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## Mishpatim

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*Israel is at war, and the suffering is difficult to bear. To better appreciate this transformation and the pressures of this moment, we have assembled a [symposium](#) of community leaders and thinkers to address the effect of the crisis on Diaspora Jewry.*

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### **STRENGTH IN THIS TIME**

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*Editor's Note: The following piece is part of Lehrhaus' current symposium: Israel At War.*

**A***vinu Malkenu, our father, our king, foil the plans of our foes," says the hazan. "Avinu Malkenu, foil the plans of our foes," we all repeat in unison. "Avinu Malkenu, wipe out every oppressor and adversary from against us," he says, we repeat the words, and the prayer goes on.*

*It's Shabbat, not a time when Jews usually recite Avinu Malkenu. But since the war started, this*

prayer has become a fixed part of our services. In the early Saturdays after October 7th I still repeated each line with tears running down my face. By now, four months later, I've grown so used to this addition that my mind wanders even as my lips shape each word. "Avinu Malkenu, pardon and forgive all our iniquities," I say, and think about the program I have to run after services. "Avinu Malkenu, send a complete healing to the sick among your people," and I think about the weekly Torah portion that we're about to read. "Avinu Malkenu, may this hour be an hour of mercy and a time of favor before You," says the hazan, and I find myself singing the words with my community.

I'm moved by the way our voices come together, and by the simplicity of this prayer, but even my elation is routine, familiar. It's yet another emotion that I got used to feeling at certain

regular times, just like the dread I feel every morning at 5:59 AM right before the new list of fallen soldiers is published, just like the grief I feel once it's published a minute later, just like the resolve I feel sometime around 7 AM when it's time to set aside the grief and focus on my children. Repetition smoothed away the jagged edges of these emotions, and wove them into the smooth flow of our daily lives, where they form a new and improbable "normal". In this new normal, it's prudent to leave some wiggle room in your weekly schedule in case you'll have to attend a funeral or make a *shiva* call. It's reasonable to hug a friend for an extra moment because who knows when you'll meet next and under what circumstances. And it's understandable to recite painful words without paying them attention, because how can we keep paying attention after four whole months of pain?

But then the *hazan* says "*Avinu Malkenu*, do it for the sake of those—," and stops. The line remains dangling. The words that are supposed to follow, "who went through fire and water for the sanctification of your name," remain unsaid. The expected flow of routine prayers is interrupted.

And just like that, the feeling of normalcy is ripped away, and I choke on tears, because the houses I've seen in Kfar Aza a few weeks ago – burnt shells where people, our people, suffocated on smoke and died in fires – slam into the forefront of my mind. The weight of everything we suffered, everything we got used to, is suddenly present and apparent and it's not normal, it can never be normal, how could I ever think of it as normal?

All around me, people cry.

The *hazan* forces his voice to form the words, eventually. We murmur after him, our voices heavy with feelings we can't name. He stumbles again over the next line – "*Avinu Malkenu*, avenge the spilled blood of your servants," but then regains his composure and keeps chanting without further pauses. We continue with him, following his example, but our experience changes. The normalcy that started coating this abnormal prayer is gone, shredded. We hear every word, feel every word, without defense against the weight of horror they imply. "Do it for your sake," we say, and all my rage at God – how could He allow His name to be desecrated in the burnt homes and broken bodies of our brethren? – comes back, as raw as it was in those early days nearly four months ago. "Deliver us," I say, and the desperation behind this request is all-encompassing. "*Avinu Malkenu*," I say, and I think: If You won't grant us victory and protect our soldiers out of a father's kindness, I demand it of You as your loyal subject, my liege.

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"But how do we keep going," a friend asks me. Her husband donned his uniform and disappeared into reserve duty on *Simkhat Torah*. Since then, she had to take care of her traumatized kids, do her job, manage the household, sooth a thousand little aches and worries, and do it all while fearing for her husband's life. She held everything together for a month, for two, for four now. But when her husband's commander said he doesn't

believe their unit will be released before March at the earliest, she broke down.

I hug my friend. I hug my sister when she asks the same question, with the same exhausted eyes. I hug all of my friends and colleagues and neighbors who are in the same situation, remarkable both in their strength, and in the fact that their situation isn't remarkable at all – there are hundreds of thousands of them, all keeping on going on, because what's the other option? And I think about that moment when the *hazan* couldn't simply say the words by rote, and how his pause pulled the sameness of routine from underneath our feet and threw us back into the full horror of our present moment. I suspect that the answer to my friend's question, or rather – two complementary answers, lie there in that pause.

The first answer is routine. That pause interrupted our attempt to create a routine in a time of upheaval. But it also illuminated, for me, what those routines achieve. We can't live our lives if we're constantly and fully aware of the horrors around us. So, we build routines and habits that carry us over and through the present, as if we're boats that float upon a river's stream.

Some rivers are small and private: my personal habit of journaling each day. My personal ties to my community, family, and friends. I embrace them, pour myself into them, and they form a tide of familiarity and security that can carry me through difficult moments. Other rivers have a longer history, a deeper bed. The weekly Torah portions, the Jewish calendar, our daily prayers – all invite me to immerse myself within their

ancient tides, like countless Jews have done before me. But no matter the type of river, they all offer the same answer to my friend's question. Routines, be they private or communal, new or ancient, carry us through time, and allow those parts of ourselves that don't have to do with immediate crises, the parts that get deactivated when adrenaline rushes through our veins, to unfurl more fully. They remind us that we are more than our present moment, and in doing so, allow us to keep going on.

But the interruption, the pause that exposes the horror underneath these routines, is its own sort of answer as well, a complementary one to the very routine it disrupted. Because it reminds us that the horror we experience, the pain we need our routines to get us through, isn't only something to repress and leave behind. Catastrophes, as Rabbi Soloveitchik pointed out in [\*Out of the Whirlwind\*](#), disrupt familiar patterns. In doing so, they open doors to revelation.

The catastrophe we're living through sheds new light on everything we thought we knew and reveals new facets in the routines we hold dear. The ancient words of *Avinu Malkenu* and other prayers never meant as much to me before. Words I used to recite by rote, like "*hayei olam nata betokhenu*" ("He planted eternal life within us," words we recite before we read the Torah) mean something different now that the Torah became my lifeline in a turbulent time. While the rivers of routine and familiarity can carry us through difficult moments, the same difficult moments can expose to us the depths and nature of these very streams.

This revelatory potential is my second answer to my friend's question. Routines can empower us to get through this abnormal new normal. But so can the choice to treat these days as an opportunity for discovery and learning. So can the choice to hold their terrible light in our hands, and let it illuminate everything around us, and open our eyes wide to see new truths.

Routines can lend us their flow and allow us to relax a little into them. The quest for revelation can give us purpose, and purpose, in turn, can lend us strength.

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### **DIASPORA IDENTITY IN THE WAKE OF OCTOBER 7<sup>TH</sup>**

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*Editor's Note: The following piece is part of Lehrhaus' current symposium: Israel At War.*

**I**n the decades leading up to the Common Era, the city of Alexandria, Egypt, was a crown jewel of the Roman Empire and a meeting point for people coming from all ends of the empire. Travelers journeying from one side of the empire to the other would stop at its port to exchange goods. Scholars would gather in the city's great libraries to share ideas and produce philosophical tracts. Throngs of Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians crowded the city's markets to buy and sell food. The city was also home to one of the largest Jewish populations in the world. The Jews of

Alexandria established synagogues, observed their ancestral traditions, organized governing councils, and participated in civic life. They also studied their scriptures, probably in Greek translation, and composed novellas, prayers, and poems about these scriptures which incorporated oral traditions and elements of Greek philosophy. Many Egyptian Jews believed that they were residents—in the words of the first-century Jewish philosopher Philo—of their fatherland and fully capable of participating in Roman life. At the same time, they remained devoted to their motherland, Judea.

The dual loyalty that Jews in Alexandria adopted was not celebrated by many of their Greek and Roman neighbors, who accused these Jews of separating from their society and of being disinterested in the welfare of the empire. Such accusations were not trivial. In Roman society, the conviction of disloyalty was a grave one, and the accusation that the Jews of Egypt were not true patriots percolated for decades until it boiled into violence in 38 CE, when mobs of Alexandrian residents organized a massacre against local Jews. They destroyed synagogues, assaulted and killed hundreds of Jews, and put countless others to flight. Those who survived this attack were shocked by their neighbors' assault and enraged by their betrayal. Philo, who chronicled these events in his treatises *Embassy to Gaius* and *For Flaccus*, described the apathetic inaction of Roman officials who stood by and allowed chaos to reign as throngs of people took to the streets to kill their Jewish neighbors.

Perhaps the oddest feature of the incident in 38 CE is the fact that in its aftermath, Jews who

survived the massacre stayed in the region. Their sense of home was too permanent, it seems, for the attack to have forced a demographic change. Still, there is evidence that these same Jews were not satisfied with life under Roman rule. Many supported the Jewish rebellion which took place in Judea in 66–73, which may partly explain why the empire held all Jews responsible for the rebellion and taxed them with the *fiscus Judaicus* after the war. This taxation probably enforced the Jews' sense that they were outsiders with a powerful connection to Judea. A half-century later, many Jews in Egypt participated in a rebellion against Rome in 115–118 CE that began in the diaspora and later spread to Judea. The violent Roman response to this rebellion may have been the final death knell for the Jews of Alexandria. Little is known about Jewish life in Alexandria following this conflict.

When I teach about the pogrom of 38 CE to Jewish audiences, students often show little sympathy for the Jews of Egypt. Why didn't more Jews leave the city after 38 CE, they ask? More fundamentally, why did these Jews not anticipate the violence and leave earlier? Did they not understand that Jews were unsafe, and that their persecution was a sign that they belonged in the Land of Israel?

I push back against such questions. Jews were unlikely to view their suffering as a product of their own sins, I respond, for the simple reason that the pattern of integration and suffering experienced by the Jews of Alexandria broadly paralleled what Jews living in the Land of Israel

experienced at around the same time. In 63 BCE, the Roman general Pompey invaded Jerusalem with brutal force and began the process of incorporating Judea into the empire while killing thousands of Jews in the process. This catastrophe initiated a period marked by debilitating taxation, neglect, and ultimately a response to rebellion so harsh that it was memorialized in the city of Rome with triumphal parades and two arches: The Arch of Titus on Palatine Hill, and another arch on the Circus Maximus. Sixty years later, a Judean who called himself Simeon Bar Kokhba (after the verse in [Numbers 24:17](#), “a star shall come out of Jacob (יִדְרֹךְ כּוֹכָב מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל)”), and a scepter shall rise out of Israel”) led hundreds of thousands of Judean Jews into rebellion against the Roman Empire, and again, the Romans responded with astonishing force. The Babylonian Talmud memorializes the cruel Roman response to this rebellion, which was even more harsh than its response to the rebellion of 66–73:

“He cut off in fierce anger all the horn of Israel” ([Lamentations 2:3](#)). Said Rabbi Zeira, said Rabbi Abahu, said Rabbi Yohanan: “These are the eighty thousand officers bearing battle trumpets in their hands, who entered the city of Betar at the time it was captured. And they killed there men, women, and children until their blood flowed into the Mediterranean Sea. Lest you think it was near, it was a Roman mile away.” ([Gittin 57a](#))

The Roman quelling of Bar Kokhba culminated in the Jews' expulsion from Jerusalem and their forced migration to the Galilee.

This sad history reminds us that we cannot critique the Jews of Alexandria for not seeing the writing on the wall without similarly condemning the Jews of Judea. We are left with two choices about how to understand the difference between the experiences of Jewish suffering in Judea and the experiences of Jewish suffering in Alexandria. One is to argue that Jewish suffering in the Land of Israel has a kind of constructive cosmic significance in the history of Judaism, which makes it more meaningful than Jewish suffering outside the Land of Israel. The other choice is to argue that Jewish suffering has no relationship with where a Jew is, since the Jews' connection to the Land of Israel is unrelated to their physical safety. After all, Jews might suffer at the hands of their enemies wherever they are.

I am wary of the impulse to attribute meaning to any Jewish suffering. If there is anything to be learned from October 7<sup>th</sup> and its aftermath, it is only that God endowed human beings with the capacity to commit acts of incomprehensible evil, and the capacity to commit spectacular moral failure by refusing to condemn such evil. Still, I have been thinking about the relationship between anti-Jewish violence and the notion of homeland in the wake of October 7<sup>th</sup>. After the massacre, a number of friends in Israel shared their conviction that rising antisemitic violence in America should serve as a reminder that all Jews belong in the Land of Israel. In their view, diasporan Jewish suffering is distinctive from suffering in the Land of Israel because it is a sign

that Jews are meant to return to their homeland. Jewish suffering in the Land of Israel, meanwhile, is not taken by these friends as a sign that Jews should leave Israel. Many of my friends in Israel believe that the events in their country signify the beginning of a new era, one that is shuttling the Jewish people toward a significant moment in Jewish history which will culminate in an ultimate restoration.

In view of the history of Alexandrian and Judean Jewry in the early Common Era, I would note another possible lesson arising from the global rise in antisemitic violence. This lesson has little to do with *where* the Jews should be and more to do with *who* the Jews should be. With the understanding that Jews will always be perceived as outsiders regardless of whether they are, Jews are leaning into the fact that the cultivation of a distinctive religious identity is not a liability but a strength. This perspective has contributed to increased Jewish self-identification in the diaspora in recent months. Faced with murderous and genocidal hatred, an increasing number of Jews are wearing Star of David necklaces in public, putting *kippot* on their heads at airports, and adding Israeli flags to their social media profile pictures.

As in the Hellenistic era, the connections that Jews cultivate with their homeland today are most effectively grounded not on safety but on existential connection. The founders of modern Zionism understood this. If escaping the threat of violent Jew-hatred was the sole priority of establishing a Jewish state, they would have chosen to settle in Uganda or Argentina. The Jewish connection to the Land of Israel transcends

the desire for mere survival. It is grounded on the notion that the Jews' historic roots are deeply implanted in the land that God sanctified by appearing to our ancestors and by residing in the Jerusalem Temple. Now, as in the Hellenistic era, Jews cannot flee from this ancestral heritage. Regardless of where they live, Jews identify with a distinctive heritage that highlights both covenantal particularity and universal concern for the wellbeing of all people. Like Jews who lived in the Hellenistic era, Jews today are forever connected to the sacred land that their ancestors called home.

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### THREE QUESTIONS AFTER OCTOBER 7

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*Editor's Note: The following piece is part of Lehrhaus' current symposium: Israel At War.*

**W**e lack adequate terminology to describe the horrors of our young century. We are reduced to using mere numbers for events too huge to encompass with a word, like 9/11 in the US and 7/7 in the UK, and now October 7 in Israel. The terrorists have been, sadly, more creative: Al-Qaeda speaks of *Gharat Manhatin* (The Manhattan Raid), and Hamas infamously termed their attack *Tufan al-Aqsa* (The Al-Aqsa Flood). Only the London bombings are still called 7/7, perhaps because the perpetrators were Anglophones.

Historians, of course, spend a lot of time thinking

about dates, leading to some jarring contrasts. For example, the Europeans list day before month, so 9/11 is not September 11 but November 9, which marks the anniversary of the massive Nazi *aktion* known as Kristallnacht. October 7 also has an echo, albeit of a different sort. On that date in 1944, in a doomed but highly symbolic act, the most degraded and debased prisoners of Auschwitz—the so-called *Sonderkommandos*, Jews forced to manage the grotesque process of burning the corpses of gassed fellow Jews in the crematoria—revolted against their Nazi overlords and destroyed one of the gas chambers, effectively shutting down the Holocaust machinery shortly before the camp was liberated by the Allies.

Despite their common date, there is nothing remotely similar to connect these two October 7 events. 1944 was a desperate attempt to assert a fundamental belief in the dignity of humanity. 2023 was a perverted criminal act of murder, rape, kidnapping, and arson that renders the term “pogrom” weak by comparison. Yet the juxtaposition demands questions, and I have three of them.

#### 1. Who are the Palestinians?

I don't have the temerity to suggest I have a solution to the deep-seated challenges of the region, but whatever thoughts I ever had on the subject were always based on some fundamental assumptions about the Palestinian people. I believed that, despite our very different backgrounds, we shared fundamental values. They, like me, loved their children and wanted them to reach their maximum potential for

personal happiness; they, like me, had a basic moral code that may have been inspired by different sources but ultimately championed similar objectives of peace and coexistence.

After October 7, I'm not so sure. Even a casual perusal of video clips from Arabic-language media on the remarkable Middle East Media Research Institute website ([memri.org](http://memri.org)) demonstrates just how pervasive the death-cult philosophy of Hamas has penetrated the Palestinian mindset. We have all seen the videos of school plays featuring six-year-old boys with realistic toy guns capturing classmates dressed as Israelis and dragging them off into captivity. I used to dismiss these as expressions of a radicalized minority, but no more. There are just [too many videos](#) of mothers who express joy at the prospect of raising children who die as suicide bombers, because "[we should devour the Jews with our teeth.](#)"

I can't imagine any Jewish mother saying this. I just can't. And the [tearful expressions of joy from a mother in Gaza](#) when her son called her from the phone he took from the body of a *yahudia* after killing her and her husband, urging them to get on WhatsApp to see the corpses of the ten Jews he murdered? I can't wrap my mind around it.

So who are the Palestinians? All I see in Gaza are people who seem to come from another planet. Where are the Palestinians who share our basic

human values?

## 2. Who are the *polezni duraki*?

The Russian term "*polezni duraki*" was coined in the Soviet era to identify unwitting human assets outside the USSR that would promote pro-Soviet foreign policy objectives, even at the expense of their home countries: they were therefore called "useful idiots." Included in this category were people who were encouraged to foment dissent against their own democratically elected leadership, broadening social fissures and weakening resistance to Soviet propaganda.

After October 7, many Jews—especially, perhaps, those with liberal leanings—encountered a wave of vitriol from erstwhile friends. Offensive slogans like "From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be free" (which many understand as "free of Jews") are widely disseminated, along with open calls to violence like "Resistance by any means necessary" and the incomprehensible "Globalize the Intifada." They certainly have no clue what those slogans mean, hence the moniker "useful idiots."

Yet these are, or at least were, our friends. They were our non-Jewish and some Jewish coworkers, colleagues, and neighbors. How can they be so blind to the gross violence perpetrated against Israel? Yesterday there was yet another *polezni duraki* gathering here in Manhattan, and I saw signs calling for "the release of all Palestinian prisoners." Where is the concern for those Israelis



snatched from their homes and abused in the darkness under Gaza?

So who are these people who we once thought were friends and fellow travelers? Are those friendly relationships viable anymore? Were they ever?

### 3. Who are we?

Since October 7, Jews around the world are experiencing a “Come to Moses” moment. We recall the divisive arguments that literally filled the streets of Tel Aviv last summer, and just two weeks prior to October 7 we saw the ugly confrontation over public prayer. Now, however, so many Jews have set aside their profound differences and have come together as a people. That’s encouraging, and I hope it will continue.

The first two questions are beyond me, and I raise them in the hopes that people smarter than I will answer them. The third is a question I’ve taken to heart and have been exercising my own personal *teshuvah* to respond to appropriately. The answer is obvious: we are a family. Raucous, sometimes dysfunctional and fractionated, but a family. And families come together, especially in times of crisis.

Am Yisrael Hai.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this essay, I will use the standardized abbreviations for Philo's works. A full list of these abbreviations can be found at: [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philo#List\\_of\\_extant\\_works](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philo#List_of_extant_works). Unless noted, all English translations of Philo are from the Loeb Classical Library edition: F.H. Colson, G.H.

## **PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA AND THE SOUL OF THE TORAH**

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**P**hilo of Alexandria<sup>1</sup> is the distant and somewhat estranged relative of today's Judaism – no one is quite sure how he's related to the rest of the family, nor are we certain about where he should be seated at the table. Throughout our long history, Philo has been alternately venerated and ignored, championed and utterly forgotten. A contemporary of Hillel and Shammai, and a prominent member of Alexandria's Jewish community, Philo wrote eloquent Torah commentaries to draw his fellow Jews to love for their Creator. The reasons for Philo's unique position within Jewish history and his enduring relevance for modernity deserve closer attention. We will begin by giving Philo his seat at the table.

But I hope to show that Philo deserves more than a seat. There is something special about Philo's writing, something both charming and challenging, and I have spent a lot of time trying to understand exactly what it is. One answer may simply be style. Philo's writing can be deeply personal, reflecting his own inner struggles, triumphs, and regrets. But Philo can also take

Whitaker, and Ralph Marcus, eds., *Philo* (Harvard University Press, 1929–1962).

My sincere thanks to Lehrhaus editor David Fried and copy-editor Avi Herzog, whose comments and insights greatly improved the quality of this essay.

flight, soaring above mundane concerns and revealing a soul intoxicated with the love of God.<sup>2</sup> It is this skillful movement between the personal and the universal – between his self-assessment and his vision of Judaism – that reveals so much about Philo.

Ultimately, it is this vision of Judaism that draws me to Philo more than anything else. He is best known as a reconciler of Greek philosophy with Jewish tradition, using an allegorical method that was already well-established among Alexandrian Jews.<sup>3</sup> But this is a shallow portrait. As we will see, Philo's primary concern was always to reveal how the Torah speaks to human experience and our very natural questions about our place in the universe. Greek philosophy served Philo as a valuable repository of these questions (and their speculative answers), as it continues to do for all Western thinkers today. But I do not believe that he lived in constant tension between his religious devotion and his philosophical training.

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<sup>2</sup> The opening of *Spec. 3* is a beautiful example of both of these tendencies in Philo:

"There was a time when I had leisure for philosophy and for the contemplation of the universe and its contents, when I made its spirit my own in all its beauty and loveliness and true blessedness... But, as it proved, my steps were dogged by the deadliest of mischiefs, the hater of the good, envy, which suddenly set upon me and ceased not to pull me down with violence till it had plunged me in the ocean of civil cares, in which I am swept away, unable even to raise my head above the water... Yet it is well for me to give thanks to God even for this, that though submerged I am not sucked down into the depths, but can also open the soul's eyes, which in my despair of comforting hope I thought had now lost their sight, and am irradiated by the light of wisdom, and am not given over to lifelong darkness. So behold me daring, not only to read the sacred messages of Moses, but also in my love of knowledge to peer into each of them and unfold and reveal what is not known to the multitude."

The Roman playwright Terence famously wrote, "I am human, and I consider nothing human foreign to me."<sup>4</sup> Terence's human possesses a complete self-knowledge; a familiarity with every crack and crevice of our human condition. History and experience show this to be a rare accomplishment indeed. To some extent, we all remain strangers to ourselves, but if there is a hope for overcoming this self-alienation, Philo saw it in the Torah.

"I am a Jew," Philo might reply to Terence, "and *therefore* nothing human is foreign to me."<sup>5</sup>

### **The Soul of the Torah**

We will see that Philo meant very different things to very different people. For the rabbis of Renaissance Italy, he modeled a Judaism that valued the products of Greek civilization but thoroughly subordinated them to religious practice. For those religiously-conservative promoters of the Haskalah movement, he was a halakhic Jew who nevertheless found value in

<sup>3</sup> Hunt notes that "Aristobulus is thus an early witness to the Alexandrian exegetical tradition that Philo inherited, though that tradition was quite varied. Philo himself refers to other allegorists up to seventy-four times in his extant works..." Jeffrey M. Hunt, *De Vita Mosis I: An Introduction with Text, Translation, and Notes* (Baylor University Press, 2023), 29.

<sup>4</sup> From his play, *Heauton Timorumenos*. As has become common, I am taking the line somewhat outside of its original context.

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Professor Shalom Rosenberg for this juxtaposition, which he uses to characterize the worldview of R. Avraham Yitzhak Kook. See *The World of Rav Kook's Thought* (Avi Chai, 1991), 22. Among Jewish thinkers of the modern era, I find R. Kook's religious philosophy to be an important parallel to what we encounter in Philo. It is therefore unsurprising that R. Kook's close student, R. David Cohen, studied Philo extensively. Later on, we will explore what "Ha-Rav Ha-Nazir" found so valuable in Philo.

culture and worldly wisdom. And for a unique brand of kabbalists, he offered a philosophically-informed mysticism.

At the heart of all these encounters was a desire for balance. Philo represented a sage who was deeply immersed in Jewish texts and practices and yet found value in the products of human creativity. He could write equally passionately about the spiritual insights gained from Torah study, a haircut, and a boxing match (*Cher.* 79-82). He was a pious Jew who often sought solitude in the wilderness, only to find that his thoughts were more collected in a bustling crowd (*Leg.* 2.85). And he was deeply sensitive to the natural world. In the early rays of dawn and the fresh blooms of spring, he found tangible symbols of the soul's yearning for the Divine (*Mut.* 161-162).

All of this was grounded in a particular understanding of what the Torah is and how it guides us. Philo explains that the Torah includes an account of Creation to indicate that one who observes its laws thereby becomes a citizen of this universe, attuned to nature's harmony (*Opif.* 3). There is an inherent continuity between Torah and worldly experience that can only be appreciated when one is immersed in both. For Philo, the Torah guides us to the various branches of wisdom, but it cannot replace the love of harmony that we gain from music or the appreciation of order that is cultivated in the

study of mathematics.<sup>6</sup> Nor does it seek to.

This understanding of Torah study is perhaps best encapsulated in a powerful statement of R. Tzadok HaKohein of Lublin: "God, may He be blessed, made a book – which is the World – and a commentary to that book – which is the Torah, for the Torah is like an explanation of the ways to acquire knowledge of God through created things" (*Tzidkat Ha-Tzaddik* §216).<sup>7</sup> Torah study is our essential guide, directing our attention to every corner of God's wondrous creation and teaching us to place it in its proper context. But as R. Tzadok clearly implies, our primary object of study was always meant to be the world itself.

If there is an area in which Philo might help to restore balance in our current era, it is undoubtedly this. I will elaborate on this idea in my conclusion, but first, let us explore how Philo became a quiet, yet influential, voice in modern Jewish thought.

### **Philo's Seat at the Table**

How Jewish is Philo? It's a natural question, and we see that it was particularly perplexing to one of the first Jews to engage seriously with Philo's thought – R. Azaria de Rossi of sixteenth century Italy. In his *Me'or Einayim*, de Rossi levels powerful challenges to Philo's orthodoxy, including his suspicion that Philo was ignorant of Hebrew and the Oral Torah. After weighing the

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<sup>6</sup> See *Congr.* 16 and my analysis of its significance in "Finding Philo: Rabbi David Provençal's Invention of Rebbe Yedidya," *Tradition* 55:4 (2023), 15-40; relevant section at 35-38. See also *QG* 3.3, where Philo writes explicitly that the Torah's intention is to guide us to "the various forms of knowledge."

<sup>7</sup> My translation here draws on R. Tzadok's interpretation of Psalms 104:24 in his *Pri Tzaddik*, Pesach, §30. See there for R. Tzadok's relevant and equally illuminating interpretation of Psalms 111:2. Unless cited, all translations from Hebrew are my own.

evidence, de Rossi ultimately concludes with a neutral verdict, capable of defending Philo but unwilling to venerate him.<sup>8</sup> As we will see, de Rossi's contemporaries did not share his concerns.

Philo was born circa 20 BCE. Why did it take over fifteen centuries for Jews to begin studying his writings? Alexandrian Jewry collapsed not long after his death, and with it Jewish immersion in the Greek language. Philo's works were preserved almost exclusively by Christian scholars, who found his allegorical approach valuable.<sup>9</sup> Only in the sixteenth century, with their translation into Latin, did Philo's extensive writings become available to classically educated Jews. Since then, Philo has been translated into English and even Hebrew, but de Rossi's suspicions still hover over his works. Can Philo ever be considered a "traditional" source for modern Jews?

There is no simple answer here, but I would like to argue that he can. To understand why, we should begin by trying to understand Jewish Alexandria in the first century CE, particularly through the eyes of Hazal, the sages of the Mishnah and Talmud. Throughout their writings, we find scattered references to Alexandria, particularly

during the time period that concerns us here. From these, we can gain an incomplete, yet illuminating, picture of the Jewish community that produced Philo.

Hillel the Elder was a contemporary of Philo, and *Bava Metzia* 104a suggests that he had some degree of involvement in Alexandria's stickier halakhic issues. When unfortunate practices in Alexandria caused the sages to raise the question of *mamzeirim*, children born from illegitimate unions, Hillel diffused the crisis through a technical reading of Alexandrian marriage contracts. We see that the sages in general, and Hillel in particular, were aware of, and actively involved in, the legal questions of Alexandrian Jews, precisely during Philo's lifetime.

More broadly, *Tosefta Pei'ah* 4:6 discusses methods for establishing an individual's status as a *kohein*, relative to where they live. In those locations with a functioning *beit din*, a rabbinic court, anyone who performed the priestly benediction could be considered an authentic *kohein*, since the local *beit din* was assumed to have inquired into his lineage. R. Shimon ben Elazar notes that Alexandria was once such a place, "at first, when there was a *beit din* there."

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<sup>8</sup> For a summary (and dismissal) of de Rossi's concerns, see Naomi G. Cohen, "Philo Judeaus and the Torah True Library," *Tradition* 41:3 (2008), 31-48. For more on the general context of his treatment of Philo, see Joanna Weinberg, "The Quest for Philo in Sixteenth-Century Jewish Historiography," *Jewish History: Essays in Honour of Chimen Abramsky*, Ada Rapoport-Albert and Steven J. Zipperstein, eds. (Peter Halban, 1988), 163-187.

<sup>9</sup> Professor Harry Austryn Wolfson, in his *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*

(Harvard University Press, 1947) sees Philo's thought as foundational for all western religious philosophy. See also Luis Cortest, *Philo's Heirs: Moses Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas* (Academic Studies Press, 2017). In the realm of religious mysticism, Afterman calls Philo "fundamentally the first attempt to articulate the idea of mystical union with God, as found later in the monotheistic mystical traditions." See Adam Afterman, "From Philo to Plotinus: The Emergence of Mystical Union," *The Journal of Religion* 93:2 (2013), 177-196, citation at 189.

When did this approved rabbinic court disappear?

In his *Tosefta Kifshutah*, R. Saul Lieberman speculates, on the basis of the Talmud Yerushalmi, that this *beit din* ended during the reign of Trajan, who was emperor from 98-117 CE. If correct, then Philo's Alexandria was overseen by a rabbinic court that Hazal considered both authoritative and sufficiently influential in the community.

Leading scholars believe that such a *beit din* served as the primary source of Philo's substantial halakhic knowledge. Building on the work of Bernhard Ritter and Erwin R. Goodenough, R. Dr. Samuel Belkin develops this theory in his definitive work on the subject, *Philo and the Oral Law*. R. Dr. Belkin was one of the very few who combined the broad erudition of a classics scholar with the talmudic expertise of a *rosh yeshiva*, allowing him to offer an authoritative statement on Philo's legal tradition. While acknowledging disparities and possible foreign influences, Belkin's well-argued conclusion is that "Philo's Halakah is based upon the Palestinian Oral Law as it was known in Alexandria" and that Philo himself was a "competent jurist."<sup>10</sup> In another work, he illustrates the numerous parallels between Philo's midrashic teachings and those found in the works of Hazal.<sup>11</sup>

Though certainly a distinct community with its own customs and eccentricities, Philo's

Alexandria seems to have been authentically committed to Jewish tradition, and we have seen indications that Philo was a learned recipient of that tradition. Philo himself says as much when he states his reliance on "some of the elders of the nation; for I always interwove what I was told with what I read" (*Mos.* 1.4). But there is perhaps a broader issue at stake, and it revolves around the question of Judaism's dynamic evolution.

Philo lived and wrote over a century before the codification of the Mishnah, at a time when the Oral Torah retained its truly oral and organic form. His work did not enjoy the same process of cultural translation, commentary, and reapplication that gradually adapted the works of Hazal to the modern era. Rather, Philo abruptly reappears during the Renaissance with an outdated halakhic system, an unapologetically Greek vocabulary, an uncomfortably allegorical exegesis, and asks to be seated at the table of a Judaism that no longer recognizes him. Even if we have shown that Philo's thought is authentically "Jewish" as far as the Judaism of the first century is concerned, perhaps this matters little if we cannot hear how Philo is speaking to us, here, today.

### **Philo's Growing Fanbase**

When R. Azaria de Rossi penned his thorough critique of Philo, he was writing for an audience that may have already had some positive exposure to the Alexandrian sage. The Provençal

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<sup>10</sup> Samuel Belkin, *Philo and the Oral Law; the Philonic Interpretation of Biblical Law in Relation to the Palestinian Halakah* (Harvard University Press, 1940), x, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Belkin, *The Midrash of Philo* (Yeshiva University Press, 1989). The subtitle of this work, recorded on the title page, refers to Philo as the author of Judaism's "oldest recorded *midrash*."

brothers – Moshe, David, and Yehuda – were "setting a golden crown on his head and regarding him as a noteworthy member of our people," according to de Rossi.<sup>12</sup> The Provençals were a vibrant force within Renaissance Italy's Jewish community. R. Moshe was a major *poseik*, halakhic decisor, whose responsa are still printed and studied today, and R. David was a popular *darshan*, preacher, who cited Philo over one hundred times in his commentary to *Pirkei Avot*.<sup>13</sup> In this commentary, R. David refers to Philo as "the sage, Rabbi Yedidya" – seemingly an attempt to honor and normalize Philo with a rabbinic title and a new Hebrew name. But it goes to show how deeply the Provençals valued Philo and how much they wanted others to do the same.<sup>14</sup> R. Yehuda Moscato, another popular preacher from that period, also refers to Philo with this title.<sup>15</sup>

Other Jewish scholars were taking note of Philo as well. R. Avraham Zacuto's *Sefer Yuhasin*, an extensive presentation of Jewish history, includes an entry on Philo and refers to him as a "great sage." R. Simha Luzzatto, chief rabbi of Venice, revered Philo as "a man not only of remarkable

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<sup>12</sup> Weinberg, "The Quest for Philo in Sixteenth-Century Jewish Historiography," 165.

<sup>13</sup> David Provençal, *Hasdei Avot*, trans. Yaakov Shmuel Spiegel (Petah Tikva, 2022).

<sup>14</sup> For an analysis of R. David Provençal's complex relationship with Philo, see my "Finding Philo: Rabbi David Provençal's Invention of Rebbe Yedidya," *Tradition* 55:4 (2023), 15-40.

<sup>15</sup> Weinberg, "The Quest for Philo in Sixteenth-Century Jewish Historiography," 179.

erudition in the Greek language, but also of incomparable learning in human as well as divine doctrines."<sup>16</sup> And R. Yosef Delmedigo began a Hebrew translation of his works.<sup>17</sup>

What explains this sudden and widespread interest in an obscure Jewish philosopher? The Renaissance was a time when the classics of Greek and Roman literature were being rediscovered amidst a widespread cultural revival. Many young Jews were being swept up in the excitement and in the new opportunities for a university education, as R. David Provençal noted with anguish.<sup>18</sup> In Philo, the Italian rabbis probably saw a model to be emulated: a well-educated and culturally-savvy Jew who, nevertheless, kept his religious devotion primary. Rabbi Yedidya could take the place of Plato and Aristotle.

It is hard to know if the Italian rabbis were successful in their campaign, but it seems clear that Philo's newfound fame dwindled with the Renaissance. Delmedigo's translation was tragically stolen,<sup>19</sup> and Provençal's *Avot*

<sup>16</sup> Simone Luzzatto, *Discourse on the State of the Jews: Bilingual Edition*, trans. Giuseppe Veltri and Anna Lissa (De Gruyter, 2019), 203.

<sup>17</sup> Weinberg, "The Quest for Philo in Sixteenth-Century Jewish Historiography," 179.

<sup>18</sup> R. David sought to establish a *yeshiva* that would provide a thorough secular education and save students from the universities. See Jacob Rader Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Source Book, 315-1791*, revised ed. (Hebrew Union College Press, 1999), 438-446.

<sup>19</sup> In the letter where he reveals that his translation has been stolen, Delmedigo also "stresses the importance of Philo for the Jews." See Weinberg, "The Quest for Philo in Sixteenth-Century Jewish Historiography," n. 115.

commentary lingered quietly in manuscript until recently. It would not be until the early nineteenth century that Philo would get a second, and more significant, reintroduction.

In the 1820s and 30s, a Moravian writer named Josef Flesch began translating Philo's works into Hebrew.<sup>20</sup> Suddenly, and for the first time, Philo's works were potentially available to every literate Jew. But a renewed interest in Philo had already been brewing in the decades before Flesch's translations. What made Flesch's contribution particularly significant was the involvement and support of major rabbinic figures, including R. Shlomo Yehuda Rapoport and R. Nahum Trebitsch, the chief rabbi of Moravia, who referred to Philo as "one of the *gedolim* and men of renown... a great philosopher and magnificent advocate, in addition to his wisdom in our holy Torah."<sup>21</sup> Quite an approbation.

What were the reasons for this second revival of Philo among Torah-observant Jews? They were likely quite diverse. Some Jews, drawn to the enlightenment values of the Haskalah, and

simultaneously concerned for the antinomian trends that they perceived in both the budding Reform and Hasidic movements, saw Philo as a forerunner to their more balanced approach.<sup>22</sup> For others, Philo offered valuable tools for exegesis. Thus we find luminaries like R. Meir Leibush Wisser (Malbim), R. Yaakov Zvi Mecklenburg, and R. David Tzvi Hoffmann, mining Philo's works for Egyptian vocabulary, authentic traditions regarding the ancient world, allegorical interpretations, and parallels to the tradition of Hazal.<sup>23</sup> Philo had something for everyone.

And yet, he remained far from the mainstream. While academia continued, and continues, to produce a steady stream of translations, commentaries, and studies of Philo's works, it does not appear that there was a similar interest among religious Jews. Perhaps Philo was simply too strange, and no amount of translation or veneration could conceal it. Or, with the crystallization of the Reform and Hasidic movements and the party lines sharply drawn, perhaps there was no longer a market for a thinker who straddled boundaries and

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<sup>20</sup> Ze'ev Strauss writes that "the most comprehensive and profound treatment of Philo's thought within the Haskala is undoubtedly that of Josef Flesch. During the second part of the 1820s and throughout nearly all the 1830s, Flesch directed almost all of his intellectual endeavors towards one goal: translating the writings of Philo of Alexandria into Hebrew and methodically commentating on them through countless recourses to the entirety of the rich Jewish tradition." See "Solomon Judah Rapoport's Maskilic Revival of Philo of Alexandria: Rabbi Yedidya Ha-Alexandri as a Pioneer of Jewish Philosophy" in David T. Runia and Gregory E. Sterling, *The Studia Philonica Annual XXXI, 2019: Studies in Hellenistic Judaism* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2019), 201-226, citation at 204.

<sup>21</sup> R. Trebitsch's glowing approbation is printed in Flesch's translation of *De Vita Mosis* (Prague, 1838).

<sup>22</sup> See Strauss, "Yedidyah Ha-Alexandri and the Crisis of the Modern Jewish Age: Philo of Alexandria as an Exemplary Ḥasid in Nahman Krochmal's Thought," *Religions* 12:6 (2021), 1-27.

<sup>23</sup> See Malbim to Exodus 2:10; *Ha-Ketav Ve-HaKabbalah* to Genesis 20:6; R. David Zvi Hoffmann to Genesis 2:10, Exodus 12:35-36, Deuteronomy 15:2, and numerous other locations. R. Hoffmann, with his education in classical languages, was not dependent on Hebrew translations.

championed nuance.

### The Latest Revival

The twentieth century nevertheless saw an important step forward in Philo's Jewish reception. R. David Cohen was a unique spiritual seeker, and his journey led him from the *yeshivot* of Radin and Slabodka to the University of Basel, where he studied philosophy and classical literature. With a strong interest in Kabbalah as well, R. Cohen was looking for a spiritual teacher who could help him put all of these diverse pieces together. In 1915, he found such a teacher in R. Avraham Yitzhak Kook.

If R. Kook served R. Cohen as a contemporary model for a holistic worldview, then Philo likely served him as an ancient one. R. Cohen's systematic treatment of Jewish mysticism, *Kol Ha-Nevuah*, includes numerous references to Philo, and the posthumous publication of his writings, *Nezir Ehav*, includes eighty pages dedicated to Philo alone. Philo embodied the synthesis of religiosity, philosophy, and mysticism that characterized R. Cohen's unique project. More importantly, Philo seemed to possess an awareness for *how* these diverse disciplines should come together.

Professor André Neher, summarizing R. Cohen's thinking about Philo, writes that "the

disappearance of Philo deviated medieval Jewish philosophy toward a Hellenization which Philo would have been able to resist. Only the Cabbalah remained faithful to Philo..."<sup>24</sup> Ironically, it is Philo, the archetypal "Hellenized Jew," who would have corrected the hellenizing tendencies of medieval Jewish philosophy. For R. Cohen, Philo – so often labeled a philosopher – is better understood as a mystic.

Surveying Philo's works, it is not difficult to understand why. Philo often discusses visions of the incorporeal realm, and he is not shy about sharing his own experiences in this area.<sup>25</sup> He unquestionably values science and philosophy, but their value is limited to the moral beauty, self-knowledge, and spiritual insight that they inspire. He writes that "as there is no advantage in trees unless they are productive of fruit, so in the same way there is no use in the study of natural philosophy unless it is likely to confer upon a man the acquisition of virtue, for that is its proper fruit" (*Mut.* 73, Yonge translation). And, taking aim at those who do not ground their philosophical speculations in genuine self-knowledge, Philo writes:

"God saw all that He had made,  
and behold it was very Good."  
(Genesis 1:31) For it was not  
possible for any one to have an

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<sup>24</sup> Roberto Radice and David T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria: An Annotated Bibliography, 1937-1986* (Brill, 1992), 374. Here, R. Cohen seems to eschew the academic view that sees Philo as foundational for the religious philosophy of Maimonides. However, one might concede that while Philo's thought is closer in spirit to the mystical teachings of Kabbalah, the types of questions with which he was concerned provide a basis and precedent for the Maimonidean project.

<sup>25</sup> See *Spec.* 3:1-6; *Migr.* 34-35. Regarding the nature and object of Philo's mysticism, see Scott D. Mackie, "Seeing God in Philo of Alexandria: The Logos, the Powers, or the Existent One?" *The Studia Philonica Annual* 21 (2009), 25-47.



accurate view of all that had been created, except for the Creator. Come, then, you who are full of arrogance, and ignorance... Come, and at once abandoning all other things, learn to know yourselves, and tell us plainly what you yourselves are... For do not tell me long stories about the moon and the sun, and all the other things in heaven and in the world...before you examine into and become acquainted with yourselves; for when you have learnt to understand yourselves, then perhaps one may believe you when you enter into explanations respecting other things. (*Migr.* 135-138, Yonge translation)

Philo's mysticism is similarly enmeshed with his moral philosophy. Virtues such as courage and compassion are both human ideals and ontological foundations of reality. Therefore, we find Philo speaking of the cosmos as a "virtuous animal" (*QG* 4.188), equating the law of nature with virtue itself (*Post.* 185), and describing the Logos, the blueprint/architect of reality, as having

its "stronghold" (Colson) or "starting place" (Yonge) in the virtues (*Abr.* 244). There is indeed a spiritual realm to be visited, populated by Divine Powers and Ideas, but it is a realm that can only be entered following a journey into the self.<sup>26</sup>

In this context, we should note that R. Cohen was not the first kabbalist to be drawn to Philo. R. Avraham de Herrera absorbed Arizal's kabbalistic system through Arizal's student, R. Yisrael Sarug, and was also well-versed in Neoplatonic philosophy.<sup>27</sup> In his *Gate of Heaven*, R. de Herrera cites a teaching of Philo in order to elucidate the nature of the *sefirot*, divine emanations in kabbalistic thought.<sup>28</sup> Though Philo does not use the language of Lurianic Kabbalah, R. de Herrera evidently found Philo's teachings to be consonant with the philosophically-informed mystical tradition he had received. Interestingly, *Gate of Heaven* served R. Kook as a "lodestar" for the holistic philosophical/mystical worldview that he hoped to realize as well.<sup>29</sup>

For these kabbalists, Philo served as an ancient precursor and an interesting precedent. But Philo's version of Jewish mysticism also has unique features that would certainly have appealed to thinkers like R. Samson Rafael Hirsch.

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<sup>26</sup> *Migr.* 195.

<sup>27</sup> For more on de Herrera, see Alexander Altmann, "Lurianic Kabbala in a Platonic Key: Abraham Cohen Herrera's 'Puerta del Cielo,'" *Hebrew Union College Annual* 53 (1982), 317-355. See also Krabbenhoft's work, cited below. R. Elia Benamozegh, another philosophically-trained kabbalist, cites Philo repeatedly in his Torah commentary, *Em La-Mikra*. In his comments to Exodus 20:14, he notes that the Divine wisdom in Philo's works is "extremely close" to our received tradition, and he cites a parallel teaching found both in Philo and the Zohar.

<sup>28</sup> Kenneth Krabbenhoft, *Abraham Cohen de Herrera: Gate of Heaven* (Brill, 2021), 422.

<sup>29</sup> Betzalel Naor, "The Hasidism of Rav Kook," *The Lehrhaus*, (December 25, 2017), <https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/the-hasidism-of-rav-kook/>. There is also some evidence that Philo's works were studied in the circle of R. Moshe Cordovero, who placed special emphasis on the mystical nature of God's moral attributes in his *Tomer Devorah*. See Spiegel, *Hasdei Avot*, introduction, 51-52.

In one of his rare discussions of the Kabbalah, R. Hirsch refers to it as

an invaluable repository of the spirit of Bible and Talmud, but which has been, unfortunately, misunderstood; and what should have been eternal, progressive development, was considered a stationary mechanism, and the inner significance and concept thereof as extra-mundane dream-worlds. This learning came into existence, and the mind turned either to the external ingenious development of the Talmud, or to this learning, which appealed to the emotions as well. Practical Judaism, which, comprehended in its purity, would perhaps have been impregnated with the spiritual, became in it, through misconception, a magical mechanism, a means of influencing or resisting theosophic worlds and anti-worlds.<sup>30</sup>

This hope for a mystical spirituality that recognizes its true value in the realm of genuine

religious feeling seems to be a fitting summary of what Philo offers his kabbalistic students.

R. Cohen's interest in Philo made a modest impact. Professor Naomi Cohen credits R. Cohen, her father-in-law, with encouraging her to devote her scholarly attention to Philo.<sup>31</sup> Professor Cohen might be seen as the most recent advocate for the reintroduction of Philo's writings to "their natural contemporary readership—the halakhically committed modern educated Jew."<sup>32</sup> And R. Shlomo Goren, R. Cohen's son-in-law, similarly valued Philo as "a Jew given over in heart and spirit to the Jewish nation and to everything sacred to it."<sup>33</sup>

All of these diverse Jewish thinkers felt that Philo had something important to say, not just to the Judaism of the first century but to our modern era as well. In fact, today's Judaism might need Philo more than ever.

### **Returning to God's Book**

Above, we cited R. Tzadok HaKohein of Lublin: "God, may He be blessed, made a book – which is the World – and a commentary to that book – which is the Torah." Our generation has unparalleled access to knowledge and unparalleled opportunity for curiosity, and yet so

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<sup>30</sup> R. Samson Rafael Hirsch, *Nineteen Letters*, Letter 18, Bernard Drachman translation, 1899. See also Letter 10, where R. Hirsch laments that the commandments have been misconstrued as "mechanical, dynamical, or magical formulas for the upbuilding of higher worlds, and that thus the observances meant for the education of the spirit to a nobler life were but too frequently degraded into mere amuletic or talismanic performances."

<sup>31</sup> Naomi G. Cohen, "Philo Judeaus and the Torah True Library," n. 18.

<sup>32</sup> Naomi G. Cohen, "Philo Judeaus and the Torah True Library," 32.

<sup>33</sup> Shlomo Goren, *Torat Ha-Philosophia* (Haldra Rabba, 1998), 112.

little of this world seems meaningful to us. We do not seem to appreciate it as a Divine book, waiting to be read. On the contrary, we studiously avoid many domains of knowledge and avenues of experience, as if the world – outside of our religious rituals and obligations – is simply dead matter. R. Yerukham Levovitz, the legendary *mashgiach*, spiritual mentor, of the Mir Yeshiva, made this point explicitly:

It is brought in Hazal (*Eruvin* 100b), “If the Torah had not been given, we would have learned modesty from the cat, etc.” Seemingly, we do not understand what relevance the modesty of the cat has to us, etc. Aren’t we accustomed to always say (Rambam, *Hilkhot Dei’ot* 3:1), “What the Torah forbade is sufficient for us?” But from that which they said, “If the Torah had not been given, we would have learned from animals,” we see that man is, in his nature, configured to learn from others... The issue is that he thinks that nature is just a simple piece of wood, and he himself is the sage, and obviously, how could he learn from nature? However, if only he knew that “there is no sage like

nature,” and he is standing before a great sage, then he would already think otherwise, and he would certainly stand before nature with great respect, as before supernal wisdom, which it truly is.<sup>34</sup>

In our pursuit of personal piety, we have secularized the world itself. R. Levovitz, alongside major Jewish thinkers from R. Bahya ibn Paquda to R. Shlomo Wolbe, recognized nature as a vital source of moral instruction that must be *complemented* by Torah study, not replaced.<sup>35</sup> We have lost this vision of the world, and an unfortunate consequence is that many domains of human experience that should be permeated with spiritual values are instead left abandoned – only to be claimed by the most materialistic elements within society. Perhaps no domain has suffered this fate more fully than the arts, and perhaps no modern rabbi decried this trend with more passion than R. Kook.

"I walk around with an overwhelming jealousy of the secular world," wrote R. Kook. "It is a jealousy that consumes me. For is it really possible that the power of creativity has ceased within the religious world?"<sup>36</sup> In a letter to R. Yitzhak Herzog, R. Kook's successor as chief rabbi, R. Kook elaborated on this concern:

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<sup>34</sup> *Da'at Torah, Parashat Naso* (my translation). See also R. Tzvi Shraga Grossbard's *Da'at Shraga, Parashat Toldot*.

<sup>35</sup> For an extensive presentation of this point and the relevant rabbinic sources, see my "Introduction to the Perek Shira Project," *Nature of Torah*, (March 20, 2023), <https://www.natureoftorah.com/post/introduction-to-the-perek-shira-project-part-i>.

<sup>36</sup> R. Kook, *Chadarav*, 215. This and the following quotes from R. Kook are translated in R. Ari Ze'ev Schwartz's *The Spiritual Revolution of Rav Kook* (Gefen, 2018), chapter 9, "The Spiritual Importance of Creativity." This quotation appears at p. 100.

Indeed, it should not be an accepted fact that every talented writer and famous poet is an atheist or one who has already given up his religion. We must break this stigma and show the world the poetic beauty that comes from those who are immersed in the source of the nation's natural life, from those who are faithful to God, the source of the waters of life.<sup>37</sup>

R. Kook further recognized that this reclamation of the arts could only come about following a profound shift in perspective. In a passage that reflects the words of R. Levovitz above, R. Kook describes a new worldview:

Contemplate the wonders of creation. Look at the divine life within them. Do not perceive the universe as a faded image that is placed in your line of vision from afar. Rather, you must be familiar with the reality in which you live. Know yourself and your world. Know the thoughts of your own heart and of every visionary and philosopher. Find the source of life that is within you, that is beyond you, and that surrounds you. Know the glory of life of which you are a part.<sup>38</sup>

Almost two thousand years before R. Levovitz and R. Kook, Philo of Alexandria recognized the danger of a Judaism that had lost its grounding in God's book, this world. His solution was to combine within himself all of those qualities that would allow him to stand as an example for others. Philo comes down to us as both a philosopher and a rabbi, a communal leader and a solitary mystic, a scientific mind and a poetic soul. But none of these titles would have meant much to him in isolation. For Philo, and for those he continues to inspire, they are simply the natural fruits and full expression of one single, encompassing title – Jew.

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<sup>37</sup> Schwartz, 104.

<sup>38</sup> *Orot Ha-Kodesh* I, 83. Schwartz, 102. See R. Hirsch, *Collected Writings*, vol. 8 (Feldheim, 1995), 259 for a similar sentiment.