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BEHAR - BEHUKOTAI

THE MAY LEHRHAUS OVER SHABBOS IS SPONSORED BY
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THIS WEEK'S LEHRHAUS OVER SHABBOS IS SPONSORED BY
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IN HONOR OF THE 4TH YAHRZEIT OF HER MOTHER,
MILDRED ROSENTHAL, MALKAH BAT YEHUDAH V'DINA

RECLAIMING LAG BA-OMER

RONEN NEUWIRTH is author of *The Narrow Halakhic Bridge: A Vision of Jewish Law in the Post-Modern Age*, soon to be published by Urim Publications.

Can Israeli society follow the example of American Jewry and end the destructive tradition of Lag ba-Omer bonfires, perhaps opting to light candles instead? Maybe the COVID-19 pandemic will spur us to reconsider this dangerous practice.

From a very young age, my experience of Lag ba-Omer in Israel was something I looked forward to each year. Some of my fondest memories from my youth are of collecting firewood a month before Lag ba-Omer, competing with friends to build the biggest bonfire, and singing and playing around the fire from dusk till dawn on the actual holiday. Even the smell of smoke the next morning, following hundreds of bonfires all around the city, remains an unforgettable memory. Because I had such wonderful memories of this tradition, I never questioned it.

Many years later, when I went on *shelihut* (Israeli emissary) to the U.S., I discovered another option for celebrating Lag ba-Omer. Learning that bonfires in the United States are generally illegal without prior police approval came as a cultural shock. Instead, I was invited to a *kumzitz* around several lit candles, where we sang and told stories. I found myself feeling disappointed and even frustrated by our inability to celebrate Lag ba-Omer the way we did in Israel.

However, looking back now with a more mature perspective, I am very pleased that fewer bonfires will be lit in Israel on Lag ba-Omer this year. Beyond the fire hazards to which many children are exposed, the environmental damage caused by tens of thousands of bonfires each year is outrageous. This concern is not merely a generic "Green Agenda" but an authentic Jewish and halakhic requirement as well.

To begin, the source of the bonfire tradition relates to lighting candles and torches around the grave of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai, as the *Arukh ha-Shulhan* explains: "This day is named *Hilula de-Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai*, and the tradition in Eretz Yisrael is to add special prayers and light candles on his holy grave" ([Orah Hayyim 493:7](#)). There is no halakhic source or significance to lighting bonfires, but there are strong halakhic requirements to protect the environment and prevent damage and pollution. One of many examples is the prohibition to build kilns in Jerusalem "due to the unsightly smoke [produced by kilns]" ([Bava Kama 82b](#)). In Jerusalem—the paradigm of holiness—spirituality is maintained not merely by "religious practices" but also by preventing pollution and keeping the environment clean, as expressed in other restrictions detailed in this *gemara*. This should become part of the fabric of every Jewish community that aspires to holiness and spiritual growth.

There is a well-known midrash on a verse that says, "Consider God's doing! Who can straighten what He has twisted?" ([Ecclesiastes 7:13](#)). This is how the Sages interpreted it:

When the Holy One, Blessed be He, created the first human, God took him and led him around all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him: "Look at My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! And all that I have created, it was for you that I created it. Pay attention that you do not corrupt and destroy My world; if you corrupt it, there is no one to repair it after you." ([Kohélet Rabba 7:13](#))

[Sefer ha-Hinukh \(529\)](#) explains that this is the rationale behind the commandment of *bal tashhit* (do not destroy)—that is, to protect all of creation, as this is the role of humankind:

The root of this commandment is to teach our souls to love that which is good and beneficial and to cling to it... And this is the way of the

pious... they love peace and rejoice in the goodness of humankind... and they do not destroy even a grain of mustard in the world. And they are distressed by all loss and destruction that they see; and if they can prevent it, they will prevent any destruction that they can with all of their strength.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch further explains that when mankind abuses nature, Hashem will cause nature to take its revenge:

Bal tashhit is the first and most general call of God, which comes to you, Human, when you recognize yourself as master of the earth ... If you should regard the beings beneath you as objects without rights, not perceiving God Who created them, and therefore desire that they feel the might of your presumptuous mood... then God's call proclaims to you, "Do not destroy! ... If you destroy, if you ruin, at that moment you are not a human but an animal and have no right to mastery over the things around you... As soon as you use them unwisely, be it the greatest or the smallest, you commit treachery against My world, you commit murder and robbery against My property, you transgress against Me!" ([Horeb](#), ch. 56 sec. 397)

Perhaps the COVID-19 pandemic is a wake-up call from God, as Rabbi Hirsch hints: "This is what God calls to you. With this call does God represent the greatest and the smallest [creations] against you and grants the smallest and also the greatest [creations] a right against your presumptuousness." When the smallest unseen creation becomes the worst enemy of humanity, it requires a reassessment of our attitude toward nature.

The growing awareness and demand to protect the environment in modern times may have an even deeper underlying motivation. In my new book [The Narrow Halakhic Bridge](#), I analyze many of the trends and transitions in contemporary society, based on the philosophy of Rav Kook regarding societal changes that will take place in times of *athalta di-geulah* (the beginning of redemption). One of the ramifications of Adam's sin was God's curse: "Cursed be the ground because of you. Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you" ([Genesis 3:17-18](#)). This curse is not meant to be humanity's lot forever; rather, it is man's responsibility to return the world to a repaired state, as Rav Kook writes:

Man must use his cognitive essence to uplift the [labor of] tilling of the ground from its lowliness. God is doing this by shining His light [of wisdom] within human science... and eventually, [in times of the Redemption,] the Earth will be released from most of the spell [caused by Adam's sin] for wisdom shall redeem it. ([Orot ha-Kodesh 2, 1964](#))

Today's growing awareness of environmental matters brings us closer to a more redeemed, healed, and spiritual world—a world of peace between man and nature.

Moreover, according to Rav Kook, one of the characteristics of the generation that marks the beginning of redemption is this growing moral sensitivity. In the past, when human morality was at a low point, the role of Halakhah was to fight against people's corrupt

nature. In a world of redemption and repair, human morality becomes elevated and is meant to elevate the world of Torah and Halakhah as well. We cannot judge the moral demands of society in our time as disconnected from the ongoing process of *athalta di-geulah*.

Rabbi Kook wrote a comprehensive essay entitled "[The Vision of Vegetarianism and Peace](#)," in which he outlines much of his vision. He argues that killing living beings was only an allowance given to mankind following the sins of the generation of the flood. In a redeemed world, he says, we will return to being vegetarians, as we were before the flood:

We cannot describe in specifics what the light of human morality will be in the future... but we can surmise that, although humanity is not presently in a condition that allows the prohibition of the practice of killing animals, it will ultimately come to a more elevated position, and understand that it cannot remain at this [current] moral level. Not for naught did the Torah tell us that there were days when humankind was forbidden to kill animals. ([Ein Ayah, Shabbat 2:15](#))

I suggest that social movements advancing environmental issues are integral to the process of *athalta di-geulah*. Does this mean that every activity undertaken by these movements is appropriate, correct, or justified? Of course not! Does it mean that we should oppose or annul the Halakhah when it seems wrong to us? God forbid! However, bonfires on Lag ba-Omer have no solid halakhic basis, and I believe that Israel's rabbinical leadership should take this opportunity to raise a strong voice against them.

Will these words be widely heard and followed? Can Israeli society learn from American Jewry and stop the destructive tradition of Lag ba-Omer bonfires? Maybe we can all celebrate around candles as we did at my first Lag ba-Omer American experience? One can only hope. At least this year, due to the coronavirus, there will be unity across the Jewish world as almost no bonfires will be lit, and we can perhaps return to the true origins of the *minhag* (custom) and light candles in memory of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai.

THE TORAH OF RASHBI AND THE HEALING OF THE WORLD

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Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brothers also to dwell together!

הִנֵּה מֵ-טוֹב וּמֵ-נֶעִים שָׁבֵת אֶחָיִים גַּם יִחָד: (תהלים קלג:א)

The appearance of the Hebrew word *גַּם* as the penultimate word in this verse makes an accurate translation especially awkward. But even in its original language this word indicates that something additional and yet unmentioned is being celebrated, besides for the dwelling of brothers together. In several places in the *Zohar* this is interpreted to refer to G-d. When people dwell together as brothers, G-d “also” dwells with them in harmony; when “G-d” dwells among us, we “also” dwell together as brothers.

We currently inhabit a moment when it seems that nature has conspired to isolate us from one another. The world is suffering from illness. All of us are suffering from isolation. The implication of the *Zohar* is at once poignant and comforting, comforting and poignant; G-d is also in isolation.

Each year, *Lag ba-Omer* is celebrated as the “*yahrtzeit*” or “*hillula*” of the *Zohar*'s hero, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (“Rashbi”). The following passage was often cited and discussed by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, as an illustration of the transformative power of Rashbi's Torah, and of its significance in our own service of G-d.

This year, this passage reads with particular resonance:

One time, the world needed rain. Rabbi Yeisa, Rabbi Hizkiyah, and other members of the fellowship came before Rabbi Shimon. They encountered him as he was on the way to visit Rabbi Pinhos ben Ya'ir, together with Rabbi Elazar his son. As soon as he saw them, he opened and spoke:

“A song of ascents ... Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brothers also to dwell together.” This is as it is said, “and their faces each toward the other” (Exodus 25:20). Of the time when they are one to one, gazing into each other's faces, it is written “how good and pleasant!” And when the male turns his gaze away from the female, woe to the world! And of this it is written, “and some perish without justice” (Proverbs 13:23). Certainly, without justice, and it is written “righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne” (Psalms 89:15), meaning that one cannot go without the other. When justice becomes distant from righteousness, woe to the world! And now I have seen that you have come because the male does not dwell with the female.

Said Rabbi Shimon:

If it is for that reason that you have come to me, you may return. For on this day I have looked and seen that all is returning to dwell face to face. And if you have come to hear Torah, remain with me.

They said to him:

It is for everything that we came before the master. One of us will depart to tell the good news to our brothers, the rest of the fellowship, and we will sit before the master.

Before they departed, he opened and spoke:

“I am dark and beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem, etc.” (Song of Songs 1:5). Said the Congregation of Israel before the Holy One, blessed be He, “In the exile I am dark, but with the commandments of the Torah I am beautiful; for although the Jewish people are in exile, they do not abandon the commandments.”

... “My mother's sons quarreled with me” (Song of Songs 1:6) ... Of this it was certainly said “behold how good and how pleasant it is for brothers also to dwell together” ... This refers to the fellowship, when they sit as one, and are not separated one from the other. At the outset, [when engaged in Torah debates,] they appear as warriors at war, as if they want to kill one another. Afterwards, they return to one another with the love of brothers. What does the Holy One, blessed be He, then say? “Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brothers also to dwell together.” The additional word “also” includes among them the indwelling of the divine (shekhinta). And more so! The Holy One, blessed be He, listens to their words [of Torah], and it is pleasant for Him, and He takes joy in them. This is the meaning of the verse, “then shall those who fear G-d speak, one to his fellow, and G-d shall listen and hear, and a scroll of remembrance shall be written before Him etc. (Malakhi 3:16).

And you, the fellows who are here, to the same degree that you have cherished one another with love prior to now, so too, from now and onwards, you shall not separate one from the other. Then the Holy One, blessed be He, will take joy in you and draw peace upon you. And in your merit peace will settle upon the world. This is the meaning of the verse, “For the sake of my brothers and friends; I shall speak, beseeching peace among you” (Psalms 122:8).¹

Characteristically, the *Zohar*'s profound mix of lyrical narrative and rich exegesis brings its lofty message into the concrete reality of embodied life.

Of course, there are many prisms through which to parse the meaning of this passage, with layer upon layer of significance waiting to be discovered. Here I will not attempt to explain each detail and nuance, and will leave the reader to probe the different dimensions of this zoharic story and the teachings it contains.

On *Lag ba-Omer* in the year 1962, the Lubavitcher Rebbe delivered a set of [informal talks](#) on the unique revelation embodied by the Torah of Rashbi, followed by a formal discourse that brings the significance of the above passage into sharp focus. The following reflections are based on that discourse, [as edited and published in 1990](#).² A recording of the original audio can be heard [here](#).

¹ *Zohar* III, 59b.

² Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, *Kuntras Lag ba-Omer 5750*; also published in *Torat Menahem - Sefer ha-Ma'amarim Melukat*, Vol. 3 (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot Publication Society, 2012), 270-275.

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In the *Zohar's* account, as translated above, Rashbi preempts a request to pray for rain with a Torah teaching about the intertwining of the horizontal relationship between human beings and the vertical relationship between human beings and G-d. Thereby, Rashbi contextualized the occurrence of a natural disaster—in this case a drought—within that larger matrix of social and spiritual reality.

From this perspective, a natural disaster cannot properly be understood, and we cannot properly respond to it, without taking stock of what it signifies for the way that we each interact with our fellow human beings, and for the way that interaction is further reflected in the union of G-d within the cosmos.

What is it that binds individuals one to another? What is it that creates a community, a society, a dwelling of brothers “also” together? What is it that makes us beautiful even when our situation is dark? What is it that brings repair, healing and peace to the world?

Torah.

It is Torah that binds us together. It is Torah that creates community. It is Torah that makes us beautiful when our situation is dark. It is Torah that brings repair, healing, and peace to the world.

This is the Torah that Rashbi taught. And in teaching this Torah he also enacted it, eliciting rain to end the drought that had parched the world.

* * *

Rashbi's teaching is not only Torah, but also a reconfiguration of Torah.

Ordinarily, Torah is likened to water, which flows downwards from on high (cf. *Taanit* 7b). Torah reveals the wisdom and will of G-d to humankind, and thereby dictates the path by which we live out our days upon this earth. Indeed, the Torah's account of its own giving, of *matan torah*, begins with the words “and G-d descended upon Mt. Sinai” (Exodus 19:20).

Yet here the living waters of Torah flow upward as well as downward. In both affect and effect, Rashbi's teaching takes on the quality of prayer; his Torah interpretation intercedes on high and reshapes earthly reality.

In prayer we turn to G-d and plead, “may the desire arise before You, G-d ...” That is, we seek to elicit a *new* desire. We do not simply seek to affirm or draw forth blessing that G-d has already assigned us. But we seek to intercede, to intervene, to change the course of events as they have previously been prescribed. To pray, therefore, is to exceed the ordinary boundaries that circumscribe existence, to exceed nature and creation, to exceed reason, and to elicit the boundlessness of G-d's true infinitude.

Torah, by contrast, is divine wisdom. In the Torah G-d's will is circumscribed and extended into the bounds of created existence; the Torah itself operates and applies law according to clear principles of logic. But in this case Rashbi's Torah teaching did not provide any logical argument as to why the world deserved rain. On the contrary, it seems that he affirmed the world's unworthiness: “*When the male turns his gaze away from the female, woe to the world! ... And now I*

have seen that you have come because the male does not dwell with the female.” And yet, in the very next line, Rashbi announces that the crisis is already over: “*I have looked and seen that all is returning to dwell face to face.*”

How is it that Rashbi's Torah exceeded the boundaries of its own logic and took on the transformative efficacy of prayer? This is possible only because the Torah of Rashbi is more than the revelation of divine wisdom and will, because the Torah of Rashbi is the revelation of G-d's boundless infinitude within the finite world.

Rashbi's Torah reconciles opposites. Rashbi's Torah reconciles heaven and earth, male and female. Through Rashbi's Torah miracles coincide with nature.

Rashbi did not need to pray for reconciliation, whether between one person and another or between heaven and earth. His Torah itself enacted that reconciliation. In the Rebbe's words:

Torah [revelation from on high] and prayer [the service of humankind] are two distinct phenomena [each one with its own advantage] only on the station of the souls as their existence becomes distinct from that of G-d. But on the part of the root of the souls, as they are rooted in the divine essence, no distinction can be made between that which flows from above and that which is the service of humankind, for Israel and the Holy One are entirely one. This is revealed in the inner dimension of the Torah, the Torah of Rashbi, and therefore the Torah of Rashbi also encompasses the phenomenon of prayer.³

Rashbi's path of Torah, the Rebbe emphasized, provides each of us with a course to follow in our own lives:

It is incumbent on a Jew that he shall set his life, and his relationship with the world around him, in such a manner that “brothers also dwell together,” meaning that the path of miracles coincides with the path of nature.⁴

These are profound words to be pondered, especially in our current moment of crisis. For the Rebbe, miracles and nature, divine intervention and human work, are not at odds, but must ultimately be understood as a single phenomenon; nature provides the vessel through which miracles are received. To separate miracles from nature, on the other hand, is to isolate G-d from the world.

Rashbi's Torah—as transcribed in the *Zohar* and continuously refracted through the revelatory teachings of subsequent masters of Kabbalah and Hassidut—provides an interpretive and cosmological prism through which to transform isolation into togetherness, revealing the infinite within the finite and the miraculous within nature. Through this prism we come to see our place in the cosmos differently; our relationships with the world, with other people, and with G-d acquire new breadth and new depth. All our actions and interactions, including our prayer and our Torah study, are likewise endowed with a quality that contains multitudes.

³ Ibid., parentheses are in the original text.

⁴ This quote is from the talk delivered prior to the formal discourse. For the transcript see, *Sihos Kodesh* 5722, page 466. For a Hebrew language translation of an edited transcript of the talks delivered during the course of this farbrengen, [click here](#).

This is the kind of Torah that we need today: Torah with which we can raise ourselves from the lowest depths precisely because it reveals to us the loftiest heights; Torah with which we can transform the world from within because it reveals nature's essence to be utterly transcendent.

Just as the Torah of Rashbi brought rain to the world in his own time, so may it bring healing to the world in our time.

MY REBBE – RAV NACHUM ELIEZER RABINOVITCH

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In coming to write this piece – a eulogy for my great master and teacher, in some sense – I am overcome by a sense of fear, as many students would be in my position. To give over an adequate and accurate description of my Rosh Yeshiva, in order to explain to those who did not know him who he was and what his contribution amounted to, is as important an endeavor as it is treacherous. What if I misspeak? What if I don't present things exactly as he would have wanted? What if I give over the wrong impression? And, of course, there is always the obvious obstacle, that the notions I have of my great master and teacher, are simply my own, and provide nothing more than Rav Rabinovitch as seen through my personal prism. Even if I were his closest student this would be a problem, how much more so now that I am not.

And yet, "*patur be-lo kelum ee efshar*" - it is not possible to stay silent, and to leave a vacuum for many who would seek to know what we have lost, or those who would not know that there was what to lose in the first place. So, with the above qualifications in mind, I turn my meager skills to the task of describing the great and pious Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Birkat Moshe in Maale Adumim; that Doctor of Mathematics; community Rabbi in Charleston, South Carolina, and Toronto, Canada; and head of Jews College in London. The boy from Montreal who learned under such luminaries as Rav Pinchas Hirschprung and Rav Yaakov Ruderman, and went on to become one of the most important voices in the Modern Orthodox/Religious Zionist world.

I came to Yeshivat Birkat Moshe in 1998. When I came to be tested there the previous year, I was tested on a passage by R. Hayyim Brisker on *Hilkhos Hametz u-Matzah*. Coming as I did from a family steeped in the Brisker tradition, and in love not only with the personality of Rav Soloveitchik, but also with his conceptual framework for learning, this was an easy test for me to pass. And coming into the Yeshiva a year later, I was ready to put those skills to use. Every *sugya* had to have a conceptual framework. Everything I learned was analyzed in full, stripped from its practical everyday moorings, and turned into pure quality. This was – I always believed, as per what I had read in Rav Soloveitchik's works – the height of intellectual achievement. Anything less, and one was selling himself short.

Bearing all this in mind, I admit that I wasn't overly impressed with my first interactions with my new Rosh Yeshiva. He was soft spoken. He didn't conceptualize. He didn't name-drop. At no time did he

directly present us with his awesome command of the material at hand. More often than not, rather than answering questions put to him, he would ask the students to answer those questions themselves. In my opinion, the reason for this is that while he was a Rosh Yeshiva for almost four decades, he never stopped being the community rabbi he started out as. (Indeed, you would be hard-pressed to find *Rashei Yeshiva* today who started out this way). And as a community Rabbi, rather than being a high-brow lecturer, he was ever the kindly teacher and educator.

When Rav Rabinovitch was a community rabbi in Charleston, he founded a school there, and a friend who was visiting saw that he was teaching the children how to read *Aleph Bet*. The friend wondered aloud: "Such a scholar as yourself should be doing such a menial task?" Rav Rabinovitch responded: "I see nothing menial or undignified in this – it is an honor and a pleasure to be teaching the *Aleph Bet* to Jewish children."

And so it was in Yeshiva as well. Anyone who was around him for enough time was exposed to the breadth and depth of his knowledge and thought, but this was not his regular *modus operandi*. He preferred to engender deep thinking in others rather than to show off his own. He preferred to strengthen others instead of weakening them by presenting himself as an ideal which can hardly be reached. And he preferred to cultivate independence in his students, rather than create a relationship of semi-subservience to him, as some rabbis would have it.

I asked my Rosh Yeshiva hundreds of questions over the years, and often he would want to hear my opinion. Sometimes I offered it before he said his, sometimes after. Even when he disagreed, he had a way of saying it that wouldn't be totally dismissive of my opinion. After a while I learnt to tell the difference between his statements of approval which were meant to simply give me the independence to follow my own thinking, and those he meant in true agreement to the things I were saying...

And when I came to him with my books of Responsa and asked him to give an approbation, he was happy to do so. But before I asked him for it, I asked whether I am even worthy of putting these Responsa out in the first place: "I am young", I said, "and I would not want to be jumping ahead if it is not proper for me to do so. I also would not want to be *moreh Halakhah bifnei rabbo*, issuing ruling when my Rebbe's influence is still very much present." Rav Rabinovitch thought nothing of this. He told me I must publish, that this is exactly the right thing to be doing, and that my age is of no consequence. "If you write good things, you must publish them." It was that simple to him. And I heard similar encouragement at other times when complex issues (such as *agunot*, *giyyur*, etc.) came up and I had qualms about whether or not to pursue them.

To be sure, it was easy being a confident rabbi when you knew you could turn to Rav Rabinovitch, and he would support you. And this goes to his stature as a *posek*. Over the last six months, as part of the process of writing my book on Halakhah and mental health, I have been immensely fortunate to visit towering *poskim* throughout the Modern Orthodox, Religious Zionist, and Hareidi communities. I have learned much from being in the presence of such *gedolim*, and thanked Hashem for every minute. Yet I have never enjoyed such clarity of thinking and *pesak* as I saw while sitting at the side of my Rosh Yeshiva.

He made it seem easy. Everyone who has ever asked him a question knows that. His responses were direct, and didn't require a plethora

of sources to prove his position. It seemed as if he were pulling a rabbit out of a hat – suddenly, surprisingly, the response was there, and everything was clear. One wondered where it came from. However, every single time I received an answer from my Rav that I was unsure of its origins, it didn't take me long to find out that the problem lay with my knowledge of the sources, while his position was well-based in many books that I simply had no knowledge of.

He also made it clear that a halakhic decision – any halakhic decision! – must conform to the precepts of what he called *sekhel yashar*: a proper and untwisted way of thinking. Rav Rabinovitch spoke about it so often that all of his students know how important the concept was to him. Yet, when I mentioned this to a member of my own community lately, he was surprised. Could it be, he wondered, that Rav Rabinovitch meant the simple common sense enjoyed by many of us? Isn't there some sort of "Torah mind" one must have in order to deliver proper *pesak*?

The answer is this: Rav Rabinovitch believed that, at base, the necessary groundwork for any rabbi to be giving proper halakhic decisions entails simple common sense, coupled with a deep ethical and moral sensitivity to the world around us. All the Torah learning in the world would not help a person who doesn't have this foundation. Of course, this common sense is not enough. In Rav Rabinovitch's view, one must also delve into the halakhic and philosophical frameworks the Torah presents us, and cultivate his halakhic decisions in light of those frameworks.

Rav Rabinovich extensively developed this last point in his written works. When I first came to Yeshiva, as mentioned earlier, I was taken with Rav Soloveitchik's world. My feeling was that while philosophical ideas are fleeting and ever-changing from person to person and generation to generation, the Halakhah is stable, and is in fact the only thing which can offer us the stability we need as ideologies rise and fall on the world stage. It is through this conception that I began to try and mimic Rav Soloveitchik's methodology of reconstructing a philosophical idea out of halakhic material. I could not think of a methodology more sound than that for creating an ideological framework that could be trusted as authentic.

But as I sat one day with Rav Rabinovitch, and asked him a question pertaining to this matter, he disagreed completely: "Halakhah cannot be the guide," he said. "Philosophy must be the light which clears the path for proper halakhic thinking." In his view, Halakhah can be easily twisted according to the whims of the *posek*. Therefore, it is the agenda itself which must be cleared of all its inaccuracies, and left pure and untainted. Rav Rabinovitch believed that an overarching view of the Torah's goals for both the individual and the community could be gleaned from *Tanakh*, and that only once this view was clear could one then direct the halachic inquiry in the direction that Hashem truly wanted it to go. And he set out to show how this is done.

It is here that we come to Rambam's central role in Rav Rabinovitch's thought. Rav Rabinovitch viewed Rambam as the foremost Torah scholar, the veritable Jewish Renaissance man, who moved Judaism into another sphere of understanding than where it was before him. Rambam's works are a watershed moment, pure and simple. He manages to take the entirety of Jewish scholarship until that moment, and create a conceptual whole which fleshes out both the details of practical Halakhah and the philosophical grounding upon which they rest.

It is this holistic picture of the world in which Rav Rabinovitch believed, and devoted his life to engendering in everyone around him. He truly believed that we could make the world a better place, and that each and every one of us was enjoined by the Torah to do just that. If only we understood what all the verses of the Torah amounted to, from a bird's eye view, we would see how it all fit together. Most of us only see part of the picture, but there are a few unique individuals who are not only able to see the picture in its entirety, but are also able to articulate what they see and present it to those who cannot see as broadly. Rambam was one of those people. And so was my Rosh Yeshiva.

It was this broad view that allowed him to be more flexible halakhically than many other rabbis, even amongst his peers. Because he understood where the Halakhah "was going," and what it was trying to achieve, he wasn't afraid to take a stand in promoting those goals. Indeed, Rav Rabinovitch was known as a "courageous *posek*," as someone who wasn't afraid to be lenient or stringent, as the case would have it, even against more commonly held beliefs in the halakhic community. To take just one example, he didn't believe there was any issue in accepting donations from Christian organizations who were friendly towards Israel, despite significant opposition amongst many leading rabbis.

Nevertheless, when I asked him a question one time and he gave me an answer I didn't expect, and I remarked: "This is a *hiddush*, I don't think the *Shulhan Arukh* says this," he got very angry at me, declaring: "This is not a *hiddush*! The *Shulhan Arukh* must be explained in this way. Don't say this is a *hiddush*. It is in line with everything we always knew." His independence never came from a place of pride or ego. He wasn't looking to make a name for himself. He simply wanted to do what was right, just, and fair, for all those seeking to serve Hashem as best they could. He wanted to help whomever needed it.

That desire to help went hand in hand with his natural affection for others around him. He loved people. He was a warm and affectionate person. There were times it was hard to daven *Minhah-Maariv* on *Erev Shabbat*, because Rav Rabinovitch was playing peek-a-boo with the young child of one of the married men learning in the Yeshiva. He would spend endless hours speaking to anyone who sought him out. He would call students who were in the hospital. One Rosh Hashanah, a student who had just arrived from abroad (he had to go through surgery shortly after his arrival but insisted on being in the Yeshiva for the high holidays) came into the *Beit Midrash* in a wheelchair and sat in the back. After *Minhah*, as the *hazzan* was about to continue, the Rosh Yeshiva suddenly got up from his place, walked to the back of the *Beit Midrash*, and inquired as to this student's health, whom he did not know by name and had not even met until that moment. Davening continued when the Rosh Yeshiva returned to his seat.

He loved people. And we loved him back. I loved him very much. He was always there for me. And I will miss him terribly. My support. My teacher. My master.

My Rebbe.

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