



Ki Tetze

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- Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove

Tradition for Non-Traditional Jews

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Review of Elliot Cosgrove, [For Such a Time as This: On Being Jewish Today](#) (Harvest, 2024)

"In the face of a world turned upside down, I am steadied by the texts of our tradition that provide solace and guidance. Ancient as our sacred texts may be, with every passing day they speak with an urgency to me, to the community I serve, and to the ever-evolving landscape of our post-October 7th world." (100)

Rabbi Dr. Elliot Cosgrove is the Senior Rabbi of Park Avenue Synagogue in New York City, one of the Conservative Movement's "flagship" synagogues. His recent book, [For Such a Time as This](#), presents a poignant and passionate adaptation of his sermons into a plea for unity and spiritual growth among American Jews and Zionists in the aftermath of October 7th, 2023.

One may reasonably ask what business an Orthodox rabbi like me has reviewing such a book in an Orthodox publication. If [For Such a Time as This](#) reflects only a Conservative rabbi preaching to his Conservative congregation, there does not seem to be much for someone like me to say. There is much, though, for an Orthodox audience to appreciate in Rabbi Cosgrove's thoughtful

diagnoses and prescriptions regarding the challenges of our current moment in time.¹

Cosgrove’s Critique of Contemporary Judaism

The book begins with a discussion of hyphenation. “To live a hyphenated life,” Cosgrove writes, “...means that life is a balancing act between the competing commitments within each of us.” Modern Orthodox readers ought to be quite familiar with such a feeling. “Our attachments to one another, to our Judaism, and to Israel require delicate balancing acts, a lifetime of negotiations taking place within our hearts, homes, and global community. The foods we eat, the observances we keep, the people we marry, the loyalties we hold—every decision is shaped by the push and pull originating in this hyphen” (3).²

Cosgrove, though, was not describing Modern Orthodoxy, but the Conservative Judaism with which he and many of his readers (myself included) were raised:

Traditional as our home was, it did not follow the letter of the law. Our Shabbat observance, our dietary observances, the schools and summer camps my brothers and I attended, the girls we dated—pretty much every aspect of life involved a negotiation between our Jewish and secular selves, an

expression of our Jewish-American hyphenated identity. Sometimes the balance tipped one way, sometimes the other, and sometimes a third way might emerge that sought to reconcile our Jewish and secular lives. But no matter the outcome, it was understood that every decision would be processed by way of the razor-thin hyphen embedded within each of us. (5-6)

Unfortunately, the American Jewish community has largely “lost our ability to articulate the hyphen within” (10). American Jews have thus largely lost their ability to pass that hyphen (and the positive value of traditionalism which is associated with it) through the generations. It is, after all, in Cosgrove’s words,

not what we say, but what we ourselves *do*, that communicates the biggest message. Our children pick up on our behavior... They also “see” the Jewish choices we make: whether we are engaged with the Jewish community, Israel, and our tradition, whether we aspire to live engaged Jewish lives. There are no guarantees of success in the transmission of Jewish identity

¹ The bulk of this review was written before the 2025 Israel–Iran War. Cosgrove’s message, however, is perhaps even more relevant now.

² All in-text citations refer to the book under review.

from one generation to the next, but the role parents play is vital. (11-12)

Then came October 7th, and the comfort American Jews felt in our liberal communities was suddenly and brutally upended. For many, it felt as if the world had lost its moral compass, and feelings of incredulity and loneliness were palpable. Yet the Jewish community “also experienced... a tribal awakening.” He writes:

Our feelings of vulnerability are intermixed with solidarity, our disillusionment with moral clarity. There is a sharpening of our sense of kinship, the feeling that indeed, we are a people who dwell apart. It is a time of profound pain and disorientation, but it also carries with it a sense of discovery and a quickening to this existential moment. Even in our dark hour, we are searching and often finding a deep, abiding connection to our community, our culture, and our faith. Fear and courage. Helplessness and a sense of duty to our people. Untethered and yet more connected than ever. (102)

This proved to be a rude awakening for many who had allowed their Zionism to replace broader Jewish commitments. Cosgrove argues that the two ought to be seen as complementary to one another with support for the State of Israel being

“an *extension of*, but not *interchangeable with*, their Jewish identity” (28). This, he writes, is a much-needed course correction:

Israel missions, Israel education, Israel advocacy... became a kind of secular religion for American Jews, sometimes supplanting Judaism itself. It is easier, after all, to write a check than it is to keep our children home on Friday night to light Shabbat candles. Uninspired by the prayerbook, unfamiliar with the Talmud, American Jews became adept at new Jewish topics of conversations—how our elected leaders vote on legislation regarding Israel’s security or the terms by which the United States should or shouldn’t enter into a deal with Iran. The dividing lines between us no longer fell along the various levels at which we observed the Sabbath or dietary laws, or our beliefs as to whether the Torah is of divine origin. Our views on Israel took the place of these. A new Israel-based religion emerged. (39)

In some cases, Cosgrove adds, support for Israel “became more than a religion—it became an orthodoxy.” Despite it making “perfect sense that the imperfect policies of Israel (or any state) might be worthy of objection—by Israelis, Jewish supporters, or anyone,” American Jews have

largely opted to “forgo their right to critique Israel because any such criticism will become fodder for Israel’s real enemies” (39-40).³ This all places Liberal American Jews in a bind where they inevitably come to “feel that the Israel they love does not love them back, or even care that we exist” (41). Indeed, liberal Jews have now come to realize that there’s “a limit to the self-flagellating exercise of supporting a state that neither recognizes you nor represents your values” and that “the loyalties of yesteryear no longer suffice” in inspiring loyalty today (41-42).⁴ Furthermore, the state of Palestinian treatment under Israeli occupation pushes more away every day. Cosgrove captures that reality extremely bluntly:

Whatever justifications (theological, security-related, or otherwise) have been and continue to be marshalled in support of Israel’s ongoing presence there, in the eyes of a liberal-leaning American Jewry, the West Bank settlements and the illiberal policies they represent pose a threat to Israel’s founding promise—its commitment to democracy. For American Jewry, it

cuts close to the bone to see its most prized liberal value in peril. As the thinking of progressive American Jewry goes, if the project of Israel is to provide a homeland and security to a historically vulnerable Jewish minority, then how can the state not respond to the needs of the vulnerable minority in its midst? Leaving aside the role of historical revisionism and progressive identity politics, the unresolved status of the Palestinians—lacking as they are in freedom of movement and access, self-determination, and other accouterments of sovereignty—forms a wedge issue between an increasing liberal-leaning American Jewry and an increasingly right-leaning Israeli Jewry. The mainstreaming of Jewish fundamentalism in Israeli society and government further compounds the problem. The fact that the same government fails to recognize American Jewry and also fails to recognize the Palestinian

³ This is despite the fact that liberal Judaism “is a religious identity that is not recognized by Israel” (40).

⁴ Note that the terms “liberal Judaism” and “liberal Jews” are used throughout this essay to refer to non-Orthodox Jews writ large. Per my teacher and mentor, Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter, the term is meant to be a positive affirmation of Jewish identity outside of Orthodoxy, as opposed to the negative formulation “non-Orthodox” which defines them

purely in relationship to Orthodoxy. It is also a term I have seen used by numerous colleagues outside of the Orthodox world. Being a “liberal Jew” in this context does not necessarily correlate to any particular political positions. As “liberal Judaism” is not the name of an official movement or grouping in North America the way that it is in the UK, the term is not capitalized. The phrase “Liberal Zionism,” connoting a particular political ideology, is capitalized.

right to self-determination increases American Jews' sense of estrangement. (42-43)⁵

American assimilation and Israeli radicalization thus force each side into becoming “unsure how invested it really is in the other’s well-being” (44). This makes it all the more important to “find common ground and points of dialogue” across these growing divides (45). For Cosgrove, such common ground begins with understanding that the ultimate moral compass “continues to point to the grief that resulted from the attacks themselves, which left an indelible scar on the soul and psyche of the Jewish people” and recognizing the unalienable “right of Israel to defend itself in the face of an enemy that would see it destroyed” (100).

Attacking those who disagree is not an option. For Cosgrove, it is unacceptable to attack the humanity or Jewish identity of those who have left Zionism behind by calling them “an enemy of the people,” “self-hating,” or “un-Jews.” Such tactics are “beyond the pale of civil discourse, a real-life example of *Sinat Hinam*. We should expect more from ourselves, and certainly from our leaders” (155).

⁵ Similar critiques have been raised by Professor Shaul Magid and summarized by me [elsewhere](#).

⁶ Cosgrove himself holds the classic Liberal Zionist position that “the only path forward is a two-state solution. Not today and not tomorrow, but in a future that we can speak of openly and proudly, toward which we seed and fund ideas

Cosgrove’s ability to push as far as he does stems from his commitment to the idea that “Judaism is not Zionism, and Zionism is not Judaism, and the flag on the pulpit and the prayer for Israel are complicated.”⁶ He acknowledges the “long history of non-Zionist Jews, not self-hating Jews or messianists for whom the establishment of the State of Israel can happen only once the Messiah has arrived. Proud Jews: labor Zionists, cultural Zionists, even religious Zionists, Zionists who had attachments to the land but not to establishing a state” (178). He also acknowledges that the increasing institutional overlap between Jewish and Zionist identity – such that commitment to Zionism has become “a litmus test of loyalty to the Jewish community and cause” – is “a disservice” to both Judaism and Zionism (180).

At the same time, he is clear that while strands of non-Zionist thought are “embedded in the Jewish ‘soul,’” it is “a profound misreading of Jewish history... to call Judaism anything other than a land-centered faith.” Judaism and Zionism may not be one and the same, but supporting Israel is still “fundamental to what it means to be a Jew today” (181). This leads Cosgrove to send a strong message to young Jews who oppose supporting Israel at this moment in history:

and initiatives, supporting all those leaders in Israel and America who are working toward such a vision and opposing those who don’t.” This belief in two states for two peoples “may be on the wane, in decline, or even dead. But that doesn’t mean it is not a noble and necessary idea to pursue” (171).

Israel is now in crisis. Are you going to exit—walk away and stand on the sidelines? Or are you going to use your voice—leverage your moral compass and the piercing clarity of your conscience to effect change, fight for your values, and help not only Israel but all the nations of the world realize a vision of national identity that does not oppress others? In Israel’s case, given the ideals you champion, given the age you are, why on earth would you cede the discussion of what Zionism is and what it should be to those who are our people’s true enemies or to your own Jewish kin who would corrupt Zionism, making it into something it is not and never should be? Encounter, T’ruah, Zionness, Seeds of Peace, Roots, Israel Policy Forum—there is no shortage of organizations fighting the good fight, and I know they would welcome your engagement. (184-185)

Not only do young liberal Jews have a place within the Zionist conversation, but addressing them directly, Cosgrove writes that the “conversation depends on you. We might not always agree, but make no mistake, now more than ever we need you, the larger Jewish community needs you, and Israel needs you” (185). The question is how to inspire liberal American Jews, young and old, Zionist and critical of Zionism, to embrace the sort

of robust, hyphenated Jewish identity that Cosgrove’s brand of Conservative Judaism asks of them.

Before October 7th, Cosgrove notes that Judaism was largely seen by liberal American Jews as

a series of episodic behavioral choices we opted into if we chose to do so, depending on the pull of our theological commitments, the communities into which we self-selected, or the degree to which we felt a sense of obligation through the pull of generational nostalgia. For non-Orthodox Jews, being Jewish was a lifestyle choice, an identity we asserted—or didn’t. (106).

The “shock and violent brutality” of October 7th, however, “was intended as and understood to be an attack not just on Israel but on global Jewry” and “activated a world of ‘us versus them,’ triggering a long-dormant sense of global Jewish peoplehood” (106-107). In the post-October 7th world, Cosgrove argues that Jewish identity became “shaped by a fight on the battlefield in Israel and Gaza, against those who would deny our kin the sovereign right of self-defense and self-determination.” No longer welcome among those with whom they previously surrounded themselves, many American Jews found themselves seeking the company of “people who confirm their spoken and unspoken commitments”:

In a world that struggles to name evil for what it is, we are thirsting for a moral axis to the universe, where wrong can be named as such. We are seeking communities of positive Jewish expression. Shabbat dinners, synagogue attendance, philanthropy, adult learning, trips to Israel, public advocacy, rallies and marches—Jews are “doing Jewish” with other Jews in unprecedented numbers, over a sustained time. As one “old timer” in my community remarked to me in a crowded synagogue service, “Where did all these Jews come from?” (109-110)

Cosgrove stresses that this energy must be put toward proactive Jewish experiences, not only in response to antisemitism and anti-Zionism. American Jews must, in his words, devote significant time and effort to “reminding one another, our children, and most of all ourselves of who we are. Jews must take agency—and joy—in their Judaism” regardless of where the inspiration to do so comes from (115). In this plea, he pulls no punches:

Uncomfortable as it is to discuss, the impoverished condition of the religion of many diaspora Jews sits in plain view. We are more at home with debating the Iran deal and the grades of uranium that can be

weaponized than we are with opening a prayerbook. We make every effort to understand the opportunity and challenge of critical race theory, but we are flat-footed when asked what it means to stand in a covenantal relationship with God. We are willing to drive for hours to stand on the sidelines at our children’s club sports, but we find ourselves unable (or unwilling) to sit next to them in synagogue on a Friday night or a Shabbat morning. We will try any fad diet other than the one prescribed by our Torah. We would rather label another a “self-hating Jew” or a “settler-colonialist” than acknowledge that our children or grandchildren have no ostensible connection to Judaism, never mind the State of Israel. (129-130)

While acknowledging that non-religious forms of Judaism exist, Cosgrove notes that “they are entirely insufficient to transmit the riches of Judaism from one generation to the next.” Going further, he even says that much of the time “secular commitments of Jews serve as compensatory guilt offerings, hiding paper-thin religious identities. In all cases, they presuppose a commitment to Judaism that, for much of diaspora Jewry, is not as vital as we would care to admit” (130).

Removing Judaism's religious foundations, Cosgrove fears, "will prove to be our undoing, a giant sinkhole into which the hard-earned superstructure supporting diaspora Jewry will collapse." He warns that "only by way of mitzvot [sic] the positive acts of Jewish identification, the language and behaviors of the Jewish religion, can Judaism survive." Even for those who do not believe in God, he suggests that "a life of mitzvot remains the most assured means to inspire individual and collective Jewish identity and continuity—a connection to the Jewish people by way of religious expression" (131). The performance of a mitzvah "is a proud transformation of a universal self into a Jewish self, making manifest one's particular identity through decisions about what to eat, how to structure one's time, and how to present oneself to the world" (132-133). Mitzvot are "the means by which one expresses pride in one's Jewishness—where one has come from and the hope that those who come after will feel and do the same. There is no greater act of Jewish self-assertion, empowerment, and hope than the performance of a mitzvah. To do a mitzvah is to take agency for one's spiritual life" (133).

Cosgrove's practical solution to get more liberal Jews performing mitzvot relies on encouraging a "preliminary vocabulary for a program to restore the religion of Judaism to the Jewish people, an effort that could be shared by Israel and the diaspora, across denominations and political divides" (135-136).

This is difficult given that for "the vast majority of American Jews, the language of mitzvot is a closed book." Nonetheless, Cosgrove writes that the "task of our time is to update and recast the efforts of our predecessors in a manner consistent with the best practices and platforms by which educational content is accessed today." This task will hopefully be complemented by acknowledging that "Rabbis and Jewish educators (and the institutions that train them) must inspire contemporary Jewry to adopt mitzvot as the historic and ever-evolving toolbox for exploring the existential questions within all our hearts." It should also be complemented by the creation of judgment-free curricula that aim to close the "gap between American Jewry's vaunted secular educational achievements and its anemic Jewish literacy" while "affirming the varied paths by which individuals today seek entry into the tradition." Of course, Cosgrove emphasizes that "only communal reinforcement will make it all stick" and suggests that things like "one-on-one mentorship, interconnected *havurot* (small communities), online engagement, and intensive, retreat-based education can together provide the ecosystem to nurture and sustain the desired outcomes in Jewish practice" (134-135).

Of course, Cosgrove acknowledges that it is "an undertaking of no small significance to reverse current trends and empower American Jews to reclaim their religious heritage, in all its manifold varieties" and yet finds himself "hard-pressed to think of a project more urgent, necessary, or

exciting” in this moment (136). There obviously will not be a single moment of changing course, but over time more Jews can be empowered to “reach out our hand to our children, with the hope that they extend theirs in return. To practice our faith, spend more time showing and less time telling. Step by step, hand in hand, mitzvah to mitzvah, generation to generation” (137).

Ultimately, Cosgrove implores his audience to deepen their commitment to both Zionism and the Judaism in which it is rooted so that the next generation of Jewish leaders can “be resilient, self-confident, and adroit defenders of the real, not the imagined, Jewish State” (189) while understanding that “American Zionism is not a substitute for American Judaism” (190-191). “To be good Zionists,” Cosgrove writes, “we must be better Jews. A robust American Jewish identity can weather policy differences with this or that Israeli government and withstand the indignity of being a punching bag for a campus culture run amok—something a paper-thin Jewish identity cannot do” (191). As Cosgrove notes,

The future of American Zionism is contingent on the future of American Judaism—not the other way around. American Jewry must redouble its investment in Jewish life and living. As invested as we are in Israel, for the sake of our Jewish and Zionist future we must prioritize efforts to cultivate rich Jewish identities: synagogues, schools, and Jewish summer camps

filled with Jews living intentionally and joyfully, capable of producing the next generation of American Judaism and training of the next generation of rabbis, cantors, Jewish educators, and professionals. (193)

Having painted the picture of an inclusive Zionism and having demonstrated the need for liberal Jews to embrace substantive Jewish practice, we can now bring Cosgrove’s collective vision together in a clear way. American Zionism, for Cosgrove, “begins with love for the Jewish people and teaches our children and grandchildren the story of our exile, the pitfalls of powerlessness, the dreams of every wave and every stage of our national longings, and our right to the land” (188). To be a committed Zionist means having a commitment to our people and to its full history, including our people’s historical commitment to living lives of Torah and mitzvot.

The Promise of Post-Denominationalism

On the surface, Cosgrove’s call for greater mitzvah observance sounds rather Orthodox. Indeed, the original version of one of the book’s most directly critical chapters of liberal Jews’ lack of commitment to mitzvot was a [2019 Yom Kippur sermon](#) proudly praising Chabad for their ability to understand that “performance of a mitzvah, a distinctly Jewish act—tefillin, Shabbat candles, making challah, or otherwise... is the key, the secret sauce by which the assimilated American-Jew would find his or her way back into

yiddishkeit.”⁷ At the same time, in that version of the sermon, Cosgrove outlines clearly that he does not, and never will, maintain an Orthodox perspective underlying mitzvah performance:

I am not a Chabadnik for all sorts of reasons. To name but a few: I have a more expansive definition of mitzvah than they do. I have a more inclusive and egalitarian definition of the Jewish people than they do. And I have a far more progressive notion of how Jewish law develops than they do. But I am your rabbi, so let’s put it out there: Can this year be the year you take on mitzvot in your life? I don’t need them all, I am an incrementalist. I believe that one mitzvah leads to another. Just don’t tell me that ritual is not your thing or that you can’t make the time. Our lives are filled with rituals: timebound, dietary, and seasonal. We go to Soul Cycle, we go to yoga, we eat GG crackers for God’s sake! We carve out time for marathons, we shlep to the new workout in SoHo, and we freeze on the sidelines of our children’s club sports in God

knows where. We can prioritize just fine—when we deem something to be a priority! American Jews are full of mitzvot, just not the Jewish ones. I want you to take on the Jewish ones! I want you to take agency for your spiritual life. Mitzvot are not the sole domain of the Orthodox—they belong to all of us! Let’s give the Jewish world something to talk about—a Conservative synagogue proudly and passionately pursuing mitzvot. The great twentieth-century Jewish thinker Franz Rosenzweig, when asked whether he put on tefillin, replied “Not yet.” Let this year be the year. Here in this room, right now, take the time to reflect, reflect with your family: how can you move from “not my thing,” to “not yet,” to “why not, let’s see what happens.”

Furthermore, as expounded upon in a [2023 article](#) in the Shalom Hartman Institute’s *Sources Journal*, Cosgrove reiterates that most Jews view mitzvot as “volitional lifestyle choices, not commanded deeds existing within the totality of a *halakhic* system” and contends that “the difference

⁷ This understanding of Chabad is quite common, but it ignores the theological and even theosophical underpinnings of their approach. As Rabbi Dr. Yosef Bronstein has pointed out, “The enterprise of going into the world at large and enabling other Jews to perform mitzvot is directly related to the Rebbe’s unique perspective regarding the significance of Sinai. The emergence of the Divine

Essence at Sinai began the process of uniting the upper and lower realms that can be completed only through our mitzvot. In this sense, the mitzva campaigns represent a final surge toward the finish line of creating a *Dora BaTahtonim* and ushering in the Messianic Era.” Yosef Bronstein, [Engaging the Essence: The Torah Philosophy of the Lubavitcher Rebbe](#) (Maggid Books, 2024), 119.

between Reform, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox Jews is a difference of degree and not of kind. Everyone is picking and choosing *mitzvot*.”

A direct precursor to Cosgrove’s approach within the Conservative Movement can be found in the writings of Rabbi Dr. Neil Gillman, who controversially argued for the movement to drop its own identification as halakhic.⁸ What separates Conservative Judaism from the Reform and Reconstructionist movements, in Gillman’s view?

⁸ Rabbi Neil Gillman, [*Doing Jewish Theology: God, Torah & Israel in Modern Judaism*](#) (Jewish Lights, 2008), 189-190. In his words,

Our critics would charge, how can you be a halakhic movement if you permit a *kohen* to marry a divorcée, or permit women to serve as witnesses in judicial proceedings, or permit the use of electricity and driving to synagogue on Shabbat, or make significant changes in the core halakhic portions of the liturgy, or even contemplate ordaining gays and lesbians and sanctioning commitment rituals? To these charges, we reply, “Ah, but we mean something else by the term ‘halakhah.’ We view halakhah as evolving in response to changing historical conditions.”

... It is a totally idiosyncratic use of the term, unrecognizable by Jews who take halakhah seriously in their personal lives. It is in effect a subjective, emotional outburst, a covert way of saying, “It’s great to be a Conservative Jew,” or “I’m proud to be a Conservative Jew,” which is totally legitimate, as long as we realize that this is what we are doing. We are simply describing how we feel about ourselves.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l, in [*One People? Tradition, Modernity, and Jewish Unity*](#) (Littman Library, 1993), 2-3, also reflected on the subject of redefining Jewish terms:

It is neither necessary nor appropriate to wax nostalgic about the premodern Jewish past, with its

Like Cosgrove, he argues that the difference is one of degree rather than of kind. In his words,

We read and we teach the same theologians. Buber and Rosenzweig, Heschel and Kaplan, their students and the postmoderns are our common legacy. Theologically, the reality is that you can’t be more or less liberal. Once you deny a literalist understanding of revelation, you are willy-nilly in the liberal camp.

partially enclosed culture, autonomous community governance, its ghettos and *Gemeinschaft*. None the less, and without yearning for *temps perdu*, we recognize to our disquiet that questions that have become unanswerable now were unaskable then. Who and what is a Jew? What is Torah? What is *galut* (exile), and what is the Jewish hope that lies beyond exile? The substantive daily content, metaphysical significance, and historical context of a Jewish life were bedrock data... There may have been fierce argument over the details of Jewish life but not over the framing fundamentals. Within this context the language of Judaism was coherent, consistent, and designated a palpable objective reality.

The language has survived but its context has not. The key words remain—terms such as *torah*, *mitzvah* (commandment), *galut* (exile), *ge’ulah* (redemption), *am yisrael* (the people of Israel), *eretz yisrael* (the land of Israel). But the meanings attached to them differ systematically from group to group within the Jewish world. What is a *mitzvah*? Is it an act performed in response to the divine command? Or from loyalty to historical tradition? Or as an act of group participation? Or as a blend of ethnicity and nostalgia? Or as a freely chosen act of autonomous Jewish self-expression? What is *galut*? Is it a geographical term meaning ‘outside Israel’? Or a cultural term meaning ‘a sense of not-at-homeness’? Or a religious term meaning ‘a time not yet redeemed’? Is America *galut*? Is Israel?

What distinguishes us then? First, we differ in how much of traditional Jewish ritual practice we want to retain, how much we are prepared to abandon or to change, and how we go about changing. In all of these areas, we are more “conservative.” That is more of an emotional stance than a theological one, and it is thoroughly legitimate on its own terms. Feelings are important. Second, we differ in our institutional loyalties. Our loyalty to the institutions of our respective movements, primarily to JTS or to HUC-JIR, is genuine and powerful. Finally, we differ strikingly in our liturgy. No one who has davened in a Reform or in a Conservative synagogue could possibly confuse the two. I have frequently suggested that were you to blindfold me and lead me into five Reform and five Conservative synagogues, I would identify the movement in less than a minute. Whatever my personal theology, I

prefer to worship from a traditionalist prayer book. None of this is going to change.⁹

Cosgrove and Gillman’s observations—that non-Orthodox Jews fall onto the same spectrum with one another—are consistent with the findings of now-retired JTS Professor Jack Wertheimer that, especially for young Jews, “hybridity is common and picking and choosing among the offerings of different synagogues is not only possible, but seen by many as desirable.” Indeed, “the very notion of adherence to one denomination is treated by many as an unacceptable imposition, a constraint upon their individuality and eagerness to experiment.”¹⁰

Professor Roberta Rosenthal Kwall of DePaul University significantly expanded this observation in arguing that a majority of affiliated Jews in the United States today “fall somewhere along a spectrum ranging from still fairly traditional (although not Orthodox) to purely cultural.”¹¹ Rather than identify with any particular denomination, such Jews find that the “language of Jewish ‘law’ suggests hard and fast rules and consequences for disobedience that are foreign to most non-Orthodox Jews.” By contrast, speaking

⁹ Gillman, 203-204. Gillman also acknowledges that “recent developments in American Reform and Orthodoxy suggest that both of those movements are slowly gravitating back to the center. The pace is understandably glacial, but the direction is clear.” Like Cosgrove, Gillman would situate at least some segments of Orthodoxy along the liberal Jewish continuum.

¹⁰ Jack Wertheimer, [*The New American Judaism: How Jews Practice Their Religion Today*](#) (Princeton University Press, 2018), 160.

¹¹ Roberta Rosenthal Kwall, [*Remix Judaism: Preserving Tradition in a Diverse World*](#) (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 3.

of “Jewish ‘tradition’ connotes positive associations and the desire for transmission.”¹²

Cosgrove’s aim, perhaps, can be articulated as an attempt to move Jews who are willing to listen to his message along the spectrum toward greater acceptance of tradition without making them Orthodox and without requiring belief in Halakhah as a binding legal system. This mission follows in the footsteps of Gillman and the subject of [Cosgrove’s doctoral dissertation](#), Rabbi Louis Jacobs, who believed that “a degree of eclecticism is required in which the good, seen to some extent in a personal way, is adopted from all the movements in Jewish life...”¹³

Orthodox readers ought to note that Orthodoxy is not immune from coming to see Jewish practices as optional. Cosgrove can so confidently assert, as he does above, that “the difference between Reform, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox Jews is a difference of degree and not of kind” because that is what he sees from the Orthodox Jews with whom he regularly interacts on Manhattan’s Upper East Side. Social Orthodoxy, in which “maintaining the continuity of the Jewish people” is considered more important than theology,¹⁴ remains a strong force to be reckoned with in much of the Modern Orthodox community. It is strong enough that even non-Orthodox Jews recognize it and see within it a kindred spirit.¹⁵

¹² Ibid., 7.

¹³ Louis Jacobs, [Beyond Reasonable Doubt](#) (Littman Library, 2004), 242. I have addressed the thought of Jacobs at length in several other *Lehrhaus* articles.

The unprecedented post-denominational reality we face today also comes with unprecedented opportunities for unity and cooperation. Indeed, Rabbi Avi Weiss predicted this state of affairs a decade ago with uncanny accuracy:

In short, I predict a reconfiguration of affiliated Jewry into three new camps.

On the right side of the religious spectrum, the various Haredi communities—Hasidim, Mitnagdim, Sefardim, as well as the more extreme wing of Chabad—will recognize that they have more in common than not. The “neo-Haredi” Roshei Yeshiva from RIETS (Yeshiva University) will find more common ground with this faction. United, their power will increase.

...

On the other end of the spectrum, we will witness an amalgamation of the liberal communities. The Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and Renewal denominations will overcome their differences and unite...

¹⁴ Jay P. Lefkowitz, “[The Rise of Social Orthodoxy: A Personal Account](#),” *Commentary*, April 2014.

¹⁵ This is, of course, not to imply that the rabbis of that community endorse such a view.

...

A third camp, in the middle of the spectrum, will be made up of a growing community of halakhically-committed Jews. From this camp—one with which I identify—there will emerge an inclusionary Orthodoxy that empowers women to be more involved in Jewish ritual and spiritual leadership; that invites religious questioning and promotes dialogue across the Jewish spectrum; welcomes people regardless of sexual orientation or level of religious observance; and looks outward, driven by a sense of responsibility to all people.¹⁶

Weiss identified the third camp as being made up of organizations like the International Rabbinic Fellowship, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, and JOFA alongside “the more conservative wing of Hadar and the more progressive graduates of Chabad, Yeshiva University, and Yeshivat Har Etzion...”¹⁷

¹⁶ Avraham “Avi” Weiss, [Journey to Open Orthodoxy](#) (Urim Publications, 2019), 80-81. Interestingly, Weiss was advocating as early as 1989 that “an alliance between the Modern/Centrist Orthodox and the Conservative Traditionalist” is no longer impossible since “what unites us is far greater than what divides us.” The proposed “Movement of Halakhic Judaism” and its accompanying rabbinical school, however, never came to fruition (see Zev Eleff, [Modern Orthodox Judaism: A Documentary History](#) [JPS, 2016], 386-387).

As the Jewish world continues to realign, then, we Modern Orthodox Jews must ask ourselves where in the new landscape we wish to end up. Are we content to be an island unto ourselves, out of touch with the majority of the Jewish world? Or, on the other hand, are we able to find comfort positioning ourselves alongside Cosgrove and others as the traditionalists in an otherwise liberal milieu?

Regardless of where we personally may choose to place ourselves, Rabbi Cosgrove’s work can assure us that the liberal Jewish world has leaders doing everything in their power to shift the tide in the right direction.

Misunderstandings in Tzniut

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Introduction

Of late, and for the good, the topic of *tzniut*¹ has

¹⁷ Ibid., 82.

¹ As a working definition of *tzniut*, we can use “privacy” (which may be slightly more accurate) and “modesty” (certainly more popular). See also Radak, *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*, with an emphasis on “self-concealment.”

been much discussed in Modern/Centrist Orthodox circles and media platforms. Much of this can no doubt be credited to the wonderful and wildly popular [Reclaiming Dignity](#) by Bracha Poliakoff and Rabbi Anthony Manning. The aim of the book, in general terms, is to provide a deeper and broader understanding of *tzniut* and the domains to which it applies.²

Likewise, there has been much discussion centering on materialism and ostentation in the Jewish community and how this interplays with *tzniut*. Here we can reference, amongst other works, the perceptive article “Materialism and the Rise of Modern, Orthodoxy,”³ as well as essays, classes, and podcast appearances from Rabbi Jeremy Wieder on related topics.⁴

Tzniut in the Torah and *halakhah* encompasses a collection of attitudes, behaviors, and practices. As such, it is natural to search for a conceptual

common denominator to tie this collection together; a single root – the ‘core’ of *tzniut*. To bring a recent example from the aforementioned book: “The commentators explain *tzniu*[t] as [a] focus on privacy and internality” (6).

However, this raises the question as to *why*, on this understanding, the Torah and *halakhah* are aiming to inculcate a focus on privacy and internality. This question has not received enough attention. Indeed, it is frequently assumed that these are inherently valuable Torah goals, or that, in other words, the root of *tzniut* is identical to its source of value.⁵

The contribution of this essay is to attempt a demonstration of the error of that assumption. It will be argued that the core root of *tzniut* is not in and of itself a value; rather, its value must be understood as it being in service of, and motivated by, greater goals. In other words, to consider

² It is largely due to the success of this book that this essay can take it as a given that *tzniut* is not exclusively about women’s dress and appearance.

³ Chaim Saiman & Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt, *Tradition Online* 52, no. 2 (Spring 2024): 84-115.

⁴ See, for instance, <https://jewishcoffeehouse.com/the-orthodox-communitys-obsession-with-materialism-a-conversation-with-rabbi-jeremy-wieder-99/>.

⁵ For example, it is argued that internality is an essential and inherent element of the service of God:

The root of *tznius* is *p’nimiyus*, internality. *Tznus* means being internally focused and determining

one’s conduct solely by spiritual intent[:] maintaining the inherent value of what is good and pure. Someone who serves Hashem with *tznius* will not allow external factors such as personal and physical feelings to dictate their behaviors (Rivka Simonsson, *Reclaiming Dignity*, 11).

And: *Tzniut* describes a deep inner yearning for private connection to God who Himself is described as an “E-I mistater- a hidden, private God...includes developing an awareness of holiness of the private domain” (Rabbi Manning).

These are two examples where the root of *tzniut* is assumed to be identical with the goal, and therefore value, of *tzniut* (see next section).

modesty a Jewish value in and of itself would be a mistake. In fact, we will shortly see three different and distinct Torah values toward which those behaviors classified as *tzniut* aim.⁶

Value, Aims, and Goals

Before we continue, we ought to clarify just exactly what it is that we mean by the term “value.” The assumption underlying this essay, as well as the misconception it is aiming to correct, is that the Torah has values and goals that it aims towards, *and* that we can work out what some of these might be. This is by no means an uncontroversial position. In the Jewish philosophical tradition there have been those who have argued that the Torah does not have aims and goals, and that it is merely the inscrutable will of the Almighty. There have also been those who have suggested that whilst there may be aims and goals that the Torah is working towards, knowing them is beyond the human ken.

Rambam adopts neither position, suggesting that the Torah has goals and that we can understand them.⁷ For example, the *mitzvah* to build a fence around a roof (Devarim 22:8) directly promotes safety, and one might infer from this that the Torah is interested in cultivating safety in society and

reducing unnecessary dangers.⁸

Further clarifying the issue, Rav Nahum Rabinovitch zt”l explains:

The purpose or goal of a *mitzva[h]* is necessarily broader than the *mitzva[h]* itself. *Mitzvot* must be defined by the precise ways in which they are violated or performed. However, the purpose of a *mitzva[h]* cannot be limited to a specific set of acts, and thus cannot be precisely defined in that manner. (*Pathways to their Hearts*)

Within this framework, the question is not whether *tzniut* has value; after all, it is certainly the focus of aspects of the Torah and *halakhah!* The question is whether this value is an aim in and of itself, or whether it is instrumental—in other words, valued because it is in service of larger aims and values which the Torah points towards. This would make it a means and not an end.

We have already noted that the former is often tacitly assumed to be true, but this essay will argue for the latter by giving examples of where *tzniut* is clearly of value because it is a means or

⁶ Given the vast literature on which one could draw for such a project, we will, primarily but not exclusively, focus on the writings of Rambam. This is not to present “Rambam’s perspective on *tzniut*,” but rather reflects Rambam’s ability to summarize the works of the Sages in a uniquely clear and concise manner.

⁷ An interesting discussion beyond the scope of this essay is whether *all* the goals of the Torah are, for Rambam, in theory, knowable.

⁸ See also *Guide to the Perplexed* III 40.

instrument to a greater aim of the Torah.

Tzniut and the Divine Presence

We start with the first goal to which *tzniut* is clearly a means: responding to and inculcating an awareness of the Presence of God.

The Divine Presence, when properly acknowledged, demands of us to behave in a respectful and dignified manner in order to, on the one hand, keep our most base needs and drives private,⁹ and, on the other, to keep our egos in check, appreciating our lowly stature in comparison to the King of Kings.

Rambam expresses this concept with great clarity and beauty in his *Guide* (III 52):

A person's sitting, moving, and behaving when alone at home is not the same as when they are in the presence of a great king. Similarly, one does not speak freely in the company of family and relatives as one would in the king's court. Therefore, one who seeks human perfection and desires to be a true servant of God must recognize and understand that the great King, who is always

enveloping and accompanying them, is greater than any human king... He is always with us, watching and guarding.

Know that when perfected individuals understand this, they attain a level of awe of Heaven, humility, and awe of God that is genuine and not feigned. They demonstrate this in various ways: They are modest in their behavior with their wives and when bathing with others, as our sages taught, "Reveal a little and conceal a little" (*Nedarim* 20b). They also said, "Who is modest? One who relieves himself at night as he would in the daytime" (*Berakhot* 62a). They prohibited walking with an erect posture, due to the verse "For the LORD of hosts is exalted" (Isaiah 6:3), (*Kiddushin* 31a). All of this is to reinforce the point I have made: we are always in His exalted presence, walking and moving before His Divine Presence. Our sages refrained from uncovering their heads because the Divine Presence surrounds a person. They also spoke sparingly due to this reason.

⁹ Hence the statement of Rabbi Yohanan, "Even if the Torah had not been given, we would nonetheless have learned modesty from the cat" (*Eiruvim* 100b). Rashi explains that cats do not defecate in public and are in the habit of covering their excrement.

Additionally, it is often observed (correctly) that keeping our more animalistic behaviors in the private domain is not the same thing as being ashamed of them. Note that we recite *berakhot* in gratitude and praise after going to the toilet!

This is also plainly the sense that Rabbi Isaac ben Joseph of Corbeil has in mind when he codifies *tzniut* as one of the 613 *mitzvot* of the Torah:

Being modest: as it is written (Devarim 23:15), “And your camp shall be holy,” and it is written (Micah 6:8), “And walking modestly with your God.” The sages said that no one is modest but he who is modest in the bathroom [*Berakhot* 62a]... One must also be modest in marital relations; also in every matter one must act with modesty and not with brazenness.¹⁰

It is telling that when codifying some specifics of these behaviors in his *Mishneh Torah*, Rambam does so as part of his discussions on the appropriate behavior for Sages to engage in.¹¹ We can suggest that this is because it is those who are the most cognizant of the Divine Presence, i.e., the Sages, who have the most strictures in this regard.

In this sense, the aim of *tzniut* is very broad—applying to all of the activities of life (and is an excellent example of where *tzniut* applies equally to men and women). It also clearly is valuable, not in of itself, but because it aims towards a higher Torah goal.

¹⁰ *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot Ha-Katan*, mitzvah 57.

¹¹ See *Hilkhot Dei'ot* Chapter 5. Note that there are additional strictures on Sages due to their unique potential to create a *hillul Hashem* (desecration of the Divine Name),

Tzniut in the Performance of *Mitzvot*

We can now turn to a second example in which *tzniut* is instrumentally valuable in its service of a higher goal. The prophet Micah instructs us as follows:

He has told you, O man, what is good, and what the LORD requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God.¹²

What does it mean to “walk modestly with God?” The Talmud expands on this verse as follows:

And this is what Rabbi Elazar said: What is the meaning of that which is written: “It has been told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord does require of you; only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8)? “To do justly”; this is justice. “To love mercy”; this is acts of kindness. “To walk modestly with your God”; this is referring to taking the dead out for burial and accompanying a bride to her wedding canopy ...[and]

but these are not directly relevant for the purposes of this essay (see *Yesodei Hatorah* Chapter 5).

¹² Micah 6:8.

if, with regard to matters that tend to be conducted in public (as the multitudes participate in funerals and weddings) the Torah says: “Walk modestly,” then in matters that tend to be conducted in private...all the more so should they be conducted modestly!¹³

Meiri summarizes the point:

If the Torah says “walk humbly” regarding matters that are normally done in public, then how much more so should one be modest in matters that are typically done in private, such as *charity and Torah study*.¹⁴

We can infer from Meiri, himself writing based on the context of the general discussion in the Talmud, that acts which should be done privately

and modestly are specifically acts which are themselves *mitzvot*.

To walk humbly *with* God is not the same thing as walking humbly *before* God (i.e., it is not the same thing as responding to the Divine Presence). Walking humbly *with* God, for the Talmud at least, is a question of how we perform His service; specifically, how we observe his commands/*mitzvot*.^{15,16} We could do so in a discreet manner, or in an overtly public manner—in order to impress others with our piety or to improve our social and communal standing.

Of course, being arrogant and public in our Jewish practice, as with any display of arrogance, is a violation of appropriately acknowledging God’s immanence, but, crucially, it is more than that. It is also the failure to have a relationship with God in the first place. Relational acts done for show are cheap and void of the necessary intent and sensitivities towards building genuine connection.

¹³ *Sukkah* 49b.

¹⁴ For a nearly identical take, see Rabbeinu Hananel ad loc.

¹⁵ Similarly, see *Sotah* 14a:

Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina, says: What is the meaning of that which is written: “After the Lord your God shall you walk” (Deuteronomy 13:5)? But is it actually possible for a person to follow the Divine Presence? But hasn’t it already been stated: “For the Lord your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God” (Deuteronomy 4:24), and one cannot approach fire? He explains: Rather, the meaning is that one should follow the attributes of the Holy One, Blessed be He:

Just as He clothes the naked...so, too, should you clothe the naked. Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, visits the sick...so, too, should you visit the sick. Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, consoles mourners...so, too, should you console mourners. Just as the Holy One, Blessed be He, buries the dead...so, too, should you bury the dead.

Note that all the given examples are also formal *mitzvot*.

¹⁶ Note that for the aforementioned codification in *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot Ha-Katan*, the verse from Micah is used as a support for the understanding that *tzniut* is a response to the presence of Hashem, and not like our *gemara* where it is specifically about *tzniut* in the context of *mitzvot*.

To walk modestly with God is to perform the *mitzvot* for God and not for others, and to be exceedingly careful about this, for it is central to the relationship between Man and God.

Rambam addresses this issue, and notably does so in a separate section of the *Mishneh Torah* from his discussion about responding to the presence of God:

Whoever becomes arrogant and ascribes honour to himself and esteems himself highly in these places [i.e., in the performance of *mitzvot*]*—*is a sinner and a fool... And whoever humbles himself...in these places is the truly great and honored one, who *serves out of love*.¹⁷

Tzniut, Intimacy, and Sexual Propriety

In our third example we consider the following law:

What is meant by "*dat yehudit*?"¹⁸
The customs of modesty that Jewish women practice. When a woman performs any of the following acts, she is considered to

have violated the *dat yehudit*:

- a) she goes to the marketplace or a lane with openings at both ends without having her head covered...,
- c) she spins in the marketplace and shows her forearms to men,
- d) she plays frivolously with young lads,
- e) she demands sexual intimacy from her husband in a loud voice until her neighbours hear her talking about their intimate affairs...¹⁹

A violation of *dat yehudit* can result in a woman losing her financial rights upon divorce. This is because, as can be seen from our examples, *dat yehudit* deals with public-facing activities. A violation in *dat yehudit* has societal ramifications, not just for the woman but for the husband too. Rav Nahum Rabinovitch summarizes the point: "*Dat yehudit* includes matters of public modesty, and if a woman violates *dat yehudit* she additionally damages her husband's reputation, which is why she is penalized."²⁰

It follows, therefore, that the modesty of *dat*

¹⁷ *Hilkhot Sukkah* 8:15-16.

¹⁸ Literally "the Jewish religion," but functionally it is a legal category defined by Rambam as "customs of modesty that Jewish women practice."

¹⁹ See *Hilkhot Ishut* 24:12.

²⁰ *Yad Peshutah, Ishut* 24:13.

yehudit aims to keep marital intimacy and its associated behaviors and modes of dress firmly and exclusively within the privacy of the marriage itself. This, in turn, serves the greater Torah goals of sexual propriety and the strength of intimacy in the marriage.^{21,22}

Conclusion

Tzniut rightfully plays a significant role in Torah thought and action. Perhaps it is just this centrality which creates the impression that *tzniut* therefore is valued by the Torah in and of itself. The three examples of *tzniut* brought in this essay offer a correction to this misconception. When we realize that *tzniut* is an instrument to a higher Torah goal, we simultaneously accept that this value is not found in of itself but, rather, beyond it. The point here is not that the importance of *tzniut* should be undermined, but that we carry a wiser and deeper appreciation for what *tzniut* is.²³ *Tzniut*, thus understood, helps us keep our hearts and minds on the manifestation of the Presence of God in our lives, on building a genuine relationship with Him, and on securing the sacred bonds of marriage.

Maccabees Redux

Letters To The Editor

It is obvious from reading the newspapers and watching TV that many people are having conflicting feelings about how Israel should try to resolve its current war. The “what’s the endgame” question in the face of world condemnation toward conquering all of Gaza presents a dilemma without any “good” choices. Current articles have headlines like, “[A Terrible Price](#),” “[Should the War Continue?](#)” and “[The Endless Cruelty of War](#),” all lamenting war’s impact on our Jewish morals, our empathy, our inbred kindness and our generosity. Yet, my inner reflection focuses not on what is being lost, but on immense joy as to what is being gained! How did the Jews of 167 BCE feel when the Maccabees took to the field, fighting against the Syrian-Greeks, losing thousands of their countrymen in the 25-year war that followed? Were they depressed – or elated? Were they concerned with the morality of their actions – or thankful and relieved to be free from the repression of the Syrian-Greeks?

As we enter the second year of a seven-front war against Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iran, I believe this is a great moment in Jewish history. After falling to the Assyrians in 722 BCE, the Babylonians in 586 BCE and finally to the Romans

the comments of *Maggid Mishneh* there. See also *Shabbat* 140b, *Eiruv* 100b, and more.

²³ After all, wisdom resides with those who embody *tzniut* (Proverbs 11:2).

²¹ See *Guide* III 49.

²² Examples of the Sages’ concern with these latter goals abound in rabbinic literature. See *Hilkhot Ishut* 15:18 and

in 70 CE, the Jews faced 2,000 long years without a homeland, a government, or an army – and as a result were killed, murdered, raped and pillaged by almost every nation in which they lived. In contrast, today, beset by multiple nation-states bent on Israel’s total destruction, we finally have a country and an army composed of hundreds of thousands of courageous young Jewish men and women, who take up arms and beat back our enemies, destroying their capacity to make war against us. Israeli young men and women courageously step forward, putting their lives at risk to confront history and say, “Never Again!”

Despite this selfless dedication to the war effort, a significant portion of the Israeli population wants to end the war now. It seems that 2,000 years of powerlessness may have left their mark on our Jewish consciousness. Two millennia without responsibility to maintain our national existence may have conditioned us to pacifism. When Joshua crossed the Jordan River to establish the nation of Israel, the Jews had to fight for seven years, almost continuously. When David reigned, Israel was plunged into continuous warfare to protect its sovereignty and its people. Our history up until the Assyrian invasion constantly alternated between wars and short periods of peace. This is the real theme of Jewish history.

Today we are experiencing “Maccabees Redux,” a glorious rebirth of a nation returned to history. A nation that has shed its weakness, now strong enough to stand up, defend its existence, and protect its citizens. Unlike the tragic story of the Jews living in the Rhineland who were rounded up

and massacred by the Crusaders, unable to defend their wives, their children, or themselves, we have courageous soldiers, an Iron Dome, a heroic and effective air force, resilient wives and mothers and a prudent populace. I feel this is a time of glory – of greatness – and of our return to history. And this sometimes requires us to sacrifice our most precious youth in this fight for life and existence.

Joab remonstrated against David when he fell into mourning over the death of his rebellious son, Absalom, as it says in [II Samuel 19:3](#), “And the victory day was turned into mourning for all the people.” Joab confronted David and [said](#), “You have shamed this day the faces of your servants (soldiers) who this day have saved your life and the lives of your family... but you have declared this day that your princes and servants are nothing to you; this day if Absalom had lived and we had all died, it would have pleased you!... If you do not go out (in joy) to meet the people, not a man/soldier will remain loyal to you in the morning!... And the King went out to greet the people as they came before him.”

As Solomon [wrote](#) in Kohelet, “There is a time for war and a time for peace.” Let us all rejoice in our victory, stand by our brothers and sisters, and recognize that we, the reborn nation of Israel, have finally returned to history.

Roy Pinchot, Netanya, Israel

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