

THE MANUFACTURE OF SULPHUROUS ACID: ON WISDOM AS A CATALYST IN TORAH STUDY

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"Like the merchant's ships, from far she brings her bread" (Prov. 31:14) – the words of Torah are poor in one place and rich in another place.

(*Yerushalmi Rosh ha-Shanah* 3:5)

I am a part of all that I have met;

Yet all experience is an arch where thro'

Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades

For ever and for ever when I move.

(Tennyson, "Ulysses")

AN EMINENT PHYSICIST was once consulted by a group of rabbis. One of them came directly to the point. "About electricity, Professor," he asked: "Is there fire in the wire?" And then he waited for a straightforward answer.

When most people consider interaction between worldly knowledge and the study of Torah, it is encounters like this that they envisage. A specific body of secular knowledge is deployed, in a tangible way, in order to reach a specific conclusion in the study of Torah. The physicist's job is to tell us where the electric current dwells, and the botanist identifies the fruits and vegetables to which the laws of *berakhot* or *geratim* are applied. Such inquiry is not limited to the natural sciences. In order to understand certain *balakhot* pertaining to business practices it may be necessary to know the details of medieval or early modern contracts. Documents and artifacts of the Ancient Near East may supply relevant information about biblical vocabulary or poetic form. One thinks of the conclusions of natural science or a body of historical and philological data.

Scholarly training is valuable both as a means to broader understanding and as an end in itself. In general, however, the study of the humanities does not yield this kind of clear-cut, incontrovertible benefit. The skeptic therefore argues that studying general history or literature or philosophy does not contribute to our knowledge of Torah. Those of us who have gained insight, and not only information, from our general studies have difficulty demonstrating what it is exactly that we have gained. In this essay I will not add to the literature arguing for the value of the humanities in the study and internalization of Torah. I assume that most readers agree that knowing how people lived and imagined and thought in the past enables us to study Torah and to experience our own creative relationship with *devar Hashem* and with *mitzvat Hashem* more vigorously and effectively, quite apart from the technical corpus of information contained in these disciplines. I shall concentrate on concrete, everyday illustrations of the interplay between the liberal arts, in this wider sense, and the life of Torah. My hope is to reveal aspects of that interaction that are neglected in more abstract treatments. The final sections concern the place of such interaction in the work of the contemporary Torah educator.

To begin, we must return to the distinction between the search for wisdom or humanistic insight and the academic enterprise, narrowly defined. Scholarship, in its purest form, seeks to accumulate knowledge, thus aspiring to the status of science. It either proposes general theories about matters significant to the study of Torah, or claims to arrive at the truth about particular propositions relevant to Torah. Many of us, whose initial attitude is the popular one sketched above, reinforced by exposure to the ideals of scholarship at some point in our education, try to assimilate humanistic insight to the scientific-scholarly model. One outcome is the impoverishment of insight and creativity, when the imitation of scholarly method prevents more imaginative approaches (and I am ignoring, for now, the secularist biases to which academic orthodoxies are prone). The alternative danger is the pretense that undisciplined approaches, rooted in arbitrariness, are equivalent to approaches sensitive to the demands of scholarly rigor. The excesses of *danhani* (homiletics) often seek corroboration, nowadays, in the whimsicality of the more blustering and self-assured reader-reception ideologies. If, to paraphrase Kant's aphorism, scholarship without imagination is empty, then imagination that disdains the questions and evidence of scholarship is little more than fantasy.

The most memorable scholarship, of course, is more than amassing accurate data. It partakes in the rich life of the imagination; and, as already noted, creative thinkers care a great deal about pertinent scholarship. None-

theless, the orientations differ, and teachers and would-be thinkers alike should recognize the characteristics of each. So before offering examples and general observations on their place within our educational framework, we ought to adumbrate some of the overall contrasts between scholarly method in its ideal – that is to say, professionally pure – form and the kind of humanistic insight I call wisdom.

First, ordinary scholarly production takes place within a rigidly defined disciplinary matrix. Humanistic insight, like the acquisition of wisdom in everyday life, is often marked by serendipity. We are surprised by insights that neither we, nor others, could have predicted.

Second, ordinary scholarly production can usually be boiled down to a finite number of steps. At its worst, this degenerates into a kind of “painting by the numbers,” in which information is amassed without any conception of why it should be of interest to anyone. One may work out an algorithm for wisdom, accumulating note cards or reading randomly and then waiting for insight to strike, but such effort is a necessary rather than a sufficient condition for an intellectual breakthrough.

Third, the elements in productive scholarly research cannot be deleted from the final record. The record can be abridged or relegated to footnotes, but whatever is pertinent must be reported to the scholarly community; the personal aspects are not pertinent features of the enterprise. A scholarly theory or discovery can often be formulated without reference to its intellectual and imaginative genesis. An insight in Torah, like a scientific discovery, should be able to stand on its own, independent of the subjective factors that brought it to consciousness. In that respect, scholarly Torah presentations resemble scholarship, and differ in style from humanistic insight.

Fourth, wisdom is inseparable from the personal quest and achievement of the creative individual. In principle, the results of scholarship should be regarded as true or adequate regardless of the traits of the person who presents them. For the study of Torah and for the type of humanistic insight we are discussing, as in real life, whether an insight has been earned, both spiritually and intellectually, is crucial in determining its validity and its value.

Fifth, the appropriation of Torah, like the wisdom of the humanities, is incomplete if it does not affect the way the recipient thinks and lives. No such claim is attached to scholarly attainments.

Sixth, failure can be an important element in both scholarly research and the search for wisdom. For the ordinary scholar, the failure of a project, or a negative result, indicates a wrong path to be avoided next time. For the student of Torah, failure is more than a mere matter of trial and error. The

talmudic teaching that one does not fully grasp Torah matters unless one has “stumbled” in one’s pursuit appeals to a midrashic move according to which “stumbling block” (*makešbelab*) is a way of referring to Torah (*Gittin* 43a). For the searcher after wisdom, as well, the exposure of faulty assumptions and confused intuitions is an integral part of the self-knowledge that paves the way to truth.

Finally, because the search for wisdom requires unrelenting examination of one’s motives and presuppositions, along with those of one’s culture, to become wise, to gain insight, is also to come face to face with one’s own foolishness. Often our study of culture – what human beings (including ourselves) have thought, imagined and done – provides the Archimedean lever that pries us loose from error and silliness. Self-understanding is not afraid of analogies and insights that the self-important academician may regard as frivolous. To this anxiety the thinker can only respond: “It is Torah, and we need to learn it” (see *Berakhot* 62a).

Our list begins with questions of intellectual procedure and method and moves on to spiritual matters: how study affects the personality of students and teachers. The two categories are not always separate, even as historical investigation is not always hermetically sealed off from theological and existential truth. The overall distinctions are nevertheless useful: keeping them in mind may spare you unnecessary confusion. The examples below show some aspects of the interplay between various facets of our concerns. They will presume an ideal commitment of time and intellect on the part of the educator. I will allow myself passing comments about the problems of translating the ideal into reality prior to confronting these obstacles and opportunities head on in the closing section.

II

Jewish Thought and Free Will

R. Eliyahu Dessler is well known for his theory of limited free will.¹ I will note one aspect of his teaching: the notion that we do not know the self as it truly is. R. Dessler posits a first-person awareness, in which we are free, and another perspective, in which actions are completely covered by scientific determinism. The approach, and even the language, indicates R. Dessler’s indebtedness to Kant’s Third Antinomy, which maintains the im-

¹ See, e.g., R. Dessler’s “Treatise on Choice: Part I” in *Mikhlav me-Eliyahu*, vol. 1 (Benei Berak 1964), pp. 111–116. I discussed the intricacies of his views in a paper presented to the 2002 Orthodox Forum, forthcoming as “Use It or Lose It: On the Moral Imagination of Free Will,” in *Judaism, Science, and Moral Responsibility*, ed. David Shatz and Yitzhak Berger.

possibility of rationally demonstrating either the existence or non-existence of uncaused events, and his view that the human self is “noumenal,” not the object of perception. The rudiments of Kant’s philosophy were familiar to the Eastern European rabbinic elite. Thus, the historical connection between Kantian and Desslerian ideas can be assumed. It is legitimate to explain some of the similarities between them as a result of this connection, and also to pay special attention to the areas where they diverge. Ignorance of the history of Western philosophy would therefore diminish one’s ability to understand what R. Dessler is doing.

Frequently, we cannot locate such an exact point of contact. Even if we doubted R. Dessler’s acquaintance with Kant, we would want to know something about the intellectual milieu in which R. Dessler formulated his theories: What is he trying to justify? Whom is he trying to confute? What data, what arguments, and what rhetorical and analytic tools are available to him? Scholarship can improve the accuracy of our speculations, and save us from fantastic blunders, but it cannot exempt us from the responsibility of entering imaginatively into the mind of the thinker and his original audience.

The goal of philosophy is not merely antiquarian. In the end, we care not only what a thinker meant, but, more importantly, why his arguments succeed or fail; if the latter, why a serious thinker might have been led astray, or what profound truth he may have been struggling to express, and whether better arguments can be constructed. To examine R. Dessler in this way would necessitate a broader backdrop than his own intellectual biography or even that of his age. We would want a synoptic and analytic insight into the vast array of problems, ranging from metaphysics to epistemology to ethics and theology, impinging upon the question of free will.

This is the prototypical situation in the study of Jewish philosophy, and it is equally so in other Torah pursuits. The encounter with R. Dessler could thus either draw upon, or open into, a variety of confrontations with the history of philosophy, with philosophical analysis, history of ideas, even social history and psychology. It is, of course, impossible to study all things simultaneously. The more knowledge and insight we gain, the better we understand how hard it is to communicate a balanced and lucid outlook to those for whose education we are responsible. You can probably bone up overnight on the relevant comparisons between R. Dessler and Kant, like an undergraduate cramming for a final. But the larger questions cannot be taken by storm; they take a lifetime to sink into your bones. Inevitably, therefore, the daunting program I have just outlined demands patience and persistence and sustained passion. The insight gained cannot be communi-

cated transparently in a neatly packaged lesson, not least because the patience and the persistence and the sustained passion are at the heart of what the teacher must give over.

Auden and the Missing *Nun*

We have just looked at an area where understanding of Torah and engagement in humanistic culture are virtually inseparable. Here is a case where information about modern English poetry is directly relevant to the study of *Tanach*, albeit in a manner that is totally extraneous to the deeper meaning of the biblical text.

Psalms 145 (widely known as “*Ashtrei*” after the verses that preface it in liturgical usage) is an alphabetical acrostic. The verse corresponding to the letter *nun* is missing. The simple explanation is that the acrostic scheme is sometimes adhered to irregularly.² R. Yohanan (*Berakhot* 4b), however, proposed that the absent verse referred to *nefilah* (falling) and was omitted in order to avoid its negative associations. The following verse (15), which states that God supports those who fall, confirms the hypothesis that we have here a euphemistic elision. In this harmonious psalm, the calamity from which God rescues one is indicated by its noticeable omission.

How seriously can one take this interpretation at the *pethat* (simple meaning) level? Is it likely that the author of a twenty-two-line poem would deliberately breach the poetic form of the composition in order to make a subtle point that is likely to be lost on the casual reader? Is R. Yohanan not reading an idea into the text that has no purchase on the text?

This issue was far from my mind the day I read W.H. Auden’s “Atlantis.” The poem, comprising seven twelve-line stanzas, which exhibit a complicated pattern of rhyme and meter, describes the effort and resourcefulness required to reach the mythical island of Atlantis. The voyage culminates in a scene where the traveler, having overcome many ordeals, collapses: “With all Atlantis shining/ Below you yet you cannot/ Descend.” At this precise point in the poem, the rigid pattern is violated: line 7 of stanza 6 does not exist. The explanation seems obvious: the poet’s “failure” to fully satisfy the complicated technical feat he has undertaken parallels the failure of the poem’s protagonist to consummate his journey. The inter-

² See Ps. 25:2, 5, 17, 34:6, 9–10. The 11th Psalms Scroll supplies the missing verse (likewise the Septuagint). This verse, however, is close to v. 17, except for the initial substitution of *ne’uman* for *ryaddek* and the replacement of the Tetragrammaton with *Eloheim*. Hence this version is presumably a scribal solution to the problem of the absent verse, rather than an original alternative. See also Amos Hakham, *Da’at Mikra: Tehillim*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1984) 578f. and note 23.

twining of form and content in the work of a twentieth-century master craftsman renders more persuasive the notion of a similar phenomenon in the psalm.

In this example, the Auden analogy is integral to the argument. Just as in the previous discussion, you cannot adopt the idea and dispense with the allusion. Yet the two deployments of “cultural literacy” operate in totally different ways. You cannot divorce your understanding of Jewish thought from your confrontation with the history of human culture, because the two are inextricably linked. The Auden reference, by contrast, has no direct connection to the psalm. It only provides an analogy that makes a certain way of reading more plausible. The skeptic may still demand more proof, preferably from an Ancient Near Eastern source. The more innocent reader may feel no sense of enlightenment – they trusted the rabbinic interpretation all along. And while the student of Jewish thought ought to train himself towards a grasp of general philosophical study, because he cannot otherwise be faithful to the work of understanding and insight, it is absurd to demand that the student of *Tanakh* who, rightly or wrongly, feels no impulse to read modern English poetry, ransack piles of literature, excellent or mediocre as they might be, in the hope of finding some stray nugget of serendipity.

Melville on Jonah

Before embarking on the whaling expedition, Ishmael attends an ex-minister turned minister’s sermon on Jonah (*Moby Dick*, chapter 9). The first part of Father Mapple’s discourse brilliantly brings Jonah to life by imagining his furtive behavior, the suspicions he must have aroused among his companions and his own tormented conscience; the vivid depiction echoes several themes found in *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer’s* midrashic reconstruction of the episode (ch. 10). The preacher goes on to analyze Jonah’s prayer from the fish’s belly. He has apparently noticed that the prayer (Jonah, chap. 2) lacks any expression of remorse for his sin or straightforward petition for his life. This might suggest that Jonah’s repentance is incomplete, that he is not yet willing to confront the realities of his spiritual predicament. The sermon, however, reaches the radically different conclusion that remorseful behavior is not all that important: “For sinful as he is, Jonah does not weep and wail for direct deliverance... And here, shipmates, is true and faithful repentance; not clamorous for pardon, but grateful for punishment... Sin not; but if you do, take heed to repent of it like Jonah.”

As an interpretation of Jonah, the sermon has limited value, because it examines only the first two chapters and does not integrate them with the

rest of the book. At a more detailed level, as I have hinted, Melville’s priest ignores, or apologizes for, the unusual features of Jonah’s prayer. From our perspectives as Jewish students, and as individuals obligated to repent, the sermon raises significant questions: Is the sinner’s “weeping and wailing” a good thing or a bad thing? *Halekhab* mandates both regret and self-reproach for the sin, bitter recognition that the sin wasn’t worth it, and resolve for the future. Why does Father Mapple seem to dismiss the expression of remorse?

These questions lead to a consideration of repentance and of the way we think about repentance. We may be reminded of the inconvenient fact that remorse is often not the first stage of repentance but a substitute for it. “Wailing and weeping” may dissolve the penitent in a warm bath of self-pity, after which he is too exhausted and comforted to repent genuinely. This is one lesson that the preacher seeks to inculcate, in the spirit of the Mishnah’s statement (*Taanit* 2:1) that God did not look at the Ninevites’ sackcloth and fasting, but at their actions.

At the same time, one wonders why the sermon sets “wailing and weeping” in such either/or opposition to genuine repentance. Is it possible that the minister wishes to impress his audience of sailors, who may be accustomed to think of religion and repentance as the feminine domain, by emphasizing that God is not served by tears and weakness, but rather by manly resolve and obedience? If that is the case, then we may wish to consider the implications of this gender division for the role of religion in American life, down to our own self-consciousness. Do we too think of religious devotion as effeminate, or do we, in our desire to think of our commitment in masculine categories, tend to suppress elements in *halakhab* and Judaism that require a frank confession of frailty and vulnerability?

The project of comparing Melville on Jonah with the Bible, as read by traditional Jews, is not especially ingenious. It could be lifted from a survey article on Jonah, under the heading *In the Arts* (though the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* article on Jonah ignores *Moby Dick*). Carrying it out, however, presupposes attention to Jonah, to American literature and culture, and to the entire assortment of tensions engendered by the juxtaposition of the two. Needless to say, there are many fruitful possibilities of confrontation between our culture and *dvar Hashem* that are not as obvious as contrasting a biblical text with its modern adaptation. For this there is no substitute for sustained and lively curiosity on the part of the teacher.

Netziv at Babel³

In his *Ha'amek Davar*, the Netziv of Volozhin (d. 1892) proposed that the Tower of Babel (Genesis, chap. 11) was constructed in the hope that humanity, united around the tower, would co-exist in universal brotherhood and uniformity. In explaining why this is a bad thing, he argues that groups dedicated to the perfection of society are likely to be intolerant of all those who decline to be part of their universal ideal. Associations of such people are liable to descend to violence and murder to get their way. The similarity between the Netziv's idealists and the practice of militant secular social utopianism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is too pronounced to ignore. In Netziv's own time the activity of Russian social revolutionaries provided a foretaste of the terror and the pseudo-religious pretensions of fraternity that still haunt our world. Dostoevsky's *The Devils* is the first of many great depictions of this mentality.

This commentary of the Netziv is powerful stuff. A full appreciation would entail examining the Netziv's internal background within the history of biblical exegesis. R. Nissim, in his Commentary to Genesis and in the second of the *Derashot HaRan*, already connected the story of the tower with the moral dangers of centralization. Seforno, whose sixteenth-century Italian commentary the Netziv valued, viewed the project as part of an attempt to enthrone Nimrod as a universal despot, where the Netziv spoke of a social totalitarianism.⁴ A full investigation of the political and cultural implications would require us to go beyond Dostoevsky and other writers on nineteenth century Eastern Europe. One would inquire to what degree the idealism deployed by the Netziv animates a variety of later movements, including the cosmopolitanism that deprecates Jewish separateness today and even offers ideological comfort to those who encompass our physical destruction.

As we have already noted, it is impossible for a teacher of *Tanakh* to master the huge amount of historical, literary, philosophical and social scientific understanding pertinent to this discussion. Where this example differs from our previous cases is the explosive relevance of the Netziv's insight. Educators must properly consider how to harness such material within an intellectually honest framework.

³ R. Yitzchak Blau suggested the significance of this example.

⁴ In the light of his commentary on Gen. 10:9, Netziv might have been disinclined to present Nimrod along Seforno's lines.

Halakthic Presuppositions

Often the study of Gemara is symied by the enormous difference between the fundamental world outlook of the *halakhab* and the mentality brought to the table by most contemporary students. The idea that under certain circumstances it is desirable, even obligatory, to die rather than commit idolatry or transgress sexual prohibitions, or the principle that only the husband can initiate a divorce, are notorious examples. Sometimes these questions can be sidestepped for the moment, as they need not distract the student from addressing the *jugga* at hand. Yet a persistent avoidance of such questions ultimately does interfere with comprehension, as students infer that "the *halakhab* is not supposed to make sense," to say nothing of the crippling consequences for the student's development as a God-fearing individual.

Even areas ostensibly removed from the practical life of modern people, when properly understood, precipitate conflict. In certain cases the *halakhab* maintains that, absent a significant, irreversible change in the object, the robber may return the stolen object, even if it has depreciated in the meantime. When the object undergoes alteration, the thief acquires title to it; he discharges the obligation of restitution monetarily, and can thus realize a profit from his transgression.⁵ Likewise, the halakthic concept of tort imposes liability only in cases of direct causality; even R. Meir's principle of *garmi*⁶ presupposes a clear connection between the act and the resulting damage. From a modern perspective, such laws are paradoxical. The modern legislator thinks of law exclusively in terms of its consequences, and the *halakhab* seems to reward the enterprising criminal. The modern economist defines the value of a thing in monetary terms, while the *halakhab* seems to ascribe to the object some inherent value of ownership that evaporates when its identity is formally affected. Contemporary jurisprudence cannot exempt tortfeasors from liability simply because the causal nexus is not clearly visible. Likewise R. Kook points out that the laws according to which a lost object no longer belongs to the original owner after he "despairs" of his ownership (*ye'usd*) imply a conception of "communal owner-

⁵ See *Bava Kamma* 96b, 65a and 66a for examples of these cases and Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkehot Gzeilah* 3:4 and *Hilkehot Geneivah* 1:11–14.

⁶ See *Bava Kamma* 100a for R. Meir's more expansive definition of causal liability. *Shi'urei ha-Rav Aharon Lieberman: Dinei de-Gemara* (Alon Shevut, 2000), pp. 198–200, touches on the potential gap between theoretical constructs and practical judgment in these areas. The preface (pp. 7–9) contains reflections on the significance of style in the presentation of *lמוד*.

ship” that sometimes outweighs, and sometimes is subjugated to, the private dimension of ownership.⁷ These *halakhot* have little effect on the lives of most people in our community: when push comes to shove, secular law governs. But they cannot be consistently banished from the classroom.

One aspect of this confrontation can be handled comparatively. R. Aaron Levine’s *Economics and Jewish Law*⁸ and its successors, as well as the works of others less prolific, is invaluable for translating *halakha* into the vocabulary of capitalist economics and spelling out the practical ramifications of the *halakha* in modern society. The questions I have raised regarding *halakha* in modern society, like the difficulties encountered in studying *Gittin*, cannot be resolved merely by bringing economics to bear. It is necessary to contrast the entire modern system, which sees private property as a commodity, with a religious outlook that conceptualizes the value of property in radically different categories. Here an awareness of economic theory must be supplemented with an imaginative conception of other ways of thinking and living.

This set of examples is particularly intimidating, and the reason is not only the intensity of reading and thought called for. Unlike *Tanakh* and Jewish philosophy, the study of Talmud generally follows a well-established paradigm, the mastery of which has little to do with these more “philosophical” topics. The textual skills and analytic techniques that go into *lomdat* are time demanding as well. If teachers in the other areas are tempted to highlight forays into side points at the expense of the set curriculum, the dedicated Talmud instructor often feels impelled to stick rigidly to the tried and true.

Yet even this is not the whole story. The questions we have just glanced at often alarm us because they are not the ones chosen by the teacher. Those of us who teach Jewish thought have experienced the issues firsthand and therefore know more or less how to tackle them. With respect to the study of *Tanakh*, we discussed “elective” insights, so to speak: if we have nothing of value to say on these subjects, saying nothing is an option. You don’t have to bring in Melville or Dostoevsky if you’re not ready to. Talmud teachers, by contrast, except for those who have struggled with these questions on their own, or have some natural affinity for them, are forced to deal with them willy-nilly, because they cannot do their jobs otherwise.

The Gods of Egypt and the 1954 World Series

After the sin of the spies, Moses pleads that if God does not relent, the Egyptians and other nations will attribute His failure to bring Israel into the Land to His weakness (Num. 14:13–16). According to Rashbi, they will infer that God was powerful enough to vanquish Egypt but not Canaan, according to Ramban, they will claim that He could crush the gods of Egypt but not the gods of the Canaanites. Against these explanations one may posit a “transitive” view of divine power. In other words, some students assume that if G can bear E, and C can bear G, then C is more potent than E. Applied to our case, this implies that the gentiles whose thoughts Moses claims to be discerning are liable to conclude, dubiously, that the Canaanites are stronger than the Egyptians.

Of course, this intuition about transitivity is not compelling. To begin with, it is Moses’ argument about a hypothetical situation. If God destroys His people and the gentiles speculate about the reason, they are apt to think that God was unable to conquer the Canaanites. It is not at all clear that such a belief would be the best explanation of God’s abandonment of Israel – in fact, it would be a false explanation, because the true reason would be their sin – or that those who buy into it would have worked out the implications regarding transitivity. Nevertheless, it is possible that such a consideration may have motivated Ramban’s alternative to Rashbi: it might be more plausible for the gentiles to ascribe extraordinary powers to the Canaanite gods than to the Canaanite military. Perhaps questions about the logic of transitivity led R. Bahya, in his discussion of Moses’ earlier prayer after the incident of the Golden Calf (Deut. 9:24), to suggest that divine abandonment of Israel at that time would have engendered doubt among the gentiles with respect to the Exodus, rather than the hypothesis that God had performed the miracles related to the Exodus, but then reached the limits of His power when faced by Canaan.

A careful study of Moses’ arguments is thus likely to raise the transitivity problem. How much weight it deserves depends on the reasoning of the last paragraph. There is, however, a certain kind of logic that would attribute artificial importance to the transitivity factor. Such thinking is based on a double premise: first, that the calculation of transitive relations is a reliable key to the comparative power of armies or deities; second, that the gentiles in Moses’ hypothetical argument base their thinking on such calculations. Here I have found it useful to contrast the proposed transitivity logic with analogous applications in other fields. It is true that military second guessers and sports fans often intuitively reason transitively. They may

⁷ *Ligei ha-Re'iyah*, vol. 1, #89 (p. 99).

⁸ Aaron Levine, *Economics and Jewish Law* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1987).

assume that because the United States defeated the Axis Powers, it should certainly win against the North Vietnamese, or that the lowly New York Giants would be no match for the record-setting Cleveland Indians in the 1954 World Series. Examining these applications highlights the limitations of transitivity argumentation vis-à-vis the biblical situation.

This kind of classroom discussion usually doesn't count as an interaction between Torah and the humanities. Unlike the other examples we have looked at, it does not deploy recondit expertise; a little knowledge is enough. In addition, the results are negative: we arrive at a better understanding of the way our unexamined assumptions may lead us astray in our study. Analogies deriving from popular culture also lack the cultural gravity that would normally add grace to a scholarly presentation. For many readers the very idea appears frivolous and self-mocking. Nonetheless, such analogies ought to play a role in our education whenever there is a need to bring hidden patterns of thought to self-critical consciousness. Humor and a modicum of self-parody help our education, and benefit our students as well.

III

The previous discussion offers an artificial cross-section of the interface between the humanities and Torah study. Let us beware of contracting our horizons to such instances. Although many of our examples can potentially expand into full-blown courses, the classroom, by its nature, provides a Procrustean bed. The tyranny of clock and calendar affect the primary Torah curriculum too. Learning how to be educated must include learning how to rebel successfully, when the occasion warrants it, against time constraints. Genuine study of literature, philosophy or history, in any event, cannot be confined to fugitive snippets and sound bites introduced into *limmudei kodesh* hours, which can provide only glimpses of the sweep and scope of a broad education, and the expressive, analytic and imaginative dimensions that can be imported into the study of Torah. Thus, full integration can only be consummated outside the class. There is much to be said for the Hirschian ideal of the Torah educator who combines Torah and secular knowledge and serves as a role model for both.

The structure of class or sermon may also deter the introduction of literature that cannot be woven into the texture of the session. No reader of Jane Austen's *Emma*, for instance, can forget the party where Emma cracks a witicism about the inoffensive Miss Bates's dullness (chap. 43): "Miss Bates... did not immediately catch her meaning; but when it burst on her, it could not anger, though a slight blush showed that it could pain her." To

experience or analyze this scene of frivolous, minor humiliation is more likely to instill interpersonal sensitivity in an overly clever student than the most strident *muskar schmus*. So even if the incident cannot be mounted on scillets of *psheif*⁹ and walked through a *shaleib sendah*, even if it can't be plugged into a worksheet, any Torah education that cannot find a place for this kind of insight cannot gain anything from the study of the humanities.

IV

The title of this essay comes from T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Eliot compares the relationship between the personality of the poet and the work of art to the role of the catalyst, the thread of platinum, in the manufacture of "sulphurous acid." The poet, "the man who lives and suffers," is essential, like the catalyst, to the process of creation. Yet the personal dimension is invisible in the final product, like the platinum that disappears from the resulting acid. Similarly, the pursuit of wisdom, insight and imagination through the humanities may refresh and invigorate our study of Torah, although, in the final analysis, the greater its contribution, the less overt the role. This is one face of our subject.

Eliot's early twentieth century comparison of poetry to science, abetted by his chemistry analogy, accords to poetry the objective, impersonal qualities associated with science. His intention is to reject the Romantic cult of the poet. It is the poetry that matters, not as self-expression of the poet, but as part of the classic tradition. Stated this way, our understanding of religious education is in line with Eliot's conception of culture, and it is not surprising that Eliot's spiritual pilgrimage arrived at the harbor of revealed institutional religion. Like the classicist, our goal is to conform ourselves to a revealed body of objective truth. The criterion by which novelty in Torah is evaluated is truth, not self-expression.

At the same time, education has a different function than art and culture. It aims not only to delight and to instruct, but also to provide a personal model for the student to emulate. If what is transmitted in the classroom corresponds to the poem (or the acid) in Eliot's essay, and the teacher is the poet (or the platinum thread), then, because Torah education, in particular, is not successful unless it communicates a tangible sense of religious experience, intellectual adventure and passionate commitment, the student must not only produce the acid but become his or her own platinum filament. The next stage of our discussion shifts away from the subject matter to the question of personal intellectual character.

⁹ Eliot probably means "sulfuric acid" (H₂SO₄), not "sulfurous acid" (H₂SO₃).

V

We have already acknowledged the impossibility of doing justice to all the challenges and opportunities with which we are blessed. No doubt some of you wonder if I have any idea how little discretionary time the average educator can call his or her own. The pressures are brutal, especially in the early formative years of teaching when one's repertoire is still inchoate. Would that all of us could feel confident of our basic Torah preparation, let alone afford the luxury of the *via official*! For the teacher who likes what I'm proposing, but despairs of doing it, I have only the obvious advice: Get started with your liberal arts education before you have to play catch up; ease into your teaching career to avoid being overwhelmed from the start; acquire friends and colleagues of like mind; read the *New York Review of Books* and similar publications; waste less time; learn to sleep more efficiently.

You will notice, perhaps with dismay, that I have not directed you to some magic manual that will supply you with pre-cooked chunks of humanistic insight and erudition. It is not that I begrudge you the assistance or doubt its utility; it is foolish to forgo whatever aid one can get; we are not intellectual Robinson Crusoes. But there are limits, and they are the same that pertain to other aspects of intensive Torah study: you can authentically borrow someone else's reconstituted wisdom only if you know what it is like to struggle for the insight yourself. (Here is where wisdom differs from information.)

Why is it important for the teacher to cherish, and to pass on, this experience of first-hand grappling with the material? Why not market a gutted version of humanistic insight, with the hard reading and thinking edited out? Here we must interrogate our educational goals. When we foster interaction between Torah study and the rest of life, what do we want for ourselves, and what do we intend for our students, beyond the transmission of information?

One answer is integrity, both in the sense of wholeness and in the sense of honesty. The Torah we study is connected to the rest of life, to the issues we confront when we read literature, philosophy or history and reflect on the world we inhabit. We want our students to be able to do this, and see us doing it too. This does not mean that we must exhibit effortless versatility in all areas: being an intelligent, educated person entails thinking resourcefully and judiciously about subjects in which one lacks thorough expertise and seeing them in relation to what we care about. Our students are

learning from the way we handle these intellectual negotiations as surely as they learn from our official curricular instruction.

Just the other day I heard of a rabbi who taught that Shimon Peres's inclusion in Ariel Sharon's emergency government was as absurd as if Churchill had retained Neville Chamberlain in a parallel post. I am not sure precisely what place this argument had in his exposition of Torah, but it helps to be reminded that "outside studies," in this case history or political science, penetrate our educational discourse in unpredictable and sundry manners, so that the choice is not really between introducing liberal arts topics and avoiding them, but between doing so competently and doing so recklessly. Relevant or not, the argument is flawed: until his final illness, Chamberlain remained a member of the five-man War Cabinet; another member was the Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax, an even more inveterate appeaser than Chamberlain.¹⁰ Knowledge of the facts might have led to a worthwhile analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of compromise for the sake of unity in crisis.

Assuming that this subject is indeed pertinent to the life or study of Torah, the historical error is regrettable: error is always inferior to truth. Among intellectually honest folk, as we like to regard ourselves, and as our students should strive to become, the sovereign remedy for error is correction. Now let me ask you: Which teacher is more likely to exhibit the virtue of intellectual honesty (*modet al ba-emet*) – the one who is genuinely interested in historical understanding and accuracy (even if on occasion he purveys faulty information), or the one who customarily pulls tidbits off the Internet or casual conversations carried on before, during or after davening? Which is more likely to influence students of whom we can be proud? Which is more likely to produce honest, intelligent students who are proud of us and committed to what we claim to represent?

A sense of religious-intellectual balance is also imperative. How much time and how much emphasis should be devoted to "outside" material and insights? In study, as in life, much depends on finding the right relationship between what is primary and what is peripheral. If we want our students to develop a healthy sense of the benefit to be gained from referring to "outside" material, we must develop such a sense of proportion ourselves. When teachers who have not mastered the art of intellectual integration introduce outside material and alien perspectives, the problem is not only

¹⁰ Churchill eventually dispatched Halifax to Washington as ambassador, where he aroused anti-British sentiment when he was taken to a baseball game and left an unearthen hot dog on his seat. For the incriminating photograph, see illustrations in Andrew Roberts, *The Holy Fox* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991).

the time lost from conventional Torah study or the irresponsibility of provoking questions that one is ill-equipped to handle. If the teacher has not thought through, and internalized, the material, he or she is liable to invest marginal pursuits with a heightened significance and interest, thus communicating an implicitly flawed paradigm for integrated study. Thus, students have been known to come out of class convinced that exotic speculation about Near Eastern parallels or the versions preserved in the Dead Sea Scrolls (or half-baked wisdom about international politics) is more exciting and more important than engaging the biblical text and the traditional exegesis in the quest for *devar Hashem*. The teacher who strives actively to acquire his or her *derekh ha-limmud* is not immune to distortion or disproportion of values, but nevertheless has an infinitely better chance of striking the right balance, over the course of a year and a career, than one entirely dependent on prefab teaching materials.

Last but not least, the teacher of Torah must be passionate about learning and must convey the passion. Not all of us can be immersed in Torah day and night, but we should all taste the consuming passion for understanding. To read a text religiously is to read it strenuously (with *yeghi'ah*), an edifying but labor-intensive engagement. There can be passion in the mere reading of sacred text – some people enthusiastically read sacred words that mean nothing to them. But for most of us, and for most of our students, there is no passion without the struggle to understand. There can be passion in rote learning too, where each repetition is identical with its predecessor and there are no new questions or surprising discoveries. But for most of us, and for most of our students, there is no abiding passion without the prospect of novelty and freshness.

For all of us some of the time, and for some of us all of the time, the freshness and the novelty emerge from the unadorned study of Torah, unaided by perspectives and preoccupations imported from other intellectual and existential regions of our lives. If, however, teacher and student are to share the ideal of strenuous Torah study as a regular feature of existence, one cannot simply assume that the freshness and the novelty will arise automatically. If, for most of us, bringing “outside” concerns and interests to bear is a means of lubricating our *yeghi'ah*, then that interaction must be pursued with passion. Because we cannot take it for granted that our students will acquire the needed passion and joy without calling upon the creative contribution of the liberal arts, that interaction cannot be consigned to a mechanical, “connect the dots” mentality. The teacher must exhibit a personal stake in this aspect of the learning process. What is worth doing is worth doing well.

Do not consider our aspiration for *yeghi'ah* a luxury, pertinent only to the elite, or merely a means to “make the class interesting.” Reading religiously, with passion and intensity, lies at the heart of our education in Torah.¹¹ Opponents of intensive Torah study know full well how central this ideal is to Orthodox commitment. They complain that the need for thorough immersion and unqualified commitment to the study of Torah excludes people like them from positions of authority and celebrate the advent of the computer database, which promises to level the playing field, allowing individuals who lack time or religious conviction to compete on equal footing with *talmithei haekhamim* who have achieved their expertise the old-fashioned way.¹²

Whether ready access to information renders hard-earned erudition superfluous and anachronistic in purely academic terms is not our present concern. Our difference from the anti-Orthodox outlook runs deeper. It extends to the way that this approach reduces the experience of Torah study to the efficient production of an intellectual commodity: the political-academic utility of which is independent of the personal engagement, the passion and the love, that the religious individual has invested in the subject matter. The politically minded pragmatist can only comprehend traditional Orthodox study as a crafty exercise in self-serving elitism. The individual who knows the personal face of Torah study firsthand does not eschew reference aids and databases as means to knowledge and insight, but rejects them as a substitute for personal engagement. Every component of the curriculum, including the ingredients discussed in this essay, can and should fortify the cause of religious reading. Is this likely to occur without the active intellectual participation of the teacher?

The qualities I have praised – religious and intellectual integrity, intellectual proportion, passion and a commitment to the strenuous life of *yeghi'ah* – are currently under attack. Given the frailties of our community, the deficiencies of our educational institutions, and the relentless drift of our secular, bottom-line-oriented culture, we cannot take it for granted that others will exemplify the virtues we are too busy or indifferent to cultivate in our-

¹¹ See Paul J. Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999) for the crucial differences between religious reading and the utilitarian secular style of reading fostered by contemporary culture. The author, a Catholic scholar of Eastern religions, is concerned about the dangers to traditional religion posed by increasingly prevalent habits of information consumption.

¹² The view here criticized has been asserted both orally and in print. Specific citations have been omitted in order not to cause embarrassment.

selves. To the extent that these virtues are tied to the interaction of Torah study with humanistic insight, each one of us must become a catalyst in the pursuit of wisdom. There is fire in the catalyst. There is fire in the human personality.¹³

WISDOM FROM ALL MY TEACHERS

CHALLENGES AND INITIATIVES IN
CONTEMPORARY TORAH EDUCATION

Edited by

Jeffrey Saks and Susan Handelman

¹³ My work on this paper coincided with the last illness of my revered mentor Rabbi Walter Wurzbarger ז"ל; the last pages were written during his *shv"ab*. Though R. Wurzbarger's substantial intellectual contribution, which fortified the understanding of Torah with the methods and achievements of philosophical ethics and political theory, did not resort to the kind of wide-ranging investigations described in the early sections of my article, the ideals of honesty and whole-hearted engagement extolled in the concluding section are very much part of his enduring legacy.

אִתִּיכְתּוּב

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