; and Merav Michaeli, an Army Radio veteran, *Haaretz* opinion columnist, current Knesset member from the Labor Party, and Kastner's granddaughter.

Under Lapid's leadership, Yad Vashem accepted the Kastner family archive for the first time in 2007.<sup>6</sup> A year later, the feature length documentary *Killing Kasztner* premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival.<sup>7</sup> The film, directed by Gaylen Ross, explored the damning facts of Kastner's relationship with Becher and counterposed them with testimony that Kastner sought to warn and mobilize the Hungarian Jewish population while simultaneously negotiating with Eichmann, and with a more recent theory that Kastner's Becher affidavit was part of a Jewish Agency-sanctioned strategy to redeem Jewish property from former Nazis. These efforts to gradually reframe the Kastner history set the stage for a new, left-wing version of Kastner-themed *midrash*, advanced by Merav Michaeli.

Michaeli—a central character in Ross' documentary—ascended to the Knesset in the 2013 elections and dedicated her [inaugural Knesset floor address](#) to the heroism of her grandfather. In emotional remarks, Michaeli drew a direct line between the attacks on Kastner's motives and the vitriol regularly directed at left-wing politicians in Israel: "He [rescued Jews] in a way that appeared to some improper, not sufficiently Jewish, not sufficiently Zionist. I come from a founding dynasty, but also from a dynasty that's not entirely in the mainstream, not in the consensus ... Very often in Israel, any criticism of the State or of the way we conduct ourselves is perceived as no less than an act of treason."

As a secular culture warrior and vocal opponent of West Bank settlements, Michaeli soon became a public enemy in Israel's right-wing religious communities. Her public embrace of her grandfather's story therefore served to reawaken popular opposition to Kastner, weaponizing it to meet the current political moment. In 2017, the conservative publishing house Sela Me'ir released a new Hebrew edition of *Perfidy*. Though the book had originated nearly six decades earlier as an effort to introduce the English-speaking public to a controversy already known to Israelis, its mission in 2017 was to reacquaint Israelis with Kastner, to make a new political issue of old news, and to target the audience thirsty for ["the book that Merav Michaeli does not want you to read."](#)

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Rudolf Kastner, those he saved, and those he failed to save still cannot get a fair hearing. Seventy-five years ago, a local Jewish community bureaucrat was called upon by history's most ruthless killer of Jews to face a responsibility of unimaginable stakes. He may have made a catastrophically wrong decision, and for this he has been sentenced to live his afterlife as a blank slate for projection of

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<sup>6</sup> "Yad Vashem Hopes Kastner Archive Will End Vilification," *The Associated Press*, July 23, 2007.

<https://www.haaretz.com/1.4954412>.

<sup>7</sup> *Killing Kasztner: The Jew Who Dealt with Nazis*, directed by Gaylen Ross (2007; Kinonation), Amazon Prime Video.

[https://www.amazon.com/Killing-Kasztner-Jew-Dealt-Nazis/dp/B076WZ7BYS/ref=tmm\\_aiv\\_swatch\\_0?\\_encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=](https://www.amazon.com/Killing-Kasztner-Jew-Dealt-Nazis/dp/B076WZ7BYS/ref=tmm_aiv_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=)

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Lawson, *Setting the Past Free - Part I* (BBC, 2016), audio, 29:45. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0739pgh>.

anxieties and competing national narratives. The retellings of the history supplement the bare facts with features evocative of later events and personalities, designed for the ideological aims of the author.

In a pathbreaking 1974 essay, Joseph Heinemann identified this storytelling method as an important subgenre of *midrash aggadah*. Heinemann explained that in many cases, the apparent goal of a midrashic text is to “reveal the image of its own age in the ancient Scriptures.”<sup>8</sup> This sort of *midrash* adds details and texture to the Biblical narrative, transforming its meaning on two levels:

The first deals openly with the explication of the biblical text and the clarification of the biblical narrative, while the second deals much more subtly with contemporary problems that engaged the attention of the homilists and their audience. The aggadists who tell of Korah, the rebellious Levite, and his followers (see Num. 16, etc.), refer, in reality, to the ‘scuffers of this generation’ who despise the sages and their teachings. The rabbis discuss Noah’s coming out of the ark, but the discussion implicitly presents differing attitudes toward the liberation of Israel from foreign oppression. (quoting *Bereshit Rabbah* 34:4).<sup>9</sup>

Kastner’s Revisionist critics, including Gruenwald in the 1950s and Hecht in the 1960s, chose to frame him in the wider narrative context of supposed collaboration between the Mapai elite and the Nazis. Gruenwald and Hecht’s own backdrop, the “contemporary problems that engaged the[ir] attention,” was the Reparations Agreement signed by Israel and West Germany in 1953 and opposed fiercely by Revisionist Zionist leader—later Prime Minister—Menachem Begin. Begin famously led the violent anti-reparations march to the Knesset in 1952, protesting, “Our blood shall not be atoned by goods. We shall wipe out the disgrace.”<sup>10</sup>

Writing in the shadow of Reparations, Begin’s followers like Gruenwald and Hecht turned Kastner into a reflection of their nemesis Ben-Gurion; the latter’s apparent blood money collaboration with the Germans after the fact came into sharper focus if understood as a continuation of a more sinister, unforgivable blood money collaboration during the Holocaust itself. In this presentation, Kastner’s deal must be understood in retrospect as a collaboration with the Nazis, in order to “reveal the image of [the Revisionists’] own age in the ancient Scriptures<sup>11</sup>” of pre-State history (see above, note 8).

Kastner’s defenders have found success by adopting, whether consciously or unconsciously, the historiographic tactics of his critics. Their account emphasizes the facts ignored or distorted by the Revisionists, and their celebration of Kastner depends on framing him as a symbol of broader historical trends: most importantly, as a martyr.

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Heinemann, “The Nature of the Aggadah,” trans. Marc Bregman, in *Midrash and Literature*, eds. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 44.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>10</sup> “Herut” Party Head Menahem Begin Addressing a Mass Demonstration Against Negotiations with Germany in Tel Aviv, 1952, National Photograph Collection of Israel, <http://gpophotohebrew.gov.il/fotoweb/Grid.fwx?search=D523-076.jpg#Preview1>.

<sup>11</sup> See above, note 8.

Merav Michaeli’s *midrash* of her grandfather focuses less on Kastner’s own decisions and more on what was done to him. In her reductive telling, Kastner’s critics were actually more concerned about Kastner’s tactics and style than his loyalty. The decision to negotiate rather than take up arms was simply “not entirely in the mainstream, not in the consensus” of early Israeli society. As Michaeli described this dynamic on the Knesset floor in 2013, she consciously evoked the place of the contemporary left in an increasingly nationalist, uncompromising political consensus. She returned to this theme in April 2019, responding on Twitter to a new article reprising the theory of Kastner’s complicity in the Hungarian Holocaust. In a [series of tweets](#), Michaeli made the link between the forces arrayed against her grandfather in the 1950s and those arrayed against her today even more explicit: “Kastner was murdered in the State of Israel even though he rescued Jews. He was murdered after a cruel political incitement campaign, for the political benefit of dangerous, messianic right-wing forces. I have the great privilege to be the granddaughter of Israel Kastner.”

This version of Kastner morphs him into Yitzhak Rabin: slandered, threatened, and murdered by small, cowardly opponents who feared the spirit of diplomacy that he had come to embody. The inclination of Rabin, and Michaeli after her, to secure Israel by dividing it is, needless to say in 2019, no longer “entirely in the mainstream, not in the consensus.” Speaking of her grandfather’s fate and considering her own, Michaeli [concluded](#), “any criticism of the State or of the way we conduct ourselves is perceived as no less than an act of treason.”

Of course, the real Kastner was neither Ben-Gurion nor Rabin. Unlike Ben-Gurion, the real Kastner never wielded political power; he lived his most consequential moments in quintessential powerlessness, as a Jew at the mercy of the SS. Unlike Rabin, the real Kastner was widely condemned even after, perhaps especially after, his murder; his death neither purified his legacy nor stimulated a public soul-searching. Nonetheless, the real Kastner has by now been replaced by the polemical one. The more these midrashic versions of Kastner take hold in the public, politicized consciousness, the more slippery the true historical facts become.

As Tamar Schwell observed in 1998, the practice of teaching children the stories of Tanakh alongside the *midrashim* on those stories tends to stifle their ability to understand Biblical *peshat* (plain meaning of the text), and the effects are apparent among graduates of traditional Jewish education:

Because they are never taught otherwise, [children] tend to perceive all that is related to them from the midrash as fact, without ever questioning and understanding the motivating force of the midrash... [M]any children, as they develop into adults, never pay attention to the fact that many of the events that they learned as stories from Tanakh are not actually written in Tanakh. The midrashim that they learned are understood literally and not differentiated from Biblical text.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Tamar Schwell, “Teaching Midrash from a Developmental Perspective,” *The Atid Journal* (1998), available at [http://www.atid.org/journal/journal98/schwell\\_sum.asp](http://www.atid.org/journal/journal98/schwell_sum.asp). For further exploration of this phenomenon, see Iscah Waldman, “Understanding the Place of Midrash in the Jewish Day School,” (Doctoral diss., New York University, 2019), 199–205.

My own experience researching and discussing the Kastner history has revealed a similar phenomenon. It is difficult, if not impossible, to have any kind of Jewish communal conversation about Kastner in the post-Hecht era without somebody defaulting to the “history” of *Perfidy*.

Merav Michaeli has worked to counter this default, not by dissociating her grandfather from the persona symbolizing Labor Zionism, but by reinforcing that association to celebrate the principles of Labor Zionism. Either way, Kastner cannot simply be Kastner; he must live on as a reflection of his camp.

We can no longer give Kastner a fair hearing on the evidence of his actions, not because the events happened so long ago, but rather for the very opposite reason. The events happened too recently, too far into the era of modern, empirical history for us to recognize that they are susceptible to, and have received, the treatment of *midrash*. Simply put, very skilled communicators have found political usefulness in the memory of Rudolf Kastner, and they got there first.

## YEMIMA METHOD: AN ISRAELI PSYCHOLOGICAL-SPIRITUAL APPROACH

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*I dedicate this essay to my friend Dr. Tsippi Kauffman z"l, who passed away in the course of its writing. A wonderful educator, academic, and spiritual force, her work lives on after her. I am happy that, through this article, more people will be able to benefit from her sensitive insights and brilliant scholarship.*

Readers of Lehrhaus have been treated recently to articles about [Rav Shagar](#) and [Rav Froman](#). That these fresh and exceptional thinkers sprang up on Israeli soil is, I would like to think, not mere coincidence. We declare energetically in synagogue, “*For from Zion shall emerge the Torah.*” While clearly much Torah emerged *not* from Zion, it seems – and has been compellingly argued<sup>13</sup> – that in Israel, a unique and profound type of Jewish spirituality may flourish in a way impossible in constricted exilic living.

We have returned to our native soil with the purpose of (re)creating not only a physical homeland but also a spiritual center, an incubator for new and diverse Hebrew approaches. Let us note, too, that both aforementioned thinkers are characterized not only by depth but also

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<sup>13</sup> This discussion often takes place under the rubric of the phrase “*Torat Eretz Yisrael*,” though that phrase originally referred in a narrower sense to a study approach. A prominent proponent of the more expanded meaning, and its concomitant spiritual approach, is Rabbi A.I. Kook, for whom, as Tzvi Sinensky explains, “...the Jewish nation is only fully in tune with its own spirit when living in Israel, its organic source. Only with the return to Zion can the Jewish people recapture their essence and reconnect with God, Whose presence is manifest in the Jewish homeland. Through Torah study, mitzva performance, Zionism and cultural activity, the Jewish nation can achieve its national destiny.” (<https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-18-torat-eretz-yisrael>). Sinensky directs us to R. Kook’s *Orot Ha-Torah* Chapter 13, “*Torat Eretz Yisrael*,” a translated excerpt of which can be found here (<https://www.sefaria.org.il/sheets/34468>).

by breadth. The Torah from Zion, far from being more localized and more nationalistic as we might expect, seems, perhaps as a result of us “breathing more freely” in our own Land, paradoxically capable of comfortably embracing broader swathes of human living i.e. being more universal in nature. Whether this really is so would require an examination of many other thinkers, and a larger discussion. What I’d like to do here is to add into the mix another uniquely Jewish-Israeli spiritual phenomenon, similarly homegrown yet with wide-ranging appeal. Though slightly off the radar for most *Lehrhaus* readers, it’s one I’ve personally encountered and find fascinating.

To introduce the topic, let me share that along with a deep suspicion of charismatic figures, I recognize the value of having a good teacher in one’s life. At its deeply Hasidic apotheosis, this latter side of me yearns to have someone to call “rebbe,” with all the baggage that that word brings. I have, in fact, been fortunate to have had several people to call my “rebbe” so far; but, like the protagonist in the movie *Good Will Hunting*, many of my heroes are dead. Of these, two recent and prominent ones are women, who passed away in 1997 and 1999.<sup>14</sup> The first is Nehama Leibowitz (1905-1997). After ten years spent writing and immersing in her biography and her Torah<sup>15</sup>, I presume I can call her my rebbe; though both her modesty and also her dyed-in-the-wool Yekkeness means that undoubtedly she would rather I dance the *horah* on her grave than call her by that title.

However, I truly learned what having a rebbe is from Yemima Avital (1929-1999). Very little is known about this special individual’s biography.<sup>16</sup> Born in Casablanca, Morocco in 1929 to a family of kabbalists, and religiously observant, Yemima made aliyah at age 20 to Be’er Sheva, married, and then completed Bachelor’s and Masters’ degrees in French literature and psychology. She subsequently moved to Tel Aviv where she studied psychology at Tel Aviv University and began healing treatments in her house, along with

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<sup>14</sup> Since I wrote an [article](#) in Lehrhaus to mark Nehama’s 20th *yahrzeit*, it feels meaningful and fitting to write another piece mentioning Yemima’s 20th *yahrzeit*. It’s likely no coincidence that two of my primary influences are women who are no longer alive, and who, when they were, made strenuous efforts to reduce the personality cult (they both prohibited recording of their lessons, and assiduously avoided being photographed), and place the focus on their teachings. How we could wish that all teachers would safeguard themselves likewise from the highly destructive ego trip that can accompany great teaching and spiritual talent. The Israelite king was commanded to wear a Torah on his arm in order to remember heaven above; perhaps we should instigate a modern equivalent, to prevent arrogance, in the spirit of Novardok? Let us also beware of placing people on pedestals. A pedestal is not a suitable base for a living, growing, and moving individual to stand upon, and limits him or her as much as it does us.

<sup>15</sup> The result of my labors was published as [Nehama Leibowitz: Teacher and Bible Scholar](#) (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Many of these biographical details are taken from Einat Ramon, “Gratitude, Israeli Spiritual Care and Contemporary Hassidic Teachers: The Theme of Thankfulness in the Works of Rabbis Brazofsky (the Netivot Shalom), Rav Arush and Yemima Avital,” *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 5 (2014): 91-92 (accessible at <http://www.schwartz-center.org/wp-content/uploads/Gratitude-Israeli-Spiritual-Care-and-Contemporary-Hassidic-Ramon.pdf>); and also Tsippi Kauffman, “The Yemima Method as a Contemporary Hassidic Female Movement,” *Modern Judaism* 32:2 (2012): 195-215 (available for download at [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)).

teaching a new approach in emotional management to groups of students. In 1987, she founded Machon Ma'ayan in Herzliya to disseminate her therapeutic teachings, which coalesced into a method that officially goes under the title *Hashivah hakaratit*, "Cognitive/Awareness Thinking", and unofficially *Shitat Yemima*, "The Yemima method."<sup>17</sup>

Yemima was not your run-of-the-mill teacher. She viewed herself as a channel for heavenly teachings that descended through her; her language was, indeed, odd and poetic, and phrased in not entirely comprehensible Hebrew. She taught while covered in white scarves, sitting at first behind a curtain and then actually a full story above her students. This was so that the students' attention would be focused on her message and not on her, to prevent the cult of personality from developing<sup>18</sup>; and also because she claimed to be able to "see" things about her students, which she found distracting when in their proximity.<sup>19</sup> People reported that she told them things about themselves that she could not have known, and she purportedly healed people of terminal diseases.<sup>20</sup>

And yet her actual topics were not mystical at all, but rather focused on the basic building blocks of how a person functions emotionally, and how this functioning can be improved, for greater happiness, wellbeing, and centeredness.

If asked what were her influences, I would have to say that I do not precisely know what these were, and I have not come across anyone listing them. If indeed she was channeling wisdom from a place beyond, then this obviates the need to speak about influences. But if forced to hazard a guess, apart from heavenly inspiration, I'd assume both psychological knowledge (from her studies) and Jewish knowledge (from her background). To compare and contrast her method with other psychological methods (such as cognitive-

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<sup>17</sup> Edit Shalev, a prominent Yemima practitioner who will be mentioned later in this essay, rejects the term method: "There really is no 'method' because if you call it a method you miss the depth and the delicacy that is impossible to transmit." (Quoted in Micha Odenheimer, "Studying 'Yamima'," *Haaretz* (February 25, 2005). Accessible at <https://www.haaretz.com/1.4755102?> Odenheimer spells Yemima's name throughout his article as "Yamima," but for consistency's sake I will spell it Yemima, even when quoting him directly).

<sup>18</sup> Ramon, 92. She also took care to disperse authority by not singling out one successor to take over after her death – see Kauffman, 196, 202. However, it is true that she had a community of students around her who held her in awe and engaged in the language of adulation, similar to that reserved for saints. This, together with the specialised terminology used in her method, does create a certain cultish atmosphere. Fortunately, I encountered and benefited from her teachings before being exposed to all of this.

<sup>19</sup> Kauffman, 196. Odenheimer writes: "She saw too much, saw into their souls, and it distracted her, broke her concentration." He notes that she would sometimes reprimand a student, with "Don't look at me!" or, sensing that a student was thinking about her, say: "Stop, don't think about me, think about what I am telling you!" "You're too emotionally turbulent," she would say to her students sometimes in the middle of receiving teachings from a higher dimension. "The words have stopped – they're not coming down anymore."

<sup>20</sup> She devoted two days a week to healing and prayers for the sick, including traveling to hospitals in order to stand in prayer near patients' beds. See Kauffman, 196.

behavioural therapy, CBT) is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to quote one psychologist very familiar with her work, who notes that Yemima's emphasis on one's responsibility to the collective separates her from the discipline of psychology: "According to Yemima, you are obligated to fix your soul. It's not a luxury, because all of Israel is responsible one for the other."<sup>21</sup>

Jewish ideas play a significant role in Yemima's work. On the one hand, they are embedded in her teachings only sporadically: a few verses on the role of men or women, on loving your fellow as yourself, or on the essential meaning of Jewish holidays.<sup>22</sup> The sessions with her could not be described as *shiurim* or Torah classes in the classic sense. As I've already mentioned, once her odd language was decoded, her lessons would be discovered to be instructions for conscious self-work and psychological balance, containing unique terminology and catchphrases. Yet her acolytes would categorically claim that her system was connected to Jewish spirituality and Torah, or even revealed the inner meaning of the Torah to this generation. One student explains: "You can study 'Yemima' only in order to be calmer and happier and you do not necessarily touch spirituality or religion. But from the beginning, there are very specific and deep connections to Jewish spirituality hidden in the teachings, which one can understand only in subsequent stages."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, a significant number of students became *baalei teshuvah* through Yemima.<sup>24</sup>

I will return to this topic soon. First, though, I'll bring some examples of her terminology to give a sense of her approach. One key term is "*diyuk*" (precision), meaning the precise action required in or by the moment. Taking into account the entire picture, and separating yourself as far as possible from your baggage, you arrive at the understanding of what is the most correct or highest course of action to take.

Of particular interest to me was the fact that while this action will sometimes involve giving to others, the question the student is encouraged to consider from the outset is "What is precise and right *for me?*", and often to prioritise her own needs.<sup>25</sup> Though this might seem at first blush to encourage selfishness – and indeed initially seemed so to me – in fact, Yemima was helping people (and religious women in particular<sup>26</sup>) to rebalance a socialised tendency to put

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<sup>21</sup> Odenheimer.

<sup>22</sup> Ramon, 93.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Kauffman, 199.

<sup>24</sup> Odenheimer: "By all accounts, Yemima did not urge people to return to Jewish observance. The lessons she dictated to her students did not include religious instructions or admonitions; they can be studied and practiced by religious and nonreligious alike. And yet hundreds of people who were influenced by her personality and ideas have 'returned' to Jewish practice in some form or another. Most, but not all, of the 20 or so Yemima disciples who she encouraged to teach her writings and methods are observant, although a significant number of them were not when they began to study with her."

<sup>25</sup> "Precision regarding oneself comes first. That means striving to find the golden path between self-rejection (over-criticizing oneself or ceding too much) and rejecting others" (Ramon, 94; this is her translation of a passage from the book published by Yishai Avital, Yemima's son, *Torat Yemima: Four Lessons of Introduction* (Be'er Sheva), 4).

<sup>26</sup> Religious people in general are brought up to give to others, and religious women in particular may pay a high price in terms of healthy

others first that leaves them drained and dysfunctional. Amongst a number of mottos and pithy maxims that she coined was the saying: “I need to give to myself, in order to give to others,” echoing Hillel’s statements in *Pirkei Avot*.<sup>27</sup> We learn how to give to others by learning how to how to give to ourselves; and giving to ourselves, when this is done with *diyuk*, can positively influence others around us.<sup>28</sup> Thus the intent was not to boost self-absorption; far from it.<sup>29</sup> For myself I can say that it was only when studying the Yemima method in my twenties that I first discovered that it was not only legitimate but also crucial to attend to my own needs – a lesson that laid the foundations for my life and strengthened me immeasurably.

Yemima employed a number of other terms and concepts relating to emotional functioning, including: *omess* (literally “(over)load”, referring to emotional baggage and unconscious defense mechanisms from childhood); *tihum ve-hafradah* (creating boundaries and separation from the baggage); *hakarah pe’ilah* (active awareness); and *regesh le-kiyumi* (positive feelings towards my own existence). Further terms she used included identifying, self-acceptance, coming close to oneself, not becoming entangled with others, and many more, repeating themselves in myriad ways throughout the lessons. Her general approach was that the human psychology is fundamentally positive.<sup>30</sup> She did not encourage picking at childhood wounds, but rather contemplating negative emotions as they arose in real time.<sup>31</sup>

Yemima often commented on the relationships between her students and their parents and how pain from those early relationships should not be carried over into the present day. She directed her students to separate between negative behavior acquired through childhood *omess* and *mahoot*, the real essence of the human being which is of a

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selfhood. Kauffman suggests a comparison with women’s consciousness-raising groups of the sixties and onwards, and writes: “Yemima’s students also learn to be ‘centered,’ to stay... in their selfhood, to be able to conduct relationships while drawing border lines between the self and the other... that sacrificing one’s needs is not a prerequisite for the wellbeing of those one loves. The learning enables them to make different kinds of choices seen previously as impossible or immoral” (204-205).

<sup>27</sup> “If I am not for myself, who am I? And yet if I am only for myself, what am I?” (*Pirkei Avot* 1:14). I heard it suggested in the name of teacher Neta Lederberg that this core principle of Yemima’s constitutes a kind of restatement of Hillel’s famous maxim. Her *diyuk* concept, which changes moment by moment as circumstances change and so is dependant on the “now”, parallels the final sentence: “And if not now, when?”

<sup>28</sup> Kauffman, 198.

<sup>29</sup> “Rather than focus on why something has happened to us in our lives, Yemima suggests that we must train ourselves to give generously, to listen to ourselves and to others, and to lead a balanced life” (Ramon, 94.) Odenheimer notes: “To the extent that a person is able to stand within ‘his own space’— i.e., the space of his essential nature – he will increasingly be able to rely on an ever-more precise and delicate awareness of when his actions toward others are in line with the biblical injunction ‘Love thy neighbor as thyself,’ which is perhaps the ultimate goal of Yemima’s method.”

<sup>30</sup> Ramon, 95-96.

<sup>31</sup> Odenheimer. To me, this sounds like the methodology of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and the two methods have been combined by practitioners; but it is beyond my expertise to undertake a comparison.

good nature and well-constructed.<sup>32</sup> “The main purpose of her theory,” notes scholar Tsippi Kauffman, “is quite prosaic: to be able to listen and respond calmly to everyone who turns to us, to be able to stay emotionally balanced in the face of every event in life.”<sup>33</sup> This is done by creating a separation between the *omess* and the aware observing self, which can then, in the space created, expand into wellbeing, good, and self love. This is what a person’s genuine self looks like, when finally free of *omess*.<sup>34</sup> One practitioner, a clinical psychologist, reported: “The baseline of my life rose to a higher level. I don’t fall down as much. I am a much happier person. I don’t hear this constant disturbing buzz of pain and bitterness that I did before I started.”<sup>35</sup>

Yemima’s teaching was given over in *halakim*, “portions”<sup>36</sup>; the word “portion” indeed subsequently became the official name for any Yemima teaching. The portions were like “therapeutic conversations” addressed in second or third person singular. Yemima explained: “A ‘portion’ can awaken understandings that separate between the *omess* that creates distance from the sought-for balance. The more she strives to be accurate, the more likely that she will discover the blockages. The mending also mends the body.”<sup>37</sup> Her students would write these down as she spoke – often struggling to keep up with her pace, the speed of regular speech – and subsequently use them as a springboard for their own personal reflection, which would also be done in writing and shared with others.

For Yemima, writing was an essential part of the practice, creating a necessary point of distance and reflection, and aiding the cleansing of baggage,<sup>38</sup> as well as serving to intensify the impression left by those things written about upon the field of awareness.<sup>39</sup> When writing one’s personal understandings of the portion, one is directed to examine one’s heart and being. Sharing such writings with the group leads to rich mutual gain. And when this sharing was done with Yemima herself, it could at times actually trigger other portions to come down to her.<sup>40</sup>

However, this writing took place for the most part with old-fashioned pen and paper. Due to this, many of these portions remain unpublished. She left behind no written legacy per se;<sup>41</sup> but they are

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<sup>32</sup> Ramon, 93.

<sup>33</sup> Kauffman, 197.

<sup>34</sup> See Kauffman, 198, and Oded David, “*Eshet Pele*”, Makor Rishon weekend supplement, May 23, 2017. Accessible at <https://musaf-shabbat.com/2017/05/23/%D7%90%D7%A9%D7%AA-%D7%A4%D7%9C%D7%90-%D7%A2%D7%95%D7%93%D7%93-%D7%93%D7%95%D7%93/>.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Odenheimer. I find it significant that the Yemima method was able to offer something to this individual that his clinical psychological background presumably failed to do.

<sup>36</sup> Odenheimer translates it as “segments.”

<sup>37</sup> Translated by Ramon, 94. I presume her use of “accurate” is her way of translating the *diyuk* concept that I translated with the word “precise.”

<sup>38</sup> David, *ibid*.

<sup>39</sup> Kauffman, 198.

<sup>40</sup> “...sometimes she would stop the dialogue and begin to dictate again. ‘So and so,’ she would say, referring to a student who had asked the triggering question, ‘has brought us down a segment’” (Odenheimer).

<sup>41</sup> Yemima’s son Yishai Avital published *Torat Yemima, Four Lessons of Introduction* which may be found amongst other items of interest at <http://www.toratyemima.co.il>.

recorded in the notebooks of these students who went on to teach others from them. Occasionally, they reflected current events at the time of writing.<sup>42</sup> Some of the writings have now made their way onto the internet and Facebook.<sup>43</sup> Today the Yemima method continues to be taught all over Israel by these students,<sup>44</sup> as well as by students of students, using the same technique of dictating Yemima's portions and then reflecting upon them for their specific personal relevance in the moment.

Yemima died in 1999 and I jumped on the bandwagon too late to meet her. But circa 2005 I spent a year and a half studying with a student of hers, Sara Schwartz, in the Nahlaot neighborhood of Jerusalem. This study was, as mentioned, life-changing, helping me to find balance and to be intentional in every moment's "diyuk". Our job is, I learned, simply to ascertain what the *diyuk* is, time after time, moment after moment. It was during this time that I grasped, probably for the first time in my life, what it means to have a rebbe: the way I articulated it to myself back then was "there is someone who is so far above you in understanding that all you can do is grab onto their coat-tails and begin to soar."<sup>45</sup>

While this experience of discovering a female rebbe for myself stood out as unique for me then, I was, unbeknownst to me, far from being alone in this when it came to Yemima. Many of those in contact here with her viewed her as the female version of the Hasidic *tzaddik*: the *tzadeket*.<sup>46</sup> It's not for nothing that Yemima has been called the "Rebbe Nahman of our time."<sup>47</sup> Both Rebbe Nahman and Yemima contributed profound and surprising insights into the workings of the inner world, and transmitted texts with the power to heal overwhelmed or broken souls.<sup>48</sup> Miracle stories were also told about

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<sup>42</sup> Ramon (p. 93): "Some 'portions' record Yemima's response to her audience's struggle with the terror attacks that followed the Oslo accord in 1992-1993. They reflect her insistence on maintaining an optimistic disposition – both personal as well as national – even as Israelis were tormented by mourning and fear."

<sup>43</sup> See for example <http://www.toratyemima.co.il>. Various other teachers have disseminated typed up material here and there.

<sup>44</sup> Before she died, Yemima "ordained" certain students to continue her approach.

<sup>45</sup> I have since discovered that many students shared a similar experience of being elevated, as Kauffman notes: "In a way, without declaration, she also elevated her disciples in a long process of spiritual development, as many of them testify" (203).

<sup>46</sup> Kauffman writes: "In Hasidism, the Tsaddik... brings down knowledge, visions, abundance, blessings, and brings up prayers, cleaves to the divine realm, and elevates his disciples through close relationships – communal and personal.... Yemima was actually a Tsadeket. People speak of her in awe, describing her sublime personality. She also functioned like the Hasidic Tsaddik in many facets of her activity, bringing real help to people, in body and soul. Stories abound of how she cured illnesses" (200-201). Many praises can be found within the eulogies, personal testimonials, and remembrances dating from different periods collated in the booklet *Likhvodah Lezikhray U-I'lluy Nishmatah Shel Yemima Avital ZT"L*, printed by Machon Ma'ayan.

<sup>47</sup> See <https://www.edit-shalev.co.il/%D7%90%D7%95%D7%93%D7%95%D7%AA/>. It would be interesting to research the question of to which Hasidic master Yemima bears the closest resemblance in her approach.

<sup>48</sup> The Baal Shem Tov, and following him the occasional Hasidic master, made reference to the wise man or *tzaddik* who is the "*rofe nefashot*", or sometimes, "*rofe neshamot*", both meaning the healer

her, such as wilted flowers coming back to life in her presence;<sup>49</sup> but I knew nothing of that (and, with my anti-groupthink tendencies, better so!). All I knew was the wisdom and insight I experienced, that had the power to cleanse my inner encrustations in a way I had never experienced.

Tsippi Kauffman is an academic and scholar of Hasidism who, prior to her untimely passing in September 2019, was researching the connections between the Hasidic movement and Yemima's work. She is the author of one of the very few scholarly articles about her, which I have cited extensively in this essay. (A long-time friend, she was also the person who introduced me to the Yemima method in the first place; it is marvelous for me to read her sensitive academic analysis of something that was, for both of us, a meaningful experience that we shared as friends way back when). In the course of her article, Kauffman credits Yemima with founding "a contemporary Hasidic female movement." She argues that while we could categorize Yemima and her method under the title of "new age" or other contemporary spiritual practices, the correct classification is as a Hasidic approach proper. The criteria Kauffman cites to support her claim are the existence of: (a) a goal of personal redemption; (b) a *tzaddik* mediator; (c) a method of mediation that conforms to the mystic-magic model; (d) the uniqueness of communal mysticism; and (e) an immanent theology.<sup>50</sup>

Einat Ramon, author of another very helpful article cited here, suggests that what Yemima did was to take Hasidic teachings one step further and to a more pragmatically-oriented approach, employing their language in the daily spiritual discipline (*melakhah*) of recording personal-emotional observations, and creating her own idiosyncratic language along the way.<sup>51</sup> Oded David, a teacher of Yemima's method, has termed it an "Israeli-kabbalistic creation," but without further elaboration or explanation.<sup>52</sup> It should also be noted

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of souls (the phrase is also sometimes used to refer to God). See for example R. Natan of Nemirov, *Likutei Halakhot Hilkhos Hoshen Mishpat, Hilkhos Hona'ah* 5. Rebbe Nahman is referred to by contemporary Breslov hasidim as a "healer of souls", see for example <https://gatesofemunah.wordpress.com/about/>. Yemima, as mentioned, also prayed for the healing of the body; while this is not synonymous with the soul, Ramon notes that, "the underlying assumption of the connectedness of body and soul and the influence of the spirit on a person's well-being is a common thread that runs through all of these works" (ibid.). Kauffman (p. 201): "A sick person is someone who has obstructions. She knew how to open those obstructions."

<sup>49</sup> Kauffman, 201. Apparently people also make pilgrimages to her gravesite in Be'er Sheva, another sign of her status as a *tzadeket* (ibid.).

<sup>50</sup> Kauffman, 199. She elaborates on these from p. 200 onwards. However, a disclaimer she issues is of general interest and importance, in terms of the connection between the Hasidic movement and Yemima: "I do not claim a straight historical line from Hasidism to the Yemima method regarding the issue of personal redemption or any other issue, but rather an inspiration or at least a phenomenological resemblance" (p. 200).

<sup>51</sup> Ramon, 93, 94.

<sup>52</sup> David, ibid. He merely notes that this idea, amongst many other aspects of Yemima's work, remains in need of further elaboration. Odenheimer notes that by her own testimony she was no kabbalah scholar and that she never formally studied kabbalah, and yet experts were amazed by her insights. Asking her about a Zohar passage, one such expert received a long, precise interpretation that filled him

that not everyone took kindly to her innovation of a new approach with neither Torah precedent, rabbinical chain of tradition, nor approval from *gedolei ha-dor*.<sup>53</sup>

Kauffman deliberately terms Yemima's school of thought a Hasidic-*female* one (and specifically female, but not feminist).<sup>54</sup> While Yemima taught men, too – separately from the women – many of whom connected to her teachings and went on to become teachers themselves, the women represented the majority and continue to do so. If Kauffman's claim is correct, then we can note that in leading a Hasidic spiritual movement as a woman, with chiefly women followers and also some men, Yemima is unique in the Jewish landscape.<sup>55</sup> For those who claim that the rise in the feminine augurs messianic times, she represents another step towards global redemption.<sup>56</sup> This helps to pinpoint, too, how she differed from my other “rebbe”, Nehama Leibowitz, who appealed to both women and men equally, and also led no movement per se – and certainly not a Hasidic one.

The momentum of Yemima's teaching did not abate after her death. On the contrary, it picked up steam and continues to do so. On Thursday May 30<sup>th</sup> 2019, I found myself at an event marking her 20<sup>th</sup> *yahrzeit*, apparently the first of its kind. I walked into the grounds of a beautiful home in Gimzo, a religious moshav in central Israel. To my left, a barn containing several beautiful horses; to my right, a table selling Yemima paraphernalia (Yemima “*merch*”! Who knew such a thing existed?). All around me, women milled around, dressed in colorful clothing, many sporting headscarves. Most were dressed in

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with wonder. He asked where she knew this from. She answered: “I suppose from the same place that Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai did.”

<sup>53</sup> See Rabbi Shimon ben Shaya's responsum in the *Moreshet* website, at <http://shut.moreshet.co.il/shut2.asp?id=84486>. Rabbi Yuval Cherlow, when asked about the Yemima method, limited himself to expressing reservations regarding any system narrowly revolving around one person; see his responsum at <https://www.kipa.co.il/%D7%A9%D7%90%D7%9C-%D7%90%D7%AA-%D7%94%D7%A8%D7%91/%D7%99%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%9E%D7%94/>.

<sup>54</sup> “There is no hint of any linkage to the feminist movement and/or its theories... Moreover, the rare explicit messages regarding femininity expressed in her lessons are traditional, reflecting patriarchal, essentialist conceptions” (Kauffman, 210). In this, Yemima and Nehama Leibowitz are similar. See chapter 14, on Nehama's femininity and feminism, in my book [Nehama Leibowitz, Teacher and Bible Scholar](#).

<sup>55</sup> Odenheimer, quoting Yossi Chajes, brings examples of Jewish female spiritual seers from 15th-17th centuries (after which mention of them was censored, due to fallout from the Sabbetai Zevi fiasco); but he notes the important difference, that Yemima was apparently the first female mystic and visionary who left the world a systematic body of teachings, recorded meticulously by her disciples.

<sup>56</sup> This notion is strongly present in Chabad Hasidism, making reference to such verses as Proverbs 12:4, “A woman of valor is the crown of her husband,” and Jeremiah 31:21, “The woman will encircle the man,” as well as the *aggadah* about the diminution of the moon (*Hullin* 60b). See more in Susan Handelman's article, “Putting Women in the Picture: The Rebbe's Views on Women Today,” ([https://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article\\_cdo/aid/161694/jewish/Putting-Women-in-the-Picture.htm](https://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/161694/jewish/Putting-Women-in-the-Picture.htm)), and in Devorah Heshelis, [The Moon's Lost Light](#) (Targum/Feldheim, 2006).

religious women's clothing, some more modern and some less so, along with a small minority that were dressed in less traditional fashion. Regardless of their religious identification, what is certain is that every one of these women was interested in a path of personal growth, infused with a unique spiritual quality.

After an introduction by our hostess and owner of the lovely house, Edit Shalev, a psychotherapist and Yemima teacher and practitioner, we split off into groups for workshops. The workshop I attended, by Avital Bar-Am, was based on what has apparently become known as the Yemima prayer, a “portion” containing the repeating phrase *yehi ratzon*, “May it come to pass.” As is typical in Yemima's writings, the sentences are somewhat obscure and not always grammatically coherent. Here is a snippet, which will also provide a taste of a session studying Yemima's teaching (my translation is inadequate in conveying the full force of her language):

*May it come to pass that we all merit the genuinely good, in truth.  
May it come to pass that your heart shall cease its crying, and you will know happiness in it.  
And that you shall be happy, too, in the profound understanding of existence.  
And that you shall sleep well at night, and arise happy again, and that you will understand differently.  
That you will understand the heart and what occurred and also your parents, to know them well, the good in them and what is not good, if such there is, it is not your business.  
Live your existence.  
Then there will be within you a secure awareness of quiet existence, of whole existence.  
Light that flourishes grows from your deeds.*

As with every Yemima class, the teacher initially dictated Yemima's words and we wrote them down verbatim. We then scrutinized the sentences and attempted to decipher them. Participants were asked for their personal understandings of the phrase “the understanding of existence that goes deep/deepens” (*havanat ha-kiyum ha-ma'amik*).

Avital then shared what she drew out of this prayer, what she defined as a surefire and accessible recipe for happiness: to do things piece by piece. If we internalize that the world is inherently imperfect, and that our job is simply to engage with those small units of goodness which are in our reach, implementing them steadily act by act, then we will be content in life, for these units are indeed within our grasp. She cited the Baal Shem Tov's statement (concerning God's oneness) that when you grasp a part, you have grasped the whole.<sup>57</sup> She related this to the idea that in doing our work incrementally, we will also be led to a gradual and steady cleansing and purification of our hearts; and hence to much joy. This, for Yemima, is the understanding of the ever-deepening existence and journey of life, which is to be found not in large gestures but in the daily portion of good work. Similarly I recall to this day, after so many years, my own teacher quoting Yemima as saying, “May it be [*halevai*] that I may carry out my *diyuk*, like a simple laborer, day by day.” After all, what else is there?

Following this, we heard a few short TED-style talks from different speakers. Tsippi Kauffman noted lines of similarity between the thinking of the Baal Shem Tov and Yemima. Aluma Lev, a popular younger teacher, spoke about the gap between understanding and

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<sup>57</sup> *Keter Shem Tov*, 111.

implementation, between awareness and emotion – likening it to two children on a school hike, with thought being the kid that eagerly runs ahead of the bunch, skipping over rocks, while emotion is the child most often found lagging behind, heavy and awkward. “They don’t even see the same landscape,” she noted poignantly.

Ilan Haran, one of the few men present, then took the microphone and recounted the beginnings of his relationship with Yemima. At the time secular and successfully working in hi-tech, after Ilan first heard Yemima’s name, both he and his wife were curious. His wife was the first to attend a lesson with Yemima, and responded afterwards to his “Nu?” with the words, “I didn’t understand anything; but it was nice.” The following week she gave a similar report, and seemed to want to continue. At this point, her husband decided to go see for himself. “I pride myself on speaking Hebrew fluently,” he informed us, “but I couldn’t comprehend in the least bit what was being said! Yet there was something special there. At the time I was not familiar with the concept of ‘light,’ but there was light there, so I continued.”

This journey was ultimately to bring Ilan to religion. He would familiarize himself with, and become part of, the light he had sensed initially but did not understand. This was true for many, though not all, of her students. Yemima was not an outreach (“*kiruv*”) teacher; she taught tools for improved mental wellbeing and cognitive and emotional functioning, of benefit to all. Yet Kauffman observes that people living according to the method reported feeling bathed in light, experiencing “openness to another dimension of reality, of spiritual life, of revealing the divine spark. They say that by being ‘in their place’ (*al mekoman*) according to Yemima’s teaching, they encounter ‘The Place’ (*Ha-Makom*), which means God in the Sages’ language.”<sup>58</sup>

Yemima referred to the generation of her students as “the generation of confusion,” indicating that many of the Jewish spiritual values had become blurred during the generation born and raised after the establishment of the State of Israel, with increased polarization of secular and religious extremes.<sup>59</sup> Her work was clearly an attempt to moderate this ill.

Today, as noted, thousands of women and men continue to study the Yemima method,<sup>60</sup> including an entire new generation of millennials, for whose self-reflective/self-improving tendencies and emotional sensitivities the method is very well suited. She is often quoted by those active in the fledgling field of *livuy ruhani* (pastoral or spiritual care/chaplaincy) in Israel.<sup>61</sup> Her terminology has actually crept into day-to-day language in certain circles. Devotees of her method include high-profile Israeli celebrities such as Etti Ankri, Avri Gilad, and Shlomo Artzi. Her adherents span the religious spectrum and encompass many types.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Kauffman, 198-199.

<sup>59</sup> Ramon, 92.

<sup>60</sup> There is no accurate measurement of the scope of the phenomenon; it was estimated in 2005 that around ten thousand people were involved (see Kauffman, 196). At the time, Edit Shalev stated her belief that too many people were teaching Yemima; that “the method without the person is not really Yemima... Her absence is felt very deeply. There is a lack of precision in the learning today. People are teaching who did not spend much or any time with Yemima.” Shalev believed that only those who had studied for many years with Yemima had the right to teach her method (Odenheimer).

<sup>61</sup> Ramon, 78. Ramon herself is active in this field and her article was written in the context of these studies.

However, Yemima’s work has not become known widely in the English-speaking world. There have been attempts to teach it in English, but I believe that they have found only limited success. Ilan Haran reports that, as a fluent English speaker, when he tried to convey Yemima’s portions in English, “the language was transmitted, but none of the light came through with it.” This remark, for me, is convincing evidence of the Yemima method being an authentic manifestation of a specifically Jewish-Israeli wisdom – coming full circle back to the point made in my opening paragraphs: that this is Torah of Zion. And, like the thought of Rabbis Froman and Shagar, her approach did evince broad appeal and universally relevant content.<sup>63</sup>

And with this thought about English I will also close. Those Lehrhaus readers who have made it through this entire lengthy article (*shkoah*), have been intrigued by the glimpse provided here, and wish to study the Yemima method in depth, will not be able to access it meaningfully without Hebrew. Even those fairly fluent in the language will not find it easy to grasp the meaning of her lyrical and somewhat obscure phraseology, and the best thing would be to find a teacher locally or online.<sup>64</sup> From experience, I can say that when attempting to access Yemima’s mindset, don’t give up too quickly; a *bissel* patience and humility will get you far. Those who are short on patience and humility will find that immersion in the Yemima method can assist. Remember, it is only your *omess* getting in the way of your true nature.

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<sup>62</sup> Attempts were made to bring her method to Haredi society (Odenheimer), but with what success is unclear. This firsthand testimony in a haredi internet forum suggests that the haredi adherents present at a memorial evening for Yemima were almost entirely not “mainstream” or “classic” haredim (the thread actually serves to illustrate very well the diversity of her fans): [https://www.bhol.co.il/forums/topic.asp?cat\\_id=4&topic\\_id=192649\\_9&forum\\_id=771](https://www.bhol.co.il/forums/topic.asp?cat_id=4&topic_id=192649_9&forum_id=771).

<sup>63</sup> “Yemima’s method appeals to secularists and atheists as well. The reason is that her teachings do not depend on theology, faith in God or the Torah (although it is assumed in her teachings). Her thought addresses everyone in a non-judgmental manner; it is not required to adhere to any particular belief, although she herself clearly did so” (Ramon, 95).

<sup>64</sup> Edit Shalev gives online courses in Hebrew, apparently for women only (<https://www.edit-shalev.co.il/>).

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