

# *The Reconstructionist*

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## FROM THE EDITOR

When the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College was founded in 1968, the program of training for the modern rabbi was envisioned as a parallel course of study in which rabbinical students studied Judaism at RRC and simultaneously pursued a Ph.D in religious studies in Temple University's Department of Religion.

That department, in those days, was a pioneer in the area of interreligious dialogue, with faculty members from every major faith tradition. Rabbinical students were in daily contact with people whose religious communities were different from their own, whose texts and traditions were distinct, and whose faiths were in some cases related to Judaism (Christianity and Islam) and in other cases had developed with little or no historical interaction with Jewish tradition (Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism). In such a context, it was impossible to take one's own tradition for granted, or to dismiss another's tradition as irrelevant.

Curiously, if not providentially, the Reconstructionist approach to the understanding of religion was both an asset and an obstacle. Insofar as Reconstructionism began with the affirmation that Judaism was the historically developed natural product of the Jewish people, it was not difficult to understand other religious traditions as similarly developed historical experiences generated by their respective communities. Reconstructionism allowed one to respect one's own tradition as well as the traditions of others.

The obstacle was that other faith groups did not always begin from the same set of assumptions. Many of those who, in the spirit of ecumenism and liberalism, sought out Jews with whom to enter into interreligious dialogue also affirmed, to a greater or lesser degree, a supernatural God whose workings in history included the forming of a covenant with the "chosen people."

Reconstructionist Jews thus stood in a curious place with regard to other religions, on the one hand seeing them all as common expressions (through distinctive refractions) of the human quest for meaning and for the sacred, and on the other hand, holding a very different understanding of religion than many of those with whom we entered into dialogue.

Rabbi Ira Eisenstein anticipated many of the issues that we would face in the second half of the 20th century when he wrote his doctoral dissertation in 1939 entitled "The Ethics of Tolerance," a study of the issues involved when (Western) religions encountered each other in the spirit of democracy, tolerance and pluralism that was found in America. In that work, Rabbi Eisenstein suggested that among the challenges facing religion in the modern period, perhaps the most important was whether religions could learn to relinquish their divisive claims to authority and truth in favor of more mod-

est affirmations that would allow for mutual respect and affirmation.

If that issue was critical on the eve of the Second World War, it remains imperative now, in the early years of the 21st century. In this issue, we examine some of the tensions as well as the opportunities that continue to arise when Judaism looks at other religions.

— Richard Hirsh

# Teaching Judaism in Indonesia: Some Reflections

BY REBECCA T. ALPERT

**B**efore Arthur Waskow began the process of bringing the liturgical calendar into conversation with politics, I never gave any thought whatsoever to the story of the exile of Hagar that we read every Rosh Hashanah. In recent years, however, that story has become a poignant reminder for me, for us, of the enmity that existed at the very beginning between the Muslim and Jewish traditions.

Now when we read the story, it makes me uneasy to think that Hagar and Ishmael were sent off to the desert, and perplexed about having as my ancestors the “winners” of the contest for Abraham’s lineage. And I struggle with Sarah’s cruelty toward Hagar, and puzzle over what — if any — positive values I can glean from the encounter, beyond the warning about this rift.

## New Perspectives

At least that was the perspective I brought to Yogyakarta (not Jakarta; Yogya is a city of 3 million in the eastern part of the island of Java) in Indonesia this past summer, where I taught “Introduction to Judaism” at the state-

run Gadjah Mada University. The participants were thirty master’s level students in a comparative religion program. All but four were Muslim (the non-Muslims were Christian and Hindu); all but seven were men.

What I learned from their perspective was that the story in Genesis 21 was indeed the beginning of the heritage of Abraham, but they, the ancestors of Hagar and Ishmael, were equally convinced that they were the true heirs of Abraham. From their perspective, they were the lucky winners of the contest for Abraham’s lineage, and they felt sorry for the people of Israel, who believed the misguided story in the Torah. That story cannot, after all, reflect the truth, since it contradicts the story as it is told in their sacred scripture, the Qur’an. (Who, after all, was Abraham’s firstborn, and therefore legitimate heir, they would ask; certainly not Isaac.)

## Living Upside Down

That disjuncture was emblematic of my experience, which had the impact of stripping away many of my assump-

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tions. How could it not, when I was literally living upside down; it was, after all, night for me when it was daytime back home.

And when I looked to the summer sky, I saw the North Star and Big Dipper, not part of my own world's sky except, of course, in winter. And when I explained that Jews pray facing Jerusalem (as Muslims do toward Mecca), I realized that Tevye's seat "by the eastern wall" was nothing if not relative, since prayers in Indonesia are said not looking east, but west.

While fascinating for anyone traveling to Asia for the first time, these disorientations are nothing in comparison to the one I experienced as I began, with the help of my students, to see Judaism through Muslim eyes.

## Islam in Indonesia

Islam in Indonesia is not the same as Islam in America, and not the same as Islam in the Middle East. Of course, that should not surprise us: Judaism in Asia, North America and the Middle East also differs. But we do tend to make the "other" into something monolithic, a very dangerous thing to do.

So what is Islam like in Indonesia? The Muslims I met were genuinely interested in learning about other religions in general, and Judaism in particular. Indonesia is not an Islamic state; it recognizes five official religions: Muslim, Protestant Christian, Roman Catholic, Buddhist and Hindu, although Muslims are the vast majority. There seemed to be little interest in,

and active dislike of, groups like Laskar Jihad (which do exist there), who wish to make Indonesia into an Islamic state.

Women indeed wear some form of head covering (at least all of my students did, and probably about 25 percent of the women I saw in the street did, too), but they also ride motorcycles and are committed to working toward gender equity. They are quite firm in their assertion that Mohammed favored women's equality and that later texts just misinterpreted his teachings, something I have heard only from the strongest of Muslim feminists I know in the United States.

## Opening Communication

The first democratically elected president of Indonesia, known as Gus Dur (who was himself a Muslim cleric), supported links with Israel. Although Gus Dur was ousted by the current ruling party, his students and followers were some of the people I got to know and meet, and they were passionately interested in dialogue and learning more about Judaism. Some of them took my course so they could teach about Judaism at their own high schools and universities; others were working on translations of books by authors like Louis Jacobs and A.J. Heschel.

Did they represent the majority of Indonesians? The concept of a majority in that context is itself laughable. Indonesia is comprised of 1,700 islands and many millions of individuals; it is the largest majority Muslim country in the world, and it would be folly to draw

conclusions based on my limited evidence.

But I also cannot discount the experience I had. Several of my students were deeply interested in Jewish-Muslim dialogue and in building understanding, because the world they live in is full of ignorance and misunderstanding when it comes to Jews and Judaism. So they invited me to give speeches and have informal conversations at several Muslim universities in Yogya and in the neighboring city, Solo.

I was welcomed warmly, although the conversations were also at times painful and emotionally draining. And though I promised myself I would avoid political conversations about Israel, it was obvious from the first day that this was not going to be possible, since the information they had about Jews was, in fact, almost exclusively about Israel.

## Frightening Stereotypes

My students and the other faculty and students I met shared notions about Jews that were positively frightening. The following quotations, from a paper by one of my students, describing the stereotypes that Indonesians believe about Jews, are typical:

Jews, by definition, are stubborn, tricky, egoistic, troublesome, but also smart and therefore dangerous. In connection with these stereotypes, a common accepted opinion about the Jews is another assumption that they are very powerful internationally in poli-

tics, thanks to their skillful lobbying, especially over the rulers of such superpower actors as USA and certain European countries; in business, thanks to their sophisticated and massive network of banking system, media and entertainment . . . They are always in agreement with whatever policy is made by the Israeli government . . . moreover, the Jews are suspected to have long-run sophisticated plan to destroy Muslim community and any Islamic manifestation through its international conspiracy spread all over the world . . .<sup>1</sup>

Jews, in other words, run the world in support of Israel. And because Judaism is not a missionizing religion, my students understood it to be “exclusivist,” closed and unwelcoming of outsiders. They interpreted my emphasis on peoplehood and community as evidence in support of this belief. They also did not believe that Jews are the pure monotheists we claim to be, (Munjit described it as “an Abrahamic tradition gone astray”) since the Qur’an says that Jews believed that Ezra was the son of God.

## Changing Perceptions

Over the course of six weeks, I was able to get my students to understand that the Judaism they were learning about from their environment was not Judaism; that only some Jews at the time of Mohammed believed Ezra was the son of God; that Jews have power

disproportionate to our numbers, but not to the extent they imagine; that not being a missionary religion does not make us exclusivist, just small; and that our tragic history can explain a lot of the passion we feel about the State of Israel.

I also was able to use the similarities in our traditions — the roots in Abraham, the nature of the revelation at the core of both religions, their similar emphasis on legal tradition and linguistic cognates of Hebrew and Arabic terminology — to enable students to feel more connected to Judaism.

They were very pleased to learn about the interplay between Jewish and Muslim mystics, philosophers and legalists in the Middle Ages, and about the general decency with which Jews were treated when we lived in Muslim societies.

While I contributed much to their education, I learned more from my students, which, as the Talmud suggests, is often the case. At our last session when they told me how much they had learned and how much they appreciated our experience together, I reflected back to them that I had received thirty times what I was able to give.

## New Perspectives

What I also gained from teaching them was a new perspective about Judaism in the United States. I never realized the extent to which Christianity has defined Judaism in the world today. Ashkenazic Jews, whose Judaism was nourished in Christian soil, make up 80 percent of the 15 million Jews

in the world, and have a defining effect on Jewish life and culture. (I thought, for the first time, how different Jewish history might have been if we'd stayed in the Southern Hemisphere.)

And there is also no underestimating how important it is that Jesus was a Jew, a fact I saw more clearly when confronted with the realization that Mohammed was not. Despite the deep similarities between Islam and Judaism, that is a profound difference.

I also learned that it was acceptable to admit that I was critical of the policies of the government of Israel. More than acceptable, actually, it lent my Jewishness credibility, because I was not just touting the party line. I wasn't sure that I would be able to be open in discussing politics. But I found that it worked and was appreciated, and that it opened doors to conversation. It also left my students room to be critical of Islam as well.

## Lasting Challenges

It is not easy to prove that Jews don't run the world, and I would appreciate any and all help in figuring out how to do that. My best answer was when someone asked me if Americans believe that all Muslims are terrorists. I responded that about as many Americans believe that as there are Indonesians who believe that Jews run the world; both are unfounded stereotypes.

While I spent much of my time trying to convince my students that Jews are not to blame for the problems we have experienced (exile, genocide), I

also had to acknowledge to myself (and we as a Jewish community need to think about) how little attention we pay to others, how high we build the wall surrounding the Jewish community, how carefully we police its borders, and how that contributes to the sense that people have (even in Indonesia) that Jews care only about other Jews.

My students were astonished to learn about any universalist tendencies in our tradition. Yet there are many, and we do not let others know enough about them, or about us. This isolation and internal focus is not good for us, and we might think about ways to create opportunities, like the one I experienced, to “get the word out” that Jews are interested in making connections to the outside world and helping others to learn about us.

## Needing Community

I also had the lesson reinforced that it is almost impossible to be a Jew without a Jewish community. I bonded deeply with the one Jewish woman who was in Yogya on a year-long Fulbright scholarship to study student democratic movements there. We had much else in common, but the Jewish connection was crucial. Luckily for me, Jessica lived out some of her interest in the subject by going to meet with the twenty or so Jews of Surabaya, the only Jewish community left in Indonesia.

She came to my class and presented her findings about the group, and showed the class images of the people and of the synagogue there. It was one

of the most important sessions we had, since Jews stopped being abstract “others” for my students and became real Indonesians who lived in their world, and worried, as they did, about governmental repression.

When Jess showed slides depicting posters with anti-Israel propaganda, and spoke about the fears of Laskar Jihad and a fundamentalist takeover, the class laughed nervously. She and I were stunned, since we ourselves experienced a sense of fear when we saw posters from this movement that included the words, “Israel and America: Axis of Evil.”

It was fascinating to see how uncomfortable our fears made my students, and how much they wanted to disallow what a threat that group is and should seem to us. Afterward, many of them talked to me about that tense moment in class. One student’s response was the most poignant: “What are we to do when we are caught between the current military regime and those who want an Islamic state?” What choice is that, exactly?

## Reaffirmations

Before I went, many people told me I was crazy to make the trip. I am glad I did not listen. This experience opened my eyes to worlds I did not know existed. And it reinforced for me some of my most deeply held beliefs: about the importance of teaching Judaism to non-Jews — and of being honest about your own interpretation of Judaism when you do so. And about challenging the insularity of the Jewish com-



munity — demanding of us that we stay open and ready to listen to and learn from those whom we too often discount and ignore.

Maybe that is the lesson imbedded in the story of Sarah and Hagar. Per-

haps, if they'd been able to listen to each other, the story would have had a different ending.

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1. As quoted in a student paper by Achmad Munjid, by permission of the author.

# Speaking From, Not For, Judaism: Reconstructionism and Interreligious Dialogue

BY LEWIS JOHN ERON

**I**nterreligious dialogue has played a central role in my spiritual and theological growth. I have eagerly sought out dialogue as a way of learning more about myself and those around me. I have been thrilled by the opportunity to look at the world from another's perspective, and moved by what I have discovered about myself as a result of that privilege.

Interreligious dialogue is a process in which people of diverse religious and spiritual backgrounds and commitments address fundamental issues of meaning, identity and faith. Unlike other encounters between people of differing religious and spiritual commitments, dialogue goes beyond the simple exchange of information. In dialogue, the participants hope to strengthen their understanding of themselves, their partners and their deep faith commitments to their religious /ethnic/cultural heritages through the sharing of ideas, hopes, dreams and practices.

## Truth, Honesty and Openness

Interreligious dialogue depends on trust, honesty and openness. Dialogue is more than a one-time experience. The insights and skills needed to build the interpersonal relationships to allow a dialogue to happen between individuals of differing faiths develop over time and through experience. Dialogue is part of a lifelong approach to spiritual and religious issues.

One enters into dialogue with the assumption that he or she has something to learn from his or her partner and also that one has something to offer. Dialogue is reciprocal. Its purpose is not to convert or convince the other but to open up hearts and minds to the wisdom of others.

Dialogue is a continuing exchange of ideas and feelings as people's understanding of each other unfolds over time. Dialogue takes place between people and not between the commu-

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nities, organizations, institutions, social and ethnic groups from which they come.

Yet dialogue differs from other interactions that may also involve people of varying backgrounds, such as athletic competition, business enterprise, political activity and social action, in which the success of the enterprise takes precedent over the individual's social, religious, ethnic and cultural roots.

Dialogue, on the other hand, addresses itself primarily to the individual participant's sense of rootedness within a specific context. Dialogue's success is found not in the achievement of an objective goal, but in the deep and often subtle changes that take place within the hearts and minds of the participants.

## Speaking From, Not For

In a successful interreligious dialogue, each participant must find a way to speak out of but not for his or her specific religious context. The deeper the participants are immersed in their faith traditions the richer the dialogue can be; but as I have found out, also the more confusing. Through my experience in dialogue, I have become more aware of the subtle gaps as well as hidden connections between my personal expression of Jewish beliefs and practices and those more generally expressed. To present who I am spiritually and where I stand religiously, I often feel the need to present a great deal of information as to the range of Jewish opinions across time and place.

Interreligious dialogue goes beyond

the comparative study of religions in that its primary concern is not with the customs, doctrines and structures of faith traditions, but rather with how individuals develop spiritual lives within their own religious contexts. The exploration of worship, spirituality, theology, ecclesiology, history and culture can play an important role within interreligious dialogue, but is not its goal.

## Self-Assessment Is Crucial

Thus, like all others who enter into dialogue, I face the same fundamental challenge: How do we honestly present our own faith tradition and our own unique relationship to it so that the dialogue partners can understand each of us as living representatives of living traditions?

I enter interreligious dialogue as a Jew. Yet, because of training, lifestyle and profession, I have a very particular Jewish identity. My resumé places me within a very specific context in the Jewish world and in Jewish history. I am an American Jew born in the latter half of the 20th century. I am a rabbi. I studied at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and I identify with the Reconstructionist movement. I have a doctorate in religious studies and an interest in history and theology. I have served the Jewish community for more than twenty years as a pulpit rabbi, a university professor and, currently, as the community chaplain for a local Jewish federation. I need to be aware of all this so that I do not forget how distinctive and idiosyncratic my ap-

proach to Judaism may be, and how equally deeply rooted it is in the faith and traditions of the Jewish people.

## **If I Am Not for Myself, Who Am I?**

Hillel's well-known challenge, "If I am not for myself, who am I? If I am just for myself, what am I? If not now, when?" (*Pirkei Avot* 1:14), resonates deeply within me, whenever I enter dialogue. That is the moment when I need to be both honest to myself and honest to the faith and traditions of my people.

It is doubtful that Hillel could have conceived of interreligious dialogue in its contemporary sense. After all, dialogue as we practice it today developed slowly during the past century. Hillel's world provided few if any opportunities for people from different religious backgrounds to meet in an atmosphere of mutual respect. When they did meet, the most likely result of the encounter was polemics and/or apologetics. Even within the more limited context of the Jewish community, it seemed almost miraculous when the sages of various schools could say that both this opinion and that opinion represent the authentic words of the Living God.

One can imagine the difficulty of expressing one's own opinion in such a world. Even today, the need to express solidarity with our fellow Jews still remains strong. The tragic events of the Shoah still cast a powerful shadow over our lives. Israel remains beleaguered. Anti-Semitism is still a significant presence. We continue to feel pressured by

the forces of assimilation from the secular world and by missionary efforts of other religious traditions. We still remain a largely unknown minority group even to those who seek us out in dialogue.

## **Personal and Corporate Voices**

Often, my initial impulse in dialogue is to speak for "the Jews." At times, the issues raised in dialogue reflect the participants' deep lack of knowledge of each other's traditions so that the pressing need is to share basic information. Other times, I may perceive a statement made by my dialogue partner as antagonistic, disrespectful or insulting to the Jews in general so that I feel that I must defend the Jewish people. I can easily lose my personal voice speaking for my people.

In these situations, I need to find myself. I need to focus on myself as an individual Jew and on my partner as an individual Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu. Before I proceed to respond to his or her statement "on behalf of the Jews," I need to know the specific, personal context out of which the statement grows. I also need to share with my dialogue partner the manner in which I heard the statement.

It is important for me to understand my partner's words as an individual's statement and not as the proclamation of his or her religious tradition. I need to remind myself that I am an individual Jew, not the Jewish people, and my task within the context of dialogue is to respond as an individual to another individual's statement.

It is often helpful in such a situation to ask my partner to reflect what has been said, so that together we may discover why he or she has framed the issue in such a way. Together, as individuals, we need to explore our spiritual, emotional, and intellectual responses to our own traditions, and to examine our need to speak universally for our faiths rather than as individual adherents.

## Perils of Expertise

The paradox at this point in dialogue is that the deeper one is involved in one's faith tradition and the more about it one knows, the greater the temptation is to speak for it in its entirety. Since being Jewish forms such an important part of my personal identity, I need to be aware to what extent I may perceive an "attack" on Judaism or the Jewish people or Israel as an attack on my sense of self. A defensive response, though personally satisfying, will not advance the dialogue. In the context of dialogue, we need to turn conflict into conversation. I would expect no less from my dialogue partner.

In interreligious dialogue, we need to remember that competition and conflict have and continue to be part of the interrelationship between our various faith communities. When Christians and Muslims enter into dialogue with Jews, all need to know how current events in the Middle East as well as the historical relationships among the three cultural and faith communities influence our appreciation of each other.

In dialogue, competition and conflict

are not values. They are, however, part of the real world with which dialogue is concerned. In dialogue, however, we are not called upon to rehearse the past, but to share with each other its present significance for each of us in our own lives.

We also need to understand that there may be limits to our dialogue. At any one point, it may be best to step back from an issue for a time. There is no need to go directly to the hard and painful issues. A Muslim-Jewish dialogue need not go immediately to the conflicts in the Middle East. A Jewish-Roman Catholic dialogue need not focus on abortion or the role of the Church during the Holocaust. A Christian-Muslim dialogue need not immediately focus on Western imperialism or the fate of Eastern churches.

We need to be aware of what issues are going to put us in a defensive mode and approach them with care. Our personal sense of comfort concerning a topic and our level of trust in the other will help define the range and depth of our dialogue. There can be no dialogue about an area in which one or more of the participants are afraid to be fully themselves.

## If I Am Just for Myself, What Am I?

But I come to interreligious dialogue not merely as an individual, but also as a Jew — a member of the Jewish people. If I just speak for myself, what am I?

What is my identity beyond my purely autonomous self? What can I bring to the dialogue besides my personal collection of beliefs and opinions?

A dialogue merely between individuals with no strong connection to a faith tradition cannot be an interreligious dialogue. We need to speak from our faith traditions. I come to a dialogue to hear a Christian speak as a Christian, a Muslim as a Muslim. I want to know what their faith and religious community means to them. In dialogue, we can learn from each other the various ways in which we can express our own religious traditions in the world we all share.

By training and experience as a Reconstructionist rabbi, I am particularly aware of how we can behave and speak out of Judaism without claiming to speak for Judaism. On the one hand, the study of Judaism as an unfolding religious civilization has shown me how inadequate any theological standpoint or movement's ideology are at capturing the full expanse of the Jewish experience. On the other hand, I have also learned how theological reflections and movement ideologies are grounded in and reflect that experience. They grew out of a specific Jewish context and respond to the Jewish world in which they live.

## Representing More Than Self

This insight enables me to speak for the Jews as an individual Jew. To do so, I need to be aware of my grounding in the Jewish tradition and, at least within the context of dialogue, be mindful that what I say and what I do need to reflect that tradition. For my dialogue partner to understand me as a Jew, he or she needs to see through me, the

Jewish partner, a broad but honest presentation of Judaism.

Reconstructionists understand that the term "Judaism" is ultimately an intellectual construct. It is a quick and easy way of summarizing our people's 4,000 years of cultural and religious discovery. We know that Judaism, as a construct, says nothing, and that only individual Jews speak. When I speak about "Judaism," I try to avoid the expression, "Judaism says." It is my task to express the voices of the Jewish people, including my own, by talking about majority and minority positions within the Jewish tradition, by trying to place ideas and opinions within a historical context, and by describing ideas and concepts that have found resonance in the Jewish community — and those that have not.

In the context of a true dialogue, one's behavior is as significant as one's words. One cannot honestly talk about prayer in Jewish life if one does not model it. One cannot explain one's relationship to Shabbat or *kashrut*, for example, if one does not enable one's dialogue partner to experience them through one's own engagement with them. For me, this means that to express the expanse of the Jewish experience and to show respect to more traditional Jews, in the course of a dialogue it is often helpful to be mindful of traditional ritual practices.

## Internal and External Dialogue

In a way, this, too, is part of the dialogue experience. "Dialogue" does not mean to hold a conversation with an-

other but to work through something of importance. It comes from two Greek words: *dia*, meaning “through,” and *logos*, meaning “word,” but with a similar range of meaning as the Hebrew word *davar*. In dialogue, the inner conversation between oneself and one’s tradition is as significant as the conversation one has with one’s dialogue partner. In dialogue, one engages one’s own tradition not to teach the other, but to learn about oneself in the presence of another. Dialogue should evoke a re-examination of one’s own tradition in response to the insights and concerns of the others in the dialogue.

This is not always easy. In May of 2002, I participated in an international Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue in Skopje, the capital of the newly independent Republic of Macedonia. I was asked to respond to a paper I had not yet read that was to be delivered by a Turkish-Muslim professor during a Saturday afternoon session. Although my personal practice is not so strict as to preclude writing in private on Shabbat, I felt it would be inappropriate to write in public on the Sabbath before Christians and Muslims who came to learn about Judaism and Jewish life. The result was that I had to listen more attentively to the paper than I would have done otherwise, and respond out of my heart as much as out of my mind. I believe that it was, ultimately, a more authentically Jewish response to the paper.

## Connecting With Tradition

As a result of the Reconstructionist focus on religious practice as the affir-

mation of basic sancta of Jewish life, in the context of interreligious dialogue it is not difficult to ground my personal ritual practice in the Jewish tradition. Obviously, the subtleties of Jewish religious practice, which play such an important role in intra-Jewish dialogue, are far less important in our dialogue with members of other faith communities.

This is not the case, however, when it comes to theological positions and ideological commitments. I would mislead my dialogue partners if I claimed that Reconstructionist approaches to God, revelation and chosenness were normative Jewish beliefs — that is, that they reflect the beliefs held by most Jews over most of Jewish history. On the other hand, I would disqualify myself from the dialogue if I could not articulate the ways in which these concepts are rooted in Jewish tradition and the reasons why I identify with a religious movement that supports a seemingly untraditional interpretation.

## If Not Now, When?

The skill we exhibit when we are able to connect our distinctive theological message — based as it is in philosophical pragmatism, sociological understandings of religion and a post-modern reading of texts — to the living religious tradition of the Jewish people, is the most important contribution we Reconstructionists can make to contemporary interreligious dialogue. It also presents the greatest challenge we bring to the dialogue.

Our embrace of modernist and post-

modernist tools of interpretation challenge those committed to a traditional reading of their texts and their past. Our commitment to peoplehood and our embrace of a communitarian vision stands against those dedicated to a radical individualism in spiritual matters. Our abstract but immanent view of God confuses those who associate divine immanence with descriptions of God as a personality and divine transcendence with a more abstract and philosophical view of God.

We should not step away from dialogue or from an honest presentation of our spiritual world-view because of others' confusion or discomfort. One enters dialogue to meet the other and to the extent that we are other, we have a place in dialogue. We need to be there for them and for ourselves.

## **Judaism Without Supernaturalism**

More than that, we represent a view of religion as the product of a community of people in dialogue with themselves over a very long period of time. Judaism for us is not a revealed set of doctrines or laws but the active log of the Jewish people's continuing voyage of spiritual discovery. We stress the sa-

credness of all the individual voices within the community of discussion, debate, controversy and conversation, the community we call the people of Israel. We understand that showing up and participating in Israel's dialogue and listening to other voices is far more important than whatever understanding might make sense to us today.

As Reconstructionist Jews, we bring that sensitivity to interreligious dialogue. At our best, we come to dialogue already committed to its basic principles. We want to be with other people of faith who are willing to speak with us out of their faith traditions and deeply held religious commitments about their lives, their beliefs, their hopes, and their fears and who are equally willing to listen to us. We understand that religious and cultural systems grow best when they interact with other religions and cultures.

It is our commitment to Judaism as the living and unfolding religious-based culture of the Jewish people that brings us to dialogue with other faiths and keeps us in dialogue with other faiths as together we discover more about the blessings we can offer each other and, in that way, more about the Divine Other, the Holy One, the source of all our blessings.



# “*Tehom El Tehom Koreh/* Deep Calls to Deep” – Contemplative Christianity and the Emerging Practice of Jewish Spiritual Direction

BY BARBARA EVE BREITMAN

**O**n the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah, two years after my husband died suddenly, I gave a *dvar torah* reflecting on Hagar’s theophany in the wilderness. I identified strongly with this single mother, cast into the desert, her relationship with home and family shattered. Like Hagar, feeling abandoned by, but still crying out to God in distress, I somehow entered a deeper relationship with the mystery we call God. With no human partner to accompany me on the journey through the desert, I experienced intimacy with a sensed Presence.

In my psychotherapy practice, I started hearing differently. Although much intuition is required to glimpse how the narrative of someone’s life fits together according to the paradoxical

logic of the unconscious, the new listening was more intuitive. Not only did I hear connections between peoples’ past relationships and their behavior in the present, but I began to sense a teleological unfolding in their narratives, some drawing toward the future, often as compelling as the urge to repeat or react to the past.

## Patterns of Connection

There were moments in peoples’ narratives in which the energy of life, of love, of creativity, of the call for justice seemed to be drawing people forward with more intentionality than could be explained by the ongoing thrust of maturation and development, or even by self-willed moral conviction.

I also glimpsed patterns of connec-

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tion within multiple layers of narrative that shimmered with meaning and symbolism greater than could be explained by simply connecting events in the stories. People were talking with me more about their spiritual yearnings and about God. After I shared some of this with a minister friend in my Clinical Pastoral Education group, she brought me a brochure from the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation, an “ecumenical Christian organization calling the people of God to deeper spiritual life for the world.”<sup>1</sup>

“Here; you might be interested in spiritual direction.”

## What Is Spiritual Direction?

Spiritual direction, about which I knew little, is a spiritual practice grounded in the Christian contemplative tradition. It draws historically on the practices of the early (third to fifth century) desert fathers and mothers; integrates the spiritual insights of great 16th century contemplatives like St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross; employs the exercises in spiritual discernment of St. Ignatius of Loyola; and includes as well the wisdom of other illumined teachers throughout church history.

The practice of spiritual direction has traditionally been identified with Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, and has continued to be practiced through the centuries in various Catholic orders. In contemporary American Christian communities, spiritual direction is being renewed for today’s seekers, and has spread to many Protestant

denominations.

As it is currently understood, spiritual direction involves a relationship among two or more people who meet regularly for the purpose of deepening their spiritual life and relationship with God, whoever or however they understand God to Be.

## Contemplative Practice

As a contemplative practice and not a counseling relationship, spiritual direction involves periods of resting in silence, reflecting on how the Source of Life, Being, the Holy One, Holiness, is experienced day to day, and how to be more attentive, aware, available and responsive to that Presence.

Because the Source of Life does not communicate as human beings do, one needs to cultivate the ability to discern how God’s Presence is manifest in the ordinary moments of life that can be traced through one’s narrative over time. The premise of spiritual direction is that, as with davening, Torah study, meditation or other spiritual disciplines, it is possible to become more adept at “hearing the still, small voice” through reflection, contemplation and practice.

Becoming a student in Shalem’s two-year training program in individual spiritual direction meant immersing myself in the Christian contemplative tradition, not as a scholar or academic, but as a person of faith. It meant opening myself to be touched by the spiritual wisdom of a tradition toward which I, as a Jew, had inherited a historical allergy, if not a phobia. Although

I have long been interested in the study of comparative religion, I initially had to struggle to enter the symbol system and mythos of Christianity.

For Christians, spiritual direction is grounded in an incarnational, Trinitarian theology that understands human beings to be capable both of being in direct relationship with and of receiving guidance from the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. This formulation is not only theologically challenging to Jews, it raises the question: Can a contemporary Jew experience or believe in the possibility of a personal relationship with God?

As a liberal Jew, I have never accepted the medieval idea of *hashgacha pratit*, Divine concern for individual human events. I have, however, experienced life crises occasioned by circumstances beyond my control and felt an inner call to which I needed to respond, "*Hineni*, Here I am." When the children of my first cousin were orphaned by the murder of their mother, I felt in the depth of my being that one of the reasons I had been put on this earth was to say, "Here I am," by assuming responsibility for the care of her daughters.

## Hearing Callings

As my life has unfolded, I have been presented with many opportunities, invitations — even demands — to use my unique abilities, talents, and gifts in service to others. I have experienced many treacherous junctures when I had to decide to "choose life" rather than proceed down a path that would lead to the deadening of my self, my cre-

ativity, my authenticity or my integrity. I had not previously thought of these as "callings" from God.

Having this language enabled me to name ineffable experiences that had profoundly impacted and shaped my choices and the direction of my life. The idea that in these moments of "calling" was evidence of a personal relationship with God was extremely compelling. It also enabled a deeper sense of identification with biblical figures portrayed as having been called by God. The concept of a personal relationship with God began to come into focus.

## "Holy Listening" and the Shema

In spiritual direction, one learns to practice "holy listening." This is listening as a contemplative discipline. As distinct from active listening or even empathic listening, we are not trying to figure anything out, or even to empathize with a person's feelings, although that might inevitably occur because our minds and emotional hearts are open.

Holy listening means cultivating an added dimension: listening with an inner attitude of receptivity, with relaxed attentiveness rather than focused concentration, with what Carol Ochs calls a stance of "attentive waiting."<sup>2</sup> It involves listening with the ear of our heart for intimations of divine presence, listening for how God's call might be emerging within the being and narrative of the other person and within ourselves as we listen to the other.

The central statement of the Jewish

faith, the Shema (Hear Israel, YHVH *Elohenu*, YHVH *Ehad*), declares that hearing is the quintessentially sacred act for Jews. Spiritual direction is a discipline through which we cultivate the kind of listening asked of us by the Shema. The director listens for how the Source of Life, *Ayn HaHayim*, is beckoning, drawing, inviting this person into deeper connection with herself, with others, with Creation; how Life is inviting this person into service.

## Encounters with the Holy

Because God is One and inheres in everything, the director can listen to the total life field of a person for how, through whom or through which experiences and circumstances the invitation is coming; the director can listen for where, how, when, through whom or through what experiences wisdom is being offered in response to that question. The director opens and listens for how Being is pressing for full presence, aliveness, expression in this person's life, how Being is moving this person at her depths.

In my earlier years of involvement in Jewish feminist communities, I had spoken of "our lives as Torah," understanding the stories of women's current encounters with the Holy to be as sacred as the journeys of our ancestors recorded in the Bible. I had not understood myself to be individually addressed by God, but I had experienced being part of a collective that was "standing again at Sinai,"<sup>3</sup> responding to a powerful urging to "go forth to a place we did not know,"<sup>4</sup> propelled by

the sense that giving voice to women's spiritual experiences was to "let more of God"<sup>5</sup> into the world.

I have found spiritual direction as a practice to be consistent with the feminist principle of giving primacy to peoples' direct encounters with the Holy, rather than ignoring or marginalizing experiences that do not conform to received tradition. People sometimes enter spiritual direction explaining that they have turned away from tradition because their experiences of the Holy are too different from the images of God they find in the Bible and prayerbook.

Spiritual direction not only supports people to give voice to their lived experiences of the Holy, but also enables them, with a Jewishly knowledgeable director, to connect these experiences to a richer Jewish language than they might previously have known to exist.

## Identifying Spiritual Types

Those who practice spiritual direction know that each individual will experience and name the Holy differently. A spiritual director needs awareness and sensitivity to different spiritual types: for some, God may be the One who urges them to work for social justice and *tikkun olam*; for others, God may be the Beloved who inspires devotion: for still others, God may be the Source of Creativity in nature, art or healing; for others, God may be most available through the exercise of the intellect and the process of study, or through direct perception and intuition: and for still others, any

talk of God or naming of God may feel idolatrous, though they may have had experiences of ineffable holiness.<sup>6</sup>

I therefore found the practice of spiritual direction to be consistent with the Jewish tradition of God's multivocality at Sinai. If, as a midrash on Psalm 29:4 states, each Israelite and every Jew to be born heard God at Sinai according to his/her own strength – "*Kol Adonai Ba-Koah*" – then spiritual direction is a discipline that enables people to develop the ability to hear how God might be communicating uniquely to them.

## Partners in Seeking

In introducing spiritual direction to Jewish seekers, it is important to note that the custom of spiritual friendship is not new to Judaism. The rabbi tells us in *Pirke Avot* 1:6 to "get yourself a friend" as a companion in religious matters. Hasidic rebbes advise that "You should see to it that you have a good friend with whom you can talk regularly about the service of God."<sup>7</sup> We are also heir to the legacy of rebbes who used their charismatic, esoteric capacities to discern the soul journeys of their Hasidim.

What is new to Judaism is a structured, contemplative discipline through which lay people (one need not be clergy to be a spiritual director) who seek a regular discipline of discerning God's presence in their lives can meet together and cultivate greater awareness and willingness on the spiritual path.

## Direct Apprehension vs. Mediation

Through my studies at Shalem, I came to see how important spiritual direction could become as a practice for contemporary Jews. However, I knew there was and continues to be, both historically and theologically, enormous tension within Judaism about whether human beings can commune directly with the mystery we call God, and more crucially, whether Jews will grant religious authority to such apprehensions.

There is, in fact, much that rabbis and Jewish scholars have to say on this subject. In a provocative essay in the "Special Issue on Theology" published in the journal *Conservative Judaism*, Martin Samuel Cohen demonstrates that this tension actually begins in the Bible:

The Torah repeatedly makes the point that seeing God is a fatal experience for human beings in all but the most extraordinary circumstances . . . [however] at the core of the spirituality of the Psalter is the idea, openly and unapologetically presented, that sensual communion with God is available to every pious Jew, to every seeker, who devotes his or her spiritual efforts to the quest for contact with the divine realm.<sup>8</sup>

Cohen demonstrates that "*TaNakh*," although indeed monolithic in its assumptions about the existence of God, presents anything but a unified concept of how human beings can know,

serve and commune with the divine realm."<sup>9</sup>

## Priests and Prophets

But Cohen goes further. He theorizes that the "spiritual program" of the Torah is the program of the priests who were hostile to the institution of prophecy and the sensual perception of God. It is the priests and the prophets "who together formed the twin poles of ancient Israelite spirituality," and "Judaism followed a specific path: the way of the priest."<sup>10</sup>

However, Cohen asserts, we have reached a moment in history when Jews "might do well to consider the path not taken and to consider the spirituality of the Psalter as a reasonable approach to developing the kind of faith in God they wish to motivate and lend meaning to their ritual observance."<sup>11</sup>

In a response to Cohen, Howard Addison further questions "whether the visual and aural presence of God is quite as absent in the Torah as Rabbi Cohen contends . . . although our tradition asserts that 'the spirit of prophecy departed from Israel after Malakhi,' there have been no lack of visions or visionaries among the Jewish people."<sup>12</sup>

Addison reformulates the question about direct experience vs. normative tradition: "For me, the question is not whether such experiences exist legitimately within Judaism, but rather 'What is the nature of such experiences? How do you know that it is God that is addressing you, and how within the bounds of normative Judaism should you respond?'"<sup>13</sup>

## Debate Over Revelation

In Talmud, the tension is expressed in terms of whether divine revelation stopped at Sinai or continues in the present. In the very *aggadah* (TB *Baba Metz'ia* 59b) that vouchsafes to the rabbis ultimate religious authority, and that is a proof-text declaring that for Jews revelation ceased at Sinai, there is still evidence of tension.

In a matter of halakhic dispute, Rabbi Eliezer invokes the intervention of Heaven to decide an issue of disagreement between himself and the other rabbis. In response to this invocation, God performs miracles and a *Bat Kol*, Heavenly Voice, is heard. Rabbi Jeremiah nevertheless concludes with the famous dictum: ". . . the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice because You have long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai . . . After the majority must one incline." God is then imagined to laugh joyously at being defeated by His sons.

Although Rabbi Eliezer is excommunicated for invoking God directly, the very presence of this story in the canon indicates the existence of tension about sources of religious authority even within the rabbinic academy. Although the rabbis definitively arrogate religious authority to themselves and the talmudic process, the tension as to whether spiritual wisdom comes through direct contact with the divine or solely through the mediation of normative religious institutions continues in later eras of Jewish history.

## Apprehending God's Presence

In a brilliant but brief study entitled "Devotion and Commandment," Arthur Green demonstrates how "a large number of Hasidic sources use Abraham . . . as a . . . way of discussing the tension they feel around the issue of commandment and spirit,"<sup>14</sup> between the primacy of Torah study and observance as the way of divine service vs. seeking direct apprehension of God's presence as the more important spiritual path.

Because Abraham is the exemplar of the pious man who heard and followed God's call prior to the Sinaitic revelation, he is a figure through whom Hasidic writers could express the tension they felt between accepting the classical authority of rabbinic Judaism (which recast Abraham as a Torah scholar) and their energetic, mystical yearning for *deveikut*, utter attachment to God.

## Divine Service

According to Green, this tension finds its most dramatic expression in the thought of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, who "compares two sorts of divine service, that of the commandments, or Judaism as we know it, and the service of God through devotion (*mesirut nefesh*) alone," concluding that "service through devotion alone is in fact superior."<sup>15</sup>

It is clear that for post-Holocaust and post-modern Jews, our belief in the existence of God, our capacity to trust any direct experience of the Holy,

much less our willingness to entertain the notion that communication from the Source of Life might be available in any discernable form to human beings has been strained beyond belief.

Our skepticism can only be intensified as God's name is invoked to justify terrorism on many sides of the Middle East conflict. And yet, contemporary Jews continue to yearn for and experience connection with YHVH, the Source of All Life. Many of the Jews who have such personal experiences with the Mystery we call God seek ways of communing with the divine, both within Jewish contexts and through the wisdom of other spiritual paths.

## Can We Learn from Christianity?

For centuries, Jews have learned from and integrated the wisdom of other philosophical and faith traditions. Jewish mystics and mysticism, in particular, have been deeply impacted by diverse forms of thought as Judaism has developed "as a minority religion in a variety of cultural environments."<sup>16</sup>

It is probably inevitable, however, that any contemporary borrowing from Christianity might seem particularly anathema. In learning from a Christian spiritual tradition, we not only have to face the resistance and theological problems generated by 2,000 years of Christian anti-Judaism and the more recent history of racial anti-Semitism, we must also confront our fears of assimilation in the uniquely challenging Christian milieu of the Americas.

I was therefore particularly moved to discover a model for interreligious learning that preserves the distinctiveness of each tradition while enabling a deep and transformative encounter with the other. The intellectual origins of the model can be found in the work of Jesuit scientist, theologian and visionary Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

### “Center to Center Union”

According to his famous formulation, “In any domain, whether it be cells of a body, the members of a society or the elements of spiritual synthesis, union differentiates.”<sup>17</sup> What de Chardin observed was that as forms of life unite in what he calls “center to center union,” they do not dissolve, disintegrate or metamorphose into the other, they actually become more richly and uniquely themselves.

This is the mystery of love between human beings, as it is the mystery of how increasingly complex life forms evolve biologically.

By touching each other at the creative core of their being, [individual elements] release new energy which leads to more complex units. Greater complexity leads to greater interiority, which, in turn, leads to more creative unions. Throughout the process, the individual elements do not lose their identity, but rather deepen and fulfill it through union.<sup>18</sup>

De Chardin believed that “center to center union” was a model for the kind

of interreligious encounter through which human consciousness could evolve to a higher stage of spiritual development, complexity and awareness of God.

### Social Constructivism

While de Chardin wrote prior to the post-modern critique of grand evolutionary schemas, Leonard Swidler, a professor in the religion department of Temple University, incorporates the crucial insights of social constructivism into a contemporary reformulation of de Chardin:

With the growing understanding that all perceptions of and statements about reality were — even if true — necessarily limited (the opposite of absolute, that is literally unlimited), the permission, and even the necessity, for dialogue with those who thought differently from us became increasingly apparent . . . But if we can no longer hold to an absolutist view of the truth . . . we must take certain steps so as not to be logically forced into the silence of total relativism . . . That is we need to engage in dialogue with those who have differing cultural, philosophical, social, religious viewpoints so as to strive toward an ever fuller perception of the truth of the meaning of things.<sup>19</sup>

At this point in history . . . the forces of planetization are bringing about an unprecedented com-



plexification of consciousness through the convergence of cultures and religions. . . . However, now that the forces of divergence have shifted to convergence, the religions must meet each other in center to center unions, discovering what is most authentic in each other, thereby releasing creative energy toward a more complexified form of religious consciousness.<sup>20</sup>

Such interreligious exchanges can enable a new global consciousness to emerge that “will not level all differences among peoples; rather it will generate . . . creative unions in which diversity is not erased but intensified.”<sup>21</sup>

## Learning and Enriching

This is precisely the kind of encounter I experienced at Shalem. I went to Shalem to learn from Christians about their contemplative tradition, but in the process, I reengaged Judaism with renewed energy, commitment and creativity. I also did not intend or expect to do any teaching about Judaism while at Shalem; however, I was strongly encouraged by Shalem’s faculty and students to share my Jewish knowledge.

I discovered that many contemporary Christians suffer because access to the roots of their own faith have been severed by 2,000 years of traumatic relationship between Christians and Jews. Their encounter with me as a Jew enriched their own Christian faith.

In the process of training spiritual directors both at the Reconstructionist

Rabbinical College and at a program called Lev Shomea (The Listening Heart) offered under the auspices of Elat Chayyim, I have discovered not only how desirous many Jews are to have a structured context for talking about their direct experiences of the Holy, but also how this practice has enabled rabbis and knowledgeable Jews, as well as unschooled seekers, to deepen their relationship with Judaism.

As I have been engaged in bringing the practice of spiritual direction into contemporary Jewish communities and articulating a Jewish theology in which to ground it, I find that classical Jewish sources and texts feel more alive to me. Though spiritual direction, as a specific form of spiritual practice, is being borrowed from the Christian contemplative tradition, the practice of keeping God before us always is central to Judaism.<sup>22</sup>

Any practice that enables us to deepen our connection with the living God deepens our relationship with the Source of Revelation in Judaism.

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1. From the Shalem Institute’s mission statement.

2. Carol Ochs and Kerry Olitzky, *Jewish Spiritual Guidance* (Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco, 1997).

3. This is an allusion to Judith Plaskow’s groundbreaking book of Jewish feminist theology, *Standing Again at Sinai* (Harper & Row, Publishers: San Francisco, 1990).

4. This experience was captured for contemporary seekers in Debbie Friedman’s song “Lechi Lach.”

5. The Kotzker Rebbe says: God is present where we let God in.

6. Tilden Edwards, *Spiritual Friend: Reclaiming the Gift of Spiritual Direction* (Paulist Press: New York 1980), 112-116.
7. Yitzchak Buxbaum, *Jewish Spiritual Practices* (Jason Aronson, Inc.: New Jersey, 1990), 669.
8. Martin Samuel Cohen, "Seeking God in the Bible," *Conservative Judaism*, Vol. LI, Number 2, Winter, 1999, 27.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 30.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Howard A. Addison, Response to Martin Cohen, *Ibid.*, 35.
14. Arthur Green, "Devotion and Commandment: The Faith of Abraham in the Hasidic Imagination" (Hebrew Union College Press: Cincinnati 1989), 19-20.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Moshe Idel, "'Unio Mystica' as a Criterion: Hegelian Phenomenologies of Jewish Mysticism" in *Doors of Understanding*, Steven Chase, ed. (Franciscan Press, 1997), 321.
17. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (Harper & Row: New York, 1961), 262.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Leonard Swidler, "The Age of Global Dialogue," in *Doors of Understanding*, *op. cit.*, 17.
20. *Ibid.*, 20-22.
21. *Ibid.*, 16-17.
22. "*Shiviti YHVH lenegdi tamid*; Place YHVH before you always" (Ps. 16:8) became the central verse in Jewish devotional art in the 18th and 19th centuries, up to the present. It forms the centerpiece of many synagogue plaques, as well as Jewish meditation objects, votive tablets and amulets that are named after the first word of the verse.

# Beyond the Noahide Laws

BY RICHARD HIRSH

**T**his second Torah portion of the year, Noah, like the first, Bereshit, is quite long; one might even say that the story of the flood covers a lot of ground. And like the first chapters of the Torah, the story is exceptional in its absence of connection to the primary concern of the Torah, namely, the story of the Jewish people, with the tiny exception of the mention of Abraham at the very end of Genesis 11. It often seems that the rabbis who devised the division of the Torah into weekly portions seemed intent on getting beyond the universal history of the first eleven chapters as quickly as possible, and so crammed them into two long liturgical assignments.

Perhaps they meant to be protective, trying to deflect Jews from excessive reflection on the mystical meanings of *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, the wonders of creation. Perhaps they were embarrassed by the sense of myth that is woven through the exaggerated narratives of the antediluvians. Or perhaps they simply thought that the sooner one got through this cosmic overture, the sooner one could get to the real story — the story of the Jewish people.

## Where the Torah Begins

We are familiar with Rashi's restate-

ment of Rabbi Yitzhak's question of Genesis 1:1: Why does the Torah start here instead of at Exodus 12, *hahodesh hazeh lachem rosh hodashim*, "this season [of the leaving of Egypt] is where your story begins." The answer offered is: lest the other nations come along later on and dispute the Israelite claim to the land of Canaan; God made the world and apportions the territory as God wishes. And in exactly this type of interpretation, we see a traditional understanding that the universal aspect of the Torah takes on meaning only in relationship to the particular story of the Jewish people. An analogy is Rosh HaShanah as *Yom Harat Olam*, the day the world is created — which just happens to fall on the first day of the Jewish year.

But these early stories, and especially the story of the flood and its aftermath, cannot be so easily neutralized or marginalized. If perhaps for no other reason than that Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and Noah are better known than Aaron and Miriam, Nadav and Avihu, and, *l'havdil*, Korah, Dathan and Aviram — to name but a few of the key characters in "our" part of the Torah — we are annually called back to the humbling realization that the whole world is not, in fact, Jewish.

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## The Noahide Laws

The story of Noah is the primary text from and through which classical Jewish tradition sought to understand the relationship of humanity at large to the God of Israel — and vice versa. This God also just happens to be, courtesy of the conundrum of monotheism, the one God of all creation, and by implication, the one God who must stand in some form of relationship to the other peoples of the earth.

To help mediate some of the tension inherent in this audacious claim, Jewish tradition speaks of the *shevah mitzvot bnai noah*, the seven commandments that are binding on humanity at large. (In the classical rabbinic imagination, the Jewish people are of course bound by the 613 commandments of the Torah.)

Rabbinic tradition derives these seven Noahide obligations primarily from Genesis 9:1-11. That text, like Exodus 20, which does not easily or clearly yield the “Ten” Commandments, does not clearly delineate seven laws that can be easily identified and enumerated. But through a combination of what the text says and what the rabbis infer, we end up with seven commandments with which gentiles must comply.

### Seven Laws of Humanity

According to David Novak,<sup>1</sup> the earliest citation of the seven Noahide laws occurs in the *Tosefta*, a rabbinic text dating to the late second century of the Common Era. In that text, we see that

the gentile population is obligated to:

1. establish a legal system (*dinim*)
2. reject idolatry (*avodah zarah*)
3. reject blasphemy (*gilelat Hashem*)
4. reject sexual immorality (*giluy arayot*)
5. reject bloodshed/murder (*shefichut damim*)
6. reject stealing (*ha-gezel*)
7. not consume meat torn from a live animal (*ever min ha-hai*)

In the Babylonian Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 56 AB) prohibitions on castration, sorcery, and mingling of plant/animal species are added to these seven. In the non-canonical Book of Jubilees (perhaps dated to the second century as well) the positive command to honor parents is included. But in most common as well as popular countings, the basic seven enumerated in the *Tosefta* are assumed.<sup>2</sup>

In comparison to the 613 *mitzvot* by which Jews are bound, the gentiles seem to get off fairly easy. And one can see the marketing wisdom of the saint formerly known as Saul (Paul), who, in the years following the death of Jesus, argued that gentiles could come into the “new covenant” without the burden of the Torah commandments.

### A Lot or a Little?

But while seven *mitzvot* may not seem like much, in that strand of rabbinic tradition that has no particular fondness or respect for gentiles, we find “the sages’ critical view of the pagan world that made them skeptical of the gentiles’ ability to fulfill even these few, very basic obligations. . . Nevertheless, with the notion of the Noahide laws

in the background, tolerant feelings toward the non-Jewish world do emerge.”<sup>3</sup>

When Israelite religion and later Judaism’s significant others were pagan nature religions or dualistic systems such as Zoroastrianism or gnostic mystery cults, it was perhaps easier to understand “that the overriding view of the non-Israelite world expressed in the Hebrew Bible [was] negative.”<sup>4</sup> But with the rise of Christianity and, several centuries later, Islam, Judaism’s significant others were no longer quite “them,” but in some peculiar way were sort of “us,” at least related in some way to us.

The Christian claim of universal salvation required some response on the part of Judaism. One talmudic position is *basedei umot haolam, yesh lahem belek l’olam haba*, the righteous of the other nations have a share in the world to come. And by the middle ages, Jewish religious authorities, under the influence of universalizing philosophy, in the context of cultural exchange, and out of social and political necessity, found themselves engaged in debate over whether Christians and Muslims were idolaters (*Akkum* [acronym for *ovdei kochavim umezalot* — literally, worshippers of stars and constellations]) or monotheists (*B’nai Noah*).

While there was debate, the majority view that eventually emerged among rabbinic authorities was that Christians and Muslims were not idolaters. This, of course, would have been of little concern or consequence to any Christians or Muslims, who presumably were not waiting for Jewish authorities to

rule on their respective faiths. But it does show one more step along the path of Judaism coming to terms with the possibility that other religions might have a glimmer of truth to them.

## Through a Jewish Prism

But even then, Jewish perspectives refracted the gentile world through a Jewish prism. Thus, Maimonides writes:

A gentile who accepts the seven commandments [of Noah] and observes them scrupulously is a righteous gentile and will have a portion in the world to come, provided that he accepts them and performs them because the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded them in the Torah and made known through Moses our teacher that the observance thereof had been enjoined upon the descendants of Noah even before the Torah was given. But if his observance is based on a reasoned conclusion he is not deemed a resident alien, or a righteous gentile, but/or one of their wise men.<sup>5</sup>

As in Rashi’s commentary to Genesis, we again see how gentile reality is but a pale reflex of Jewish centrality: If not for the Torah revealed to the Jews, gentiles would not know what they were supposed to believe and how they were supposed to act. In other words, gentiles who reason themselves and their society into a social compact

whereby the seven Noahide laws are foundational, still do not fulfill the faith requirement, regardless of their comportment. They pass the sociological test but not the religious one. They may be better to live among in this world, but they are not going to be our neighbors in the world to come.

## Modernity and Faith

The advent of modernity, with its tendency to push formerly exclusive religious and ethnic groups into collaboration, conversation, cooperation and conflict with each other, forced the issue of Judaism's relationship with other faiths to evolve again. To live harmoniously in a secular society involved the inevitable diminution of claims to exclusive salvation and possession of the one true faith. Perhaps a price that we pay, especially in America, is the modest and moderate and minimal meaning that we have often given to religion. As Dwight Eisenhower said: "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith — and I don't care what it is."<sup>6</sup>

The struggle of one religion to understand its affirmations in conversation with those who, with equal integrity, affirm different beliefs, is difficult. There is always the temptation to reduce faith to least common denominator terms. And there is always the temptation to affirm one's own tradition by denying the possibility of meaning in another's.

The Noahide discussion throughout Jewish history is one way in which Jews

have carried on the conversation about what constitutes the essential and non-negotiable beliefs and behaviors that transcend tribes and bind people into a common humanity. The Noahide tradition is on the one hand a repudiation of the exclusivity that denies that there can be more than one path to the same God. The Noahide tradition is thus a corrective to the fundamentalist impulse to demonize and to ostracize those who are "not us."

But it is equally a repudiation of relativism: not all choices are equal, not all beliefs are valid, and not all actions are acceptable. Beyond the distinctions that exist between groups, we search for basic behaviors of humanity to which we can hold anyone responsible. The Noahide tradition is thus a corrective to the relativism that would prevent us from affirming one belief over another in a values-neutral universe.

## Beyond the Noahide Laws

But the Noahide laws can only take us so far on the journey toward rethinking both our own religious tradition and our relationship to those living in and through other religious traditions. As long as the supernatural assumptions of the origins of religion, sacred text and religious identity remain intact, we will be unable to escape the grudging tolerance that often substitutes for an embrace of the opportunities — and risks — of religious pluralism.

The Noahide laws are not evidence of a liberal appreciation of the validity of other faiths, wrote Mordecai Kaplan:

Maimonides . . . maintained that for a gentile to conform to the Noahide laws was not enough. To obtain salvation he must look upon those laws as revealed by God. Since the only evidence of any revelation is to be found in the Torah of Israel, the achievement of salvation by a Gentile was thus made to depend on his recognizing Israel as the chosen vehicle of divine salvation for mankind.<sup>7</sup>

We are, the Torah suggests at the end of *parashat Noah*, destined or doomed to descend into differing tribes. Pre-modern societies affirm that there can be only One Truth among those tribes. The Other is not different; the Other is wrong. Modernity affirms that any or all of those tribes may hold A Truth, but that no one holds The Truth. The Other is not necessarily wrong; the Other may only be different.

The difference in outlook is not without consequences. In our post-September 11 world, the implications of exclusivist religious faith are all too evident. We are, Andrew Sullivan wrote, “fighting for religion against one of the deepest strains in religion there is. And not only our lives but our souls are at stake.”<sup>8</sup>

The tradition of the Noahide laws suggests that the future may well depend on which form of religion — pluralistic or exclusive — gains ascendancy within all of the religions that seek, in their own way, to discover God and what God expects of us. Perhaps what matters most is not the presumption that God has, as it were, pointed out only one true religion, but that we begin to think instead of the One True God toward which differing religions may yet learn to point.

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1. Novak, David, *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism* (New York and Toronto, The Edwin Mellon Press, 1983), 3.

2. See, for example, J.H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London, Soncino Press, 1972) 33, n.7.

3. Rembaum, Joel, “Dealing With Strangers” in *Etz Hayyim Torah and Commentary* (Philadelphia, 2001, The Rabbinical Assembly and the Jewish Publication Society), 1381.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Malachim*, 8:11.

6. Quoted in Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (New York: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1955), 84.

7. Kaplan, Mordecai M., *The Future of the American Jew* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1948) 223.

8. Sullivan, Andrew: “This Is A Religious War,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 7, 2001, 52.

# *Dabru Emet* — A Reconstructionist Perspective

BY NANCY FUCHS-KREIMER

**I**n contrast to other religious systems in the world, Judaism and Christianity have much in common. Both agree, in their traditional forms, that God works in history and that historical events reveal to us God's intentions for God's chosen people, the Jews, and ultimately for humankind. As Richard Rubenstein<sup>1</sup> pointed out, Yo-hannan ben Zakkai and Justin Martyr shared the view that the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans was part of the unfolding of a divine drama. The difference was in their understanding of that drama.

Because Christianity's founding "myth" (as Rubenstein referred to it) emerged out of Jewish history, Jews would inevitably be players in the Christian view of the world. Jews, on the other hand, had their own "myth" of Jewish history in which Christians played a far less important role.

Nevertheless, both Judaism and Christianity have classically affirmed revelation in history and scripture as a record of that revelation. Both affirm God's ongoing involvement in history.

Not surprisingly, the cataclysmic destruction of European Jewry in the heart of Western Christendom has occasioned profound thinking in both communities.

## **Theological Revolution**

During the last half century, a theological revolution has taken place within Christianity. The recognition of Christianity's complicity in creating the conditions leading to the Holocaust provoked some Christians to acknowledge the ongoing validity of Judaism and the Jewish people. This has led some to efforts at responsible rethinking of God and of Christianity.

In the interreligious world, conferences and symposia, dialogues and joint publications have flourished. Theologians have devoted large portions of their professional lives to reconstructing Christian thought in light of the new awareness of the ongoing validity of Judaism.<sup>2</sup>

Over the last decades, increasing numbers of Roman Catholic and Prot-

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estant groups have published theological statements with explicit condemnations of the Catholic Church's historic teaching of contempt, and clear affirmations of Judaism and the Jewish people as enduringly valid.<sup>3</sup> It was the courage and creativity of this work that inspired me as a graduate student to specialize in the field of Jewish-Christian Relations.

## Why No Jewish Response?

Yet despite all this activity, until recently no organized Jewish body has come together to issue a corresponding statement concerning Christianity and its place within Jewish thought. Several factors contributed to this. Perhaps most obvious, unlike the Catholic Church, the Jewish people lacks a Vatican, and while we do have institutions similar to those of the Protestant churches that drafted, voted upon and passed the resolutions concerning Jews and Judaism, Jewish groups do not often engage in theological pronouncement.

When theological statements have been made, such as in *Emet v'Emunah*, the Conservative Movement's 1988 declaration of Jewish doctrine, other faiths have been dealt with as a group without singling out Christianity for special treatment.<sup>4</sup>

Quite simply, the issues of Judaism and Jews are more important theologically for Christians than the issues of Christianity and Christians are for Jews. Although Franz Rosenzweig and a few other theologians have explored the notion of a Jewish theology of

Christianity, it would be fair to say that the endless fascination of Christians with Judaism has not been reciprocated by most Jews.<sup>5</sup>

## Pluralism and Respect

We believed in pluralism and mutual respect for all other faiths. We hoped that Christians would not persecute us or try to convert our children. Beyond that, we did not see Christianity as needing any special response. On the other hand, how the Holocaust speaks to our own understanding of God, of chosenness and of history remains an important question for Jewish theology. Rubenstein suggested in the 1960s that it would lead many Jews to "demythologize" the very world view we share with Christians.

Nevertheless, as Jews continued to appreciate the positive results of Christian self-examination and to enlist repentant Christians in various Jewish causes, an uncomfortable asymmetry emerged. While Christians were profoundly interested in talking about God, Jews appeared content to reap the benefit from Christians' more benign view of Jews — but remained reluctant to discuss theology. Jewish scholars who had the benefit of sustained relations with Christians through their work began to wonder if the Jewish community could do more.

## Origins of *Dabru Emet*

In the mid-1990s, the Baltimore-based Institute for Jewish-Christian Studies convened a group of Jewish scholars who

believed that it was past time at least to acknowledge the changes within Christianity, and to let Christians know that the struggles they were going through to rethink their own faith were not unheeded by all Jews. Beyond that, the group wondered if the time had come for a more daring step, for Jews to challenge their own thinking and to offer a thoughtful communal response to this unprecedented change in the relationship between the two faiths.

The group conceived of a book of essays and a public statement that would offer an affirmation of Christianity parallel to the one Christian bodies have been publishing about Judaism. The statement that emerged — *Dabru Emet* (“Speak the Truth,” after the words of Zechariah 8:16) — was written by four highly regarded professors of Jewish studies: Tikva Frymer-Kensky of the University of Chicago, David Novak of the University of Toronto, Peter Ochs of the University of Virginia, and Michael A. Signer of the University of Notre Dame. It was published in *The New York Times* (and several other newspapers) on September 10, 2000 with 170 signatures of rabbis, Jewish scholars and intellectuals, including some leading Reconstructionist rabbis.<sup>6</sup>

I was an early member of the group (although no longer active when the statement idea developed), a signer of the statement, and a contributor to the book that was published in conjunction with the statement.<sup>7</sup> I signed the statement because of my respect for my colleagues, and to honor and support the venture. I understood that this was

an important political gesture and that, subtleties of belief aside, I shared the intention of the enterprise and admired the motives and good will of the authors.

## Jews React to *Dabru Emet*

Not surprisingly, Christians who care about these matters were delighted by this conciliatory and pioneering gesture. The reaction among Jews was more varied. Irving Greenberg, writing on Beliefnet.com, called it “the most positive affirmation of Christianity ever made by a committed Jewish group” and praised its authors for their courage. Other Jewish leaders, however, strongly dissented.

The statement about the Holocaust drew the most emotional responses. Many Jews felt that Christians had been too easily “let off the hook.” James Rudin of the American Jewish Committee argued that the statement had been too generous in its appraisal of the role of Christianity in the Holocaust. He pointed out that it was ironic that while the Jewish statement said, “Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon,” the United Methodist Church had recently referred to the Holocaust as “the catastrophic culmination of a long history of anti-Jewish attitudes and actions in which Christians, and sometimes the Church itself, have been deeply implicated.”<sup>8</sup>

Obviously, the statement reflected the setting in which it emerged. The Christians with whom Jews tended to be in dialogue were now doing such a superb job of self critique that 170 Jews

felt it was a moment in history in which they could be the ones saying, “It was not so bad after all.” In another time or place, such a statement by Jews would have been inconceivable.

## Jewish Objections

A longer and more sustained critique of *Dabru Emet* was launched by Jon D. Levenson, a Harvard Bible scholar writing in *Commentary* magazine in December 2001. In April 2002, a series of letters to the editor appeared in which the thrust of Levenson’s critique was endorsed by such scholars as Michael Wyschodrod, David Berger and Jacob Neusner, while the authors of the statement and other scholars wrote to defend it. One of the goals of the original statement, that of provoking dialogue within the Jewish community on these matters, appears to have been met.

Levenson began his critique by lambasting the “earnest and anodyne platitude” with which the document concludes, “Jews and Christians must work together for justice and peace.” Levenson had a chuckle over that, remarking that it “no doubt provoked dismay among those bent on working apart in the service of injustice and war.”<sup>9</sup> (Regrettably, the irenic tone, respectful speech and good manners Jews use in interreligious dialogue are often woefully absent in intrareligious Jewish dialogue.)

But a more serious critique followed. Reacting to the first major dictum in the statement, “Jews and Christians worship the same God,” Levenson wrote:

Jews have not always been convinced that Christians worship the same God. Maimonides, for example, the great Sephardic legal authority and philosopher of the 12th century, explicitly classifies Christianity as idolatry, thus forbidding contact with Christians of the sort permitted with practitioners of other, non-idolatrous religions. Even in the medieval Ashkenazic world, where a very different view of Christianity obtained, some authorities interpreted the monotheistic affirmation of the *Shema*, the mandatory daily declaration of Jewish faith, as an explicit denial of the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>10</sup>

One could argue with Levenson on his own terms that the Ashkenazi tradition has found room for Christians as non-idolaters and that Menachem HaMeiri, Moses Rivkes, Jacob Emden, Elijah Benamozegh and Israel Lifschitz, to name the most prominent, viewed Christianity not only as ethical monotheism, but attested to the religio-ethical redemptive role of Christianity in human society — often in language and ideas far more bold than those in *Dabru Emet*.<sup>11</sup>

## Reconstructionist Dissent

Although I signed the statement, like Levenson I am uncomfortable with the theology underlying the statement that we “worship the same God.” Here, however, Levenson — an Orthodox Jew — and I — a Reconstructionist

— part company. In fact, our concerns are photographic negatives of one another, diametrically opposite critiques.

Levenson worried that the statement was too conciliatory, implying a kind of relativism when it comes to theological truths rather than affirming Judaism's own unique and, presumably, truer, ones. My issue is just the opposite. As a Reconstructionist, I do not believe that Judaism holds special theological truths that ought to be clarified, kept distinct from other truths and defended.

Levenson is correct, of course, that his approach would certainly be more faithful to the way Jews have understood their relationship to Christian beliefs throughout history. But like those who wrote the statement, I do not agree that such "faithfulness" is desirable today. My problem with the statement is not that it is cedes too much in the way of truth, but rather that it presumes to know too much.

## Religion As Human Construct

I come to interreligious dialogue with an assumption that our theological claims, just like those of Christianity and, for that matter, other religious traditions, are creative efforts on the part of men and women to express in human language their experience of God. So, the opening claim — "Jews and Christians worship the same God" — seems to me to be a strange assertion. There is only one God and so, by definition, all human beings worship the "same God." So, too, do I find presumptuous Levenson's claim that this

is "a question of the identity of God himself,"<sup>12</sup> surely a matter about which none of us know much at all.

I believe what the authors were trying to say (and what I, as Reconstructionist would have said) is that Christians and Jews are on historically connected and somewhat related paths toward that God. What the statement in fact did was to mirror what recent Christian theological statements had offered the Jews: we know something about religious truth and we are now deeming your tradition to be in the inner circle of those "in the know." Levenson was concerned that the statement gives in too easily on matters of truth. My concern is that we are treating both the Christian and Jewish traditions as "true" in a way that I do not understand either of them to be.

In my view, the most we can say is that historically the two spiritual traditions reveal close connections. I agree with Levenson that they also have some strong divergences. I see no compelling reason to privilege Christianity over other faiths as a theological compatriot, except in terms of historical development.

## Heresy in Dialogue

This last statement is quite heretical in the Jewish-Christian dialogue world, where a cozy kind of compact has developed in which we each find room for the other in our narrative concerning our special place in God's plan. At the heart of the new mutual acceptance of Jews/Judaism and Christians/Christianity is a continuing interest in the

issue of the chosen people. In fact, Christianity makes very little sense apart from the “chosen people” doctrine, a challenge for those of us who find the whole idea problematic.

Rabbi David Rosen, the Interreligious Affairs Director of the American Jewish Committee based in Jerusalem, was a supporter of the statement. He wants to go even further :

A serious Jewish theology of Christianity will need to go further than simply respecting “Christians’ faithfulness to their revelation; it requires an understanding of the significance of that revelation in terms of the Divine plan for humanity.<sup>13</sup>

I share the desire to be conciliatory, but honesty forces me to ask: In what sense do we mean to be using this theological language? Would it take away from the power of what we are engaged in to speak more openly about the way in which many of us understand this language as metaphoric and mythic? And if it is, in fact, human stories we are spinning about an unknowable divine reality, then what are the implications for what we want to say to and about one another?

## Implications for Israel

I agree with Rubenstein that the language Jews and Christians use to talk about God’s work in history is the language of myth. Reifying these myths is a risky enterprise. There are certain obvious benefits, of course, in encour-

aging the mythic language of God, chosenness and history, especially when it comes to discussions of modern day Israel. This is not lost on the authors of the statement, who welcome Christian support for a Jewish State in what the authors of the statement call “the Promised Land.” The statement goes on to say:

Christians appreciate that Israel was promised — and given — to Jews as the physical center of the covenant between them and God. Many Christians support the state of Israel for reasons far more profound than mere politics. As Jews we applaud this support.

Sounds good? But perhaps we are too quick in our applause. Do we really want support for Israel that is based on an understanding of “God’s promises to His people,” promises that many of us have long since demythologized in our own thinking, promises that encourage what for some of us are dangerous trends within our own community ?

## Philo-Semitism Ascendant

For centuries, Jews were demonized; now, in some Christian circles, philo-Semitism reigns. Yet, what we cannot be, as long as we agree with the Christians on our supernatural status as a people, is simply human — neither saints nor sinners. Do we really want to continue being players in another community’s myth? Perhaps we have little choice, but we need not encourage it.

It is understandable that at a time when the Jewish people feels increasingly isolated in the world, we would be eager for support and delight in a shared religious language that appears to motivate Christians to be our allies. On the other hand, such support may not be the most helpful to our long-term interests. In any event, the ultimate issue is not strategies for support of Israel but rather intellectual integrity. Can I in good faith support Christians in believing “Israel was promised to the Jews” when I do not believe that myself?

I welcome the dialogue and I applaud Christian efforts at self-analysis and reconstruction. Although I know many Christians are more comfortable speaking with me within our shared mythic language, I need to hold fast to a broader view that is consistent with a Reconstructionist understanding of religion. That means that despite the interest in the Christian world in having a special relationship with Jews and our desire to reflect back their self-understanding and to reciprocate their sense of intimacy with us, I believe that, to recast the opening statement of *Dabru Emet*, “all people worship the same God.”

## Dialogue Beyond Christianity

I am interested in dialogue with many faiths, not only Christians, and so the claim in *Dabru Emet* that “we rejoice that, through Christianity, hundreds of millions of people have entered into a relationship with the God of Israel” is more than I would want to say.

The implication of that statement is that it would be good for non-Jewish non-Christians to convert to Christianity. I am not sure that Jews want to offer that message to the various non-Christians with whom they are in dialogue. I am quite sure it is not a message that I can affirm.

Ironically, *Dabru Emet* appeared on the scene at a time when the question of how Jews and Christians see one another is becoming less and less central. Will Herberg’s America of *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* is disappearing.<sup>14</sup> Increasingly, people are identifying with secularism or secular “spirituality.”

Perhaps it is not so ironic. As Eugene Borowitz teaches: “Judaism has far more in common with Christianity than with secularism gone pagan . . . Judaism and Christianity are at least united in having a common enemy.”<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, Muslims (who will outnumber Jews in America in several decades) and members of Eastern religions are participating in the interreligious conversation, although with greater complexity since 9/11, a complexity that should not deter us from persevering in the much needed conversation. Now that we Jews and Christians are not the only players, we are drawn even closer to one another.

## Concerns About Survival

What will be the impact of Jewish-Christian dialogue on Jewish continuity? Again, Levenson’s critique is quite on target, although as a Reconstructionist I would come to a different conclusion than he about what to do with

the resulting problem. Levenson took issue with the pronouncement toward the end of *Dabru Emet* that “A new relationship between Jews and Christians will not weaken Jewish practice.” He argued that the statement was too glib when it concluded that interreligious dialogue will not lead to assimilation, intermarriage, etc. This we cannot know. As he points out,

communities that have largely overcome their animosity and moved to mutual respect, as Jews and Christians have done to a significant extent in the United States, must look elsewhere for such reinforcements to group identity as existed under the older and more contentious arrangement. Under any conditions, the risks are higher for the smaller community — that is, the Jews.<sup>16</sup>

I quite agree. But the proper response may not be to build higher walls and stronger boundaries.

Strangely enough, Richard Rubenstein’s own views were not so different from Levenson’s on this question. While he personally no longer believed in the Jewish mythic understanding of the Jewish people and their history, he concluded

The Jewish religious mainstream will, within the foreseeable future, consist primarily of those who affirm faith in the God of history and the election of Israel . . . covenant and election appear to be indispensable to normative Judaism.<sup>17</sup>

## The Reconstructionist Wager

Reconstructionism is making a different wager. In the Reconstructionist community, we have abandoned claims to being the chosen people or those in possession of special truths. We are far from certain that we need not worry about assimilation. Actually, we are very concerned about the risks involved in living in an open, pluralistic society.

We live this way not because we are sure of Jewish continuity but because that is how we can be true to our own best insights and understanding. We hope, and have some evidence to support our optimism, that Jews will continue to find Judaism meaningful and worthwhile even if they do not see it as making theological claims that are truer than others. Rather, they will come to love and cherish the uniquely Jewish language and traditions and sancta with which we celebrate our lives.

In that context, dialogue with other faiths enriches us, because it allows us to share with all people of faith and spirit our common humanity and desire to tell meaningful stories to ourselves about our sojourn on this increasingly frightening earth. The maturing conversation between Jews and Christians, whose traditional stories overlap in such profound ways, is, in this context, certainly to be desired.

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1. “Person and Myth in the Judaeo-Christian Encounter,” in *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism*, (Bobb-Merril, 1966).

2. See, for example, Paul van Buren, *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality*

(three volumes, New York: Harper and Row, 1983).

3. The literature is vast. For a review as of the late 1970s, see Michael B. McGarry, *Christology after Auschwitz* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).

4. "Theological humility requires us to recognize that although we have but one God, God has more than one nation. Our tradition explicitly recognizes that God entered into a covenant with Adam and Eve, and later with Noah and his family as well as His special covenant with Abraham and the great revelation to Israel at Sinai. It is part of our mission to understand, respect, and live with the other nations of the world, to discern those truths in their cultures from which we can learn, and to share with them the truths that we have come to know." *Emet ve-Emunah* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1988).

5. For an exposition of Rosenzweig's theology of Christianity, see H.J. Schoeps, *The Jewish-Christian Argument: A History of Theologies in Conflict* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 132 ff.

6. To view the statement and a list of all signatories, see <http://www.icjs.org/what/njsp/index.html>.

7. "Redemption: What I Have Learned

From Christians," in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, eds. Frymer-Kensky, Novak, Ochs, Sandmel, Signer (Colorado: Westview Press, 2000).

8. James Rudin, [http://www.jcrelations.net/stmnts/njsp\\_dabru\\_emet.htm](http://www.jcrelations.net/stmnts/njsp_dabru_emet.htm).

9. Jon D. Levenson, "How Not to Conduct Jewish-Christian Dialogue," *Commentary*, December 2001, 33.

10. *Ibid.*, 37.

11. David Rosen, in an address given at the 20th anniversary celebration of the Dutch Council of Christians and Jews (OJEC) at Tilburg, the Netherlands, November 6, 2001, [http://www.bc.edu/bc\\_org/research/cjl/articles/rosen.htm](http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/research/cjl/articles/rosen.htm).

12. Levenson, *op.cit.*, 33.

13. David Rosen, *op.cit.*

14. Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, (New York: Doubleday, 1960).

15. Eugene Borowitz, "On Theological Dialogue with Christians," in *Exploring Jewish Ethics* (Detroit: Wayne State Press, 1990), 394.

16. Levenson, *op.cit.*, 37

17. Richard Rubenstein, "Naming the Unnameable; Thinking the Unthinkable" (a review of Arthur Cohen's *The Tremendous*), *Journal of Reform Judaism*, Spring 1984, 54.



# Sacred Speech — Sacred Communities

BY MARGARET MOERS WENIG<sup>1</sup>

To the rabbis, gossip was a serious crime: “One who speaks *lashon hara*<sup>2</sup> [gossip] . . . denies the fundamental principal of the existence and authority of God” (B.T. *Arachin* 15b). “God does not accept the prayers of one who speaks *lashon hara*” (*Zohar, M’zora*). “*Lashon hara* is the cause of our exile” (B.T. *Yoma* 9b, *Gittin* 57b).

In contrast, anthropologists, philosophers and feminists enumerate the crucial roles that gossip plays, “conveying information without which,” as Sisela Bok has put it, “neither groups nor societies could function.”<sup>3</sup> Who among us could function without gossip? Who among us would want to? And yet, most of us also know from experience the serious damage gossip can cause.

The friction between these conflicting attitudes sparks a debate that sheds new light upon a complicated issue and challenges us to reconsider our ideas and alter our behavior. It is impossible to study the laws of *lashon hara* without reaching a new level of consciousness about our use of words. At the same time, it is also impossible to study the traditional prohibitions against *lashon hara* without feeling the need to

argue with them, revise them or adapt them. This process of study can help us use the power of speech for good and not for evil, for the creation of sacred communities rather than for their destruction.

## *Lashon Hara* Overheard

- In her sermon, the rabbi is comparing and contrasting the religious traditions of Judaism and Islam. A member of the congregation happens to be a scholar of Islam. In his view, the rabbi’s portrait of Islam is simplistic at best, a dangerous distortion at worst. He finds it difficult to sit through the rest of the service, difficult to concentrate on the remaining prayers. For him, the sermon has undermined the rabbi’s credibility. When, at the *kiddush*, another member says, “Wasn’t that an interesting sermon?” the scholar of Islam blurts out exactly what he thought.
- A synagogue nominating committee is meeting to choose a slate. When one potential nominee is mentioned, someone says, “I’ve worked with him. He makes many promises and ful-

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fills few. He's disorganized and forgets deadlines. When he loses his temper, watch out!" The committee passes over that proposed nominee. When the slate is made public, the member who was overlooked is disappointed. He is a longtime member and wanted to serve the congregation as a trustee. He mentions to a friend, "I don't understand what happened. I would have made a great trustee." The friend, who happened to be on the nominating committee, tells him why his candidacy was rejected.

- A student's paper is severely criticized by a professor. "Look at this," the student says to friends, showing them the professor's comments. As a result, none of the friends registers for a course taught by that professor.
- Teenage girls at a sleepover get to talking about their classmates. When one mentions Max, Sarah and Jessica roll their eyes. Allison, who is also at the sleepover, happens to be one of Max's good friends. On Monday morning, Max says something nice to Allison about Sarah and Jessica, who stopped to talk with him in the hallway. "You know, Max, they don't really like you," Allison tells him.
- The local paper carries the story of the resignation of a rabbi accused of having an affair before he and his wife had separated. At a party, a few members of the congregation are discussing their rabbi's resignation. After all, it's in the paper, it's common knowledge. Another guest

pipes up, "Jewish leaders are so hypocritical. That's why I'd never join a synagogue."

## Laws of *Lashon Hara*

"Who is the person who desires life (*hafetz hayim*) . . . ? Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking guile" (Ps. 34:13-14). The rabbis' prohibitions against *lashon hara* were collected and expanded by Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan, who in 1873 published anonymously the *Sefer Chofetz Chayim*. This teacher of musar (ethics) came to be known by the title of his book. Zelig Pliskin, in *Guard Your Tongue: A Practical Guide to the Laws of Lashon Hara Based on Chofetz Chayim*,<sup>4</sup> makes the Chofetz Chayim eminently accessible to the English reader. According to the Chofetz Chayim: We are "forbidden to relate anything derogatory about others. If a derogatory statement is true, it is termed *lashon hara*. If it is false, even partially so, it is termed *motzi shem ra* (defamation of character) and the offense is more severe. . . ." <sup>5</sup> Reporting to someone that another has acted or spoken against him, called *rechilus* (tale-bearing), is also prohibited. When *lashon hara* (including *motzi shem ra* and *rechilus*) is spoken, no fewer than 31 biblical commandments are violated.<sup>6</sup> Among them:

- Do not utter (or accept) a false report (Ex. 23:1).
- You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people (Lev. 19:16).
- You shall not take vengeance nor bear a grudge against the children of your

people (Lev. 19:18).

- Cursed be one who smites his neighbor secretly (Deut. 27:24).

The greater the number of people who hear one's *lashon hara*, the greater the sin. Those who habitually gossip (*baalei lashon hara*) are guilty of a much graver sin . . . One who constantly speaks *lashon hara* commits sins greater than idolatry, adultery, and murder...<sup>7</sup>

## Broad Understanding

The Chofetz Chayim defines *lashon hara* broadly: We are forbidden

- to show someone's letter or other writing to others in order to belittle the writer, even if we make no comment;
- to convey *lashon hara* through hints and signs, hand or finger motions, facial expressions, coughs, winks, tone of voice;
- to recount derogatory information that is already common knowledge;
- to speak *lashon hara* in jest;
- to take revenge on someone by telling others that she refused to or failed to help us;
- to make derogatory remarks about another person even if we do not identify the subject of the remarks;
- to discuss someone's misdeeds even with a person who witnessed them along with us;
- to discuss a person's negative character traits;
- to ask for information about someone from an enemy or competitor of that person;
- to say negative things about our boss to our spouse or to say negative things

about our spouse to our best friend;

- to make any statement, even if not explicitly derogatory, that might cause financial loss, physical pain, mental anguish or any damage to reputation;
- to make any derogatory comment, even if it causes no harm;
- to say something derogatory about a person in his presence or to his face if others may hear it;
- to disparage groups, a particular community, groups of Jews or all Jews;
- to implicate another person in order to exonerate ourselves;
- to reveal any personal or professional information about people that they themselves admitted to us, even if they did not request confidentiality;
- to speak favorably about another person lest the hearer take advantage of the information and with it harm the subject;
- to praise another person excessively lest a listener be provoked to disagree;
- to make a seemingly neutral comment, such as "Have you seen Sam lately?" if it may provoke others to speak ill of him;
- not only to speak *lashon hara* but also to listen to *lashon hara*;
- to sit in synagogue or in class next to someone who speaks *lashon hara*;
- to speak ill of a *talmid chacham* (a scholar), in his presence or absence. We are forbidden to ridicule the teaching of a *talmid chacham*. If a *talmid chacham* is the practicing rabbi of a community or a *rosh yeshiva*, belittling him is an egregious sin.<sup>8</sup>

The above list is daunting. Who among us has not violated one or more of those prohibitions? Is the list too broad? Are some of the prohibitions im-

possible to observe? Do some of the above forms of derogatory speech actually serve a positive social function? Even the Chofetz Chayim permits speaking and listening to *lashon hara* under certain circumstances. Before we take exception to the wide-ranging prohibitions, however, we would do well to remember the damage *lashon hara* can cause and thus the reasons to take seriously prohibitions against it.

## Dangers of *Lashon Hara*

At the very least, *lashon hara* can waste time. Teenagers may spend hours each day gossiping with friends, in person, on the phone or by sending “instant messages” on the Internet. For some teenagers, *lashon hara* may supplant homework, pleasure reading, music, chores, physical exercise or sleep.

Worse than a waste of time, *lashon hara* may damage a growing child’s self-esteem. Like teasing or taunting to a kid’s face, *lashon hara* behind a child’s back, which influences the way other kids treat him, can seriously damage a child’s self-esteem. Children who do not match the profile of the majority of students because they are black, or gay, or immigrants, or short/fat/skinny or because they don’t wear cool clothes, may become prime subjects for *lashon hara*. In those cases, *lashon hara* begins in prejudice and subsequently promotes and reinforces prejudice.

Adults, no less than teenagers, may spend inordinate amounts of time speaking *lashon hara*. *Lashon hara* that damages the reputation of an adult may prevent her from earning a living. The

“blackballing” that was characteristic of the McCarthy era left many out of work. On a larger scale, *lashon hara* about an entire group of people, broadcast from pulpits, over the radio or on the Web can lead to racial/ethnic/religious hatred and to violence. Jews have often been the victims of such forms of *lashon hara*.

Even when it does not lead to discrimination or violence against the subject of the gossip, *lashon hara* can do violence to values we hold dear, privacy and truth among them. Rabbi Margaret Holub writes, “When other people intervene by telling someone information about us, they are violating our control of our personal information, and this can feel like theft . . .”

Truth, too, is compromised by *lashon hara*. Even when the speaker is not guilty of intentional distortion, still, he is presenting, at best, only one side of the story. Since standards of proof are rarely met in gossip, *lashon hara* violates the principle: innocent until proven guilty. Moreover, even if *lashon hara*, when first spoken, could be objectively determined to be “fair,” with each retelling (as anyone who has played the game of “telephone” well knows), the story becomes less and less accurate.

*Lashon hara* may sometimes be motivated by an unconscious desire to avoid some truth. “It is easier to talk about other people than to talk about ourselves,” writes Holub. “It is easier to whisper, ‘I think so and so is gay . . .’ than to talk about our own anxiety about gayness.” Gossiping with a good friend or co-worker about painful situations at home or at work may calm

us down enough to enable us to tolerate bad situations. While in some cases learning to tolerate what we can not afford to change may be a healthy strategy, other times, says Judy Pritchett in conversation with Margaret Holub, “gossip, by relieving anxiety, [may] allow us to [avoid] making necessary changes.”

## Impact on Communities

As *lashon hara* can affect the lives of individuals or threaten the safety of ethnic groups, so can it undermine the well-being of a small community. People may flee from or avoid assuming leadership roles in communities in which backbiting is rampant, privacy is not honored and people are constantly being judged. In a congregation in which “nothing is communicated face to face, and [the rabbi is always suspected of] an ulterior motive,”<sup>10</sup> how many young people (including the rabbi’s children) will aspire to become rabbis? And when it is the rabbi who is known for spreading gossip, what child of that congregation would grow up longing to follow in her rabbi’s footsteps?

*Lashon hara* can soil a sacred community. As a past president, I had the unfortunate opportunity to hear first-, second- and third-hand gossip, mostly untrue, or at best, only partially true. . . . Perhaps the most damaging gossip was probably around our rabbi. We los[t] members, teachers, staff . . . Gossip about our rabbi hurt important temple relationships with local Jewish organizations, hindered

ties with the non-Jewish . . .<sup>11</sup>

Some of the most dispiriting encounters were those I had as temple president. Mostly they were talking about the rabbi, assuming the worst about his conduct or motives, discrediting him in ways that range from petty to slanderous. . . . Sometimes people raised legitimate concerns with me in sensitive ways. At other times, I felt that people were cruel. The net effect was that the synagogue felt less like a sanctuary, less holy, than it might have.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, our inability to control the dissemination of gossip and the difficulty of retracting its words or undoing its damage increase the destructive potential of *lashon hara*. In “How to be A Popular Teenager,” Deirdre Dolan gives us this illustration: “Melanie sent a scorching e-mail message to Julie, calling her a ‘tattletale’ and ‘traitor’ and telling her to keep her ‘fat mouth shut’ or she’d end up being ‘a big ugly loser.’ Within minutes, Julie sent the message to half the school.”<sup>13</sup>

Long before the Internet, the Chofetz Chayim gave his own illustration: A penitent asks for a way to repair damage done by spreading harmful information. The Chofetz Chayim gives him a feather pillow and tells him to slit it open and shake the feathers out. “Now go collect the feathers,” he tells the penitent. We can no more collect the scattered feathers than we can unsend *lashon hara*-filled e-mail messages forwarded again and again.

## Benefits of *Lashon Hara*

As necessary as it is to mitigate the potential damage, some forms of *lashon hara* are benign and thus hardly worth prohibiting, while other forms actually serve valuable social functions.

Anthropologist John Beard Haviland documented ways in which gossip plays a constructive role. "Gossip provides an individual with . . . a map of his social environment, including details which are inaccessible to him in his own everyday life."<sup>14</sup> Quoting F. G. Bailey, he explains,

An event or an action is public not only to those who see it, but also to those who hear about it. Indeed it is speech which defines the nature of that event: the moral evaluation, which is what matters, is of its very nature unseeable. Comment relates event and action to the 'eternal verities' (egoism, equality and so on) and just as these abstract qualities are invisible, so also are the events which are judged in their light. The map which a man has of the community around him, of what is going on and of how he should respond to others, is a map created by the spoken word, by the information circulating around his community.<sup>15</sup>

In *Scorpion Tongues: Gossip, Celebrity, and American Politics*, columnist Gail Collins makes a similar claim: "By revealing behavior that's normally hidden, [gossip] helps people understand how things really work in the mysteri-

ous world behind closed doors."<sup>16</sup>

Gossip not only provides a map of the seen as well as the unseen elements of society, gossip also helps us apply and actually modify cultural standards of behavior. Beard Haviland, again: "Gossip is a primary metacultural tool, an activity through which people examine and discuss the rules they espouse. . . . Through dialogue, gossip [also] allows rules to change: it redefines the conditions and application for rules, thus keeping them up-to-date."<sup>17</sup>

## Mapping Worlds

Gossip maps a seen and unseen world, enables people to apply, interpret and modify cultural norms, and creates and defines the boundaries of a community of shared value. Gossip can, of course, exclude or evict individuals (or groups) from a community of shared values, but if the grounds for exclusion or eviction are not unjust then participation in a community of shared values is probably something we all desire.

The first two definitions (*i.e.*, the oldest usages) in the *Oxford English Dictionary* reflect this function of gossip: a gossip is "1. One who has contracted spiritual affinity with another by acting as a sponsor at a baptism (from god sib) 2. A familiar acquaintance, friend, chum. Formerly applied to both sexes now only to women. Especially applied to a women's female friends invited to be present at a birth."<sup>18</sup>

In other words, there is an appropriate connection between the intimacy of family, spiritual family or the closest of friends and the intimate informa-

tion they share with one another. Former classmates or camp buddies share information with each other about members of their group (e.g., who is ill, who is getting divorced, whose child is having trouble, who is changing careers, who could use a friendly call). Cousins talk late into the night about a shared grandmother whose behavior and attitudes both inspired and mystified them. “Gossip forms a moral community,” that is, “a group of people prepared to make moral judgments about one another.”<sup>19</sup> Within this community of shared values, speaking *lashon hara* may make it possible for initial hurt or outrage to give way to comprehension or even forgiveness: the simple act of talking about another person may sufficiently alleviate anxiety in the speaker to relieve the speaker’s worries and de-escalate the conflict.

## Judging Behavior

*Lashon hara* not only helps us maintain the web of relationships in our community of shared value, it also reminds us that our behavior, too, is being judged. As much as we value privacy, the question “Who owns this story?” becomes more complicated when, for example, a woman speaks about her own father’s alcoholism. As Holub points out: It is “his story,” to be sure. But it is also her story. Does she have a right to describe life as the child of an alcoholic in order to explain to her lover why predictability in a relationship is so important to her?

In *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*, philosopher Sisela

Bok argues that “People cannot be said . . . to own aspects of their lives that are clearly evident to others and thus in fact public, such as a nasty temper or a manipulative manner, nor can they reasonably argue that others have no right to discuss them.”<sup>20</sup> It is humbling and perhaps sometimes inhibiting of negative behavior to remember that “all our deeds are written in a book” (Mishnah, *Avot* 2:1), that everything we do and say affects others and may be judged by them.

Just as children will inevitably discuss their parents, citizens or subjects will talk about their leaders. To vote intelligently, to exercise responsible roles as citizens, we need access to information about the actions of public officials, good and bad. “The greatest possible example in the political realm of ethical disclosure of negative information has to be Daniel Ellsberg’s leaking of the Pentagon Papers to *The New York Times*. “One could make the case,” argues Rabbi Margaret Holub, “that gossip ended the Vietnam War.” Freedom of speech is such an essential ingredient of our democracy that the press is afforded broad protection against libel suits. “A public official and a public figure and a private individual involved in a matter of public concern will have to prove that a statement is false in order to prevail on their libel claim” and will have to prove “actual malice,” i.e., “that the editors or reporter had knowledge that the facts were false or acted with reckless disregard of the truth.”<sup>21</sup>

For subordinates, *lashon hara* also serves as a means of legitimately wresting some power from the more power-

ful. If a child is being abused or an employee is being discriminated against, speaking *lashon hara* may actually help those who are vulnerable resist the abuse of power or organize to overthrow those in power. As Gail Collins puts it: “For much of human history, [gossip] was one of the few weapons available to the powerless: servants who spread stories about their masters, peasants who irreverently speculated about the most private aspects of life in the manor. . . .”<sup>22</sup>

In our day, the seeds of class-action suits are planted when one black or female employee confides in another her frustration at being passed over for a much-deserved promotion. Some feminists consider certain forms of gossip a *mitzvah*, “to question everything. To remember what it has been forbidden even to mention. To come together telling our stories, to look afresh at, and then to describe for ourselves . . .”<sup>23</sup>

## Degrees of Damage

Speaking *lashon hara* may be a justified political act or it may be a creative one. How much literature or theater describes, pokes fun at, or satirizes people? Empathy is crucial to art but so are irony and humor. As important as it is to take seriously the dangers of *lashon hara*, it is also important not to take life or ourselves too seriously.

If we are honest, there is probably some percentage of that awful gossip we all do which is just fun. It really doesn't fan the flames of our negativity. It doesn't keep us from more serious and intimate conver-

sation. It doesn't harm the person at whose expense we laugh. . . . I think we each need a little free zone — a few minutes a week, a single trusted companion, something like that — to keep ourselves from being insufferably self-conscious or, worse, sanctimonious. I think that the very same energy which allows us to laugh and mock, also keeps us alive, curious and fun.<sup>24</sup>

Sisela Bok urges us to remember the essential roles gossip may play:

Cheap, superficial, intrusive, unfounded, even vicious: surely gossip can be all that. Yet to define it in these ways is to overlook the whole network of human exchanges of information, the need to inquire and to learn from the experience of others, and the importance of not taking everything at face value. The desire for such knowledge leads people to go beneath the surface of what is said and shown, and to try to unravel conflicting clues and seemingly false leads. In order to do so, information has to be shared with others, obtained from them, stored in memory for future use, tested and evaluated in discussion, and used at times to encourage, to entertain, or to warn. Everyone has a special interest in personal information about others. If we knew about people only what they wished to reveal, we would be subjected to ceaseless manipulation; and we would be deprived of the



pleasure and suspense that comes from trying to understand them. Gossip helps to absorb and to evaluate intimations about others' lives, as do letters, novels, biography and chronicles of all kinds. In order to live in both the inner and the shared worlds, the exchange of views about each other — in spite of all the difficulties of perception and communication — is indispensable.<sup>25</sup>

I don't know how the Chofetz Chayim would respond to the positive assessments of gossip offered above. Perhaps he would nod in recognition. We do know, however, that even the Chofetz Chayim permitted *lashon hara* when it was the only available means to prevent future danger. Consider the following example:

In premarital counseling, a rabbi learns that the groom had long engaged in sexual practices at high risk for HIV infection. The rabbi asks him if he's ever been tested. The groom says, "No." When the rabbi recommends testing, the groom is outraged and refuses. In their next meeting, the rabbi suggests to the bride that her fiancé's behavior and attitude might pose some risk to her and to their future children.<sup>26</sup>

If the intent is to alert someone of possible danger or to warn others not to follow in the footsteps of one who has transgressed *mitzvot*, speaking *lashon hara* about that person is per-

mitted, in fact, required. Pliskin summarizes:

If you are considering a partnership with someone in business or in marriage, you are permitted to inquire about details of that person's character and behavior. You are required to explain to the informant why you are asking for information about your potential partner . . . When it is permissible to ask for information about someone, the person who is asked is obliged to give a truthful answer, even if his reply will contain derogatory facts. . . . If someone wishes to relate [information] in order to prevent an unqualified person from being mistakenly hired, it is permissible. It is permitted to speak of the poor quality of a person's merchandise in order to prevent another from being cheated. It is permitted to speak *lashon hara* if you believe your words will help an injured person receive compensation.<sup>27</sup>

Although it is permitted to speak *lashon hara* in order to prevent or to redress damage, our commitment to the principal of "innocent until proven guilty," and to the prohibition against convicting someone on the testimony of a single witness alone, still stands. Therefore, while it is permissible to listen to *lashon hara* offered as a warning of possible danger, it is "forbidden to accept what you hear as absolute truth." The listener should simply "exercise caution."<sup>28</sup>

## Acceptable Standards of Speech

How can we guard against the dangers of *lashon hara* without attempting to suppress the forms of gossip that are essential to society or merely harmless fun? Which prohibitions should we teach, which simply cannot be observed? Which prohibitions or leniencies strike us as unethical?

As individuals, we can experiment with different standards. As an exercise, try these for a week:

- Take note of everything you say about another person or about a group of people.
- Stop yourself from repeating anything you do not know firsthand to be true.
- Stop yourself from saying anything that might harm someone else (even their reputation).
- Each time you are tempted to speak about another person, ask yourself, "Can I accomplish my goal (e.g., to become closer to the listener, to help a friend, to correct a problem . . .) in a better way?"

We will each discover our own limits. I, for one, do not wish to keep secret from my partner things that happen at work. In many cases, our spouses are the only people with whom we can safely discuss such matters. Of course, professional confidentiality restricts what we may say to our spouses, and speaking with a spouse is not a substitute for professional supervision. Nonetheless, speaking with our spouses about a negative encounter with a boss, colleague, or student may be essential to helping our spouse understand why we are on edge. As long as a spouse does

not accept the *lashon hara* as the absolute truth and does not act on the *lashon hara* we tell him/her, little harm is done. And if our spouse can help us speak directly to the person with whom we are in conflict, then speaking *lashon hara* to a spouse serves a constructive purpose. Similarly, a single person probably also needs someone to whom she/he can safely speak *lashon hara*.<sup>29</sup>

Traditional prohibitions against *lashon hara* afford the greatest protection to *talmidei hakhamim*, to communal leaders, to rabbis and *roshei yeshiva* (seminary heads).<sup>30</sup> If we see any of them transgressing a *mitzvah*, we should assume that our eyes deceived us, or that the transgression was in error, or an aberration. And if we tell someone else what we saw, the punishment is more severe than if the subject of our *lashon hara* were not a sage.

Rabbi Stephen M. Wylen, in *Gossip: The Power of the Word*, rejects the traditional hierarchy that gives sages the greatest benefit of the doubt but accords none to those considered *apikorsim* (heretics) or to non-Jews.<sup>31</sup> Miriam Peskowitz, in *Spinning Fantasies: Rabbis, Gender and History*, identifies another injustice: While on the one hand the rabbis employed strong language to discourage *lashon hara*, on the other hand, *lashon hara* about a woman, even from the mouths of other women ineligible to give official testimony as witnesses before a court, was sufficient grounds for a husband to divorce a wife he suspected of adultery.<sup>32</sup> Whatever prohibitions against *lashon hara* we teach ought to be free of double standards and avoid privileging one group over another.

## Alternatives to *Lashon Hara*

### • Giving others benefit of the doubt

While it may be unjust to give greater benefit of the doubt to one category of people than to another, there is merit to the notion of initially affording it to everyone. When we witness behavior in others that provokes our rage, instead of ascribing the worst of motives or the most blatant of conscious intent, and then sharing our judgment with others, we might instead assume the best of intentions. We are taught, “As we judge others favorably, so will God judge us favorably” (B.T. *Shabbat* 127b).

### • Rebuke

Sometimes, however, a situation should not be simply “explained away.” In such cases, the alternative to *lashon hara* prescribed by the Chofetz Chayim is direct (but private) criticism of the presumed offender. As much as Jewish tradition prohibits *lashon hara*, it requires rebuke in fulfillment of an equally important biblical precept: “You shall not hate your kinsman in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor (*hacheyach tochiach et amitecha*), but incur no guilt [because of him].” This *mitzvah* is placed immediately following the prohibition, “Do not go about as a talebearer” and immediately before, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your kinsfolk. Love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Eternal God” (Lev. 19:17-18).

Rabbi Wylen teaches: “If you are displeased with the actions of another person, above all do not tell a third party. Tell only the person who has displeased

you, using gentle words of rebuke.”<sup>33</sup> In his courageous sermon as a student at HUC-JIR, Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz broached the subject of rebuke:

Who among us wants to rebuke a neighbor, . . . a classmate or a colleague? Many are scared to critique. We fear transgressing “You shall surely love your neighbor.” We know we can hurt someone by rebuking them and can be hurt if the person we rebuke lashes out... We can ruin a relationship, engage in an unhealthy power struggle, or open up our own sense of vulnerability and insecurity . . . Yet, we are commanded to rebuke and deemed guilty of sin if we do not attempt to do so. Rabbi Tarfon says, “I wonder if there is anyone in this generation capable of accepting reproof” . . . Rabbi Elazar ben Azzarya responds, “I wonder whether there is anyone in this generation who knows how to reprove” (B.T. *Arukin* 16b).

The risks of hurting someone or being hurt are severely reduced if we follow the guidelines offered by our tradition:

- Maimonides in his *Mishneh Torah* teaches that one “should administer critique in private” and never publically embarrass another (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Deot* 6:7).

- The Rambam teaches further that one should critique his/her neighbor by “speaking to the offender gently and tenderly, so that he can hear the critique.”

- We must think through the reasons behind our critique. . . . We may be angry or even jealous and so we critique others to compensate for our own sense of failure. True critique is not a vehicle through which we express hostility.

- It is our responsibility to critique our fellow, continually, until he changes his ways. Only when our fellow refuses to listen are we free from the responsibility. "Love unaccompanied by criticism is not love . . . Peace unaccompanied by reproof is not peace" (*Bereshit Rabbah* 54:3)34.

Rabbi Wylan adds,

Most of us find it difficult to accept criticism. We become defensive in the face of rebuke. We leap to justify ourselves. We shut off our minds and do not let any words of criticism enter our ears. Rebuke is hard to take when it comes from a person in authority — a boss or a teacher or a leader. It is even harder [for some] to accept rebuke from a peer — a co-worker or a friend or a sibling. It is nearly unbearable to accept rebuke from a subordinate, an employee, or a child. The wise overcome their human nature and train themselves to love rebuke. One can learn a lot from rebuke, whether spoken in anger or out of genuine concern. We might learn some way that we can improve ourselves. Even a tongue-lashing from a spiteful person may contain some surprising insight into our character that we can use to

our own advantage if we will only listen. . . . Rebuke a wise man and he will love you (Proverbs 9:8; *Sifra* to Leviticus 89a-b).<sup>35</sup>

#### • Appreciation

Rebuke or direct criticism is a *mitzvah*. At the same time, we do not want to nurture negativity but to help develop in ourselves and in others an attitude of gratitude. Rabbi Gewirtz warns, "Let us not allow our responsibility to offer rebuke prevent us from also seeing the good in each other."

### Sacred Speech, Sacred Communities

We who believe in the lofty potential of synagogue life dream of creating in our congregations "sacred communities," microcosms of the world we would like to create on a global scale, a world in which each person would be viewed and treated as a creature of God. At the same time, sacred communities cannot grow stronger by ignoring the genuine weaknesses or faults of their members, leaders or corporate culture. Sacred community admits that people sin, and believes wholeheartedly that in most cases constructive rebuke, *teshuvah*, reconciliation and forgiveness are possible. Change is possible. Learning is possible.

Can a rabbi or a national movement dictate standards of *lashon hara* for all Jews for all time? I think not. Just as libel laws vary from state to state and have changed over time, so too must the laws of *lashon hara* be developed by local communities to meet their needs

at a specific time. Some families and organizations suppress all negative comments. In those settings, laws of *lashon hara* may have to focus on permitted forms. Other families and communities fuel the destructive fire of *lashon hara*. In those settings, laws of *lashon hara* may have to emphasize the prohibitions and their sanctions. All would benefit from studying the Chofetz Chayim, and later critiques. Imagine such study taking place throughout the movements, by professional and non-professional staff, officers, trustees, committee chairs and other leaders, youth groups, confirmation classes, families, havurot, at regional biennials, and national staff retreats. . . .

“Once you read the Chofetz Chayim,” testifies Rabbi Holub, “it is hard to chat idly about other people ever again.” Rabbi Wylen’s and Rabbi Pliskin’s summaries provide excellent material for study. In Pliskin’s words, our tradition promises: “If a person diligently applies himself to studying the laws of *lashon hara*, God will remove his *yetzer hara* (his urge) for forbidden speech. But if an entire group will resolve together to guard their speech, the merit is greater than if only one individual has made this resolution.”<sup>36</sup>

## Recommended Actions

Though every community must ultimately establish its own particular laws of *lashon hara*, some general notions may be helpful.

Opening up channels for honest feedback in an organization is essential:

Many people gossip out of frustration because they are not feeling heard, listened to, and they feel powerless to elicit change. The people in charge may not be approachable, or don’t appear to care, or don’t produce results when approached. I’ve noticed some extremely caring people gossiping [out of just such frustration]. Also, the people who have the nerve to confront and complain to th[ose] in charge get pegged chronic complainers, but what those people in control don’t realize is that the ones who don’t complain often simply leave the congregation without a sound.<sup>37</sup>

Good leadership is essential to the opening of channels for honest feedback. In *Leadership and Conflict*, Speed B. Leas, observes, “A leader who is uncomfortable with dissension . . . who negatively judges those who do surface disagreements, is going to cause even more organizational difficulty.”<sup>38</sup>

Direct criticism saved and enriched my rabbinate. I arrived at Beth Am, The People’s Temple in 1984 following a bitter conflict between two warring factions. Though the focus of that conflict was gone, the war continued, and I was slated to be the new target. In a brilliant act of leadership, the president immediately mandated a monthly Liaison Committee meeting. Both sides were represented, as well as those with access to the grapevine and those in positions to make decisions that most mattered to the members of the congregation.

The agenda? Every month, the members of the committee brought complaints from the congregation to my attention. One, who had opposed hiring me in the first place, carried a little notebook in his breast pocket and after each service solicited criticism from those he knew might be dissatisfied. Every month, he drew his little notebook from his pocket and went down that month's list. As the president put it: The committee was established "not to stop gossip" but "to create an atmosphere where gossip would not breed. It was meant to drain the swamp."<sup>39</sup> Another past president testified to the achievement of that goal: "Gossip that stemmed from legitimate concerns and grievances" was curtailed by the existence of "an appropriate avenue to discuss the issues" while "idle gossip which stems from a drive possessed by too many people to entertain themselves at the expense of others" was not affected by the existence of the Liaison Committee.<sup>40</sup>

In the first few years, the constant criticism was painful for me to hear. But I far preferred knowing the details of congregants' complaints to the anxiety I would have felt had I not known what people were saying about me behind my back. In time, when it became clear that the criticism would not scare me away, the Liaison Committee meetings became the place where the leaders of the congregation (who eventually saw themselves not as enemies but as part of a team) helped me figure out how to respond to the criticism and, where possible, how to avoid provoking it in the first place. And I felt free to use the

committee meetings to air my own complaints and enlist their help in addressing them. *Brit Kodesh: Sacred Partnership, Readings and Exercises for Self-Study on the Relationship Between the Professional and Volunteer Leadership* encourages every congregation to "create a liaison person or committee for each member of the clergy."<sup>41</sup>

While the Chofetz Chayim prohibits the disgracing, belittling or ridicule of a rabbi, legitimate disagreement with a rabbi's teaching is permitted. As important as the Liaison Committee was to my tenure and education at Beth Am, equally important were the weekly *Oneg Shabbat* discussions, a tradition established decades earlier by Rabbi Israel Raphael Margolies z"l. After each Shabbat evening service, the congregation helped itself to coffee and cake and sat down for an hour-long discussion of that night's sermon. The rabbi was granted absolute freedom of the pulpit. The congregation was granted equal freedom to disagree.

I never worried that congregants might whisper about my sermons behind my back. They shared their reactions to my face: blunt, trenchant, no holds barred. On occasions when there was no sit-down discussion, congregants who objected to a sermon would tell me so on the receiving line, in a letter, on the phone or in e-mail communications. In congregations in which a sit-down discussion of the sermon is not practical, the rabbi could establish a special e-mail address dedicated to congregants' reactions to sermons. *Lashon hara* about the rabbi's sermons will, I predict, decrease and objections

voiced directly to the rabbi will become instead the basis for valuable dialogue.

## Sanctioning Transgressions

Sometimes, even in congregations with open channels of communication, there still are members who disturb the well-being of the congregation by spreading nasty rumors. The Alban Institute calls such members “church killers” or “clergy killers.”

Clergy killers . . . do evil intentionally. . . . There are clinical names . . . personality disorders, paranoid, antisocial, borderline, histrionic, narcissistic, and passive-aggressive. They may be previous or present victims of abuse. They may have volatile or addictive personalities. They may have inadequate socialization, arrested adolescence, and violent role models . . . Pastors are not always innocent victims either. . . . By and large congregations are made up of warm, loving, and tolerant [people]. And just for that reason people with power needs or other pathologies find the church a viable environment to act out their internal illness. Ideally, the congregation will react in responsible ways to transform or at least contain the harmful behavior. . . . More often, churches are unskilled or unmotivated to call people to account.<sup>42</sup>

If all other strategies have failed, “educate yourself and key congrega-

tional leaders about the reasons and procedures for censure, removal and/or excommunication of members.”<sup>43</sup>

An article on Beliefnet.com reports that “A North Carolina church takes a tough stand on gossip. Senior pastor Phil Spry preaches against it once a year, and members sign a covenant in which they commit to getting along with one another. Those that fail to honor the agreement are asked to leave.”<sup>44</sup>

Except when dealing with “clergy or synagogue killers,” it is probably not helpful for a synagogue president to dismiss a member’s *lashon hara* by saying, “You know *lashon hara* is a sin; I cannot listen to you,” or by simply refuting the content of the complaint (even if it is inaccurate or false). I believe that in many complaints lies some valuable information about the subject of the *lashon hara* or about the speaker of the *lashon hara* or about the circumstances that gave rise to the *lashon hara*. Before censoring the speaker, it may be worth discerning whether or not in this case something valuable can be learned.

## Healthy Criticism

It is important for leaders to find healthy ways of enduring the indirect or direct criticism they will inevitably receive. Leaders need to ask themselves: What will help me endure this? What support do I need? How can I listen to criticism (*lashon hara* or rebuke) without feeling so vulnerable that I am incapable of responding in any way but self-defense or offense? “The quality of interpersonal transactions between the members of the congregation,” writes

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner,

is the single most important factor in determining its health. Do they bear witness to the piety the congregation claims to perpetuate? Where the human relationships are self-righteous, deceitful, and toxic, congregational life is wretched. Where they are tolerant, honest, and nurturing, congregational life can be a transforming joy.<sup>45</sup>

Rabbi Margaret Holub and members of her community have discussed passages from the Chofetz Chayim and experimented with standards of “right speech.”

More than once of late I’ve heard someone stop a sentence and say, “Oops! I shouldn’t say this. . . . The very process of being aware of how we speak about others and how we hear others will itself guide us in the direction we want to go. . . . This process of discovering how to live through conversation and community is itself exactly the opposite of the kind of frozen silence that I fear when speech is thoughtlessly curtailed. . . . I have every confidence that we will find our answers as we keep talking.”<sup>46</sup>

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1. Another version of this article appeared in *Reform Judaism* (Summer, 2002), published by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

2. Technically, the expression should be transliterated *leshon hara*, as there is a *sheva* under the *lamed*, but the spelling used here is the more common.

3. Bok, Sisela, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (Pantheon Books, New York, 1982), 101. See also “Go Ahead. Gossip May Be Virtuous,” by Patrici Cohen, *The New York Times*, Saturday, August 10, 2002.

4. Plishkin, Zelig, *Guard Your Tongue: A Practical Guide to the Laws of Lashon Hara, Based on Chofetz Chayim* (New York, 1975).

5. *Ibid.*, 29.

6. *Ibid.*, 13ff.

7. *Ibid.*, 31.

8. This list is an abbreviation of prohibitions enumerated in Plishkin, 31ff.

9. This and all other quotes from Rabbi Margaret Holub are taken from an unpublished paper, “Gossip — An Appreciation,” which she graciously agreed to share with me and permitted me to quote.

10. E-mail to me from a rabbi who wishes to remain anonymous, Dec. 6, 2001.

11. From a letter written by a past president of a congregation in California. While he gave me permission to quote him, he wishes to remain anonymous.

12. From an e-mail to Joy Weinberg, managing editor of *Reform Judaism* magazine, written by a member of the UAHC Board of Trustees who wishes to remain anonymous to protect the privacy of her rabbi.

13. Dolan, Deirdre, “How To Be a Popular Teenager,” *The New York Times Magazine* on the web, April 8, 2001, 3-4.

14. Haviland, John Beard, *Gossip, Reputation and Knowledge in Zinzanian* (University of Chicago Press, 1979), 10.

15. *Ibid.*, 10.

16. Collins, Gail, *Scorpion Tongue: Gossip, Celebrity and American Politics* (William Morrow & Co., Inc., New York, 1998), 6-7.

17. Haviland, *op cit.*, 170.

18. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, complete text reproduced micrographically, Vol. 1 A-O (Oxford Press at the Clarendon, 1971), 310-311.

19. Haviland, *op cit.*, 8.

20. Bok, *op cit.*, 97.

21. Goldstein, Norm, ed., *The Associated Press*



*Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law* (Perseus Press, Cambridge, MA, 2000), 359.

22. Collins, *op cit.*, 7.

23. Rich, Adrienne, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (W.W. Norton, New York, 1979), 13.

24. Holub, unpublished paper.

25. Bok, *op cit.*, 90-91.

26. Report from a congregational rabbi who wishes to remain anonymous.

27. Plishkin, *op. cit.*, 64-83.

28. *Ibid.*, 83.

29. In taking this position, I am aware that I am contradicting a CCAR Responsum (5750.4), "Gossip between Husband and Wife," which upholds the prohibition against gossip even between spouses:

... it might be argued that, since total confidence between husband and wife helps to cement foundations of their marriage, *lashon hara* could be seen as serving a wholesome end (*i.e.*, *shalom bayit*), especially when they agree not to reveal the information to anyone. But such an argument offends against the basic rule that one should not try to accomplish a *mitzvah* by committing an *averah*. (2)30. Plishkin, *op cit.*, 99.

31. Wylan, Stephen M., *Gossip: The Power of the Word* (KTAV, Hoboken, NJ, 1994).

32. Peskowitz, Miriam, *Spinning Fantasies: Rabbis, Gender and History* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997). I thank

Drs. Judith Plaskow and Martha Ackelsberg for calling this to my attention.

33. Wylan, *op. cit.*, 103-4.

34. Gewirtz, Matthew D., HUC-JIR chapel sermon on *Parshat Ki Tisa*, March 7, 1996.

35. Wylan, *op. cit.*, 102-3.

36. Plishkin, *op. cit.*, 188-9.

37. E-mail message, Nov. 30, 2001, from a congregational leader who wishes to remain anonymous.

38. Leas, Speed B., *Leadership & Conflict*, (Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1982), 63-65.

39. Letter to me from Judah Rosenfeld, December 15, 2001.

40. E-mail to me from Dr. David D. Markowitz, December 19, 2001.

41. Kahn, Rabbi Yoel, *Brit Kodesh: Sacred Partnership, Readings and Exercises for Self-Study on the Relationship Between the Professional and Volunteer Leadership in Reform Congregations* (Synagogue 2000 and UAHC, 2001), 45.

42. Pappas, Anthony G., *Pastoral Stress: Sources of Tension, Resources for Transformation* (Alban Institute, 1995), 46-7.

43. *Ibid.*, 55.

44. Butcher, Andy, "Psst, Did You Hear? Someone told me this church has a zero-tolerance policy toward gossip!", [www.beliefnet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com), 1.

45. Kushner, Rabbi Lawrence, "The Tent-Peg Business: Some Truths about Congregations," in *New Traditions*, No. 1, 1984.

46. Holub, unpublished paper.

# Gateways to Hasidism

*The Hasidic Parable: An Anthology with Commentary*

edited and translated by Aryeh Wineman

Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia: 2000, 191 pages

REVIEWED BY JOEL HECKER

**T**n the 1956 edition of *Tales of Rabbi Nachman*, Martin Buber wrote in his prefatory remarks, “I have not translated these tales, but retold them with full freedom, yet out of . . . [Rabbi Nahman’s] spirit as it is present to me.” With that bold, romantic, existential interpretation, Buber began his efforts to render the spiritual wealth of Hasidism accessible and meaningful to modern readers.

In several volumes’ worth of essays, Buber aimed to represent the Hasidic teachings, not with the ostensibly clear-eyed objectivity and dispassionate analysis of the historian, but rather with the goal of enabling the reader to open her very self to the presence that the Hasidic teachers themselves were trying to elicit. Buber aimed to kick-start an entire generation out of the spiritual lethargy that modernism, in his mind, had wrought, and he sought to do so through the resurrection of apparently parochial and archaic tales and teachings.

## Appeal of Hasidic Stories

What was the allure of these teachings and tales, unmoored from their East European and ultra-Orthodox milieus? First, they offered the promise of an unmediated relationship with God, apparently freed from the appurtenances, rites and robes of institutionalized religion. In the modernized renderings of Hasidism, all one needed to do was open one’s heart with sincerity and joy in order to enjoy *devekut*, communion, with Divinity itself.

Deep within each person lay a spark of holiness that waited its overdue polishing and attention. God was not the harsh biblical judge or the exacting counter of *mitzvot*, an image promulgated by the rabbis. Instead, God was to be seen as the Source of All Life, the Hidden Repository of Mysteries, the Fount of All Being.

These were descriptions that harmonized with the ideals of universalism and individualism that colored much of Western culture in the 20th century. Rational ideals of democracy and freedom were, somewhat ironically, found

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to be distant echoes of this esoteric and arcane lore. In the cosmology of Hasidism, holy sparks were scattered throughout the cosmos, each needing its redemption by a particular individual, sometimes through eating a particular meal, sometimes through business dealings in a particular location.

Each of these events promised a surprising encounter redounding in spiritual, even material, riches. This doctrine of *avodah be-gashmiyut*, worship through materiality, taught that everything in the world bore holy sparks; that through the sincere and open engagement with the spiritual core of people, food, places and things, one could open up one's own being to the common unity underlying all of reality.

## Origins in Mysticism

Jewish mysticism dates back to ancient times, and it was almost always the restricted preserve of an elite group of initiates, men who had spent considerable time in traditional learning of Talmud and *halakbah*. It was only with the advent of Hasidic teaching that making hidden holiness manifest became a popular doctrine. In this seeming democratizing of holiness, the child and the pauper, the shoemaker and the donkey-driver were all potentially equal bearers of holiness. As in the famous Hasidic tale, the whistle of a child on Yom Kippur could break through all the barriers that hampered the success of the adults' prayers. In this theme of surprise and paradox, Hasidism leveled the playing field of the esoteric tradi-

tion within Judaism.

For Buber, these Hasidic teachings resonated with the revival of religious feeling that he himself was trying to engineer, as suggested in his landmark *I and Thou*. In that work, he draws distinctions between religion and religiosity, institutionalized religion and the spontaneous movements of the individual spirit.

In Buber's romantic assessment of Hasidism, the nascent movement was rebelling against an entrenched rabbinic elite, and idealizing all interactions in the here-and-now.<sup>1</sup> The immanence found in Hasidism, the latent presence of Divinity in all of reality, provided the perfect backdrop to his own revivalist encouragement to seek an I-Thou relationship with the Eternal Thou at every turn.

## The Hasidic Parable

In *The Hasidic Parable*, Aryeh Wineman offers translations and analyses of more than forty parables taken from a range of Hasidic sources, though most are from the early generations of Hasidism. This book has the advantage of treating the parable — a small literary unit, often overlooked in the shadow of the tales or the larger homilies that make up the bulk of Hasidic teachings. Wineman defines parable as an imaginative story whose meaning refers to something quite beyond itself; it alludes to an analogy or application not contained within the story proper. A parable is a work of fiction, necessarily brief and compact, that is not told for its own sake, but to make a point

and speak a truth (*xiii*).

Most Hasidic works are collections of homilies, long discursive talks, often centered or building upon exegeses of the biblical portion of the week. They were generally delivered on the Sabbath at the Friday evening meal night or at *shalosh seudos*, the third meal eaten in the Sabbath's late afternoon. Delivered in Yiddish, they were remembered by an amanuensis who would write them down at the end of the Sabbath.

Subsequently, they would be translated and published in Hebrew for posterity, usually without editorial oversight of the rebbe who had given the talk. Contained within these homilies were the parables, often serving to illustrate in a folksy way the more challenging substance of the teachings proper. Very often the parable (*mashal*) was followed by the application or significance (*nimshal*) of the story.

## Paradox and Surprise

Wineman argues that the parables are not subsidiary elements of the homilies; rather, the often paradoxical surprises of the parables are a major component of what lends the homilies their power. The parables usually revolve around a king (or sometimes a father or a teacher) who seeks an indirect method to transmit his teachings. In other instances, the surprise occurs when a parable challenges a commonsensical premise, thus encapsulating profundity within its nugget-like structure. The parable is a literary mirror of the cosmic act of *tzimtzum*, in which

God concentrates divine energies into the finite world, or a teacher simplifies a profound teaching into digestible form.

The descriptions above all suggest the concessions made by a father or teacher in the face of reality: accepting that ideal teaching must cede ground to practicality. Some of the Hasidic texts, however, go so far as to argue that the truth can only be understood by way of the parable: Yitzhak of Radvil explained that “paradoxically, only through the concrete garb of analogy can one grasp the abstract idea conveyed in parable, just as the human eye can gaze at the bright sun only through a curtain or veil” (*xviii*).

Wineman sorts the parables thematically: “Paradox and the Unexpected,” “Redefinitions,” “Deepening the Implications of Divine Oneness,” “Echoes and Transformations of Older Motifs,” and “The Polemics of an Hour of History.” Each section, save one, has close to ten translations of parables with an accompanying analysis. The analyses provide background material of Hasidic history and doctrines, information about the personalities behind the texts, and parallels or alternate versions from other Hasidic works. The latter are particularly helpful as Wineman traces the development of a motif or simply the range of uses that a particular parable can serve. The author's style is accessible to a broad audience and he is often quite successful at making these largely unfamiliar texts comprehensible and meaningful to a modern audience.

## Keys and Locks

One of Wineman's most intriguing offerings is the following parable and accompanying analysis:

Every lock has a key that opens and fits that particular lock, but there are also thieves who open doors and locks without using any key at all but rather by simply breaking the lock. Similarly, every hidden matter has a key, namely the *kavanah*, the specific contemplation appropriate to that matter. But the ideal key is to do as the thief does and break down everything, namely break one's own heart with submission, thus breaking the barrier separating man from God, which serves as the lock keeping man out (159).

In this parable, we find unusual advocacy of learning the tricks of thievery. When access is denied to the words of prayer, any means can be used to gain entry. Here the surprise of the parable rests on two separate twists: First, one would have thought that highly refined tools would be superior to brute force, whereas here the latter is preferred; secondly, the assault is not waged upon an external object, such as the gates of prayer, but rather inwardly, to the psychological impediments to spiritual engagement.

### Techniques of *Kavanah*

The parable's references are to the liturgical and spiritual implements of

prayer, *kavanot* (intentions), developed by the 16th-century kabbalists. The trend of mystical prayer from the 16th through much of the 18th century was to employ highly complex and demanding technical *kavanot*, before or during the recital of each unit of the prayer service, often for each word.

For the spiritual elite, and for those who could afford to do so, praying with these *kavanot* could take hours.

While recent research has demonstrated that the founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov, himself used these intricate techniques,<sup>2</sup> his students and his students' students, in a populist and anti-scholastic turn, endorsed attention to the simple meaning of the words and to the holiness that is latent in each word. To these Hasidim, the words of the Torah and the words of the prayers bore holy light, and the one who devoted himself could attain *devekut* (union) with Divinity within those very words.<sup>3</sup>

The focus here is inward, on the opening of one's consciousness to fuse with the godliness underlying all reality. The teaching offers a critique of the artificial keys of *kavanot*, opting instead for the less erudite, but more broadly available, sincerity of the heart.

### Breaking the Door

In another version of the same parable, force is regarded not as an ideal but rather as a measure of final resort:

It sometimes happens that people open a lock with a key, but there is also the case of a person who has

no key and who needs to break the door and the lock with some strong object capable of breaking iron. So it is that the earlier generations, after the destruction of the Temple, would open all the locked gates with keys, namely, the *kavanot*. The later generations, however, lack the power of the *kavanot* and consequently we must break all the locks without keys, employing instead simply the shattering of our own evil hearts (159-60).

Here, the thief's model is not the ideal, but rather the last resort of a generation that has lost the power of the *kavanot*; this latter model deprives the parable of its surprise, rationalistically affirming the conventional condemnation of the thief. But, in doing so, this version offers a more pessimistic assessment of the quality of contemporary Jewish spirituality. (A pessimistic and ascetic current is one of the streams that runs through the course of Jewish mysticism, and is not alien to the Hasidic tradition).

## The Evil Inclination

Another parable, this one by Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, highlights the difficulties of maintaining discipline in one's spiritual path:

The *yetzer ha-ra* [evil inclination] can be likened to one who goes running among people . . . his hand . . . closed shut, no one

knowing what he is holding in it. And he deceives people and asks each person, "What am I holding in my hand?" To each person it seems as though he is holding whatever that particular person happens to desire. And so everyone runs after him thinking whatever he desires is in that runner's hand. But afterward, the person running opens his hand and it is empty.

Similarly, the *yetzer ha-ra* deceives the whole world; everyone pursues it as it deceives each and every person into thinking that whatever he desires is in its hand, each person according to his foolishness and his lusts and desires. And afterward, in the end, it opens its hand and there is nothing in it, for no one can satisfy his desires through it . . . (33).

This parable speaks to the insatiable and empty nature of our desires. With this fleeting image, desire allures us and we are tricked. In the first of the Harry Potter volumes, the Mirror of Erised serves a similar purpose. When one gazes upon it, one sees whatever one wants; Harry is warned about the danger of excessive gazing, for it can lead to an immersion in one's desires.

The extension of this parable in our socio-cultural context is the lesson about our consumerist culture, whose multisensory assault not only suggests that new products will satisfy our desires, but first creates the need and then offers to satisfy it.

## Quest for Wholeheartedness

In one of the most startling of the parables, we read the following:

A parable told about two brothers, one of whom was wealthy, the other poor. The poor brother asked his rich brother, “What accounts for your wealth?” And he answered him, “It is because I do evil deeds.” The poor brother then went and forsook the Lord and did as his brother, but his evil actions bore no fruit. He returned to inquire, “See, I have done as you do, and why hasn’t success come my way?” This time, the rich brother answered him, “It is because you have done evil only in expectation of wealth and not for the sake of the evil deeds themselves” (20).

This parable, offered in slightly different versions by Ephraim of Sedlikov, the grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, and by Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye, another leading disciple, champions the value of wholeheartedness even over righteousness. The reader delights in the apparently subversive switch, winking along with the text, knowing that the parable’s true intent is not to undermine traditional morality but rather to expand the pantheon of values, placing genuineness and integrity in its upper echelons.

In his analysis, Wineman indicates the context for this parable, a homily based on the rewards and punishments for following God’s will, as prescribed in Leviticus 26-27. The author takes the opportunity to explain the Hasidic

penchant for emphasizing sincerity over seeking any kind of pecuniary or social benefits. He then proceeds to indicate Maimonides as an important literary source for privileging service out of love (*avodah me-ahavah*), *i.e.*, sincerity, over service out of fear (*avodah me-yirah*), *i.e.*, fear of punishment or hope for personal utility.

## Spontaneity in Prayer

Emphasizing the need for spontaneity and transparency in prayer, Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav recounts the following tale:

On a well-traveled road, known to all, murderers and highway men act at will because they know in advance the route on which people will travel. But when people journey instead along a new path that is not commonly known, the thieves are unable to lie in wait to ambush them (65).

Wineman describes Rabbi Nahman’s pervasive concern with the dangers of rote performance in prayer. The mystical mindset animated the dangers of perfunctory prayer in the guise of demonic agents, seeking to waylay those who lack appropriate fervor. For Rabbi Nahman, the road to mindfulness and sincerity came through a practice of *hitbodedut*, solitary interaction with God. While for earlier kabbalists and other Hasidim, *hitbodedut* signified a contemplative practice, for Rabbi Nahman, it pointed to a pouring out of one’s soul (*bishtapkhut ha-nefesh*),

preferably in an isolated location where one could truly cry out to God. This innovative practice set a high standard for his disciples, but reflected Nahman's general critique of the increasing institutionalization of Hasidic ideals that threatened to encrust them with the same tiredness that potentially plagues any orthopraxy.

## **Distraction at Prayer**

How to manage distracting thoughts during prayer was a perennial problem for normative Judaism. Hasidism innovated a practice for dealing with these *mahshavot zarot*, strange thoughts, that called for tracing them back from their profane expression to their divine origins. Ephraim of Sedlikov offers a tale to describe this tool.

When a person is standing in the presence of the king and speaking with him, it would certainly be improper and impudent for any of the king's servants to call out to that person and to chat with him, interrupting that person's meeting with the king for matters lacking any import. . . . And should one of the king's servants call to a person and converse with him, it stands to reason that he is acting in accordance with a directive from the king himself.

[Or] it may be that the servant is announcing that he, too, is in need of the king but is unable to approach the king while in his garment of sackcloth, and so he

requests of that person having an audience with the king to have him in his thoughts and remove the servant's sackcloth, clothing him instead in respectable and beautiful garments so that he, too, may be able to come before the king . . . (88).

The Hasidim taught that when an extraneous thought comes to mind during prayer, the person should not cease or interrupt his praying. His continuing to pray at such a time affirms that the "strange thought" came to him for the specific purpose that he repair that thought so that it might be able to ascend to its real Root in the holy (89).

Everything stems from holiness and so, if one is thinking of a beautiful woman during one's prayer, the most common example provided in the Hasidic texts, one should find its root (we might say "reframe the thought") and see that the underlying desire is for intimacy with God. Erotic energies are thus intentionally, and in consonance with mystical traditions cross-culturally, sublimated toward God. Wineman notes that, increasingly, this doctrine was relegated to an elite, the dangers of focusing on distracting thoughts such as these being too great to trust to the common folk.

## **Divine Dialectics**

Meshullam Feibush Heller teaches a lesson about the dialectics of relationship with God.

A very young child pursues some



very childish thing and his thoughts turn away from his father. But afterward, upon seeing his father, he casts everything aside out of his desire for him and thinks only of him, running to him, all because he is made of the very substance of his father (97).

Heller teaches here, as Wineman explains, about the two contradictory impulses within human beings. On the one hand, the individual needs to separate from the Divinity, and requires the freedom to explore even if it leads to distance from one's holy source. The successive impulse is that of return, overcoming the distance from holiness, having established one's own existence.

This is an interesting precursor to Freud's tale of his grandson's playing Fo and Da with a ball attached to a string. Freud interpreted this as an enactment of the separation from the mother, the process of individuation required for all individuals, first establishing independence, then internalizing the security that the home-base originally provides.

## Normative Praxis

Many of the parables cited above validate the sincerity of worship that characterized early Hasidism, rather than the piety of practice that is characteristic of present day ultra-Orthodoxy. The following parable sacrifices none of the former preference, but, in historical context, fuels the devout commitment to normative praxis:

A parable of a king who gives substantial wages to his servant that he might carry out his wishes whenever the king might require his service . . . . And the servant takes those wages and goes instead to carry out the wishes of another king who is hostile to the servant's own king and employer. Now, could there be a greater act of rebellion and disloyalty than this? Indeed, he would deserve death at the hands of his king. And the *nimshal*: This is what happens when one takes the divine life force that belongs to the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, the sole purpose of which is to enable a person to do the Divine Will, and rebels, using it instead to do the will of the *Sitra Ahra* [the Other Side] and the *kelipah* [shell] that the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, detests (101).<sup>4</sup>

Wineman explains as follows:

Hasidic teaching emphasizes that apart from *hiyyut* (the divine life force activating all that [exists]), . . . nothing whatsoever could exist. And it is that same life force — divine in origin and nature — that accounts for whatever capacities we have, including the ability to see and hear, speak and think, etc. The concept of *hiyyut* implies also that our perceptions of multiplicity, along with . . . [that] of separate identity, are ultimately inaccurate. The *hiyyut*, which partici-

pates in any person and any existing entity, is also the same sole divine life force that enables the existence of all that is (101-2).

The core teaching here is that of *bittul atzmi*, annihilation of self, and *bittul ha-yesh*, annihilation of reality. In order to attain the awareness of the monistic or undifferentiated quality of reality, one must first shed the egoistic parts of the self that construe individuality as a virtue. For the Hasidim, one destroyed the ego's constraints on relationships with others and with God; in other words, the *bittul atzmi* was not so much an act of destruction as one of expanding one's consciousness, allowing the holistic nature of the divine reality to prevail over the constrictions of one's mind.

## Continued Appeal of Hasidism

In historical context, this teaching was understood, at least partly, as a raising of the stakes of deviating from halakhically prescribed norms. Using one's life energy (a discrete microcosm of the divine matrix underlying the fabric of reality) for something other than its intended use was deemed a grave act of disloyalty to God. Zeev Gries, an Israeli scholar who studies the practices of the early Hasidic movement, refers to the Hasidic masters as "men of *halakhah*" first and foremost. Nonetheless, a non-Orthodox reader will find support in the parable above for impassioned dedication to any just cause. This reading also effectively transvalues the crucial religious cat-

egory of sin, redeeming it from the discomfort that people often have with conventional understandings of sin.

It is that potential for wide application that explains the continued appeal of Hasidism to the modern reader. One of the longstanding reasons for Hasidism's appeal is its emphasis on joy as an independent religious value. One of Rabbi Nahman's teachings about dancing illustrates this well:

Sometimes when people are rejoicing and dancing in a circle, and there is a man outside the circle who is immersed in sadness and depression, they will grab him and bring him into the dance against his will and force him to rejoice with them.

Gladness and joy should pursue and grab sadness and sighing, which flee from the very presence of joy, in order to bring them within the orbit of joy even against their will. For there is that sadness and sighing that are really the *Sitra Ahra*, and that have no desire to be a foundation for the holy, and so they flee from the very presence of joy. Therefore, it is necessary to force them into the realm of the holy and its joy, against their own will (103).

Rabbi Nahman developed a typology of sadness with levels of brokenheartedness coming from regret and an ongoing and prevailing sadness that could lead to depression. With both, however, he advocated not denial but rather a full engagement with the root

cause of the depression, ultimately seeking to redirect those energies toward joy. Personifying the sadness as the man who cannot dance, Rabbi Nahman gives feet to the abstract, if palpable, feelings that prevent emotional and spiritual wholeness.

## Cultural Chasms

There are instances in which the author's explanations do not reach as far as one might have wished. Though throughout the book Wineman is careful to translate and analyze in a modern idiom, there are times when the cultural ethos of the Hasidim and that of the contemporary reader are separated by such a chasm that one wishes he would have acknowledged the disparity or worked harder to "translate" from one paradigm to another.

The most striking instance of this comes in a parable in which a king summons a skilled violinist to come play the king's favored melody on a daily basis. For a while, the musician performs admirably, pleasing the king. After some time, however, the tune becomes stale for the musician, so the king compensated by bringing in a new person from the marketplace on a daily basis; the new audience inspired the violinist to play with increased vitality and enthusiasm.

The king tired of laboring to bring in a new market-goer every day and found a better solution: He blinded the eyes of the musician so that he could never discern the actual presence of a new person. The violinist always imagined someone new there and so never

again lacked for incentive for galvanized playing.

As Wineman explains, the *nimshal* here is that the ideal in prayer is to battle against the fatigue and rote recital that can set in as a result of daily repetition of the same prayers. Each day, one must marshal resources to find something new and illuminating in the same, old words (29-30).

## Modern Barriers

I would add to Wineman's explanation that God slowly enhances one's concentration in prayer, eliminating distraction, enabling the pray-er to devote herself with renewed daily fervor. Unfortunately, even this modified lesson will be largely lost on the modern reader, too horrified by the idea of blinding as a legitimate course for inducing animated virtuosity on the part of the musician. While the core of Hasidic teaching is indeed soulfulness, as Wineman indicates (xi), there are times when it sounds a sour note.

Wineman recognizes the startling quality of the blinding, but addresses it only from within the context of the Hasidic literature itself, without questioning or interrogating the nature of that soulfulness. The author has some other inelegant and outmoded formulations, but on the whole, they are infrequent and do not hamper the book's aims.

There have been many books purporting to be introductions to Hasidism; Wineman's book, while not expressly aspiring to that goal, does so admirably. Through the translations of

these pithy bits of Hasidic lore, contextualizing them within the history of Jewish mysticism and Hasidism, providing background information about the doctrines undergirding them, Wineman has succeeded in giving a hospitable entry into a foreign world.

When Martin Buber first started translating Hasidic tales for Western audiences, he hoped that their very foreignness would help jolt the reader into confronting their spiritual and moral claims. Wineman has succeeded impressively in continuing Buber's overarching goal.

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1. These interactions are not only human encounters but with all of nature, as Buber indicates in his discussion of an I-Thou encounter with a tree. Buber's explanations of Hasidism came under harsh critiques by

contemporary and subsequent scholarship. See, for example, Gershom Scholem, "Martin Buber's Interpretation of Hasidism" in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (Schocken Books, New York, 1971), 228-250.

2. Menahem Kallus, "The Relation of the Baal Shem Tov to the Practice of Lurianic Kavanot in Light of his Comments on the Siddur Rashkov," *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 2 (1997), 151-167.

3. The teachings and spiritual practices of Hasidism, like those of the entire recorded history of Jewish mystical practice, were androcentric, with little or no treatment of women as subjects in their own right.

4. In the kabbalistic tradition, the *Sitra Ahra* signifies the demonic counter-image to the side of Holiness, the Godhead. Materiality, itself often a marker of evil, trapped the sparks of holiness in shells or husks, hampering access and maintaining demonic sovereignty.

# Journeys in Judaism

*The Way Into Torah,*

by Norman Cohen

Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, VT: 2000, 176 pages

*The Way Into Jewish Prayer,*

by Lawrence Hoffman,

Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, VT: 2000, 186 pages

*The Way Into Encountering God in Judaism,*

by Neil Gillman,

Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, VT: 2000, 205 pages

*The Way Into Jewish Mystical Tradition,*

by Lawrence Kushner,

Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, VT: 2000, 184 pages.

## REVIEWED BY YAEL RIDBERG

I continue to be amazed by the expansion of the Judaica section of bookstores. It has obviously become profitable for these stores to make room for titles that enable a wide audience to find its way in the search for meaning from a Jewish perspective. There is clearly a market for such books, and Jewish Lights Publishing has been at the forefront of this growth, enabling seeking Jews (and non-Jews) from all walks of life to have meaningful encounters with Jewish texts and tradition.

The two-year-old Jewish Lights series, *The Way Into...*, presents an opportunity for readers to be exposed not only to the major spiritual and historic paths of Judaism, but to many of the seminal thinkers of the 21st century. In what will eventually be a 14-volume series, these authors present, in a clear

and accessible way, a journey through the sacred texts of Jewish tradition. Each volume addresses an important Jewish concept in terms of its history, vocabulary and meaning for contemporary seekers.

### Complex Metaphorical System

The intention of the series is to serve and educate the liberal Jewish community by presenting a guided tour of Jewish texts through the ages. Biblical, midrashic, talmudic, Hasidic and contemporary texts are presented as evidence of the evolving Jewish experience.

The complex metaphorical system that supports Judaism is one that, according to Neil Gillman is pluralistic and fluid. Although speaking primarily about the Jewish encounter with

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God, Gillman's sentiment is one that can be applied to the approach of the entire series:

It is pluralistic because it is composed of images formed by countless human beings who, over centuries, experienced God's presence in their lives in an infinite number of ways and then translated their experiences into metaphors that captured what they felt. It is fluid because as we study Judaism's classical texts, certain metaphors disappear, presumably because they no longer capture our ancestor's sense of God's presence in their lives; other ones are added — again presumably because these new metaphors more effectively capture experiences that our ancestors did not share; still others are transformed before our eyes so that the later image, though clearly emerging out of an earlier one, completely subverts the original meaning.

## **Either-Or Judaism**

I often meet Jews who find themselves in what they believe to be an "either/or" approach to Judaism. Either God is supernatural, all knowing and all powerful, or God does not exist. Either ritual practice or prayer must be done in their totality or not. Either the Torah is a literal deposition of God's word and deed, or it is simply myth. I have often found that these same Jews can embrace an alternate understanding of how Judaism has developed over

time when presented with texts that show Judaism to be "the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people." *The Way Into...* series is a successful effort to underscore that evolution. By presenting, in the case of these four volumes, prayer, Torah, mysticism and the encounter with God as journeys Jews have traveled over time, we become aware of the complexity and diversity of Jewish experience, religion, and the Jewish people's quest for meaning.

This series is a great resource for rabbis and teachers of Judaism, as well as for those going at the learning on their own. For rabbis, it is helpful to have a variety of texts (often in civilizational order) at one's fingertips to use in classes on prayer, Torah and spirituality/theology.

I appreciated the scope and range of perspective that was created by each author, bringing me into the subject in a holistic way. I was reminded of the teaching that even if one knows the whole of the siddur by heart, to pray from memory doesn't allow for the same level of attention and intention. Something different happens when we have a text open in front of us.

Although the concepts and many of the texts were familiar to me, I was able to appreciate the author's perspective and knowledge because of the structure and content of each book. Even when I was familiar with the concept under discussion, these books refreshed my own understanding of the evolution of Jewish practice and thought.

For those just beginning their journey into Judaism, these books are written in a clear and accessible style,

thoughtfully translating, explaining and interpreting. Each book has an introduction that seeks to define and explain the approach of the author. For example, Lawrence Kushner organizes *The Way into Jewish Mystical Tradition* around fifty Jewish mystical ideas. Each is presented in a classical way — by biblical verse, rabbinic maxim or phrase. Hebrew and/or Aramaic are used with translation and transliteration, and then each idea is illustrated with several classical texts.

## Essential Elements of Judaism

*The Way into Torah* by Rabbi Norman Cohen also invites readers to explore the origins and development of Torah by understanding what Torah is, the different approaches to study and understanding, as well as asking why and how Torah study in general became such an integral part of the Jewish experience. As in the other books in the series, we are shown the way into an essential element of Judaism, and after interacting with representative texts, we

are then invited to examine the larger questions of integrating Jewish study and practice into our modern lives.

Jewish Lights Publishing has brought us opportunities to increase our interaction with Jewish tradition, and this series is no exception. Each of the authors makes the reader feel as if s/he is receiving a private guided tour through the author's area of expertise and passion in Jewish textual experience. Each volume points to the larger questions — not only about what each of these central aspects of Judaism comprises, but how these concepts can make a difference in the lives of those who engage in the study of these ideas.

These volumes will surely find a place of primacy in the lives of those who open themselves to the journey into Judaism — and, not incidentally, will continue to find a place of prominence on those many shelves of Judaica in contemporary bookstores.

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1. Neil Gillman, *The Way into Encountering God in Judaism* (Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000), 11.

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