Hayyei Sarah

Why the “Weeping” of Abraham Was Diminished: An Orthographic Exploration Inspired by the Teachings of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l

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The final word of the second verse in this week’s parashah is written in the Torah with a minuscule letter: “And Sarah died in Kiryat Arba, that is Hevron in the Land of Canaan, and Abraham came to eulogize [or mourn] Sarah and to weep for her” (Genesis 23:2). Kaf, the fourth letter of the word כה, “and to weep for her,” is writ small.

There is a classic teaching of the Ba’al Shem Tov, the eighteenth-century founder of Hasidic Judaism, that each of us is like a letter in the Torah, or as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks put it in his book of that name, that we are each “a letter in the scroll.” In the context of Genesis, the universal story of creation, one can think of Adam and Eve as prototypical humans represented by the letters of the alphabet written in the Torah scroll. Most letters are neither majuscule nor minuscule, but are regular-sized. There are times, however, when we humans feel taller, just as there are moments when we feel smaller. Those moments can be represented by the larger or smaller letters in the Torah. Here, Abraham felt diminished by the pain of losing his wife, a pain that is represented by the small kaf in the word which tells us that he wept.

There is, however, a second way of looking at the small kaf based on the comment of Philo of Alexandria, who, in his Quaestiones on Genesis, notes that Abraham only “came to eulogize Sarah and to weep for her,” but that Scripture does not report the actual eulogizing and weeping that Abraham did. Perhaps, then, the small kaf signifies not only that Abraham was diminished, but that his eulogizing and weeping was somewhat diminished.

In his masterful collection of essays on mourning, Out of the Whirlwind, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik taught of the Talmudic distinction between aveilut yeshanah, “historic mourning” for a past tragedy, and aveilut hadashah, “individual mourning” spurred by grief from a recent loss.

Jews have a unique historical consciousness; we have the practice of not just remembering our holidays and tragic days, but of reliving them. On Sukkot, we sit in booths, just as our ancestors did in the desert. On Passover, we reenact the Exodus from Egypt, eating matzah and bitter herbs. And on Tishah be-Av, we mourn for the loss of the Temple, almost as though it had been destroyed days ago and not thousands of years ago. That grief seems to be never-ending. One of Rav Soloveitchik’s students summarized how this “historic mourning” differs from individual grief:

The concept of continued, unending mourning is a special, unique aspect of aveilut yeshanah, mourning for a tragedy that occurred long ago, as opposed to aveilut hadashah,

1 Philo, Quaestiones et Solutiones in Genesin et Exodum, Genesis 23: 2-3.
mourning for the recent bereavement. In the case of avelut hadashah, there are limits, and Maimonides says⁵ that one who mourns “too much” is acting foolishly.⁴

Judaism teaches that there should be limits to the grief caused by a recent bereavement. In this context, Philo writes that to over-grieve is, as Rabbi Samuel Belkin summarized it, “a sign of selfishness.”⁵

The small kaf in רַבָּנָא יָרָא, then, teaches us two seemingly paradoxical messages: that Abraham was diminished by grief, but also that his grief, his “weeping,” had limits.

I write these words about grief only a few days after the passing of our teacher, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l. Three years ago, he visited my community, The Downtown Minyan in Lower Manhattan, to join us in prayer and in learning Torah. On that Shabbat, he reflected on a notion he has also written about: that at the time of Sarah’s death, God’s promises to Abraham had largely not been fulfilled. His written words are well worth quoting in full:

Seven times he [Abraham] had been promised the land of Canaan, yet when Sarah died he owned not one square-inch of it, not even a place in which to bury his wife. God had promised him many children, a great nation, many nations, as many as the grains of sand in the sea shore and the stars in the sky. Yet he had only one son of the covenant, Isaac, whom he had almost lost, and who was still unmarried at the age of thirty-seven. Abraham had every reason to sit and grieve.

Yet he did not. In one of the most extraordinary sequences of words in the Torah, his grief is described in a mere five Hebrew words: in English, “Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.” Then immediately we read, “And Abraham rose from his grief.” From then on, he engaged in a flurry of activity with two aims in mind: first to buy a plot of land in which to bury Sarah, second to find a wife for his son. Note that these correspond precisely to the two Divine blessings: of land and descendants. Abraham did not wait for God to act. He understood one of the profoundest truths of Judaism: that God is waiting for us to act.

How did Abraham overcome the trauma and the grief? How do you survive almost losing your child and actually losing your life-partner and still have the energy to keep going? What gave Abraham his resilience, his ability to survive, his spirit intact?⁶

The answer, Rabbi Sacks said, is one that he learned from Holocaust survivors, who “did not talk about the past, even to their marriage partners, even to their children. Instead they set about creating a new life in a new land.” The lesson he learned was that “first you have to build a future. Only then can you mourn the past.” He continued:

Abraham heard the future calling to him. Sarah had died. Isaac was unmarried. Abraham had neither land nor grandchildren. He did not cry out, in anger or anguish, to God. Instead, he heard the still, small voice saying: The next step depends on you. You must create a future that I will fill with My spirit. That is how Abraham survived the shock and grief. God forbid that we experience any of this, but if we do, this is how to survive.⁷

The small kaf reminds us that though we may be diminished by grief, we cannot let it overtake us; we must build toward a future. Rabbi Sacks frequently reminded us of the value that Jews place on education, our investment in the future. In his Maiden Speech at the House of Lords, he said:

In ancient times the Egyptians built pyramids, the Greeks built temples, the Romans built amphitheatres. Jews built schools. And because of that, alone among ancient civilizations, Judaism survived.⁸

Our emphasis on education is precisely what allows us to celebrate the holidays in such a way that we actually relive them, reexperiencing the Exodus from Egypt at the Seder and mourning for the Temple on Tishah be-Av. We are able to mourn our collective past because we build the future, and we are only able to build the future by limiting the grief for our recent losses. Aveilut yeshanah is only possible when we limit avelut hadashah. Abraham showed us the way forward; his small kaf is symbolic of that. And when we recognize that, then we, too, will move forward with unceasing faith in our capacity to build the future.⁹

³ Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Avel 13:11.
⁴ “Commentary on Kina 45 (“Lament, Zion”),” in Koren Kinot Mesorat HaRav, ed. Simon Posner (Koren, 2010), 614-615.
⁵ Rabbi Dr. Samuel Belkin, In His Image: The Jewish Philosophy of Man as Expressed in Rabbinic Tradition, (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1960), 25.
⁷ Ibid.
⁹ “Faith in the Future” is a reference to the title of Rabbi Sacks’s 2015 devar Torah on this parashah cited above.
A Eulogy for Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks Zt”l

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If you ever had the privilege to sit in a shul, or a classroom, or an auditorium, filled to the brim with people eager to hear the words of Rabbi Sacks, then you know what malchut [majesty] really is.

My friend and colleague, Rabbi Dr. Rafi Zarum, paints the picture most eloquently. He writes: “Rabbi Sacks stands up to speak, there is a hush of anticipation, “Friends, let me share with you a little bit of Torah...”” Those words take me back. There could have been a thousand people in the room, but when Rabbi Sacks approached the podium, the anticipation would be thick in the air. You could have heard a pin drop. Rabbi Zarum continues: “And then, as he spoke, the world would become a little brighter, hope became more real, God came closer, and life had more meaning.”

It is often said that Rabbi Sacks wrote and spoke with a prophetic voice. His command of language and the lofty heights of his ethical vision combined with his deep faith to give rise to prose that truly competes with the prophets of Israel. In eulogising my master and teacher, Rabbi Sacks, there is no need for exaggeration. His achievements speak for themselves. He certainly did have a prophetic voice, but – of course – he wasn’t a prophet. And yet, I truly believe that there is no exaggeration in saying that Rabbi Sacks possessed a tangible degree of Ruach Hakodesh (divine inspiration, brought about by God’s holy spirit). I say this based upon my preferred interpretation of what Ruach Hakodesh is.

King David once claimed that, “The spirit of the LORD has spoken through me, and His message is on my tongue” (II Samuel 23:3). Some of the commentators take this to be an indication that King David had attained to the level of prophecy. The Abrabanel, by contrast – citing Maimonides – disagreed. In his commentary on this chapter, he writes:

David was not among the prophets. [Maimonides] explained [that David only said that] “The spirit of the Lord has spoken through me, and His message is on my tongue” in order to make known that he had arrived at the level, not of fully fledged prophecy, but of Ruach Hakodesh.

But what does that mean? The Abrabanel goes on to suggest that Ruach Hakodesh is a Divine influence that:

alights upon a person’s faculty of speech and intellect, to speak awesome words in the manner of poetry and wisdom; not to see [as the Prophet does] wondrous visions, and not to understand [hitherto fore concealed] notions of Divinity, but with regard to the perfection of speech in the manner of wisdom and poetry.

Rabbi Sacks had a tremendous intellect, a profound wisdom, a set of very human and humane sensibilities, and an appreciation for beauty. His searing visions of justice and hope were informed by his rootedness in the Jewish tradition, and thus they came from the Rabbis and the Prophets; but he was not a prophet himself. And yet, he had an ability to express those ideas and those visions in words that wouldn’t merely be accessible to others, but would pierce their hearts, and capture their souls; I find it hard to accept that that was a totally natural phenomenon. To hear Rabbi Sacks speak was sometimes to feel oneself vividly in the presence of something supernatural. This wasn’t merely malchut [majesty]. It was Ruach Hakodesh.

One time, I had the pleasure of seeing him participate on a small panel at a conference organised by President Shimon Peres. The panel had been a rather dull affair, and Rabbi Sacks could tell that the interest of the audience was flagging. And then, all of a sudden, he made an intervention that sent a bolt of electricity through the audience, a sudden burst of eloquence. As the audience filed out at the end of the session, I was lucky enough to be walking with Rabbi Sacks and his wife, Lady Elaine, and another dedicated student of the Rabbi, Jonny Lipęzer. The Rabbi turned to us, and with an almost cheeky glint in his eye, but without undermining the genuine humility for which he was known, he said something to the effect of “that session really needed a lift.” His ability to dial up elegance and eloquence on demand like that seemed, to me, supernatural.

His majestic air, and the holy spirit that elevated his language, to speak the message of the Lord, were both, I think, a consequence – a mere side effect – of the fact that Rabbi Sacks’s life and work were grounded in a deep and intimate relationship with God Himself.

The Anglican Priest, Giles Fraser, put it better than I could when he wrote, of Rabbi Sacks, that “all of what he said was grounded in a very intense personal relationship with God. It ran through him like the words in a stick of Blackpool rock.” A Blackpool rock is a long stick-shaped, hard boiled candy. It often has a word or phrase written all the way through its centre, always appearing on the surface of its outside edge.

To be in the presence of Rabbi Sacks was to be in the presence of majesty and holiness because Rabbi Sacks, himself, lived always – or so it seemed to me – in the presence of majesty and holiness. He was a Godly man.

Before I share some of the ways in which he touched my life, personally, as a mentor, I’d like to share some of his teachings which have moved and shaped me most.
The first is his notion that Judaism is, what he often called, a future-oriented faith. In his book, To Heal a Fractured World, he wrote that hope, in Judaism, is:

a refusal to give up on your deepest ideals, but a refusal likewise to say, in a world still disfigured by evil, that the Messiah has yet come, and the world is saved. There is work still to be done, the journey is not yet complete, and it depends on us: we who now all too briefly stride upon the stage of time.10

One of the defining elements of Judaism itself, according to Rabbi Sacks, is its dogged refusal to believe that the messiah has come already; its refusal to look at the world as somehow already saved. Our faith is pinned upon the not present. This conviction has many ramifications. It demands a sort of intellectual humility. If you believe that the story isn’t complete, you must be willing to accept that its full meaning cannot yet be grasped.

Much the same idea was vividly formulated by Michael Wyschogrod, who wanted to distinguish between Jewish theology and Jewish thought. Jewish thinking about God was well and good; but Jews are in no place to make a science – a logos or an ology – about God. He argued that Jews don’t do theology. He wrote:

To think is to shed light, to create a limited clearing. But the clearing is always surrounded by darkness and it is easy to forget the darkness and to see only the light. But Jewish thought cannot lose sight of the darkness. This is so because Jewish thought is on the way. The Jewish story is incomplete. We do not see the outcome... It is not a question of uncertainty. The redemption has been promised by God and therefore will come. But because it has not yet come, the story of Israel is still happening and cannot therefore be laid before us as an object of contemplation. Before faith lies the darkness of the future and therefore no logos of God is possible. At least not to man. And not now.11

Of course, Rabbi Sacks and Michael Wyschogrod were both rightly described as theologians. But the point is that their theology was in principle incomplete; and thus, by Wyschogrod’s somewhat idiosyncratic definition, they were thinkers rather than theologians.

Theologians too often talk as if they know God’s thoughts and character traits better than God does Himself. But Jewish thought, for Rabbi Sacks, is rooted in the Biblical notion that God’s thoughts and ways are not like our thoughts and ways (Isaiah 55:8); in the medieval doctrine of apophaticism, according to which God’s nature somehow defies the limits of language; and in the Hassidic notion that the ephemeral heavenly Torah can only come into the world clothed in human language, and that it therefore has to submit to some degree of dilution.

When it comes to matters of theology, the full truth lies beyond comprehension, just as it lies beyond the present moment. It waits for us in the eschaton.

Rabbi Sacks had a profound belief in the reality of God, but he recognised that this was a reality that can only be partially grasped in the unsaved here and now. Bertrand Russell once said of philosophical analysis that it “gives us the truth, and nothing but the truth, yet it can never give us the whole truth.”12 Rabbi Sacks, I’m sure, would say the same thing about theological analysis. This explains, in part, how he could believe that Judaism, whilst true, and whilst imposing real obligations and duties upon the Jew, could have no monopoly on religious truth, thus making room for the Dignity of Difference.

This was an echo of the great teaching of Rabbi Yosef Mordehcai Leiner, the Ishbitzer Rebbe, who said:

“If you walk in the path of my statutes...” (Leviticus 26:3): “If” indicates uncertainty. That is to say that even one who walks in the path of the Torah must also be in a state of uncertainty, since perhaps he is not fulfilling the will of God completely. The will of God is exceedingly profound.

On this view, Jewish law is only an approximation of God’s infinite will. It is the best we have. We have no authority to jettison any of its details. We must cleave to it fastidiously. But it is, perforce, an approximation. Human thought can only create a clearing in the darkness. The whole truth awaits us only in the eschaton. And, in the words of Rabbi Tarfon, adopted as the official motto of Rabbi Sacks’s Chief Rabbinate: “It is not incumbent upon you to complete the job” – even in Jewish thought, we shouldn’t expect to achieve a complete understanding of the Divine – “but nor are you free to desist from it” – because we can, at least, shed some light.13 These sound like controversial ideas. In actual fact, they’re deeply rooted in almost every stratum of the rockface of Jewish texts.


12 The Principles of Mathematics, §138

13 Avot 2:16
They're rooted in the fact that Judaism has always been a future-oriented faith.

The next, and more important, principle that shapes me personally and which, I think, Rabbi Sacks was most eager to emphasise, is the centrality and pervasiveness of ethics throughout the woof and warp of Jewish life and thought.

In his *Covenant and Conversation* series, on parshat Bereshit [the first reading of the book of Genesis], Rabbi Sacks writes about the genre of the Torah. This is a question that has deep philosophical significance and plays a central role in some of my own work on the philosophy of Judaism. To which genre is the Torah a contribution? He writes:

Torah is not a book of history, even though it includes history. It is not a book of science, even though the first chapter of Genesis ... is the necessary prelude to science. It represents the first time people saw the universe as the product of a single creative will, and therefore as intelligible rather than capricious and mysterious...  

Having ruled these options out, Rabbi Sacks continues. The Torah is not history nor science:

Rather, it is, first and last, a book about how to live. Everything it contains – not only mitzvot [commandments] but also narratives, including the narrative of creation itself – is there solely for the sake of ethical and spiritual instruction. I don’t think Rabbi Sacks was overstating his position. I think he truly believed that every single detail of the Torah has to be mined for “ethical and spiritual instruction.” This is a quite remarkable claim. Even the genealogies: “so-and-so begot so-and-so...”; until we have figured out how a verse is supposed to shape our lives and our deeds, then we haven’t plumbed its depths. Ethics is the beating heart of Judaism.

In his *To Heal a Fractured World*, Rabbi Sacks develops a crucially important account of the Rabbinic notion of *darkei shalom* [the ways of peace]. One place in which this notion is most radically articulated is the *Tosefta* in Tractate Gittin (3:18), which teaches:

If a city has both Jewish and idol worshiping residents, then the charity collectors should collect from Jews and idolaters because of *darkei shalom*, and they should sustain [with those funds] the poor idolaters alongside the poor Jews because of *darkei shalom*, and they should eulogise and bury the dead idolaters because of *darkei shalom*, and they should comfort the mourners among the idolaters because of *darkei shalom*.

There’s no doubt that the Bible itself only imposes an obligation upon Jews towards Gentiles if those Gentiles renounce idolatry. Moreover, the vision of eschatological peace expressed by the prophets of Israel tends to be predicated upon the universally shared monotheism that shall emerge at that time – “And the LORD shall be King over all the earth; in that day shall the LORD be One, and His name one.” (Zechariah 14:9) But, in these days, before the coming of the messiah; in these non-Biblical days in which open miracles are not the norm, and God’s face is painfully hidden; in the here and now, the Rabbis tell us to love the Gentile without any preconditions.

Even if the Gentile is an *idoler*, we are to support their poor, visit their sick, bury their dead, and comfort their mourners, *just* as we would to the Jewish poor, the Jewish sick, the Jewish dead, and to Jewish mourners.

Why? Is it perhaps because we are in exile, and often subject to the rule of Gentiles, such that we don’t want to provoke hatred? Rabbi Sacks forcefully argued that this is the wrong explanation. There is a category of Jewish law directed towards the prevention of enmity – enmity within the Jewish community, and enmity between Jews and Gentiles. Those laws have the form: don’t do such and such because it will provoke enmity. That is to say, those laws are all framed in negative terms, in terms of what we *shouldn’t* do – unlike the laws of *darkei shalom* which are all positive, framed in terms of what we *should* do. Moreover, those laws are always explicitly justified in terms of the prevention of enmity (*mipnei eiva*), and not in terms of promoting the ways of peace (*mipnei darkei shalom*). In other words: the Rabbinic obligations upon Jews to care for Gentiles, *irrespective* of their beliefs – the duties motivated by *darkei shalom* – are not some two-faced political compromise.

According to Rabbi Sacks, the obligations of *darkei shalom* emerge because nobody can be held particularly culpable today for their failure to see the truth of monotheism. We should try to spread the truth of monotheism by peaceful persuasion, where possible, but, until the coming of the Messiah, and the overwhelming evidence of God’s presence that will emerge in those days, the love of peace and justice, which stand at the heart of the Jewish religion, are not to be conditioned upon the belief of its beneficiaries. Why? Because God’s face, right now, is hidden.

Indeed, Rabbi Sacks points out, these laws of *darkei shalom* (ways of peace) take their name from the verse in Proverbs (3:17), traditionally understood as a description of the Torah itself: “Her *ways* are ways of pleasantness and all her paths

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15 Ibid.
are peaceful.” In other words, the Rabbinic obligation to extend kindness, even to idolaters, is actually the very essence of the Torah itself.\textsuperscript{16}

The amazing thing about his book, \textit{To Heal a Fractured World}, is that Rabbi Sacks equally challenges the people to his left and to his right. To his left, he addresses the many Jews in this world for whom the Jewish identity boils down to nothing much more than a fervent love for social justice. Social justice is certainly important, but, according to Rabbi Sacks, it is far from enough. A human cannot truly flourish, he thought, without a life of ritual lived in the presence of God.

The rhythm and discipline of ritual is not some sort of optional add-on to the ethical life, but an essential feature of it. With his inimitable turn of phrase and facility with analogy, he wrote, “ritual is to ethics what physical exercise is to health. Medical knowledge alone will not make me healthy. That requires daily discipline, a ritual – and religion is the matrix of ritual.”\textsuperscript{17}

Equally, he turned to those on the religious right, for whom Judaism was all about halakhic obedience, ritual, and social conformity. How can a person take pride in their care never to mix wool and linen, and only to eat the most strictly supervised kosher food, if they don’t care about the plight of refugees and climate change? Have they forgotten that \textit{darkei shalom} is the very beating heart of the Torah? Have they forgotten that every single detail of the Torah is included “solely for the sake of ethical and spiritual instruction”?

Two of my beloved mentors once spoke about my own work, without me in the room. Maureen Kendler of blessed memory was telling Rabbi Sacks about a project I was working on, a great big book of Jewish metaphysics. She told me what he told her: metaphysics is of great importance, but only if it has something to say about how we should live our lives. Everything, for Rabbi Sacks, came back to ethics. And so, I tried my hardest to conclude that book (\textit{The Principles of Judaism}) in that same spirit; if it doesn’t make us better people, it’s unlikely ever to be worthwhile.

This brings me to one last message that Rabbi Sacks had for all of us, which begins to reveal how important he was in my own life. He taught us that God has faith in us. This thought appears in various places in Rabbi Sacks’s writings. It also permeated his life.

I find this teaching in the verse of Deuteronomy (32:4): “The Rock!—His deeds are perfect, Yea, all His ways are just; A faithful God, never false, True and upright is He.” God is a faithful God. Sometimes, this is understood as God being a trustworthy God. When we wake up in the morning, we thank God for his “great faithfulness” in restoring our souls to us. The Midrashic sources for that prayer make clear that God’s trustworthiness is the issue. We hand him our souls each night, and he can be trusted to return them to us in the morning, or in the end of days, as he resurrects the dead. But the \textit{Sifri} (§307) offers us a different understanding of our verse. God is a faithful God, it says, “because he had faith in the world and created it.” The creation itself was God’s expression of faith in us.

When you wake up in the morning, God expresses faith in you. Surely, many wicked people will wake up tomorrow morning. But if they do wake up, then God is telling them that he still has faith in them to turn everything around; to make the most of the rest of his or her days.

Rabbi Sacks wasn’t afraid of doubt and uncertainty. But it seems to me that his doubt was never focused upon the existence of God. He knew God too intimately for doubt like that. The locus of his doubt, when it appeared, was centered upon humanity. When he was asked where God was during the holocaust, his stock response was to ask not “where was God”, but “where was humanity?” And sometimes it can be hard, as a Jew; not hard to believe in \textit{God, per se}, but to believe in Jews! We Jews so often fall so far short of the light that we’re supposed to be. I’m not sure that Rabbi Sacks had a \textit{philosophical} response to that problem. Instead, I think, he simply took comfort from the faith that God has in us, even when we lack faith in ourselves!

Just as God has faith in us, Rabbi Sacks would invest tremendous faith in his students, and followers. I think he believed that putting faith in people could help them to live up to their potential. This I know from personal experience.

In the aftermath of the controversy surrounding the first edition of \textit{The Dignity of Difference}, I was in Yeshiva in Israel. I was blessed to be studying Talmud with a tremendous thinker and educator, Rabbi Shmuel Nacham. But the wider environment in the Yeshiva was toxic. I was being bullied by certain Rabbis. Moreover, those Rabbis were publicly defaming Rabbis Sacks. One of them threw his books onto the floor of the study hall and stood on them. I didn’t know what to do. I felt so crushed and victimised, but I knew I would be unlikely ever to have another opportunity to learn Talmud from a teacher like Rabbi Nacham, and to concentrate all of my time, before the responsibilities of marriage, fatherhood, and career, to the study of Torah. So, I wrote to Rabbi Sacks. I told him the whole story. I didn’t hide from him what people were saying about him and his work. I laid everything on the table. This is part of his response:

\textsuperscript{16} This presentation of \textit{darkei shalom} appears in chapter 8 of \textit{To Heal a Fractured World}.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{To Heal a Fractured World}, p. 171
Do not come home at this stage, please. It would be the wrong decision. Please feel free to email me whenever you feel the need. One day the Jewish people will be very proud to have one such as you; and Hashem will surely give you, in the fullness of time, the right rebbeim [teachers] and chaverim [friends and colleagues], as well as the opportunities to use all those facilities to the full which you now feel are, in Milton’s words “lodged with me useless.”

In another e-mail, he told me:

[Y]ou have my full encouragement. May you be guided by one simple (or perhaps not so simple) principle: may all you do be a Kiddush ha-Shem [a sanctification of God’s name]. Let’s continue the conversation. You are destined for great things, and Hashem surely wishes you to use your gifts to bring people close to Him.

Rabbis Sacks said that his life was shaped by a handful of people who believed in him more than he believed in himself. Rabbi Sacks certainly believed in me more than I believe in myself, and that faith he had in me continues to inspire me to strive to be better. Moreover, his faith in me was just an expression of the faith that he knew God to have in every person.

Let me add to these reflections a couple of things that have come up in the days immediately subsequent to his passing.

Rabbi Sacks was the first person for whom I tore kriya [the ritualistic tearing of clothing as an act of mourning for a relative or Rabbi]. My children have seen how grief stricken I’ve been by his passing. So, one night, I was putting our 9-year-old daughter, Hadassa, to bed and we decided to read, instead of a bedtime story. Celebrating Life is a collection of little snippets and thoughts, and so, unlike his other books, I was able to make it accessible to her, with some slight doctoring.

One of the chapters I read to her spoke of the empirical evidence that correlates religious devotion and longevity. Hadassa looked up at me and said that Rabbi Sacks didn’t have a particularly long life. She worried. Wasn’t that a powerful counterexample to what we were reading?

I didn’t know what to say. I carried on reading, and Rabbi Sacks went on to answer us both. He said that longevity isn’t really what matters. It’s very nice if religious devotion provides it, but it’s not the point. “Whether or not [religious faith] makes us live longer, it lets us live each day to the full. Faith is about how we live, not how long.”

As I read those words, I felt that he was wiping tears from my face and telling me that he was fine. He had lived his life well. He had packed each day with meaning, significance, and achievement. He was the very epitome of the Zohar’s understanding of the Biblical phrase, ba bayamim, comely of days.

“And Abraham was old, comely of days...” (Genesis 24:1). According to the Zohar (I.224a), it means that Abraham came before God dressed in each and every day that he had lived. Each and every day of Abraham’s life was a testimony to his righteousness. He wore each day as a badge of honour. Rabbi Sacks, as an energetic and passionate 72-year-old, was far from being an old man, but he was certainly ba bayamim. He didn’t live long, but few people live so well.

The other moment in which Rabbi Sacks spoke to me, in the week of his passing, was when I turned to Psalm 40, which just happened to be the reading of the day, in the 929 cycle of Biblical chapters. To use Rabbi Sacks’s translation, it said:

To do Your will, God, is my desire; Your teachings course through my insides.
I proclaimed Your righteousness before the great assembly;
see – I have not sealed my lips, Lord, as You know.
I have not kept Your justice secret in my heart;
I proclaim Your devotion and salvation;
I have not denied Your loyalty and truth before the great assembly.

God’s teachings coursed through the insides of Rabbi Sacks like the writing on a piece of Blackpool rock. Few Rabbinic figures in the history of Judaism, from Abraham and Sarah until today, have taught words of Torah to such great assemblies: from Windsor Palace to Lambeth Palace; from the Pope to the Dalai Lama; from Presidents and Prime Ministers, and from Kings and Queens; the Torah of Rabbi Sacks was in high demand. He proclaimed God’s righteousness before them all.

The Talmud predicts that, in messianic times, Torah will be taught by the princes of Judah in the amphitheatres of the Western world (Tractate Megillah 6a). It might not be an amphitheatre, but Rabbi Sacks’s Ted Talk has been seen by over 2 million people; and he was certainly a prince of Judah.

It would be traditional to end this eulogy by praying that his memory should be a blessing. And yet, I think he would rather we pray for his memory to be a challenge. His memory should challenge us always to strive to be better; to embrace a life of ritual, “exercise for the soul”, and to ensure that an ethic of

Streamlining Services: What Can We Learn from High Holidays 5781?
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Virtually every American Modern Orthodox congregation omitted something from their typical High Holidays liturgy this year. What would have been a four hour Rosh Hashanah morning service for many was trimmed down to a meager two and a half hours. More than one congregant has already remarked to me that they would be willing to pay twice the amount for their seats if they are guaranteed the same experience next year. While he may have expressed that sentiment tongue in cheek, I believe that there are many of us - congregants and rabbis included - who have begun to contemplate if we need to return to a complete four hour service. As the musician Arthur Fields put it in 1919: “How ya gonna keep’sem down on the farm after they’ve seen Paree?”

My goal is not to dictate policy to any particular synagogue. Rather, my hope is to provide halachic sources in the efforts of generating a healthy discussion about how to make services efficacious and efficient. Unfortunately, the conversation about streamlining services is many times stunted. It is easy to halt such a conversation if we imagine that the only people who care about the timing of services are the people slipping out to kiddush club or the nudniks holding audible conversations in the back of the sanctuary. Because of this perception, many genuine synagogue-goers who come primarily to pray are beset with guilt for wishing that services be run more expeditiously. My goal is to show that there is little reason to feel ashamed, as many of our great rabbinic leaders shared a similar sentiment.

On August 30, 2020, R. Hershel Schachter published a responsum (Piskei Corona #50: Inyanai Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur) in which he advised that piyyutim (poetic liturgical additions) may be omitted since they only bear the status of a minhag (custom). R. Asher Weiss (Minhat Asher, Responsa for Coronavirus, 3rd Edition, no. 4) administered a similar ruling, though he advocated for maintaining sentimentally significant piyyutim such as Unetaneh Tokef.19 Rabbis Schachter and Weiss were not the first to suggest this, as R. Akiva Eiger, who is cited as precedent, provided a similar dispensation for omitting piyyutim during a cholera outbreak in the early 19th century:

> While these authorities’ willingness to omit parts of the traditional liturgy indicates a degree of flexibility, there still remains an intrinsic limitation within such an approach: The implication of their respective responsa indicates that the normative Ashkenazic community would be required to recite its standard piyyutim when there is no longer a sha’at hadowekh (extenuating circumstances).22

This should not come as a surprise, since the innovation of piyyutim known as krovetz have enjoyed support from foundational halachic authorities, most notably Rabbeinu Tam and Ra’avad (cited in Tur Orah Hayyim 68), Rosh (Berakhot 5:21) and Maharil (cited in Rema Orah Hayyim 68:1). Additionally, R. Elazar Fleckes, is often invoked for providing an impassioned approbation of piyyutim within the very first responsum of his work Teshuvah me-Ahavah (no. 1).

Although there were certainly authorities who approved of the incorporation of piyyutim, this practice was not without halakhic controversy. Tur (ad loc.) cites Ramah and Rambam both of whom oppose additions to the accepted procedure of prayers on the basis of Berakhot 11a.24 Along the same lines, Shulhan Arukh (Orah Hayyim 68:1) rules that one may not insert piyyutim into the Blessings of Shema since it would

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19 See also Responsa Zekher Yehosef (Orah Hayyim Vol. 4, no. 213), which is cited in support for the position of omitting piyyutim.

20 It is intriguing to note that an abridged Rosh Hashanah service for Rabbi Akiva Eiger would still take five hours.

21 Translation is made accessible by Rabbi Dr. Edward Reichman in his article, “From Cholera to Coronavirus: Recurring Pandemics, Recurring Rabbinic Responses”, Tradition Online. Source: Natan Gestetner, Pesakim ve-Takanot Rabbi Akiva Eiger (Jerusalem, 5731), letter 20, 70ff.

22 This is well documented in the Tur and Shulhan Arukh (Orah Hayyim 68). See also Ma’aseh Rav (no. 127).

23 However Jacob ben Asher (author of Tur), reports that his father Asher ben Jehiel who is the author of Rosh, disagreed with Rabbeinu Tam’s support for this practice. This creates doubt as to whether one can count Rosh among the supporters of piyyutim.

24 The same fundamental dispute manifests itself between R. Yosef Karo and Rema in Orah Hayyim (112:2).
constitute a disruption to the standardized formula. While Rema (ibid) is more accommodating, he writes that “one who is lenient and does not recite them [piyyutim] has not lost out.”

Even if one manages to circumvent the issue of disrupting the standardized formula recorded by Shulhan Arukh, there are additional issues that need to be reckoned with. Pri Hadash (Orah Hayyim Siman 112) based on the Talmud (Berakhot 21a), mounts a fierce opposition to adding piyyutim, at least during weekly Shabbat services:

Nowadays, in our multitude of sins, we squander our time with piyyutim. And due to their great length, everyone stops to talk with anyone who is within their vicinity. But why do we act more righteous than the sages of the Talmud, and instead of taking their message and common sense when they say in Berakhot (21a) that in truth a person is supposed to pray all eighteen blessings [of the Shemoneh Esrei] but ‘the Rabbis did not want to burden him [with reciting so many blessings] out of honor for [resting on] the Sabbath’...And behold, now there are many ignoramuses who could not care less for the words of our Sages and instead seek to impose a burden on both ourselves and others [by adding piyyutim i.e. extra prayers] – these people ought to pray all eighteen blessings of the Shemoneh Esrei on the Sabbath!

And I call upon heaven and earth as my witnesses! For there are a number of cities which I have passed through which recite Shema after a fourth of the day has passed and tefilat ha-shakhar after a third of the day has passed. Behold! They began by degrading the reading of Shema, which is a Biblical commandment that cannot be made up. They have since heaped evil upon evil and have neglected Shemoneh Esrei which is Rabbinically mandated...

According to Pri Hadash, not only is it not pious to append piyyutim to the liturgy, but it takes a degree of hubris! We are not more righteous than the Sages of the Talmud that we should add on to what they have already deemed fit. Therefore, Pri Hadash concludes “that which R. Elazar HaKalir [one of the great paytanim] composed was designated for his generation alone and not for the generations that ensued...Therefore, all who heed my voice and curtail as many piyyutim as possible will extend the longevity and pleasantness of his days.”

In a similarly heated fashion, R. Yaakov Emden (Responsa She’eilat Ya’avetz, Vol. 1 Siman 64) penned a scathing rebuke in which he condemns the addition of mi she-beirakh prayers on Shabbat, even for the moderately ill:

...According to the Talmud Yerushalmi that is cited by the Tur (Orah Hayyim 188), in principle we should not say the fourth blessing of Birkat Hamazon (grace after meals) [on the Sabbath, since it makes a request of God], but we continue to do so because the it has been formalized into the text by the Rabbis...The reason that there is an imperative to refrain from making requests of God on Shabbos is because of the injunction “that your speech on Shabbos should not be the same as during the week”...This applies as long as someone is in serious danger; anyone who is not in danger should instead have faith in the merit of Shabbos rather than beseech God the way that they would during the week...Along a similar line of reasoning, in principle we should pray all eighteen blessings of the Shemoneh Esrei on Shabbat, but the Rabbis curtailed it to only seven blessings because of tirha de-tzibura – meaning, we are commanded to enjoy (l’aneig) ourselves during the Sabbath, therefore it is inappropriate to spend extra time on making requests of God like we would do during the week...This injunction applies whether the mi she-beirakh request is made for an individual or even for the general public...Therefore, this practice of making extra requests on Shabbat is erroneous and has nothing for them to rely on. The people practicing this are doing it for their own [selfish] benefit and gratification! ...Certainly, a mi she-beirakh for every individual that wishes to have one is inappropriate and constitutes a major violation of tirha de-tzibura. Nowadays, they extend services so long that it takes until midday (hotzot) to conclude! Shame to the proponents of this practice – I would put an end to this, if only I had the power.

Between Pri Hadash and R. Yaakov Emden, we are presented with three issues when it comes to incorporating liturgy beyond the formulae of the Talmudic sages such as piyyutim or mi she-beirakh:

25 Cf. Shibolei ha-Leket (no. 28).
26 See Mishnah Berurah’s (68:1) interpretation of the Talmud in Tractate Berakhot (11a) and his presentation of Kesef Mishnah (Laws of Blessings 1:7).
1) **Technical**—By adding time to services, a congregation runs the risk of missing the appointed time for reciting Shema and Shemoneh Esrei.

2) **Fundamental**—It is presumptuous to add to what the Sages have already determined adequate.

3) **Fundamental**—The additional time spent on these prayers constitutes a *tirha de-tzibbura*, an imposition on the congregation. This imposition is not simply problematic since it does not honor *kavod ha-tzibbur* (dignity of the congregation), but it also infringes on *oneg shabbat*, the enjoyment of the Sabbath. Therefore, Mishnah Berurah (53:36) based on *Yam shel Shlomo* (no. 50) rules, that while a congregation may generally forgo an imposition on their time, a prayer leader would not be permitted to excessively extend services on Shabbat and Holidays even with the congregation’s consent. The reason that the congregation cannot waive their own *tirha de-tzibbura* in this instance is because the honor of the Shabbat and Holiday are also at stake.\(^\text{27}\)

If we read *Pri Hadash* and R. Yaakov Emden on a superficial level, we might erroneously walk away thinking that it is imperative to make prayer services as swift as possible on Shabbat. However, R. Ben-Zion Uziel (*Mishpeiti Uziel* Vol. 3, *Orah Hayyim* no. 7) clarifies that there is a critical distinction between the quantity of prayers versus the quality of prayer:

> In my humble opinion, the Rema only spoke [out against lengthening services] in a case where they *added on* [extraneous] *beseechments* that relate to the theme of the [mandatory] blessings or with *adding words* into the formulation of the blessings. This is what *Mahatzit ha-Shekel* means when he comments “and [Rema wrote this] because it [these extra prayers] take up large swaths of time thereby causing *tirha de-tzibbura*. However, if they are extending the length of services so that the congregants will have *adequate time to pray in a meticulous manner*, it is in fact a *mitzvah* to wait for them so that they do not have to miss answering to *Kedushah* with the congregation. And this is reasonable, after all, do you think that because some of us want to rush through services with insufficient concentration and inaccurate pronunciation that it should be to the detriment of those who wish to pray in a plausibly appropriate manner?

There is a difference between additional prayers and obligatory prayers. While many of the aforementioned authorities were opposed to incorporating *piyyutim*, *mi she-beirakhs*, and other non-essential prayers, even they would likely concede that a synagogue is required to allot a reasonable amount of time to recite obligatory prayers, such as *Shemoneh Esrei*, with sufficient *kavanah* (concentration). As R. Binyomin Zilber (*Az Nidabru* Vol. 2, 79:3 aptly puts it: The prayer leader is called the “*shaliah tzibbur*” (the representative of the congregation) not the “*shaliah shel yehidim*” (the representative of a few individuals). While a congregation may choose to omit non-essential liturgy, it is imperative that it still provides sufficient time for the majority of the congregants to recite the core prayers with adequate *kavanah*.

On the topic of the prayer leader, we should note that even if a congregation opts to streamline the text of its services, it is of little avail if the appointed prayer leader decides to lengthen each prayer with excessively drawn out melodies. *Ri Migash*, in his responsa (no. 108), addresses the case of a prayer leader who chooses to take his time. He writes that the prayer leader should act with “*derekh ertz u-mussar*” (common decency) by not causing the congregation to wait for him. Clearly it is not etiquette for a prayer leader to opt by his own initiative to extend services beyond the congregation’s preference. Rashba, in his responsa (Vol. 1 *Siman* 215),\(^\text{28}\) goes a step further by strongly condemning prayer leaders who make services longer than necessary for the sake of displaying their voice and receiving accolades:

> And it was taught in a *baraaita* that we do not stand in prayer from a place of conversation nor from a place of frivolity nor from a place of lightheadness and nor from a place of inane words. Therefore, if the prayer leader’s intention is to make his voice heard and take joy in the fact that the congregants praise his voice, that is *abhorrent*. And it is a scenario like this that the verse refers to when it states in Isaiah (12:8), “…she lifted her voice upon me, therefore I despised her.” In any case, it is inappropriate to lengthen the prayer services since in many places we are instructed to curtail out of concern for *tirha de-tzibbura*. For example, R. Yehuda recorded that the custom of R. Akiva was to shorten his prayer time when he prayed with the congregation...\(^\text{29}\)

While it is difficult to quantify what constitutes *shlepping* (dragging along), it is clear from Rashba that the prayer leader needs to move at a pace which keeps the needs of the congregation as his top priority. To accomplish this, there are

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\(^{27}\) *Beur Halakhah* (529:1 s.v. Keitzad) where he implies that this issue is rooted in the nature of *Yom Tov* as opposed to there being an intrinsic necessity to expedite prayer services.

\(^{28}\) *Responsa of Rashba* (1:115) where he further elaborates on the importance of mitigating *tirha de-tzibbura*.

\(^{29}\) This ruling is codified in *Shulhan Arukh* (*Orah Hayyim* 53:11).
congregations who post a schedule detailing which section the prayer leader should be up to at specific times.30

Prior to Rosh Hashanah, I drafted a guide for my synagogue, in which I have a rabbinic role, which outlined precisely what we would be skipping and how long each section of services should take. Many of our seasoned prayer leaders were aghast when I instructed them to omit almost every piyyut. How could we expect our congregants to feel connected to God in the absence of the hymns and melodies that have become a part and parcel of our High Holiday experience? How could we expect that our prayers should be accepted by God if we spend less time in synagogue than any other year? The answer, I shared, is that less is sometimes more: *ke-shehm shekibalti sekhar al ha-drishah kakh ani mekabel sekhar al ha-perishah* - just as God rewards me for expounding so too He rewards me for refraining (Kiddushin 57a). When it comes to additional prayers, it is preferable to pray a little with proper concentration than a multitude without (Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim 1:4). This was not only relevant for our recent holiday season, but rings true for how we pray in all contexts. If we add too much to services and are not cognizant of the nature of our congregations, we run the risk of reaching a point of diminishing returns. While there are many of us, myself included, who benefit from the poignant tunes and connect to God through heartfelt song, eventually we arrive at a point where the specter of remaining one more hour in synagogue becomes daunting to the point of distraction. It is this very concern that, perhaps, led *Tur* (ibid.) to conclude: “Nonetheless, it is preferable to omit [piyyutim] for anyone who is able to do so. For it is the cause of people chattering empty and meaningless speech [during services].”

At any rate, it is clear that many great Rabbinic giants such as Rashba, *Pri Hadash*, R. Emden, and many others felt the same way that many of us do. If we do all that we can to concentrate during services and genuinely attempt to communicate with God, then there is little more that can be asked from us. I do not presume to recommend what should remain from High Holidays 5781 and what should revert back to High Holidays 5780.31 Though, I can suggest that any rabbi who wishes to remove piyyutim and melodies from his synagogue’s liturgy should also be prepared to trim down his sermon to achieve the same goal.

There is a legitimate conversation to be had about streamlining services in the years to come. Whatever the decision, it must be done with sensitivity to tradition and the character of the particular congregation. I hope that the material I provided will serve as a basis for a genuine, respectful, and source-based discourse.

**Rav Nachum Rabinovitch and the Art of Ancient Dyeing**

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"The Worst Jobs in History," a lesser-known but very entertaining BBC series, ran sporadically from 2004 to 2006. Just as it sounds, it was an engaging presentation of some of the truly repulsive career choices made throughout the ages. One of the most highly rated episodes—which suggests that this job falls somewhere near the top of the unfortunate list—describes the ancient profession of sea snail-dyeing. The show features an interview with a certain John Edmonds who, dressed in medieval garb, demonstrates the steps involved in the dyeing process. We watch as he smashes the snails with a hammer, ferments their putrefied dye glands in a murky chemical concoction, tastes a sample of the rancid mixture to test its readiness, and finally, under incredibly malodorous conditions, dips a tuft of wool into the dye. The beautiful color, which slowly appears before our eyes, belies its disagreeable origins. Rav Nachum Rabinovitch zt”l, *Rosh Yeshiva* of *Yeshivat Ma’aleh Adumim*, was undoubtedly unaware of the part he played in the making of that memorable episode. But first, let me back up a bit.

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Lustrous dyes obtained from snails living in the Mediterranean Sea and the fabrics dyed with them were once the cornerstone of the economy in the ancient Near East. Merchants greedily viewed them through the lens of financial opportunity, and buyers saw them as symbols of status and opulence. But to the Jews, however, they were to be sanctified, particularly the sky-blue wool known in the Bible as *tekhelet*. It adorned the Temple walls and curtains, comprised the clothes of the High Priest, and, of course, a thread of *tekhelet* was worn by Jews as a reminder of their holiness and spiritual responsibility. At some point around the seventh century CE, however, due in part to war, persecution, and the vagaries of history, knowledge of the process of the manufacture of *tekhelet*, and the secrets of obtaining – or even identifying – its marine source, slipped into obscurity. The verse in Numbers, “Let them attach a cord of *tekhelet*...” (15:38), continued to be recited daily by Jews in the *Shema* prayer. But it was transformed from a practical directive—which the Talmud describes as equal in import to all the other commandments (*Menahot* 43b)—to a reference to an arcane *mitzvah* to be

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30 Oreah Ne’eman (Vol. 3, Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim 124:1).
31 There is a legitimate caveat when it comes to changing a congregation’s prior customs. Even if a synagogue unanimously reaches the conclusion that it would benefit from decreasing its piyyutim, they will still need to reckon with the laws of abrogating a communal custom. Moreover, while some piyyutim have been accepted as optional (evidenced by their varying prominence in different mahzorim), piyyutim such as *Unetaneh Tokef* appear to be universally accepted within the Ashkenazic community. However, see Sedei Hemed (Vol. 4, Sec. The Synagogue, no. 37) where he revoked a communal custom that caused an untenable imposition on his congregation. I hope to elaborate on this source in a future essay.
reinstated in the distant future, perhaps only in messianic times.

Modern investigation into tekhelet and the hillazon (the Talmudic term for the marine creature), both secular and Jewish, has been ongoing for over 200 years. Most notable among the Jewish scholars who were among the attempts in the late 1800s of the iconoclastic Hasidic Rebbe, R. Gershon Henokh Leiner of Radzyn, to reestablish the mitzvah of tekhelet, as well as the comprehensive research of Rav Yitzhak Isaac ha-Levi Herzog. Rav Herzog, a brilliant Talmudic scholar and polymath—who would later become the first Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel—wrote his doctorate on the subject of “Hebrew Porphyrology,” a term he coined to describe the study of the ancient purple and blue dyes. This masterful work, completed in 1914 and still an important source today, delves deeply into all aspects of the topic from Halakhah to archaeology, chemistry, marine biology, philology, and more. Efforts notwithstanding, however, the mystery of tekhelet and the hillazon remained intractable.

About 35 years ago, Israeli researchers discovered that at a very specific stage in the snail-dyeing process, exposure to sunlight, would yield the desired sky-blue color which had so eluded previous investigation. This scientific breakthrough made possible the identification of the authentic hillazon as the murex trunculus sea snail and revealed the method of using it to yield the azure hue as maintained by Jewish tradition. Rav Eliyahu Tagger of Jerusalem applied that newfound information, and in 1987 he succeeded—through much trial and error—in dyeing the first tekhelet strings in over 1,300 years. “Ptil Tekhelet” was founded shortly thereafter by Rav Tagger, Joel Guberman, Ari Greenspan, and myself, with the goal of making murex-dyed tekhelet strings available to all. My background in science and engineering proved valuable in bringing the processes for manufacturing tekhelet strings up to a modern industrial level that would allow for mass production. Gradually, Rabbis and lay people became aware of our organization and the reasoning which leads to the identification of the hillazon as the murex. As a result, many began to wear tekhelet strings on their tzitzit and tallit. Prominent poskim (such as Rabbi Zalman Nechemia Goldberg, z”l, Rabbi Yisroel Belsky, z”l, and Rabbi Hershel Schachter, yibadel le-hayyim arukhim) were among the earliest—and most enthusiastic—adopters.

From early on, Rav Nahum Rabinovitch was aware of our work but was quite skeptical and hesitant to accept the new tekhelet as authentic. Joel Guberman, who lived close to Rav Rabinovitch’s yeshiva, would engage him regularly in discussion about the topic, but he was met with an interesting challenge from the Rav. All the current researchers, he argued, used modern techniques and modern chemistry. How could one be sure that in ancient times, it was possible to dye with the murex in general and to get the snails to dye sky-blue in particular? Could we dye tekhelet using only means that were available to the dyers of old? To be sure, from a halakhic perspective, Rav Rabinovitch had no problem using modern chemicals and processes. Many ritual objects (including kelaf and tefillin) are manufactured today using updated techniques and ingredients that are very different from those employed by previous generations. However, Rav Rabinovitch maintained, it required demonstration that it was possible to obtain sky-blue tekhelet from the murex using methods that were available in ancient times. If that could be shown, modern techniques could be used thereafter without any problem.

Enter John Edmonds. Through a series of unlikely events, our organization became aware of Edmonds’s work with dyes. He was a retired engineer whose hobby was studying medieval crafts. He also volunteered at the Chiltern Open Air Museum, a lovely, family-friendly place on the outskirts of London with the tagline, “Where buildings come alive through history.” John (dressed in appropriate costume) would demonstrate crafts as they were carried out in earlier times, and his forte was dyeing wool with Isatis tinctoria, commonly known as woad. Woad is a plant that produces blue indigo dye and was known to the Talmud as isatis—one of the fraudulent sources of tekhelet (along with Kala ilan, another plant-based indigo) passed off as authentic by unscrupulous dealers. The dye molecules obtained from the Murex are closely related structurally to indigo, and their chemistry is likewise similar. They both belong to a class called “vat dyes.” In order for them to bond with fabrics, vat dyes need to be dissolved in water through a process called “reduction.” Only then can the wool or cotton be dipped into the resulting solution. Once the dyes are thoroughly absorbed, they undergo the reverse process called “oxidation” to return the molecules to their original state. This exacting procedure results in extremely colorfast and durable colored textiles. All this is well known to modern chemistry, but in ancient times the methods used to dye plants were completely dissimilar to those used for sea snails. While indigo dyeing has been practiced continually since antiquity, murex dyeing ended abruptly and the associated know-how was lost. Due to the fact that Edmonds had vast experience with dyeing plant-based indigo, Joel reached out to him and asked if he could determine how sea snails might have been used to dye in ancient times. Challenge accepted, John began to research the matter.

Using the vague and often ambiguous 2,000-year-old descriptions of snail-dyeing provided by Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder, Edmonds eventually came to realize that the “natural” process for dyeing that was employed back then was based on fermentation. The key was to create conditions for bacteria of the Clostridia class, which are found on the snail meat, to thrive. Wood ash or stale urine would have been used in ancient times to create the basic environment with a pH between 8.5 and 9 that was necessary for fermentation to take place. Pliny mentions adding salt, which John did as well, realizing that this served to keep competing bacteria at bay. Edmonds placed this heady brew into a warm bath and heated it to a moderate temperature for a week or two to optimize the fermentation process. In fact, this recipe dovetails well...
with the somewhat laconic description of the dyeing process used by Jewish tekhelet dyers in Israel as reported by Rav Shmuel bar Yehuda to Abaye upon his arrival in Bavel: “How do you dye tekhelet? . . . We take the secretion from the hillazon and various herbs, put it in a pot, and heat it all up.” (Menahot 42b). John’s experiments proved successful, and it was the discovery of this unsavory process which ultimately led to his starring role on the BBC program.

The results of Edmonds’s experiments were immediately shared with Rav Rabinovitch, who remained skeptical. With all due respect to John Edmonds, he pointed out, the information obtained and data provided were hardly up to the scientific standards of peer-reviewed observation and reporting. Furthermore, good scientific experimentation must be replicable. Even if that meant pushing off a decision regarding tekhelet, he gently quipped, “We waited over a thousand years; we can wait a bit longer.” And so, undeterred, we continued our efforts and experimentations, eventually enlisting the help of Dr. Roy Hoffman (a former student of Rav Rabinovitch) of the Department of Chemistry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. With our assistance, he carried out the process under laboratory conditions with precise measurements (leading to an article that can be found here). Once Rav Rabinovitch saw these results, he accepted the fact that the means and methods of murex-based tekhelet dyeing were indeed available to the ancients. It was only a short while later that Rav Rabinovitch himself began to wear tekhelet strings on his tzitzit. His innate humility, however, which was evident even as he pushed us harder, prevented him from advertising his position. With characteristic respect for personal autonomy with regard to halakhic decisions, he encouraged his students to come to their own conclusions based on their own careful investigation.

This episode highlights a number of the attributes of Rav Rabinovitch’s personality that made him the great leader, posek, thinker, and teacher of so many. His skepticism was hardly the result of a disparaging attitude toward secular scientific thought—quite the opposite. He was thoroughly aware of modern scientific methodology, including the pitfalls of amateur experimentation. In order to allow “scientific proof” into his halakhic pesak, he demanded that it be of the highest quality. If it did meet his standards, however, he would accept the ramifications and absolutely incorporate it into his thinking and practice. He was a man of truth, uncompromising in his search for it yet ready to bow before it once convinced. Over the years, we have met many Rabbis who have accepted murex tekhelet as authentic; but, for one reason or another, they feel that they cannot acknowledge that fact and certainly will not wear it. Rav Rabinovitch, once convinced, let no extraneous considerations deter him from doing what he believed was correct.

This same adamant quest for truth and demand for the highest standard when it came to science is evident in his piskei Halakah in other areas as well. Jewish Law as it pertains to electricity (its use on Shabbat in particular) is complicated, and any attempt to find precedent in Talmudic discourse will necessarily rely on comparison of context or analogy of principles. Without a deep, fundamental understanding of the nature of electricity, circuits, and the physical processes that generate heat, light and force, comparison to cases that arose in a world before electricity can be flawed, inaccurate, or imprecise. As someone with a doctorate in Quantum Optics, I have often been frustrated when reading teshuvot dealing with modern LED lighting or wireless technology, for example. The approach taken by Rav Rabinovitch in collaboration with students of his who have become experts in the field (particularly Prof. Dror Fixler of Bar Ilan University), however, relies on a thorough knowledge of the relevant physics. Whether or not one agrees with their practical decisions, there is no question that they are based not only on a comprehensive grasp of all halakhic issues related to the topic but also on a profound understanding of the underlying scientific principles of the reality in question.

From a halakhic perspective, dyeing according to the ancient recipe discovered by Edmonds would have made things much simpler—though extremely less efficient and certainly unrealistic for mass production. The reintroduction of tekhelet into practice using modern techniques has complicated matters, raising issues similar to those relating to electricity on Shabbat. The requirement that an action be performed “with intent” factors into what is prohibited on Shabbat (termed melekhet mahshevet, or “thoughtful activity”). In the same way, there is a requirement when dyeing tekhelet and manufacturing tzitzit that it be done with the express purpose of the mitzvah in mind (lishmah). Furthermore, the definition of what is considered a person’s direct force (koah gavro) is likewise an issue that comes into play both with respect to Shabbat and tekhelet, since both the violation of Shabbat and the production of kosher tekhelet require a direct human act. Can one open a window that leads to extinguishing a candle on Shabbat, and can one open a valve that leads to a flow of tekhelet dye through the wool? Indeed, principles derived from hilkhot Shabbat, an area deeply studied and well traversed, can shed light on problems relating to the uncharted halakhic territory of tekhelet-dyeing. Questions regarding the use of an electric pump or introducing ultrasonic probes into the bath in order to increase penetration and adherence of the dye, for example, are being asked for the first time in halakhic history. Poskim like Rav Rabinovitch have sought from us the relevant scientific background and engineering details so that the fundamental physical reality can be completely understood before determining the permissibility of such innovative techniques.

There is one final point I take away from our encounters with Rav Rabinovitch. In our attempts to revive the lost mitzvah of tekhelet, in some cases, the perceived challenge to tradition

32 See David Silverstein’s article on this site.
has led detractors to respond with cynicism and even derision. Rav Rabinovitch’s rejection of our original endeavors did not come from a negative place and was not taken as such. Rav Rabinovitch simply wanted us to meet higher standards, and eventually we did. Through the behind-the-scenes part he played in the discovery of the ancient methods and means of the job deemed “history’s worst,” we continue to be inspired by Rav Rabinovitch to strive to achieve our absolute best.

Yehi Zikho Barukh.

Personal Autonomy in the Thought of R. Nachum Eliezer Rabinovitch

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In a 2016 article in Tablet magazine, Yair Rosenberg and Yedidyah Schwartz compiled a list of ten influential Israeli rabbis that the English speaking world “should know” about. The list was eclectic, and contained rabbis from across the denominational and ideological spectrum. Nonetheless, the age range of the rabbis was fairly narrow. The one exception was the seventh rabbi on the list, Rabbi Nachum Eliezer Rabinovitch. Already in his 80s, R. Rabinovitch was referred to by the authors as the list’s “old timer.”

The fact that R. Rabinovitch is not well known among English speaking Orthodox Jews is puzzling. Intellectually, his resume could not be more impressive. He was a towering scholar who published a twenty-three volume, monumental commentary on Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah. In addition to his doctorate in the history of science, he also wrote a book of Talmudic novella, two volumes of halakhic responsa, and books and articles on a wide range of contemporary topics in Jewish thought. Beyond his academic accomplishments, R. Rabinovitch had a successful career as a congregational rabbi in the United States and Canada. He helped establish the first Jewish day school in Charleston, South Carolina, and ultimately served as the head of Jews’ College in London, as well as Rosh Yeshivat Birkat Moshe in Ma’aleh Adumim.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in eulogizing his beloved teacher, said that R. Rabinovitch and R. Aharon Lichtenstein were the “gedolei hador,” the greatest rabbis of their generation. Yet while R. Lichtenstein is well known in the English speaking Orthodox world, R. Rabinovitch still remains relatively anonymous within the same ideological group.

There may be sociological factors that explain this phenomenon. After all, R. Rabinovitch doesn’t fit neatly into any single subset of contemporary Orthodoxy. Educationally, he was trained in traditional yeshivot, and studied with great Torah sages who were culturally affiliated with the Yeshiva world. He even married the niece of his Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchok Ruderman, of Ner Israel in Baltimore. Nonetheless, he earned a doctorate in the history of science from the University of Toronto and served as one of the halakhic advisors for the Centrist Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America. Even his Zionism was unique. He was the head of a religious Zionist Yeshiva, yet had no formal connection to the intellectual world of Rav Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen Kook, whose worldview shaped much of contemporary religious Zionism. In fact, R. Benny Lau penned an article protesting a headline that eulogized R. Rabinovitch as “the elder sage of religious Zionism.” According to R. Lau, R. Rabinovitch was a “man of Torah,” and any attempt to categorize him through denominational labels undermines his uniqueness and greatness.

Whatever the cause, R. Rabinovitch’s anonymity outside of Israel makes it that much more critical to introduce his scholarship to the English speaking world. In this essay I would like to explore one essential theme in R. Rabinovitch’s writing: the centrality of personal autonomy. This topic is not new, and R. Rabinovitch is not the first contemporary scholar to address this issue. However, R. Rabinovitch’s perspective on this topic is extremely innovative and provides an important counterweight to the traditional voices who try to limit the role of human autonomy in the service of God.

While the theme of personal autonomy permeates many of R. Rabinovitch’s theological writings, I want to focus specifically on two examples where his commitment to autonomy is particularly manifest. The first relates to his reading of a well-known Talmudic passage in tractate Shabbat. The second involves his understanding of rabbinic authority.

Shabbat 88a: From Coercion to Autonomy

The aggadic passage in Shabbat 88a is a classic. Expounding on a biblical verse in the book of Exodus, the Talmud embarks on

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34 https://www.makorrishon.co.il/judaism/230239/.
35 https://www.srugim.co.il/445678-
%D7%94%D7%9B%D7%95%D7%AA%D7%A8%D7%AA-
%D7%96%D7%A7%D7%9F-%D7%94%D7%8A%D7%99-
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36 So far, very little has been written to familiarize English speaking audiences with the work of this great sage. For two excellent essays in English, see Dr. Alan Nadler, “Maimonides in Maaleh Adumim,” available at: https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/3235/maimonides-in-
an ambitious attempt to discuss the exact nature of the Jewish peoples' willingness to enter a covenant with God at Sinai:

“And they stood under the mount” (Exodus 19:17):

R. Avdimi b. Hama b. Hasa said: This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, and said to them, ‘if ye accept the Torah, ‘tis well; if not, there shall be your burial.’

R. Aha b. Jacob observed: This furnishes a strong protest against the Torah.

Said Rava, Yet even so, they accepted it again in the days of Ahasuerus, for it is written, [the Jews] confirmed, and took upon them [etc.] (Esther 9:27): [i.e.,] they confirmed what they had accepted long before.

The imagery used by R. Avdimi describes God coercing the Jewish people into accepting the Torah. After all, the Jewish people at Mount Sinai were exposed to an unmediated interaction with God. That encounter seems by definition coercive. Who would possibly say no to a covenant being offered by God Himself?

Aware of the theological challenges posed by a coerced agreement, the Talmud proceeds to quote Rava, who argues that the real acceptance of the Torah actually took place during the time of Mordekhai and Esther. The clear implication of the Gemara is that Purim is the mirror image of Sinai. God’s involvement in the Sinai revelation is undeniable. His strong hand, according to the Talmudic account, is what allows the covenant to be accepted. Purim, by contrast, involves God working from behind the scenes. The name of God is not found at all in Megillat Esther. It is exactly God’s lack of overt involvement in the Purim story that allows the Jewish people to actively choose to attribute the miracle to the Divine and reaffirm their covenant with God. Sinai is about coercion and authority while Purim represents autonomy and choice.

The theological timeline that emerges from the Gemara is clear. Sinai is stage one of Jewish history, while Purim is stage two. R. Rabinovitch, however, reads the Gemara differently, setting up a model whereby Purim represents stage two of a three-stage process. The philosophical background that motivates R. Rabinovitch’s reading of this passage is his insistence that man’s unique divine spark (tzelem Elokim) is his ability to choose right from wrong. As a twenty-first century theologian, R. Rabinovitch is certainly aware of the variety of traditional interpretations offered to explain the phrase tzelem Elokim. Nonetheless, he adopts the view of R. Meir Simhah ha-Kohen of Dvinsk that "tzelem Elokim" is synonymous with "free choice." For R. Rabinovitch, "Only by exercising free will does man realize his essence. He who does not exercise the power to choose—his spirit is dimmed, and he does not reflect the Divine image."

The act of choosing by itself is not sufficient to capture man’s uniqueness. Choice is only of ultimate value if one "chooses the good because it is good." A proper choice made "due to any external constraints, pressures, or incentives" does not accurately express man’s "true essence." This is true with regard to observance of God's commandments as well. Any type of coercion of man denies him the ability to express his unique capacity to choose. As a result, "fulfillment of the mitzvot only has value if it stems from man’s free will. Otherwise, it is mere apelike imitation."

Given his commitment to autonomy, how can R. Rabinovitch account for the Talmudic statement that God forced the Jewish people into the Sinaitic covenant? After all, in doing so God completely undermined their tzelem Elokim? To answer this question, R. Rabinovitch argues that just a child is educated in a way that acknowledges her own intellectual and spiritual maturation, so too, the Jewish people as a collective accepted the Torah in stages reflecting their own evolution as a people. Stage one was in fact coercive, and reflects the fact that it was essential for God to find a people to whom to give the Torah in order to justify the act of creation: "If there is no one to accept the Torah, which makes it possible to progress toward the goal of choosing good, then all of the world is not worthwhile, and it would be fitting for it to return to primordial chaos." This represents the earliest stage of Israelite history, that of Sinai.

Stage two begins at the time of Purim. While this stage does not involve direct divine coercion, it still cannot be described as a time when the Jewish people choose to observe mitzvah observance from a place of complete freedom. Why not? R. Rabinovitch highlights a subtle comment of Rashi in the Talmudic passage described above. Commenting on Rava’s

37 See, for example, Meshekh Hokhmah to Exodus 19:14.
38 See R. Nachum Eliezer Rabinovitch, Mesilot Bilvavam (Maale Adumim: Maaliyot, 2015), 3.
40 Mesilot Bilvavam, ibid. R. Rabinovitch argues that this is the view of Rambam as well. This creative Maimonidean reading is discussed at length in Ido Pachter’s doctoral work, The Ideological Development of Modern Orthodoxy in America: Models and Methods (Hebrew), (Bar Ilan University: 2016), 295-300.
42 Ibid., 5.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 18.
46 Shabbat 88a s.v. “bimei.”
claim that the Jews again accepted the Torah during the time of Purim, Rashi notes that they did so out of a "love of the miracle" that God performed for them. For R. Rabinovitch this is a red flag. Referencing Maimonides' description of how we educate children, R. Rabinovitch notes that as a student matures, we transition our educational strategy from a model rooted in fear to an approach based on incentives. The transition from Sinai to Purim reflects this shift. At Sinai, God coerced the people into accepting the covenant. During Purim, there was no active coercion. Nonetheless, by saving the people from physical destruction, God "incentivized" the people of Israel to accept the Torah anew: "Like a youngster who studies Torah in order to receive treats, Israel accepted the Torah out of love for the miracle." The Jewish people were overjoyed after being saved from Haman's decree. This joy was the source of their willingness to accept the Torah and therefore contained "an element of coercion." This subtler form of coercion prevented the Jewish people from fully expressing "the Divine image within [them]."

While the Talmudic discussion ends here, R. Rabinovitch adds another layer. He begins by referencing Antigonus of Sokho's teaching in Avot: "Do not be as servants who serve the master in order to receive reward. Rather, be like servants who serve the master regardless of reward." In R. Rabinovitch's reading, Antigonus articulates the most pristine form of faith. In this paradigm, there is no coercion and no room for compliance motivated by a desire for reward.

For R. Rabinovitch, this represents stage three of Jewish history: a time when faith can be appreciated on its own terms, divorced from external pressure. Purim symbolizes faith rooted in an appreciation for a miracle performed by God. For Antigonus, by contrast, faith should reflect the idea that one "should believe in the truth for the sake of truth."

Yet while R. Rabinovitch accepts Antigonus's model as a philosophical ideal, he faults Antigonus in prematurely introducing this idea to the Jewish people. Antigonus mistakenly thought that stage two had come to an end. The Jewish people, however, had yet to achieve the theological maturation needed to accept his teaching. In fact, the Rabbis note that two of Antigonus's students misunderstood their master's ruling, erroneously thinking that he denied the existence of reward and punishment. As a result, they decided to abandon traditional rabbinic Judaism and found other sectarian groups. It requires a deep appreciation for nuance to understand that Antigonus was affirming the metaphorical truth of reward and punishment while simultaneously rejecting it as a legitimate motivator to inspire authentic faith. R. Rabinovitch affirms that Antigonus was correct in principle. His challenge was the timing, not the content of his teaching.

At what point, then, are we intended to transition into stage three of Jewish history? When will the Jewish people be sufficiently ready to choose to worship God divorced from external pressure and motivated by a commitment to truth? Interestingly, R. Rabinovitch sees modernity as providing a unique theological opportunity that didn't exist in previous generations. He notes that "until the modern era, an authoritarian worldview, which viewed obedience as the supreme value, prevailed. Today, however, freedom is at the top of our priority scale." The rise of post-enlightenment modernity posed significant theological challenges to traditional Judaism. Reason, not revelation, became the preferred medium for attaining truth. This philosophical shift forced Jews to struggle with classical faith categories that do not easily harmonize with a scientific worldview. R. Rabinovitch is aware of this, noting that "in our times, there has been an increase in the number of people who are not impressed by the notion of reward and punishment." How are religious leaders to respond to this challenge? Instead of rejecting this modern ambivalence, R. Rabinovitch decides to embrace it. In a fascinating twist, R. Rabinovitch argues that it is exactly this orientation that makes authentic faith more accessible. Obviously, traditional Judaism believes in reward and punishment. However, in pre-modern times Jews were more emotionally enamored with this idea, and it often served as their motivating factor for religious compliance. While the net outcome was positive, this type of observance is by definition compromised. Modern Jews, influenced by scientific thinking, often lose this direct religious connection to the world of reward and punishment. Paradoxically, it is modern man's experiential disconnect from certain traditional categories that allows him to connect with tradition in its most authentic form.

R. Rabinovitch is certainly also aware of the challenges posed by modernity to halakhic commitment. For example, assimilation is a greater threat now than it ever was. R. Rabinovitch directly acknowledges this point, stating that "our generation, relative to earlier generations, is lacking with respect to faith and mitzvah observance." His broader claim about the nature of faith, however, is theological, not sociological. Given his profound commitment to human autonomy, he is particularly intrigued by modernity's commitment to freedom. The more autonomous man is, the more he can truly express his tzeelem Elokim: "Our generation

47 Maimonides, Laws of Repentance 10:5, as well as Maimonides, Commentary on the Mishnah, Introduction to the Tenth Chapter of Sanhedrin (Perek Helek), 131.
49 Ibid., 21.
50 Ibid.
51 Avot 1:3.
52 Maimonides, Commentary to Avot, 1:3.
53 Avot de-Rabbi Natan 5:2. See also Maimonides on Avot 1:3.

Hayyei Sarah

54 Mesilot Bilvavam, trans. Fischer, 22.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 There are challenges with this model. For example, what if one chooses to reject the tradition on philosophical grounds? Would this be at least partially an affirmation of one's tzeelem Elokim? Assuming
is approaching national maturity, the age in which the human spirit recoils from any attempt to coerce it. There is no greater guarantee that mankind is on the verge of a great age, when the divine image within man will appear in all its radiance.58

What emerges from his reading of this Talmudic passage is that any form of coercion50 limits a truly authentic affirmation of traditional commitment. Because man’s defining quality is his ability to choose, external pressure can pose a threat to classical faith. While modernity creates significant challenges to traditional observance, it also provides the philosophical framework for Jews to experience an authentic connection to Torah. Divorced from both social as well as theological pressures of previous generations, modern Jews are blessed with a unique opportunity to activate their tzelem Elokim in its purest form.

Rabbinic Authority: Restoring the Autonomy of the Questioner

The second area where R. Rabinovitch’s commitment to autonomy is overtly expressed is in his understanding of the traditional category of emunat Hakhamim.60 On the surface, rabbinic authority poses a direct challenge to R. Rabinovitch’s vision of personal autonomy. After all, turning to rabbinic sages for halakhic guidance seems to undermine the autonomy of the questioner. Shouldn’t a learned Jew, capable of navigating rabbinic texts, be able to answer a halakhic question for himself? Wouldn’t this be the greatest expression of his divine spark?

Interestingly, some contemporary Orthodox thinkers express the opposite idea. They claim that deferring one’s autonomy to rabbinic sages is one of the defining features of classical faith. In its most extreme form, this ideology, sometimes called Daas Torah, assumes that great sages “possess a special endowment or capacity to penetrate objective reality, recognize the facts as they really are, and apply the pertinent halakhic principles.”61 Not only is the autonomy of the laymen limited, but “even knowledgeable rabbis who may differ with the gedolim on a particular issue must submit to the superior wisdom of the gedolim and demonstrate Emunat Hakhamim.”

R. Joseph Soloveitchik also tries to limit the halakhic autonomy of the layman. In his famous essay, the “Common Sense Rebellion,” he challenges attempts to bring common sense into the realm of halakhic discourse.62 Halakhah is an a priori construct that contains its own inner logic. “The Oral Law has its own epistemological approach which can be understood by a lamdan who has mastered its methodology and its abundant material.”63 For Rav Soloveitchik, to commit to the halakhic system means to “surrender to the Almighty the every-day logic…the logic of the businessman…and…embrace another logic—the logic m’Sinai.”64 A full treatment of both Daas Torah as well as R. Soloveitchik conception of rabbinic authority, is well beyond the scope of this essay. Nonetheless, both Daas Torah theology as well as Rav Soloveitchik’s rejection of “common sense” assumes limited autonomy given to a non-scholar in navigating one’s halakhic life. True commitment requires one to suspend his thoughts in service of the view of Gedolim (Daas Torah) or the “logic of Sinai” (R. Soloveitchik).

R. Rabinovitch argues for a different model. On one hand, he wants to preserve the dividing line between the scholar and novice. After all, the Shulhan Arukh rules that only a sage who achieves a certain level of scholarship (hakham she-higia le-hora‘ah) is allowed to issue halakhic rulings.65 While later scholars debate the exact parameters of this rule,66 it is clear that only certain sages are truly autonomous in terms of their ability to decide matters of Halakhah. Other Jews must seek their counsel and not rely on their own limited knowledge of halakhic material.

On the other hand, he argues that a reality whereby ordinary Jews cannot adjudicate on their own is far from ideal: “Until one has studied sufficiently and become capable of issuing halakhic rulings, he has no choice but to choose a rabbi to ask what to do and what path to take.”67 Instead of seeing submission to great sages as a sign of piety, he argues that true commitment requires one to take responsibility for his own religious life. This should certainly be done in consultations with great scholars. Nonetheless, in the ideal sense, every Jew should become a scholar capable of issuing rulings. Only then is one truly halakhically autonomous.

Moreover, he provides a quasi-autonomous model even for those Jews who are not yet able to issue their own rulings. Instead of rooting their piety in an ethic of submission, these Jews have a responsibility to actively try to understand the rationale for a halakhic ruling given to them. Addressing this

57 Mesilot Bilvavam, trans. Fischer, 7.
59 Ibid., 147.
60 Cf. cited by Herzl Hefter in his article, “Surrender or Struggle: The Akeidah Reconsidered,” available at: https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/surrender-or-struggle-the-akeidah-reconsidered/
62 See Pithei Teshuvah Yoreh De’ah 242:14, 8.
63 Mesilot Bilvavam, trans. Fischer, 7.
point, R. Rabinovitch argues that "even one who asked a rabbi for instruction and was indeed given a ruling is not absolved of his duty to try to understand the reasons for the ruling."\[^{68}\]

Quoting from the Ba’al ha-Maor,\[^{69}\] R. Rabinovitch notes that an individual questioner can actually be held legally liable if he follows the view of a sage that contained an obvious error; "one who consults even an outstanding rabbi can be considered negligent if he does not ascertain that the ruling he received is correct."\[^{70}\]

This allows R. Rabinovitch to restore a maximal amount of autonomy to the questioner. While he is certainly not able to offer a halakhic opinion on his own, the requirement to fully investigate and understand the logic of the rabbinic ruling given to him provides the non-scholar with at least some degree of autonomy in the halakhic process. Blind obedience cannot be seen as an expression of religious virtue. Understanding, not submission, must be the motivating factor in navigating our halakhic lives. As R. Rabinovitch notes, "One must not think that since a great rabbi gave him a ruling, he must therefore follow blindly."\[^{71}\] Ultimately, even the non-scholar has a perpetual responsibility to "learn, so that he can understand his rabbi’s instruction."\[^{72}\] By doing so, he activates his tzelem Elokim.

R. Rabinovitch is an extremely creative theologian. While much of contemporary Orthodoxy embraces the language of submission and authority, R. Rabinovitch provides a nuanced voice advocating for autonomy, while still deeply rooted in the world of traditional learning and commitment. For R. Rabinovitch, autonomy is a *traditional* category, emanating from the bible’s earliest description of man. It is this insistence that allows him to see religious possibility in modern man’s experiential disconnect from the world of reward and punishment. Nonetheless, while advocating autonomy, he still preserves traditional reverence and respect for the word of the scholar. Seeking halakhic guidance when we are unsure or untrained reflects a posture of humility. Only a truly arrogant individual would think that he has all the answers. Ultimately, R. Rabinovitch articulates a unique model that prioritizes autonomy while still validating the self-transcendent quality of authority.

As discussed earlier in this article, R. Rabinovitch’s personal biography is eclectic and transcends simplistic categorization. He was loosely affiliated with the Yeshiva world, Centrist Orthodoxy, and Religious Zionism simultaneously. Clearly, R. Rabinovitch’s commitment to personal autonomy was not simply theoretical. This central religious virtue was instead a guiding principle both in the works and in the life of this great Torah scholar.

\[^{68}\] Ibid.
\[^{69}\] *Sanhedrin 12a* in the pages of R. Alfasi.
\[^{70}\] *Mesilat Bivvam*, trans. Fischer, 8.
\[^{71}\] Ibid.
\[^{72}\] Ibid.