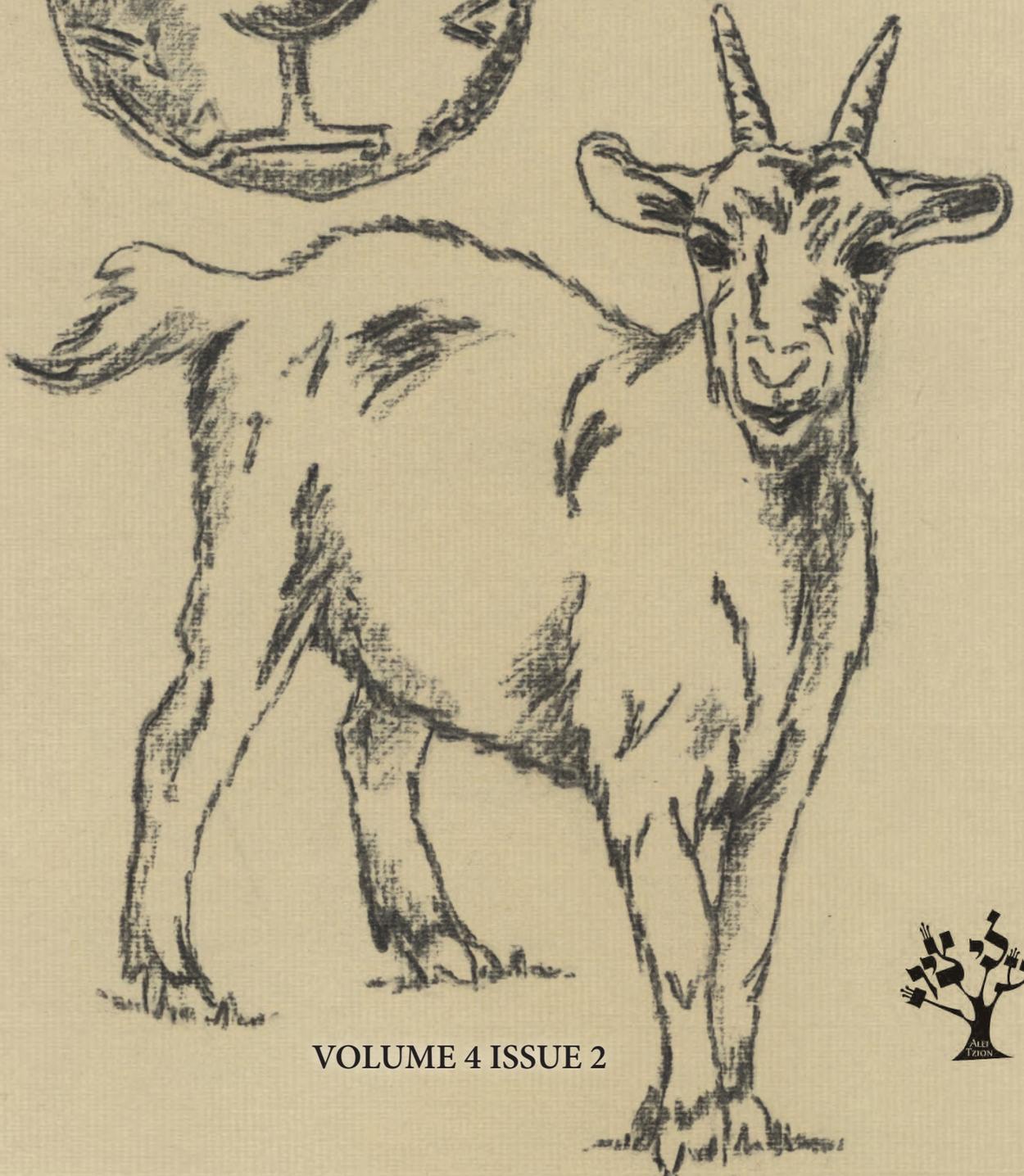


# דגל DEGEL

תורה וחכמת ישראל מקהילת עלי ציון  
TORAH AND JEWISH STUDIES FROM ALEI TZION

פסח תשע"ב  
NISSAN 5772



# חג כשר ושמח

RABBI DANIEL AND NA'AMAH ROSELAAR  
DEVORAH, ELISHEVA, NETANEL AND CHANANYA  
TOGETHER WITH KEHILLAT ALEI TZION  
WISH THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY A HAPPY AND KOSHER PESAH

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## *Message from the Rav*

The collective term for the rituals that are performed on the first nights of Pesach is 'Seder' and the nights themselves are called 'Leil HaSeder'. This is no modern phenomenon and can be traced back at least as far as the time of the Rishonim - the Rambam (Hameits U'Matsa 8:1) used this term as did the students of Rashi in Sefer Hapardes and Mahzor Vitri. Rav Soloveitchik considered the word 'Seder' in a halakhic context and concluded that the term is not merely descriptive but also prescriptive. It indicates that there is a particular requirement that the various mitsvot of the evening be observed in a particular sequence. Even though the mitsvot are fundamentally independent of each other, and even if one particular mitzva cannot be observed one must still fulfil the others, a further kiyum is achieved when they are observed in their particular order. The term 'Seder' means that there is a halakhic preference that Maggid precedes Matsa, that Matsa precedes Maror and that these three mitsvot all precede Hallel. If, for example, the Matsa is eaten before Maggid is recited both mitsvot have been fulfilled, but neither in the most ideal manner. Maggid is enhanced if the Matsa is on the table as a visual illustration of the story that is being told.

The Hiddushei HaRim has a different approach to the term 'Seder'. To him it does not describe halakhic ideals but a much broader philosophical approach. It is a term that teaches us about God's omnipotence in the world and His perpetual involvement in the workings of nature. He explains that one who is oblivious to miraculous events and the Hand of God can simply dismiss history as a coincidental and haphazard series of occurrences. But on Pesah we talk about the 'Seder' because it emphasises that there was a clear pattern and order that governed what has happened to the Jewish people over the course of history.



As we sit at the table on Leil HaSeder we want to try to fulfil the incumbent mitsvot with attention to all their minutiae and enhancements. At the same time we must make sure that we do not allow halakhic rigour to divert us from understanding and appreciating the fundamental ideas that should be associated with these mitsvot. By calling it 'Seder Night' we are stressing that we recognise God's role in everything that led to and accompanied the Exodus from Egypt and that this is the overarching theme that gives meaning to all our observances of the evening.

May the members of Kehillat Alei Tzion and the readers of *Degel* have a meaningful and inspiring Pesah.

RABBI DANIEL ROSELAAR

# DEGEL

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## *Notes from the editor*

This edition of *Degel* presents a truly international line up. Contributions come from writers based in London, Cambridge, New York and Los Angeles.

As ever, articles come from a wide range of perspectives. The echoes of the Battei Medrash of Har Etzion, Mir, Gateshead, Chovevei Torah and Hakotel will all be heard in these pages. That has always been a strength and a pride of *Degel* and the community it represents. We stand for Torah and Jewish Studies from all shades of Orthodox thought, and believe that intellectual vibrancy comes from learning together.

Readers can enjoy in the edition work by old friends and new. M.D. Spitzer, David Pruwer and I are all past contributors. We are joined by a new local writer, Aryeh Grossman, and by a rising star of the American rabbinate, R. Shmuly Yanklowitz. Yolanda Rosalki's art again graces the front cover. The subjects are also diverse, from lomdut and halakha, to the history of Jewish thought, the modern application of ancient concepts and contemporary Jewish philosophy, including two proposals for the contemporary relevance of idolatory.

These pages are in a sense a reflection of the central ceremony of Pesah, the Seder. The best Sedarim are about building community through learning from each other. No Seder should have only one voice. Each person has

their own questions and answers, their own perspectives and insights. By sharing those we shape the common memory which is essential to social unity. And then on Seder night we do something even more remarkable. We transform memory into a renewed present. Rather than merely recalling yetsiat Mitsrayim we leave Egypt again. That is one reason why we do not make a berakha on Hallel on Seder night. If you 'recite' Hallel because you are commanded, you make a berakha, but if you spontaneously burst into song in the joy of deliverance, no berakha is necessary or even appropriate.

Shared memory, shifting into shared experience moves to the third and most important stage, of shared future. By showing we came about the same past, so much so that we revive it in the present, we commit to working with each other to the next stage in the Jewish story. Just as in the past, the future will not be monochrome, and will be all the richer for that. I hope Alei Tzion will continue to play its part in that great work.

I want to close by thanking the contributors, everyone who placed a greeting and in particular Jessica and Sam Caplan and their family, Jemma Jacobs and Sandy Tapnack for kindly sponsoring this edition. To one and all, a Hag Kasher vesame'ah!

- BEN ELTON

# *The splitting of the sea: part of the Exodus, or a separate event?*

M.D. SPITZER

**A** week after Yetsiat Mitsrayim – when the Jews were redeemed from Egypt – they experienced Kriat Yam Suf – the splitting of the sea – when their enemies were drowned and they miraculously survived.<sup>1</sup> To give thanks for this event, the people sang the famous Shira. The commentators ask why they only sang Shira after Kriat Yam Suf, and not immediately on leaving Egypt; we will return to this question later. This essay will mainly examine two halakhic questions relating to these events, and distinguish between two ways of understanding the connection between Yetsiat Mitsrayim and Kriat Yam Suf.

There is a mitsva to mention Yetsiat Mitsrayim twice daily, at morning and at night.<sup>2</sup> This can be fulfilled by just mentioning Yetsiat Mitsrayim, even in a cursory way; but the optimal way is by saying the third paragraph of Shema, which mentions the Exodus from Egypt.<sup>3</sup> The main question we will examine is: *can one fulfil this mitsva by mentioning Kriat Yam Suf instead of Yetsiat Mitsrayim?*

At first glance this question might not seem practically relevant; however on closer inspection, it is. The Shulhan Arukh rules that to fulfil mitsvot, one has to intend to fulfil them, and not perform them without due attention to what one is doing (mitsvot tserikhot kavana).<sup>4</sup> Now, as sometimes happens, what if one daydreamed through the third paragraph of Shema and most of the berakha following (starting ‘emet vayatsiv’, or ‘emet ve’emuna’ at night) – in which we also mention Yetsiat Mitsrayim? It is likely that one did not properly fulfil the mitsva of mentioning Yetsiat Mitsrayim. However, later in that berakha, we mention Kriat Yam Suf: ‘veyam suf bakata’.<sup>5</sup> If at this point one stopped daydreaming, and whilst mentioning Kriat Yam Suf one had the intention to fulfil

the mitsva of mentioning Yetsiat Mitsrayim, is that sufficient? Can mentioning Kriat Yam Suf alone suffice, or must one actually mention the going out of Egypt?

A second, related question: there is a mitsva to talk about Yetsiat Mitsrayim on Seder night, sipur Yetsiat Mitsrayim.<sup>6</sup> Can one fulfil this mitsva by mentioning just Kriat Yam Suf?

## **The Magen Avraham and the Hatam Sofer**

The first question is dealt with by the commentators to the Shulhan Arukh, in a slightly different context. If one is not sure if one has mentioned Yetsiat Mitsrayim (i.e. one is not sure if one said the last paragraph of Shema and the berakha following Shema) does one have to mention Yetsiat Mitsrayim again, to ensure one has fulfilled the mitsva? The Shulhan Arukh rules that he must.<sup>7</sup> However, the Magen Avraham points out that if one remembers saying the Shira in pesukei dezimra, it is not necessary to repeat anything about Yetsiat Mitsrayim, as he has already mentioned Kriat Yam Suf. We see that the Magen Avraham holds that one can fulfil the mitsva of mentioning Yetsiat Mitsrayim by talking solely about Kriat Yam Suf.<sup>8</sup>

The Hatam Sofer objects to the Magen Avraham on two counts.<sup>9</sup> First, he points out that mitsvot require intention. We can assume that people prefer to fulfil the mitsva of mentioning Yetsiat Mitsrayim in the most optimal way – in the third paragraph of Shema. Therefore, when one recites the Shira earlier in pesukei dezimra, one surely did not have intention to fulfil the mitsva of mentioning Yetsiat Mitsrayim.<sup>10</sup>

We can dispense with this objection of the Hatam Sofer, as it has no bearing on our specific question, because we are examining a situation where one *does* have intention to fulfil the mitsva of mentioning Yetsiat Mitsrayim when he talks about Keriat Yam Suf. So far, it seems from the Magen Avraham that one can fulfil the mitsva in this way.

But the Hatam Sofer has another objection to the Magen Avraham. The mitsva of mentioning Yetsiat Mitsrayim is to mention ‘the *day* you left Egypt’.<sup>11</sup> Keriat Yam Suf happened a week later, so obviously it is not possible to fulfil the mitsva by mentioning Keriat Yam Suf!

It would seem that the Magen Avraham disagrees with this point – he would say that Keriat Yam Suf was actually an intrinsic part of Yetsiat Mitsrayim, and that the Jews were not truly free until the Egyptians had drowned in the sea. Thus, ‘the day they left Egypt’ can be interpreted to include Keriat Yam Suf. The Mishna Berura quotes this argument between the Magen Avraham and the Hatam Sofer, and does not make a definitive ruling.<sup>12</sup>

## Was Keriat Yam Suf the conclusion to Yetsiat Mitsrayim, or a separate event?

These two halakhic views are reflected in the commentaries on the Humash and sifrei mahshava. First, we return to the question posed at the start of this essay: why did the Jews not sing Shira as soon as they left Egypt – why did they wait until the splitting of the sea?

The Rebbe Reb Herschel of Krakow (1595-1663) in the essay on Beshalah in his *Hannukat Hatorah* quotes Kiddushin 16b stating that a slave who runs away is still considered to be a slave; he is only free when the master dies. So too, the Jews who left Egypt were still slaves until the Egyptians died at Keriat Yam Suf. This is why they only sang the Shira after Keriat Yam Suf – until that point they were not truly free.

This view is also subscribed to by other commentators, most explicitly by the Seforno on Shemot 14:30, and also by the Or HaHayim on same pasuk and the Malbim on Shemot 6:6. It is possible that this is the view of the Magen Avraham, who holds that Keriat Yam Suf was the continuation of the Exodus, and the Jews were only truly free after Keriat Yam Suf – and this is why he holds one can fulfil the mitsva of mentioning Yetsiat Mitsrayim by mentioning just Keriat Yam Suf.



*Magen Avraham: Rabbi Abraham Abele Ben Hayyim Halevi Gombiner (c1637-1683)*

However there are opposing views, which would support the Hatam Sofer. For example, Rabbi Chaim Friedlander (1923-1986).<sup>13</sup> He writes that the Exodus was indeed complete immediately after they left Egypt; the Jews were now free and no longer slaves. However, the purpose of Keriat Yam Suf was different: first to punish the Egyptians, and secondly to demonstrate Divine glory and might by performing public miracles. This is alluded to when the Torah records that God instructed that the people should turn and travel back towards Egypt, so that Pharaoh would think they had got lost and would pursue them.<sup>14</sup> This implies that if they had continued travelling out of Egypt, Pharaoh would not have pursued them and they would have been free. They had to turn back to encourage the Egyptians to pursue them, and thereby facilitate the miracle of Keriat Yam Suf.

Another support comes from the statement of the Midrash, that all the waters in the world split at the time of Keriat Yam Suf – this shows that the purpose of Keriat Yam Suf was to demonstrate God’s miraculous powers to the entire world not just to save the Jews.<sup>15</sup> We can suggest another supporting allusion: there is an opinion that the Jews did not cross the sea from one side to the other, but travelled in a semi-circle, emerging on the same

side they entered.<sup>16</sup> This would also appear to emphasise that their passage through the sea was not an essential part of their route out of Egypt.

## Support for these two viewpoints

We will now examine five sources in support of each viewpoint, which neither the Magen Avraham nor the Hatam Sofer draw upon themselves.

1. In the Hagada, during the passage of ‘dayenu’, we sing, ‘If You had taken us out of Egypt... and not split the sea... and not drowned our oppressors, dayenu – it would have been enough for us’. This seems to support the Hatam Sofer’s position that Keriat Yam Suf was not an integral part of Yetsiat Mitsrayim – they were free even without Keriat Yam Suf. However it is possible to understand it differently: ‘even if You had not split the sea, we would have had enough to thank You for’ despite the fact that it would not have represented a complete freedom.
2. The Ramban writes that the reason we say the Shira in pesukei dezimra every morning is ‘as a remembrance of Yetsiat Mitsrayim’.<sup>17</sup> This may indicate that the Ramban understood Keriat Yam Suf to be part of Yetsiat Mitsrayim, and held the same view as the Magen Avraham.
3. The Gemara in Pesahim 108a states that women are included in the mitsva to drink four cups of wine on Seder night, because ‘af hein hayu be’oto hanes’, ‘they too were included in *the miracle*’. However the Gemara does not say which miracle it is referring to – presumably it refers to the miracle of Yetsiat Mitsrayim. However the Maharam Halava in his commentary to Pesahim writes that this may refer to the miracle of Keriat Yam Suf. This would indicate that he held that Keriat Yam Suf was part of Yetsiat Mitsrayim, like the Magen Avraham – otherwise it would not make sense to drink wine on Seder night to commemorate a miracle which occurred a week later, and was not intrinsically connected to the Exodus. (The Hatam Sofer would presumably explain that the ‘miracle’ the Gemara refers to is Yetsiat Mitsrayim.)
4. Famously, the Gemara in Sotah 2a compares God’s matching of individuals in marriage, to the splitting of the sea. The Gemara adduces this from a pasuk in Tehillim: Elokim moshiv yehidim beta, motsi asirim bakasharot (Tehillim 68:7). The first part of the pasuk, ‘Elokim moshiv yehidim beto’, is explained to

mean ‘God matches individuals’. However, it is not clear exactly how the second part of the pasuk compares this to the splitting of the sea. The wording is ‘motsi asirim *bakasharot*’. Rashi explains this to mean, ‘He releases prisoners [i.e. the Jews left Egypt] in a ‘*kosher*’ [i.e. pleasant] season’ – springtime, which is neither too hot nor too cold. Rashi goes on to state explicitly that Yetsiat Mitsrayim took place in springtime.

But this interpretation is problematic: why does Rashi explain the pasuk to be talking about Yetsiat Mitsrayim, when the Gemara is comparing matchmaking to Keriat Yam Suf? We see that Rashi held that Keriat Yam Suf was an integral part of Yetsiat Mitsrayim, and that the terms can be used almost interchangeably. This supports the view of the Magen Avraham. The Hatam Sofer might explain the pasuk differently. For example, Tosafot Shants (Sotah 2a) prefers to explain the phrase ‘motsi asirim *bakasharot*’ as ‘he releases prisoners ‘*bekhi veshirof*’, at a time when there was simultaneous crying and song’ – which he interprets to mean Keriat Yam Suf, when the Egyptians cried and the Jews sang. According to his explanation, the Gemara and the pasuk are more congruent – they both refer to Keriat Yam Suf alone. This is how the Hatam Sofer (who holds that Yetsiat Mitsrayim and Keriat Yam Suf were separate events) might understand the Gemara.

5. The Gemara (Megilla 14a) examines why the Sages at the time of the Purim story decided to institute the mitsva of reading the Megilla. The Gemara explains their reasoning: ‘if we sang Shira when we went from slavery to freedom, then how much more should we should commemorate the transformation from death to life [i.e. the Purim story, by reading the Megilla]’.

There is some disagreement over what the Gemara is referring to when it states that ‘we sang Shira when we went from slavery to freedom’. Rashi explains that this refers to Keriat Yam Suf, after which we sang the Shira. This clearly follows the view of the Magen Avraham – who holds that they were only redeemed from slavery at Keriat Yam Suf.<sup>18</sup> However the Turei Even asks various questions on Rashi, and prefers to explain that the Gemara refers to Seder night, the night of Yetsiat Mitsrayim, when we sing Hallel to commemorate the miracle. This is how the Hatam Sofer would explain the Gemara; the redemption from slavery occurred on the

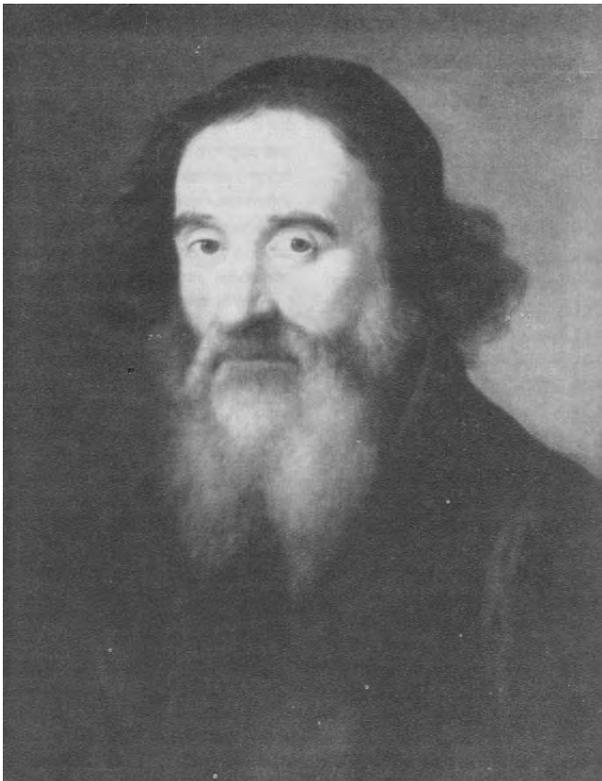
night of Yetsiat Mitsrayim, and Keriat Yam Suf was a separate event.<sup>19</sup>

## The Mitzva of Sipur Yetsiat Mitsrayim on Seder night

Thus far we have focused on the disagreement between the Magen Avraham and Hatam Sofer over whether one can fulfil the *daily mitzva* of mentioning Yetsiat Mitsrayim by talking about Keriat Yam Suf instead. What about a different mitzva: talking about Yetsiat Mitsrayim on Seder night? Is it enough just to mention Keriat Yam Suf?

At first glance this would seem to depend on exactly the same argument between the Magen Avraham and the Hatam Sofer, as to whether Keriat Yam Suf is considered to be a part of Yetsiat Mitsrayim or a discrete event.

However Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik is quoted as making a distinction between mentioning Yetsiat Mitsrayim every day, and the mitzva of talking about Yetsiat Mitsrayim on Seder night.<sup>20</sup> He points out that the Rambam's edition of the Hagada (brought at the end of Hilkhos Chomets Umatsa) does not include the passages which mention Keriat Yam Suf.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, the Rambam writes that the mitzva of talking about Yetsiat Mitsrayim on Seder night applies specifically to events that occurred in Egypt



Hatam Sofer: Rabbi Moshe Schreiber/Sofer

itself, which Rabbi Soloveitchik understands to exclude Keriat Yam Suf (which occurred in the sea).<sup>22</sup> Rabbi Soloveitchik then goes on to make a novel and startling suggestion: that the mitzva only applies to talking about the miracles that occurred specifically on the night of the fifteenth of Nisan (which would exclude Keriat Yam Suf). He deduces this from the Rambam's statement:

'It is a positive mitzva of the Torah to talk about the miracles and wonders which God performed for our ancestors in Egypt *on the night of the fifteenth of Nisan*'.<sup>23</sup>

A simple reading implies that 'the mitzva is to talk ... every year on the fifteenth of Nisan', but Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests an alternative reading: that the mitzva is to talk about 'the miracles ... of the night of the fifteenth of Nisan'.

Hence, even if one can indeed fulfil the daily mitzva of mentioning Yetsiat Mitsrayim by talking about Keriat Yam Suf, Seder night might be different – mentioning Keriat Yam Suf alone might not be enough. In fact, many authorities try to define the difference between the mitzva of mentioning Yetsiat Mitsrayim on a daily basis, and sipur Yetsiat Mitsrayim on Seder night. Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests that this might be the difference – the former might be fulfilled by mentioning Keriat Yam Suf, whereas the latter cannot.)

The Maharam Halava we quoted does not accord with this view. He wrote that women are included in the mitzva of drinking four cups of wine on Seder night, because they were included in the miracle of Keriat Yam Suf. It is clear that he holds that it *is* a mitzva to commemorate the splitting of the sea on Seder night, even though it occurred a week later.

## Conclusion

The question comes down to whether Keriat Yam Suf was the culmination of the process of Yetsiat Mitsrayim, or a separate event? We have seen that this is a point of contention in halakha (can one fulfil the mitzva of mentioning Yetsiat Mitsrayim with Keriat Yam Suf alone?) and also in the Torah commentaries. We then examined five sources which offered support to each viewpoint. Finally, we considered whether the mitzva of talking about Yetsiat Mitsrayim on Seder night was subject to the same difference of views.

*M.D. Spitzer learned in the yeshivot of Gateshead and Mir and trained as a doctor at London University. He gives the Monday evening Gemara shiur at Alei Tzion.*

<sup>1</sup> See Megilla 31a, also Rashi Shemot 14:5

<sup>2</sup> Mishna Berakhot 12b, Rambam Hilchot Keriat Shema 1:3

<sup>3</sup> See Mishna Berura 67:3

<sup>4</sup> Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayim 60:4

<sup>5</sup> Or 'hamaavir banav ben gizrei yam suf' at night. The source for mentioning Keriat Yam Suf (and also makas bekorot) in the berakha after Shema is the Yerushalmi, quoted by the Tur and Mishna Berura in Siman 66:53

<sup>6</sup> Rambam Hilchot Hamets Umatsa 7:1

<sup>7</sup> Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayim 67:1, in keeping with the rule that one must be strict regarding a law of Torah (a opposed to Rabbinic) origin

<sup>8</sup> NB At the beginning of pesukei dezimra, at the end of the section of 'hodu', Yetsiat Mitsrayim is also mentioned – we must therefore assume that the Magen Avraham was talking about someone who said the part of pesukei dezimra that includes the shira, but not the part at the beginning which includes 'hodu'!

<sup>9</sup> Hagahot Hatam Sofer 67:1, also with more elaboration in Teshuvot Hatam Sofer Orah Hayim 1:15; also quoted in Hagahot Rabbi Akiva Eiger 67:1

<sup>10</sup> The Hatam Sofer points out that a similar situation occurs on Friday night: the Magen Avraham (271:1) writes that one fulfils the mitzva of Kiddush on Friday night by mentioning Shabbat during the Amida – consequently, when he repeats Kiddush later at home over a cup of wine, he is only doing so for a mitzva derabanan. The Hatam Sofer objects: since the best way to say Kiddush is over a cup of wine and at the start of his meal, he surely did not have intention to fulfil the mitzva during tefilla! Another example is the Shema we say in korbanot at the beginning of tefilla, when we do not have intention to fulfil the mitzva of keriat Shema, because the most optimal way is to do so later in tefilla, when we sat berakhot beforehand and afterwards, followed by the Amida.

<sup>11</sup> Devarim 16:3

<sup>12</sup> Mishna Berura 67:3

<sup>13</sup> Menahel of Ponovezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak, prominent disciple of Rabbi E. E. Dessler and author of Sifsei Chaim (see volume 2 on Moadim, 411)

<sup>14</sup> Shemot 14:3

<sup>15</sup> Rashi Shemot 14:21. (According to some interpretations, this is the meaning of the phrase in Hallel 'Hayarden yisov leochor' – this refers to the waters of the Jordan which also split at the time of Keriat Yam Suf. Others say that it refers to a prophetic vision of the time that the Jordan would split forty years later when the Jews would cross into Israel.)

<sup>16</sup> Rashbam, quoted in Tosafot Erakchin 15a s.v. Keshem

<sup>17</sup> Ramban, Oxford manuscript, quoted in Rabbi A.L. Frumkin's commentary to the Siddur of Rav Amram Gaon; and by Rabbi S.Y. Zevin in *Hamo'adim Behalakha*, Shirat Hayam, footnote 46

<sup>18</sup> Rashi is consistent; he also explained the previous proof in accordance with the view of the Magen Avraham.

<sup>19</sup> It is clear from the Turei Even's comments that he actually holds that Keriat Yam Suf was a part of Yetsiat Mitsrayim, like Rashi and the Magen Avraham, and unlike the Hatam Sofer; he only argues against Rashi here for other reasons. However his new explanation of the Gemora would nevertheless provide a way for the Hatam Sofer to understand the gemora

<sup>20</sup> *Harerei Kedem* Vol 2 Chapter 81

<sup>21</sup> Such as the section counting the number of makkot that occurred at the sea, or in 'dayenu'. The Rambam does include the first two paragraphs of Hallel, ending with the words 'chalamish lemayno mayim' – He changed a rock to a spring of water – an allusion to Keriat Yam Suf; but Rabbi Soloveitchik proves that this is not part of the mitzva of Hagada, but part of the mitzva of Hallel, so this does not present a difficulty. In any case it does not seem problematic, for although mentioning Keriat Yam Suf is not part of the mitzva of remembering Yetsiat Mitsrayim, there would be no harm in merely recalling it by the way.

<sup>22</sup> Hilkhos Hamets Umatsa 7:1

<sup>23</sup> Rambam loc cit

# Who knows four? Wine, hefsek and Haggada

BEN ELTON

**H**azal enhanced the performance of some mitsvot by associating them with wine. Making Kiddush on Shabbat and Yom Tov, Birkat Hamazon, Eirusin and Nisuin at a wedding, Sheva Berakhot at a wedding meal, the naming at a Berit Mila and the ceremony of Pidyon Haben are all performed over wine. Seder night is structured around four cups of wine. The first is the cup of Kiddush. The Haggada is said over the second cup, culminating the berkaha of 'asher ge'alanu'. Birkat Hamazon is said over the third cup and Hallel over the fourth cup.

The Ashkenazi practice at the Seder is to say a 'borei peri hagafen' on each of the four cups. This is strange. If we have multiple cups of wine at a regular meal (especially from the same bottle) we only make one berakha. In fact, many Rishonim objected to our custom of making four berakhot on Seder night. They held that only two berakhot should be said: on Kiddush and Birkat Hamazon. The 'borei peri hagafen' of Kiddush covers its own cup and the second cup, and the 'borei peri hagafen' on the third cup, drunk after Birkat Hamazon, should also cover the fourth cup.

Whether two or four berakhot should be said over wine on Seder night is the subject of an extensive makhloket between the Geonim, the Rif and the Ramban on the one hand, who hold that four berakhot should be said and the Baal Hamaor, Tosafot and the Rosh on the other who hold only two berakhot should be recited. This dispute is reflected in the Shulhan Arukh and R. Moshe Isserlis's Mapa, which records that (oddly), Sephardim follow the Ashkenazi Baal Hamaor and Tosafot, while Ashkenazim follow the Sephardi Rif and Ramban. This dispute was therefore live for at least five



hundred years, from the time of the Geonim in the first millenium CE to R. Yosef Karo and the R. Mosher Isserlis in the sixteenth century.

The discussion revolves around the issue of hefsek. What constitutes a halakhically significant interruption (hefsek) which closes a particular activity, and which would require you to make new berakhot if that activity were resumed? A classic example of hefsek is Birkat Hamazon. When you say Birkat Hamazon you close your period of eating, and if you want to eat anything more you must make a new berakha rishona. Another case of hefsek would be speaking between making a berakha on an item of food and eating it. If you did so, your berakha loses its capacity to enable you to eat the food (it 'closes' the berakha), and you would have to make a new berakha before you ate.

The question for the Rishonim is therefore whether there is a hefsek between the first and second cup and between the third and the fourth cup, which would require you to make a new 'borei peri hagafen'. The

Rishonim bring proofs from comparative cases, dealing with the effect of zimun, the halakhot of shehita and with saying Minha in the middle of a meal. As always in a makhloket Rishonim, each side have texts that incline towards their position, but they also have to deal with other texts which are difficult to understand in the light of their halakhic conclusion.

## Rif

R. Yitshak Alfasi (born North Africa 1013, died Spain 1103) was active during the period of transition between the Geonim and the Rishonim. His *Sefer HaHalakhot* sets out the position of the Geonim on many issues, including on the question of berakhot over the four cups on Seder night. It is important at this stage to understand the particular approach of the Geonim. Although they had the utmost respect for the Bavli, they did not learn it or derive halakha from it in a detached or abstract way. They read the Gemara in the context of concurrent traditions passed on from teacher to student. They would not pasken in a way inconsistent with the Gemara, but they would not necessarily conform to the simplest read of the text, especially as in Geonim times the text was still somewhat fluid. Their rulings can therefore sometimes be surprising.<sup>1</sup>

The Rif picks up on a statement in Pesahim 109b-110a that each cup on Seder night is its own mitsva.

Interestingly, that statement is made in a non-halakhic context. The Gemara is concerned that the four cups of wine on Seder night might form two 'zugot' (pairs), which Hazal did not like for mystical reasons. The Gemara solves this potential problem by stating that as 'each cup is its own mitsva' they cannot form zugot. It is noteworthy that the Rif takes this metaphysical statement and imports it into a halakhic discussion to imply (although he does not derive the halakha explicitly from this source) that each cup requires its own 'borei peri hagafen'.

The Rif brings a firmer and more halakhic proof from Hullin 86b-87a. After you slaughter a bird or a wild animal, for example, a deer, it is a mitsva to cover the blood (kisui hadam). The Gemara reports a view that after you cover the blood you can go back and slaughter more animals without making a new berakha 'al hashehita'. The Gemara is concerned that this

opinion might contradict a halakha about Birkat Hamazon. We know that soon as you begin a zimun, it is forbidden to drink without making a new berakha rishona. If beginning the zimun closes previous berakhot rishonot, why does kisui hadam not close the berakha on shehita?

The Gemara answers that there is a fundamental physical difference between zimun and kisui hadam. Zimun is part of Birkat Hamazon, and on a practical level you cannot say Birkat Hamazon and drink at the same time (unless you want to choke). On the other hand, it is theoretically possible to slaughter with one hand and cover the blood with the other. Thus a principle emerges: Hefsek happens when you perform a ritual action (like saying Birkat Hamazon) which cannot physically take place at the same time as the action you have been performing until this point (like drinking). On the other hand, if you could perform both actions at the same time (like shehita and kisui hadam), not a hefsek takes place. Here we have a fundamentally *physical* understanding of hefsek.

If we apply this principle to the four cups on Seder night, we find that a hefsek takes place after the first cup and again after the third cup. You cannot recite the Haggada and drink at the same time, and you cannot say Hallel and drink at the same time. Therefore, there has been a hefsek and to drink cups two and four you have to make a new berakha.

## Baal HaMaor

As usual, R. Zerahya HaLevi (born 1135 in Gerona, Spain; died 1186 in Lunel, Provence) critiques the Rif. This is not simply part of an abstract scholarly debate. Although he was born in Sepharad, he came from an old Provençal family, and was determined to defend the ancient traditions of Provence from being overwhelmed by foreign minhagim. The work of the Rif, which cut through the shakla vetarya of the Gemara and brought the halakhic conclusion made pesak highly, and in the view of many in Northern Europe, too accessible. It was easier to glance at the Rif for a ruling than to engage with the Gemara and associated traditions in the Franco-German method. R. Zerahya wished to show that the Rif should not be preferred to local poskim, and set out to challenge the Rif whenever he could, and so to justify ancient local practice.



In his *Maor HaKatan* R Zerahya raises two objections against the Rif, and argued with him on his own terms. He points out that it is permissible to drink during the recitation of the Haggada (Pesahim 117b), so there need not be a physical interruption during the Haggada, and by the Rif's own logic, there is not a hefsek.<sup>2</sup>

More fundamentally, the Baal HaMaor contends with the Rif about the main concern of the Gemara with regard to both Birkat Hamazon and kisui hadam. He argues that the major issue is not whether they can be done at the same time as drinking or slaughtering, but whether they have terminate previous activity in a halakhic, conceptual sense. Birkat Hamazon finishes a meal and kisui hadam finishes a period of shehita. By that logic, after both Birkat Hamazon and kisui hadam you would have to make berakhot. However, there are exceptions to this rule, and here the Baal HaMaor leaves room for the physical. Since you could both slaughter and cover the blood at the same time, kisui hadam does not end a period of shehita, and no new berakha is required to resume shehita. Applying these principles to the Seder, we find that the recitation of the Haggada and Hallel does not conceptually terminate the act of drinking, and therefore cannot function as a hefsek. It follows that no new berakhot are required on cups two and four.

The Baal HaMaor brings a case to support this more conceptual basis for hefsek. In Pesahim 101b-102a we find a series of cases of people temporarily leaving their meal. If they left some of the party at the table, when they returned they would not need to make new berakhot. That even applies when they left to pray. That implies that prayer is not intrinsically a hefsek, and no different than if you went outside to greet a

hatan and kala or to speak to friends. It is true that you cannot pray and eat at the same time, but for the Baal HaMaor that cannot of itself constitute a hefsek. Only actions that create a halakhic closure can do so. Praying, reciting the Haggada and singing Hallel do not fall into that category. On Seder night you would therefore only make two berakhot on wine; one on Kiddush when you drink for the first time and once after Birkat Hamazon, which is a real halakhic hefsek.

## Tosafot and the Rosh

The Baalei HaTosafot (Northern France, twelfth and early thirteenth centuries) also took different approach to pesak than the Rif. In the previous generation Rashi and Rashbam had standardised the Talmudic text. Their exegetical method of commenting on a quotation from the text (dibur hamathil) presupposed a shared and canonical text. Their repeated assertion of 'hakhi garsinan' – this is *our text* (literally 'how we recite') displays their mission to determine and disseminate a correct text of the Talmud. Once the text was fixed it acquired a canonical status. Its exact and unchanging nature gave it authority. Further, it was possible for the first time to make detailed comparisons between sugyot. This leads to the launching of the major Tosafistic enterprise, which is the internal reconciliation of the Bavli through intense dialectics. The text became seen as of primary important, not accompanying oral traditions. The Bavli as the authoritative halakhic text stood alone and must be internally consistent. Tosafot are therefore willing to depart from old traditions in the cause of following the best composite position pieced together from all relevant sugyot from across the Bavli.

Tosafot took an interest in our question of hefsek. They addressed the case of praying in the middle of a meal and treat it in similar terms to the Baal Hamaor. Tosafot (Pesahim 102a, DHM 'Ve'akru ragleihem') says explicitly that prayer has no halakhic effect on a meal. It has no ability to close a meal halakhically and require new berakhot on food eaten subsequently. The fact you cannot eat and pray at the same time has no bearing, as Tosafot writes 'ein bekakh klum'. The Rosh (Rabenu Asher ben Yehiel, born c. 1250 in Germany; died 1327 in Toledo, Spain) adds (Hullin Chapter 6, halakha 6) that if prayer was inherently a hefsek, then a berakha on thunder or lightening in the middle of a meal would also be a hefsek, and after such berakhot you would need to wash and say hamotsi again, and that clearly is not the case. Thus, while the Rif, following the Geonim

adopted an essentially physical understanding of hefsek, there was a rival consensus among the Baal HaMaor, Tosafot and the Rosh that a hefsek must have some halakhic content, and a mere physical interruption is not significant.

## Ramban

The Ramban (born 1194 in Gerona, Spain; died 1270 in the Land of Israel) was committed to upholding the authority of the Geonim, but he adopted the methodology of the Tosafists. In his work *Milhamot Hashem* he therefore defended the Rif against the Baal HaMaor. However, while he came to the same halakhic conclusion as the Rif in our case, because he was not relying on Geonic traditions, but on the dialectical techniques of the Baalei HaTosafot, he did so on a completely different conceptual basis than the Rif. The Ramban did not adopt the physical understanding of hefsek we have seen in the Rif. Rather he distinguished between a necessary (hova) interruption and a voluntary (reshut) interruption. According to the Ramban a hova creates a hefsek while a reshut does not. If we compare the case on Pesahim 102a regarding prayer in the middle of a meal with Haggada on Seder night we can see the way this new conceptualisation explains the different halakhic conclusions. Prayer is not a hova interruption in a meal and therefore cannot create a hefsek.

There is an obvious challenge to this contention, which was raised by the Rosh (Arvei Pesahim, Halakha 24). He objected that tefilla is indeed a hova, and could become an immediate hova during a meal. For example, if you were in the middle of a long lunch and realised there was a minute to go before it became dark and the time for Minha was over. In that case, you would then have a hova to say Minha at once. Therefore, contends the Rosh, by the Ramban's logic, prayer should be a hefsek, but Ramban holds that prayer is not a hefsek and so his system breaks down. We must conclude that the Ramban distinguished between an inherent and an incidental hova. Even if Minha became an immediate hova for practical purposes during a meal, it is not a hova connected to the meal. It is an incidental hova, not an inherent hova, and therefore not a hefsek.

By contrast, on Seder night, saying the Haggada is an inherent hova. Reciting the Haggada is an integral part of the Seder, and therefore creates a hefsek. The Baal Hamaor could respond that the Haggada does not

create a hefsek because you can drink during the Haggada. The Ramban answered by claiming that Pesahim 117b only allowed you to drink between drinking the first cup and beginning to read the Haggada, but not during the Haggada itself. Furthermore, even if you could drink during the Haggada you still could not drink during Hallel, because we know that even casual chatter is not allowed in the middle of Hallel. Either way, according to the Ramban, a hefsek is bound to occur and you therefore need four berakhot for four cups.

The Ramban's conceptualisation works in the context of Seder night, but he has other Gemarot to contend with if his system is to stand. He brings three further cases which could support the Baal HaMaor and Tosafot, but which he explains according to his own analysis.

The first takes us back to the case of kisui hadam (Hullin 86b-87a). The Baal HaMaor would explain that covering the blood creates a hefsek, because in a halakhic sense, it closes an act of shehita. In fact, this is a bold claim. Kisui hadam follows shehita but that does not mean that it marks the end of shehita. Indeed, it does not even need to be done by the same person who performs the shehita, and therefore cannot necessarily be compared to Birkat Hamazon; after all I cannot say Birkat Hamazon on your meal!

The Ramban points out that kisui hadam is a hova connected to shehita and therefore, under his system, in theory at least, it constitutes a hefsek. In practice it is not a hefsek because you could slaughter an animal and cover its blood at the same time. Nevertheless, the principle underlying the Ramban's system remains intact.

The Ramban's second case appears on Berakhot 42a. There we learn that if you make a berakha and drink a glass of wine before hamotsi, you do not have to make another berakha if you want to drink a glass of wine at the end of the meal. This implies that saying hamotsi and eating your meal is not a hefsek. That could support the view of the Baal HaMaor. Eating is not a halakhically significant action that closes a period of drinking. It is therefore not a hefsek. Further, even though you cannot drink and say hamotsi at the same time, we do not say that it creates a hefsek. This is a serious blow to the Rif, because this case undermined a physical conception of hefsek. However, Ramban could reply very simply, according to his own system, that as the meal is not a hova, it cannot be a hefsek.<sup>3</sup> He has

rescued the Rif's conclusion although he has not managed to save his reasoning.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, the Ramban brings a case from Seder night. The Gemara in Pesahim 114b-115a discussed eating Maror on Seder night, and the Rishonim discuss extensively why we do not make a berakha 'proei peri ha'adama' R. Yosef Tov Elem (Northern France, eleventh century) and the Rashbam (Rashi's grandson, R. Samuel ben Meir, Troyes, c.1085-c.1158) both hold that the 'borei peri ha'adama' on Karpas at the start of the Seder covers the Maror we eat after the Haggada has been read. This is a beautiful proof for the Baal HaMaor. The Haggada is clearly not a hefsek, because a berakha we make before we read it remains 'live' even after the Haggada is read. Therefore, just as there does not need to be a further 'borei peri ha'adama' to eat Maror there does not need to be an additional 'borei peri hagafen' on the second cup.

Of course, this argument is based on the assumption that we do not say 'borei peri ha'adama' on Maror because we rely that berakha on Karpas, but that is not necessarily the case. In fact, Tosafot, the Mordekhai and the Rosh all hold that the reason we do not make 'borei peri ha'adama' on the Maror is because the hamotsi we have just said on the Matsa covers the Maror, in the same way that any food we eat with bread is covered by hamotsi. According to this view, the Haggada may be a hefsek (whether according to the Rif's physical logic or the Ramban's concept of 'hova') and we can reinstate the Rif's pesak that a new berakha is needed for each of the four cups on Seder night.

## Understanding Asheknazi practice.

It seems, then, that although Tosafot and the Baal HaMaor make a coherent case for two berakhot over wine on Seder night, which the Shulhan Arukh adopts, the Ramban has provided a sound conceptual basis for the Ashkenazi practice of saying four berakhot. However, the Ramban seems not to be the basis for the Ashkenazi custom. In the Shulhan Arukh (Hilkhot Pesah 474) the Rema says explicitly that our practice is based on the Geonim. If the Rif truly reflected their thinking, it seems they had a physical understanding of hefsek, which the Baal HaMaor, Tosafot and the Rosh refuted, and the Ramban did not revive. Even the Ashkenazi Aharonim seem unhappy with the Rif's conceptual basis. The Taz (the Turei Zahav, R. David haLevi Segal, Poland c. 1586-1667) and the Magen

Avraham (R. Avraham Gombiner, Poland c. 1635-1682) both concede that the opponents of the Rif are correct as far as hilkhot berakhot are concerned, and restate the the Rif's first reason, which the Rif himself seemed unhappy with, that as each cup is its own mitsva, it requires its own 'borei peri hagafen'. The concept of making separate berakhot on cups of wine fulfilling different mitsva purposes also appears on Pesahim 103b, and may be another basis for the Taz and the Magen Avraham. Yet, the fact that these Aharonim had to develop other explanations of four berakhot implies they were not convinced by the Rif's strictly halakhic proofs. Perhaps the greatest stumbling block to justifying the Rif's view, and with it Asheknazi practice, is the beraita on Pesahim 102a about leaving a meal to pray, and which seems to provide a conclusive proof that prayer, and by extension the Haggada, does not constitute a hefsek. Yet, although the Geonim and the Rif did not necessarily adopt the easiest reading of the Gemara, they did not pasken against it. They must have had a coherent reading of Gemara. I wish to suggest what that reading may have been, which will require a close reading of the beraita in question.

## How the Rif read Pesahim 102a – a suggestion

The relevant beraita reads as follows:

<p>If a group was eating together, and they got up to go to the synagogue or the Bet Midrash, when they leave they do not have to make a berakha aharonah and when they return they do not have to make a new berakha rishona.</p>	<p>חברים שהיו מסובין ועקרו רגליהם לילך לבית הכנסת או לבית המדרש כשהן יוצאין אין טעונין ברכה למפרע וכשהן חוזרין אין טעונין ברכה לכתחלה אמר רבי יהודה במה דברים אמורים בזמן שהניחו שם מקצת חברים</p>
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R. Yehuda said 'what is the case? When you leave some of the group behind at the meal.'

We have seen that both the opponents of the Rif (most explicitly Tosafot) and the Ramban understand this beraita as proof that prayer by itself cannot constitute a hefsek. The preceding braitot imply that the problematic aspect is the act of leaving the meal. Leaving the table would constitute a hefsek unless some people remained behind. If some of the guests stayed seated it would indicate that the meal had not broken

up and no a hefsek was intended by those guests who stepped away from the meal for a short time. Tosafot makes clear on both Pesahim 102a and Hullin 87a (first Tosafot) that prayer itself is could never be a hefsek. If that is true, then reading the Haggada would also never be a hefsek by itself.

However, there are two different ways to read the beraita on Pesahim 102a. There is a makhloket in Eruvin 82a (highlighted by the Rashbam on Pesahim 102a) between R. Yehoshua ben Levi and R Yohanan about what R. Yehuda means when he asks ‘bameh devarim amurim?’ – ‘what is the case the previous statement is dealing with?’ R. Yehoshua ben Levi holds that R. Yehuda intends to clarify the previous statement of the Rabanan, but R Yohanan thinks is he arguing with the Rabanan. Thus far, this question did not seem to make a difference. Either way, prayer itself is not a hefsek, although some people remaining behind might mitigate the problem caused by physically leaving the meal. If prayer were itself a hefsek, we have assumed with Tosafot that leaving people behind would not help.

But perhaps prayer can be a hefsek under certain circumstances, and the makhloket in Eruvin in the key to understanding the fundamental dispute between the Rif and Tosafot. Let us say that Tosafot hold like R Yohanan. They believe Rabanan and R. Yehuda are arguing with each other. That would mean that the Rabanan hold that under all circumstances you can pray in the middle of your meal without having to make new berakhot, but R. Yehuda thinks this only applies when only some of the party prays, but the rest keep eating. Naturally, we pasken like the Rabanan against R. Yehuda. Therefore Tosafot holds that prayer is never a hefsek.

By contrast, the Rif holds like R. Yehoshua ben Levi. He believes that R Yehuda is simply explaining what the Rabanan meant. He regards the beraita is a unified whole and follows R Yehuda. That implies that the universally held halakha is that prayer in the middle of a meal is a hefsek unless some people at the meal do not pray. If my suggestion is correct then both Tosafot and the Rif have a viable read of the beraita and Pesahim 102a would no longer be a conclusive proof for Tosafot.

## A proof

We can prove that the Rif and Tosafot did indeed understand the beraita differently by looking at a

makhloket on the previous daf between R Sheshet and R Hisda.<sup>5</sup> Some foods (for the sake of brevity let us say the shevat haminim) require you to say your berakha aharonah where you had your meal. On the other hand, you do not need to say ‘borei nefashot’ on relevant foods, where you ate. R Sheshet holds if you ate shevat haminim foods and then get up to leave the meal, even temporarily, you must say your berakha aharonah immediately. He regards standing up to leave as a hefsek, and there must be no hefsek between eating and saying a berakha aharonah. R. Hisda disagrees, and holds that you can leave a meal, return and then say the berakha aharonah. For R Hisda, leaving the meal by itself is not a hefsek.

It is easy to see R. Hisda’s source in the Tannaim. The Rabbanan at the beginning of our beraita, and in the two previous beraitot on the page, hold that when you leave a meal you never need to make an immediate berakha aharonah. R. Hisda holds like R. Yohanan and therefore understands that the Rabbanan and R. Yehuda are arguing, and we rule according to the Rabbanan. But what is R. Sheshet’s source? Can he really hold like R. Yehuda against the Rabbanan? It must be that R. Sheshet holds like R. Yehoshua ben Levi. R. Sheshet thinks that R. Yehuda was explaining the Rabbanan and the universal opinion is that you can only leave without making an immediate berakha aharonah only if some people stay behind. If no one stayed behind you would have to make a berakha aharonah before you left. If Tosafot holds like R. Yohanan and therefore like the Rabbanan, it follows that he also holds like R. Hisda. If the Rif follows R. Yehoshua ben Levi and therefore R. Yehuda’s understanding of the Rabbanan, he will also follow R. Sheshet. Sure enough, Tosafot (Pesahim 101b-102a DHM: Keshehein yotsin teonin berkha lemafrei’a) rules like R. Hisda and the Rif (on Pesahim 101b) like R. Sheshet. Thus proving that Tosafot reads the beraita as an argument between the Rabbanan and R. Yehuda, and holds like the Rabbanan, while the Rif thinks that R. Yehuda is explaining the position of the Rabbanan, and the beraita as a whole follows him.

## Rationale and implications

R. Shimon Shkop (1860-1939) said of his teacher R. Hayim Soloveitchik (1853-1918), ‘Reb Hayim asks *vos* (what), I ask *forvos* (why).’ Let us move from the what to the why. R. Yehuda (and following him the Geonim, the Rif and contemporary Ashkenazim) all hold that prayer is a hefsek in a meal, unless some people at the meal did not pray. But why should that make any difference? I suggest that their reasoning is based on their essentially physical understanding of hefsek. *Kisui hadam* is not a hefsek after *shehita* because you could cover and slaughter at the same time. Prayer is a hefsek because you cannot pray and drink at the same time. But, if you leave some people behind at the meal while you go to pray, on a conceptual level, you *are* praying and drinking at the same time. This may not be literally true, but we are not primarily interested in what actually happens. No one actually slaughters and covers the blood at the same time. The theoretical and the conceptual are as important as the actual.

That being the case, it becomes clear that leaving people behind prevents a hefsek, which would have been achieved through prayer, or in the case of Seder night, through reading the Haggada. We only make a second and fourth *berakha* on Seder night because there has been a complete hefsek. If that hefsek is missing, *Tosafot’s pesak* is right, and the second and fourth *berakhot* would be *levatela*. It follows that it is essential that when we move, not physically but conceptually, from a mode of drinking at the start of the Seder to a mode of Haggada, everyone moves together. If we leave some people behind there will not

be a hefsek. Unless we involve everyone in the Haggada, make them part of the experience, transport them from a social occasion with a glass of wine to the re-enactment of *yetsiat mitsrayim*, when we make our second ‘*borei peri hagafen*’ it will not be a *mitsva* but an *avera*. If we do not involve everyone in the experience of Seder night then our own religious activity will be undermined. We can only achieve all that we hope for ourselves on Seder night, if we bring everyone with us.

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<sup>1</sup> For a full discussion of the historical context of *makhlokot* between the Geonim and the Rishonim, see T. Fishman, *Becoming the People of the Talmud* Philadelphia, 2011

<sup>2</sup> The structure of the *HaMaor HaKatan* could be taken to imply that the *Baal HaMaor* considers this to be his strongest argument, but the following discussion is important in setting out the concepts that other Rishonim raise.

<sup>3</sup> The *Gemara* is dealing with a meal on Shabbat, in which case one could argue that the meal is a *hova*, but the *hova* is to eat, not to eat after that particular glass of wine. We often make *Kiddush* separately to our main meal on Shabbat morning.

<sup>4</sup> Presumably the Rif would argue that *berakhot* are an integral part of any meal, and do not create *hafsakot* in other *berakhot*.

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to R. Ysoscher Katz and Ari Webber for this proof.

# *Habad and Braslav attitudes to philosophy and secular study*

ARYEH GROSSMAN

The tension in Jewish thought regarding the balance between Torah study and secular study dates as far back as Rabbinic times. The Talmud in Menahot states:

Ben Damah the son of R. Ishmael's sister once asked R. Ishmael, May one such as I who have studied the whole of the Torah learn Greek wisdom? He thereupon read to him the following verse, '*This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth, but thou shalt meditate therein day and night*'. Go then and find a time that is neither day nor night and learn then Greek wisdom.<sup>1</sup>

This implies that there is seemingly no time when one should not be learning Torah and could learn Greek wisdom, which in Talmudic terms, referred to all types of secular wisdom. On the other hand, the issue is left more open elsewhere in the Talmud, where it is written:

Cursed be the man who would breed swine and cursed be the man who would teach his son Greek Wisdom....But was Greek Wisdom proscribed? Did not Rav Judah say that Samuel stated in the name of R. Simeon b. Gamaliel:... 'thousand youths who were in my father's house; five hundred of them learned Torah and the other five hundred learned Greek Wisdom, and out of all of them there remain only I here and the son of my father's brother in Asia?' – It may, however, be said that the family of R. Gamaliel was an exception, as they has associations with the Government...So also the members of the family of Rabban Gamaliel were permitted to discuss Grecian Wisdom on account of their having had associations with the Government.<sup>2</sup>

It is clear that from Talmudic times, there was a certain level of ambiguity in terms of the viability of secular study and it was this ambiguity that would later become key in

the time of the enlightenment when this discussion was pushed to the forefront of Jewish life.

In the twelfth to fourteenth centuries onward, there was great controversy surrounding Maimonides and in particular, the *Guide to the Perplexed* in which he quotes Aristotle and other non-Jewish writers. The controversy was caused by the questioning of Maimonides' intentions in citing non-Jewish philosophers which led to certain factions passing Maimonides' books to Dominican monks to be burnt. The response of Nahmanides, who stood in the middle of this controversy, to those who opposed Maimonides' writings was that *Guide for the Perplexed* was intended to be for those who were already learned in the writings of non-Jewish scholars in an aim to bring them back to Jewish practice. Nahmanides also wrote to those who followed the Maimonidean view and encouraged them to calm their anger against their opponents. This controversy led to R. Shelomo ben Adret (also known as the Rashba), decreeing a herem against the study of Greek philosophy in 1305.

## **Nahmanides**

Nahmanides also writes in the introduction to his commentary on the Pentateuch, that the Torah not only contains 'Torah wisdom', but indeed, all wisdom can be derived from its teachings. Nahmanides brings the example of King Solomon, 'whom God had given wisdom and knowledge, and who derived it all from the Torah. He studied it until he knew the secret of all things created, even of the forces and characteristics of plants...'<sup>3</sup> Nahmanides' idea was important in later modern discussions of the value of learning only Torah and not secular wisdom – if all wisdom could be derived from the Torah, was there a need to learn secular wisdom?

## Naftali Herz Wessely

The tension between secular and Torah study was brought to the forefront once again towards the end of the eighteenth century in the period of the early Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment). In 1782, the 'Edict of Tolerance' of Emperor Joseph II of Austria allowed Jews to attend schools and university, engage in trades that had not been previously available to them, and lifted previous humiliating restrictions such as wearing gold stars and taxes that were levied only on Jews and cattle.<sup>4</sup> The condition of the Edict was that Jews would learn in the official national language and not their own languages of Hebrew or Yiddish, and that their schools would be under close governmental control. Naftali Herz Wessely, an advocate of the Edict, published a proposal for how to put the Edict into practice for the benefit of the Jewish community, in the form of the first Haskalah educational tract, titled *Divre Shalom ve'Emet*.

Wessely's plan recognised that there were two types of study, *Torat ha'Adam*, secular study, and the Law of God, Torah study, and that it was essential for Jewish students to study both. Wessely quoted a Midrashic statement 'even a carcass is better than a Torah scholar who has no other knowledge'<sup>5</sup>. Mayer Waxman writes that 'He (Wessely) interpreted the statement to mean that a Jewish scholar who has no secular knowledge is worse than a carcass, for eating of carcass is prohibited by the Torah only to the Jews but may be eaten by others, while a Jewish scholar who is ignorant of secular studies is of little value either to Jews or Gentiles, for he lowers the honour of the Torah.'<sup>6</sup>

## Hasidic attitudes

Within Hasidism there are many different approaches and attitudes to secular study, particularly the study of philosophy and science. In Europe at the end of the

eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, many Jews responded to continuing discrimination by the ruling powers by either encouraging the granting of Emancipation by embracing the Haskalah and thereby persuading the civil authorities that they were worthy of political rights, or by rejecting the modern world and plunging into the depths of the Hassidic world. Raphael Mahler goes as far as to describe the Haskalah as the 'opposite of Hasidism...an antithesis that reflected the conflicting interests and philosophies of two classes of the Jewish people, who were separated by a deep social abyss: Hasidism – the impoverished, suffering retarded petty bourgeois and *lumpenproletarian* (ragged proletariat) masses – and Maskilim – the rising Jewish bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia associated with it.'<sup>7</sup>

The parallel growth of the Haskalah movement and the Hassidic movements was key in pushing Hassidic leaders to address the issue of secular study within their own communities. Some Hasidic leaders instructed their followers to block themselves off from secular studies entirely. Others saw the need to find ways to engage in the study of philosophy, both secular and Jewish, and the wider study of general subjects, echoing discussions in Talmudic times. Two Hassidic groups, Habad and Braslav both took very interesting approaches to the issues of secular study, which were connected, but different.

## R. Nahman of Braslav

R. Nahman of Braslav was born in 1772 in Podolia as the great grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of the Hasidic movement. Rabbi Nahman never really had a successful leadership role in his lifetime, the work of his key disciple, Rabbi Natan Sternharz, in writing down Rabbi Nahman's teachings in several volumes meant that he became the posthumous spiritual leader of Braslav Hasidim.



defense of simple faith in God over against any sort of philosophical speculation or inquiry'.<sup>15</sup> This warning is very much in keeping with Rabbi Nahman's warnings as recorded by Rabbi Natan in *Shivhei Moharan*. Green, however, argues that the lessons of 'The Wise Man and the Simpleton' and other tales of Rabbi Nahman are much deeper and provide a deep insight into the complexity of Rabbi Nahman's mind.

'The wise man, the messenger, and the simple believer who appear in this story are all aspects of Nahman's own tortured and conflicted mind.'<sup>16</sup> Whilst the message that Rabbi Nahman intended was almost certainly to simply put across the point of the dangers of indulging too heavily in philosophical questioning, the internal struggle of which Green writes is certainly prevalent in Rabbi Nahman's other writings.

## Role of the tsaddik

Rabbi Natan writes that although Rabbi Nahman forbade regular people to engage in philosophy he explained in *Likutei Amarim* that a 'very great tsaddik needs to carefully look into these subjects in order to raise from there those souls who have fallen into them'.<sup>17</sup> It is clear that Rabbi Nahman saw himself as a tsaddik, as Green points out 'his constant mentions of 'a certain zaddiq' or 'the true zaddiq' are thinly-veiled references to himself'.<sup>18</sup> It thus becomes clear that within the mind of Rabbi Nahman, a line is drawn between himself and his followers and that while they must not learn *Guide to the Perplexed* and such works, he must explore such works to help those who have strayed from a life of Torah through the study of such philosophies. In a sense, Rabbi Nahman's approach to secular study and the study of philosophy was split into the instruction to which he gave his followers and that which he followed himself for the sake of 'the fallen.' This was an instrumental and regrettable engagement, not a positive embrace of secular study.

## R. Nahman and Maskilim

In his role as the tsaddik, Rabbi Nahman grappled with the issues he believed were too dangerous for his followers to study, for example the question of free choice.<sup>19</sup> Rabbi Nahman used his wider learning when he developed a close relationship with the Maskilim in Uman. Khaim Liberman writes that it was 'clear that Rabbi Nahman had hoped to achieve something by his conversations with the maskilim'.<sup>20</sup> When he was able to build a close relationship with them, 'they became attached with heart

and soul to the Rabbi and were frequent visitors in his house'.<sup>21</sup> Rabbi Nahman's conversations with the Maskilim were effective, as Liberman notes, 'after the demise of the Rabbi, when Rabbi Natan lamented bitterly, they said to him: 'you think you are missing the Rabbi? We are missing him. Had he been alive, we should have now become truly repentant'.<sup>22</sup>

R. Nahman's encounters with Maskilim when he witnessed the results of philosophical study first hand on his contemporaries, only firmed his opposition to the study of philosophy for its own sake, and he remained a 'deep and thoroughgoing anti-rationalist'.<sup>23</sup> Liberman goes so far as to say that 'in his relations with them [Maskilim] a slight note of contempt is detectable'.<sup>24</sup> Liberman detects this contempt in the tale of 'The Wise Man and the Simpleton'.<sup>25</sup>

Rabbi Nahman's dual approach to the study of philosophy highlights his eagerness to address what he believed were the challenges of his day in a way befitting a leader. As well as ensuring his own followers did not stray from his path, he actively sought after those who had fallen from this path in order to help them back to the path he viewed as true – a path based in the study of only Torah and not secular philosophy.

## Habad

As Joseph Weiss notes, it is possible to label Habad 'the philosophical movement in Hasidism'.<sup>26</sup> The writings of Habad are not made up of parables, proverbs and anecdotes. Rather, as Weiss writes, 'it constitutes a whole body of literature written by systematic thinkers who make use of conceptual and symbolic language'.<sup>27</sup> As a result, the Habad approach to philosophical study is not as clear cut as that of Rabbi Nahman.

R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745–1813), was the founder of Habad Hasidism. He was a disciple of R. Dov Baer the Maggid of Mezritch, leader of the Hasidic movement following the Ba'al Shem Tov. In Mezritch, R. Shneur Zalman became one of the inner circle of the Maggid's pupils. Although R. Shneur Zalman was one of the youngest, the Maggid had a high opinion of him and in 1770 delegated to him the task of composing a new and up-to-date Shulhan Arukh.<sup>28</sup> R. Shneur Zalman worked on this book for many years but published only small parts of it during his life time. As a precursor to this work, R. Shneur Zalman produced 'Laws of the Study of Torah.' In this work, R. Shneur Zalman first addresses the question of whether it was permitted for a Torah scholar to study secular works. For similar reasons to Rabbi

Nahman he allows such study, only for the 'hakhmei hadorot' – the wise of the generations, in order to help those who have moved away from the religion through a path of philosophical study and 'in order to bring them back and to strengthen their religiosity...'<sup>29</sup> Notably, R. Shneur Zalman also recognised the value of such study also in order to learn from them 'words of Torah, and fear of heaven and derekh eretz' as long as the works are not the writings of heretics. He therefore gives a positive value to secular study absent from R. Nahman's thought.

In 1797, R. Shneur Zalman published (anonymously) his *Likkutei Amarim* (collected sayings), which became known as the *Tanya*. *Tanya* is a masterly and systematic exposition of Hasidism, accepted to this day as the principal source of Habad Hasidism.<sup>30</sup> In *Likkutei Amarim*, R. Shneur Zalman warns that 'the uncleanness of the science of the nations is greater than that of profane speech', but allows their study for one who 'employs [these sciences] as a useful instrument...as a means of a more affluent livelihood to be able to serve God, or knows how to apply them in the service of God and His Torah.' As in 'Laws of Torah Study', R. Shneur Zalman recognises the value of secular study in aiding personal advancement in the study of Torah and not just in providing a source of revenue for oneself and one's family.

## Two approaches

This recognition of the inherent value of secular study, within certain restrictions, is what really separates the approach of Rabbi Nahman and R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi. The Habad approach developed through the subsequent leaders of Habad. Certainly, while Rabbi Nahman went as far as to exclude the study even of Jewish philosophy, Habad leaders would often take inspiration from the works of Maimonides and others whom Rabbi Nahman warned against. An example is a discourse given by the fifth *Rebbe of Lubavitch* Rabbi Shalom Dov Baer, in which he discusses the differences between Maimonides and Aristotle. He explains that Maimonides' placed the Torah as the highest source of truth at the centre of his intellectual study around that, whereas Aristotle simply began a disinterested enterprise of intellectual study and sought to discover the truth from first principles.<sup>31</sup> This is a stark contrast to the more critical presentation of Maimonides by Rabbi Nahman.

Yet, Habad and Braslav, share an approach to philosophy that sees its study as not entirely ideal, since all wisdom

can be found in the Torah, even though in certain cases, one might have to study secular works as well.

## The Seventh Rebbe

A major difference in the views of Habad and Braslav is that whereas the development of the main philosophies of Braslav ended after the death of Rabbi Nahman, Habad thought continued to develop through the subsequent Rebbes. Particularly notable are the writings of the last Lubavitcher Rebbe – Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994) on the topic of science and scientific study. It was well known that Rabbi Schneerson had studied in several high profile institutions in both Germany and France studying several different academic subjects. Of particular note is a letter that Rabbi Schneerson wrote to a certain scientist in which he compares the study of science to the study of Torah:

Geometry has the characteristics of an exact science as well as of an applied science. The same is true of our holy Torah (lehavdil a thousand separations)...there can be no refutation of Torah by science, since the Torah is absolute truth, while science itself attests that it is not absolute, but dependent upon the person's wilful acceptance of certain givens...<sup>32</sup>

Standing on the legacy of Rabbi Schneerson, Habad takes the view that although secular study may be necessary, the absolute truth of Torah is the priority. However, since Habad, is a movement founded on the deep Jewish philosophy of R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, as opposed to Braslav, which is founded on the basis of a simple service of God, free from questioning and philosophy whether Jewish or non-Jewish, Habad is open to Jewish philosophy, although it still limits the study of secular study to those for whom it is truly necessary. This, in itself, is an echo of the Talmudic case of the members of the family of Rabban Gamaliel for whom the study of 'Greek wisdom' was permitted also by necessity.

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<sup>1</sup> Menahot 99b-100a

<sup>2</sup> Bava Kama 82b-83a

<sup>3</sup> Nahmanides, *Commentary on the Torah*, Introduction

<sup>4</sup> W. C. Ingrao, *The Habsburg Monarchy 1618-1815* (Cambridge, 1994), 199

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- <sup>5</sup> Vayikra Rabba, chapter 1
- <sup>6</sup> M. Waxman, *A History of Jewish Literature* vol. 3 (Kingsport, 1960), 116
- <sup>7</sup> R. Mahler, *Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment* (Philadelphia, 1985), 64
- <sup>8</sup> Rabbi N. Sternharz, *Shivhei Moharan*, 36
- <sup>9</sup> Rabbi N. Sternharz, *Shivhei Moharan*, 37
- <sup>10</sup> 'Solomon Maimon' *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol.13, 370
- <sup>11</sup> Rabbi N. Sternharz, *Shivhei Moharan*, 37
- <sup>12</sup> A. Green, *Tormented Master: The Life and Spiritual Quest of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (Vermont, 1992), 290
- <sup>13</sup> A. J. Band, (trans.) *Nahman of Bratslav: The Tales* (New York, 1978), 153
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 154
- <sup>15</sup> A. Green, *Tormented Master: The Life and Spiritual Quest of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (Vermont, 1992), 289
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 291
- <sup>17</sup> Rabbi N. Sternharz, *Shivhei Moharan*, 39
- <sup>18</sup> A. Green, *Tormented Master: The Life and Spiritual Quest of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (Vermont, 1992), 287
- <sup>19</sup> Rabbi N. Sternharz, *Shivhei Moharan*, 39
- <sup>20</sup> K. Liberman, 'Rabbi Nakhman Bratslaver and the *Maskilim of Uman*' in K. S. Pinson. (ed.) *Yivo Annual of Jewish Social Science Vol. VI* (NY, 1951), 297
- <sup>21</sup> K. Liberman, 'Rabbi Nakhman Bratslaver and the *Maskilim of Uman*' in K. S. Pinson. (ed.) *Yivo Annual of Jewish Social Science Vol. VI* (NY, 1951), 294
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 295
- <sup>23</sup> A. Green, *Tormented Master: The Life and Spiritual Quest of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (Vermont, 1992), 298
- <sup>24</sup> K. Liberman, 'Rabbi Nakhman Bratslaver and the *Maskilim of Uman*' in K. S. Pinson. (ed.) *Yivo Annual of Jewish Social Science Vol. VI* (NY, 1951), 298
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 298
- <sup>26</sup> J. Weiss, *Studies in East European Jewish Mysticism and Hasidism* (Oxford, 1997), 194
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>28</sup> 'Shneur Zalman of Lyady' *Encyclopaedia Judaica* vol.18, 501
- <sup>29</sup> R. Shneur Zalman, *Shulhan Arukh HaRav, Hilkhhot Talmud Torah* 3
- <sup>30</sup> 'Shneur Zalman of Lyady' *Encyclopaedia Judaica* vol.18, 501
- <sup>31</sup> *Torat Shalom*, 243-244
- <sup>32</sup> Rabbi M.M. Schneerson, *Iggrot Kodesh* vol.VI, 145-156

## *A new look at idolatry and slave labour*

RABBI SHMULY YANKLOWITZ

**I**dolatry (*avoda zara*) is one of the gravest sins in the Torah. In fact, it is one of three sins for which one must accept death before succumbing (*Yoma* 82a). But is it merely an ancient relic? As twenty first century Jews who have demythologized the world, we simply cannot relate to the worship of trees, rivers, and statues. Nonetheless, today's desire for idolatry is as strong as ever, clothed deceptively in new forms such as slave labor and unethical consumption.

Monotheism is inimical to idolatry. The importance of monotheism highlighted in the daily *Shema* declaration is foundational to Jewish belief. This is primarily a commitment not to believe in or serve any other god or to make any statues (*Shemot* 20:3-4). For many, it is also a denial of multiplicity to the God of oneness. While theists and atheists both can act morally or immorally, all individuals must beware that no absolute object or value replaces the concept of God. When embraced properly, a belief in God should inspire more humility. One always knows that the job of God is taken.

I would suggest that monotheism and the rejection of idolatry can be understood not only as a theological, but also a moral, commitment. The Greek philosophers taught that polytheism leads to moral relativism, since there are many conflicting authorities. When we embrace one God, on the other hand, we are guided by the one absolute moral truth and by its Author.

### **Idolatry and morality**

The Meiri explained that among non-Jews an idolater for halakhic purposes was one who lives a lawless lifestyle. He wrote: 'They are polluted in their practices and disgusting in their moral traits...but the other nations, which are law-abiding, and which are free of these disgusting moral traits and, moreover, punish people with these traits—there is no doubt that these laws do not apply to them at



all.<sup>1</sup> Thus he linked the practice of a moral life to the question of what is holy or idolatrous.

Many Jewish sources understand idolatry not to be an intellectual error but a wrong associated with sexual morality: 'The Israelites knew that the idols were nonentities, and they engaged in idolatry only in order to allow themselves to perform forbidden sexual relations publicly' (*Sanhedrin* 63b). Again the rabbis teach that the rejection of idolatry is indelibly bound to a moral commitment.

Hazal continued the tradition of, the prophets, who constantly compared idolatry to adultery. If one betrays God for another, one is like an adulterer cheating on a spouse. The comparison is not only metaphorical. A desecration of God can be done to God's image. We learn that each human being is created in the image of God—to desecrate a human being is to desecrate a *tselem Elokim*. Here too, immoral activity is also compared an act of idolatry. A rejection of idolatry can inspire care for physical human needs. Hillel the Elder noted that the Romans honoured statues of their rulers, and concluded that to wash oneself must be a *mitsva*: 'All the more so am I required to scrub and wash myself – I, who have been created in God's image and likeness'.<sup>2</sup>

## Idolatry and the Philosophers

Philosophers have broadened our understanding of modern idolatry. Emil Fackenheim explained: ‘Sinful passion can reach a point at which it becomes an independent power - as it were, an alien god within - a point at which the ordinary relation is reversed and passion no longer belongs to man but man to passion. This is why the rabbis refuse to belittle idolatry by defining it too widely, as indistinguishable from sin in general’<sup>3</sup>. The role of religious life is to become aware of, and take control of, this ‘independent power’ that can dominate our capacity for reason and restraint.

Theologian Paul Tillich wrote, ‘Idolatry is the elevation of a preliminary concern to ultimacy. Something essentially conditioned is taken as unconditional, something essentially partial is boosted to universality, and something essentially finite is given infinite significance; the best example of contemporary idolatry is religious nationalism’<sup>4</sup>. There is only one unconditional, universal, infinite Entity, and when anything concrete or finite is made absolute or infinite, it may be considered an act of idolatry.

## Self interest as idolatry

I wish to focus on one expression of idolatrous behaviour condemned by Hazal. Choosing self-interest over the needs of another was considered by the rabbis to be comparable to idolatry. ‘Anyone who shuts his eye against charity is like one who worships idols, for here it is written, “Beware that there be not a base thought in thy heart,” etc. [“and your eye will be evil against thy poor brother”], and there it is written, “Certain base fellows are gone out, as there [the crime is that of] idolatry, so here also [the crime is like that of] idolatry”’ (Ketubot, 68a). Caught in the traps of insatiability, one can throw off the very moral responsibility that makes us human. The paradigmatic idol, the golden calf, represents this undisciplined pagan behaviour combined with materialistic greed. The rejection of idolatry is nothing less than the rejection of determinism. The Torah comes to teach that we have the free will to attain self control and elevate our pursuits toward our ideals. We are not determined by our desires.

The Sefer HaHinuch, links idolatry to consumer spending: ‘For we should not attach any item of idol worship to our money or property, in order to gain pleasure from it, and for this reason, the Torah says, “You must not bring an abhorrent thing into your house”. And

one reason for this commandment is to distance every element of detested idol worship. He goes on to say ‘ And within the commandment is that one should not attach to his own money, which God graced him with, the money of another which was gained through theft, violence or exploitation, or from any disgusting element, because all of these are included in the elements of idol worship. For man's heart is inclined towards evil, which desires [items paid for by any means] and brings it into the home; and this inclination towards evil is called idol worship’<sup>5</sup>.

## Consumption, Idolatry, Slavery

The Hinuch is teaching that when one merely fulfills a desire for consumption, ignoring the moral duty to consider how it was produced, one worships pleasure over all else. When one worships oneself, it is considered an act of idolatry.

Today, we are aware that as westerners we benefit from slave-produced products. Consider taking the slavery footprint survey.<sup>6</sup> You are likely to find that more than 20 slaves produced the food and consumer goods that you use daily. In an age where more than 30 million people live as slaves and millions more work in sweatshops around the world, we must confront this reality. The idol of immediate gratification at the expense of the basic welfare of human beings needs to be smashed. This requires more moral sophistication than a hammer.

Today, there is growing transparency in where our food comes from, such as kosher certifications, fair trade stamps, and the ethical kosher seal Tav HaYosher.<sup>7</sup> There are so many other areas where we do not have access to transparency. Clothes production is a great example. How can we become moral exemplars willing to make significant personal sacrifices in areas where transparency and access to credible reliable information is so difficult?

The rabbis teach us, ‘One who sees an idol that has not been destroyed pronounces the blessing, ‘Blessed is He who is slow to anger”’ (Tosefta, Berakhot 7:2). Incredible! I would suggest that this wording was chosen because God should be angry at how much evil there is in the world that is unchallenged. Yet God has humbly allowed us to be the ambassadors of truth and the defenders of justice on earth. We can emulate this Divine patience frustrated at an unredeemed world while still feeling a great sense of urgency. May our rejection of idolatry inside and outside of ourselves inspire us to live more ethical and holy lives, spreading justice near and far.

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<sup>1</sup> Beit Habehira, Avoda Zara 48

<sup>2</sup> Vayikra Rabba, 34:3

<sup>3</sup> E. Fackenheim, *Encounters Between Judaism and Modern Philosophy*, (New York 1980), 178

<sup>4</sup> P. Tillich, *Systemic Theology*, (Chicago 1951), 1:13

<sup>5</sup> Sefer HaHinuch, mitsva 429

<sup>6</sup> [slaveryfootprint.org](http://slaveryfootprint.org)

<sup>7</sup> [isupporthetav.com](http://isupporthetav.com)

# *Is idolatry a folly safely surpassed?*

DAVID PRUWER

In the modern Western world, one does not encounter idolatry frequently. For the past few centuries, Judaism has been forced to confront a whole host of rival ideologies and belief systems; whether it was the lure of secularism and atheism or simply the pervasive modern penchant to shirk tradition. Indeed, these philosophies remain highly attractive for many and demand novel responses on behalf of Judaism's representative voices. At first blush, the one threat that Judaism in the modern world has safely and permanently laid to rest is the menace of idolatry. Idolatry is seemingly so distant from the contemporary conscience that one begins to wonder how people throughout the ages could possibly have been drawn towards such a primitive worldview. Even within secular Western culture, the last remnants of idol worshiping cultures are to be found in the exhibition cabinets of museums and collections rather than in society's religious establishments.<sup>1</sup> Certainly within contemporary Jewish society we have dealt paganism and idolatry a knock-out blow. Idolatry been permanently ejected from the pantheon of respectable and acceptable beliefs. Even the most pessimistic of forecasters do not predict a resurgence of paganism and idolatry. However, this article will argue that such conclusions would be premature and overlook the underlying relevance idolatry has in the modern age. Idols might indeed be hard to come by, but idolatry remains an ever-present and perilous possibility.

## **The appeal of idolatry in the Gemara:**

The belief that idolatry has been finally overcome is not a recent phenomenon. A number of passages within the Talmud intimate that Hazal also felt the attraction of idol worship to be a long-gone attraction. The Gemara in Sanhedrin (102b) reports a dialogue between Rav Ashi



and Menashe; 'He [Rav Ashi] then questioned him [Menashe], 'Since you are so wise, why did you worship idols?' He replied, 'Had you been there, you would have raised up the skirt of your garment and run after me [to worship idols].'<sup>2</sup> We can readily associate with Rav Ashi's perplexed question: How could intelligent and rational individuals fall prey to the snares of idol worship? In the 'post-idolatrous world' which we inhabit, Menashe's claim is still a mystery. How did this radical transformation of attitudes to idolatry come about? Has human nature changed so drastically since the ancient world of idolatry that we can no longer even begin to comprehend Menashe's warning?

Another aggadic piece in Avoda Zara (17a) relates a tale of Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Yonatan who were travelling along a road and encountered a fork in their path. One trail led down a pathway filled with idolaters whilst the other passed by a street occupied by prostitutes. Presuming that retreat was not an option, the Gemara records the ensuing dilemma; 'One said to the other; "Let us follow the road of idolatry, for we have conquered this desire [for idol worship]". The other replied; "Let us go past the prostitutes and gain reward for controlling our desires". These two sages disagree as to whether one ought

to knowingly place oneself in potentially religiously challenging circumstances if a safer route presents itself.<sup>2</sup> One position advocates spiritual safety and avoidance of potentially harmful situations whilst the dissenting approach argues for the positive religious value in overcoming spiritual challenges. Nonetheless, the underlying assumption behind both opinions is that *avoda zara* has lost its alluring appeal and is a vacuous threat. It is hard to imagine how the pagan worldview ever became so thoroughly entrenched in society that people were willing to sacrifice themselves for their idols rather than pledging allegiance to God.<sup>3</sup>

If we take it for granted that *avoda Zzra* no longer plagues humanity, then idolatry remains an antiquated phenomenon irrelevant to modern society. Idolatry would become an interesting subject of historical investigation but ultimately only of theoretical worth.<sup>4</sup> We could indeed sleep safely at night knowing that idolatry is a ‘folly safely surpassed.’<sup>5</sup> We are in no doubt as to God’s unity and omnipotence. There is no need, at least here, to convince anyone of that. The very idea of worshiping physical objects and attributing divine or spiritual powers seems a ludicrous suggestion. However, if idolatry truly is an irrelevance to the modern Western man, a number of problems present themselves. Why does the Torah dedicate so many *mitsvot* and warnings against idolatry if it remains mere stupidity? After all, of the six hundred and thirteen *mitsvot* enumerated by the Rambam in his *Sefer HaMitsvot*, at least fifty surround the prohibition of idolatry! In addition, what inspiration and relevance are we to draw from the plethora of biblical detail surrounding idolatry if it is no longer germane to contemporary Jewish thought? Evidently, a closer look at the sources surrounding the nature of *avoda zara* is necessary.

## Idolatry as error

This issue has plagued Jewish thought for centuries and has led to much debate stretching from the Geonim until today. As an introduction, it would be helpful to split up the Jewish perspectives on idolatry into two camps. The first school of thought understood the core problem with idol worship as an error in the way *we think about God*. This approach sees the Jewish ban on idolatry as guiding our thoughts and beliefs about the Divine. God has certain characteristics and any deviation from these traits is a misrepresentation of God, and thus constitutes idolatry. This strict adherence to the plain understanding of *avoda zara* interprets idolatry as simple ‘alien’ or false worship. The error of idolatry was in the longing for gods

that are ‘no-gods’ (Jeremiah 2:11). Instead of believing in a monotheistic world, idolaters adopt the mistaken belief that physical objects in the real world are injected with divine spirit. Very often, these forms of idolatry also believe in a polytheistic universe where multiple deities exist and exert differing degrees of power over the human world. However, irrespective of the particular belief adopted, the common feature underlying all these approaches is that they are false *conceptions* of God. Seen in this light, this perspective views idolatry as a purely intellectual sin whereby individuals believe God to be otherwise than He truly is. This misguided conviction might lead individuals to the actual idolatrous worship of other gods, be they physical objects or multiple metaphysical entities, but the core source of idolatrous practise is a problem of faulty logic in the mind. The Rambam is perhaps the clearest advocate of this approach towards *avoda zara*. In his short introduction to *Hilkhot Avoda Zara*, the Rambam indulges his readers in a rare moment of historical narrative accounting for the inception of idolatry in the world. The Rambam writes:

‘In the days of Enosh, the people erred and the counsel of the sages degenerated into stupidity. Enosh himself was amongst those who deviated. Their mistaken reasoning was that since God created the skies and spheres as part of nature, and placed them high up, giving them dignity, and that they are servants who serve Him, it would be appropriate to laud, glorify and honour them as well... Once this matter was decided upon, they proceeded to build temples to the stars, to bring sacrifices to them, to praise and glorify them verbally and to bow down to them, in order to attain [by these means] the will of the Creator by their opinions, which were evil... Owing to the passage of time, the honoured and fear-inducing Name was forgotten by all of nature, and was not recognised. Everybody, women and children included, knew only their forms of wood and stone, and the temples of stone, which they had been educated to bow down to from childhood.’<sup>6</sup>

The Rambam’s association of idolatry with ‘error’, ‘stupidity’ and ‘forgetfulness’ indicate that for him, the root of idolatry lies in thinking about God incorrectly. As it were, the Jewish ban of idolatry is sinful thought rather than action. Perhaps even the physical act of idol worship is only problematic because of the incorrect philosophical and theological beliefs that lie behind, namely that God exists as an entity in the physical world rather than a wholly transcendental Being. In his *Moreh Nevuhim* (*Guide to the Perplexed*), the Rambam highlights all image making and idol creation as so pernicious precisely

because of its tendency to lead people to conceive of God in a physical or anthropomorphic manner.<sup>7</sup> The ban on idolatry in Jewish law at its core represents a series of ways in which we are supposed to conceive God.

According to this cognitive understanding of *avodah zara*, we are charged with the imperative to purge our minds of all fallacious and misleading conceptions of God, who ought to remain wholly transcendent. This approach sees idolatry as an internal battle within one's own mind. Indeed, according to the Rambam someone might very well fulfil the entire corpus of halakha to the finest detail and yet still be considered an idolater on account of his innermost thoughts.<sup>8</sup> The Rambam here acts as a foil for the other approach taken towards *avoda zara*, that which is found most prominently in the thought of R. Yehuda Halevi in his *Kuzari*.

## From idolatrous belief to practice:

The alternative to conceiving idolatry as a problematic metaphysical belief is to view it as a sinful practice. The focus of this second understanding of *avoda zara* concentrates on incorrect modes of worship irrespective of the object of worship. Consequently, idolatry can be found both in the worship of idols and even of God Himself. In this view, one can violate the prohibition of idolatry in full knowledge that idols are no gods at all.<sup>9</sup> R. Yehuda Halevi, in the *Kuzari*, famously adopts this approach to idolatry. The paradigm example of idolatry, according to R. Judah, was the sin of the Golden Calf:

‘This sin was not on par with an entire lapse from all obedience to the One who had led them out of Egypt, as only one of His commands was violated by them. God had forbidden images, and in spite of this they made one. They should have waited and not have assumed power, have arranged a place of worship, an altar, and sacrifices. This had been done by the advice of their astrologers and magicians among them, who were of the opinion that their actions based on their ideas would be more correct than the true ones.’ (*Kuzari*, 1:97)

For R. Yehuda Halevi, the focus of idolatry is not on the object of worship, but on the particular mode of worship. God has sanctioned certain ways in which to worship Him and excluded others. Idolatry, according to R. Yehuda Halevi, is mistaken in its belief in the power of ‘human wisdom’ to dictate the proper mode of worshipping God without recourse to higher Divine authority.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, for the *Kuzari*, the sin of the Golden Calf was abhorrent in the first instance not merely because Benei Yisrael worshipped a golden idol rather

than God. Conversely, in refusing to wait for God's instructions as to the proper mode of worship, Benei Yisrael implicitly denied God's absolute authority to demarcate and prescribe the parameters of legitimate worship.<sup>11</sup> This assertion of human freedom is so pernicious because it strikes at the very heart of the relationship between God the Jewish people. Idolatrous worship is a rejection precisely of ‘God's freedom to give His laws and of the Jews' freedom to obey them.’<sup>12</sup> At the heart of this conception of the idolatrous impulse lies the will to carve out a space in the universe for a complete human freedom from all strictures and constraints.

Following in the footsteps of the *Kuzari*, Ran also disputed the Rambam's exclusive association of idolatry with metaphysical belief. Ran argues that the root of idolatry lies in the belief propounded by the ‘philosophers that God has no interest and interaction with His creations and that all creations are determined.’<sup>13</sup> For the Ran, as for R. Yehuda Halevi, the sin of idolatry is rooted in the yearning for human autonomy in the world, which for both rabbis was manifest most clearly in the enterprise of Greek philosophy.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the Jewish battle against idolatry, in the eyes of the Ran and the *Kuzari*, dovetailed neatly with the fight against philosophy.

Taking this broader perspective on idolatry, one realises that *avoda zara* is indeed as vibrant today as in ancient society. Accordingly, *avoda zara* is no mere appendix to the Torah. After all, the desire to shirk authority, specifically religious authority, is certainly a pervasive trend throughout modern Western culture. It is perhaps for this very reason that the Talmud (*Kiddushin* 40a) described idolatry as ‘so heinous [a sin] that he who rejects it is as though he affirms the entire Torah, all of it.’ R. Yehuda Halevi's definition of idolatry takes on a much broader definition and thus strikes at the very core of the human desire to create an independent power sphere in the world.

## Idolatry and the search for clarity

The view of idolatry, in the *Kuzari* and the *Derashot HaRan*, located the root of idolatry in the creation of distance between God and the world to make room for human autonomy. A number of nineteenth century Rabbinic sages were also troubled by the relevance of idolatry for the modern age and developed understandings of the danger of idolatry in its modern guise. In particular, two unique Hassidic figures, Rabbi Mordekhai Yosef Leiner of Izbizca and Rabbi Tsadok Hakohen of Lublin, developed an existential approach towards idolatry that brought it to the heart of the

religious experience in the modern world. From this perspective, rather than trying to build an abyss between God and the world, the idolatrous act became the desire to bring God too close to the humanity.

For both rabbis, the Talmudic passages describing the destruction of the inclination for idol worship proves highly instructive in detailing the nature of idolatry as a sin. The Gemara in Yoma (69b) describes a dialogue between God and the Anshei Keneset HaGedola (Men of the Great Assembly) regarding the danger that the appetite for idolatry presents for Benei Yisrael.<sup>15</sup> In this passage, the Sages complain to God of all the destruction and misery that the idolatrous yetser hara has caused:

‘And [they] cried with a thunderous voice unto the Lord, their God. What did they cry? — Woe, woe, it is he [the desire for idolatry] who has destroyed the Sanctuary, burnt the Temple, killed all the righteous, driven all Israel into exile, and is still dancing around among us! Thou hast surely given him to us so that we may receive reward through him. We want neither him [the yetser hara for avoda zara], nor the reward through him!’

The Men of the Great Assembly decided they wanted to rid the world permanently of this idolatrous weakness that had wrought so much chaos throughout Jewish history. They were even willing to sacrifice the ‘reward’ that went hand in hand with the potential for idolatry. Whilst the Gemara gives no indication as to the nature of this reward, numerous commentaries all understood that this reward was prophecy itself. The destruction of the idolatrous impulse would simultaneously bring about the demise of prophecy. Both the Gaon of Vilna and R. Meir Simha of Dvinsk state that the decline of idolatry coincided historically with the termination of prophecy.<sup>16</sup>

Seizing upon this link between idolatry and prophecy, R. Tsadok HaKohen of Lublin asserted that this bond is not limited merely to featuring in a common epoch in world history. More importantly, both prophecy and idolatry share a fundamental similarity in their approach towards God. Rav Tsadok writes: ‘Whenever great wisdom exists, so too does great folly. The lure of idol worship emanates from prophecy itself: Whenever the light of prophecy shines to reveal God clearly to the human eye, man is also tempted to make other gods visible to the human eye.’<sup>17</sup> For R. Tsadok the underlying human desire to see the Divine with complete clarity presents a link between idolatry and prophecy, two notions otherwise wholly distinct from each other. Prophecy, for R. Tsadok, represents the apprehension of God with complete clarity whereby God’s will becomes intelligible and lucid to the

human mind. A similar sentiment is found in the Midrash: ‘the Holy One appears to the prophets of Israel with complete speech, clear speech...in language of purity.’<sup>18</sup> However, experiencing God in such a vividly real manner can also lead man to seek perfect clarity in all religious experiences, even idolatrous ones. At its most basic level, idolatry represents the urge to ‘place God’ within physical limits or to create a tangible material entity to act as a conduit to God Himself. In short, it is the impulse to make God easily accessible to mankind. Idolatry is thus rooted in the positive desire to attain a more unambiguous and clearer image of God.

In R. Tsadok’s account, the dusk of prophecy heralded an era where the God-Man encounter would take place within the teachings of the sages of the Torah Shebe’al Peh. ‘R. Avdimi of Haifa said: Ever since the Temple was destroyed, prophecy was taken from the prophets and given to the sages.’<sup>19</sup> This encounter, however, would now be shrouded in mystery, precluding immediate clarity and lucidity in the Divine encounter. The notion that ambiguity forms an innate part of the religious experience was developed more thoroughly by Rabbi Mordekhai Yosef of Izbica, R. Tsadok’s mentor. R. Mordekhai Yosef posited that man’s encounter with God is always inherently surrounded by certain elements of haziness:

‘I (anokhi) am the Lord your God.’ The verse does not state ‘ani,’ for if it stated ‘ani’ that would imply that the Holy One Blessed Be He revealed then the totality of His light to Israel, precluding the possibility of further delving into His words, for everything would already be revealed. The letter ‘khaf’ [of anokhi], however, denotes that the revelation is not complete, but is rather an estimation and comparison to the light which God will reveal in the future.’<sup>20</sup>

The very first of the Aseret HaDibrot, according to R. Mordehai Yosef, is worded precisely to indicate the incomplete nature of the Divine revelation to mankind. God never fully reveals Himself to man. Indeed, given man’s inherently limited intellect, he is prevented from ever attaining complete clarity of God. Making any attempt to achieve such certainty, in R. Mordekhai Yosef’s eyes, risks a descent into idolatry. Indeed, the Torah’s prohibition against the making of statues and images inheres precisely in the belief that man’s encounter with God ought to be one of uncertainty and ambiguity:

‘The reason that the Commandment of Thou shall not make for yourself a graven image [follows the commandment of anokhi]. . . is because a graven image is cut according to specific dimensions, perfect, lacking

nothing. . . this is to teach us that nothing is revealed to man completely.<sup>21</sup>

This notion of uncertainty and mystery in man's relationship with God forms a dominating motif throughout R. Mordekhai Yosef's writings. Some of the most pivotal and central events in Jewish history, according to R. Mordekhai Yosef, should be understood through this principle of Divine mystery. This approach is most apparent in his commentary on the *Akei\dat Yitschak*. R. Mordekhai Yosef writes:

'And God tested Abraham'... Actually, Abraham did not receive an explicit command to slaughter his son. That is why the Torah does not state 'And the Lord (YKVK) tested' but rather, 'And God (Elokim) tested.' This indicates that the revelation was seen through an unclear speculum (*aspaklaria de-lo nehira*). . . It was a test to Abraham precisely because the command was not explicit.<sup>22</sup>

In this novel understanding of the Akeda, R. Mordekhai Yosef explains that this test proved so monumental for Avraham precisely because God's command was shrouded in uncertainty. Avraham did not know whether God was actually instructing him to slaughter his son or merely to 'raise him up' on the altar on the mountain.<sup>23</sup> Faced with such ambiguity, Avraham could have easily deceived himself into believing that God would never command him to kill his own son. Avraham might even be forgiven for assuming the benign nature of God's command given that he had just received a Divine promise of plentiful offspring.<sup>24</sup> Despite the manifold opportunities for self-deception, Avraham emerged triumphant from this trial due to his ability to perceive God's will in spite of doubt and uncertainty.<sup>25</sup> Thus, for R. Mordekhai Yosef and R. Tsadok, the prohibition against idolatry strikes to the very heart of the religious experience in a post-prophetic world. The attempt to feign certainty in the religious world is idolatrous precisely because it seeks to place God where He cannot be found. The challenge thrown upon modern Jews by R. Mordekhai Yosef is to come to terms with this lack of complete assurance and to still seek out God. Conjuring up Divine immanence, according to R. Mordekhai Yosef, is tantamount to placing infinite and eternal meaning where it does not belong.

This approach towards idolatry should not be confused with the understanding of God promoted by Karl Barth, the early twentieth century Protestant theologian. Barth argued that God was totally transcendent and completely inaccessible to any human mind. In Barth's words; 'We

who stand in this concrete world know nothing, and are incapable of knowing anything of that other world.'<sup>26</sup> The only possible reaction to this situation in Barth's view is simply to wait for God to reveal Himself; 'Religion, as the final human possibility, commands us to halt. Religion brings us to the place where we must wait, in order that God may confront us- on the other side of the frontier of religion.'<sup>27</sup> R. Mordekhai Yosef did stress the inability of man to fully comprehend the Divine will. However, Avraham's greatness lay in his ability to act heroically in spite of doubt and uncertainty. He was able to intuit God's latent will despite its ambiguous guise. Thus, in contrast to Barth, man does have access to God in a world bereft of prophecy. The ultimate challenge placed upon us is to seek out the Divine command hidden within the clouds of God's transcendence.

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<sup>1</sup> This, of course, touches on whether Christianity falls under the category of idolatry. Rabbenu Tam, Sanhedrin 73b s.v. Assur, claims that non-Jews are not prohibited from *shituf*, the belief in multiple distinct powers of God. Rambam, however, posits that Christianity is indeed idolatrous, see: Rambam, *Perush haMishna*, Tractate Avoda Zara 1:1 and Rambam *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Makhalot Asurot*, 11:7. Jacob Katz has an extensive discussion as to the eighteenth and nineteenth century evaluation of Christianity within Rabbinic thought. See J. Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (Oxford 1961), chapter 13.

<sup>2</sup> Another interesting Gemara which relates to the issue of deliberately placing oneself in religiously challenging is found in Sanhedrin 107a, in which King David is rebuked for asking God to challenge him.

<sup>3</sup> In Sanhedrin 63b-64a, the Gemara relates a tale where Eliyahu finds a starving child and offers to save his life if he is willing to embrace God. The child obstinately refuses: 'The child took his idolatrous object of his awe out of his bosom, fondled it, and kissed it until his belly burst.'

<sup>4</sup> Avoda zara would thus presumably take on the characteristics of the other portions of Torah that are of heuristic and intellectual significance but of little or no practical consequence. See, Sanhedrin 71a.

<sup>5</sup> E. Fackenheim, *Encounters Between Judaism and Modern Philosophy* (New York 1973)179.

<sup>6</sup> Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avoda Zara*, 1:1-2

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<sup>7</sup> Rambam, *Moreh Nevuhim*, 1:36.

<sup>8</sup> M. Halbertal and A. Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge Mass.) 109.

<sup>9</sup> E.I Fackenheim, *Encounters Between Judaism and Modern Philosophy*, (New York 1973) 178.

<sup>10</sup> L. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*(Chicago 1988) 105.

<sup>11</sup> L.Batnitzky, *Idolatry and Representation*, (Princeton 2000) 26.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> *Derashot HaRan*, ninth drdasha.

<sup>14</sup> M. Halbertal and A. Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge Mass 189.

<sup>15</sup> This particular account appears verbatim in Sanhedrin 64a as well.

<sup>16</sup> R. Meir Simha, *Meshekh Hkhma; Ba'alotekha*, s.v. veAzalti min harua'h. R. Meir Simha cites the Vilna Gaon as an additional proof too without providing a source.

<sup>17</sup> R. Tzadok HaCohen, *Resisei Laila*, 14. This translation is my own. I have slightly rephrased the passage in order to ensure that the intention and meaning of R. Tsadok is not lost in the English translation.

<sup>18</sup> Bereshit Rabba, 52:5 and 74:7. Here, the Midrash clarifies the distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish prophets. Jewish prophets, the midrash posits, see God with perfect clarity and during the day, whilst other prophets only see God at night and clouded in mystery.

<sup>19</sup> Bava Batra, 12a.

<sup>20</sup> R. Mordechai Yosef of Izbitza, *Mei Ha'Shiloah*, , Yitro s.v. anokhi

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> R. Mordechai Yosef of Izbitza, *Mei Ha'Shiloah*, Vayera, s.v. veba Elokim.

<sup>23</sup> J. Gellman, *Abraham! Abraham!: Kierkegaard and the Hasidim on the Binding of Isaac*, 78.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.,79.

<sup>25</sup> R. Herzl Hefter, 'Idolatry a Prohibition for Our Time' in *Tradition*, 42:1 (2009), 19.

<sup>26</sup> K. Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. E. Hoskyns (London 1968), 30.

<sup>27</sup> K. Barth, *Der Römerbrief*,(Zurich 1985) 250.







# תג כשר ושמח

TO EVERYONE AT ALEI TZION, FROM  
SAM, JESSICA, GIL, AVIVA, NOMI, NOA, EMUNA  
AND BARAK CAPLAN

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SANDY TAPNACK

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