

LEHRHAUS

LEHRHAUS OVER SHABBOS

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IN SEARCH OF MODERN ORTHODOXY

Rafi Eis

In introducing his embrace of Rav Shagar, Rabbi Dr. Gil Perl details his personal journey of being initially excited, then disappointed with the writings of our teacher, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein. In the essay cited by Perl, Rabbi Lichtenstein explained that, when facing moral, theological, textual, and historical difficulties with Judaism, he relied on the continued faith of his teachers—Rabbi Yitzchok Hutner and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik—who likely had similar questions, in order to maintain his own.

Perl was ultimately dissatisfied with this approach, as he was seeking certainty of faith rather than reliance on someone else's presumed resolution. In addition, he thought it unlikely that Rabbi Lichtenstein did in fact grapple with the same quandaries that he was facing. Rav Shagar answers Perl's crisis by asserting that postmodernism rejects certainty in many areas, including faith, and Perl's crisis no longer loomed large. Perl could also now integrate the dilemmas of the academy into his Judaism.

Gil Perl is a friend and a former colleague at Kohelet Yeshiva High School. My comments therefore come out of deep respect for him.

While the personal journey is touching, both the crisis and its resolution are problematic. Perl's faulty understanding of the Modern Orthodox agenda, which he incorrectly attributes to Rabbi Lichtenstein, sets the stage for his future disenchantment with it. His choice of the postmodern Rav Shagar as an alternative is deeply concerning, as well.

During my own crisis of faith, I happened to be reading the Rav's *Lonely Man of Faith*. In a footnote, the Rav rejected the need for rational proofs for God and forcefully reminds us not to get trapped within the framing of the dominant philosophies of our day. A good portion of *Lonely Man of Faith* still makes use of various modernist philosophers, including Kant and Hermann Cohen, to build the tension between the majestic Adam I and covenantal Adam II.

We do not begin with Kant, just as the Rambam did not begin his philosophical oeuvre with Aristotle. Instead, we begin with our experiential relationship with God. The *Kuzari* (1:11-13, 25) formulated this relationship as focusing on the personal God of our forefathers, who redeemed us from Egypt, rather than on the philosopher's God, derived by logic as the creator of the world. That is the internal Jewish framing, which ought to be the starting point for every Jewish thinker.

Perl's depiction of Modern Orthodoxy applies a modern framing, describing the endeavor as the

“merging,” “reconciliation,” and “resolution” of Torah and general culture. His quest aims for “certainty.” Perl expects Rabbi Lichtenstein, one of the leading intellectual leaders of Modern Orthodoxy over the past several decades, to smooth the rough edges of modernity and “succeed” in integrating it with Judaism. In fact, Perl describes Rabbi Lichtenstein's lack of answers as a “failure.”

But this analysis is built on a fundamental misunderstanding of Rabbi Lichtenstein's approach. Instead of seeking reconciliation or resolution, Rabbi Lichtenstein used the words “confluence and conflict” in the title of one of his numerous essays on the manner of integrating Judaism with modernity. At the most basic level, Rabbi Lichtenstein never assumed that we must adopt the modern project, its obsession with reason and its rejection of blind faith.

Conflict between religion and modernity is thus inevitable. The central question for Rabbi Lichtenstein was: “How much?” When Rabbi Lichtenstein described relying on his teachers, he did not mean that he relied on their intellectual successes in answering questions of faith posed by modernity. He meant that he looked to his teachers as exemplars of perseverance in the face of difficulties. Regardless of the questions, they continued.

We do not know if they had answers to the questions, or even if they asked the same questions we are facing. That is Rabbi Lichtenstein's point.

Even if the challenges that Perl faced in the academy were new, pertaining to its “unrelenting emphasis on deconstruction and relativism, its wholesale embrace of previously countercultural social mores, and its perspective-altering breakthroughs in science, technology, psychology, anthropology and history,” Perl's new questions would not change the argument of Rabbi Lichtenstein's essay. (For a further fleshing out of this point, see Aaron Segal's analysis of this essay of Rabbi Lichtenstein's.)

We also might do well to consider Rabbi Lichtenstein's feelings regarding postmodern trends within Judaism. While in his formative years, Rabbi Lichtenstein did not grapple with the questions of postmodernism, he definitely had opinions on Rav Shagar, calling his approach an “exercise in narcissism,” and was concerned that the approach could lead to deification of the self.

Moving from the philosophic to the educational, Rav Shagar's approach is, I believe, harmful rather than helpful. In his essay on Kabbalat Ol Malkhut Shamayim, Rav Shagar reconstitutes the traditional understanding of weightiness and obedience as a postmodern faith of “self-acceptance, meaning accepting my life as part of reality, of the will of God,” that “its existence is as God created it.”

While Shagar later tries to integrate this concept with free will and human growth, he cannot do so convincingly. As Levi Morrow notes, any resolution would either face difficulties or else allow for an “anything goes” attitude, incorporating all sorts of contradictions in the name of postmodernism.

While those who accept the principles of postmodernism might revel in such confusion, it is difficult to accept. With this version of “acceptance of the yoke of Heaven,” the individual never truly becomes a servant of God, although he is now equipped with a fundamental philosophy to pat himself on the back for his mediocrity.

Further, not all intellectual movements are equal. While the Enlightenment and modernity broke communal bonds and the concept of essential religious obligation, they also led to great scientific advances and increased self-understanding. In its wake emerged a messianic drive toward realizing utopian visions: “Make everything scientific and understood, remove difference and conflict! We want truth!”

Postmodernism, on the other hand, correlates with increasing rates of mental illness and drug use in the U.S. population. Postmodernism corrodes the human psyche, leading to a desperate cry for help. Even with soft postmodernism, which finds truth in everything, humans become complacent, and choices lose their importance and meaning—no decisions are meaningful when all decisions are good. One religious thinker and a psychologist suggest that the postmodern removal of the meaning of life has created an existential-psychological void that craves to be filled, but the person no longer has the values or character strength to choose wisely. Actions have consequences, whether we like it or not.

While completely anecdotal, my experience has been that those who promote Rav Shagar’s philosophy tend to view halakhah as more malleable than it truly is, in service of providing self-fulfillment in the endless search for personal meaning. Halakhah becomes clay in the hands of the potter to serve this end. I have not seen Rav Shagar’s philosophy lead to greater observance, commitment, and sacrifice.

But observance, commitment, and sacrifice are precisely what our goals must be. As Deuteronomy 10:12-3 puts it:

Now, Israel, what does the Lord your God demand of you? Only to revere the Lord your God, to walk only in His paths, to love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, keeping the Lord’s commandments and laws, which I command you today, for your good.

Educational challenges change from generation to generation, and educational leaders generally have great leeway in choosing the proper approach for their community and time period. To be sure, the process is not always smooth, as any eighteenth century hasid would testify.

The philosophies that end up out of bounds are the ones that begin with a different source of truth and undermine the heteronymous nature of the Torah. Rav Shagar’s starting point and source of truth is the “self” instead of the Torah and his approach therefore undermines the Torah’s heteronomy. If the current generation struggles with accepting the yoke of Heaven, we need to figure out a better way to deliver the message, but should not fundamentally change it.

The tension-filled approach of the Rav and the nuance of Rabbi Lichtenstein may not speak to the current generation. There are other options. As an alternative, I would like to recommend the thought of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. First and foremost, his source of truth is Judaism as he looks to Tanakh in developing philosophic principles. Rabbi Sacks even criticizes the Rav's Lonely Man of Faith for not fully reflecting the Jewish sources.

Second, he understands that some of these philosophies correlate with unarticulated different modes of thinking about the right and good life. People with different consciousnesses actually end up talking past each when discussing topics like moral behavior or Jewish unity. It is therefore quite helpful that Rabbi Sacks devotes much ink to contrasting Jewish values with the errant ways of other philosophies. While he integrates much material from other philosophies, he does so to shed light on internal Jewish values.

Third, his writings address pertinent issues of the day and simultaneously inspire its readers to greater action. His use of accessible language enables easier internalizing of the ideas.

Modern Orthodoxy does not assume that Torah is defined by modernity, but rather that Judaism is engaged with the modern world. The Jewish challenge is to be a light to the nations, a charge which includes proper modes of military engagements and the messy challenges of building a polity.

We are supposed to show that the moral life of kindness and generosity, a fair justice system, strong families and communities, properly channeled sexuality, a commitment to God's commands, cleaving to His ways, and sanctity lead to human flourishing. At moments like this we are supposed to double down on this agenda instead of being caught up in the milieu.

Observe them faithfully, for that will be proof of your wisdom and discernment to other peoples, who on hearing of all these laws will say, "Surely, that great nation is a wise and discerning people" (Deuteronomy 4:6).

The challenges of each generation require its leaders to find new formulations for traditional Jewish values. Instead of trying to contort Judaism into the latest philosophical trends as Shagar aims to do, we need to promote those like Rabbi Sacks who present Judaism articulated for the current challenges.

It is my hope and prayer that we are successful.

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ON RACISM AND THE TORAH

Elli Fischer

“Is the Mishnah racist?”

This is the question my son asked me when we studied Nega'im together, and which later became part of the speech he gave several months later, when we celebrated his becoming a bar mitzvah and his completion of all six orders of the Mishnah. The question was provoked by the following mishnah:

A bright blotch on a German (Germani) appears dim, and a dim blotch on an African (Kushi) appears bright.

Rabbi Yishmael says: Israelites, may I be their atonement, are like boxwood, neither black nor white, but in the middle.

Rabbi Akiva said: Painters have pigments with which they paint forms black or white or intermediate. One brings an intermediate pigment and paints around [the blotch] from outside, and it is viewed within the intermediate.

Rabbi Yehudah says: The shades of the blotches create leniency but not stringency; it should be viewed when on a German on his skin, for the sake of leniency, and when on an African within the intermediate [paint], for the sake of leniency. The sages say: both within the intermediate [paint] (Mishnah Nega'im 2:2).

At issue here is the diagnosis of tzara'at, the biblical skin condition often translated as “leprosy.” A kohen views the affected skin, and if he determines that it is, or may be, tzara'at, the patient is declared impure and quarantined. Among the characteristics that the kohen looks at is color: to be rendered impure, tzara'at of the skin must have a requisite degree of whiteness (Vayikra 13:1-3). The question of this mishnah is whether the whiteness of tzara'at is evaluated objectively, or in contrast to the patient's skin color.

The initial anonymous opinion maintains that it is indeed evaluated subjectively: a white patch that appears on the light skin of a German will not be diagnosed as tzara'at, whereas the same patch on the dark skin of an African will be rendered impure. (I translate “Kushi” as “African” because both, in different contexts, are geographical terms that imply skin color; similarly, [Rashi](#), as well as [German](#) and other translations of Yirmiyahu 13:23, render “Kushi” as “Moor.”)

The implication of Rabbi Yishmael's statement about the skin color of Israelites is somewhat ambiguous. According to the twelfth-century scholar, Rabbi Shimshon of Sens, it means that all tzara'at is viewed the same way, as though it was on the skin of a neither-black-nor-white Israelite. According to his contemporary, Ra'avad of Posquières, in Rabbi Yishmael's view, neither a German nor an African can ever be diagnosed with tzara'at of the skin, as it is impossible to truly determine whether the affected area is sufficiently white.

Rabbi Akiva addresses this problem by suggesting a way for the kohen to view the affected skin “objectively;” one must simply paint around the blotch with boxwood-colored dye. Rabbi Yehudah advocates this technique in the case of an African patient, but is willing to let the German patient keep the leniency of having a blotch appear dimmer next to his white skin. The sages, however,

apply Rabbi Akiva's technique in all cases; according to them, all are equal before the law of tzara'at, regardless of skin color.

So is this mishnah racist, as my son suspected?

I answered him that, no, this mishnah is not racist. Firstly, the idea of "race" was developed long after the Mishnah was completed. More importantly, however, the mishnah's concern with skin color is purely clinical: how is tzara'at diagnosed in comparison with various shades of skin? The very next mishnah addresses the very same question but with respect to conditions prevailing outside: "Affected skin is not viewed early in the morning, nor late in the afternoon, nor indoors, nor on a cloudy day, for the dim will appear bright; nor at midday, for the bright appears dim" (Mishnah Nega'im 2:2).

In fact, the Torah seems to take a stand against judging people based on the color of their skin, using some of the same terminology that we encountered in our mishnah. When Miriam spoke ill about the African woman that her brother, Moshe, married, God's punishment was swift: she developed tzara'at, and her skin immediately turned snow white.

Though the Torah does not explicitly state that Miriam's punishment had anything to do with her sister-in-law's skin color (and indeed, several exegetes interpret this description of Moshe's wife metaphorically or euphemistically), punishment in the Torah usually fits the crime.

It is true that, [as Chaim Trachtman wrote recently](#), some early Jewish texts speak disparagingly of dark-skinned people and, borrowing a page from Aristotle (Politics 1:5), deems them naturally predisposed to be slaves. It is true that such texts have been used to justify slavery until well into the modern period, even until today.

Moreover, there is no doubt that racism persists within Jewish communities. I often encountered racist attitudes among members of the Jewish community where I grew up, and to this day I struggle to eliminate the prejudices I absorbed from that environment.

Still, as the sources above indicate, the Jewish tradition is multivocal: we need not resort to a creative interpretation of the duty to rebuke a fellow in order to find the strains of our tradition that tell us that people should "[not be judged](#) by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." In my experience, the best way to combat racism in our communities is by creating opportunities for people to encounter one another. Essentialist views are hard to maintain when one is constantly encountering individuals who do not fit the stereotype.

But what of the peoples with which the Torah forbids intermarriage? What of the tribes that the Torah commands us to annihilate? Is this clear evidence that the Torah regards certain peoples as essentially, intrinsically different and even worthy of eradication?

These commandments are indeed troubling, and we are thankful to Sennacherib for mixing up all the peoples, leaving these mitzvot impracticable. It is not far-fetched to suggest that Hazal utilized the Assyrians' population transfer tactics to remove these commandments from the realm of practice. Nevertheless, even if only on the theoretical level, the level of "study it, and receive reward," we must ask whether the Torah espouses essentialist views.

It is interesting to note that the nations, peoples, and tribes that the Torah seeks to separate Israel from are specifically those peoples that have the most in common with Israel--that share blood, language, or land with Israel. The Torah's foundational stories about Ammon, Moab, and Edom--three of the peoples that the Torah says explicitly may not enter God's community--treats them as close relatives, members of Israel's extended family.

The problem with these tribes is not the impurity of their blood, but the similarity of their blood to ours. The Torah's concern is not with the other, but with those who are not-quite-other, the greatest threats to lead Israel astray from its mission and covenantal relationship with the Almighty.

This was also the challenge faced by Ezra during the Return to Zion: the peoples he encountered were an amalgam of Israelites, neighboring tribes, and peoples that had been relocated from distant lands. Judeans intermarried with them because they seemed so us-like, so not-other; and it was for that very reason that Ezra, attempting to constitute a commonwealth based on the Torah and Israel's covenant with God, perceived those quasi-Israelite, quasi-monotheistic tribes as its greatest threat.

In this sense, I was troubled by Trachtman's concerns about Jewish particularism, and especially his understanding that Jewish universalism and particularism are in tension with one another. In fact, Jewish particularism is a prerequisite for Jewish universalism. The notion that a particular group of people has been chosen by God to bear a universal message is both particularist and universalist.

It faces its greatest challenge not when encountering the groups that are most foreign and most distant, but specifically when facing groups that seem so close, so similar, yet that are nevertheless "off-message". Jewish particularism is not, as Trachtman suggests, ethnocentric. On the contrary, it seeks to discriminate between those who are part of the covenantal community and those who are not within our particular ethnos.

This set of attitudes toward others can be discerned even today when we consider the positive encounters between Jews and Christians and compare them with the wall-to-wall agreement within the Jewish community that Messianic Judaism lies beyond its boundaries.

Trachtman's article is predicated on the notion that Judaism's particularism creates a tendency toward xenophobia and racism. The presence of xenophobia and racism in the Jewish community is undeniable, and indeed, such phenomena exist in any sufficiently close-knit community. Moreover, as Trachtman demonstrates, there is a strain of Jewish thought, running from Yehudah Ha-Levi through Maharal to Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook, that essentializes difference. Nevertheless, it seems to me that our texts and traditions, on balance, can be read far more generously than Trachtman suggests.

Being a "kingdom of priests" is central to Israel's mission, an integral part of the covenant established between God and Israel at Sinai. Implicit in this charge is that Israel must maintain the (particularist) integrity of its priestly status in order to fulfill its (universal) mission. As Rambam's son, Rabbi Avraham, explains in his father's name:

The priest of the flock is the leader that is most eminent and is its role model, who members of the flock follow and thereby find the straight path. Thus, it says: You shall be, through observance of My Torah, leaders of the world. You will be to them as the priest to his flock. The world will follow after you, imitating your actions and walking in your path. (Commentary to Shemot 19:6)

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THERE IS NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN: A REPLY TO GIL PERL

Gidon Rothstein

I was moved by Rabbi Dr. Gil Perl's recent [essay](#). He and I have much in common. We both attended Yeshivat Har Etzion, both consider ourselves students of Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, zt"l, and we worked with the same dissertation advisor for our PhD theses.

Like Perl, I believe we should seek and find ways to articulate Hashem's service that reach and appeal to all Jews, including in ways that resonate with postmodernists. And I, too, was influenced by Rabbi Lichtenstein's [article](#), "The Source of Faith is Faith Itself." It helped me greatly in my own path.

We part company, however, on a few points. First, Perl understood a line in that article differently than I did. Second, Perl promotes Rav Shagar's approach as one way to speak in a postmodern yet faithful voice, advocating both a rejection of objective truth and a pluralism that refuses to assume any of us might be more broadly right than others. Each leaves room for reconsideration.

What Those Who Came Before Knew

Perl tells of reading Rabbi Lichtenstein's article, "The Source of Faith is Faith Itself," and being struck by a passage in which Rabbi Lichtenstein says that he at one point in his life took comfort that the great teachers he knew had faced the doubts he had and still remained faithful. If it was good enough for them, who was he to continue to doubt?

Much as he originally appreciated the sentiment, Perl describes himself as eventually coming to the view that, while he was "fortunate to have strung together an alternate set of people, many of his friends were 'different.'" They followed a narrower path, and encountered conditions that their teachers clearly had not faced. It was, after all, a new intellectual era. It meant that Modern Orthodox Jews could not be as confident that the challenges arising were ones that could be well met. These sentiments made Perl all the more curious about Rav Shagar.

I did not read Rabbi Lichtenstein's comment the same way as Perl did, and the point that I believe he missed will be relevant when I show where I think Rav Shagar is not as good a model as Perl suggests.

I never thought that Rabbi Lichtenstein meant that Rabbis Hutner and Soloveitchik literally had thought about whatever issues he thought of; they had vibrant and full intellectual lives of their own and, just as Gil Perl grew up in a different culture and intellectual era than Rabbi Lichtenstein, so he grew up in one distinctly different from the Europe of their youth.

My understanding was that he meant something broader, which I personally attach to Ecclesiastes 1:9: "there is nothing new under the sun." To insist on a literal reading is to render the verse nonsensical. Doesn't all of human innovation, especially in the realm of technology, disprove the verse?

The answer to that question also explains Rabbi Lichtenstein's characterization of his predecessors. The verse tells us that whatever seems new is only superficially so. In fact, there is

nothing categorically or fundamentally new, including his doubts. Doubt about Judaism took a particular form in his mind, as it does in each generation and each person. That the greats he knew had met their own doubts, whatever they were, as had the greats of all generations, reassured him that the doubts he was facing were not qualitatively different, and therefore no more problematic than the ones that his teachers had vanquished.

To me, the verse and Rabbi Lichtenstein's article ask us to recognize that each generation has a new version of the struggle to assert the truth of Hashem's existence, but that it differs only in form, not essence. In dealing with the challenges that arise in any particular generation, a key piece of the approach is to remember that nothing about Torah and faith is essentially new. We will need to find the answers that respond to the doubts that become problematic in our times, but our starting point should be that there is nothing essentially different or more challenging about these than about the doubts that arose and were dealt with in other generations.

Once we remember that, we can see why Rav Shagar's attempt to reconcile Judaism with postmodernism, however noble and ahead of its time as it was, does not pass muster. Perl focused on two aspects of Rav Shagar's work—how to express Judaism in a way that accepts postmodernism's rejection of objective truth and its demand of a thoroughgoing pluralism—and I will respond to each.

There Is Objective Truth

Postmodernists have become acutely aware of how personal life is, how much each of us shape what we hear, understand, and believe. There is much truth to that, but they take that a step further, denying the existence of objective truth. The softer version of this assertion is that none of us can access objective truth because we are always subjective in our approach to the world. Perl notes how Rav Shagar offers a theory for how a committed Jew could wrestle his or her observance into a rubric where there indeed might not be objective truth.

This presents a problem, however, because Judaism very much believes that objective truth exists, and that the Jewish people were given a piece of objective truth, the Torah. A professor of mine once argued that Rambam stressed the uniqueness of Moshe's prophecy precisely to address this point, to say that the Torah is not "merely" a prophetic work, that it contains the direct *devar Hashem*, the Divine Word unmediated.

We need not deny the difficulty of accessing objective truth nor the general subjectivity of human beings' approach to the world to understand that Judaism requires us to believe in this one exception. (I know of those who argue that that might be true, but that our interpretations of the Torah show that even there we cannot get at what it is saying unequivocally. I dealt with that claim in the first part of my book, [We're Missing the Point](#)).

Postmodernism might help us remember how subjective almost all of us are, even ordinary prophets. After all, Hazal spoke of the style of prophets, which suggests that they conveyed what they gleaned from the divine voice. That opens interesting possibilities in studying the rest of Tanakh, such as comparing how Yirmiyahu and Yehezkel discussed similar phenomena from different perspectives and contexts.

But Moshe Rabbenu delivered Hashem's truth, not his version of that truth, and much about what that Torah says and means has never been seriously debated. We do, in fact, believe in objective truth, and we are certain that we possess a document that captures important parts of that truth.

Pluralism

The recognition that we usually see the world from inside our own heads, so that whatever we are saying, right or wrong, is subjective led to an overly extreme statement, that there is no objective truth.

Similarly, the recognition that many people can be right about a topic, even if they seem to be starkly disagreeing, leads some to argue for a pluralism that denies that anyone can be wrong. Perl quotes Rav Shagar as accepting that as well, that we would never say that anyone else is wrong; we can only say that our truth works for us.

There is certainly pluralism in the Torah world as well. The Gemara famously says that *eilu va-eilu divrei Elokim hayyim*, all sides to Talmudic arguments are the “words of the Living God.” That has been interpreted in many ways, the broadest version being that Hashem left much of Torah open to interpretation, such that all the views espoused in a particular argument in fact are equally legitimate. They all capture elements of truth, and we can and should be pluralistic about them in that sense.

But that’s not the pluralism of postmodernists or of Rav Shagar. The Talmud is also comfortable rejecting certain ideas as *baduta*, beyond the pale, and certainly they were not pluralistic about the Sadducees’ approach to Judaism. To say that many views can capture elements of truth and are therefore legitimate cannot be allowed to shade over into saying that all views have some legitimacy.

This is not the place to define which are which, especially since each discipline (within and without Torah) has its own rules of the game. But when Jews look at other religions, as Perl cites from Rav Shagar, they might view some as having elements of truth, but not all of it.

A famously censored passage in Rambam’s *Laws of Kings* (ch. 11) says that Jesus and Mohammed were sent by God to wean the pagans from their paganism, a waystation on the path to correct monotheism.

Yet, he also comfortably denies any value to the beliefs of those who worship powers other than Hashem, as well as those who use divination or witchcraft. To recognize multiple aspects and elements of truth is a far jump from pluralism; a jump that Rav Shagar, and Perl, by extension, makes.

Building a Postmodern Orthodoxy

If markers of postmodernism are the denial of objective truth and the pluralism that extends from it, a Postmodern Orthodoxy can—and perhaps should—stress where Torah is more open than we might have realized, where the right and wrong of living a life in the service of Hashem is not as unequivocal as prior generations made it seem.

A Postmodern Orthodoxy can and probably should emphasize its openness to forms of spirituality that we have not yet encountered, as long as they do not fly in the face of the objective truths we know and they can be fit into our limited pluralism. A Postmodern Orthodoxy can and probably should stress that many aspects of *avodat Hashem* were left undefined by Jewish tradition, so that many more choices can fit comfortably within the world of Torah than we have hitherto modeled.

But a Postmodern Orthodox approach can never allow itself to accept what Rav Shagar seems to believe, that we can acquiesce to the denial of objective truth, that pluralism can mean all ideas are equally valid. As *ma’aminim benei ma’aminim*, a favorite phrase of Rabbi Lichtenstein’s,

descendants of those who have faced such challenges repeatedly, we know Hashem exists, that Hashem gave us objective truth in the Torah.

There are many, many ideas whose falsity we should recognize by virtue of that Torah, and therefore reject, even as we recognize the subjectivity of much else that we say, and remain open to the maximal pluralism allowed within that framework.

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THE SOUL OF MAN UNDER POSTMODERNISM: FURTHER COMMENTS ON RAV SHAGAR'S CONTRIBUTION

Shalom Carmy

The last couple of weeks have brought two worthwhile assessments of Rav Shagar's [Faith Shattered and Restored: Judaism in the Postmodern Age](#), Matt Lubin's fine [review](#) in Kol Hamevaser and Rabbi Gil Perl's [response](#) in these columns which explores what Rav Shagar offers to the younger generation. This was followed by a [pair of critiques](#) by Rabbis Rafi Eis and Gidon Rothstein. (The latter article was published after I composed my comments, and I have no disagreement with it.)

Although much of what I write here is covered in my Afterword to the Shagar volume, I wish to offer two comments on Rabbi Perl's essay.

When he compares and contrasts Rav Shagar with *mori ve-rabbi*, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l, Rabbi Perl ascribes to Rabbi Lichtenstein a position he did not take. Rabbi Lichtenstein did not state that struggles about faith are adequately resolved by virtue of one's confidence that all of one's questions have been duly considered and disposed of by one's mentors.

This view is empirically dubious, to say the least, even regarding as wide-ranging a thinker as Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. It is inconsistent with other statements in Rabbi Lichtenstein's brief but intense [essay](#), "The Source of Faith Is Faith Itself." What Rabbi Lichtenstein actually says is that he took comfort in this thought at an early stage in his development. He does not claim that this thought was sufficient for his mature intellectual and religious life. I made a detailed argument about how to read Rabbi Lichtenstein several years ago in "[The Gate Matches the Home](#)." Rabbi Rafi Eis notes the well-known fact that Rabbi Lichtenstein was highly critical of salient elements in Rav Shagar's outlook, which he pronounced "narcissistic." This overall judgment has implications for many important areas—from *devarim ketanim* (Talmud study) to *devarim gedolim* (the God-man relationship).

In my [contribution](#) to the Hebrew symposium on Rav Shagar's approach to Talmud in *Netuim 17*, I tried to explain how the "narcissism" problem affects the realm of Torah study and how one may benefit from Rav Shagar despite his vulnerability on this score.

The stakes are much higher with respect to the nature of our connection to the *Ribbono shel Olam*. Rav Shagar often advocates unquestioning reliance on self-acceptance as a guarantee of our certainty regarding moral and religious truth, even while doubting, in the postmodern mode, the existence of truth external to oneself.

Such attitudes are indeed characteristic of postmodernism, and any attempt to bring Judaism in line with the subjectivism fashionable among the enlightened classes must contend with the total

opposition between them. Rav Shagar himself is sensitive to the danger that his teaching sounds like worship of the self. He fears that such a faith, “the tendency to turn oneself into the yardstick for reality” (Faith Shattered, 34), emanating from the bowels of one’s selfhood, would not be religious faith, but merely an act of egocentric self-anointment.

Rav Shagar often appeals to a combination of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and Hasidic ideas to resolve the difficulty. The reader can evaluate the success of these strategies. For anyone to follow Rav Shagar on this point it would be neither necessary nor sufficient to believe that he got it right. It would not be necessary because he may have failed but we might succeed by improving on his work.

More ominously it would not be sufficient, because his success would not ensure his readers’ full understanding and internalization of his ideas. Incomplete assimilation of the Lacan-Hasidut cocktail—assuming its validity—would still leave the individual dancing around the Golden Calf of the self.

Rabbi Perl correctly recognizes that both Rav Lichtenstein and Rav Shagar confront a reality in which believers cannot demonstrate “externally” and “impersonally” the truth of their core convictions; both are committed to maintaining the certitude of religious dedication within that framework. Rabbi Lichtenstein (and I) in effect, recognize this reality and move on. Rav Shagar attempts to turn what most would see as an unfortunate situation into something desirable. He sees these challenges as opportunities.

Some challenges can turn into opportunities. Some must simply be resisted. I have devoted much time to the study of Rav Shagar and made a significant effort to publicize his work. I have done so because, as Rabbi Perl perceives, he has often succeeded in speaking for people and about real problems that had not been articulated previously. He is a master diagnostician of the human soul under postmodernism and has struggled to define its implications sincerely and eloquently. On some of the questions with which he grapples, I believe he may provide positive orientation. On others he may be propagating a confusion of diagnosis with remedy, with the danger that his readers are liable to perpetuate the disease.

For millennia Jewish thinkers have had to judge whether elements in non-Jewish culture could enrich the service of the Ribbono shel Olam or must be rejected as poisonous to that service. Again and again Rav Shagar recognizes the danger of confounding God, who confronts us and commands us in His transcendent Otherness, with a mystified image of the self. It is not as if he dismisses this danger. Whether he succeeds in overcoming that danger is an open question; whether many of those invoking his authority have overcome it is even more open to question.

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THE BEIT MIDRASH IN THE AGE OF SNAPCHAT

Shira Hecht-Koller

Earlier this year, Apple released the iPhone X. When the first iPhone was released in 2007, I was completing my second year of formal teaching, and over the course of these ten years, I, like so many other educators and parents on the frontlines of adolescent education, have watched teenagers grow and develop with this new, powerful, and rapidly evolving device in the palms of their hands. Its presence in our world has shifted the way we teach and learn, and has altered our familial, religious and social landscapes.

The Challenges

Educators face, of course, numerous challenges, some timeless and some specific to our age. I would like to focus on three challenges felt more sharply now than in earlier times, all encapsulated in the ubiquitous smartphone.

First, there is an ethos of individualism. Much of our culture promotes the ideals of personal autonomy and even a personal brand. Teens in particular are subject to social forces that emphasize individualistic expression and development. While self-discovery and actualization are important, there can be no self outside of relationships with other selves, and personal identity can only fully develop when in conversation with others. In order to find themselves, teenagers also have to confront others.

Second, the most obvious benefits of technology for Torah study—the ease with which it allows the learner to collect and translate sources—also present a challenge. Given that ease, how do we impress upon students the importance of the work that can't easily be done by computer? To sit with a text, noticing patterns, inconsistencies, looking up words, learning language and concepts is difficult work. With the prevalence of so many available translations and online resources, why should our students want to do the hard work of learning?

Third, we live in an age of distraction. We are bombarded constantly with images and short texts, encountering both other humans and ideas in snaps that disappear and thoughts that cannot exceed 140 characters. The important questions, though—the cosmos, the complexity of humanity, the beauty of creation, encountering the hardships, challenges and many nuanced layers of our world—require focus and attentiveness, a way of engaging with texts and people in sustained detail. As they develop in the landscape of the twenty-first century, teenagers need to be given opportunities to focus on one thing, do it exceptionally well, and then let it course through them as they move on. They need to be able to dwell on what is of interest. The skills of pausing and noticing have become rare in our society.

This past summer I directed an immersive Talmud Fellowship program for high school women at Drisha, and over the course of a very intensive five weeks, I came to realize that the traditional Jewish learning culture may be more powerful than ever as a force to combat the pernicious effects of technology, and enhance its benefits. Certain aspects of the “old school” way of learning

are uniquely equipped to address the new challenges that confront us and in that way, are themselves revolutionary. I will focus on three aspects of that learning.

Havruta

The intensive havruta experience focuses on this type of relationship, and thereby promotes profound individual growth. A productive havruta involves listening carefully, pushing back, sharpening, questioning, suggesting, inviting dialogue and disagreement. It is a mode of both learning and teaching, and the two operate in a feedback loop: the more one learns, the more one can teach, and the more that one teaches, the more one learns. It is a mode of communication and dialogue that is being erased from contemporary discourse.

Besides the educational component to this study, this relationship is one that cultivates deep empathy. A learner cannot simply read and move on, but must ask: Does my havruta understand? Does she understand it as I do? Should I be troubled, too, or push her along? Can we arrive at a joint understanding? Am I giving her enough time and space to speak? Am I being fully heard? Fully understood?

This mode of interpersonal dialogue stands in stark contrast to how our teens communicate in contemporary society. Teens often engage in multiple conversations at the same time, with Snapchat, Whatsapp, and Instagram open simultaneously, and multiple conversations occurring on each. Such conversations tend to take place in time-lapse, with interruptions and other conversations in between, and (perhaps as a result), such conversations are often light, casual, and cursory. How could one debate the meaning of freedom on Snapchat?

There are many positives in these media which are important for adolescent development, but they should complement and not replace face-to-face, in-depth conversations. Educators and parents can foster such development, actively creating opportunities and spaces for meaningful, focused dialogue to take place in real time. Dedicating large blocks of time to serious havruta study is a way to enable students to be present while listening, challenging, and engaging. Our experience certainly tracks with the [research on havrutastudy](#): it can truly be a transformative mode of learning and can revolutionize contemporary discourse.

Sacred Spaces: Kedushat Makom, Technology Integration and Divestment

Schools and educational institutions spend a lot of time and money strategically thinking about how to best integrate technology into classrooms and learning environments. The [online Torah resources](#), [apps](#), and [open source materials](#) at our disposal to influence and animate the way we learn and teach are incredible. The proliferation of resources has shaped and continues to re-shape the fundamental nature of our classrooms, and needs to be embraced. I am actually participating in Sefaria's Partnership Initiative this year, because the transformative potential is undeniable.

Alongside the focus on technology integration, however, it seems to me critically important for educators and parents to also focus on technology divestment and to create tech-free zones for their students and children. Without adults imposing this from on high, it becomes very hard for kids to learn how to disconnect and self-monitor. [Some research suggests](#) that as a result they have become more lonely and isolated, and possibly even more depressed. For them to be fully present in experiences with others, they need the adults in their lives to impose limitations and create a culture of self-discipline.

For those who are shomrei Shabbat, the concept of kedushat zeman, sacred time, is already one that creates limitations on technology. Utilizing the idea of kedushat makom, tech-free zones can be created to nurture a culture of moderation and self-discipline.

How that will manifest itself will likely differ in individualized environments and contexts. It may mean a fully technology-free beit midrash, or a tech-free hour in the library, or particular days that a classroom does not allow laptop or iPad use, or areas of a home where technology is off limits. At Drisha this summer, the beit midrash was a tech-free zone, and students reported a real enjoyment of that freedom. This will not work in all contexts, but we must continue to explore the basic concept of maintaining certain spaces as “sacred.”

Focus and balance: La-asok be-Divrei Torah

A key feature of the Drisha Summer high school program is the focused, holistic, and immersive nature of the experience. Students come to spend five weeks learning in New York City, in a rigorous and intensive program characterized by concentrated text study. While there, instead of sealing them off from the world, they are asked to view communities and societies, culture and art, leisure and literature through the lens of the Torah that they study.

The average high school student lives a fragmented life, moving at a frenetic pace, balancing a dual curriculum with ten classes a day, each a 40 minute chunk, involvement in co-curricular activities, sports teams, and community service projects, all while maintaining active social and familial lives. They are exposed to a wealth of ideas alongside rich and diverse opportunities, but it comes at a tremendous cost: they live in an environment of distraction.

This mode is one that can falsely allow students to feel as though they are super-productive: after all, they say, “we are excellent multi-taskers,” but studies have shown, time and again, that [people can't actually multitask](#) nearly as well as they think they can, and that trying to do so [adversely affects academic performance](#). People produce their best work when given the space and freedom to focus on one task at a time.

During the Drisha program, the students did much more than study texts. A signature part of the program is the holistic experience: They lived together, cooked together, traveled together, rode the subways together, and explored the streets of New York City together. Their cohort is formed and relationships are built as they walk over the Brooklyn Bridge, bike Governor’s Island, explore modern art at the Guggenheim, and listen to concerts in the park. But the core of their time is spent in the beit midrash where the intensity and focus on learning is enhanced and developed. The holistic nature of the experience allows the ideas that are explored with rigor in the texts studied to transcend the walls of the beit midrash and permeate all aspects of their lives. In many ways this is what it means to be la-asok be-divrei Torah. The core experience connects to and influences all else.

Conclusion

There has been a fair amount of discussion of the effects that modern technology is having on the human ability to concentrate. Quite a few researchers have argued that whether or not attention spans are diminishing, people are [getting better at extracting more information more quickly](#). Nevertheless, a mind that can extract information more quickly still needs guidance on how to prioritize and rank what can and should be at the core of their lives. Educators and parents have the opportunity and responsibility to step in, and help frame the way our teenagers receive,

process, and integrate the information they encounter and help them determine what should be situated at the core.

In many ways, the layout of webpages, Facebook pages, and newsfeeds, are reminiscent of the classic Vilna Shas. The core text is in the center, but there is so much going on around it. These can come together in beautiful harmony, but it takes training and practice to not simply be distracted. Our lives—real and digital—are structured in a similar fashion.

There are core texts, images and stimuli in the center with so much going on around us all at once, stirring our emotions, eliciting our ideas, and uncovering our dreams. What is at the center impacts what is on the periphery, and what is on the margins, speaks deeply to the core. They overlap and interconnect in deep and penetrating ways.

Navigating the complexity of this interconnectedness is what our teenagers are confronted with on a moment to moment basis; when they study in the beit midrash and when they explore the urban jungle. To help them in this rapidly evolving and shifting world, the tools and values that are core parts of our traditional frameworks can be enormously powerful. In the age of distraction, the art of havruta, sacred spaces, and holistic learning environments teach them to stop, listen, notice, prioritize, think, and imagine, so they can live fully integrated lives.

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