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RASHASHIAN KAVANOT AS CONCRETE POETRY

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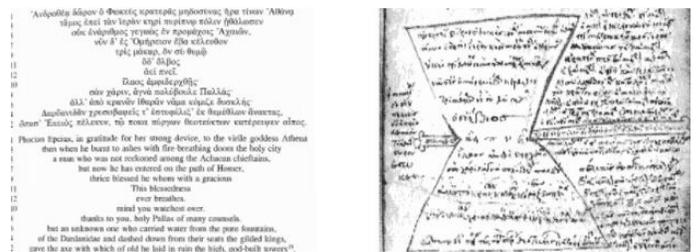
"God... is a three letter poem... approach God language as a poetic force, as a practice-oriented, experientially informed discourse." -Dave Collins, *"Zen and the Art of Unknowing"* 27:50

As a religion which eschews iconography, words are necessarily at the center of Jewish symbolism.¹ We have strict rules about the order of our words of prayer, divine names which cannot be pronounced or erased, and even traditional guidelines on the manner in which our sacred texts can be written. Jewish tradition at times takes a physicalist approach to language in which meaning is ascribed to the physical characteristics of the Hebrew letters themselves.² In the 18th century, R. Shalom Sharabi zy" a (or Rashash, 1720-1777) recreated the Lurianic Kabbalistic *siddur* by turning divine names and Hebrew letters into a sort of automorphic structure for the intangible spiritual worlds, indirectly depicting the undepictable. This concretization of the Hebrew language shares themes with concrete poetry, an aesthetic movement that uses physical and symbolic elements of language to produce poetry. This essay will begin by exploring classical examples of concrete poetry, then turn to its major themes, and finally applying these themes as interpretive principles to Rashashian *kavanot*. It is my hope that this can increase exposure to the Rashashian prayer system, provide a lens through which to read the different layouts of *kavanot* in Kabbalistic *siddurim*, and ultimately inspire other interdisciplinary studies between *kavanot* and other fields.

Concrete poetry

The oldest extant forms of what could be called concrete poetry are from 3rd century BCE Ancient Greece, first attributed to poet and grammarian Simias of Rhodes, often dubbed "pattern poetry."³ In pattern poetry, the words of a poem are arranged in the shape of a certain pattern. In *Axe*, a

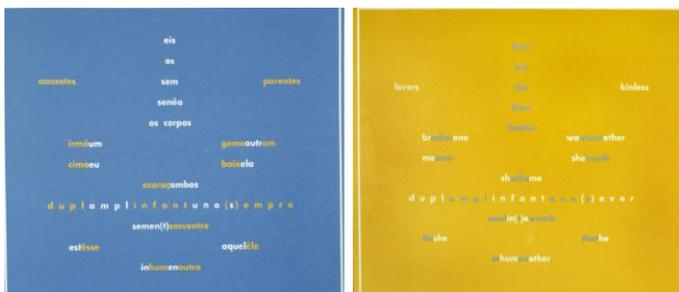
poem written in the shape of its title object, Simias praises Epeius of Phocis, the architect of the Trojan War, for redeeming himself from the charge of cowardice by offering Athena the axe he used in the war against Troy. While the words constitute poetry in their own right, the configuration of the poem as an axe adds an additional layer of meaning. Simias' poem creates a literary representation of the axe of Epeius itself, this time with Simias' inscription on the axe's blade.⁴ Through this act, Epeius' axe transcends time and space and exists as it would for Athena beyond our realm. As will be explored below, concrete poetry like Simias' often intersects with religious themes.



Two versions of Simias' Axe

Pattern poetry such as Simias' is also called a calligraph, where words are arranged in order to create a picture. They served as a prevalent form of concrete poetry through the medieval and modern eras.⁵ Concrete poetry in its current form emerged in the 1950s through the interconnected works of German concrete poet Eugen Gomringer and the Brazilian group the Noigandres, the latter of which described their work as utilizing "the advantages of non-verbal communication, without renouncing the virtuality of the word."⁶ The Noigandres saw Joyce, Pound, Mallarmé, and other modernists as their main literary precursors. They took letters and words and sought to create art by manipulating the physical forms of the letters without foregoing the meaning of the words themselves. Augusto de Campos' *eis os amantes (here are the lovers)* exemplifies what he and his fellow Noigandres sought to create in concrete poetry. The

progressing words form a sort of “semantic union,” depicting physically through words the unity of two lovers becoming one and the creation of new life through their union.⁷



Campos' *eis os amantes* in the original and translation.⁸

One principle in the evaluation of concrete poetry is the importance of symbols and their contextual meanings. Concrete poetry extricates words and symbols from their contexts in order to highlight and extract new meanings. Letters are reworked, undone, and reconfigured to provide new meanings. In a personal favorite, the 20th century Japanese concrete poet Niikuni Seiichi's *elegy* takes the *kanji*-ideogram for “sorrow” and plays on the fact that it is written by combining the *kanji* for “non” with the *kanji* for “mind.” Seiichi depicts a flurry of “nons,” scattered and disorganized, while at the bottom “mind” is written very small. The intensity of loss and the associated sorrow and pain form a literal cloud over the mind. It could also be read as creating a sort of thought bubble, depicting a mind in which nothing can be present except for thoughts of absence. The poet supplies the reader with the *kanji* for “sorrow” to show that which is alluded to but not directly stated by the poem. This poem exemplifies the first principle which will be of use to us in concrete poetry: its message is extra-linguistic. Rather than seeking to use letters and words in their usual syntax, it is precisely by taking them out of their normal uses that concrete poetry employs them for meaning. As Charles Russell has noted⁹ and as will be shown below, concrete poetry can be written using non-linguistic symbols, stretching the very definition of what constitutes poetry. The question could be reasonably asked: what makes concrete poetry distinct from other visual arts? What is gained by labeling it as a poem? Concrete poetry intentionally blurs these lines. The concrete poet creates an image that is meant to be “read,” to be analyzed in a similar manner to how we analyze written poetry. By labeling their work as a poem, they lead the reader towards a certain attention to the symbols used and signal to the reader to read them as words. The unique features of analyzing poetry, such as “the visual and auditory patterns... meaning of words and sentences... those properties of words, depending on their history and usage... feeling, attitude towards subject matter and audience, and intent of speaker”¹⁰ come to be applied to pieces of art that we would never otherwise think to apply them to.



Niikuni Seiichi's *elegy*¹¹

Second, the viewer is critical to concrete poetry. Poetry in general engages the reader intellectually to try to understand the poem, to determine what it means to them and what underlies its symbolism. Concrete poetry takes this one step further by forcing readers to examine their own conventional understandings of poetry. Take 20th century concrete poet and anthologist of concrete poetry Mary Ellen Solt's [Moonshot Sonnet](#). This sonnet was created using the grid pattern placed over photos that NASA engineers took when photographing the 1968 moon landing. Solt isolated the grid and dubbed it a Petrarchan sonnet, consisting of fourteen lines of five different rhyming sets. It is precisely the inventive use of structure that draws in the reader as a creative partner in the work. In concrete poetry, there is “some loss of semantic control by the poet, but a corresponding increase of opportunity for the reader... the poet sets it all up. He designs the play-ground as a field-of-force & suggests its possible workings. The reader, the new reader, accepts it in the spirit of play, and plays with it.”¹² The knowledge that concrete poetry will play with structure in addition to content opens up new vistas for interpretation. The reader is drawn into a cascade of questions about the poem's makeup and meaning. Perhaps the writer is suggesting that a sonnet's structure has come to express love beyond the words that comprise it. Perhaps Solt is likening the NASA engineers to lovers caressing their photographs with electronic grids. It has even been suggested that Solt here is writing “an entreaty to the American reader to appreciate the importance of a ‘worldview’ in the age of peaceful lunar exploration.”¹³ There is a playfulness to concrete poetry's interpretation, a coyness in our own wondering at the inner meaning as our normal syntactical interpretative tools prove ineffective.

Poetry often walks hand-in-hand with mysticism. Aubrey Glazer identifies a larger unity between the practitioner of poetry and of mysticism:

both poet and mystic seek to overcome the yearning that separates every human being from the divine. It is that very tantalizing trace of divine consciousness, always almost within reach, that gives way to this deeper yearning to re-ascend after descending into disconnectedness from the divine. That point of reuniting in unitive consciousness is called *devekut*.¹⁸

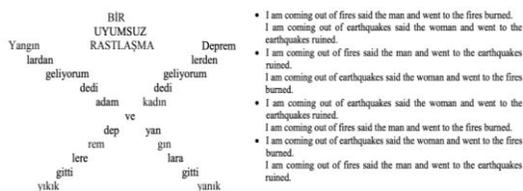
For Glazer, the internal ecstatic journey of the mystic and of the poet are one and the same. This is further reinforced by recent neuroscience which suggests that the areas of the brain which are engaged in the writing and creating of poetry, namely the amygdala, sections of the right temporal lobe, and the orbitofrontal and dorsolateral precortices,¹⁹ are also the areas of the brain which are activated in religious experiences.²⁰ Concrete poetry is no exception to this connective rule and the religious theme in concrete poetry did not end with Simias over two thousand years ago. The concrete poet Emmett Williams wrote that next to concrete poets, “side by side are militant social reformers, religious mystics, lyricists of love, psychedelic visionaries, engaged philosophers, disinterested philologists and poetypographers.”²¹ In Williams’ view, the “poetypographers,” or concrete poets, find themselves at the intersection of all of these worldviews, weaving them together into a cohesive whole.

Dom Sylvester Houédard, or dsh, was a Benedictine monk who occupied this intersecting space between concrete poet and mystic. His practice mixed Christianity, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism, all of which came to expression in the pages born on his typewriter. These “poemobjects,” as he dubbed them, became a manner of putting onto paper his mystical feelings and thoughts. Houédard felt that his typestracts were not simply expressive: “Rather than Dadaist declarations, Houédard believed in the transformative power of his word-based arrangements to elicit linguistic, visual, and spiritual connections, citing previous examples as ‘texts created for concrete use: amulets talismans grigris mani-walls devil traps kemioth tefillin mezuzahs medals sacred-monograms.’”²² The texts Houédard cited above are “created for concrete use” due to the fact that, like the scroll in a *mezuzah* or in *tefillin*, the written text’s purpose is not to be read but rather to effect some kind of change in an object, such as sanctifying one’s *tefillin* or protecting one’s home. The concrete poet placed his writing in the same tradition as such religious objects. The writing and usage of concrete poetry extends beyond the usage it served for the creator and the reader, taking on a ritual use. Language has the capacity to transcend the description of the spiritual and take on a prescriptive function, facilitating change in the spiritual and thereby creating something actually new. This is what Hakham José Faur zy”a means in his observation that in Philo’s philosophy, “*logos* is



Moonshot Sonnet, Mary Ellen Solt¹⁴

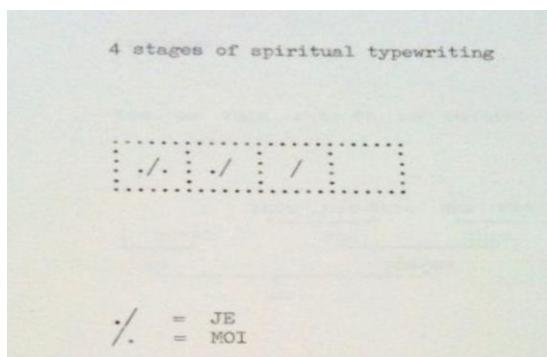
The final principle that will be of use regards concrete poetry’s use of space. The idea of manipulating space in poetry beyond the construction of calligraphs was pioneered by the French Symbolist poet and inspirer of concrete poetry Stéphane Mallarmé in his 1897 poem *Un Coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard*. His assertion in the introduction to the poem that “the ‘blanks’ take on importance, and are what is the most immediately striking” exemplifies what has come to be a hallmark of concrete poetry.¹⁵ The use of space can actually subvert or redirect how the poem is read altogether, as can be seen in the 20th century Turkish poet Metin Altıok’s *Bir Uyumsuz Rastlasma* (*Discordant Encounter*). *Bir Uyumsuz Rastlasma* is a poetic crossroads, offering multiple potentially valid readings by nature of its structure.¹⁶ Altıok does not indicate a fixed start or end-point of the poem to the reader; any line could be the beginning or conclusion. It is specifically through his use of space that Altıok disorients the reader and forces her to create her own reading. This exposes the multi-leveled meaning of the title: not only are the encounters of ruinous earthquakes and burning fires themselves discordant, but the actual information about them is disrupted and discordant. Altıok captures the way that communication and language itself is distorted through disaster.



Bir Uyumsuz Rastlasma and its possible readings¹⁷

dynamic: it does not *reveal* but creates--not as an absolute, but as ciphers and consonants from which the reader must spawn meaning."²³

In dsh's *4 stages of spiritual typewriting*, he depicts the progressions of the spiritual writer. The poem depicts different stages in the relationship between the "JE" and the "MOI," which can be defined as follows: "what we think of as our I, or in Houédard's interpretive framework, our JE, is actually our MOI, a persona we impute on a continually changing flux of mind experiences and mindevents... the MOI is reborn moment to moment in a continuum of becoming... 'thru the MOI I intuit 2 sacred néants or nothings ie both JE & god."²⁴ The persona or the self (the MOI) proves to be illusory and impermanent, giving way through its finitude to a self intertwined with the divine Nothingness (the JE). This "JE/MOI" flicker, dsh's name for the dissolution of the moi into the je, is depicted in *4 stages of spiritual typewriting*. While the initial movement is the dissolution of the impermanent self, that also comes to fade away, leaving only division. In the fourth and final stage, even division is done away with, or in Kelsang Gyatso's words, "eventually we shall realize nothingness directly."²⁵ There are clear parallels between this four-fold system and the four-leveled Kabbalistic and Hasidic interpretation of the Tetragrammaton and the four worlds of *Atzilut*, *Beriah*, *Yetzirah*, and *Asiyah*, particularly in the idea that as one ascends higher in the worlds, distinction begins to melt away in the face of the divine."²⁶



dsh's *4 stages of spiritual writing*²⁷

In sum, the three prevalent themes that define concrete poetry are the use of symbols and words outside of their normative context, the necessity of an active reader, and the importance of space. The symbols and words that are used in concrete poetry are not necessarily used in their normal context and as such cannot necessarily be read as they normally are. It is precisely because these semantic rules are changed that the reader is involved in the meaning-making of the text. This extends beyond the content of the poem and means that the form is critical to determining the meaning of the text. These principles get to the heart of what concrete poetry sets out to accomplish, and they will be useful below as interpretative keys for reading Kabbalistic *kavanot*.

Rashashian *Kavanot*

The system of Kabbalistic *kavanot* as laid out by Rashash emerged from the Lurianic prayer system two hundred years after its initial creation. Ari (also known as Arizal or 1534-1572) created a complex set of intentions to use in prayer. These *kavanot* provide an inner meaning and channel through which to apply the restorative properties of our words and minds. "There is no doubt," wrote Ari, "that one who knows how to intend all of this in all its truth will cause the aforementioned interconnections to be achieved by their efforts literally, and there is no limit to their reward."²⁸ In a similar key to Houédard, Ari conceives of his *kavanot* as creating a reality or facilitating a spiritual connection. *Kavanot* constitute a concrete poetry that creates the concrete. The secrets of the universe's origins take on a practical application as the thought of them can fix the worlds.

The use of imagery in Kabbalistic texts has not yet received sufficient study, as acknowledged by Marla Segol in the opening chapter of her [Word and Image in Medieval Kabbalah](#). Segol identifies three main motivations for the use of graphics in Kabbalistic manuscripts: to convey information that stands in relation to text, orient the reader cosmologically, and provide instruction in practically applying the information given.²⁹ These map onto the three central features of concrete poetry: to convey something outside of the text but still within language, create a new spatial orientation for the reader, and engage the reader in the act of meaning-making. The students of Rashash explicitly wrote about their belief in "the wherewithal of kabbalistic poems to 'do away with the peels [i.e. spiritual impurities], the dark side, and all the abominable spirits.'"³⁰ It is in this light that we will examine a few of Rashash's Kabbalistic *kavanot*, first on their own, then in comparison with different versions as found in the different *siddurim*.

Upon looking into one of the *siddurim* written by the students of Ari, one finds the specific *kavanah* for a given prayer written out as an instruction. The symbolism is secondary to the language. Rashash completely overhauled the Lurianic *siddur*. Using the principles in R. Hayyim Vital *zy"o's* (1542-1620, Ari's main disciple) *Etz Hayyim Sha'ar Ha-Sheimot* that map a name of God onto every spiritual entity, Rashash created a *siddur* that illustrated the *kavanot* system entirely coded through the different names of God.³¹ Rather than using the language of Ari to explain what to do, Rashash in a sense depicted it through a method intended precisely to prevent corporealization and depiction of the divine. For instance, the tree of ten *sefirot* is transformed into a branching structure of names one atop the other. Rashash's linguistic recasting of Ari's *kavanot* is at once both hieroglyphic and pictographic: the words are replaced with non-verbal symbols which visually represent their subjects, and from these hieroglyphs the actual spiritual entities being manipulated through our intentions are indirectly depicted.

Rashash delved into the Lurianic corpus and reformed the Kabbalistic *siddur* from the raw material. For example, the *kavanah* of the *merkavah*, in which one intends to make himself a vehicle for the *Shekhinah*, is listed in *Sha'ar Ruah Ha-Kodesh* as a *yihud* “that is always fit to intend... particularly at the moment when a person is praying.”³² Similar to De Campos’ *eis os amantes*, the culmination of Ari’s and thereby Rashash’s Kabbalistic *kavanot* are *zivug* and *yihud*, the intercourse and interconnection of two parts of the upper worlds in order to create a new flow of vitality and energy below. The Kabbalists intentionally use the metaphor of human sexuality to describe these unifications.³³ Only one *siddur* from the direct students of Ari contains any *kavanot* from works besides *Peri Etz Hayyim* and *Sha’ar Ha-Kavanot*, the principle Lurianic works on *tefillah*. While the *Hasidim* opposed these additions,³⁴ Rashash would develop a similar line of thinking in certain elements of his *siddur*. Not only were the preexisting *kavanot* reimagined in a concrete manner, but new *kavanot* were also integrated into the *siddur*. The *kavanat ha-merkavah* is listed in many *siddurei Rashash* right before the *Amidah*, turning an undefined *kavanah* in Ari’s writings into an actual piece of the prayer book. Additionally, Rashash recast it in concrete terms. It is here that the principles distilled above can be applied.

Take the symbols Rashash uses to rewrite *kavanat ha-merkavah*. While Ari provides only an explanation of where one should imagine the names of God mapped onto his body, Rashash creates the physical map so that one can see a sort of reflection of the body printed in the *siddur*. The *siddur* becomes a sort of mirror, drawing a person into himself before beginning the *Amidah*. This is also accomplished through Rashash’s depiction of many body parts as containing an inner and outer part, allowing a person to draw energy inward or effuse it outward. Rashash’s use of space is also worth noting. His depiction reconfigures a person with the head as the largest and most central part of the body. A page and a half is devoted to the depiction of the head and only half a page to the rest of the body. This calls to mind the creation of the universe through the world of *Adam Kadmon*, whose descending creative lights are called the “eyes, ears, nose, and mouth.”³⁵ R. Hayyim Vital’s statement that the *kavanat ha-merkavah* is the secret of the verse “know God in all your ways” (*Mishlei* 3:6)³⁶ can be understood anew through this Rashashian reconfiguring, as our very ability for sensory perception becomes a way to know the divine. Rashash reveals through this *kavanah* his understanding of the essence of a person as their head and particularly their face: the power of the *kavanat ha-merkavah* is “to grant a person any knowledge they want as long as they do not stop thinking this for a moment and they don’t separate their thoughts from it, for it all depends on the strength of their intention and cleaving to what is above.”³⁷ The *kavanah*’s starting point and end result are in one’s head. This *kavanah* therefore becomes a depiction of the human body as it is idealized spirituality and not as it is physically. All of these coalesce to create a highly involved experience when performing this *yihud*, causing a

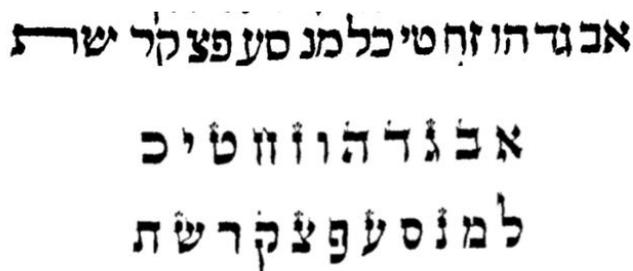
person to read herself into the *siddur* and through it. These are some of the ways that the principles of concrete poetry can be applied to interpret and draw new meanings from Rashashian *kavanot* which are latent but not explicit in the text.

Such principles can be applied not only when looking at individual *kavanot* but also when examining the same *kavanah* across different authors of Kabbalistic *siddurim*. As part of the *kavanah* for bringing together the upper worlds, Vital wrote that individuals should intend to “give up their life to sanctify God’s name through which all of their sins are forgiven, giving them the ability to rise upwards... and to bring *malkhut* up with us,” described in the same essay as the essential work of all of our prayers.³⁸ In a different essay, Vital explains how this is accomplished: “place before your eyes two names, the Tetragrammaton and *shem Adnut*, and connect them.”³⁹ Rashash adds without explanation that one must see these names connected by the name *Ekyeh*.⁴⁰

The layout of this *kavanah* takes different forms in different *siddurei Rashash*. In the *siddur Ha-YaReH* made by R. Yedidiah Refael Hai Abulafia (1806-1869), the *kavanah* places the names in the order they were written in the source material, going from the Tetragrammaton to *Shem Adnut* and ending with *Ekyeh*. This use of space denotes the centrality of the connection of the two names in which the act of *mesirut nefesh* is rooted.⁴¹ There is a logic to this layout in which one is able to read these aligned names as a sort of text of their own, progressing through the actual names in the same order as they are given in the explanatory text. R. Hayyim Shaul ha-Kohen Dweck (1857-1933), publisher of the *Siddur Ha-Nidpas*, lays out the *kavanah* differently. In his depiction, *Ekyeh* is placed in between the two names that it unifies, acting as a spiritual adhesive for the two. This layout centers the role of *Ekyeh* as facilitating their connection and allowing for the elevation of the self and *malkhut* with it. Later *siddurim* use a sort of mixed model in which the names are put together in pseudo-sentences explaining what to do with them. These more recent *siddurim* actually engage the reader in a potentially deeper way than the previous printings in that they do not directly depict what one is to “place before your eyes.” In this way, the principles distilled from concrete poetry above become useful beyond their status as interpretive keys and actually constitute benchmarks through which to evaluate different *kavanot*. None of the *kavanot* below are inaccurate, nor are they trying to express anything different than each other. There is a degree to which one is making an aesthetic choice by preferring one layout over another.

The *kavanah* of the twenty two letters will serve as a final example. These letters serve as the building blocks for the lower worlds. The lower worlds are compared to a fetus, as the letters act as a nutritional agent rooted in the upper worlds for the lower world’s construction.⁴² While normally they reside in the upper worlds “above the heads” of the lower world as written by R. Hayyim Vital, they are drawn

down when we say the word *barukh*.⁴³ These letters descend in accordance with the pre-existing three-part structure of the worlds such that the first seven letters are on the right side, the middle seven letters are on the left side, and the final eight letters are in the middle.⁴⁴ Most *siddurim*, though, do not print this intention this way. In the *Siddur Ha-YaReH*, for example, the letters are arranged in pairs in a single line. In the *Siddur Ha-Nidpas*, they are arranged in two rows of eleven letters, one atop the other. Both arrangements call to mind [Sefer Yetzirah's](#) 231 "gates," in which letters are paired up to activate their creative potential.⁴⁵ Furthermore, both have established Kabbalistic import, with the right to left *a"b g"d* progressive pairing representing a movement of divine flow outwards,⁴⁶ and the top down progression of *a"l b"m* representing the transition from concealment to revelation.⁴⁷ Both representations of the formative twenty two letters provide deeper meanings that can be seen as complements to the initial meaning laid out in *Sha'ar Ha-Kavanot*, intertwining different layers of Kabbalistic meaning latent in the letters as symbols beyond their defined use in this *kavanah*. These spatial arrangements require an involved reader who can know how to parse and distribute the letters to their appropriate place in the worlds below them. In the recently printed *Siddur Etz Ha-Tidhar* by R. Tidhar Azulai, the letters are arranged in line with the language of *Sha'ar Ha-Kavanot*.



From top to bottom: the *kavanah* of the twenty two letters from the *Siddur Ha-YaReH*,⁴⁸ *Siddur Ha-Nidpas*,⁴⁹ and *Siddur Etz Tidhar*.⁵⁰

Conclusion

The role of written language as it relates to spoken language continues to be debated today by linguists.⁵¹ Rashashian *kavanot*, and concrete poetry more largely, forge a new path in their analysis of the relationship between word, language, and meaning. The ability to supply new meanings to linguistic symbols allows for new vistas of interpretation to be opened which could not otherwise be. I hope that this essay has served to bring forward new layers of meaning previously latent in these *kavanot* and can inspire deeper study into Rashash's system of *kavanot*, both on their own and through an interdisciplinary lens.

May it be Your will that through making further *yihudim* and connections between different types of wisdom and our uniquely Jewish wisdom, we can attain holy and pure perspective on the world as described by Rav Kook *zy"a*: "people--eager to affirm their ideological stances--battle

against the so-called 'evils' which arise in the world: scientific knowledge, heroism, beauty, and order... all of this is a grave error, and displays a lack of faith. The 'pure view' sees God's appearance in all worldly progress."⁵²

¹ My thanks to Joey Rosenfeld for his encouragement and his feedback on this piece.

² See *Shabbat* 104a. This is also highly prevalent in Kabbalistic works: see for example R. Elazar Rokeach's *Sodi Rezaya Vol 1*. as well as numerous passages in *Etz Hayyim*, such as 1:5, 4:4, and 4:5.

³ "[Simias' Pattern Poems: The Margins of the Canon](#)" by Luis Arturo Guichard, pg. 84.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 90.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 85.

⁶ "[Speaking About Genre: The Case of Concrete Poetry](#)" by Victoria Pineda, pg. 380.

⁷ "[The Noigandres Poets and Concrete Art](#)" by Claus Clüver.

⁸ *Ibid.* Clüver also briefly discusses the inverted color scheme of the translation, drawing further attention to the inversion of the text via its translation.

⁹ "[Word and Image](#)" by Charles Russell.

¹⁰ "[The Interpretation of Poetry](#)" by Isabel C. Hungerland, pg. 352.

¹¹ "[Zero-On](#)" by Niikuni Seiichi, pg. 157.

¹² "[Concrete Poetry](#)" by R.P. Draper, pg. 332.

¹³ "[Concrete Poetry in America: A Story of Intermedia Performance, Publishing, and Pop Appeal](#)" by Craig Saper.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ "[Reading Space in Visual Poetry: New Cognitive Perspectives](#)" by Knowles, Schaffner, Weger, and Roberts.

¹⁶ "[Concrete Poetry in Turkish Literature](#)" by Türkan Topcu.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ "[Mystical Vertigo: Contemporary Kabbalistic Hebrew Poetry Dancing Over the Divide](#)" by Aubrey L. Glazer, pg. 94.

¹⁹ "[Brain activity and connectivity during poetry composition: Toward a multidimensional model of the creative process](#)" by Liu, S. et. al.

²⁰ "[The Neuroscience of Religious Experience](#)" by Patrick McNamara, pg. 105. Interestingly, these areas of the brain are also involved in love. For more on this, see "[The neuroscience of love, mysticism and poetry](#)" by John Cornwell and the referenced book by Semir Zeki, [Splendours and Miseries of the Brain: Love, Creativity, and the Quest for Human Happiness](#).

²¹ "[Anthology of Concrete Poetry](#)" by Emmett Williams, pg. vii.

²² "[Dom Sylvester Houédard](#)" by Victoria Mitchell. A gris-gris (meaning "magic") is a bag containing a ritual charm originating within Ghanian Vodun traditions that can bring good or bad luck depending on the intention of the user. Mani-walls (mani meaning "jewel" or "bead") are walls made of mani-stones, carved with the ritual mantra *om mani padme hum*, which line the path to ritual sites.

²³ "[The Horizontal Society: Understanding the Covenant and Alphabetic Judaism](#)", pg. 10. Although Faur was a highly rationalist thinker even to the point of being anti-mystical and would probably not agree with how I am using this quote, his insight into Philo stands on its own.

²⁴ [Right mind-minding: the practice and transmission of Zen and Tantric Buddhist method practices in the poemobjects of Dom Sylvester Houédard, 1960-1975](#) by Nicola Jane Simpson, pgs. 53-54.

²⁵ Ibid., 59.

²⁶ See for example *Sha'arei Kedushah* 3:1, *Sha'ar Ha-Shamayim* 6:1, *Siddur Tefillah Yesharah Keter Nehora Hakdamah Rishonah*, and *Torah Ohr Miketz* 41a. See also Simpson, pg. 61 for the discussion of a hidden and highest fifth level in the je/moi flicker in comparison to *Sha'arei Kedushah* and *Sha'ar Ha-Shamayim* which discuss Adam Kadmon as the hidden fifth world.

²⁷ Simpson, pg. 57.

²⁸ *Sha'ar Ha-Kavanot Drushei Laylah* #4.

²⁹ [Word and Image in Medieval Kabbalah](#) by Marla Segol, pgs. 8-9.

³⁰ [Kabbalistic Circles in Jerusalem \(1896-1948\)](#) by Jonatan Meir, pgs. 170-171.

³¹ "Contemporary Kabbalistic Publishing in the Middle Eastern Tradition" by Pinchas Giller.

³² *Sha'ar Ruah Ha-Kodesh Yihud* #21.

³³ See Pinchas Giller's [Shalom Shar'abi and the Kabbalists of Beit El](#) pg. 26.

³⁴ See R. Yitzchak Meir Morgenstern *shlit"a's* approbation to the *Siddur Sha'ar Ruah Ha-Kodesh*, a *siddur* designed

specifically to integrate the *yihudim* of works like *Sha'ar Ruah Ha-Kodesh* and *Sha'ar Ha-Yihudim* into the daily prayer service.

³⁵ *Etz Hayyim Sha'ar Iggulim Ve-Yosher Drush* #3.

³⁶ *Sha'ar Ruah Ha-Kodesh Yihud* #21.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ *Sha'ar Ha-Kavanot Drushei Kavanot Kri'at Shema* #6.

³⁹ *Sha'ar Ha-Kavanot Drushei Ha-Laylah* #5.

⁴⁰ See R. Yechezkel Bing *shlit"a's* *Nekudot Ha-Kesef* Vol. 1 pgs. 529-531 for further analysis of this addition.

⁴¹ *Nekudot Ha-Kesef* Vol. 1 pg. 531.

⁴² *Bati Le-Gani* pg. 74a-74b.

⁴³ *Sha'ar Ha-Kavanot Drushei Ha-Amidah* #2.

⁴⁴ Ibid., based on *Zohar* Vol 1. pg. 16b.

⁴⁵ [Sefer Yetzirah](#) 2:7-10.

⁴⁶ *Etz Hayyim* 40:13.

⁴⁷ *Emek Ha-Melekh* 1:60.

⁴⁸ *Siddur Ha-YaReH* Vol. 1 pg. 304.

⁴⁹ *Nekudot Ha-Kesef* Vol. 2 pg. 52.

⁵⁰ *Siddur Etz Tidhar Anaf Minhah V-Arvit* pg. 126.

⁵¹ "The Relation Between Written and Spoken Language" by Wallace Chafe and Deborah Tannen.

⁵² *Shemoneh Kevatzim* 2:190. Translation adapted from R. Hillel Rachmani's ["The Essence of the Holy and the Secular."](#)

MODERN ORTHODOXY IS A SWING STATE

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In October 2017, the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks [told](#) a large crowd at Yeshiva University that the "phrase 'Modern Orthodoxy' is overrated to the nth degree." He reasoned that the Modern Orthodox were too tiny to stake it out on their own. Their disagreements with other Orthodox Jews were too "small" to require brand differentiation. "I urge you to find another label."

Modern Orthodox Jews were the group that had emerged in the postwar period most committed to synergizing their commitment to middle-class America, Zionism, and observance of Jewish law. They were young and educated, and they had sought out a label that could provide a definition for their cause.

Rabbi Sacks had a point. Later that day, at a luncheon for the conference presenters—sans Rabbi Sacks—another panelist concurred with the former British Chief Rabbi's sentiment, suggesting that there was no longer much separation between the Modern Orthodox and the so-called Yeshiva World on once pivotal issues such as college education and Zionism. He

posited that the former was no longer so keen on liberal education. The latter, he alleged, no longer was so opposed to the State of Israel.

Pundits have also questioned whether Modern Orthodox politics vary from the Orthodox mainstream. I say mainstream because according to the Pew Research Center's [Portrait of Jewish Americans](#), those self-identifying as Modern Orthodox comprise just 30% of the American Orthodox community, totaling about 150,000 women and men. Several weeks before the presidential election, historian Joshua Shanes [published](#) an article full of trenchant observations on the right-wing political leanings of the Modern Orthodox, a trend that follows—but, he admitted, lags behind—the trajectory of the rest of Orthodox Jews in America.

However, I think the issue is more complex. The Modern Orthodox are a political unicorn. This group's posturing resembles neither its Orthodox counterparts nor the larger American Jewish sphere. Politics might be one crucial reason

why there is still a place for the Modern Orthodox Jew as a religious type, despite Rabbi Sacks's judgment on the matter.

Orthodox Jews tend to vote Republican, at least when it comes to their preference for the occupant of the White House. The American Jewish Committee's [survey](#) of Jewish voting behavior in the months leading up to the 2020 presidential election revealed that 74% of queried Orthodox Jews indicated their intentions to vote for President Donald Trump. The figure is staggering because it contrasts so vividly with the broader American Jewish landscape. The same survey reported that three-quarters of Jews in the United States had planned to vote for former Vice President Joe Biden. The number of those favoring Biden would have risen even higher were we to decouple the Orthodox quotient—about 10%—from the total Jewish population.

It was not always this way. Before the 1980s, Orthodox Jews voted in line with their American coreligionists. The reason for this is complex. The political scientist Kenneth Wald [suggested](#) that the Orthodox turn toward the GOP might have something to do with a shared interest in blurring Church-State doctrine, particularly in the case of government funding for public schools.

Recent observers side with Wald. Social scientists Ilana Horwitz and Laurence Kotler-Berkowitz [found much of the same](#) in their conversations with Orthodox Jews in Northeast Philadelphia. Many interviewees confided to Horwitz and Kotler-Berkowitz that they found Trump an “abomination.” However, the vast majority also said that they intended to vote for Trump anyway since they found his policies much more in line with conservative religious points of view. Orthodox Jews also overcame their feelings about Trump's personal character to vote for him because of what interviewees described as Trump's very solid support for the State of Israel. The historian David Myers [agreed](#), placing the Orthodox vote into historical context and in coordination with right-wing Christian groups.

Yet, other data indicates that the Modern Orthodox's voting behavior doesn't necessarily match that of other Orthodox Jews. First, the northeast sector of Philadelphia is home to many more right-wing Yeshivish Jews than Modern Orthodox. Second, a dive into the Pew Research Center's 2013 dataset—tabulated by Kotler-Berkowitz—shows that 77% of self-described Yeshivish Jews identify as or lean Republican. Just 22% of that population figures into the Democrat pool. The Modern Orthodox, even as the sample size is smaller than other groups, are split on party affiliation: 47% side with or lean Democrat and 46% gravitate toward Republican. The remainder claim a *parve* space as “independents.”

Pew also polled on political ideology, stripped of party affiliation. Among the Yeshivish group, 80% registered as politically conservative or very conservative. By comparison, only a third of the Modern Orthodox described themselves

along the spectrum of political conservatism. A quarter of this group claimed space along the liberal flank of American politics. Most tellingly, 38% of the Modern Orthodox self-defined as moderates, a figure that significantly outpaced Yeshivish Jews.

All this implies that it is sensible to decouple the Modern Orthodox from the larger Yeshivish enclave. Some point out that religious elites across all Orthodox sectors have embraced Trump, including certain Modern Orthodox rabbinical organizations that have published praises of Trump's policies. However, with the Modern Orthodox at least, the rabbinic position may not correlate with the much larger lay population. For example, earlier generations of Modern Orthodox Jews parted ways with their rabbis on hot-button issues such as the [Vietnam War](#) and access to contraception. The same is possible for the 2020 presidential election.

How did Modern Orthodox Jews vote in 2020? There are no exit polls dialing in on this small faith group. In 2017, I [argued in a Lehrhaus article](#) that day school mock presidential elections are a useful resource to obtain a better handle on this. I figured that student voting trends can approximate the voting behavior of their parents. Four years ago, tabulations submitted by 60 day schools indicated that Trump had garnered a majority of the Modern Orthodox vote.

I repeated the experiment in 2020. This time, I queried 80 Modern Orthodox day schools. I generated this fuller list from a [census](#) of Jewish elementary and high schools furnished by the late Marvin Schick and the Avi Chai Foundation. Half decided against holding mock elections, a much higher percentage than in 2016. These schools worried that polling would generate too much commotion. They found other ways to educate. For example, YULA Girls High School in Los Angeles did not host a mock election for similar reasons that the school decided against it in 2016. Political discussions are just too heated.

Instead, explained Social Studies Chair, Brian Simon, YULA students focused on civics education. “Our history classes all carefully taught the inner workings of the electoral college. Our students now understand the role of the popular vote and how it impacts the electoral process,” said Simon. “We also analyzed the political significance of swing states.” YULA's boys and girls' divisions also joined a student-driven debate that focused on political issues rather than candidates.

The results of the 40 schools that conducted mock elections prove just how unpredictable the Modern Orthodox vote can be. Four years ago, Trump dominated. In November 2020, Biden won most of the mock elections—34 to 16—within the day school circuit, but not by a wide margin. There were a few cases of total landslides; Biden and Trump collected an equal share: four apiece.

Why did Trump lose more Modern Orthodox mock elections this time? I asked day school administrators, especially those who work in schools that flipped to Biden in 2020. Some suggested that the impact of COVID-19 on day schools since last March likely figured into students' decisions. "Many of our students implicate the government's handling of the pandemic for the decision to close schools last spring and the strict precautions needed to resume school this year," said one principal.

Other school leaders told me that young people are very informed on the issues. Like many Americans, they assessed the candidates' positions and records on the economy, healthcare, and immigration to cast their mock vote. "Israel and the perception of who is better for it was not the only determining issue this time around," explained a social studies chair who handles her school's mock election program.

Several cases in particular were revealing. One school in the Tri-state area polled students and staff on a variety of issues. This school community voted on solidly liberal lines on climate change, abortion, and whether to abolish the electoral college. On Biden versus Trump, however, the Democratic nominee barely edged out the incumbent, 49-45%.

Another school took a similar approach. This one surveyed students: first on Middle East politics and then on Church-State policies. In this instance, the majority of Modern Orthodox girls and boys took the conservative stance on the Middle East and Israel but voted like moderate liberals on religion in the public square. On the presidential race, the students sided with Joe Biden, but barely.

The students voted in line with our knowledge drawn from survey data. According to the Pew data, the Modern Orthodox are moderates and liberal-leaners when it comes to most political issues. But, they flip on Israel. That coheres with Brandeis University's 2015 community study of Boston Jews, one of the few such surveys that asked participants to measure their politics against lobbying groups. A crosstab of religious affiliation with the bipartisan and pro-Israel AIPAC is informative. Among those familiar with this lobbyist group, about three-quarters of Orthodox respondents (in Boston, particularly, most of these are likely self-identifying Modern Orthodox Jews) indicated that AIPAC either somewhat or very much matched their Israel politics. That figure was higher than Conservative (67%), Reform (44%), and Reconstructionist (19%) Jews.

That many perceived Trump better aligned with AIPAC's mission complicated voting decisions for Orthodox Jews who hold this issue as very important, above—but not overriding—other significant political variables. Biden, of course, has also spoken at AIPAC conferences and received applause from attendees. Still, the messaging from pundits and politicians outside of AIPAC, in the newspapers and on social media, is confusing. It is a challenge for voters to make sense of this,

and then to weigh these values against other deeply held beliefs. The parents, then, face the same predicaments as their school-age children.

The Modern Orthodox's political arithmetic does not fit so neatly as it might for other Jewish groups. Positioned closer to the middle of the religious spectrum, their social networks reach liberal and conservative sections of American Jewry, a versatility that further complicates the Modern Orthodox's voting behavior.

What, then, of the Modern Orthodox vote? They are the unpredictable swing state among America's Jews.

THE MODERN ORTHODOX VOTE AND THE EPISCOPALIAN TURN

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On October 31, 2016, Rabbi Menachem Genack ventured into "enemy territory." Careful to speak for no organization or no one but himself, the OU Kosher CEO participated in a pre-election debate in Brooklyn. A well-known [supporter](#) and [confidant](#) of the Clintons, there was little question in anyone's mind that Rabbi Genack would make the most of the opportunity to support the Democratic Party's presidential hopeful. Sure enough, the mild-mannered rabbi offered a smattering of facts and a number of well-reasoned arguments to explain why Orthodox Jews ought to vote for Hillary Clinton. For this, the audience heckled and hollered. Some [reportedly](#) walked out in protest.

This is the sort of episode that convinced pundits to [fear](#) and prognosticators to [predict](#) that Trump was bound to receive the lion's share of the Orthodox vote. Upon the Trump victory, sociologist Samuel Heilman [pointed out](#) the political proclivities of other rabbinic leaders—from [Rabbi Shlomo Riskin](#) to [Rabbi Avrohom Levin](#)—to demonstrate the politically conservative leanings of America's Orthodox Jews and to question whether a more open-minded, liberally-driven Modern Orthodox has a future in the United States. Elsewhere, the same scholar [offered](#) Orthodox-leaning newspapers' endorsements of Donald Trump as further proof of Orthodox political conservatism.

What can account for this? According to Heilman, the supposed Orthodox embrace of the Republican Party has much to do with day school education: “Over time, the religious and moral instruction to which the Orthodox have been exposed—from their rabbis and yeshiva or seminary teachers—comes from the haredi wing of their movement, and not from the center or left.” In other words, the Orthodox Right has influenced more than a generation of Modern Orthodox children, steering them to grow up “rightwing,” religiously and politically. Similarly, concludes Heilman, to other traditionalist faith communities like the Catholics, for instance.

That Orthodox Jews seem to have leaned toward the Republican candidate probably should not surprise Heilman. In a [book](#) he coauthored with Steven M. Cohen in the late 1980s, the two scholars found that Orthodox Jews—mostly New Yorkers, in this limited study—tended to side with politically conservative points of view. Heilman and Cohen found that this was particularly true for issues that could be informed by Jewish law—say, like abortion or homosexuality—but it was also evident in politically charged cases like affirmative action and the death penalty which have little or no bearing on Halakhah. More recently, the 2013 Pew Research Center [report](#) on American Jews indicated that 57 percent of Orthodox Jews are more GOP-inclined; a remarkable but unsurprising contrast to 70 percent of the overall American Jewish population that are basically in concert with the Democratic Party’s planks and platforms.

Still, there is no hard evidence to prove how Orthodox Jews voted last November, in an election that defied all precedents and political procedures. To throw some light on the whole issue, I contacted more than sixty Modern Orthodox day schools, asking them back in October, when Clinton was still very much the frontrunner, to share mock election results with me. The idea started to percolate in 2012, when I served as a teacher at Maimonides School in Brookline, Massachusetts. Despite overwhelming statewide support for President Barack Obama, three-quarters of the high school student body at Maimonides penciled in Gov. Mitt Romney on their theoretical ballot. The results, I observed, could not have been swayed by “rightwing” teachers. First, most educators at the school could not be classified as such. Second, the vast majority of my colleagues happily refrained from relating political judgments and opinions to their students. The same impression was [confirmed](#) at Shalhevet High School. Students enrolled in this Los Angeles school also heavily favored Romney. Some of the reasons offered for the results at this school to a student reporter were Obama’s strained relationship with Israel, the rocky economy and because “this school has a lot of people that are wealthy,” explained one freshman. “Romney is for the wealthy people.”

My premise, then, was that day schoolers would vote according to the messages transmitted to them at home. The

results of this modest 2016 study appear to confirm the widely held supposition that Modern Orthodox Jews by and large voted for the Republican nominee. More important, perhaps, is what this research tells us about the sources of this voting behavior. At least for the 2016 presidential election, the Trump vote emanated from the home while the day school remained timid and neutral. Perhaps, then, the trouble with Orthodox schools is not that it pushes its students rightward: It’s that it doesn’t push much at all.

The Orthodox Turn to the Republican Party?

In October 1980, Rabbi Bernard Weinberger of the Young Israel of Brooklyn anticipated that his congregants and most other Orthodox Jews would soon be casting their vote for President Jimmy Carter, the White House’s Democrat incumbent. “A large segment of the Jewish community,” he reckoned, “is so inexorably linked to the Democratic Party it still sees itself voting for Roosevelt, Truman and Kennedy when they pull the Democratic lever.” This troubled Weinberger, who violated his own code of rabbinic conduct when he so publicly supported the Republican nominee, Governor Ronald Reagan.

There exist no reliable figures on Orthodox voting patterns before 1980, save for the Hassidic enclaves that received strict instructions to vote Democrat. As one pundit put it back in 1978: “There is no reporter on any of the major papers who really has ever stopped to analyze the Orthodox vote.” They were just not that significant of a voting bloc. There is no reason, though, to suppose that the Orthodox mainstream varied much from the rest of American Jewry. Just like most Americans, the Orthodox Union hailed Kennedy’s 1960 presidential victory, even offering a prayer that JFK “receive Divine guidance in the performance of his tasks, and may he bring to our country and all countries the leadership for which mankind thirsts.” The OU even constructed an argument for why Judaism supports Kennedy and the Democratic Party. In the nineteenth century, America’s Jews debated whether or not someone should vote like a Jew or an American (when the two contradicted) in the ballot box. A hundred years later, it was altogether clear that Jews—Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike—should pull the lever as one unified whole: as a Jewish Democrat. Four years later, Hunter College political scientist and ever-astute Orthodox observer, Marvin Schick, published an essay in the same OU publication, warning his coreligionists about some of the policies and political associations held by the Republican candidate, Sen. Barry Goldwater, though he admitted that Schick hardly needed to fear, as so many of his readers “have been identified with the Democratic Party.”

Consider, as well, surveys reported in the Yeshiva College student newspaper. From 1948 to 1976, male undergraduates voted overwhelmingly Democrat. In 1952, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower’s heroics in World War II were not nearly enough to sway Yeshiva Collegians. They supported Gov. Adlai Stevenson by a 16-1 margin. Student polls showed the same sort of excitement for Kennedy, Johnson and Humphrey. The

same goes for Carter, at least the first time around. In March 1978, Yeshiva students participated in rallies to protest Carter's dealings with Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Carter was a turning point.

Two years later, most Yeshiva University students cautiously sided, for the first time, with the Republican candidate. Students admitted: "The choice is between a proven disaster and a potential catastrophe and I vote catastrophe;" "There have to be more qualified people than these candidates. Something is wrong with the system if this is the only choice we're provided with. But I am leaning toward Reagan as the lesser of two evils;" "The choices are limited and I feel Reagan is much more qualified than Carter. I chose Reagan on the basis of his policy toward Israel and his economic policy;" "Even though I've voted Democratic in the past I feel the Republicans are offering our best bet;" "The choice of candidates is very poor, but the clear-cut choice for me is Ronald Reagan since he represents a sound economic and foreign policy;" and "The choice is between a peanut farmer and an actor, I'll take a movie over a crummy jar of peanut butter anytime."

The sentiment matched feelings at Stern College for Women. Three quarters of eligible voters were registered Democrats. Yet, all but a handful of polled women on the Midtown Manhattan campus voted for Reagan. Stern students flipped due to his positions on the issues of Israel, the economy and inflation. According to Stern's student paper, "women's rights" did not play much of a role in student voting calculations.

This coheres with available data on Orthodox Jews. The National Jewish Coalition found that 60 percent of Orthodox Jews voted for Reagan. Most certainly, Rabbi Weinberger had underestimated Orthodox voters in Brooklyn. In Boro Park and Flatbush, Reagan amassed 15,779 votes. Carter received 8,773. Actually, Carter's 1980 presidential campaign was far and away the worst showing for a Democrat among Jewish voters since 1920. Most chalk that up to Carter's presidential struggles and Reagan's "strong" support of Israel. Despite all this, America's Jews remained loyal to the Democratic Party in later presidential elections. Any thought to the contrary was rebutted by a much-discussed pre-election survey conducted by a consortium of prominent Jewish newspapers in 1988 amid "widespread expectations of a significant shift by Jews ... from their traditional Democratic voting patterns." The Carter-Reagan race, however, formally unhinged Orthodox Jews from that sort of liberal voting behavior.

Orthodox Jews and the "Single Issue Voter"

This does not mean that Orthodox Jews pledged allegiance to the Republican Party. To the contrary, not long into Reagan's tenure, amid fears that the president would cooperate with Saudi Arabia, a Bronx-based rabbi penned an open letter in a New York newspaper stating: "I was a Democrat all my life and I deeply regret voting for you and urging hundreds of my friends to do likewise in our last National election." In his

campaign for a second term, Reagan claimed the rightwing Flatbush Jews in Boro Park and Williamsburg. His opponent, former Vice President Walter Mondale, won two to one in other New York City districts with larger Modern Orthodox residents. The patterns remained somewhat erratic. In 1988, most Orthodox Jews in Brooklyn sided with Gov. Michael Dukakis rather than the Republican, George H. Bush. However, Market Opinion Research, a Detroit-based firm, tabulated that three out of four Orthodox Jews in other parts of the United States tended to vote for Bush.

In the subsequent decade, there was still a substantial sense that Orthodox Jews veered toward conservatism. Accordingly, it was very encouraging to liberals to learn that Orthodox Jews had something to do with Gov. Bill Clinton's victory over Bush in the 1992 race. The press reported that "some observers say that [Sen. Joseph Lieberman]—the only Orthodox Jew in the Senate—was particularly effective in convincing Orthodox Jews to return to the Democratic party." It certainly did not help Bush that in the months before the election his administration rejected Israel loan guarantees because the agreement on the table provided too much latitude for Israel to "continue building settlements in the occupied territories." Orthodox Jews somewhat cooled to Clinton—due to his own Israel policies—in the next presidential election but intensified their support of the Party in 2000 when Al Gore ran alongside their religious kinsman, Sen. Joseph Lieberman.

In the post-Carter era, it is not the case that the Modern Orthodox have converted to Republicanism (although, the Democrats' gay marriage plank has become a nonstarter for some of the Orthodox Right). Rather, polls and surveys made it clear that more and more Orthodox Jews emerged as "single issue voters." In a word, most Orthodox Jews made their way into the ballot boxes most prepared to pull the lever for the candidate who they perceived was best for Israel. Was this all to do with President Carter? Certainly not. First, the Six-Day War and its "miraculousness" had inspired many Jews in the United States that their dual-loyalties could no longer be justified. Israel needed to come before their Americanism. It infuriated some Orthodox commentators who found it downright irritating that in 1976 "both presidential candidates directed themselves to Jewish voters on the single-issue of Israel." Yet, the strategy often worked. In a rather extreme example, this is exactly what transpired in Boro Park in the early 1970s. Reported one sociologist:

Richard Nixon swept the community in 1972 by as large a plurality as he lost it in 1960 ... Young people in the community, who just four years earlier had rallied to the idealistic calls of Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy, threw their support behind Nixon in 1972. In fact, the offices of the Democratic Party in Boro Park did not even carry the names of McGovern and Shriver in their windows during the '72 campaign.

Second, and to a much lesser extent, Orthodox Jews—despite the hawkishness of their rabbinical and congregational organizations—were opposed to the Vietnam War. Like so many other Americans, they became disillusioned with the government, politics, and, of course, the Democrat presidents who were most associated with that military situation. All of this played a role in removing Orthodox Jews from the list of de facto Democrat voters.

Israel has remained the looming issue for Orthodox Jews in recent elections. To them, this meant turning to the Republican candidate with added fervor. The Orthodox Union reported that 70 percent of this community voted for Gov. George W. Bush in 2004 and then Sen. John McCain and Gov. Mitt Romney in their efforts to oppose Barack Obama. However, in the Modern Orthodox-dense Teaneck, precincts reported a slim advantage for the Democrat ticket in 2004 and 2008. In 2012, Romney edged Obama 52-47.

2016 Presidential Mock Elections

On October 20, 2016, I sent e-mails to ranking principals and Modern Orthodox day school administrators. My goal was to gain a better understanding of where Orthodox Jews stood in the current political arena, figuring that young people, as addressed above, would vote according to the impressions made upon them in their homes.

Essentially, the results confirmed the prevailing assumptions that this Orthodox community aligned with Donald Trump. Nine out of eleven Modern Orthodox day schools in the “Tristate” area overwhelmingly voted for Trump. The lopsidedness hardly jives with the results of Jewish day school mock elections recorded by the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York. Officials responsible for this effort recall that the races in the Bush and Obama eras were far tighter in the more recent tabulations. But this last election was altogether different. In one instance, students in a large New York Orthodox high school voted for Trump by a 254-25 margin. Despite the reports of the Republican candidate’s questionable comments on women, “Trump won by a landslide” at some all-girls schools. Perhaps most astounding, Trump carried 68 percent of the vote in the liberal-leaning Ramaz School, in contradistinction to how most Upper East Siders [voted](#) last November.

Trump also won in most of the so-called out-of-town Orthodox environs by a ratio of 5:2. One young woman in a Florida day school asked her fellow students in an editorial “how can we expect a man who shows no respect for women, or even his own daughter, to treat our country with the reverence it deserves as the leader of the Western World?” Another in the northeast affirmed that “Hillary is the right choice. Donald Trump is offensive and obnoxious.” For these reasons, no doubt, Clinton was more competitive in these schools; there were few Trump “landslides.” At Robert M. Beren Academy in Houston, Trump garnered 43.7 percent of the vote while Clinton claimed 40.2 percent. Interestingly, the margin of

victory in “blue” schools was also [slim](#), and within a certain margin of error. For example, high schoolers at the Melvin J. Berman Hebrew Academy in Rockville, Maryland, voted for Clinton at a 45.1 percent clip and Trump at 42.5.

A good share of Modern Orthodox day schools did not hold elections. One of these was YULA Girls High School in Los Angeles. For Brian Simon, the school’s history department chair, a mock election would have offered some interesting results. According to him, many high school girls “are inspired by the idea of a female president” but are still “very concerned by the recent developments, investigations and reports surrounding the conduct of both candidates.” In any case, Simon and his colleagues decided not to hold a mock election, contrary to the practice in prior years. The reason for this, explained Simon, was “due to the tenor and tone of this particular election’s news cycle.” The decision echoed many other day school sentiments. In fact, it has [proved](#) menacing for many teachers and students of all stripes during this election cycle. Another Orthodox day school principal reported: “we feel, due to the nature of the current political climate, we prefer to focus on the ballot measures and teaching our students more about the process and less about the current candidates.”

These concerns, for a few schools, meant changing the paradigm for election education. The same principal therefore explained that “we prefer to focus on the ballot measures and teaching our students more about the process and less about the current candidates.” The idea was shared by another head of school. His middle school students were asked to “create fictional candidates based on the Republican and Democratic platforms and had them campaign, debate and fund-raise.” This attitude reflected Simon’s decision on how to incorporate the campaign into his curriculum at YULA. “This year,” he said, “our election-based activities and projects have focused on candidate platforms on concrete, relevant issues such as health care, the economy, climate change, privacy and data security and education. We have tried to steer clear of the sensationalistic aspects of this election.”

However, for about half of the solicited schools, this quagmire meant not addressing the presidential campaigns and election in any formal manner. One school administrator put it very pithily: “I think we feel it would bring an unproductive tension into the school.” Similarly, most of the schools that held a mock election did so with great reservation (and asked to remain anonymous for this study). A number of them decided to hold the traditional vote but did so in isolation. Meaning, all other discussions, assemblies and other forms of political pageantry were muted or canceled—again, out of concern for the comportment and sensitivities of their students.

Whither Modern Orthodoxy?

The results of this mock election research confirms two important items. First, Donald Trump’s victories within the halls of Modern Orthodox day schools helps substantiate the

supposition that these students' voting-age parents also supported the Republican candidate. The reasons for Trump's success in this realm are varied. No doubt, his strong rhetorical support for Israel, like all candidates before him, played a role. In addition, one school principal figured that Trump's 'potty talk' speaks very well to ten-year-old boys." Even more educators offered that "economics" steered the mock election vote. By this, principals and teachers did not have in mind Trump's policies on the country's economy. Rather, they meant to single out a certain space for their Modern Orthodox families—or at least the perception of them—with American demographics: wealthy white men and, to a somewhat lesser extent, white women, [voted](#) in considerable numbers for Donald Trump.

That this contributed to the Modern Orthodox political calculations of these girls and boys is unsurprising, especially in light of the standoffishness demonstrated by so many day schools. In other words, it is altogether possible that Modern Orthodox Jews—children and adults—supported Trump based in large measure on decisions uninformed by Jewish education or Jewish interests. Unquestionably, there are well-reasoned arguments grounded in Jewish texts and tradition that cohere with Donald Trump's mission. Whether these are acceptable or untenable is not my point.

Instead, I am concerned that Orthodox Jews play politics based on their whiteness rather than their Jewishness. Decades ago, the leading Jewish commentator and essayist, Milton Himmelfarb, [quipped](#) that "Jews earn like Episcopalians and vote like Puerto Ricans." The clever line alluded to the point that Jews remained liberal voters despite their increased wealth. But wealth and money eventually make a difference, especially when it weighs so heavily on a community's culture. Currently, Modern Orthodox women and men need to earn a lot to afford the basics of a Modern Orthodox lifestyle; items like day school tuition, kosher food and synagogue membership, to name a few. The vast majority who cannot pay the retail rate must scramble for scholarships and subsidies, or find an [emerging community](#) that can better discount these high costs of living. All of this is infused into the community's psyche and impacts how its members make decisions.

Student newspapers revealed similar concerns. Editorials and student surveys related distress over the United States' relationship with Israel, antisemitism and political corruption. "He supports Israel more," said one freshman about Trump, "and for me Israel is my top priority." Young people also amplified their parents' concern for the economy in strident terms and ones untethered to their religious tenets or teachings. The current condition of the country's economy led one student to affirm: "I just hate Hillary. Donald Trump tells it like it is." In far calmer language, a student at a different high school explained that "from what I hear, they think Donald Trump would be the best candidate. Especially because my dad is a small business owner and economically it makes more sense for them." For the Modern Orthodox, therefore, it may well be that they now vote like Episcopalians, as well.

The move toward voting along economic lines arrives at a pivotal moment. Years ago, Modern Orthodox champions prided their communities for their ability to grapple with tensions and place disparate notions into conversation. Now, it appears, many Modern Orthodox educators are backpedaling, nervous about uneasiness and confrontation. Accordingly, those who most often wonder about "whither Modern Orthodoxy" miss the point. Our dilemma is not how to identify the right people to educate and lead the discussions. Ours is a challenge to convene the conversation at all. Not too long ago, this was the stuff that made Modern Orthodox Judaism so compelling in the first place.

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