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An Alternate View on Rav Aharon Lichtenstein and Academic Talmud Study

Lawrence Kaplan

In his recent *Lehrhaus* essay "Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein and Academic Talmud Study," Professor Avraham (Rami) Reiner proves himself to be a genuine disciple of his great master, as he manages to balance genuine admiration—indeed reverence—for his teacher with an objective and critical stance regarding some of his basic teachings and attitudes in a blend that is both personally moving and intellectually illuminating. I find myself, however, unable to agree with Reiner's thesis that Rav Lichtenstein's attitude to academic Talmud study changed over the course of time from an earlier completely negative and rejectionist outlook to a later one that "reflects a certain softening, an understanding, and perhaps even a limited acceptance of the accomplishments of academic Talmud study." In my view, Rav Lichtenstein's opposition to academic Talmud study was consistent throughout his life. Moreover, I would contend, Reiner's misreading of the historical picture points to a deeper error, namely, his failure to appreciate the roots of this opposition, to understand the genuine threat that academic Talmud study poses, in Rav Lichtenstein's view, to traditional Jewish faith in general and the authority of the *Halakhah* and its representatives in particular.

The overwhelming evidence that Reiner brings for Rav Lichtenstein's earlier opposition to academic Talmud study—and more such evidence could be cited as well—is clear and undisputed. However, the two pieces of evidence—one historical, the other textual—that Reiner offers for a softening of that opposition are much less convincing. Let us examine each in turn.

Reiner invokes the historical example from the history of Herzog College, noting that when the College first opened, "the lecturer for a required course called 'An Introduction to Oral Law' was none other than Rabbi Lichtenstein." Reiner suggests that it was Rav Lichtenstein's "desire to prevent the teaching of a historicist course [that] led him to teach the course himself." In support of this suggestion, Reiner further notes that "(i)n the early 1990s, as the college steadily grew and developed, prospective teachers of Talmud and *halakhah* were disqualified one after another as it became clear to Rabbi Lichtenstein, in his capacity as rector, that these teachers had been trained in academic Talmud departments."

But, "(f)rom that point forward," Reiner indicates, "in contrast to everything we have thus far described, the Faculty of Oral Law at Herzog College developed in a different direction, to the point that eventually, every one of its members was the product of research institutions where they had studied Talmud and related disciplines."

Reiner claims that these facts "speak for themselves" and they indicate that Rav Lichtenstein "backtrack(ed) from his prior staunch opposition."

But facts rarely speak for themselves; they require interpretation. While they may indicate that Rav Lichtenstein *on a practical level* backed down from what he might have come to see as an increasingly quixotic attempt to keep academic Talmud study out the College, they do not show that he ever abandoned or even softened his fundamental theoretical opposition to such study.

In substantiation of my contention that these "facts" adduced by Reiner do not speak for themselves, let me cite a very thoughtful comment on Reiner's article by Rabbi David Brofsky, a leading disciple of Rav Lichtenstein, who, unlike Reiner, has remained within the walls of the *beit midrash*. Brofsky takes issue with Reiner's conclusions, maintaining, as I do, that Rav Lichtenstein's fundamental opposition never changed. As for his softening on a practical level and allowing academic Talmud study to take root in Herzog College, Brofsky suggests that, in addition to age being a factor, such "softening" may have been caused by "decades of watching frustrated students turn to institutions such as Hartman, Beit Morasha, and Siach (all of which he did not approve) and becoming more open to and aware of their religious needs."

Brofsky's astute observation deserves elaboration. By allowing academic Talmud study to take root in Herzog College in response to the desire on the part of many of his students for such study—and this despite his disapproval *ab initio* of academic Talmud study—Rav Lichtenstein accomplished two things. First, such students could now pursue academic Talmud study at Herzog College, which, while distinct from Yeshivat Har Etzion, was still affiliated with it and under its general influence. They would not be forced to wander in "strange fields," either pursuing such studies in Israeli universities or in the various *yeshivot* and institutes listed by Brofsky of which Rav Lichtenstein disapproved. And, since Academic Talmud study is not cut from one cloth, the teachers of Oral Law at Herzog College, while "product[s] of research institutions where they had studied Talmud and related disciplines," may have espoused somewhat more traditionally oriented modes of such study. This situation of allowing academic Talmud studies to take root in Herzog College was no doubt far from ideal in Rav Lichtenstein's mind, but he may have viewed it as a necessary concession, in the sense of *mutav she-yokhelu besar temutot shehutot, ve-al yokhelu besar temutot nevelot*, better to engage in an activity that is disapproved of than in blanketly forbidden activity.

Furthermore, by allowing academic Talmud study to take root in Herzog College, despite his disapproval, Rav Lichtenstein neatly forestalled the possibility of any effective pressure on the part of students desiring such study to incorporate any academic Talmud in Yeshivat Har Etzion proper. Indeed, I have heard that when such students would approach various *ramim*

and request that some academic Talmud study be incorporated into the *shi'urim*, they were told, "If you are interested in such study you can pursue it at Herzog College. Here we study Talmud in the traditional manner."

We have here an ironic development. Reiner relates that at the yeshiva's annual Hanukkah party in 1982, Rav Amital gave what became known as "the hilltop speech." In response to reports that a student at the yeshiva had taught visiting high school students *mishnah* in a manner different from the way the *gemara* interpreted it, Rav Amital told the student "to go and establish another yeshiva on the next hilltop over, where he would be able to teach whatever he wanted." As fate would have it, eventually the yeshiva itself built a "hilltop" institution where Talmud would be taught in non-traditional academic manner—Herzog College. And this institution was not even "on the next hilltop over," but on the very same hilltop as the yeshiva! Although ironic, at least this development allowed such teaching to be cordoned off from the yeshiva proper.

[In a similar way, Rav Soloveitchik was once heard to have praised Rabbi Dr. Samuel Belkin, the President of Yeshiva University, for having kept "Hokhmas Yisrael out of the Yeshiva," that is, out of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, the Yeshiva proper. But it was so kept out by being cordoned off in YU's adjacent Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies.]

Contra Reiner, the mere historical fact that Rav Lichtenstein backed down from his attempt to keep academic Talmud study out of Herzog College does not show that he ever abandoned or even softened his fundamental theoretical opposition to such study.

Perhaps aware of the speculative nature of his historical piece of evidence, Reiner turns to textual evidence. He adduces a passage from Rav Lichtenstein's important programmatic essay, "The Conceptual Approach to Torah Learning: The Method and its Prospects," delivered in 1999 at Yeshiva University's Orthodox Forum. This passage in particular, Reiner alleges, "reflects a certain softening, an understanding, and perhaps even a limited acceptance of academic Talmud studies."

In the passage, addressing the question of the academic study of textual variants and realia, Rav Lichtenstein writes:

> Indeed, the Torah world should pay more attention to this component [study of textual variants]…. [A]ccess to its findings can and should be more widespread than it is today. We need not exaggerate… Many of the points that have been raised with respect to textual accuracy apply equally to knowledge of realia. This, too, is the province of experts, but accessible to a wider audience. This, too, can obviously be of critical halakhic import in some cases… This is not to denigrate the importance of

> factual information or of those who labor to provide it. Anyone who engages in serious learning is indebted to them at some point, and the debt should be acknowledged.

On the basis of this passage, Reiner claims that "(t)here can be no doubting that the tone and content of this article differ significantly from the rejectionist atmosphere that prevailed in the early 1980s," and that—here comes the key claim—"it reflects a certain softening, an understanding, and perhaps even a limited acceptance of the accomplishments of academic Talmud studies."

Allow me to count myself among the doubters.

First, Professor Reiner, through his careful excisions (indicated by the ellipses) leaves out those parts of Rav Lichtenstein's remarks where he minimizes the importance of the study of textual variants and realia. Thus, after the sentence "We need not exaggerate" regarding use of textual variants, Rav Lichtenstein goes on to say "The prevailing perception that the overwhelming majority of textual variants cited are of little or no substantive consequence is indeed correct. Nevertheless, awareness is in order." Similarly, after his comment that knowledge of realia "can obviously be of critical halakhic import in some cases," Rav Lichtenstein continues "Yet here too most of the specialized knowledge is of little conceptual significance, except insofar as one simply wants to know, as fully as possible, what is being depicted in the gemara." It need not be said that, given Rav Lichtenstein's overriding commitment to the conceptual approach to the study of Talmud, his saying "most of the specialized knowledge is of little conceptual significance" is equivalent to his saying it "is of little significance."

Furthermore, while it is true that Rav Lichtenstein states in this passage that the study of textual variants and realia does not in any way challenge or undermine traditional Talmudic study, there is no indication that he ever felt differently. All the evidence brought by Reiner about Rav Lichtenstein's rejectionist attitude toward academic Talmud study in the early 80s does not indicate any opposition to the study of textual variants and realia. Indeed, in the methodology *shi'urim* that Rav Lichtenstein gave in the Yeshiva from 1974 to 1992 discussed in Ron Kleinman's article on the topic, he would often discuss the significance of textual variants and their use.

These two points are related. Precisely because textual variants and realia offer little conceptual significance, as such issues focus merely "on secondary issues, at the margins of the *sugya*, rather than the heart of the matter," to quote an article by David Flatto, Rav Lichtenstein could, at the same time, accept the usefulness of the academic study of textual variants and realia, while minimizing both its importance *and* any possible theological danger

it might pose. Inasmuch as *this* aspect of academic Talmud study only touches on the margins of a *sugya*, it does *not* affect how we approach its heart.

This brings us to a third point, possibly our central one. If Rav Lichtenstein, going back to the early 80s, never opposed the academic study of textual variants and realia, inasmuch as they focus "on secondary issues at the margin of the *sugya*," what aspect of academic Talmud study that *does* focus on "the heart of the matter," on the heart of the *sugya*, did he oppose?

The answer, as it emerges both from Reiner's account and from Rav Lichtenstein's writings, is that what Rav Lichtenstein objected to was academic Talmud study's historical, diachronic approach to rabbinic literature. What seems to have been particularly objectionable to him was the diachronic approach's attempt (to again cite Flatto) "to sort the material temporally in order to map out the trajectory of development of rabbinic concepts." This approach can often reach the conclusion that the meaning that a later layer of rabbinic literature ascribes to an earlier one—such as the view that a Babylonian *amora* will ascribe to a tannaitic statement or the way a particular amoraic statement was understood by the *stama de-Talmuda* (anonymous redactor)— often does not correspond to its original meaning.

It was precisely this implication contained in his use of the diachronic approach on the part of Aharon Mishnayot in his article "*Li-fshuto shel Talmud*" ("Toward the Plain Meaning of the Talmud") to which Rav Lichtenstein objected, in Reiner's description. As Mishnayot relates:

> Rabbi Lichtenstein['s]… main criticism was against my claim that the Yerushalmi tends towards straightforward explanations more than the Bavli. Rabbi Lichtenstein explained that the halakhic tradition accords with the Bavli, whereas the implication of my words is that the Yerushalmi is to be preferred, in opposition to the said tradition.

Here Rav Lichtenstein's objection to the diachronic approach to the study of rabbinic literature is legal in nature, that the logical conclusion of academic assumptions may diverge from traditional ones on how to determine the bottom-line *halakhah*. But in various other essays that touch on the subject, Rav Lichtenstein's objections are more religious and theological in nature. Nowhere, to my knowledge, does Rav Lichtenstein discuss this matter in an extended and systematic way. But from his various scattered remarks it appears that in his view the diachronic approach raises two main dangers: it takes a judgmental attitude to *Hazal*, demonstrating a lack of respect for their stature; and it raises the specter of the historical development of the *halakhah*, challenging its authority as a divinely revealed system of Law and possibly even leading to a relativistic historicism. [A similar approach was also set forth by Rabbi Dr. Kalman Neuman, a careful and knowledgeable observer of the Israeli Religious Zionist scene who was close to Rav Lichtenstein, in an extended and thoughtful comment on Reiner's article.] Interestingly, the first danger appears to occupy a greater place

in Rav Lichtenstein's consciousness than the second. In any event, the authority of the Talmud in both cases is undermined.

With respect to the first danger, in his essay "Why Learn Gemara?" among the reasons Rav Lichtenstein offers to explain "the yeshiva world's continued commitment to gemara" (p. 11) is: "To open a gemara is to enter into th(e) overwhelming presence [of *Hazal*], to feel their force of their collective personality… so as to be irradiated and ennobled by them." And then, almost parenthetically, he adds "and not as in a historico-critical mode in order to pass judgment on them."

Similarly, in his exchange with Rabbi Yehuda Brandes addressing the problems involved in teaching *gemara* in religious Zionist Yeshiva high schools, Rav Lichtenstein, in responding to several new approaches advanced by R. Brandes for teaching *gemara* in this context, forcefully states:

> Regarding [some of these approaches] I am ready to declare that even if, as argued by R. Brandes, they reap success, it is sometimes better to close the gemara than to distort it. Some approaches undermine Hazal's enterprise, their motivations and their authority; some dim the holy trembling that must accompany Torah study and characterize it (p. 55).

Though Rav Lichtenstein does not specify to which of the approaches advanced by R. Brandes these criticisms apply, it appears almost certain that he has in mind R. Brandes' call to "cause an upheaval regarding the use of well-known and accepted scientific, philological, and historical tools in the *beit midrash* and in holiness" (p. 47). The very fact that R. Brandes felt the need to add the concluding words "and in holiness" indicates that he was sensitive to the possibility that some might charge, as indeed Rav Lichtenstein did charge, that such approaches "dim the holy trembling that must accompany Torah study and characterize it."

Finally, in his essay "The Conceptual Approach to Torah Learning," referred to earlier, Rav Lichtenstein states that "Considerations of *emunot ve-de'ot* effectively bar the acceptance of certain [academic] modes on interpretation, specifically those that denigrate Hazal and challenge their preeminence… A Talmudic critic might sit in superior judgment upon the gemara because he can conjugate the aorist, while Ravina and Rav Ashi probably couldn't. Brisker scions harbor no such inclinations" (p. 50).

Even more striking, in the middle of the passage from that essay dealing with the study of textual variants and realia, the very passage that Reiner claims reflects "a certain softening" in Rav Lichtenstein's opposition to academic Talmud study, he parenthetically contrasts the (limited) usefulness of the study of textual variants with the unhelpful "gutting of Hazal's

world through conjectural evisceration and stratification" (p. 48). It is difficult to see any "softening" here.

But, more important, this seems to be the one place where, if only obliquely, Rav Lichtenstein refers to the diachronic approach.

Rav Lichtenstein's comment regarding "conjectural… stratification" is revealing. He, of course, was acutely aware of all the different strata comprising rabbinic literature: Tannaitic midrash, Mishnah, Tosefta, Yerushalmi, and Bavli—indeed, he would often in his *shi'urim*, unlike more standard yeshiva heads, refer to and analyze Tosefta and Yerushalmi, in addition to Mishnah and Bavli. It would seem, then, that what Rav Lichtenstein has in mind here is the diachronic approach, exemplified by Professors David Weiss Halivni and Shamma Friedman, which sharply differentiates and drives a wedge between the Amoraic material and the *stama de-Talmuda*, the anonymous material, in the Babylonian *gemara*, viewing them as two distinct strata. Thus, Halivni writes (*Mekorot u-Mesorot*: *Yoma 'ad Hagigah*, pp. 7-8) "We should view the gemara as a work comprised of two separate books: the book of the Amoraim and the book of the anonymous material, which differ from one another in language, approach, and history."

It follows from this that by "conjectural evisceration" Rav Lichtenstein has in mind Halivni's further claim, alluded to earlier, that "the authors of the anonymous stratum," inasmuch as "they flourished long after the Amoraim," would often explain the Amoraic material in forced ways because, he goes on to explain, they "lacked the complete versions of all the relevant sources, or lacked the correct version of the text they were explaining, or lacked the requisite knowledge for understanding the text" (*The Formation of the Babylonian Talmud*, p. xxxi). These gaps are then to be filled by Halivni himself in his "critical" explanations of the Amoraic material.

If this is what Rav Lichtenstein had in mind, it is not surprising that he would have viewed such "conjectural evisceration and stratification" of rabbinic literature as "gutting … Hazal's world" and, we may add, lessening respect for them and "dim[ming] the holy trembling that must accompany Torah study and characterize it."

Regarding the dangers of historicism posed by the diachronic approach, Rav Lichtenstein points out in his essay "*Torat Hesed* and *Torat Emet*: Methodological Reflections":

> The world of *wissenschaft* ... focuses on facts, is committed to the hegemony of authorial intent, and is marked by a measure of austerity–critics would say, of aridity. It bears, in sum, a monistic cast. It, of course stresses, often contentiously, the element of change and development within halakhah. Given a historicist orientation,

> however, this is frequently ascribed to external factors, and is thus perceived as a corrosive process, reflecting presumed relativism (p. 83).

We can return, then, to the conclusion reached by the diachronic approach that the meaning a later layer of rabbinic literature ascribes to an earlier one often does not correspond to its original meaning. To the extent that exponents of this approach, such as Halivni, attribute this shift in meaning from the earlier to the later layer as resulting from the later layer's misunderstanding the intent of the earlier one, they are guilty, in Rav Lichtenstein's eyes, of undermining respect for *Hazal* in suggesting they are poor, careless, or uninformed interpreters. And to the extent that the diachronic approach's adherents attribute the shift in meaning to the later layer's revision, whether deliberate or inadvertent, of the earlier layer against the background of changing historical conditions, they are, for Rav Lichtenstein, not only guilty of undermining respect for *Hazal* but also of engaging in a corrosive historicism, leading to relativism.

But the challenge the diachronic approach poses to the unity, continuity, and authority of rabbinic literature, as well as, in Rav Lichtenstein's eyes, to reverence for *Hazal*, goes even deeper. This deeper challenge, perhaps paradoxically, arises precisely from an approach to the study of the Talmud that seeks to combine traditional modes of study of rabbinic literature, with *both* the diachronic approach *and* the search for the religious significance, the underlying values, of that literature. [Such an approach is now practiced in various religious Zionist Yeshivot, such as Siach, Othniel, and Ma'ale Gilboa, which I have analyzed in a recent essay.] Precisely such a combination might seem to imply that the development of rabbinic law, the shift in meaning between its layers, were fueled by shifts or even revolutions in values among rabbinic sages.

Rav Lichtenstein does not address this particular issue directly, but there can be no doubt that such an implication would be anathema to him. His article, "The Human and Social Factor in Halakhah," is one of his most nuanced and carefully balanced articles, with Rav Lichtenstein drawing perhaps even more distinctions and qualifications than usual. But one thing is clear—the claim that there have been fundamental changes in the ethos of the Torah, "virtually by definition, is, to the committed Jew, unconscionable" (p. 178). Furthermore, the argument that such putative changes in the Torah's ethos would have played a role in later Sages reinterpreting earlier strands of rabbinic literature would, for Rav Lichtenstein, be tantamount to impugning *Hazal's* "wisdom and integrity," insofar as it suggests "that their judgment was diverted or warped by extraneous factors" (p. 180). Such opposition on Rav Lichtenstein's part to the claim that there have been fundamental changes in the ethos of the Torah also lies behind his well-known and exceptionally harsh critiques of the views of Professor Tamar Ross on feminism and Rabbi Benny Lau on disabilities, both of whom argue, albeit in different ways, that there can be a shift of values in the unfolding of the halakhic tradition.

The deep roots of Rav Lichtenstein's opposition to the diachronic approach are clear. But there's the rub. Many individuals, among them students of Rav Lichtenstein, who have moved from the world of the *beit midrash* to the world of academic Talmud study, or who wish to bring some elements of the world of academic study into the inner sanctum of the *beit midrash*, believe that such an approach can be undertaken. They see the conclusion arising out of the diachronic approach to rabbinic literature – that the meaning that a later layer of rabbinic literature ascribes to an earlier one often does not correspond to its original meaning – is true and convincing, that is, this conclusion is *Torat Emet*. [See "*Torat Hesed* and *Torat Emet*" p.83. "The world of *Wissenschaft* envisions itself as primarily devoted to *Torat emet*."] The question arises then: Is it possible to formulate this conclusion drawn by the diachronic approach in such a way that it would not be subject to the criticisms leveled against it by Rav Lichtenstein? And this question, in turn, raises a further question, the answer to which is, of course, necessarily speculative: How might Rav Lichtenstein have responded to such formulations? I will address these questions in the forthcoming second part of this article.

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Rabbi Jonathan Sacks's Portrait of Moses

Ari Lamm

Editors' Note: This month, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks turns 70 years old. In honor of this occasion we present this essay examining Rabbi Sacks's contributions to the field of Biblical commentary.

The first thing one notices about the biblical commentaries by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks is the cover art. Comprising volumes on Genesis through Numbers—as well as two companion volumes, *Lessons in Leadership* and *Essays on Ethics*—each edition of *Covenant and Conversation* is adorned with another seventeenth century European masterpiece, including several by Rembrandt.

The choice is suggestive. The paintings from this era, whether of the Dutch Golden Age or the Baroque tradition, collectively represent one of the crowning achievements of Western art. Likewise, one of the central arguments of *Covenant and Conversation* is that the five books of Moses should be seen as essential and foundational texts for Western civilization. And with the caveat that "Judaism is a complex faith[,] there is no one Torah model of leadership" (*Exodus*, 113), the personality that looms largest in Rabbi Sacks's biblical interpretation is Moses. While this is to be expected for a corpus—*Torat Moshe* (Joshua 8:31)—that has traditionally borne his name, the Moses that emerges in Rabbi Sacks's writings embodies two of the core themes of *Covenant and Conversation*: the challenges of wielding power, and the importance of building a just society that will stand the test of time.

Rabbi Sacks employs two different strategies for uncovering each theme in Moses's career. In eliciting the first, Rabbi Sacks plays the role of textual interpreter. Through close readings of the Biblical text, the traditional Jewish commentaries, the classics of political theory, and modern social science, he explains how Moses dealt with various leadership challenges. We the readers are meant to learn from Moses's personal example through the Torah's usually positive—but sometimes quite critical—depiction of the legendary prophet.

In developing the second theme, by comparison, Rabbi Sacks seeks not to explain the text, but to comment on the fundamental structures of Jewish life and community throughout the ages. What institutions, offices, and ethical principles characterize the Torah's vision for a good, lasting society? Here we are less interested in literary analysis of Moses as a singular individual as we are in the Torah's grand vision for the future of human flourishing.

But whether Rabbi Sacks trains his focus upon scripture or upon society, the life of Moses proves instructive.

I.

Rabbi Sacks prefaces his commentary on Exodus with an unequivocal statement on the dangers of power, "Power destroys the powerless and powerful alike, oppressing the one while corrupting the other" (*Exodus*, 2). For Rabbi Sacks, wariness of power animates Moses's entire career. This is not to say that Moses found power inherently evil. He was simply convinced that there is only one being—God—to whom absolute power truly belongs. God could wield this power because He truly understands the necessity for evil and human suffering in the grand scope of history. But human beings are not capable of this, nor, thought Moses, should they *want* to be. After all, to be human is to *rage* against suffering, even when such feelings may, from the perspective of eternity, be misplaced. Moses feared losing this quality, and so always feared power. For Rabbi Sacks, this explains Moses's reticence to gaze upon God at the burning bush, described in the Bible and later rabbinic texts (*Exodus,* 40). Unlike so many other heroes of the ancient world, Moses did not aspire to divinity.

Of course, no leader can avoid exercising power, and Moses is no exception. But Moses knew—and this, for Rabbi Sacks, is perhaps his greatest quality as a leader—that human power requires strict, conscious limits. In fact, one of the most powerful things a great leader can do is empower others. This motif suffuses Rabbi Sacks's characterization of Moses. Moses, for instance, maintained a remarkable ability to appreciate the talents—and even different moral foundations—of others. Drawing upon the nineteenth century Lithuanian commentator, Netziv, Rabbi Sacks explains Moses's decision to heed his Midianite father-in-law's advice in founding a comprehensive judicial system as born out of a recognition that whereas Moses himself intuitively embraced the strict demands of justice, it was important for the Israelites as well to have leaders who excelled at promoting compromise and reconciliation (*Exodus*, 129-130). In similar fashion, while Moses viewed Korah as a genuine threat to his legitimate authority, he saw Eldad and Medad—potential prophetic rivals appearing in Numbers 11—as capable figures whose leadership, rather than undermining Moses's authority, would in fact magnify his influence. He therefore chastises his disciple, Joshua, for accusing them of usurping Moses's prophetic prerogatives (*Numbers*, 222-224). The general principle at work here, in Rabbi Sacks's formulation, is that "no one individual can embody all the virtues necessary to sustain a people" (*Exodus,* 130). Moses, accordingly, shared power as much as possible.

Questions of power lead Rabbi Sacks to consider Moses's "leadership style" (*Numbers*, 128). In the history of traditional Jewish biblical commentary broadly conceived, Rabbi Sacks may be the first since Philo of Alexandria to treat this topic holistically. The results are certainly in keeping with a picture of Moses as sensitive to the challenges of power. In direct contrast to much of contemporary religious leadership, Moses led by listening rather than telling—by

making space for others (*Lessons in Leadership*, 255). It is of special significance in this context that Moses was surrounded by confidants—in particular his brother, Aaron—whose worldview so contrasted with his own. Rabbi Sacks juxtaposes Moses's stoicism, for example, with Aaron's deep passion. When tragedy strikes their family in Leviticus 10, Moses is strengthened by his faith in God's covenant, while Aaron is inconsolable. Rabbi Sacks represents both as legitimate reactions to catastrophe, and sees them both playing out in tandem over the subsequent course of Jewish history (*Leviticus*, 155). Tellingly, it is precisely when Moses gives in to his grief in the wake of his sister Miriam's death—when he, in effect, becomes Aaron—that he loses control at Meribah (*Numbers*, 272-275). This leads directly to God punishing Moses by refusing him entry into the Land of Israel.

In fact, Rabbi Sacks consistently describes even Moses's leadership failures in terms of the challenges of power. At the nadir of Moses's career, the Korah rebellion in Numbers 16, the Biblical text appears to depict a Moses who has lost control. He beseeches God to make an example of Korah—the only time in the Torah that Moses ever asked God to punish another person. This show of force only worsens the rebellion. In Rabbi Sacks's interpretation, Moses's mistake here was to read criticism of his office as personal criticism. The ability to distinguish between one's public role and oneself is the difference between viewing oneself as wielding power, and viewing oneself as power*ful*. "It is hard," writes Rabbi Sacks, "not to see this as the first sign of the failing that would eventually cost Moses his chance to lead the people into the land" (*Numbers*, 216).

For a person so preoccupied with power, one might have imagined Moses developing into a Nietzschean skeptic, sighing at "the comedy of existence." But it is here that Rabbi Sacks identifies Moses's true greatness. Throughout all his travails, Moses never became a cynic. This is how Rabbi Sacks reads the final verses of Deuteronomy, describing Moses's eyes as undimmed until the moment the Almighty reclaimed his soul (*Lessons in Leadership*, 301-302). Moses feared power, and struggled with it, but he never let it consume him. And it certainly did not sour him on the beauty and mystery of human existence.

II.

In Rabbi Sacks's view, the Torah's project is to articulate the principles for constructing a just and lasting society. In this long-term project, Moses appears not as a literary character, but a moral and political visionary. Although Rabbi Sacks's conception of the (or an) ideal Biblical society owes a great deal to Moses at every turn, perhaps the single greatest insight that he attributes to Moses is this: a healthy society must actively cultivate future leaders.

Moses, in Rabbi Sacks's reading, saw as society's greatest enemy what economists refer to as the "discount rate," or the tendency to value the present at the expense of the future. In response, Moses consistently emphasized the need to take account of future generations.

On the basis of a Talmudic passage in Tractate *Kiddushin* (32a-b), Rabbi Sacks points to the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15 as the earliest instance in which Moses stressed the danger of relying for leadership upon once-in-a-generation supernovas, like Moses himself (*Exodus*, 111-114). Stable, dependable leadership would be an absolute necessity in ensuring Judaism's continued vigor. This theme repeats itself frequently in Rabbi Sacks's characterization of Moses. Most importantly, it forms the basis for Rabbi Sacks's interpretation of the Temple as an institution—the introduction of which into Jewish life he associates with Moses. That is, in the wake of the crisis of the Golden Calf, one of the central events in the book of Exodus, the Biblical text depicts Moses as the only thing standing in the way of God's wholesale annihilation of the Israelites. Moses recognized this situation as inherently unstable. No people could build a lasting society if they depended for their survival upon prophets—the supply of which is by definition unpredictable. What the Israelites needed, Moses argued, was some mechanism for ensuring that future generations would have a steady stock of leaders. In response, God instituted the Temple and its priesthood. "The priesthood," observes Rabbi Sacks, "represents continuity immune to the vicissitudes of time" (*Leviticus*, 12).

Concern for the future further explains why Moses's temporary embrace, in Numbers 11, of the *in loco parentis* mode of leadership proves so disastrous. In this episode, Moses had suffered an emotional collapse in response to the Israelites' complaints. Rabbi Sacks contrasts this with similar complaints in the book of Exodus to which Moses had reacted with equanimity. He resolves the discrepancy by noting that over the course of the Biblical narrative, Moses appears to become increasingly convinced that, as a leader, he must do it all. By the time we reach Numbers 11, Moses began comparing his role to a nurse carrying a child (Numbers 11:12). "The trouble," Rabbi Sacks notes, "is that if the leader is a parent, then the followers remain children" (*Numbers*, 129). Unchecked, unbalanced leadership may yield order in the present, but it stunts the social growth of subsequent generations.

Moses recognized that genuinely sustainable leadership is rooted in teaching. This, too, is a constant refrain in Rabbi Sacks's *oeuvre*. A righteous society that wishes to remain so places education at its foundation (*Exodus*, 77-81). The purpose of this education is to transmit core values over long time-horizons. This is why Moses constantly exhorts the Israelites and their descendants to "remember" the significant moments in their history (*Numbers*, 157). The values that Moses was responsible for transmitting would take many generations to seize hold—to become a "culture." Only a robust commitment to education and instruction would ensure these values' continuity and vitality over the course of time. This sort of long-term thinking is an essential element of the Biblical *ethos* such that, as Rabbi Sacks notes, the historical narratives of the entire Hebrew Bible span roughly a thousand years. The Bible thinks in these sorts of increments.

In the end, perhaps the clearest expression for Rabbi Sacks of Moses's commitment to the long-term gains of education is that the sobriquet by which he is known in Jewish literature and vernacular to this day is *Moshe Rabbeinu*, "Moses our teacher." This reflects, Rabbi Sacks argues, the role that Moses embraced at the end of his life, in the book of Deuteronomy. When all was said and done, Moses was not a king, nor a prophet, but an educator (*Lessons in Leadership*, 243).

III.

In considering Rabbi Sacks's portrait of Moses—and more broadly, the former Chief Rabbi's legacy as a Biblical commentator—my mind keeps returning to Rembrandt's *Moses Smashing the Tablets of the Law*, the iconic painting that adorns the cover of *Covenant and Conversation: Exodus*. It strikes me that another masterpiece might have been even more fitting: Marc Chagall's *Moses Receiving the Tablets of the Law*. After all, in Rembrandt's work, Moses stands alone on a mountaintop, a lonely man of faith. This is not Rabbi Sacks's Moses.

Chagall, by contrast, paints Moses's encounter with God on Mount Sinai—in direct contradiction to the Biblical text!—as a crowded emotional spectacle. A joyous smile upon his face, Moses is surrounded on one side by the Israelites at the foot of the mountain, looking up at him in wonder. On the other he is ringed by contemporary figures—a bearded man lighting a *menorah*, a religious official grasping a Torah scroll, and other modern Jewish onlookers. Moses's receipt of the Torah is not a solitary experience, but a communal one, a societal one. And its significance reverberates not just across space but across time, touching the lives of Jews—in truth, all of humanity—throughout history.

Rabbi Sacks's Moses—like Chagall's Moses—is not an inscrutably righteous person perched atop an unscalable mountain. He is a man who can only be understood in the context of his people, his followers across the generations, and the great moral and political philosophy he helped birth. He is a leader whose teachings guide the Jewish people, inspired Western Civilization, and continue to speak to the great human questions of the day.

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From San Francisco to Synagogue: Can Startup Culture Invigorate Jewish Organizations?

Gabi Weinberg

Talking About the Next Generation: A Brief Review

In November 2017, thousands gathered at the annual "Lean Startup Week" run by Eric Ries and Melissa Moore of the "Lean Startup Co." in San Francisco. In the tens of presentations, Ries and Moore, as well as many others, teach the replicable pieces of startup work that can be transferred across platforms and organizations, from a non-profit to a Fortune 100 company, and everywhere in between. These meetings spur discussions, Twitter debates, and opportunities for those willing to take risks—whether in high positions or entry level roles—to take a crack at bringing "startup methodology" into their particular workplace.

Can Jewish organizations build a culture to do just that?

Some certainly think so. In *Next Generation Judaism*, Rabbi Mike Uram makes the claim that: "The Jewish institutional world is already struggling to maintain its position and in some cases even to survive. There are countless outside forces that disrupt the way we are doing business. Let's get ahead of that curve and create our own disruptive innovations."

His premise is that through applied method—some that echo startup method and some that do not—and cultural change—a more amorphous, but still essential change—across Jewish communal organizations, more Jewish people will participate in Jewish experiences and become more involved in Jewish life.

He does an accurate job depicting "Millennials." He also conveys the power of self-driven experiences on the students he interacts with on a daily basis. Many Jewish organizations like Moishe House and OneTable follow a model of entrusting millenials with significant financial capital to create self-guided Jewish experiences for their peers and Uram begins that work at an earlier stage: when these students are in college. In his broader sociological analysis, Uram questions the assumptions of a unified "Jewish people" that needs one type of Jewish experience. He describes that there are issues that we disagree on and sub-groups that would happily join together if the Jewish angle was under their banner and brand of Judaism, but then there are others who don't agree, and would find themselves "outside" of the group.

The author weaves conceptions of the modern "disruptive innovation" language adopted from the business world with the more familiar Jewish organizational structure. This merger of ideas proves an essential tenet of his organizational philosophy. Uram's track record at University of Pennsylvania Hillel speaks for itself, with over 1,750 Jewish students on campus. He has been the executive director and campus rabbi for nearly a decade and has managed to run two parallel organizations. In Hillel they focus on "in-the-building-people"—namely the students that come to the Hillel itself—and in the other, called the Jewish Renaissance Project, they focus on the students that would never step foot

in Hillel. Between the two organizations, they reach almost the entire Jewish student population.

In reflecting on his experience, Uram suggests that developing "grassroots" infrastructure to empower members of the broader community to work with professionals one-on-one and then bring those teachings to the comfort of their own apartment, dorm room, or common area (using college language) can be replicated in other iterations of Jewish life.

Limitations to Implementation of Next Gen Method

An important thing to realize in his presentation is that Uram takes the approach that an organization's staff can drive culture change within an organization. While on the face of it this sentence should ring true, when it comes to organizations that are strongly defined by the constituents who utilize the space or the service (read: synagogues, schools, Hillels et. al.), the culture a staff brings will often be dwarfed by the populations they serve. In the Hillel model, as relayed in the book, the students are viewed as a type of hybrid consumer/producer that should take the lead from the professionals at Hillel (or some other named organization) and that will create change.

However, there are other players in this space that might also be necessary to make changes like these happen in organizations that don't have as much organizational education and capital like Hillel. To its credit, Hillel International supports annual conferences and professional development opportunities to share best practices. Repackaging this for synagogues just does not hold up. A motivated rabbi and executive director, assuming a synagogue has both, would still need constituents willing to adopt the language and take volunteer leadership roles that will move the needle to a more design thinking approach to organizational leadership.

An Alternative Approach to Spreading a "Next Gen" Methodology

In this vein, Uram does not offer a comprehensive "playbook" to bring the volunteers of an organization into the conversation. In my theory of how to bring this method into communities and synagogues, the largest part of the battle goes into sharing with the constituents of these communal experiences the mechanism that the leadership wants to spread into the community. By giving the members the tools, which isn't clarified in this book, the community members can become producers and think with more precision about the goals of an event or the purpose of a meeting. When that language gets implemented by members of the community it is more likely that the method will seep into the broader community.

To bring this back to where Uram derives a lot of his evidence, I am curious to find out how many of the Penn alumni actual apply this methodology in their lives and in their Jewish communities? The potential for Hillel to train thousands of future members of Jewish communities with the tools for them to try and solve Clay Christensen's "innovator's dilemma" that Uram discusses in the book (in short, why large organizations usually don't see new markets emerging) would have an exponential effect on Jewish institutions soon to be populated by these alumni.

It would seem that the best way to place community members into communities that would adopt these methods would be by teaching the method as it was employed. A sort of peeling

back the curtain so students can see how and why successful Hillels make such a big impact and then see if the "users" themselves buy-in enough to develop this outside of the institutions that they found it in.

So much of Jewish life is a result of lived experience, and if "consumers," even "empowered consumers" don't get exposure to how organizations make decisions, the odds of the method expanding past the walls of Hillels across America are slim. Discovering and sharing how these methods have been applied by the students outside of their time in Hillel would be incredibly useful to see if this method truly is replicable in the way Uram lays out.

What would it look like to change the language of entire communities regarding how we innovate? What would the f-word, failure, look like in synagogues, communal organizations, and in small micro-communities? I posit that we need to change the language, embrace experimentation, and spread that beyond a proximate community. Students in college would seem to be a great place to start, but stopping with them would certainly not be enough to effect a sea change in the way the community approaches challenges. This startup approach, just as applied by those in the Lean Startup Co., of spawning groups trained with the language and the method to create experiences for others has incredibly high upside for long-term impact on the Jewish community. Perhaps it's time for us to have a Lean-Startup Conference of our own.

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