

- Dine (Page 1)
- Wolkenfeld (Page 3)
- Reichman (Page 5)
- Poupko (Page 11)

NITZAVIM - VAYELEKH

"ANI L'DODI V'DODI LI: I AM MY BELOVED'S, AND MY BELOVED IS MINE."
LEHRHAUS OVER SHABBOS FOR THE MONTH OF ELUL IS DEDICATED
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WRITTEN AND SEALED (AND STAMPED) IN
THE BOOK OF LIFE: WHY WE SHOULD SEND
PHYSICAL CARDS THIS ROSH HASHANAH

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Perhaps one of the most stereotypically Jewish things about this holiday period is that we cannot even agree on the proper way to greet each other on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. *Poskim* and halakhic codes from the Magen Avraham to the [Kitzur Shulkhan Arukh](#) weigh in on the specifics, including the proper way and time to extend greetings.¹ The oral greetings for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are elaborate and varied, leading many *mahzorim* to include instructional guides explaining the grammatical changes based on the gender and size of the group addressed. The traditional *Ashkenazi* greeting for an individual man is *le-Shanah Tovah Tikateiv ve-Teihateim* - "May your name be written and sealed for a good year." The phrase goes back to the idea, originating in the Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 16b), that only the truly righteous are written immediately in the book of life; thus we pray that our friends and neighbors be seen by God as *tzaddikim*. As the *Koren Sacks Rosh Hashanah Mahzor* commentary (written by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks) explains, "[A]s we judge others, so are we judged." If we pray for others to be seen as righteous, then maybe we too can be seen in the eyes of God (and others, and perhaps even ourselves), as deserving of a sweet new year.²

Greeting another person on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is powerful not just because it is a greeting, but because it functions also as a short prayer for another that can reverberate back to the

¹ For more see Macy Nulman, "The Greetings of the Jewish People," *Journal of Jewish Music and Liturgy* 21 (1998-1999): 6-19.

² The *Koren Sacks Rosh Hashanah Mahzor*, Commentary by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, 2nd North American Hebrew/English Edition (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd., 2014), 100-101.

self. Indeed, verbal greetings have always had special significance in Judaism. Biblical characters greet each other with kisses and words of peace, and rabbis in the Talmud discuss the best local customs for greetings among friends.³ Most powerfully, Judaism utilizes rules against greeting to separate normal and happy times from those of tragedy; we do not say hello to one another on Tishah Be-Av and one does not greet the mourner upon entering a *Shiva* house. That moment of greeting, of saying hello, *shalom*, is all important, distinguishing between joyful and tragic times and between old friends and strangers.

The significance given to personal greetings speaks to the relational emphasis within modern Jewish philosophy pioneered by thinkers like Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. This thread in modern Jewish ethics focuses on the significance of the relationship of an individual to another, of an [I to a Thou](#), and how these relationships link back to the divine. For Levinas in particular, the moment of encountering the face of the other, and the moment of greeting, is an opening to all of ethics. In [Ethics and Infinity](#), Levinas explains (in his typically cryptic style) that when encountering the face of another person, in the moment of greeting, "it is necessary to speak of something, of the rain and fine weather, no matter what, but to speak, to respond to him and already to answer for him."⁴ For Levinas, this moment of encounter and answering the face of the other, of words of welcome and apparent small talk, is really anything but small talk. Rather, "the epiphany of the face is ethical," and in that encounter we are bound by the command not to murder our fellow.⁵

³ See the stories of Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 43:27) and David and Nabal (1 Samuel 20:41). For Talmudic discussions see *Sukkah* 53a and *Berakhot* 8b.

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, [Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Phillippe Nemo](#) (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1995), 88.

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, [Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority](#), trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 199.

But this year, how many “others” will we be able to greet? Many of us will be davening alone or with just our families. Some of us may attend small outdoor or socially distanced *minyanim* where no *kiddush* is served and no schmoozing occurs. Greetings will be yelled through masks from eight feet away. And this is how it should be, this year.

So this *Yamim Noraim* we need a new way to greet each other, one that will still be as powerful as our oral greeting tradition but safer than speaking to each other in person. And here is where I want to propose a revival of the Jewish New Year’s greeting card tradition. Now sending physical Rosh Hashanah cards has never totally disappeared – I have a vague memory of learning to fold origami shofars to glue onto cards as a young child at Jewish day school. But particularly among younger engaged Jews, the physical card has been replaced by the Facebook message, the email, and the status update for those who need to send Rosh Hashanah greetings to loved ones far away. And with good reason: communicating over the internet is fast, cheap, and reliable. We usually get our fill of verbal greetings among our friends and family who we celebrate the holidays with.

Yet this year, I argue, sending handwritten cards to loved ones—both those physically near but still impossible to see, and those far away who we cannot travel to visit—will provide a way to wish that all those whom we care about be seen as the *tzaddikim* they are to us. Looking back at the history of these greeting cards provides some insight into how this tradition might help fill voids we are experiencing in our High Holiday celebrations this year.

Postcards as we know them were invented in 1869 in Austria and spread rapidly from there. These cards quickly became a popular way for Jews to send New Year’s wishes to loved ones, and various printing houses began to specialize in cards with Jewish content. As Jews emigrated en-masse from Europe to America and Palestine, cards became an important way of maintaining contact between the Old and New Worlds. Postcards and letters made material the “traditional oral wishes for God to grant the recipient a good year and continued life,” sentiments that could no longer be expressed in person.⁶ They also became an important way for Jews to depict their engagement with contemporary technology and the modern world. Many cards included symbols and images of migration (ships) and communication technology (radios).⁷

The distance experienced by the thousands of Jewish immigrants stimulated growth in the Jewish greeting card industry, a phenomenon noted during the heyday of Rosh Hashanah postcards themselves. The *American Hebrew* in 1905 wrote that when most Jews lived in small communities in Europe, “It was then both practical and possible to convey all the personal greetings of the festivals, as

⁶ Jeffrey Shandler and Aviva Weintraub, “‘Santa, Shmanta’: Greeting Cards for the December Dilemma,” *Material Religion* 3, no. 3 (November 2007): 387-388.

⁷ For more on this fascinating history see: Shalom Sabar, “Postcards and Greeting Cards,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Postcards_and_Greeting_Cards (accessed August 24, 2020); Shalom Sabar, “A Survey of the Literature on Jewish Postcards and New Year Cards,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* 27 (2011): 269-290 (Hebrew); and Ellen Smith “Greetings from Faith: Early-Twentieth-Century American Jewish New Year Postcards” in *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, eds. David Morgan and Sally Prome (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 229-248.

well as the social news of the home circle, by word of mouth.”⁸ By 1905 this was no longer possible; daughters raised grandchildren thousands of miles away from grandmothers, and nephews worked at jobs unimaginable to uncles back in the *shtetl*. So enters the Rosh Hashanah greeting card. Some cards explicitly dealt with the issue of immigration in their design. For example, a rare postcard from the turn of the century depicts a steamship, moving from right to left, from the Old World to the New. Two eagles, one representing imperial Russia, the other the United States bald eagle, sit on either side: underneath the former is written *mi-hoshekh* (from darkness), and under the bald eagle is written *le-or* (to light). (The image of the greeting card at the top of this article has some similar features.) Ellen Smith, in a chapter devoted to studying these cards as a part of Jewish material religion, points out that women were the ones most responsible for sending and receiving Rosh Hashanah cards, making the study of these objects also a chance to gain insight into the female experience of Judaism, materialism, modernity, and immigration at this time.⁹

A fair amount has been written about the history of these cards, and I recommend looking at some of them online (YIVO has a lovely collection [here](#)). Perhaps some of the best are the obviously repurposed cards that were made for a Christian or secular market and then “transformed” into Jewish New Year’s cards with the addition of some traditional Hebrew greetings and Yiddish verses. Most of the articles written about the past popularity of Rosh Hashanah cards take a historical interest in the tradition, implicitly assuming that since today we do not live in a time of mass Jewish immigration—and we do live in a time of fast-paced communications technology—these cards are a relic of the past or at least serve a different function today. Technically this is still true. But this year we live in a world where our access to verbal face-to-face communication is severely reduced. Going retro and writing cards and letters could perhaps fill this gap, just like Rosh Hashanah cards once crossed the ocean to give loved ones back in Europe the latest news and sincerely wished New Year’s greetings.

For immigrants, writing letters also created a new mode of ethical communication. Unable to fulfill Levinas’ “face-to-face” opening to ethics, nineteenth century immigrants used letters “as a new basis for reconfiguring and sustaining a relationship that has been rendered vulnerable by separation.”¹⁰ But a letter, even to a neighbor, by its “very nature marks a separation and the need to overcome it,” making letters their own kind of communication, and requiring a new kind of contract within the relationship. Pen-pals agree to respond to one another, to take the time to truly communicate despite physical separation, creating what has been termed a specific “epistolary” or “correspondence” ethics.¹¹ This Rosh Hashanah, sending a sincere greeting via an old style Rosh Hashanah card, with a thoughtful message and a purposeful design, is one way to overcome the distance created by the pandemic.

Like more than half the world at this point, I celebrated my birthday in the pandemic. Unable to mark the day with friends, I asked the people I know to send me snail mail letters. By a few days after my birthday I had quite a nice pile of letters and cards – and origami

⁸ *American Hebrew* quoted in Smith, 232.

⁹ See Ellen Smith, 243-247.

¹⁰ David A. Gerber, “Epistolary Ethics: Personal Correspondence and the Culture of Emigration in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 19, no. 4 (2000): 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

cranes, cows, and flowers. One enthusiastic friend sent me five cards; an old friend from summer camp painted me a picture of a parrot with the accompanying text “happy birthday.” (For context, until recently I was the proud owner of a very silly “Shabbat Shalom” greeting parrot.) I received sincere letters from new friends and reconnected with old friends who enjoy stationary and a chance to put pen to paper. It was one of the best sets of birthday presents I could have asked for.



The author's birthday cards

Writing out letters by hand (or, for those with challenging handwriting, even typing them) is a way to communicate that is sincere and thoughtful, a step beyond email greetings or Facebook messages with GIFS of shofars. There is something about the act of writing a physical letter, of taking the time to think of a message specific to the recipient, that lends itself to sincere and heartfelt sentiments. Many people think as they write, coming to new ideas, conclusions, and messages as they go. Even the act of choosing a design, writing out an address, or finding a stamp shows a level of love, care, and attention that an email can never quite equal. Further, cards have traditionally allowed Jews to share good wishes and good news over long distances, to overcome separations from loved ones. Letters were a way to truly greet and wish people well when wishing “*le-Shanah Tovah Tikateiv ve-Teihateim*” face-to-face was impossible. This year, saying this greeting in person will be challenging for many of us. So why not send a greeting card instead? (And also [help out](#) the US Postal Service with increased business.) Cards, with their inherent sincerity, allow us to hope that our most distant friends (and thus ourselves) will be judged as immediately righteous. So, my wish to all is for a sweet *and healthy* new year, to be inscribed in the book of life, and to have a full mailbox, stuffed with good wishes from all those you love, no matter the distance.

WHEN THINGS GO BACK TO NORMAL

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When will things go back to normal?

Particularly as the high holidays approach, rabbis and lay leaders across the country are entwined in a series of negotiations about the how and when of a return to pre-pandemic synagogue: Which services? For how many people? What about children's programming? Constructing these opportunities feels like a game of Jenga, with extra blocks—we pile on the additional constraints (masks, size limits, etc.) and then ask which pieces we can remove from the puzzle before the whole thing comes crashing down.

But “normal” is a very uninspiring religious goal. Instead, we might ask: Given the need to reimagine our *shul* experience, how might we reach new heights of religious engagement? How might we help people reclaim important components of their spiritual lives while simultaneously encouraging people to try to find new avenues of connection?

In “normal” times, the average Modern Orthodox synagogue experience consists of at least three elements; analyzing these components can open our eyes to the potential to reopen and reconstruct the individual's experience in congregational life. Using traditional language, let's call these elements “*tefillah*,” “*minyan*,” and “*shul*.” Outlining these paradigms allows us to focus on the ways in which we might craft new opportunities by weighing the components that have always been a part of our religious lives.

Let's start with *tefillah*, or prayer. Personally, I have always preferred to pray in the synagogue. My own *tefillot* are enhanced by hearing familiar tunes and the voices of those who sing more beautifully than I do. The rhythms of the service provide structure for my own prayers. I rarely find as much *kavanah* (directed intention) when *davening* alone, even in the most beautiful and inspirational spaces. Yet the *mitzvah* of *tefillah*, in its most basic definition, is independent of the presence of others.

Rambam defines the biblical *mitzvah* to pray as an expression of the obligation to “serve God” (*Sefer Hamitzvot, Positive Mitzvah #5*). While the Torah's language is sweeping, the implication—according to Rambam—is that one way in which we are to serve God is through our prayers. Rambam, commenting on this formulation, proposes that prayer is a biblical *mitzvah* only in times of distress (*Hasagot ha-Ramban on Sefer ha-Mitzvot, 5:1*). In either case, at least according to R. Soloveitchik's analysis, the implication is likely that prayer responds to an existential need for the human being to be in conversation with God, whether or not there is an external source of distress.

The global pandemic has touched everyone in the Jewish community in some way, and in this time of pain and need, there are many who feel a need to pray in ways they did not before. Indeed, it may be that large numbers of people now feel called to fulfill Ramban's biblical obligation of *tefillah* as we respond to an *et tzarah*, a time of communal and personal distress. What will our communities do to welcome people who feel a need to pray as never before? Practically speaking, some communities may choose to open the sanctuary for people to come, one or two at a time, and many have a sacred space in which to pray even before they are ready to return to public

prayer. There may also be room for new *tefillot*, or an opportunity to revive prayers written in response to pandemics past that have been forgotten. Prayer communities need to give people space to express new kinds of pain, or perhaps a newly discovered sense of gratitude for all that we previously took for granted.

The second element is *minyan*. While sometimes used colloquially as a synonym for communal *tefillah*, *minyan* is a particular type of gathering. In discussing groups of people coming together for *tefillah*, the Talmud never uses the word *minyan*. Statements about the importance of praying with a group generally refer instead to the *tefillot* of the community (*tzibbur*). Perhaps the closest the Talmud comes to talking about what we call “*minyan*” is the discussions of which *tefillot* are enabled by the presence of ten men.

One salient example is the recitation of *kaddish*. If you have never needed to recite *kaddish*, the obsessive counting of ten may be hard to understand; but if you ever have, you likely feel it too. During the years that I recited *kaddish* for my parents, I was thus a *minyan-goer*. I showed up on time, or as close to on time as was possible with an infant daughter. I leaned over to the men’s side of the *mehitzah* and counted eagerly, waiting for that all-important tenth man so that I could recite *kaddish* along with the other mourners. I sought out *minyanim* in unconventional spaces and said *kaddish* quietly when I found a pop-up gathering that was not accustomed to hearing a woman’s voice during prayer. What I needed was not a physical *shul*, and what I found was often not a communal embrace or a source of inspiration; my purpose was simply to find ten men with whom to pray.

In our present situation, countless people in our community have missed the opportunity to mark *yahrzeits*, convene for *shivah*, and observe *aveilut* as they would have wished. What might a reopening provide for those who feel the opportunity has passed them by? Synagogues might convene special gatherings, *minyanim* or not, to honor or mark past occasions. A group *bar/bat mitzvah* celebration, a special *yizkor* service, or welcoming-spaces to mark the births since the lockdown began—all of these and more might be part of a re-entry process to communal *tefillah*.

Kaddish can be a powerful motivator for *tefillah be-tzibbur*. Yet the months-long absence of all communal prayer can also illuminate something for those of us not in mourning and those of us who are never able to help “make a *minyan*.” When we pray with a *tzibbur*, we experience all those parts of the service that cannot be replicated at home: the melodious congregational singing of *kedushah*, the dramatic opening of the *Aron Kodesh*, the communal *mi sheberakh* blessings, and so many other things. Our reopenings can be marked by renewed attention to the moments of *tefillah be-tzibbur* that inspire us and the special power of those prayers only recited when we gather as a *minyan*. Instead of a focus on counting up to ten men, we might think about the resonance of the Talmud’s idea that God hears the prayer of a *tzibbur* (*Berakhot 8a*). The implication is that even the words that we say on our own have a special resonance when we say them together. Right now, even praying with nine other people feels like a revelation. I want to continue feeling that sense of wonder when my voice joins with that of the *kelal* (community), and I hope that synagogues will focus anew on celebrating each and every participant who arrives, whose presence encourages the special divine attention granted to a *tzibbur*.

The third element is *shul*, which can be neatly summed up by a personal memory. When my spouse and I lived in Israel with a toddler, we often split up our Shabbat morning *tefillot*. One parent

would attend an early morning service, and the other went to a later one, so we each had a chance to pray free of childcare duties. When it was my turn to attend the later service, I sat in the courtyard with my little one, chatting with friends and other parents, waiting eagerly to greet more people when the first service ended. This was an experience of *shul* in its exclusively social sense. The communal gathering framed our Shabbat and provided a spiritual home for my little one and myself, even though we had not yet engaged in any *tefillah* whatsoever.

In my community, and maybe in yours, many of the people bemoaning the lack of “normal *shul*” have just this model in mind. I will borrow the language of the Gemara (*Berakhot 30a*) and call this the “*hever ir*” aspect of *shul*. This coming together as a community is epitomized by Tot Shabbat, children’s groups, *kiddush*, and all the hallway *kibitzing* (socializing). This is what builds the social fabric of the *shul*. This is what enables us to perform acts of *hesed* for each other because we know that this one had surgery, this one’s child is struggling in school, this one just started dating someone. When I read the famous dictum of Hillel, “Do not separate yourself from the community,” this is the image that comes to mind (*Pirkei Avot 2:4*). One could, in theory, attend *minyan* on a regular basis, pray with great intensity during all *tefillot*, and still not engage with a community in this thick and important way.

Communities have tried to keep this part in place throughout the pandemic, with expanded focus on *hesed* projects, Zoom *kiddush*, and other creative initiatives. But one aspect of this model that is hard to recreate online is the serendipitous encounters: the person you happen to be next to in line during *kiddush*, the parent you meet because your children end up playing together. In fact, these online meetings can exacerbate the worst of these opportunities: talking to just the people you already know. When we meet again, will we be sure to break those patterns? Synagogue leadership will have work to do in order to encourage us all to break out of our silos and get to interact with one another. When COVID-19 broke out, there was widespread concern for the vulnerable among us: the elderly, those living alone, people in compromised health. These may be the people who take the longest to feel comfortable joining in communal settings, but whether present or not, a robust *shul* social life must include those we must go out of our way to include.

But perhaps the greatest opportunity for what we can create when we reconvene comes from the convergence of all three of these paradigms. I have attended many synagogues in my life—as a congregant, mourner, parent, communal leader, and rabbinic spouse. I cannot personally recall any *shul* in which the leadership reached out to check on what I was doing at home when I was not present. Ours was a *shul*-based Judaism; classes, resources, social connection, *minyan*, and *tefillot* were all based in and around the synagogue.

Yet the new perspective we have gained during this crisis shows us both what shuls can be when they are able to safely reopen as well as what they can provide to those who are not present. This includes books or PDFs when someone needs to *daven* at home, outreach even when it isn’t our friend who doesn’t show up that week, Zoom classes for the home-bound, *kiddush-to-go* for the folks who couldn’t make it, and a commitment to adding to the richness of Jewish home life. *Tefillah*, *minyan*, and *shul* are all important elements, and not all of them always have to take place in the shul itself. The pieces we add may not only be home-based elements, but also components that were previously crowded out by our fealty to an established structure and liturgy, such as varied prayer gatherings, the addition of *tefillot*, and a renewed commitment to creating meaningful prayer

opportunities for individuals and groups to *daven*. This is a different game than Jenga, more like the MineCraft games that play in the background now whenever I am able to get any actual work accomplished. We are challenged to build something new, reassess communal needs, and reexamine religious priorities.

Elul encourages this kind of introspection and growth. In one of Rav Hutner's essays on the process of repentance (*Rosh Hashanah, Ma'amar 6*), he describes the process of *teshuvah* as a type of "middah k'neged middah," measure for measure. The starting point for this assertion is a midrashic comment on the verse "And these matters that I command you today shall be upon your hearts" (Deuteronomy 6:6). The word "today," asserts the midrash, means that we should approach Torah as though it is new and exciting each and every day (Sifrei Devarim 33). Past mistakes have no hold on us, as we reorient ourselves to what it means to observe *mitzvot*. When this is our stance toward the Divine, Rav Hutner writes, God responds in kind and treats us as new beings. Each one of us wants to hold on to that which is familiar and comforting, and, as a collective, we want to be careful not to lose those aspects that made our *shuls* special and meaningful in the past. The special challenge of Elul and the high holidays, this year and every year, is to open ourselves up to what we can do differently, refusing to content ourselves with simply "returning to normal."

FROM GRADUATION TO CONTAGION: JEWISH PHYSICIANS CONFRONTING PLAGUE IN PADUA, 1631

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Introduction

We are presently in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The United States has not experienced a plague of this magnitude in over a century. As such, we have no personal historical memory to guide us through these "unprecedented" times. It therefore behooves us to seek out collective historical memories of similar events experienced by Jewish communities of the past in order to gain insight, guidance, and inspiration during these challenging times.

In this small contribution to this effort, we look back to seventeenth century Italy during the plague in Padua of 1631. We further narrow our focus to one unique segment of the population particularly affected by plague: the Jewish physician.

Jews, Medical Training, and Italy

The affinity of Jews to the practice of medicine dates back millennia. Yet, for centuries Jews were prohibited by law from receiving formal training. It is only beginning in the Renaissance that Jews were allowed to obtain formal, academic, university-based medical training,¹² and even then, primarily in Italy, as Cecil Roth notes:

There was only one country of Western Europe in which Jewish life continued to flourish and to maintain its contact with the general world; thus the inquiry as to the position of the Jews in university life must in effect be very largely confined geographically to Italy, as it is, in point of subject, chiefly to medicine.¹³

The University of Padua in Northern Italy was the first university to officially open its doors to non-Catholics, including both Protestants and Jews.¹⁴ Other Italian universities accepted Jews during this period

¹² On the history of the Jews and medicine, see Harry Friedenwald, [*The Jews and Medicine*](#), 3 v. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1944); and Frank Heynick, [*Jews and Medicine: An Epic Saga*](#) (Ktav Publishers, 2002).

¹³ Cecil Roth, "The Medieval University and the Jew," *Menorah Journal* 19:2 (1930): 128-141, esp. 134. The University of Leiden admitted its first Jewish student in 1650. See Kenneth Collins, "Jewish Medical Students and Graduates at the Universities of Padua and Leiden: 1617-1740," *Rambam Maimonides Medical Journal* 4:1 (January 2013): 1-8; Hindle Hes, [*Jewish Physicians in the Netherlands, 1600-1940*](#) (Van Gorcum, 1980). It wouldn't be until the early eighteenth century that Jewish students could attend German medical schools. See, for example, John Efron, [*Medicine and the German Jews: A History*](#) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

¹⁴ On the Jews and the University of Padua see A. Ciscato, [*Gli Ebrei in Padova \(1300-1800\)*](#) (Italian) (Arnaldo Forni Editore, 1901); S. Dubnov, "Jewish Students at the University of Padua," *Sefer Hashanah: American Hebrew Yearbook* (1931): 216-219; Jacob Shatzky, "On Jewish Medical Students of Padua," *Journal of the History of Medicine* 5 (1950): 444-47; Cecil Roth, "The Qualification of Jewish Physicians in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 28 (1953): 834-843;

as well, though papal permission was usually required.¹⁵ Thus, it is primarily in Italy, and particularly in Padua, that the majority of Jewish physicians of the Renaissance trained.

By the early 1600s a steady stream of Jewish students traversed the halls of Padua's famous medical school.¹⁶ In addition to the local Italian communities, students came from abroad to avail themselves of this unique opportunity.¹⁷ The students were received warmly, and their graduations were celebrated with fanfare including the composition of special poems for the occasion.¹⁸ Their special status as physicians often exempted them from wearing the required Jewish garb.¹⁹ Despite their advances in society, the practice of Jewish physicians was largely confined by law to their fellow Jews. On rare occasions one could obtain special papal dispensation to treat non-Jewish patients as well.²⁰ As such, a number of the graduates served

David B. Ruderman, "The Impact of Science on Jewish Culture and Society in Venice (with Special Reference to Jewish Graduates of Padua's Medical School) in his [Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe](#) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); S. G. Massry, et. al., "Jewish Medicine and the University of Padua: Contribution of the Padua Graduate Toviah Cohen to Nephrology," *American Journal of Nephrology* 19:2 (1999): 213-221; S. M. Shasha and S. G. Massry, "The Medical School of Padua and its Jewish Graduates," (Hebrew) *Harefuah* 141:4 (April 2002): 388-394; Kenneth Collins, "Jewish Medical Students and Graduates at the Universities of Padua and Leiden: 1617-1740," *Rambam Maimonides Medical Journal* 4:1 (January 2013): 1-8.

¹⁵ These include, for example, the universities of Rome, Siena, Ferrara, and Perugia.

¹⁶ For a list of Jewish graduates from the University of Padua Medical School during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see A. Modena and E. Morpurgo, [Medici E Chirurghi Ebrei Dottorati E Licenziati Nell'Universita di Padova dal 1617 al 1816](#) (Italian) (Forni Editore, 1967).

¹⁷ For a list of the geographical origins of the Jewish students of the University of Padua Medical School from 1617-1717, see Debra Glasberg Gail, [Scientific Authority and Jewish Law in Early Modern Italy](#) (Ph.D. Dissertation: Columbia University, 2016), 305.

¹⁸ See, for example, S. Liberman Mintz, S. Seidler-Feller, and D. Wachtel (eds.), [The Writing on the Wall: A Catalogue of Judaica Broadides from the Valmadonna Trust Library](#) (London, 2015).

¹⁹ See Benjamin Ravid, "From Yellow to Red: On the Distinguishing Head-Covering of the Jews of Venice," *Jewish History* 6:1-2 (1992): 179-210.

²⁰ Abraham de Balmes is an early example. See Giancarlo Lacerenza and Vera Isabell Schwarz-Ricci, "[Il diploma di dottorato in medicina di Avraham ben Me'ir de Balmes \(Napoli 1492\)](#)," (Italian) *Sefer Yuhasin: Review for the History of the Jews in South Italy* 2 (2018): 163-193. In the late sixteenth century, Abraham Portaleone received permission from Pope Gregory XIV to treat Christian patients. On Portaleone, see H.A. Savitz, "Abraham Portaleone: Italian Physician, Erudite Scholar and Author, 1542-1612," *Panminerva Medica* 8:12 (December, 1966): 493-5. Throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, despite the explicit edicts against Jews treating Christians, many popes retained Jewish physicians on their medical staff. See, for example, Harry Friedenwald, "Jewish Physicians in Italy: Their Relationship to the Papal and Italian States," in his [The Jews and Medicine](#) (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1944), 551-612; Edwin Mendelssohn, [The Popes' Jewish Doctors, 492-1655 CE](#) (self-publication, 1991).

the Jewish communities in Padua and its environs, largely confined to the Jewish ghettos.²¹

Little did these young Jewish medical graduates know that their choice of profession would soon thrust them into unforeseen, daunting, and life-threatening circumstances within only a few years of graduation. From 1629 to 1631 the Bubonic Plague swept through Northern Italy, killing an estimated one million people. Since the Black Death some three centuries earlier, Europe had not seen a plague of such magnitude. The students' training surely did not prepare them for the unprecedented challenges they would face.

The Jewish Graduates of the Class of 1623

As our lens into the impact of plague on Jewish physicians, we consider the students of one graduating class²² from the University of Padua Medical School. In 1623,²³ four young enthusiastic Jewish students graduated the Padua medical school.²⁴ Like every graduate

²¹ A number of Jewish physicians treated non-Jews specifically in times of plague, despite the prohibitions and potentially fatal consequences. A Dr. Valensin disregarded the prohibition for practicing outside the Venetian ghetto and treated Christian patients in an area deserted by the gentile practitioners during the plague in 1630. He was long remembered with gratitude for his actions. See Cecil Roth, [Venice](#) (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1930), 96 and 189. This may possibly be the same physician mentioned in Ravid, *op. cit.*, 197. In 1730, during a severe influenza outbreak, Shimshon Morpurgo distinguished himself by providing medical services to both Jew and Christian alike. This earned him the approbation and commendation of Cardinal Prospero Lambertini. Lambertini would later go on to become Pope Benedict XIV (1740 – 1758). In gratitude, Morpurgo and his heirs received rights to act as superintendents of merchandise arriving at the port of Ancona and intended for use in the Apostolic Palace. See Edgardo Morpurgo, [La Famiglia Morpurgo di Gradisca sull'Isonza 1585-1885](#) (Italian) (Padova: Premiata Societa Cooperativa, 1909), 69. These privileges were issued to the heirs of Morpurgo as well, and a number of these documents are extant. Elia Consigli, Padua graduate of 1723, treated a clergyman named Steffano during a plague in Rome in 1735. See Nathan Koren, [Jewish Physicians: A Biographical Index](#) (Jerusalem: Israel University Press, 1973), 37.

²² Graduation was not a one-time event, as is the case with most universities today. Rather, students graduated on a rolling basis. I exercise literary license in using the phrase "graduating class." These students all graduated in the same calendar year.

²³ In this essay we focus on the plague in Padua, but Jewish physicians were obviously impacted in other Italian cities as well during this outbreak. Isaac Gedalya graduated the University of Padua Medical School in 1622. See A. Modena and E. Morpurgo, *op. cit.*, p. 4, n. 10. He wrote two poems in honor of Leon Cantarini's medical school graduation in 1623, one in Spanish and one in Latin. Cantarini is one of the students discussed in the present essay. Gedalya died in 1630 during the Bubonic Plague in Venice at the age of 32. He is buried in the Lido Cemetery of Venice, and his epitaph reflects that he died while treating patients in Venice during the plague. See Abraham Berliner, [Luhot Avanim: Hebraische Grabschriften in Italien](#) (Hebrew) (Frankfurt a. Main: 1881), p. 40, n. 59. Berliner erroneously lists the year for Leon Cantarini's graduation as 1618. It was 1623.

²⁴ A total of six Jewish students graduated in 1623. Rabbi Moise di Guida Uziel and Joseph di Guida Chamitz also graduated that year, but I have seen no historical evidence of their involvement with the plague. They may not have lived in Padua or its environs during the

before them for hundreds of years, they entered the final examination chamber,²⁵ which was filled with various depictions in paint and stone of history's greatest scientists. They occupied the small chair in the center of the room, surrounded by an imposing tribunal of world-renowned physicians who would administer hours-long grueling oral exams. In the hallway, supporting and admiring family, friends, and colleagues eagerly awaited their departure from the chamber.

The shared experience of attending one of the world's finest institutions of higher medical learning as practicing Jews, something long denied their ancestors and only possible in one institution at that time, created a unique bond between them. Two of the four graduates were siblings, and all were members of the same brotherhood and fraternity²⁶ of Jewish medical graduates of the University of Padua.

After graduation, they would go their separate ways. It would not be long, however, until they would be reunited by another shared experience, no less historically significant, though unfortunately of a tragic nature. The Bubonic Plague raged in the Northern Italian Peninsula from 1629 and would reach the Jewish community in the ghetto of Padua in 1631.²⁷ Each of these students would be impacted by this event in different though interrelated ways. Two Padua alumni would be in the eye of the storm, confronting the plague

plague. On Chamitz, see D. Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), index, Hamitz.

²⁵ This room stands today much as it did then, and is still used for the same purpose.

²⁶ The student body of the University of Padua was divided into "nations" based on country of origin. According to some historians, the Jewish students formed a student body of their own, irrespective of their country of origin. See Shatzky, *op. cit.*, 446.

²⁷ Here we discuss the impact of the plague exclusively on the city of Padua. The plague started in Padua on September 15, 1630, but did not reach the ghetto until a few months later. For discussion of the impact of plagues during this period on the different Jewish communities in Italy, see Yaffa Kohen, *The Development of Organizational Structures by the Italian Jewish Communities to Cope with the Plagues of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Hebrew) (Doctoral Dissertation: Bar Ilan University, submitted Tishrei, 5740). I thank Naomi Abraham, librarian at Bar Ilan University, for her truly exceptional efforts in making this dissertation available to me in the midst of the COVID pandemic. The plague in Rome of 1656-1657, discussed by Kohen, merits its own separate treatment regarding the role of Jewish physicians. I hope to return to this at a later time. A broader study of Jewish physicians and plagues across time and locations remains a desideratum. Some have written on the Black Death, such as Gerrit Bos, Ron Barkai, and Susan Einbinder. Less attention has been given to the role of Jewish physicians in other epidemics. See, for example, Theodore Cohen, "Walter Jonas Judah and New York's 1798 Yellow Fever Epidemic," *American Jewish Archives Journal* 48 (1996): 23-34. Judah, a Columbia University graduate and medical student, died at the age of twenty in 1798 while attending the sick during the Yellow Fever epidemic in New York. He is buried in the Spanish Portuguese Synagogue Cemetery in New York. [His tombstone reads](#): In memory of Walter J. Judah student of physic, who worn down by his exertions to alleviate the sufferings of his fellow citizens in that dreadful contagion that visited the City of New York in 1798 fell a victim in the cause of humanity on the 5th of Tishri A.M. 5559.

directly. The others would be less directly impacted by the ravages of the outbreak. All of their lives would be irrevocably changed as a result.

Being a physician during a plague in the pre-modern era, at a time when the mechanism of disease transmission was not well understood, in an era before antibiotics, is tantamount to fighting a war without ammunition, a near-impossible task. How did these physicians respond to these circumstances? Did they enlist, or were they drafted into battle, knowing that the odds were clearly against their survival? Did they feel a sense of duty or allegiance to their profession, or to their people? Did they flee to safer ground until the danger had passed? What factors informed their decisions? As Jews, did Halakhah play a role? How many of them or their families survived?

While we unfortunately have no surviving evidence of the inner thoughts of our graduates, we do have some historical record, albeit incomplete, that sheds light on their trials and tribulations. As mere observers, our role is primarily descriptive. We are in no position to second guess motives or decisions, nor to impugn those whose behavior may at first blush appear difficult to explain. Instead, we explore the available sources to gain at least limited insight as to the impact of this catastrophic event on the lives of these Jewish physicians.

In the Line of Fire

Two graduates of the class of 1623, Caliman Cantarini and David Loria, were physicians in Padua when the plague struck. Their responses to the epidemic differed, and the decisions they made during these challenging times would forever change the future of their families.

Caliman Cantarini

Clemente Caliman Kalonymus Cantarini was born in 1593 and was a member of the illustrious Cantarini family which served the Padua community in multiple capacities for centuries.²⁸ Caliman was the very first of the family to obtain an academic degree, graduating from the University of Padua Medical School in 1623. Clemente was involved in creating the botany lessons and labelling the plants in the famous Botanical Garden of the University of Padua founded by Francesco Bonafede in the mid-sixteenth century.²⁹ Caliman was described as a man great in Torah, in addition to medicine.³⁰

On the fourth of Tevet, in 1627, Caliman married Eva, the daughter of Azriel Koen Porto of Verona. In 1631, when the plague arrived in the Padua ghetto, Caliman chose to remain in the ghetto to attend to the

²⁸ See Marco Osimo, *Narrazione della Strage Compiuta nel 1547 Contro gli Ebrei d'Asolo e Cenni Biografici della Famiglia Koen-Cantarini* (Italian) (Casale-Monferrato: 1875). This is the definitive work on the Cantarini family.

²⁹ Osimo, *op. cit.*, 59. According to Osimo, Cantarini wrote the detailed descriptions of 186 plants for the Botanical Garden, certifying the nomenclature affixed to each of them with admirable accuracy and with diligent mastery. As of the time of Osimo's writing in the late 1800s, almost all of them were well-preserved, still making a fine display of the color of the leaves and flowers.

³⁰ Isaac Hayyim Cantarini, *Pahad Yitzhak* (Amsterdam: David Tertus, 1684), 10a. He includes Caliman's brother Leon (Yehudah) in this description. In this passage Cantarini lists the great Jewish personalities of the previous period.

victims of the plague, some of whom were his own family members.³¹ We can imagine that he donned the conventional plague doctor garb, including the gloves, boots, and long coat, as well as the beaked mask, which would have contained sweet-smelling substances to neutralize and ward off the odors associated with the pestilential disease.

The impact of the plague on Caliman and his extended family is chronicled in the remarkable work of the physician Abraham Catalano.³² As one of the four administrators of the plague in the Padua Ghetto, Catalano authored a diary of the daily events entitled *Olam Hafukh* (World in Upheaval). It is through this diary that we gain a glimpse of the effect the plague had on this one family. To appreciate the full impact, one would need to read through this work in its entirety to identify every Cantarini family member mentioned. Remarkably, someone has done just that.

There are few extant manuscripts of *Olam Hafukh*. It was only published for the first time in 1946 by Cecil Roth.³³ One of the manuscripts was transcribed meticulously in the late 1600s by Isaac Hayyim Cantarini,³⁴ a nephew of Caliman, who was only born years after the plague. Isaac was likewise a medical graduate of Padua, as well as a rabbi and prominent figure in Italian Jewish history. In his manuscript, Isaac Cantarini makes a notation in the text for every mention of one of his family members, and in the margin identifies their relationship to him. There are no other additions or notations to the manuscript. This remarkable fact, which has escaped the attention of scholars, is a testimony to the enduring impact of the 1631 Padua plague on the Cantarini family.³⁵ Surely it is his family's extensive involvement and loss during the plague that compelled Isaac decades later to transcribe this manuscript as a record of his personal family history.

From *Olam Hafukh*, we learn that on July 8, 1631 Caliman's father Shimon died from plague, to be followed by his uncle Menahem on July 22. Caliman himself would succumb to the disease only eight days later. He died on July 30, 1631, at age thirty-eight.³⁶ His life and death are memorialized in the plague diary of Abraham Catalano. Other Cantarini family members are also accounted for in the diary. Caliman lost two other brothers to the plague, and while their names, Mordekhai and Yosef, are not provided by Catalano, they are added in the margin of Cantarini's transcription. Three of Caliman's brothers

in Padua survived, and one, whom we shall discuss below, was in Venice during the outbreak and unaffected.³⁷

Caliman battled the plague, sacrificing his life in the process leaving no direct descendants. In his will and testament, written by another hand and signed by him, he expressed his wish to be buried among his dead relatives. Having no children, he provided for his mother and his wife, in addition to leaving some of his estate to his sister Didele.³⁸

David Loria

Caliman was not the only Jewish physician in the Padua ghetto at this time. Indeed, one of his medical school classmates, David Loria, lived in Padua at the same time. The relationship of the Loria³⁹ and Cantarini families preceded these two medical students. In February 28, 1603, shortly after the formation of the Jewish ghetto of Padua, Shimon Cantarini (father of Caliman) and Shimon Loria (father of David)⁴⁰ served as agents of the Jewish community and obtained permission from the town hall to add a number of streets to the ghetto map.⁴¹

In honor of Loria's graduation in 1623, Leon Da Modena composed a poem.⁴² Loria himself composed a poem in honor of his fellow graduate, Yosef Chamitz.⁴³ At the behest of the rabbis of Padua, Modena offered to bestow rabbinic ordination on Loria some years later, though Loria declined for unclear reasons.⁴⁴

Towards the end of May 1631, Loria elected to flee the plague-infested city of Padua to Montagnana, a city some thirty miles to the south.⁴⁵ Here his father-in-law lived and had procured permission from the health department of the government to house his immediate family. His departure was not simply accomplished. Permission was required and the requisite authority, who was out of town at the time, refused passage. Loria then turned to the officer left in command to procure permission, which was ultimately granted. The officer, Piero Sagredo, however, subsequently regretted his acquiescence and rescinded his permission. By that time, Loria and his family were well on their way to Montagnana, where they would wait out the remainder of the plague in safety.

Loria by no means abandoned his fellow Jews, making significant provisions to assist those remaining in Padua while he was in exile. Through his personal donations and solicitations of others he collected two hundred ducats for the community, the equivalent of

³¹ We have no record of Caliman treating his own family.

³² Though not himself a graduate of the University of Padua Medical School (we have no record of his graduation), Catalano was certainly traveling in the same circles. In fact, he wrote a poem in honor of the graduation of Yosef Chamitz from Padua in 1623.

³³ See Cecil Roth, ed., Abraham Catalano, "Olam Hafukh," (Hebrew) *Kovetz al Yad 4:14* (1946): 67-101.

³⁴ On Cantarini, see, for example, Harry A. Savitz, [Profiles of Erudite Jewish Physicians and Scholars](#) (Spertus College of Judaica Press, 1973), 25-28.

³⁵ Catalano also suffered the loss of his wife and daughter during the plague, which he records in his diary.

³⁶ Caliman Cantarini's death is also listed in the *Archivio di Stato di Padova*, Volume 472 (from July 3, 1631 through 1634). This volume lists the deaths in Padua from any cause. The archive occasionally mentions treating physicians, and Caliman is the only Jewish doctor mentioned as having treated patients during the time of the plague. Abraham Catalano is not mentioned in the State Archives. I thank Ghila Pace for this reference and information.

³⁷ The plague had affected Venice earlier, in 1630.

³⁸ Osimo, *op. cit.*, 60.

³⁹ On the Loria family, see Isaia Levi, "La Famiglia Loria," (Italian) *Il Vessillo Israelitico* 52 (1904): 156-158, though Levi provides only scant information and a skeletal family tree.

⁴⁰ Elia dei Velli was also involved in this endeavor.

⁴¹ Osimo, *op. cit.*, 48. The addition included the small road of S. Canziano, and a portion of S. Urbano, where a number of Jews lived but which was not initially included.

⁴² See Simon Bernstein, [The Divan of Leo de Modena: Collection of his Hebrew Poetical Works](#) (Philadelphia: 1932) n. 78; Yehudah Arye Modena, *Hayei Yehudah*, 53.

⁴³ See N. S. Leibovitz, *Seridim* (The Writings of R. Yosef Chamitz, including *Be-Leil Chamitz* by R. Yehudah Aryeh Modena) (Hebrew) (Darom Books, 5697).

⁴⁴ S. Simonsohn, *Ziknei Yehudah* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 5716), 46.

⁴⁵ The following is from Catalano's "Olam Hafukh," Roth, *op. cit.*, 81.

roughly thirty thousand dollars today. Furthermore, before his departure, he deposited funds with Shemarya Morpurgo, a prominent rabbi of the community, to distribute weekly to the poor and needy. Loria also coordinated distribution of the wines from his cellar to the Jewish community.

Loria lost a number of relatives to the plague, though the details are less well known than those of Caliman. Upon Loria's return to Padua in 1632, after the resolution of the plague, he, along with Mandolin da Zara, was in charge of the custody and protection of the effects left by the victims of the plague.

Loria would continue to live in Padua for a number of years after the plague. The work *Yesha Ya-h* by Yeshaya ben Eliezer Hayyim Nitza,⁴⁶ published in 1637, is dedicated to Loria for his patronage. Loria later lived in Mantua, where he was appointed both rabbi of the community and physician to the poor in 1660.⁴⁷

David Loria, who fled the plague in Padua to seek shelter with his father-in-law, survived the ordeal. He left a family to carry on his name. He lived another productive thirty years, long enough to see his son, Isaac, graduate from his alma mater, the University of Padua Medical School, in 1653.⁴⁸ He died in Mantua,⁴⁹ where his descendants would serve as physicians in the city.⁵⁰

On the Sidelines

While Caliman Cantarini and David Loria were directly impacted by the Padua plague by virtue of their being physicians in the city at the onset of the plague, two of their other classmates were less directly, though also significantly, affected.

Leon (Yehudah) Cantarini

Caliman Cantarini had a younger brother by some two years, Leon. Born in 1595, Leon obtained his rabbinical degree in 1618, and his

⁴⁶ The book is comprised of two sections. Section one is on the difficult words in the Zohar, and the second deals with the proper behavior before and after meals. It is based on the teachings of the kabbalist Yosef ben Shraga and contains additional material from Nitza.

⁴⁷ See S. Simonsohn, 579-580. Loria came from Padua to Mantua to console the family of Rabbi Samuel Meldola, to whom he was related by marriage, upon his death in 1660. While there, the community invited him to succeed his deceased relative as rabbi of the community for an annual salary of 120 scudi, the equivalent of roughly two thousand dollars. As he was also a physician, they contracted with him to serve the poor. Loria received tax exemption for his services as well.

⁴⁸ Another descendent of the same name, David Vita di Isacco, graduated Padua Medical School in 1696. See Modena and Morgurgo, *op. cit.*, 55.

⁴⁹ Modena and Morgurgo, *op. cit.*, 6, citing Mortara, write that Loria died in 1660. Mortara does list a date in 1660 for Loria, but not specifically as the date of his death. See Marco Mortara, *Mazkeret Hakhme Italia: Indice alfabetico dei rabbini e scrittori israeliti di cose giudaiche in Italia* (Italian) (Padova: F. Sacchetto, 1886), 35. Simonsohn rejects the 1660 date as Loria's date of death and cites documents that Loria was only first appointed as the city physician that year. See S. Simonsohn, *The History of the Jews in the Duchy of Mantua* (Jerusalem: Kiryath Sefer, 1977), 718.

⁵⁰ S. Simonsohn, *op. cit.*, 718.

medical degree from the University of Padua in 1623,⁵¹ the same year as his brother Caliman and David Loria. Leon was living in Venice during the height of the plague in Padua.⁵² Though he could not treat the plague patients in Padua, he was worried about his older brother and the risk to which he was exposed.

Leon wrote his brother Caliman on July 18, 1631, showing himself distressed because the epidemic was raging in Padua, and advising him of some effective remedies recommended to overcome the dreaded disease, as well as appropriate precautions not to contract or spread the infection.⁵³ He specifically recommended the use of emeralds, which since the Black Death had been considered a cure for plague. Leon emphatically warned his brother to exercise extreme caution and diligence in order to preserve his health.⁵⁴

Caliman died just twelve days later. One can only imagine the emotional distress of losing his older brother, a fellow physician who battled on the front lines of the plague, while he, Leon, watched helplessly from afar. But as mentioned above, this was not his only loss. Many other members of Leon's immediate family also perished during the plague. Though not in the direct line of fire, Leon experienced first-hand the devastation of the plague.

Leon became a renowned Jewish scholar and accomplished orator of Jewish law and philosophy. We have a record of his May 15, 1643 request to the Venetian Senate that he should be exempt from the prohibition against wearing the black *cappello* (hat) on the basis of his medical degree. The privilege was granted.⁵⁵

David Morpurgo

The last of the classmates we discuss is David Morpurgo. In the text of David's graduation diploma from March 9, 1623, he is identified as "*David Morpurgo, hebreus, Patavinus, filius D. Rabbi Smariae.*"⁵⁶ The word "*hebreus*" was typically used for all Jewish graduates of the University of Padua at this time and was not invoked in any negative way. It was also conventional to identify the graduate by their city of residence, in this case, Padua, and to list the graduate's father. The fact that his father Shemarya is identified by his title, rabbi, is unique.⁵⁷ This may be the first Padua medical diploma to contain the word "rabbi."

⁵¹ Isaac Gedalya wrote two poems in honor of his graduation. See above, note 12.

⁵² Venice had also been swept by the same plague the previous year. I am unaware of any record of Leon's participation in the Venetian plague.

⁵³ Osimo, *op. cit.*, 61.

⁵⁴ The text of the letter appears in Osimo, *op. cit.*, 109.

⁵⁵ See Ravid, *op. cit.*, 207.

⁵⁶ Modena and Morgurgo, *op. cit.*, 4. For the full Latin text of the diploma, see, Majer Balaban, *Historja Żydów w Krakowie i na Kazimierzu 1304-1868* (History of Jews in Kraków and Kazimierz), vol. I (Kraków: 1931), 560. I thank Dr. Andrew Zalusky for this reference, and for the additional information on David Morpurgo's practice in Krakow.

⁵⁷ There are at least two other examples of rabbinic fathers mentioned in the diploma text: Abba di Rabbi Elia Medigo in Modena and Morgurgo, *op. cit.*, 11, and Leo di Rabbi Isach Winkler in Modena and Morgurgo, *op. cit.*, 12. There is even one example of a graduate himself identified as a rabbi, Rabbi Moise di Giuda Uziel, in Modena and Morgurgo, *op. cit.*, 5.

David clearly maintained his Torah studies in addition to his medical practice, as evidenced by the fact that Rabbi Leon da Modena bestowed upon him the title of *Haver*.⁵⁸ While David Loria had declined to receive rabbinic ordination from Leon da Modena, Morpurg accepted the title of *Haver* from him.

Morpurg and Loria were connected in more direct ways as well. Morpurg was David Loria's brother-in-law.⁵⁹ In addition, it was with David's father Shemarya that David Loria deposited money to be distributed to those financially impacted by the plague. Tragically, it was not long after Loria deposited the money with him that Shemarya himself died of the plague.

Though a resident of Padua during the plague, we have no record of Morpurg's medical practice during these times. However, soon after the death of his father, David moved to Krakow, where he lived the rest of his life, practicing medicine and serving as a head of the Jewish community. In Krakow, Morpurg was engaged in regulating the work of the paramedical personnel in the Jewish district as well, including determining which practitioners were competent to perform enemas and bloodletting. His son Shimon became a physician,⁶⁰ and Aron Morpurg, another relative, graduated from the Padua Medical School in 1671.⁶¹

Conclusion

Through the eyes of four graduates of the University of Padua Medical School in 1623 we see the profound and long-lasting impact of the plague on the Jewish community, and on Jewish physicians in particular. We are left with many unanswered questions about these specific classmates. Of note, all four students were Torah scholars of varying degrees. They surely encountered halakhic issues in the course of the plague, be it in their medical practice or otherwise. Today, in the midst of the current pandemic, we discuss numerous halakhic issues, such as risk and triage. Did they consider the same issues? Did they seek halakhic guidance for their decisions, or perhaps felt competent or confident to render the decisions themselves?

Why did Cantarini stay while Loria fled? Was it related to family dynamics, health, or perhaps halakhic disagreement? While the Mishnah explicitly states that one should shelter in place during a plague,⁶² rabbinic authorities of this period, including Rabbi Moshe

Isserles, advocated fleeing.⁶³ Indeed, the first line of a poem written by Moshe Catalano, son of Abraham, during the 1631 Padua plague, advocates fleeing in times of plague.⁶⁴ Does the recommendation to flee apply to a physician, whose role is to serve the community and treat patients suffering from the plague? Could Cantarini and Loria have debated this very point, either themselves or with each other?

How did Leon Cantarini react emotionally to the decimation of his family by the plague, including his brother of closest age and similar medical training? Did Morpurg serve as a physician in the ghetto during the plague? Did he flee or perhaps remain but not practice? Morpurg's family would live and contribute to the Jewish community in Poland for many generations. Would Morpurg have remained in Padua had his father not died? Alas, we are bereft of answers, just as those who survived remained bereft after the plague.

There is at least one question for which we do have an answer. Did the experience of the plague discourage Jews from applying to Padua's medical school? We see from the graduation records of the University of Padua Medical School that while there was a slight diminution in the immediate aftermath of the plague of 1631, there was a steady flow of Jewish graduates thereafter, continuing until the early nineteenth century.⁶⁵ In addition, a number of later Padua graduates lost family members to the plague of 1631 but were undeterred in their quest, or were perhaps inspired, to pursue a medical career.⁶⁶

As a physician myself practicing emergency medicine in the midst of the current COVID-19 pandemic, I seek historical precedent for our present predicament and find solace in the fact that our predecessors faced similar circumstances. To be sure, both the medical knowledge, as well as the social situation of Jewish physicians, have evolved over the ages. However, the personal protective equipment (PPE) we don is not fundamentally dissimilar to that of the plague doctor, though God provides the ultimate protection. Nor, for that matter, are the ethical, social, and family issues we face. While the ubiquitous presence of Jewish students today at medical schools across the world has lamentably diminished our sense of brotherhood and camaraderie, there is nonetheless much commonality and shared human experience that binds and unites us across the ages.

⁵⁸ S. Simonsohn, *Ziknei Yehudah* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 5716), 48. The title *Haver* is a lower form of rabbinic approbation than rabbinic ordination.

⁵⁹ S. Simonsohn, *Ziknei Yehudah* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 5716), 48. In "Olam Hafukh," Catalano seems to identify Shemarya, David's father, as Loria's brother-in-law. See Roth, *op. cit.*, 81. Loria's wife Miriam was the dedicatee of a work by Jacob Alpron (aka Heilprin or Heilbronn). The work was an Italian translation published in Padua in 1625 of the popular Yiddish work of Binyamin Slonik, entitled *Seder Mitzvot Nashim*. See Pia Settimi, *L'ultimo traduttore – Jacob Alpron tra yiddish e italiano* (Italian) (Casa Editrice Il Prato, 2017), 33. I thank Ms. Settimi for bringing this to my attention and furnishing me with the passage from her book.

⁶⁰ N. M. Gelber, "History of Jewish Physicians in Poland in the 18th Century," (Hebrew) in Y. Tirosh, ed., *Shai li-Yeshayahu* (Tel Aviv: Center for Culture of Poel ha-Mizrachi, 5716), 347-371, esp. 350.

⁶¹ Modena and Morgurgo, *op. cit.*, 31.

⁶² *Ta'anit* 3:4.

⁶³ For further halakhic discussion on this issue, see M. D. Chechik, "The Prohibition or Obligation to Flee the City in Times of Plague," (Hebrew) *Ha-Ma'ayan* 233 (Nissan 5780): 22-34; T. Morsel-Eisenberg, "[Is It Permitted to Flee the City?](#)" *Tablet Magazine* (April 22, 2020):.

⁶⁴ This poem appears at the end of "Olam Hafukh" by Abraham Catalano, the father of Moshe. See Roth, *op. cit.* For more on this poem and other Hebrew poetry associated with plagues, see S. Einbinder, "Poetry, Prose and Pestilence: Joseph Concio and Jewish Responses to the 1630 Italian Plague," in Haviva Yishai, ed., *Shirat Dvora: Essays in Honor of Professor Dvora Bregman* (Hebrew) (Be'er Sheva: Ben-Gurion University, 2019), 73-101.

⁶⁵ See Modena and Morgurgo, *op. cit.* In the ten years prior to the plague, nineteen Jewish students graduated, while ten graduates are listed for the following decade.

⁶⁶ See, for example, the students Foa, Fano, and Ben Porad listed in Modena and Morgurgo, *op. cit.*, pgs. 57, 61, and 63.

RABBI STEINSALTZ: AN OPEN SECRET

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Why bother setting the stage with the environment? Everyone knows what the weather was like on a wintry Moscow day, February 22, 1989. What is not well-known is the atmosphere in the House of Sciences, a club for Soviet scientists on Kropotkinskaya Street.

The walls of the science building were suffused with decades' worth of lies. In the audience that afternoon were officials of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, and two or three past and present members of the Soviet Politburo. In addition, there were scores of Soviet Jews, some of them accompanied by a personal KGB officer. Some had jail records. Most had been living in defiance for several decades. They had been immersed in the study of Hebrew or the study of *Tanakh*, some in the study of Talmud, all longing to live in Israel and be united with the Jewish People.

On the stage in the House of Lies stood ha-Rav Adin Steinsaltz. The Soviet Academy of Sciences had decided that a Yeshiva, or, to be more precise, a Department for the Study of Jewish Civilization, could be opened in Moscow. It all started a year earlier at a meeting of the Parliament of World Religions in Britain. As the Rabbi recalled, he was walking across one of the lawns at Oxford with the number two person in the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Rabbi Steinsaltz inquired, "You are a great academic institution, like the Sorbonne, like Oxford, like Cambridge, like Harvard, Yale, Princeton?" Of course, the official said, "Yes!" The Rabbi then said, "Well, they have departments for the academic study of religion, such as Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and, by the way, Judaism as well. How can you be a great university on the par with other world class institutions when you don't have a Department of Religion?" Nine or ten months later Rabbi Steinsaltz was there to inaugurate the Yeshiva. Other religions were invited to open programs, but they couldn't quite get their act together. In exchange for this opportunity, the Rabbi helped raise the funds necessary to microfilm all of the Soviet Academy's Judaica holdings.

At first glance, Rabbi Steinsaltz's success seems inexplicable. For decades, Jewish leaders from Western Europe and North America had visited with Soviet officials to ask for a particular publication or school to be founded or to plead that a synagogue not be closed. Rarely did much of anything come of this. These requests were always addressed Soviet government's Ministry of Cults. Rabbi Steinsaltz understood that the purpose of the Ministry of Cults was not to cultivate religion. He grasped something that had eluded the leaders of diaspora Jewry. The doorway to teaching Torah in the Soviet Union was in an academic institution, not in a ministry designed to perpetuate religion. That is what brought him on that winter's day to the House of Sciences.

Rabbi Steinsaltz stood on the stage of the House of Sciences, supported and backed by no government, no official institution in the West, and no international body. He was appropriately introduced with a simple, well-earned title. The moderator said, "I give you today's *Hatan ha-Torah*, ha-Rav Steinsaltz." The Rabbi was not triumphal. He did not stand with his head held high, his shoulders rising to the full height of his stature, which, in any event, wouldn't have been that tall anyway. He stood with his smile, the radiance of his eyes, and he began teaching the first Mishnah that the new Yeshiva would study, *Arvei Pesachim*. Except for a few westerners,

almost no one in the room had ever heard him speak before. This was the first officially sanctioned *limud Torah* in Soviet Russia since the Bolshevik coup d'état of 1917.

At this understated epoch-making event, Rabbi Steinsaltz brought only two offerings. The first was the Mishnah he taught. The second was his *neshamah*, his very being, which was suffused with boundless *ahavah* -- *ahavat Hashem* and *ahavat Yisrael*, cloaked in the warmth and radiance of his personality. More was not needed. Neither Russian culture nor Soviet society knew a man of such assets.

How did this come to be? How did a rabbi, a man of Chabad principles and Haredi appearance, come to be standing in the House of Sciences under the sponsorship of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, an institution which did its fair share to deprive many people of livelihood and basic human rights? How did such a man come to be at the Parliament of World Religions seemingly and casually bumping into an official of the Soviet Academy of Sciences? What was he doing at the Parliament of World Religions in the first place? Who is this man?

This essay contributes nothing to the basic biographical data about the life, education, development, and family of Rav Steinsaltz. All that has, in the weeks since his passing, been well-publicized. Instead let's begin with a facet closely associated with his appearance at the Academy of Sciences: the rabbi was educated in science and mathematics. Indeed, it is not a coincidence that Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson, the last Rebbe of Habad, was similarly educated. This was no coincidence: in the all-encompassing life philosophy of the [Tanya](#), the foundational work of Habad upon which Rav Steinsaltz [wrote a commentary](#), everything in material reality – nature, the human being, community, and social reality – is imbued with the divine, is an expression of the divine, always benefiting from the radiance and flow (*shefa*) of the divine.

Accordingly, there are opportunities for one to encounter the divine and raise levels of holiness and purity in all of life's experiences. For Rabbi Steinsaltz, a variety of human expressions of the divine intellect in philosophy, history, languages, mathematics, sciences, and the arts were familiar to him. He was at home in many realms of the human endeavor. He was a renaissance man who encompassed more than just the humanities, the sciences, and the arts. As a polymath and as an autodidact, he acquired residence in all the homes of Torah, [Tanakh](#), [Torah she-be'al Peh](#), [philosophy](#), [Kabbalah](#), and [Hasidut](#). He had a unique capacity to talk to and be at home with so many different people immersed in so many disciplines and arts. This is why all sorts of people from many walks of life sought him out.

How did Rabbi Steinsaltz achieve all that he embodied? We are handicapped in our times; we try to understand a person in what popular language calls feelings and emotions. We reduce charisma to social circumstance. As a consequence of living in the age of the triumph of the therapeutic, ideas and thoughts are attributed to personal circumstance and feelings. For this reason, we do not take the time to understand and appreciate that very often what we call emotions are intimately bound up with expressions of ideas and principles. For Rabbi Steinsaltz, love was not just a sentiment, nor even a feeling. It was a *philosophical principle* by which he presented himself, the Torah, and his way of *emunah*: living with God in his personal encounters, in his writing, and in his teaching.

The source for this is found, appropriately, in [the Tanya](#), one of the greatest works of modern Jewish thought. The Tanya is nothing if not a psychological portrait of the divinely endowed soul. Rabbi Steinsaltz

became a person after the Ba'al ha-Tanya's image of the *homo religiosus*. (As noted, one of Rabbi Steinsaltz's many great works is his [commentary on Tanya](#).) Put succinctly, the authentic Jewish *homo religiosus* is one upon whom rests the presence of the *Shekhinah*.

In that magnum opus, the Alter Rebbe describes a higher form of love. It is in reference to the verse in *Tanakh*, *ahavah ba-ta'anugim*, love of delights (Song of Songs 7:7). Rabbi Steinsaltz explains that common love of something else, or of another person, too often involves love of self. As Hasidim used to point out, the expression "they love one another," in Yiddish (*zey hoben zikh lieb*) also means "they love themselves." A higher form of love, *ahavah rabbah*, is achieved when a person no longer experiences any tension between his divine and material selves, and all his desires are directed to God.

Too often, love is rooted in a desire to accrue what a person lacks. In this higher love, however, as Rabbi Steinsaltz writes, the beloved is loved for its own sake, unconnected with the lover's needs. The more one thinks about and occupies himself with the object of his love, the more satisfying that love becomes: *ahavah ba-ta'anugim*.

For Habad thought, the Torah is an expression of the radiance of the *Ein Sof*, the One and the light beyond all. There is nothing more familiar and attractive to the soul of a Jew -- which emerges from the *Ein Sof* -- than the Source itself. Rabbi Steinsaltz, a devotee of the Ba'al ha-Tanya's worldview and a devoted [follower of the Lubavitcher Rebbe](#), set out to disseminate oceans and oceans of Torah light.

How, then, did Rabbi Steinsaltz come to present to the world all of the Talmud Bavli? The answer lies in the very name Habad, an acronym for *Hokhmah*, *Bina*, and *Da'at*. From its very inception, Habad was about the [topography of the soul's](#) intellect, wisdom, knowledge, and understanding, each of these possessing increasing depth. This should not surprise us. There were always great traditions of immersion in Gemara over the seven generations of Habad Rebbes.

To better understand the intellectual emphasis of Habad philosophy among the varieties of Hasidism, it is worth considering a bit of geography. Lithuanian Jewish civilization was characterized by magisterial Talmudic scholarship, which reached its apex in the Gaon of Vilna and received its lasting institutional expression in the Yeshiva birthed by Rabbi Hayyim Itzkowitz in Volozhin. With its similar abiding commitments to philosophic mysticism and the great traditions of immersion in Talmud learning, it is no coincidence that Habad flourished in this Lithuanian Jewish religious sphere.

In Habad thought, both *Nigleh* and *Nistar* -- the revealed and the hidden-- are animated by the divine light or intellect. With this in mind, we can begin to understand Rabbi Steinsaltz's approach to -- and presentation of -- the Talmud. In [The Talmud: A Reference Guide](#), Rabbi Steinsaltz presents a view of *lernen* that goes well beyond the profound scholarship of the Lithuanian *yeshivot* as developed in Volozhin and Brest-Litovsk. Torah study makes it possible to learn "the principles and details necessary to fulfill the *mitzvot*." However, Rabbi Steinsaltz teaches that "this view of Torah fails to convey its true purpose... It does not explain why Judaism developed such great veneration for the study of Torah." This is, as he notes, characterized by:

"all things that may be desired may not be compared to it [the study of Torah]"
(Proverbs 8:11). This means that even the desires of Heaven [the commandments]

cannot be compared to Talmud study.
(*Moed Katan* 9b)

To say that the "study of Torah is equal to all of them" implies that Torah study is at a higher level than performing the commandments.

Thus, for Rav Steinsaltz, we don't just study the Torah to help us fulfill the *mitzvot*. It is not just a utilitarian tool. The Talmud is a comprehensive guide, the expression of Judaism's conception of Everything. Every subject lies within the corpus of Torah. Torah teaches us how *every subject* is to be understood, how we should relate to it and act toward it.

Hence, it makes no difference "whether the subject is concrete and practical or abstract and spiritual." In other words, in Rabbi Steinsaltz's conception, which has also its roots in the teachings of the Alter Rebbe, every part contains the whole within it. The Talmud presents the proper way in which to view all of material, social, and spiritual reality. Through his many writings and talks, the Rabbi was able to link the immediate realm of material being with *Olam Habah*. These worlds of potentiality are not just lodged in the future. They are with us. We need only open our divine soul to experience them.

Often, when he was asked to teach a passage from *Tanakh*, he would turn to Psalm 139, which contains the following verse:

It was You who created my conscience;
You fashioned me in my mother's womb. I
praise You, for I am awesomely,
wondrously made; Your work is
wonderful; I know it very well. (Psalms
139:13-14)

These verses describe the immediacy of the divine caring presence from the moment of conception through all of life. It is these immediate and parallel realities to which the Talmud lends meaning. For him, God's love of every Jewish person must then be expressed by every individual who has received that love, by extending it to all Israel. Therefore, when Israel grows distant from God there is only one response that a great lover of Israel and Torah can have: Israel and its Torah must be reunited.

In conceptualizing how this principle applies in our time, Rabbi Steinsaltz emphasized a somewhat overlooked event in twentieth-century Jewish history. Surely, the destruction of European Jewry, followed by the establishment of the State of Israel, followed by the liberation of Soviet Jewry were monumental events. Yet, there is an event that preceded all these. The Rabbi noted that, by the time World War I had begun, a majority of the Jewish People were no longer keeping the *mitzvot* in the traditional sense of the term.

When the Lubavitcher Rebbe passed, the Rabbi was interviewed by Ted Koppel on Nightline. It was not an easy time for him. He had fallen and broken an arm so he was bound up in a sling. And he was in deep mourning.

Koppel asked him what was unique about the Rebbe. Rabbi Steinsaltz responded, "It is given to very few in Jewish history to reverse the course of Jewish history. The Temple was destroyed. No one has yet been able to reverse that. Whole Jewish civilizations in Arab lands and European lands have been destroyed. No one has been able to reverse that."

Rabbi Steinsaltz then noted, "Facing the profound decline in the observance of *mitzvot* that overtook the Jewish People in the early twentieth century, along with its attendant assimilatory trends, the Rebbe reversed the course of history. He brought more and more people to lives of *mitzvot*, to lives of Torah learning, to lives of love of Israel. The Rebbe reversed the course of history."

Rabbi Steinsaltz's larger project - and his appearance in both the Academy of Sciences and Yeshiva in Moscow - now become clear. His efforts to bring the entire corpus of Jewish learning to the Jewish People was also meant to reverse the course of Jewish history. Along with assimilation and along with a decline in Jewish practice came profound ignorance. In response, the Rabbi's motto was "Let My People Know."

Inspired by his Talmud, one day a Jew far from practice and far from knowledge came to see him. This Jew, head of an internationally important Jewish organization, began to talk with the Rabbi about his Jewishness. Finally, this articulate man who was capable of Demosthenes-like oratory in the public realm began to stutter and stammer. He said to the Rabbi, "I don't know what's happened to me." The Rabbi looked at him and said, "You have ancient voices in you that are trying to get out." This Jew broke down in tears. Rabbi Steinsaltz heard the ancient voice that is in every Jew. He set himself the task of giving word and speech and articulation to those inchoate ancient voices.

As far as I can tell, Rabbi Steinsaltz is the only person whose family name was changed by the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Steinsaltz is German for stone salt. The name is probably vocational in origin. Jews in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland and Ukraine, made commerce from salt stones, or salt licks. The Rebbe changed his name to Even and suggested that the Rabbi, if he liked, could add to it. He did. Rabbi Steinsaltz added the word Yisrael. The Rabbi surely understood what the Rebbe intended. As a master spiritual figure, the Rebbe would often indicate the direction, and his interlocutor would then have the task of identifying the end to which this direction might lead. When Yaakov gives his *berakhah* to Yosef he declares:

ותשב באיתן קשתו ויפזו ידיו מידי אביר
יעקב משם רעה אבן ישראל:

Yet his bow stayed taut, And his arms
were made firm By the hands of the
Mighty One of Jacob -- There, the
Shepherd, the Rock of Israel -- (Genesis
49:24)

One of the features of Habad Hasidism is that there really are no secrets. What we think are secrets in *avodat Hashem* are really right there for everyone to see and experience. All we have to do is to open our eyes. When we open our eyes to this verse and look at its context, what do we read? From there will come a shepherd, the rock of Israel.

The Rabbi often inspired others with stories. On that first Friday night after the Yeshiva opened in Moscow, he was sitting together with many of the students and their families. Before he made *Kiddush*, the Rabbi told a story from the Besht. It was the practice of the Besht to light many, many candles to bring in Shabbat. He was asked why. He taught: the *gematria* (numerical equivalent) of light, is 207. The numerical equivalent of *raz*, meaning secret and mystery, is 207. The Besht asked, "How is it possible that these two words should be so intimately related and bound up with each other? Radiance and light banish and uncover mysteries and secrets. Radiance and light are the enemy of secrets." The Besht explained that secret and light have the same numerical equivalent because the greatest secret of the Jewish People is that we have no secrets. What we have, anyone can see just by opening up their eyes to the light. This was true of Rav Steinsaltz and animated his entire worldview and life project. *Elokut* is at hand.

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