



Volume VIII, Issue 2 January 2014 Tevet 5775

KOL HAMEVASER

THE JEWISH THOUGHT MAGAZINE OF THE YESHIVA UNIVERSITY STUDENT BODY

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ABOUT KOL HAMEVASER

Kol Hamevaser, the Jewish Thought magazine of the Yeshiva University student body, is dedicated to sparking discussion of Jewish issues on the Yeshiva University campus and beyond. The magazine hopes to facilitate the religious and intellectual growth of its readership and serves as a forum for students to express their views on a variety of issues that face the Jewish community. It also provides opportunities for young thinkers to engage Judaism intellectually and creatively, and to mature into confident leaders.

Kol Hamevaser is published monthly and its primary contributors are undergraduates, although it includes input from RIETS Roshei Yeshivah, YU professors, and outside figures. In addition to its print magazine, *Kol Hamevaser* also sponsors special events, speakers, discussion groups, conferences, and shabbatonim.

We encourage anyone interested in writing about or discussing Jewish issues to get involved in our community, and to participate in the magazine, the conversation, and our club's events. Find us online at kolhamevaser.com, or on Facebook or Twitter.

Editor's Thoughts: The Battlefield of Belief

BY: RAPHAEL OZAROWSKI

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has given us the Torah of truth, planting everlasting life in our midst. Blessed are You, Giver of the Torah.

- Blessing after Torah Reading, 'The Koren Siddur'

Even if we do not realize it, as Orthodox Jews we are accustomed to asserting the objective truth of our own religious beliefs. We say it multiple times a day in our prayers; we say it before and after publicly reading the Torah; and we may say it casually when discussing Judaism with others.¹

At Yeshiva University, we are constantly exposed to and involved in intra-religious dialogue. It is something which permeates the fabric

of our everyday lives, which occupies hours of our mornings, afternoons, and evenings. It is easy to get so ensconced in our own bubble that

we forget there is an entire world of religions out there, each one bearing ownership to an entirely different belief system than our own. The absence of a Religion department in YU also means that many students are overwhelmingly ignorant about religions that are not Judaism—religions which dominate our country's population.

This is unacceptable.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in his famous 1964 essay *Confrontation*, insisted on an unwavering commitment to Jewish beliefs in the face of growing pressure to capitulate to the theological demands of others: "Only a candid, frank, and unequivocal policy reflecting unconditional commitment to our God, a sense of dignity, pride and inner joy in being what we are... will impress the peers of the other faith

community among whom we have both adversaries and friends." Rabbi Soloveitchik continued by affirming his hope that "our friends in the community of the many will sustain their liberal convictions and humanitarian ideals by articulating their position on the right of the community of the few to live, create, and worship God in its own way, in freedom and dignity."² Famously staking out a (subtle) position against interfaith dialogue, he argued for the impropriety and impossibility of communicating the language of religious belief

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and theology to those outside one's own faith.

The contemporary relevance and application of Rabbi Soloveitchik's ideas have been considered as well as contested in more recent years.³ Many leaders still follow his rulings devoutly, while others like Rabbi Shlomo Riskin have advocated a more open approach to theological dialogue with other religious groups.⁴ In any case, we can discern what I believe to be a fundamental caveat underlying Rabbi Soloveitchik's thought: once we declare that Jews have an inalienable right to feel comfortable in their own eschatological projections and other miscellaneous beliefs, surely other religions should be entitled to the same level of unabashedness in their beliefs as well. Barring any attempt to hurt others or violate basic morality, we can safely state that any and every religious group has equal right to, in



Rabbi Soloveitchik's words, "create and worship God in its own way."

One of the central texts in our *Yamim Nora'im* liturgy already hints at this tension regarding how Jews should relate to other religious believers. God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, states the following about the time of salvation:

"As for the foreigners who attach themselves to the Lord, to minister to Him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be his servants—all who keep the Sabbath and do not profane it, and who hold fast to My covenant—I will bring them to My sacred mount and let them rejoice in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices shall be welcome on My altar; for My House shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."⁵

On the one hand, this ideal vision insists that foreigners will be received with open arms in the Temple of God; they

too are encouraged to offer sacrifices and pray to the one true God. However, acceptance by God seems to hinge on acceptance of the covenant, perhaps employing Shabbat here as a particular example. It is not merely any non-Jew who may worship God alongside us; only "the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths" have an open invitation.

Though many have pointed to this text as evidence of a more accommodating Jewish perspective in the end-time, we must note that God's claim that His house will be a "house of

prayer for all peoples" does not quite reach the level of pluralism. Though it is not clear if the prophecy predicts that non-Jews will actually convert, the stipulation remains. In this text, it is only those non-Jews who commit to God's covenant who may join in Temple worship.⁶ The Jewish God is welcoming, but not all-welcoming.

A trope I often hear recited among observant Jews is that "Judaism is not a proselytizing religion." Though this may not always have been the case⁷, it is certainly true of contemporary Judaism. A religious sect that believes in its own cosmic "truth," when combined with an attitude of non-proselytization, can lead to a number of interesting and peculiar conclusions. If we are in fact a religious sect that fundamentally believes in the certainty of its own truth, should we *not* be attempting to 'show others the light,' so to speak? Should we not be promulgating the ideal path to serving God, endowing all

individuals both Jewish and non-Jewish with the requisite tools and knowledge for entrance into heaven?⁸ Perhaps we can suggest that the current trend of non-proselytization actually points to an implicit attitude of religious pluralism among contemporary

Jews. Conversely, how can we possibly preach the *sheva mitzvot b'nei Noah* as binding over others who themselves do not accept the authority of our religious texts?

Indeed, it is undeniable that a core tenet of traditional Orthodox Judaism is belief in the divine origin of Torah and the unbroken chain of its transmission. Our question becomes the following: does believing that Judaism is “true”—in some cosmic sense of the word—mean that other religions are, by extension, “false?” Is the only way to acknowledge the potential truth in

other religions by acknowledging the fallibility of our own, or can we perhaps draw some middle theological ground?

Are we really in a place to say that Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, Sikhism, Shintoism, and many others are all false?

I am certainly not so bold as to delegitimize the spiritual endeavors, feelings, and beliefs of others, nor am I a historian to make truth claims that our narrative is the “correct one.” Can Judaism really require us to make any declarations of this sort at all? I leave that question for the reader to decide.

Though Judaism’s relationship to other faiths may not be a pressing issue on Yeshiva University’s own campus, modern society has made the question particularly relevant in a fresh way. A

Our question becomes the following: does believing that Judaism is “true”—in some cosmic sense of the word—mean that other religions are, by extension, “false?”

FOR MY HOUSE
SHALL BE CALLED
≡ a house of ≡
PRAYER
FOR ALL PEOPLES

ISAIAH 56:7

world of technology and flight means that ideas travel across continental lines quicker and more effortlessly than ever before. Instead of simply practicing whatever tradition with which one was raised, an individual is essentially free to mix-and-match whatever faith traditions s/he wishes and produce a new, hybridized worldview. Rather than functioning on a geographical and familial level, religion and spirituality have become an open market. The bounds of established, institutionalized religion have begun to fade and transform. In democratic America, religion is a personal choice.

Though we need not profess to agree with any of these developments, we cannot hide from the fact that this is the reality before us.

I am optimistic that, through the framework of Kol HaMevaser and other groups on campus, we can carry out a thoughtful and nuanced dialogue about these ideas, both within Yeshiva University and beyond its confines.

Let us not run away from these questions, questions which touch at the very foundation of what it means to be a religious believer or to identify with a faith tradition. Instead, let us approach them with the honesty and intellectual rigor that they deserve. Let us delve deeply into the realm of Judaism’s relationship to other faiths—without relinquishing the self-confidence that makes Orthodoxy what it is.

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Endnotes

1. The traditional list of Orthodox dogmas as well as their binding nature is actually quite complicated. See Dr. Marc B. Shapiro’s excellent *The Limits of Orthodox Theology* for a full treatment.

2. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Confrontation,” *Tradition* 6:2 (1964): 25

3. To complicate matters, we would also be loath to forget that Soloveitchik himself first gave a little lecture known as ‘The Lonely Man

of Faith’ before none other than a Catholic seminary in Brighton, MA.

4. See Shlomo Riskin, “Is Christian –Jewish Theological Dialogue Permitted? A Postscript to Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s article, ‘Confrontation.’ *CJCUC*, available at <http://cjcuc.com/site/2012/08/30/is-christian-jewish-theological-dialogue-permitted-a-postscript-to-rav-joseph-b-soloveitchiks-article-confrontation/>, Eugene Korn, “The Man of Faith and Religious Dialogue: Revisiting ‘Confrontation,’” *Modern Judaism* 25:2 (2005): 290-315, available at http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/center/conferences/soloveitchik/Korn_23Nov03.htm as well as Marshall J. Breger, “A Reassessment of Rav Soloveitchik’s Essay on Interfaith Dialogue: ‘Confrontation,’” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 1:1 (2005-2006):151-169, available at <http://scholarship.law.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1102&context=scholar>

5. Isaiah 56:6, NJPS Translation

6. It is worth noting that other prophets may point to a slightly different picture of the Messianic era. See Micah 4:1-5, Zechariah 2:15, 8:22-23, and others.

7. Ancient Jews did not necessarily share the beliefs of modern ones with regard to proselytization and conversion. Scholars debate the extent that Jewish proselytizing occurred during the Second Temple period. See Louis Feldman, “Was Judaism a Missionary Religion in Ancient Times?” in *Jewish Assimilation, Acculturation, and Accommodation: Past Traditions, Current Issues, and Future Prospects*, ed. Menahem Mor (Lanham: University Press of America, 1992), 24-37 and Martin Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 116, as well as Shlomo M. Brody, “Is Judaism a Proselytizing Religion?,” *Jewish Ideas Daily*, available at: <http://www.jewishideasdaily.com/5189/features/is-judaism-a-proselytizing-religion/>

8. One might be tempted to mention those Chabad messengers who persuade irreligious Jews on the street to lay Tefillin. However, as is clear from this example and others, it is essential to note that nearly all modern *kiruv* endeavors are limited to the non-observant, rather than the non-Jewish.

Learning from Other Nations: An Exploration of “*Uvehukoteihem Lo Teileikhu*”

BY: MIRIAM PEARL KLAHR

Ben Zoma said, “Who is wise? He who learns from all people.” (*Pirkei Avot* 4:1). However, Leviticus 18:3 instructs, “You shall not perform the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt and the land of Canaan to which I am taking you and you shall not walk in their statutes (*Uvehukoteihem lo teleikhu*),”² implying that there is a limit to whom one may learn from.³ Yet where exactly the limit lies—both halakhically and ideologically—is hard to decipher since this verse, and especially the word *uehukoteihem*, is vague and difficult to interpret.

Sifra, the Midrash Halakha for the Book of Leviticus, asks if this verse could possibly mean that the Jewish people cannot plant trees or build houses in the manner of other nations. It then explains that the verse is only referring to ancient traditions of non-Jews. This teaching is derived from the word *uehukoteihem*, which clarifies that the practices this verse speaks of are only those that are *hakukim* (engraved or legislated) to them, their fathers, and grandfathers. The *Sifra* then elaborates that these practices cannot be referring to idol worship as the Torah already prohibited idolatry, and offers three possibilities explaining what the word *hukoteihem* is referring to. Firstly, attending theatres or circuses, events which are ingrained within the non-Jewish identity. Secondly, the ways of the *Emori*, the Rabbinic term for witchcraft or superstitious behavior. Finally, to dress like non-Jews, such as copying their haircuts.⁴

Different *poskim* incorporated

parts of these three possibilities when deciding when and if it is permissible to follow the ways of other nations. When counting the commandments of the Torah, Rambam quotes all three approaches brought down in the *Sifra* as part of the “thirtieth negative commandment of not walking in the

ways of nor acting according to the practices of the *kofrim* (those who hold “incorrect” notions about God).⁵ In

Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim, Rambam places extreme emphasis on the last possibility of the *Sifra*. In tremendous detail, he delineates how a Jew shall not appear physically similar to an idol worshiper. He also adds that a Jew should not imitate the building structures of non-Jewish sanctuaries.⁶ The *Shulhan Arukh* follows the ruling of Rambam almost precisely, interpreting not walking in the *hukot* of other

nations (“*uehukoteihem lo teleikhu*”) as not appearing similar to them in dress, hair style, and architecture of sanctuaries.⁷ Rambam also explains that this commandment’s purpose is to physically separate a Jew from an idol worshiper, reflecting that a Jew is different in his or her beliefs. The

Following this interpretation of “*uehukoteihem lo teleikhu*,” the purpose of the commandment is not to physically separate Jews from non-Jews, but rather to separate Jews from possible pagan and immoral practices of non-Jews

Sefer HaHinukh expands these statements, saying that a Jew must separate himself from all non-Jewish nations, even those that are not pagan.⁸

However, there is another stream of halakhic thought which, in contrast to Rambam’s interpretation, significantly restricts the influence of “*uehukoteihem lo teleikhu*.” *Ran* interprets *hukoteihem* as referring only to practices which are connected to idol worship. He says such practices are empty and null. Thus, practices of the non-Jews which evolved for reasons unrelated to idolatry, such as customs of respect

and honor, are permissible for Jews to imitate.⁹ Maharik, a fifteenth century Italian rabbi, follows this approach in his ruling about the permissibility for a Jew to wear a cap. Maharik rules that a practice only falls under the category of the *hukot* Jews may not follow if it is connected to idolatry or immorality. Since the purpose of a cap is to dress respectfully and with honor, it is an acceptable mode of dress for Jews.¹⁰ Rama similarly rules that it is only forbidden to act like non-Jews regarding practices of immorality or when there is reason to suspect that the practice stems from idolatrous origins. However, if a practice has an evident purpose and does not fall under one of these two categories, it is permissible.¹¹ Following this interpretation of “*uehukoteihem lo teleikhu*,” the purpose of the commandment is not to physically separate Jews from non-Jews, but rather to separate Jews from possible pagan and immoral practices of non-Jews.

The motivation behind these differences in halakhic ruling and general interpretation of the commandment can be traced to two different approaches found in the Talmud. The first source presents Rav Yehudah opting to use a more repulsive death penalty so as to not imitate the ways of other nations:

“It had been taught: R. Yehudah said to the Sages: I too know that this is a death of repulsive disfigurement, but what can I do, seeing that the Torah hath said, neither shall ye walk in their ordinances? But the Rabbis maintain: Since Scripture decreed the sword, we do not imitate them [when using their method]. For if you will not agree to this, then how about that which was taught: Pyres may be lit in honor of deceased kings, and this is not forbidden as being of the ‘ways



of the Amorites': but why so? Is it not written, neither shall ye walk in their ordinances (*u-vehukoteihem lo teileikhu*)? But because this burning is referred to in the Bible..... it is not from them [the heathens] that we derive the practice. So here too, since the Torah decreed the sword, it is not from them [the Romans] that we derive the practice. (*Sanhedrin* 52b)¹²

The Talmud imparts that Rav Yehudah is incorrect and the less repulsive death penalty is allowed because it is referred to within Tanakh. This teaching seems to imply that a practice of non-Jews is permissible only if it is already a part of Jewish culture and taught within Tanakh. However, a similar discussion in tractate *Avodah Zarah* yields a different understanding of when it is forbidden to follow the ways of non-Jews. The discussion revolves around an ancient custom to burn artifacts at the funerals of important dignitaries which was prevalent among the Romans, a pagan nation.

The burning of articles at a king's [funeral] is permitted and there is nothing of Amorite usage about it. Now if it is a cult of idolatry how could such burning be allowed? Is it not written, and in their statutes ye shall not walk? — Hence, all agree that burning is not an idolatrous cult and is merely a mark of high esteem [for the deceased]" (*Avodah Zara* 11a)¹³

The assumption of this discussion is **not** that the burning of possessions at a king's funeral is only permitted if it is mentioned in Tanakh.¹⁴ Rather the deciding factor is whether the action itself has an idolatrous purpose or significance. Therefore not only are practical behaviors of pagan nation

such as building or plating permissible, but even behaviors which lack practical purposes are permitted, so long as the practices themselves are neutral acts. Burning objects at a funeral, which is merely a signal of importance and carries no idolatrous symbolism, is one such example of a neutral act.¹⁵ The ramifications of this difference in interpretation of "*uvehukoteihem lo teileikhu*" are seen in the different halakhic approaches cited earlier. The *Shulhan Arukh* and Rambam follow the attitude found in *Sanhedrin*, that unnecessary practices not found within the Torah are prohibited even when they are not immoral or idolatrous. However, Rama, Maharik, and Ran reflect the viewpoint expressed in *Avodah Zarah*, establishing whether an act is contradictory to Jewish ideology before deeming it prohibited.

Furthermore, these two Talmudic approaches to the boundary of imitating non-Jewish practices serve as an important framework not just for halakhic decisions, but also for a mindset of how a Jew may approach and learn from the ways of different religions. The approach of *Sanhedrin* 52b is to view the Torah as an exclusive source of values, behavior, and actions. When encountering a practice, the appropriate response is not to evaluate its moral repercussions or purpose; such evaluation is irrelevant. Rather, the only possible justification for adopting a practice associated with pagans is if the behavior also has a Torah source. But *Avodah Zarah* 11a demonstrates a different attitude towards viewing the acts and practices of other religions. The Talmud there does not assume that practices which are not inherently Jewish are automatically irrelevant or forbidden to Jews. Instead, it evaluates each practice, searching to untangle the values each action incorporates,

Such a method requires a willingness to learn from, engage, and understand the non-Jewish world. It acknowledges that value can be found even in practices that do not originate in Jewish sources.

and only then deciding if it has a place within the life of a Jew. Such a method requires a willingness to learn from, engage, and understand the non-Jewish world. It acknowledges that value can be found even in practices that do not originate in Jewish sources.

The impression that *Avodah Zara* 11a gives of advocating a more open approach to secular culture is strengthened by the context of the "*uvehukoteihem lo teileikhu*" discussion. Immediately preceding it, the Talmud tells a series of stories about Rav Yehudah HaNasi, a 3rd century CE leader and the compiler of the Mishna, and his close friendship with Antoninus, a prominent Roman Emperor. The bond between them was so strong that when Antoninus died, Rebbe (a name of endearment for Rav Yehuda HaNasi) proclaimed "the bond has been snapped." Rav, one of the greatest *amoraim* of the Talmud, is quoted to have said the same words upon the death of his close friend Artaban, a Parthian king.¹⁶ The juxtaposition of the admiration Rebbe and Rav express for their non-Jewish friends and the laws of "*uvehukoteihem lo teileikhu*" is not accidental. These halakhic and aggadic components complement one another, expressing that the lives and practices of non-Jews are inherently valuable.

This Talmudic debate about whether or not to forge a bond and learn from non-Jews continues with pages of halakhic discourse concerning the imitation of non-Jewish dress and architecture. These differences in approach, expressed in both the Talmud and halakha, are still being debated today. The modern-day argument is often expressed in terms of how a Jew should view and relate to the secular world. Rav Aharon Lichtenstein eloquently articulates the two approaches:

"On the one hand there may be a dualistic conception which sets up a rigid barrier between the two; which conceives of man's purely natural life as intrinsically corrupt; which

sees the religious as being established not upon the secular but despite it; which in short considers *kodesh* and *chol* not simply distinct but disjoint. On the other hand we have a unified conception which stems from a deep seated belief that life is basically one; that the secular and religious aspects of human experience are in fundamental harmony, the latter perfecting rather than destroying the former; that, finally, while *kodesh* and *chol* are neither identical not coextensive, they are both contiguous and continuous."¹⁷

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein does not separate all things secular from the religious, nor does he view them as opposing ideas. Rather, he advocates a belief in viewing the secular and religious aspects in this world as ultimately existing in agreement with much in common, complementing one another. This unified conception of secular and religious life existing in harmony is not a modern or novel concept in Judaism. Granted, looking to the Torah as a sole source of wisdom is a well-established Jewish belief. However, the willingness of great Jewish leaders to respect non-Jewish practices—to interact with and admire leaders of pagan nations—testifies to their belief that the experience of life is one, with *kodesh* and *hol* inextricably linked. Ben Zoma's statement "Who is wise? He who learns from all people" may be limited in the sense of what one may learn from all people. Yet it teaches that learning from all people, is a deep-rooted Jewish value.

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Endnotes

1. I first studied the *sugya* of *Uvehukoteihem Lo Teileikhu*, *Avodah Zarah* 11a with Rabbi Yehoshua Weisberg, Director of Nishmat's Shana Ba'Aretz program. Rabbi Weisberg exposed me to many of the sources quoted in

Orthodox Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue

BY: DANIEL ABBOUDI

“I am Joseph, your brother” (Bereishit 45:4). These are the words spoken by Pope John XXIII to an American delegation of Rabbis in October 1960, just one month after he instructed that a draft outlining the relations between the Church and the Jews be prepared.¹ This draft – later to be known as *Nostra Aetate* – rejects the traditional accusation that the Jews killed Jesus, and it condemned antisemitism thereby recognizing the legitimacy of Judaism.² These five words, drawn from *the* common text between Jews and Christians, effectively illustrate the attitude of the Pope towards his relationship with the Jews. The Pope did not want to be a simple friend to the Jews; rather, he thought of himself as one of our brethren. The Second

Vatican Council, initiated by Pope John XXIII and continued by Pope Paul VI, started a reformation of the Church’s relations with other religions. Notably, it extended a hand to the Jews in order to mend relations with them by enacting



Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s article, “Confrontation,” set policy guidelines for the Modern Orthodox community to follow, guidelines the RCA adopted. It is therefore important to note that his guidelines never utilize formal Halakhic terminology to forbid or permit such encounters, rather his guidelines offer historically and philosophically based parameters for such relationships.

documents such as the *Nostra Aetate* and by inviting Rabbinic delegations to the Vatican and to churches throughout America for interfaith dialogues. Two Orthodox Rabbinic leaders—Rabbi Moshe Feinstein and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik—responded to this call of brotherhood by the Pope. These rabbinic authorities had to grapple with the question: Do we, Orthodox Jews, encourage interfaith encounters meant to create pluralistic relationships?

This article will discuss two types of interfaith encounters through the lens of Orthodox Judaism: interfaith dialogue and interfaith cooperation. Before delving into whether or not interfaith dialogue and interfaith cooperation can be encouraged among Orthodox Judaism, we must first define the nature of both relationships and explain what sets them apart.

The difference between the goals of interfaith dialogue and interfaith cooperation is stark. The goal of interfaith dialogue is to create religious unity, which is accomplished by engaging people of diverse beliefs in a conversation about faith, through which thoughts about theology, ritual, and values will be brought to the forefront. Oftentimes, interfaith dialogue is criticized for being too focused on attempting to proselytize members of other faiths,³ as well as trying to highlight specific common values for the sake of molding all religions into one standard and essential message.⁴ On the other hand, interfaith cooperation shifts focus from dialogue to common action for the sake of civic concern: building stronger communities and creating social cohesion.⁵ Common action builds bridges of cooperation, which requires mutually

inspiring relationships between people of different backgrounds, basic knowledge of other traditions and their values, and a positive attitude towards other religions.⁶ This triangle of relationships, knowledge, and attitude contributes to the creation of a pluralistic environment where all members of the community can respect each other’s unique belief system. While interfaith dialogue tries to create religious unity by proselytizing or creating a common thread, interfaith cooperation hopes to stamp out prejudice and negative attitudes towards other faiths by having people of diverse background come together to make the world better for all people of all faiths.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, leading Orthodox Rabbinic leaders whose words continue to impact Judaism to this day, both recorded their opinions in regard to interfaith encounters. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein⁷ argued against interfaith encounters based on the Torah prohibition of inciting others to worship idols. There are three steps necessary for understanding how this prohibition applies to interfaith dialogue: First, an interfaith relations conference run by a member of a different faith is really a means of converting Jews to the other faith. Second, the image that appears in the worldwide news of Christian clergy and Jewish rabbis praying together in a church or a synagogue brings down the barrier of difference between the two religions. Third, and finally, other Jews, who are more susceptible to accepting the values of other faith, will be encouraged by the example of these rabbis to engage members of other faith communities in dialogue; and, the openness of the Jews to discuss religion will give the Christian clergy the opportunity to convert them. Therefore, according to Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, rabbis should avoid setting an example of engaging in interfaith dialogue.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s article, “Confrontation,” set policy guidelines for the Modern Orthodox community to follow, guidelines the

the article and greatly influenced the way I approached the topic.

2. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted

3. Even if one argues that the verse only instructs one not to perform the practices of other nations, this alone limits the experiential aspects of any learning process.

4. *Sifra Aharei Mot Parsha 8:13*

5. *Rambam, Sefer HaMitzvot, Lo Ta’aseh 30*

6. *Rambam, Hilkhhot Avodat Kokhavim, 11:2*

7. *Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh De’ah 178:1*

8. *Sefer Ha-Hinukh, mitzvah 262*

9. *Dapei HaRif, Ran- Avodah Zarah Daf Bet Amud Bet,*

10. *Shu”t Maharik, Siman Peh Het*

11. *Hagah, Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh De’ah, 178:1*

12. Soncino Press Babylonian Talmud Translation

13. Soncino Press Babylonian Talmud Translation

14. *Avodah Zarah* 11a later provides an example of when a burning ceremony at the funeral of the king is mentioned within the bible (Jeremiah 34). However the point still stands, as this is not brought as a proof as to why it is permissible to practice a ritual that pagan cults perform.

15. *Ritva Avodah Zarah* 11a

16. *Avodah Zarah* 10b

17. Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, “A Consideration of General Studies from a Torah Point of View,” reprinted in *Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Learning* (Ktav Pub Inc. 2003) 103.



as a satellite in any orbit. Nor are we related to any other faith community as ‘brethren’ even though ‘separated.’”¹² Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that there is legitimacy to acknowledging the historical relationship between

Christianity and Judaism, since the former grew out of the latter. Furthermore, it is also legitimate to claim that there is a cultural relationship between the two communities, since both faith communities have contributed their cultural values to Western society and, thereby, to each other. However, Rabbi Soloveitchik argues against legitimizing the sense of brotherhood for which Pope John XXIII advocates. He feels that acknowledging such a relationship only affirms the belief of the Church that Judaism’s sole purpose was to pave the way for Christianity. As such, it is imperative for Jews partaking in interfaith dialogues to uphold the fact that Judaism is a distinct and unique faith community that exists in and of itself within the realm of religion and theology.

Second, perhaps in response to the nature of interfaith dialogue itself, Rabbi Soloveitchik insists, “the *logos*, the word, in which the multifarious religious experience is expressed does not lend itself to standardization or universalization.”¹³ Rabbi Soloveitchik believes that to create a common thread between all religions for the sake of unity is to water-down the intimate relationship each faith community experiences in its relationship to the divine spirit. Certainly in connection with his view of the nature of Judaism’s confrontation with God, it would be absurd for Jews to adopt the language of another faith community to explain to others how they relate to God in a

unique manner. The very fact that an outsider to the Jewish faith community may not be able to understand our relationship to God attests to the fact that our faith is a private affair between us and God. This aspect leads us to the third stipulation: Jews engaged in interfaith dialogue will “refrain from suggesting to [Christians]...changes in ritual or emendations of its texts.”¹⁴

Just as we hope to be viewed as an independent religion, so too we should respect the rituals, beliefs, and texts of other religions. They should not interfere in our faith, and we will not interfere in theirs.

Finally, Rabbi Soloveitchik stipulates his last condition that “we certainly have not been authorized by our history, sanctified by the martyrdom of millions, to even hint to another faith community that we are mentally ready to revise historical attitudes, to trade favors pertaining to fundamental matters of faith, and to reconcile ‘some’ differences.”¹⁵ According to Rabbi Soloveitchik, there will never be a time when we can forgive another faith community for the oppression and persecution it enacted against us. While the religious leaders of our time might not be responsible for those crimes, it does not negate the severe impact those historical moments has had on our identity as Jews. Holding onto the memories of those killed by members of another faith community drives a wedge between us and other faith communities necessary for upholding a distinctly unique identity as the Jewish people. Only if all four of these conditions are met are we safe to engage in interfaith relations with other faith communities without fear of proselytization or standardization of beliefs.

Is there room for interfaith encounters within Orthodox Judaism? From the *Teshuvah* of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein it seems that interfaith

dialogue is *halakhically* prohibited based on the concern that Jews might be seduced by the faith and values of other religions. Though the *Teshuvah* only discusses interfaith dialogue with the Catholic clergy, it seems clear that the prohibition includes similar dialogue with members of any faith community based on a concern of putting Jews into a situation where they will be influenced

Furthermore, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein does not limit this prohibition solely to interfaith dialogue; rather, any form of encounter with members of other faith communities is similarly prohibited, even if the encounter is centered on social issues and not religion.

by any foreign value. Furthermore, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein does not limit this prohibition solely to interfaith dialogue; rather, any

form of encounter with members of other faith communities is similarly prohibited, even if the encounter is centered on social issues and not religion. Interestingly, it could be argued that the prohibition that Rabbi Moshe Feinstein enforces only prohibits the unintended consequence of all interfaith encounters—leading others to convert to, or accept the values of, other religions—while fundamentally there might not be a problem with interfaith encounters if it can be guaranteed that no one will be converted out of Judaism. However, it is clear from the *Teshuvah* that Rabbi Moshe Feinstein believes that trying to convert Jews to the another religion is an inherent part in interfaith encounters; why else would the Christians engage the Jews in conversation if not to convert them?

In contrast, according to Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, there are four conditions that must be met in order for interfaith encounters to be considered safe for engagement. These four conditions all work with the underlying necessity that, while interfaith dialogue might smooth the tension between Jews and other communities, there needs to be an understanding that the Jewish faith community is unique based on the nature of our covenantal confrontation with God. Interestingly, it is possible to assert that interfaith

RCA adopted. It is therefore important to note that his guidelines never utilize formal *Halakhic* terminology to forbid or permit such encounters, rather his guidelines offer historically and philosophically based parameters for such relationships.⁸ Rabbi Soloveitchik believed that “we are summoned by God, who revealed himself at both the level of universal creation and that of the private covenant, to undertake a double mission—the universal human and the exclusive covenantal confrontation.”⁹ From the moment of creation, Adam 1 was charged to be a dignified human being through his mastery of nature and ability to create, while Adam 2 was charged with the knowledge of the cosmos and his relationship to a higher being. The universal confrontation of Adam 1 belongs to all of humankind; however, the covenantal confrontation of Adam 2 belongs only to the Jewish people from the revelation at Sinai to this very day. Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that this covenantal confrontation requires us to interact with the divine separate from other faith communities due to its uniqueness in the very nature and origin of the confrontation.¹⁰

Therefore, in the event that interfaith dialogue was going to occur, Rabbi Soloveitchik stipulated four conditions to interfaith dialogue in order to “safeguard our individuality and freedom of action.”¹¹ First is the issue of our uniqueness; Rabbi Soloveitchik argues, “We are a totally independent faith community. We do not revolve

cooperation would be more acceptable to Rabbi Soloveitchik than interfaith dialogue. Interfaith cooperation, by its very design, puts less emphasis on the theological ideas and stresses more the need to simply respect the beliefs of other communities. Diversity is key to the pluralistic community that interfaith cooperation serves to create and, therefore, everyone would acknowledge the right for each faith to intimately confront the divine in their own unique manner. Furthermore, the civic cooperation and common action that the diverse members of interfaith cooperation take part in will build a community of trust and decrease prejudice while still being able to acknowledge the historical moments of oppression that some communities have imposed on others.

Despite the difficulty that the *Teshuvah* of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein poses in the *Halakhic* discussion, Rabbi Soloveitchik presents an opening for Orthodox Jews to engage in interfaith encounters based on a universal confrontation that every person in the world shares. Whether or not we, students of Yeshiva University where Rabbi Soloveitchik dedicated his life to teaching the future members of Jewish community, choose to partake in interfaith dialogue, interfaith cooperation, or avoid such programs entirely, I think that there is an important message that can be taken away from this conversation by all. Interfaith encounters, to me, express the importance of making the world a better place for all members of the world, a place in which we must all live. While many are not inclined to taking part in that responsibility, we must all feel compelled to making our own community—Orthodox Jewish community—a better place for all of its members. If the Jewish faith community is really a unique confrontation with God that cannot be had in any other faith, then it is our responsibility to help fellow Jews—our brothers—find their place in the Jewish community in order to take part in the special, day-by-day relationship with God that we may take for granted. We should all

feel compelled to take on the mission of approaching fellow Jews and saying, “I am Joseph, your brother.”

Daniel Abboudi is a staff writer for Kol Hamevaser. His interest in the relationship between interfaith encounters and Judaism was sparked by the sociology of religion courses he has participated in during his studies in Yeshiva College.

Endnotes

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8. Korn, Eugene. “The Man of Faith and Religious Dialogue: Revisiting ‘Confrontation’.” *Modern Judaism*. 25.3 (2005): 290-315.
9. Soloveitchik, Joseph B. “Confrontation.” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought*. 6.2 (1964). Web.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.



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YU's Thinkers of the Past: A Monthly Column

Revel and the Cross

BY: ARYEH SKLAR

This new monthly column will explore the thoughts and opinions of rabbis of YU's past, especially as they pertain to the issue of the month. Our first column will discuss an opinion of Rabbi Bernard Revel (1885-1940), the first president of Yeshiva College and dean of RIETS. His contribution to the shaping of YU and its philosophy was pivotal at the early stages of YU's development.

"May I ask you to be good enough to assist me with your opinion concerning Jewish law." So begins the April 4th, 1928 letter of George W. Matheson, the dean of St. John's College of Law, to R. Bernard Revel, the dean of RIETS.¹ What a rare moment in history this must have been, wherein the dean of

a school named after a saint asks a "shaila" (question) regarding Jewish law to the dean of a school named after a rabbi. Matheson explains the issue simply. The school traditionally has a cross symbol engraved in the scroll work on their diplomas. Some

Jewish students accept the diploma nevertheless, yet others "seem to be of the opinion that their religion forbids them to accept this diploma... If the Jewish religion prohibits our Jewish graduates from accepting this diploma, I am naturally anxious to know about it immediately."

This question, being of an ecumenical sort in 1928, was enough to elicit a hint of surprise in R. Bernard Revel. "I appreciate your being good enough to interest yourself in, and to put before me, the question of the acceptance of the diploma of St. John's College of Law..."

Dean Revel's response is quite interesting.

The law is "not free from complication," he writes. "During the Middle Ages the cross was a specific Christian symbol, often an object of worship; as such, it was, and is, scrupulously avoided by Jews who adhere to Jewish law and tradition." This is the historical and religious background of why Jews generally avoid owning objects that have crosses on them. But what about a cross on a college diploma, where the cross isn't used as a religious symbol as much as, in his own words, "to indicate the origin of the College and the auspices of its inception?" His answer is, "the Law does not definitely forbid the acceptance of a diploma so

During the Middle Ages the cross was a specific Christian symbol, often an object of worship; as such, it was, and is, scrupulously avoided by Jews who adhere to Jewish law and tradition"...But what about a cross on a college diploma, where the cross isn't used as a religious symbol as much as... "to indicate the origin of the College and the auspices of its inception?"

enrolled." We can clearly see Dean Revel's quandary expressed here. On the one hand, halakha as he sees it can be lenient in this case. Yet, the students have n't

objected unreasonably. The issue truly at hand is that Jewish people have always stayed away from this symbol, even when it serves no particularly religious purpose. While he could not deny the letter of the law, his language of "does not *definitely forbid*" gives the permission a certain edge to it. There is something forbidden here, but not of the halakhic variety.

In this vein, he ends his response with an appeal to Matheson's position, "as a scholar and dean of a college of law," that just as secular law has a spirit of fairness to it, religious law as well has "a spirit



of equity behind the law." We should appreciate, he writes, why the Jewish students have objected as they did, for it indicates that they have "preserved a concern beyond the material aspects of the age." Reading between the lines, there is a strong insinuation that the cross on the diploma represents a failure at equity of religion, that Jewish students who complain are expressing the feeling of being religiously out-of-place and unwanted at the school. The implication is that Matheson should think about changing this feature of the diploma. Matheson got more than he bargained for; he posed a simple question of Jewish law, and Dean Revel saw fit to give him *mussar* – rebuke.

It is quite understandable that Dean Revel's response does not mention any primary sources. Of course, there is much discussion regarding Christianity's status as *avodah zarah* in halakhic literature, and this may or may not be relevant to crosses on diplomas. Regardless, Dean Revel certainly has much support for his lenient halakhic conclusions. Rema, Y.D. 141:1, already wrote that a cross worn around the neck is not to be considered an object of worship, as it is merely a reminder of their religion, and therefore does

not pertain to the rules of an object of *avodah zarah*. This can easily be applied to a cross on a diploma that exists for no real religious purpose and is certainly not worshiped.²

What is more interesting is Dean Revel's focus on the sensitivity that Jews possess in relation to Christianity and Christian symbols. There is a historical sensitivity here, which comes from nearly 2,000 years of Jewish persecution at the hands of Christians and the Church. And there is a religious sensitivity that comes from the halakhic distance from *avodah zarah* that has classically been attributed to Christianity. Today's Orthodox attitude, even to a large extent among the Modern Orthodox, remains at this distant and suspicious state. But how can we keep this status quo even when the dean of a Christian-founded college reaches over this divide to the dean of the Jewish-founded seminary in order to be more sensitive to his Jewish students? Especially today, when so many Christian leaders make overtures of peace towards Israel and the Jewish people, can we really continue to view it in this fashion?

Dean Revel's response is that although halakha does not demand of us to act this way, we all must at least appreciate this Jewish sense of uneasiness. There is a feeling of uncomfortableness when faced with an unnecessary closeness with religions and ideologies that had such an effect on our religious psyche. The intuition that made these Jewish college students of the 1920s (who were most likely not Orthodox) object to such a diploma clearly exists deep in the consciousness of Judaism and Jewish culture. And though Dean Revel calls for a "spirit of equity" in St. John's on behalf of all people, he recognizes the right for subconscious uneasiness that is "beyond the material."

This sensitivity to our past is important.

Though there is a Torah prohibition to return to Egypt in Deuteronomy 17:16, the reasons for and applications of this prohibition are not clear. Most understand this prohibition as applicable today, its reason being in order to keep the Jews away from the pagan and uncivilized society that Egypt represented.³ But the deepest reason is simply because the Jewish people should not go back to a land that so traumatized them. It smacks of callousness to do so. The Jewish national narrative, repeated and emphasized yearly on Passover, speaks of the terrible abuse at the hand of Egyptians, ingraining every generation with this sensitivity to their ancestral sorrow. It makes Jews uneasy to go back. Though the Torah commands us not to despise the Egyptian (Deuteronomy 23:7), Jews are nevertheless enjoined to continue to appreciate that feeling of disconcertment.⁴

This isn't an isolated concept. Several sources speak of an unofficial ban on returning to Spain that was promulgated after the expulsion from Spain in 1492.⁵ In 1968, permission by the Franco government of Spain to rebuild a synagogue in Madrid sparked a flurry of literature⁶ about the subject. The response of many rabbis was to reaffirm this unofficial ban even to the modern day. Even this year, in February of 2014, Spain announced that it would be offering Spanish citizenship to all Jewish descendants of those who were expelled in 1492.⁷ Though Spain saw

this as a peaceful gesture, some rabbis, including R. Shlomo Aviner and R. Haim Druckman, declared it forbidden for anyone to take advantage of this offer.⁸ Of course, this has no bearing on the people of Spain. But it surely reflects that same historical sensitivity.

One of Professor David Berger's arguments against Chabad messianism is in large part from this standpoint of being sensitive to our history. He writes (emphasis mine), "Jews throughout the ages repeatedly--through both word and deed--rejected the possibility that God would send the Messiah

to announce that redemption was imminent, preside over a movement identifying him as the Messiah, and then die in an unredeemed world... Since this point was a key argument used against Christianity for untold generations, rendering it false is a **betrayal** not only of the Jewish faith but of generations of Jewish martyrs."⁹ It is not merely a breach in what has traditionally been believed in Judaism. Dr. Berger believes it is a betrayal of those who were murdered with denial of such a possibility on their lips. The



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"scandal", as he puts it, is more than what is halakhically permitted or prohibited, it is our indifference to this betrayal, and our implicit allowance of who he considers betrayers to remain within Orthodoxy. Dr. Berger does not deny the

tremendous good that Chabad does every day, all around the world. But, as the Dean of the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies, his perspective is one of tremendous sensitivity to this topic.

Rav Soloveitchik in, his seminal essay "Confrontation," writes about the perils of historical betrayal when Jews engage in interfaith dialogue. After a list of

preconditions to engaging in interfaith dialogue, he writes (emphasis mine), "[W]e certainly have not been authorized by our history, sanctified by the martyrdom of millions, to even hint to another faith community that we are mentally ready to revise historical attitudes, to trade favors pertaining to fundamental matters of faith, and to reconcile "some" differences. Such a suggestion would be nothing but a **betrayal** of our great tradition and heritage and would, furthermore, produce no practical benefits."¹⁰ For the Rav, mere hinting at compromise not just with Jewish law, but with "historical attitudes," how Jews have viewed other faiths historically, is a betrayal of our history and the millions who died to protect Judaism. While we may have some interaction with other faiths (to what extent the Rav meant has been debated more recently),¹¹ our historical responsibility must temper it.

R. Revel was expressing an important Jewish notion. When we forget our history, we betray it. Even as we forgive, we cannot forget - for our own sakes. We are commanded not to hate the Egyptian, despite his ancient sins against us, and we are commanded to love every Jew as our selves, despite what their beliefs mean to us. So too we must seek to find a balance between caring for our Christian brothers, while

appreciating the discomfort we have from our deeply implanted sense of Jewish history.

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Endnotes

1. See Rabbi Aaron Rothkoff, *Bernard Revel: Builder of American Jewish Orthodoxy*, (JPS 1972), 316-317
2. However, see Shakh 141:6 for qualifications, but others take a less qualified approach, both Sefardi and Ashkenazi, see for more recent examples, Responsa *Yalkut Yosef*, Yoreh Deah 139:4, Responsa *Iggerot Mosheh*, Yoreh Deah 1:69.
3. See for example Sefer HaMitzvot l'R' Saadia Gaon L" T 235, Maimonides Sefer Hamitzvot L" T 46, Nachmanides Deuteronomy 17:16, Sefer Hachinuch 500.
4. For a discussion of how Maimonides and others could live in Egypt, see the excellent and fairly comprehensive essay by R. Eliezer Waldenberg, *Tzitz Eliezer* 14:87.
5. Thanks to Michael Alweis for mentioning this to me.
6. See David J. Bleich, *Contemporary Halakhic Problems Vol.1*, (New York: KTAV, 1977), 206-209 for more details about this.
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11. See R. Meir Soloveichik, "How Soloveitchik Saw Interreligious Dialogue," *The Forward*, 25 April 2003, and R. Shlomo Riskin, "Is Christian-Jewish Theological Dialogue Permitted? A Postscript to Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik's article, 'Confrontation'", *CJCUC*, 30 August 2012. See also Jake Friedman, "Confronting 'Confrontation: Understanding the Rav's Approach to Interfaith Dialogue," *Kol Hamevaser* 4:2, (2010): 17-18, available at www.kolhamevaser.com

“For they worship vanity and emptiness”: An attack on Christian belief?

BY: JENNIFER VAN AMERONGEN

The *tefilah* of Aleinu, (“It is our duty”)¹ that is said at the conclusion of the daily *tefilot* consists of two parts, “Aleinu” until “*Ein Od*,” and “*Al Kein*” until “*U-shemo Ehad*.” The first half, Aleinu, expresses praise of God and proclaims Israel’s recognition and acceptance of God’s sovereignty as Ruler of the universe. The second half of this *piyut* expresses our confidence that all humanity will eventually recognize God’s sovereignty and be obedient to His commandments.²

Aleinu was originally found as part of the introduction to the *Malkhuyot* section in *Musaf* of Rosh Hashanah, but has since found its way into multiple locations of the liturgy. It is a declaration of one of the most important tenants of Jewish belief, that God is one and there is no other god but Him. Around the year 1300 Aleinu became the closing

prayer of the daily service along with the second paragraph of “*Ve-Al Ken*” in order to serve as a reaffirmation of the proclamation of God as Supreme King of the universe and of the Divine Unity.³ Additionally, Aleinu is recited at the end of a *berit milah* to emphasize that the child is no longer like the other nations of the world and is now a Jew⁴. It is recited at the end of *Kiddush Levanah*, about which the Be’ur Halakha writes, “Lest people should think that we worship the moon when we joyously go out to greet it, we recite this prayer [Aleinu] which closes with *ein od*, saying that the Lord alone is God and none beside Him”^{5 6}

There is a line in Aleinu that has been the source of controversy for quite some time. “*She-Hem mishtahavim la-hevel va-rik, u-mitpalelim le-el lo yoshia*—For they worship vanity and emptiness and pray to a god who cannot save,” is viewed by some as offensive to other religions. In various versions of *siddurim* the line is present, included in parentheses, taken out altogether, or replaced by an alternate line. The Vaani

עלינו לשבח לאדון הכל, לתת גדלה ליוצר
בראשית, שלא עשנו כגויי הארצות, ולא שמנו
כמשפחות האדמה, שלא שם חלקנו בהם
וגורלנו ככל המונם. (שהם משתחווים להבל
וריק ומתפללים אל א-ל לא יושיע.)

T’fillati Siddur Yisraeli, for example, includes an alternate line that is more inclusive of other religions—“*Ki kol ha-amim yelkhu be-shem elohav ve-anahnu be-shem Hashem le-olam va’ed*—For all of the nations will go by the name of their god and we, by the name of Hashem forever.”⁷⁸

The line “*She-Hem mishtahavim*” is controversial because it is thought of as derogatory towards other religions. The history of the controversy traces back to the year 1400, when a baptized apostate Jew spread the rumor that this line was meant to slander Christianity. The

Jew claimed that the prayer was used to reject the Christian belief that Jesus is the messiah. He used as proof that the *gematria*, numerical value, of the word “*va-rik*,” (“and emptiness”) has the same value (316) as “*Yeshu*,” the Hebrew name for Jesus. Throughout many countries in Ashkenaz during the Middle Ages the Church condemned this phrase and took actions to eradicate it. As printed reproductions of the *siddur* in the mid-sixteenth century increased, Christian censorship altered the line in many books. In France and Germany the line was deleted altogether. In Berlin in 1703 the Prussian government prohibited its recital, appointing special commissioners to see to it that the *hazan* would not recite it. Again in 1716 and then in 1750 censors strengthened their attacks, and as a result the line was completely deleted from all Ashkenazic prayer.⁹

Consequent to the spread of the rumor and the censorship of the Church, Jews and Christians alike came to regard this line as anti-Christian. It is

not clear that this *piyut* was meant as an attack on Christian belief. As a matter of fact, most of the traditions of ascribed authors of this *piyut* show that the author probably had no disposition toward Christianity, because the author either lived before the development of Christianity or composed it in a non-Christian country. Therefore, the line was probably directed toward pagan religions and idol worshippers.¹⁰ One tradition points to Yehoshua ben Nun

as the poet who wrote Aleinu after entering the land of Israel with the Jewish nation. He wanted to praise God for making the Jewish people different from the other nations, who, in Israel at that time, were idol worshippers.¹¹ A second tradition attributes Aleinu to Rav, a third century *Amora* from Babylonia. The author of *Iyun Tefillah*

in *Siddur Otzar Hatefilot* explains that Rav penned the introductory lines to the *Malkhuyot* section of *Musaf* for Rosh Hashanah, where this *piyut* is originally found, implying that he was the author of Aleinu.¹²

Furthermore, the line “*U-mitpalelim le-el lo yoshia*,” is drawn from two verses in Yishayahu. The *navi* asserts, “For Egypt helpeth in vain, and to no purpose; (30:7) and, “they have no knowledge that carry the wood of their graven image, and pray unto a god that cannot save” (45:20) In these verses, the *navi* condemns idol worship, clearly referring to pagan gods.^{13 14}

Interestingly, there are practices that indicate Aleinu is derogatory toward other religions. Historical context, however, refutes such a notion. Although not widely practiced today, it has been noted that there was a tradition to spit after reciting the line “*She-hem Mishtahavim*.” The reason given is that the root of the word “*va-rik*” is the

“No prayer more elegantly expresses the dual nature of the Jewish people.”



same as the word “rok,” meaning spit.¹⁵

Still today in some Chabad-Lubavitch communities, the phrase “U-mitpalelim le-el lo yoshia” is omitted, and congregants spit after saying the line “She-Hem Mishtahavim.” Although at face-value these practices appear like acts of disgust for other religions, there are alternative explanations. *Hayom Yom*, an anthology of Hasidic customs, explains that the purpose of the spitting is so one will not benefit from the saliva accumulated in the mouth after reciting a phrase about *avodah zarah*, idol worship.^{16 17} Spitting can also be explained as an act of detestation toward those who worshipped idols during the time of Yehoshua, who first composed this prayer.¹⁸

Based on historical context and tradition, it is unlikely that Aleinu, and specifically the line “she-Hem Mishtahavim,” were originally written as an attack on Christianity. Today, many publishers have reinstated the previously censored line to the Ashkenazi siddur based on the Sefaradi version, although there are still many synagogues that do not recite it aloud. Aleinu can be viewed more positively as a testament to the singularity of the Jewish nation and its future hopes that one day all of mankind will also recognize God as the One God. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says, “No prayer more eloquently expresses the dual nature of the Jewish people: its singular history as the nation chosen to be God’s witnesses on earth, and its universal aspiration for the time when all the inhabitants of earth will recognize God in whose image we are all formed.”¹⁹

Endnotes

1. All translations from Aleinu are from the Koren Hebrew-English Siddur
2. Commentary on Aleinu, Artscroll Siddur
3. Bach, Orach Chaim, 133
4. Ozt Din Umin, p. 323; Otz Hat, vol. 1, Seder Brit Milah
5. MB Chap. 426:2, Be’ur Halakhah
6. Macy Nulman “Alaynu” *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Prayer: The*

Ashkenazic and Sephardic Rites. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993): 24.

7. “What Makes the Siddur ‘Vaani T’fillati: Sidur Yisraeli’ to the Right Siddur for this Time,” *Masorti*, available at: <http://www.masorti.org.il/page.php?pageId=274>.

8. Translation mine

9. Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993) 71-72

10. Macy Nulman “Alaynu” *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Prayer: The Ashkenazic and Sephardic Rites.* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993): 24-25.

11. Teshuvot ha-Geonim, Sha’arei Teshuvah #43

12. Rabbi Dov Shahor, “Studies in the Prayer ‘Alenu Le-Shabeah’” *Daat Limudei Yahadut Ve-Ruah - Michlelet Hertzog*, available at <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/kitveyet/niv/shahor-1.htm>

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14. “ICCJ: Daily Prayers: Aleynu” *International Council of Christians and Jews*, available at: <http://www.iccj.org/index.php?id=3699>

15. Leonid Livak, *The Jewish Persona in the European Imagination: A Case of Russian Literature* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford UP, 2010) 97

16. Uri Kaploun, *Sefer Haminhagim: The Book of Chabad-Lubavitch Customs* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Kehot Publication Society, 1991) 35

17. “Hayom Yom: Tevet 9 - Wisdom & Teachings.” *The Rebbe: Menachem Mendel Schneerson*, available at: http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/6029/jewish/Hayom-Yom-Tevet-9.htm

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On the Role of Reason in the Ethical Thought of Aristotle and R. Saadia Ga’on¹

BY: ALEX MAGED

Left to their own devices, most animals do what they want, when they want. When they’re hungry, they eat. When they’re thirsty, they drink. When they’re aroused, they copulate. When they’re tired, they sleep. In short, animals spend their days satisfying their instincts. And why shouldn’t they? No way of life could possibly be more natural or more desirable, it seems.

Yet this is precisely the way of life whose value philosophers call into question when they suggest that there is an “ethical” way to act, distinct from and superior to the merely “pleasurable” mode of conduct. To convince man that he ought not to do that which he wants to do is, of course, a monumental task. Nevertheless, both Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*,² and R. Saadia Ga’on (“Rasag”), in his *Sefer Emunot V’De’ot*,³ attempt to do just that: they reason with their readers in an effort to demonstrate why pleasure is not quite as attractive as it might appear on the surface.⁴

For his part, Aristotle challenges the worth of pleasure by observing that it is finite—since it can vary in degree—whereas “nothing can be added to the [truly] good to make it more choiceworthy.”⁵ Aristotle also emphasizes that pleasure is fleeting, for “no one is continuously pleased.”⁶ Meanwhile, Rasag notes that what is pleasing to one person, such as murdering an enemy, is often painful to another person, so that if pleasure is the measure of good and pain is the measure of evil, one arrives at the absurd conclusion that the same act could be both “good and evil at one and the same time.”⁷ Thus, while we might intuitively assume that pleasure is the end of human action, both Rasag

and Aristotle reject this notion on rational grounds. Of course, this leaves us wondering: if pleasure is not the ultimate good, what is?

On this question, the two thinkers would part ways. For Aristotle, “the human function is activity... in accord with reason.”⁸ As such, he contends, “the life in accord with understanding will be supremely best.”⁹ To be sure, Aristotle acknowledges that acting in accordance with reason – living “virtuously,” as he terms it – does not alone produce happiness; to be happy, one must also be blessed with “externals” such as “good birth, good children [and] beauty.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, Aristotle insists that “actions in

Conduct in accordance with reason is inherently pleasant.

accord with virtues are pleasant in their own right”¹¹ and that such actions are unique in this regard. Rasag disagrees. He views God’s commandments, not virtuous actions, as “the means whereby [one] attain[s] complete happiness and perfect bliss.”¹² Moreover, Rasag’s “bliss” is not intrinsic to ethical activity, as the “good” is in Aristotle’s conception. Instead, Rasag identifies the “perennial delight and perpetual reward” and the “painful torment and perpetual sojourn in hell-fire”¹³ of the afterlife as the primary factors which motivate one’s conduct. Indeed, he concedes, “were it not for these two alternatives, there would have been nothing to imbue man with either aspiration or fear.”¹⁴ Unlike Aristotle, Rasag does not consider virtue, or “actualized reason,” to be a sufficiently satisfying recompense for moral behavior. Hence he presents an extrinsic incentive for such behavior, in the form of divine blessing and punishment.

Actually, Aristotle also makes mention of the divine when explaining why the virtuous life is preferable to any

other. Having established that conduct in accordance with reason is inherently pleasant, Aristotle proceeds to map out the mechanisms which make it so. It is in this context in which he invokes the divine. Aristotle claims that “the best [virtue] is understanding” for it is “the most divine element in us.”¹⁵ From this premise he concludes that “happiness extends just as far as study extends, and the more someone studies, the happier he is.”¹⁶ For Aristotle, man’s rational faculties—his “virtues of thought”—are his “supreme element”¹⁷ precisely because they are rooted in the divine. He even equates “the activity of study” with “the gods’ activity,”¹⁸ arguing that it is unreasonable to imagine that the gods spend their time in any activity other than study. According to Aristotle, then, the gods are essentially reasonable. Thus, humans, too, should act rationally, in order to lead a life which is “valuable in itself.”¹⁹

Interestingly, the notion of God as fundamentally reasonable is one which Rasag also seems to assume throughout his treatise. At one point in his work, Rasag struggles to understand why God commands mankind to worship Him given that He does not derive any benefit from said worship. Rasag settles this question by observing that “logic” itself “demands that whoever does something good be compensated,” and that “it would not have been seemly for the Creator” to “neglect” the “general demands of reason.”²⁰ Elsewhere Rasag claims to “have demonstrated clearly that [logical] necessity led God to dispatch messengers [i.e. prophets] to mankind.”²¹ In yet a third passage Rasag argues that “if God were to exercise his force upon His servant there would be no sense to His command”²²—taking it for granted that the commands should be “sensible” in the first place. Indeed, Rasag explicitly asserts that a large body of God’s commandments fall into what he calls the category of “rational precepts of the Torah.”²³ He even purports to understand the logic

behind these commandments. Thus we find statements such as “the divine Wisdom imposed a restraint upon bloodshed among men *because...*”²⁴ “divine Wisdom forbade fornication *in order that...*”²⁵ “theft was forbidden by divine Wisdom *because...*”²⁶ and many other statements to this effect. Rasag imposes the standard of human reason upon God with considerable frequency. He thereby communicates his tacit belief that God’s system of ethics is, for the most part, intelligible to human beings.

Even Aristotle recognizes the moral limits of reason

On the other hand, Rasag certainly acknowledges that human reason is limited in its ability to lead one towards the ethical life. In one particularly pointed remark, Rasag labels the person who is unable to “concede to the existence of any wisdom that might be hidden from him” as someone who is “dominated” by “arrogance and conceit.”²⁷ For Rasag, this “hidden wisdom” is to be discovered primarily through “authentic tradition”—a source of knowledge without which, he points out, man “would not even be certain of being the son of his mother.”²⁸ What is more, those who abandon the tradition will necessarily neglect aspects which Rasag considers critical to proper conduct, since some commandments, in his view, “consist of things neither the approval nor the disapproval of which is decreed by reason.”²⁹ Although Rasag surmises that even the commandments in this category “have some partial uses as well as certain slight justifications from the point of view of reason,”³⁰ he maintains that these commandments are ultimately arational. Without the tradition, we would never know of them.

Needless to say, Aristotle would not countenance Rasag’s inclusion of “arational precepts” within the rubric of ethical activity. Yet even Aristotle recognizes the moral limits of reason, in his way. At the very outset of his work, Aristotle establishes that the “purpose of [ethical] examination is not to know what virtue is [through study], but to

become good, since otherwise the inquiry would be of no benefit.”³¹ By way of analogy, Aristotle compares those who try to “become excellent people”

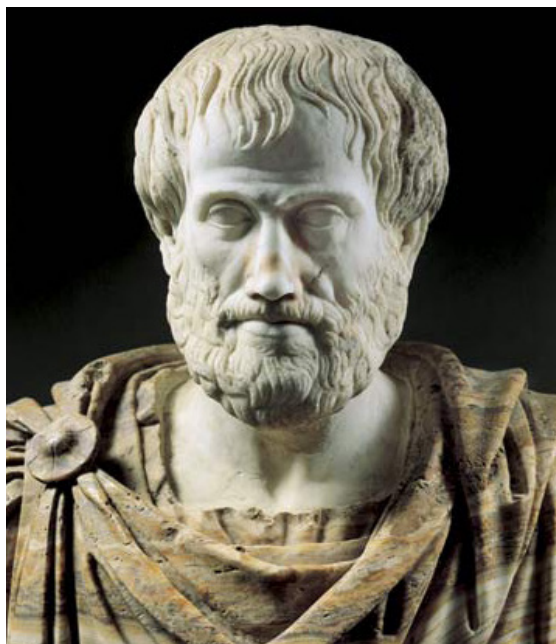
by “taking refuge in arguments [and] philosophy” to a “sick person who listens attentively to the doctor but acts on none of his instructions.”³² So convinced is Aristotle that reason alone cannot produce ethical behavior that he actually doubts whether someone who has not received prior training in ethical conduct can benefit at all from ethical philosophy. To that end, Aristotle states that “we need to have been brought up in fine habits if we are to be adequate students of fine and just things,”³³ and cautions that it is “very important” to “acquire [the right] sort of habit right from our youth.”³⁴

Where Aristotle speaks of ethical “education” or “habituation” as the necessary precursor to ethical reasoning, Rasag speaks of revelation. Since Rasag posits that “all matters of religious belief... can be maintained by means of research and correct speculation,”³⁵ he is led to conclude that these “matters” could just as soon have been transmitted by God through “intellectual demonstration” as through “prophecy.”³⁶ The question thus arises as to why God ultimately elected the latter over the former. By way of response, Rasag explains that God chose to communicate via “His messengers” in order to “afford... quick relief” to those who “might never complete the process because of some flaw in [their] reasoning” or because they are “overwhelmed by uncertainties.”³⁷ God, implies Rasag, prioritizes ethical conduct over ethical comprehension: He prefers to see man



act ethically today—even if man does not currently appreciate the significance of his actions—rather than waiting until tomorrow, by which time man might gain complete cognizance of what he is doing. In this way, Rasag echoes Aristotle, who also holds that ethical actions must precede ethical thoughts.

But of course, neither Aristotle nor Rasag regards the interplay of these two factors as a zero-sum proposition. More accurately, the relationship between ethical conduct and ethical comprehension is, in their view, symbiotic: one must act ethically even before one understands the nature of proper actions, and yet only by gaining said understanding can one’s actions truly be deemed “ethical,” in the fullest sense of the term. Aristotle puts it bluntly when he states that “actions are not enough.”³⁸ Rather, he argues, the man of virtue “must know that he is doing virtuous actions,” and must “decide on them for themselves.”³⁹ By way of analogy, Aristotle reminds us that “it is possible to produce a grammatical result by chance or by following... instructions.”⁴⁰ To qualify as true grammarians, however, “we must both produce a grammatical result, and produce it... in accord with the grammatical knowledge in us.”⁴¹ Aristotle extends this principle to the realm of ethics, claiming that “we must take someone’s pleasure or pain following on his actions to be a sign of his state.”⁴² For instance, someone who “stands firm against terrifying situations” is only brave,



from Aristotle's standpoint, if he "does not find it painful"—otherwise, "he is cowardly."⁴³ According to Aristotle, then, one's mindset is just as important as one's actions in determining the quality of one's conduct.

Here too Rasag concurs, adding once again a spiritual dimension to the discussion. As Rasag sees it, "men will improve in their inner beings as well as their outer conduct" only when their "[theological] doubts are dispelled."⁴⁴ Unlike many religious thinkers, Rasag rejects the epistemic validity of "blind faith." Quite the contrary: Rasag considers it supremely important that men develop a firm intellectual basis for their belief in God and their adherence to His commandments. In this vein, he begins his treatise by challenging his readers to "acquire in their hearts a deterrent from error"⁴⁵ on matters of doctrine or creed. By doing so, Rasag assures them, they will create space for their "beliefs to prevail in their affairs,"⁴⁶ thereby enabling their minds, hearts, and bodies to operate in harmony rather than in dissonance. In fact, Rasag claims, "our Creator Himself enjoin[s] us to do this very thing"⁴⁷—namely, to "engage in speculation and diligent research"⁴⁸ until "the arguments in favor of [the tradition] have become convincing for us."⁴⁹

Given the enormous theological and chronological divide separating Aristotle from Rasag, it is remarkable to observe how closely their thinking

aligns when discussing the role that reason ought to play in one's search for the "good," or ethical, principles of conduct. Both argue discursively against our intuitive notion that pleasure constitutes the ultimate end of human agency. Rasag would deny Aristotle's contention that acting in accordance with reason serves as its own reward. However, both Rasag and Aristotle conceive of the divine as fundamentally reasonable, and both call on their readers to imitate this divine trait. Unlike Rasag, Aristotle does not regard revelation as a valid source of ethical information. But, like Rasag, Aristotle insists upon correct intention as a critical component of any ethical act, even as he recognizes that children must be trained to act ethically *before* they develop the capacity to think ethically.

In a limited sense, then, both Rasag and Aristotle acknowledge that reason and some form of "revelation" are mutually indispensable in our quest to lead an ethical life. We humans certainly possess the ability to analyze moral questions rationally. Nevertheless, caution these thinkers, we cannot rely solely on our rational faculties if we wish to ensure the morality of our behavior. Each of us depends on our parents and teachers to provide (reveal?) the axioms which then shape the trajectory of our normative thinking. It is a supreme act of faith to erect our ethical edifices upon the education with which our elders endow us. As far as Aristotle and Rasag are concerned, though, it may be one of the most reasonable decisions we ever make.

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Endnotes

1. This paper was originally written for a course in moral theory, in which context R. Saadia Ga'on was presented alongside Aristotle as an "ethical philosopher." Though we use the terms "philosopher," "thinker," "theorist," etc. throughout to refer to Rasag, this is merely for the sake of con-

venience. It goes without saying that for us as *b'nei u'bnot Torah*, R. Saadia—one of the foremost Halakhists, *mefarshei Tanakh* and *ba'alei mahshava* of the Geonic period—is so much more than that which is conveyed by the blanket term "philosopher."

2. Translations and page numbers taken from Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*, Second Edition, trans. Terence Irwin, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1999.

3. Translations and page numbers taken from Saadia Gaon: *The Book of Beliefs & Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.

4. Aristotle was born in the fourth century BCE, in Greece; Rasag was born in the ninth century CE, in Egypt. Much of Islamic philosophy in Rasag's day was grounded in the writings of Aristotle and Plato, and Rasag himself was certainly familiar with Aristotelean philosophy. But the name "Aristotle" does not appear once in his writings. At any rate, it is not my intention in this essay to speculate on what sort of impact Aristotle's thought may have had on that of Rasag. Our goal here is simply to compare their ideas. Readers interested in the question of historical influence are encouraged to consult "Aristotle in Jewish Literature," available at: www.jewishencyclopedia.com.

5. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 155

6. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 159

7. *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions*, 25

8. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 9

9. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 165

10. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 11

11. *ibid.*

12. *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions*, 137

13. *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions*, 185

14. *ibid.*

15. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 163

16. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 166

17. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 167

18. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 166

19. *ibid.*

20. *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions*, 139

21. *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions*, 147

22. *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions*, 189

23. *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions*, 141

24. *ibid.*

25. *ibid.*

26. *ibid.*

27. *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions*, 35

28. *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions*, 156

29. *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions*, 140

30. *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions*, 141

31. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 19

32. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 22

33. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 4

34. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 19

35. This statement need not contradict Rasag's earlier statement to the effect that some commandments are fundamentally arational. Most likely, Rasag maintains that even the so-called "arational" commandments operate according to some rationale, but that humans are not capable of accessing this rationale independently. This does not preclude the possibility of God taking the initiative, as it were, to divulge their rationale through what Rasag terms "intellectual demonstration." In other words, although humans might not be able to derive the "arational" commandments of their own accord, they can nevertheless find "slight justifications" to understand these commandments once these commandments have been introduced to them.

36. *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions*, 31

37. *ibid.*

38. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 22

39. *ibid.*

40. *ibid.*

41. *ibid.*

42. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 20

43. *ibid.*

44. *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions*, 9

45. *ibid.*

46. *ibid.*

47. *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions*, 27

48. *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions*, 28

49. *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions*, 32

Bilga and Synthesis: An Ancient Response to the Clash of Universalism and Particularism

BY: ARYEH SKLAR

In October 2014, Jewish sociologist Alan Wolfe published a book entitled, "At Home in Exile: Why Diaspora Is Good for the Jews." In it, he argues that particularism, an extreme patriotism to one's own nation, is not a good Jewish trait, though he recognizes it definitely exists in Jewish history and thought. The exile is therefore good for the Jews because it is allowing them to open themselves up to universalism, which he defines as a commitment to defend the rights of all nations and peoples, but also tends to include the belief in a universalistic value system. As Peter Beinart argues in the NY Times

Sunday Book Review,¹ it is hard to see such universalistic values as being good for American Jews. One point he makes is that the universalistic values of non-Orthodox

Jewish groups that Wolfe celebrates has expressed itself in mass intermarriage, with the latest Pew polls showing a full 71 percent of American non-Orthodox Jews intermarrying. As I read this adept review, I was reminded of another case of unfortunate universalism that manifested in intermarriage, apostasy, and cultural confusion. It is a case from more than 2,000 years ago, referenced in the Mishnah and explicitly described in the Tosefta, that could perhaps shed light on how to successfully integrate the important value of universalism into Judaism.

The last mishnah in Sukkah (5:8) states:

"Those who entered, shared [their portion] on the north side; and those who went out, on the south side [of the Temple court]. The order of Bilga always divided [their share] on the south side; their slaughter ring was fastened down,

and the cabinet window closed up."

The last Mishnayot of Masekhet Sukkah had been dealing with the different work rotations, known as the "mishmarot" of the priestly class, 24 set groups who would offer the sacrifices in the Holy Temple throughout the year. After detailing all the different *mishmarot*, we are told, in the very last line of all of Mishnayot Sukkah, that there is one exception - the *mishmar* of "Bilga". They are very different from the rest in three ways.

Normally, each priestly family served in the Holy Temple for a week at a time, and at the end of the week, the incoming and outgoing families would divide the priestly bread between themselves. The incoming family would eat their portion in the north of the Temple courtyard, while the outgoing family would do so in the south. The Bilga family, however, were required to always share their bread in the south, in the area where the other groups were exiting - even when they were the incoming group. Additionally, while all the other groups had their own ring attached to the floor that was used to place the head of the animal sacrifice so that it would not move during slaughter, the Bilga family's was closed off, forcing them to ask other groups to use

north of the Temple courtyard, while the outgoing family would do so in the south. The Bilga family, however, were required to always share their bread in the south, in the area where the other groups were exiting - even when they were the incoming group. Additionally, while all the other groups had their own ring attached to the floor that was used to place the head of the animal sacrifice so that it would not move during slaughter, the Bilga family's was closed off, forcing them to ask other groups to use

theirs. Lastly, their storage cupboards were locked, requiring them to go to other groups to use their slaughter knives and priestly garb. Each of these required the Bilga group to socialize with other groups particularly in the very beginning of their service.²

What is the cause for this difference? One of the explanations that the Talmud Sukkah (56b) offers for this mysterious statement in the *mishna* is the following story:³

"Our Rabbis taught, It happened that Miriam the daughter of Bilga apostatized and married an officer of the Greek government. When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary, she kicked with her sandal upon the altar,⁴ crying out, "Lukos! Lukos!"⁵ Until when will you consume Israel's money,⁶ and not stand by them in the time of oppression?"⁷ When the Sages heard of the incident, they fastened down her ring and closed up her cabinet...

The Talmudic rabbis sensed the seemingly unfair punishment. They end Tractate Sukkah by asking:

...Do we penalize a father on account of his daughter?

Abaye said, "Yes. It is as they say, 'The talk of the child in the

marketplace, is either that of his father or of his mother'."

Do we penalize the entire watch on account of her father or mother?

Abaye said, "Woe to the wicked and woe to his neighbor; Well are the righteous and well is his neighbor."

The placement of this story at the end of Tractate Sukkah leaves us on a rather bitter note. Is there any purpose or intent, even a small connection, to the placement of this story at the end of Mishnah Sukkah (as well as the Babylonian Talmud and Jerusalem Talmud, and the Tosefta), or is it simple coincidence? Within the story itself, how can one understand the nature of Miriam's apostasy? Lastly, how does the three-fold punishment of the Sages fit her crime?

The story, situated as it is at the end of Tractate Sukkah, is a great lead-in to the next holiday on the Jewish calendar, Hanukkah. There are many connections between the Bilga story and the context of Hanukkah. The Greeks taking over Jerusalem and the Temple, as this story describes, resulted in the Maccabean revolt. The assimilation characterized by Miriam, who apostatized and married a Greek man, was probably typical of



the Hellenization of so many Jewish people at that time. Miriam represents the inculcation of Hellenistic values that the Hasmoneans fought against. Additionally, the story incorporates a major rabbinic theme of Hanukkah, that of divine intervention. The cause of Miriam's apostasy, as she cries out herself, is somehow connected to the seeming non-responsiveness of the divine will, which the holiday of Hanukkah righted. In fact, this aspect of Hanukkah was emphasized by the Talmudic rabbis when they chose to focus on the miracles involved in Hanukkah instead of the war victory, in Talmud Shabbat 21b.

Many have noted Sukkot's connection to Hanukkah as a whole. This goes as far back as to 2nd century Book of Maccabees (II, 10:5-8), which is explicit in this regard. In it, the author states that the Maccabees, after reestablishing the Holy Temple, instituted an eight day holiday as a remembrance to how they were unable to celebrate Sukkot only a short time prior. In their celebration of what became known as Hanukkah, they brought out palm branches and other plants, singing psalms, an obvious nod to Sukkot.⁸ If the rabbis felt, as the author of II Maccabees did, that the holidays were linked in some way, the Mishnah's inclusion of a Hanukkah story at the end of Sukkah highlights this relationship between the two holidays.⁹

This relationship unfolds in an interesting way. It could be a theme of Hanukkah ends Mishnah Sukkah in order to be a capstone definition for the holiday of Sukkot as a whole, and to allow us to better understand Hanukkah. In Tanakh and in the Talmud, Sukkot stands out as one of the most universalistic holidays on the Jewish calendar. In the end of days, says Zechariah (14:16-19), all nations will observe the festival of Sukkot. This concept of a universal holiday of Sukkot is connected to the reason given in the Talmud Sukkah 55b for the reason of 70 total sacrifices on Sukkot:

To what do the seventy bulls that were offered during the seven days

[of Sukkot] correspond? To the seventy [gentile] nations. To what does the single bullock [of Shemini Atzeret] correspond? To the unique nation [of the Jewish people].

The sacrifices for an entire holiday are for the purpose of the gentiles. The surprise at such a concept is expressed in Numbers Rabbah 21:24 and Midrash Shochar Tov 109:4, which lament the hate of the world against the Jewish people, even as the Jews sacrifice on their behalf. Nevertheless,

the universality of Sukkot is clear. And yet, Hanukkah seems to steer away from such notions. Far from universalistic, it was established as a celebration of a proud victory over other nations, the reinstitution of the Jewish religious center, and the miracles wrought for the Jews in particular.

With these two holidays clashing, the Bilga story at the end of Sukkah may be the rabbis' way of warning us of the dangers of excessive universalism. When we allow our consideration of cosmopolitan ideals to interfere with our ethnic and religious identities, confusion and contradictions abound.¹⁰ Though Miriam was the daughter of Bilga, a priest of the Temple whose *mishmar* is named after him, she married not just a Greek man, but a member of an army which sought to destroy the Temple. She entered the Temple, yet kicks the altar. She speaks in Greek to the holy altar, but speaks Hebrew in reference to her people. She cries out about the oppression of the Jewish people and how the altar, and by extension, God, abandons her people in their time of need, yet she abandons her own people in their time of need by leaving her faith and family. She is obviously concerned for the Jewish people, but her unchecked universalistic ideals have caused her to desert her religion, her familial ties, and her unique identity, in the

process of bringing in all other kinds of relationships and cultures. The dangers of Sukkot's universalism comes to a head at Hanukkah, which is a holiday built on fighting for the protection and preservation of the Jewish people and religion against Greek-Hellenistic notions.

What is the solution, then? To abandon Sukkot's universalism for particularism, or to synthesize the two and take the good in both? This question may explain the famous argument between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel

Instead, the rabbis intended to fix the problem of excessive universalism that had come out in the ranks of the family of Bilga, by forcing them to interact with other priestly families.

in the Talmud, Shabbat 21b about the order of lighting of the Hanukkah candles. Beit Hillel holds that the best way to light the candles to add one candle each night. However, Beit Shammai holds that the best way to start with eight candles and take away one candle each night. One of the opinions quoted in the Talmud for this dispute is that Beit Shammai saw a connection between Sukkot and Hanukkah - just like the process of the Sukkot sacrifices go down in number each day, so too should the candles of Hanukkah. Beit Hillel, however, respond that, "We go higher in holiness, not lower!"

Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel seem to be talking past each other; these concepts do not necessarily conflict. However, the argument can be understood in light of the question of how to deal with universalism in Judaism. Two different views emerge. Beit Shammai are realists, and Beit Hillel are idealists. Or, Beit Shammai are absolutists, and Beit Hillel are harmonists. If Sukkot represents unbridled universalism, and Hanukkah represents complete particularism, Beit Shammai believe that realistically, universalistic ideals will spell the end of a Jewish identity. Hanukkah is therefore meant to replace universalism with particularism, and the "sacrifices of Sukkot" with the candles, and the holiday of Sukkot is thus redefined as

particularist in light of Hanukkah.¹¹ Beit Hillel can be interpreted as meaning that we rise in holiness - if there is a danger of uninhibited universalism, Hanukkah corrects this by inhibiting it. If unbridled universalism caused war, strife and apostasy, Hanukkah teaches the necessity of universalism combined with a strong nationalist identity.¹²

The Mishnah's placement of the Bilga-Hanukkah story in Tractate Sukkah shows it supporting Beit Hillel's view of synthesis. This support can be found throughout the Talmud. For example, though the Talmud Sukkah 55b, as we saw above, states that the sacrifices are for the other nations during Sukkot, it is also sure to mention that the last day's one bull was for the uniqueness of the Jewish people. Similarly, in the same breath that Rabbi Akiva (Pirkei Avot 3:14) praises all of humanity for being created in the image of God, he praises the Jewish people for being called "God's children." Both are worthy of praise, but Judaism confers a unique identity on its people.

This value, of holding onto Jewish identity and religion, while believing in the universalistic ideal, plays a large part in a fascinating Talmudic story (see Rosh Hashanah 19a, Taanit 18).¹³ As related by the Talmud, the Roman government forbade Jews from studying Torah, performing circumcisions, and keeping the Sabbath. Judah ben Shammua and his colleagues consulted a certain woman whom all the Roman leaders would frequent. She told them to protest in the night. And so they did, crying out, "Ay, in heaven's name, are we not your brothers, are we not the sons of one father and are we not the sons of one mother? Why are we different from every nation and tongue that you issue such harsh decrees against us?" They were successful, and the decree was annulled.

There is a pattern in the three laws of Torah, circumcision, and Sabbath. These are commandments that only apply to Jews. They are exclusionary, particularist. Laws that separate Jews from general society represents dangerous political and



moral ideals to the Romans. To convince the Romans that this was not so, the rabbis sought help, from a woman who understood Roman political society in their most private ways. She advises that they should make a statement at night. Go out at a time when people cannot see each other's unique faces in the darkness unless they are close together, to symbolize humans are all the same, yet unique at closer inspection (indeed, perhaps in the light of a candle). They went out, demanding to be treated the same as every other country, by being true to their unique laws and culture. A thesis of successful combination of universalism and particularism, and it worked. The Romans repealed the decree, and the Jews made a holiday.

If untempered universalism was the problem that Miriam represented, the rabbis' seemingly harsh response to the Bilga group is actually ingenious. For what reason was there an eternal decree on the family of Bilga to constantly embarrass them, an act the Talmud Bava Metziah 58b states is tantamount to murder? How could such a punishment be decreed to have a family be embarrassed forever, and in the Holy Temple of all places? And why, if the Bilga group had done something so bad it warranted this response, why were they allowed to keep their privileged status as a Temple *mishmar*? Perhaps embarrassment was never the goal. Instead, the rabbis intended to fix

the problem of excessive universalism that had come out in the ranks of the family of Bilga, by forcing them to interact with other priestly families. They couldn't access their slaughter ring which kept their animals in place for ritual slaughter, nor their cupboard, which contained their knives or other items for the slaughtering of animals, so they had to go to other groups and request to use theirs. In doing so, they were forced to seek out fellow Jews and become familiar with them, on their way in to begin their weekly service. They were to eat their portion in the area where others were leaving, forcing them to see others and socialize with the groups that had just finished their weekly service, so that the Bilga group could enter having just made a connection to another group.

This is the import of Abaye's two statements. If Miriam acted as she did because of what she saw in the home, how her parents spoke and behaved,

then the solution is to pull the family out of the home and circle, into other social groups. Indeed, "Woe to the wicked, and woe to his neighbor. Well are the righteous and well is his neighbor." Neighbors have an impact on each other. If the Bilga group could learn to be part of a community of fellow Jews, move outside themselves and look at others within the Jewish community, they can learn what it

means to have a Jewish identity, an appreciation for the Jewish community and ritual law.

Many ask why the Talmud ends with an unnecessary line that goes further than the needs of the question. The reason why the entire Bilga *mishmar* is punished is answered with one line, "Woe to the wicked, and woe to his neighbor." The next and ultimate line seems to just be, as Meharsha, ad loc. suggests, simply to end the Talmud on a better note. However, this line explains exactly what the motives were of the sages who sought to "fix" the Bilga group's broken culture. Though it is true that one can turn off from the right path through bad community, this can be undone by being part of a good community, because "Well are the righteous and well to his neighbor."

There is an amazing textual variant that truly brings this point home. One manuscript¹⁴ does not have that last line, "Well are the righteous and well to his neighbor." Instead it ends with, "Said R. Elazar in the name of R. Hananya: Torah scholars increase peace in the world, as it says, (Isaiah 54:13) 'All your children shall be taught by God, and great shall be the peace of your children.'" Though some have joked that this is evidence of humor in the Talmud, the placement here of this line really helps us understand the "peace" the Talmudic rabbis had in mind. The rabbis did not want to hurt and humiliate the Bilga people. Rather, they desired the harmony of conflicting philosophies, of seemingly opposite ideals, into a beautiful harmony and great synthesis. Universalism does not have to destroy Judaism, as long as it is tempered by recognition of difference, being proud of national identity, and holding true to the tradition of our ancestors.

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Endnotes

1. Beinart, Peter, "'At Home in the Exile' and 'The Pious Ones,'" NYTimes Online, 6 November, 2014, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/09/books/review/at-home-in-exile-and-the-pious-ones.html?_r=0

nytimes.com/2014/11/09/books/review/at-home-in-exile-and-the-pious-ones.html?_r=0

2. Some interpret this as merely indicating that they were never really welcome, as if they were always leaving, see Meiri ad loc.

3. See also Tosefta Sukkah 4:28

4. This line has many different versions in manuscript; above is the standard Vilna printed version. We can speculate that its reference to apostasy, and the mentioning of a "Miriam", probably put some scribes and censors on edge. One significant variant is whether she kicked the altar with her sandal (as we have it), or even stood upon it (see the standard Jerusalem Talmud Sukkah 5:8, London - BL Harl. 5508 (400), and Munich 95), or simply hit her head with her sandal (see Munich 140, New York - JTS Rab. 218 (EMC 270), and Bodl. heb. e. 51 (2677)), which seems to be a symbolic gesture. These variants could change the tone of her words from anger to frustration. The root of "b-'t", "kick", to reference what she does to the altar, present in our printed version and in many manuscripts, might be in reference to I Samuel 2:29, "Why do you kick at My sacrifice and at My offering which I have commanded in My dwelling..."

5. The Greek word for "wolf". This might be a reference to the altar's service in the Temple, which consumes sheep like a wolf, or it could refer, as some suggest (R. Reuven Margoliot, Nitzotzei Ohr ad loc., and R. Yehezkel Abramsky in Hazon Yehezkel on Tosefta Sukkah 4:28), to the location of the altar, which is the portion of Benjamin, who is compared to a ravenous wolf, see Genesis 49:27, and Targum Onkelos there. The calling of the altar in a twice-repeated proclamation occurs in I Kings 13:2, "Altar, Altar!", and the connection between these scenarios would be an interesting area of study.

6. The Tosefta and Jerusalem Talmud have, "destroy the property of", perhaps a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the enemy army.

7. Most versions similarly have "their oppression", instead of simply, "the oppression". However, there is a version that has it as "our oppression" (see BL Harl. 5508 (400)), which may change how she views herself.

8. Indeed, the relationship between eight days of Sukkot and eight days of Hanukkah easily answers the question as to why Hanukkah is eight days if the miracle was only the final seven days.

9. A possibility also might be that a Tractate Hanukkah was planned, and the story of Bilga is perhaps a lead-in to the tractate (and this is not completely unfounded, the medieval sages generally assume a thematic connection between tractates in an order of Mishna). But, for whatever reason (political, religious), the tractate was never created or published as part of the Mishnah collection. More interestingly, it may have been created but lost. See R. Avraham ben HaRambam, *Rav UPoalim*, Hakdama 8a, who posits a "minor tractate" of Hanukkah, and R. Schorr, *Mishnas Ya'akov* Jerusalem 1990,

pp. 33-34, on a similar answer to why there is no Tractate Tefillin.

10. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, suggests in a video that can be viewed here (http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/livingtorah/player_cdo/aid/942194/jewish/Wolf-Wolf.htm) that the lesson of Bilga is that a Jew remains a Jew, regardless of how far they fall; the *yiddishe neshama* can still be there. This does not seem to explain all the elements of the story and placement, as I seek to do.

11. Perhaps this is the import of Shammai's Pirkei Avot saying (1:16), "Make the Torah keva" - make it fixed, the ideal to focus on!

12. Perhaps this is the import of Hillel's Pirkei Avot saying (1:12), "Love peace and pursue peace, love people and bring them closer to Torah." He believed that universal ideals can be "made peace" with Torah ideals, and that it is the Jewish obligation. While it is true that "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?", focus on identity, it is equally true that, "If I am only for myself, what am I?", with a focus on others.

13. See also Scolion to Megillat Taanit

14. JTS Rab. 218 (EMC 270)

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The Beurei Hatefila Institute

Test Your Knowledge Of Tefila

Can you answer these questions concerning Tefila?

1. Name the first Siddur, when it was compiled and why it was compiled?
2. Why do we read Birkat Kohanim as an example of Torah study after reciting Birchot Ha'Torah as part of Birchot Ha'Shachar?
3. Is Mizmor Shir Chanukas Ha'Bayit L'Dovid a part of Korbanos or a part of Pseukei D'Zimra and why do we recite Kaddish Yasom after saying it?
4. When was Kaddish Yasom instituted and why?
5. Do you say B'Phi Amo or B'Peh Amo in the Bracha of Baruch Sh'Amar and why?
6. Why do we recite Kaddish at a funeral and not at a wedding (an excellent question found in the Teshuvot Ha'Geonim)?
7. Why do we include Oz Yashir as part of Pseukei D'Zimra when Baruch Sh'Amar specifically refers to Shirei Dovid and Oz Yashir is not one of the Shirei Dovid?
8. Why do we recite Birchot Kriyas Shema if we can fulfill the Mitzvah Of Kriyas Shema without reciting them?
9. Why do Ashkenazim change the text of the Bracha of Yotzer Ha'M'Orot on Shabbat but not on Yom Tov?
10. Why do we call the prayer of nineteen Brachot by the name Shemona Esrei which is the Hebrew word for eighteen?
11. The Shulchan Aruch (OH) states that the only Bracha in Shemona Esrei that must be recited with Kavanah is the first Bracha, Avos; why is the first Bracha given such significance?
12. Why do bow when we recite the word Modim?
13. Why did Chazal institute the practice of having the congregation recite Modim D'Rabbanan when the Shaliach Tzibbur reaches the Bracha of Modim?
14. Why do Ashkenazim not have the Kohanim perform Birkat Kohanim in Tefilas Shacharis every morning as part of Chazarat Ha'Shatz?
15. Why do we say: V'Anachnu Lo Nai'Da Mah Na'Aseh and not V'Anachnu Lo Nai'Da Mah Nomar at the end of Tachanun?
16. What is the purpose behind Kriyas Ha'Torah?
17. Why do we call individuals (Aliyot) to read from the Torah and not have one person read the whole section of the Torah?
18. All the middle Brachot of Shemona Esrei on Shabbos begin with Piyuttim. What was the original middle Bracha of Shemona Esrei for Shabbos?
19. We omit the middle Brachot of the daily Shemona Esrei on Shabbat but then pray for the sick during Kriyas Ha'Torah; how do we explain the apparent contradiction?
20. Why do Ashkenazim never open Kedushah with the line of Keter Yitnu?
21. When did the practice to light Chanukah candles in synagogue begin and why?

You can find the answers to these questions and hundreds of other questions you should be asking concern-

ing Tefila at the website of the Beurei Hatefila Institute,

www.beureihatefila.com

The Beurei Hatefila Institute was established in 2003 to promote the study of Tefila as a primary subject in Jewish day Schools. Over the last 12 years, Abe Katz, founding director of the Institute, has written a commentary on the daily, Shabbos, Yom Tov, Rosh Chodesh and Yomin Noraim Tefilot by way of a weekly e-mail newsletter. Those newsletters are available for downloading from the Institute website.

Abe Katz is available to consult with schools that are interested in developing a Tefila curriculum. He also provides classes for Rabbis, teachers and laymen who want to improve their knowledge of Tefila. He is also available to provide source sheets and shiur outlines to anyone who would like deliver Divrei Torah on the subject of Tefila. Abe can be reached by e-mail: beureihatefila@yahoo.com or by telephone: 718-747-0100.

Abe Katz is a Talmid of Rabbi Yeshaya Wohlgemuth, z"l, who developed and taught a course in Beurei Hatefila at Maimonides School, Brookline, MA, the day school established by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, z"l. Abe recently edited and annotated a new edition of Rabbi Wohlgemuth's book: Guide To Jewish Prayer which is available for purchase by contacting Maimonides School by e-mail: mike@maimonides.org. Plans are in place to have Rabbi Wohlgemuth's book available for purchase at the upcoming YU booksale.