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SHEMOT

THIS WEEK'S LEHRHAUS OVER SHABBOS IS SPONSORED BY
ROBERTA KWALL
IN HONOR OF THE 11TH YAHRTZEIT OF HER FATHER,
ABE ROSENTHAL, AVRAM BEN YITZCHAK V'RIVKAH

A NEW COFFEE-TABLE HUMASH IS A
GATEWAY TO ACADEMIC BIBLICAL
SCHOLARSHIP

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Somehow, Pharaoh has wormed his way onto the cover of the Book of Books. You will find him front and center on the dust jacket of [Exodus](#), the *Koren Tanakh of the Land of Israel's* debut volume, represented by the thirteenth-century-BCE [gold face mask of King Tutankhamun](#). With piercing obsidian eyes, a lapis-lazuli beard, and a forehead sprouting a cobra and vulture, King Tut looks straight at the reader and proclaims: here is a different kind of *Humash*.

Within, the reader will find not just the Masoretic text and a new English translation by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt"l; they will also find an ambitious attempt to place the divine word in its historical and archaeological context. There are color photographs of a wide array of artifacts, art, and other discoveries, and the commentary is broken down into categories which include such nontraditional subjects as Near East, Egyptology, and language (see sample pages [here](#)). Periodically, the volume includes full-page introductions to ancient Near Eastern concepts that play a central role in unlocking the context of the biblical account. The contributors, whose initials follow their comments and whose biographies appear in the back of the volume, include Dr. Jeremiah Unterman and Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, the volume's academic advisor and rabbinic advisor, respectively. Many other contributors, such as Drs. Racheli Shalomi-Hen, Ilan Peled, and Shawn Zelig Aster, are subject matter experts who hold academic positions. The volume closes with a bibliography citing many academic articles, not all of which adopt Orthodox positions on the authorship of *Tanakh*.

Moreover, unlike other recent *Humashim* that were designed for synagogue use, such as the Koren [Steinsaltz Humash](#), this volume is essentially a coffee-table book. It is folio sized and printed on glossy paper; with all the images and resources it contains, the *Humash* is a little too big and perhaps too colorful to comfortably bring to shul (its cover alone might raise some eyebrows). It is meant to be perused on Shabbat afternoons from the comfort of one's living room.

Yet despite its novelties, the *Humash* also wants to brand itself as part of a long and respected Orthodox tradition. Take off the dust jacket cover, and underneath is the plain blue cover that graces nearly every other Koren *Tanakh*, complete with the publisher's unique but familiar artistic Hebrew flourish declaring that "the Torah comes forth from Zion and the word of God from Jerusalem." This *Humash*, then, straddles tradition and modernity.

Translation

The volume debuts R. Sacks's translation and is unfortunately the only volume that was released with his translation during his lifetime. R. Sacks' translation will, however, also feature in several other forthcoming works, such as his highly anticipated one-volume synagogue *Humash* still in production at Koren. The translation marries close fidelity to the Hebrew with concise, readable, elegant sentences. Unlike ArtScroll, for example, R. Sacks does not zealously preserve the Hebrew syntax, or word order, a choice which makes for better English phrasing. R. Sacks's contemporary English also avoids certain holdovers from the King James Bible, such as translating each and every *vav* as "and"; he sprinkles in "but," "instead," and "then," or he just omits the conjunction entirely if warranted.¹ On the other hand, some King James translations were apparently too iconic to discard: when the Israelites wistfully reminisce about the *sir ha-basar* in Egypt, R. Sacks still translates the term as "fleshpots" ([Exodus 16:3](#)). And overall, R. Sacks is a literal translator. His work is quite different, for

instance, from that of Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, whose [Living Torah Humash](#) is far more colloquial.²

Illustration

In medieval times, illustrated *Humashim* were not uncommon. Sephardic scribes fit the *masorah*—the marginal notes about spelling, vocalization, and word usage statistics—into complex micrographic designs around the edges of the pages.³ Unlike the aniconic designs of their Sephardic counterparts, Ashkenazic scribes sometimes drew the *masorah* micrography in the shape of griffins, dragons, and other fantastical or grotesque beasts.⁴ On occasion, and again only in Ashkenaz, *Humashim* included color illustrations of biblical stories: the [De Castro Pentateuch](#) from 1344 features a nude Adam and Eve about to eat from the Tree of Knowledge.⁵ These medieval *Humashim* used illustration for aesthetic purposes: to beautify the Torah.

More recently, however, such as in the twentieth century and beyond, *Humashim* have used diagrams and illustrations more for educational purposes than aesthetic ones. And most modern *Humashim* are relatively plain overall. Other than the [1958 Illustrated Jerusalem Bible](#), most fully illustrated bibles are [abridged versions](#) for [children](#).⁶ Many contemporary synagogue *Humashim*, such as the [ArtScroll Stone Edition](#), incorporate images of the Tabernacle's vessels, but they go no further.

The Koren Tanakh of the Land of Israel sticks to using pictures educationally for the most part, but it has far more images than any other recent *Humash*, which contributes to its strong coffee-table-book vibe. Like its predecessor, the Koren [Steinsaltz Humash](#), it contains photographs of mock-up Tabernacle vessels and priestly garments as well as photos of plants and animals.⁷ But there is also so much more: photographs from museum collections worldwide portray clay tablets, steles, gods and goddesses, ancient relief drawings, and famous Renaissance portraits. Even Michelangelo's sculpture of Moses—horns and all—makes an appearance (103). By contrast, the biblical characters drawn on the [Torah Cards for children](#) produced in the 1990s [were not even given faces](#), lest they be seen as too relatable, or even too human.

This may be the first time that the complete Hebrew text of a book of the Torah has been printed alongside such a range of images and iconography. Yet it is also fitting: Koren is no stranger to re-envisioning what the Torah looks like. In 1962, the publisher Eliyahu Koren [created a new typeface for Koren's first Tanakh](#). It merged the look of an early medieval Masoretic manuscript belonging to Cairo's Karaite community—which was considered to preserve authentic Hebrew writing—with design principles derived from an ophthalmologist's research suggesting that each Hebrew letter needed to be recognizable from the top one-third alone in order to be fully legible and distinguishable from other similar letters. Now Koren has gone further and turned the Torah into a coffee-table book with images galore.

Commentary

The vivid illustrations pair well with the succinct scholarly comments highlighting some of the most salient aspects of the Torah's ancient Near Eastern context.

For example, the commentary notes that circumcision was common in much of the region but that the Torah infused the rite with new meaning (28). It explains that the Ten Plagues, which disturbed several natural phenomena, were particularly disruptive to the Egyptians, who understood Pharaoh to be the guarantor of *Maat*, or cosmic order (36-37). Much is made of the similarity between the form of the covenant at Sinai and Hittite suzerainty treaties (104-05), and the Torah's laws are compared and contrasted with those in law collections like the Code of Hammurabi (112-13). We learn that the *Mishkan's* design—with its outer and inner sanctuaries—paralleled the layout of many ancient Near Eastern city-temples of that time, with the Ark taking the place usually reserved for a statue of the deity (142-43). The commentary also solves the problem of the repetitiveness of the Torah's account of the *Mishkan's* construction by explaining that repetition was a common ancient literary technique used to demonstrate that a god's directives were fulfilled (192).

So how revolutionary is this kind of commentary? Not as revolutionary as it might appear at first glance. To be sure, the focus on the Torah's ancient context is a far cry from ArtScroll's approach. Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, in his 1976 introduction to ArtScroll's first work, [Meqillat Esther](#), wrote, "No non-Jewish sources have even been consulted, much less quoted. *I consider it offensive that the Torah should need authentication from the secular or so-called 'scientific' sources.*"⁸ On the other hand, there is ample precedent for what the new *Tanakh* series is trying to accomplish. As the publisher's preface explains, none other than Maimonides [relied on idolatrous Sabian texts](#) in his quest to divine the purpose of the *mitzvot* (ix-x). Moreover, since 1936, we have had the [Hertz Pentateuch](#). Rabbi Joseph Hertz, the Chief Rabbi of England, proudly quoted the truth from wherever it came (a la [Maimonides](#)),⁹ and he filled his *Humash* with contemporary scholarship. In long-form essays at the end of each book of the Torah, Hertz explored parallel flood stories, attempted to determine the date of the Exodus based on archaeology and other records, made comparisons between the Torah and Hammurabi's code, and much more.¹⁰

And yet, Koren's new *Humash* is also quite different from the Hertz Pentateuch. In his introduction, R. Hertz, [ever the polemicist](#), called out Julius Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis as a "perversion of history and a desecration of religion."¹¹ Concerned by the rising tide of biblical criticism, Hertz wanted to show that there was ample evidence amassed even by non-Jews and academic scholars which could be harnessed to demonstrate the Torah's historicity and Mosaic authorship. For example, when arguing that the Exodus actually occurred, he quotes a non-Jewish Egyptologist, T. Eric Peet, instead of a more traditional source. (Peet wrote: "That

Israel was in Egypt under one form or another no historian could possibly doubt.”¹²)

In the series introduction, Koren’s editors of course affirm consistency “with the beliefs and traditions of Orthodox Judaism,” accepting “Divine authorship of the Torah” and rejecting “theories of multiple authorship which disregard its fundamental unity” (xvi). But on the other hand, they acknowledge that in discussing “the text’s relationship to its time and milieu,” there will inevitably be some tension, and “when there is a clear conflict between current knowledge and some element in the text, the series notes the conflict and leaves the question open” (xv-xvi).

The best example of this issue concerns the dating of the Exodus. The volume’s introduction to the Book of Exodus notes that the Book of Kings, which puts the construction of Solomon’s Temple 480 years after the Exodus, cannot be taken literally. The Temple was built around 960 BCE, and 480 years before, during the mid-fifteenth century, the land of Canaan was under Egyptian control (xxiii). This observation is already interesting, as it suggests that a number or date mentioned in *Tanakh* might be typological rather than historical—a point to which the commentary returns a few times.¹³ The introduction then suggests a thirteenth-century date for the Exodus instead, which fits with the Israelites having built the city of Rameses for the Pharaoh of that name (*ibid.*; see [Exodus 1:11](#)). But later, the commentary seems to question the thirteenth-century date on the same grounds as it rejected the fifteenth-century one. Egyptologist Dr. Racheli Shalomi-Hen explains that although “it seems logical to assume that Rameses II was the Pharaoh of the Exodus,” Egypt still ruled Canaan during Rameses’s reign, and had the Exodus taken place then, “the Israelites would have fled Egypt only to discover that Canaan was under the rule of the Egyptians.” Therefore, “there is no way to know the exact time period of the Israelites’ slavery and redemption” (69).

In sum, any date for the Exodus has its difficulties. The reader is assured that the Exodus took place (in part based on an argument by R. Hertz) (xxi) but is left with unanswerable questions about when it happened. To my knowledge, there is nothing comparable in the Hertz *Humash*. Hertz felt that conflicts of this kind needed to be solved and could be solved. As he explained (albeit writing nearly 100 years earlier with less evidence at his disposal), there is “no cogent reason for dissenting from the current view that the Pharaoh of the Oppression was Rameses II, with his son Merneptah as the Pharaoh of the Exodus.”¹⁴ Not so here—Koren is willing to raise problems with no simple solutions.

The volume’s acknowledgement of the concept of a type-story is another example of its readiness to raise difficult questions. The commentary notes that Moses’ birth parallels the much earlier tale of the birth of Sargon, king of Akkad. Both figures were placed in river baskets and raised by foster parents before later becoming leaders (11). The commentary

emphasizes that Moses’ story, unlike Sargon’s, highlights his moral character, distinguishing the Torah’s approach from the rest of the ancient Near Eastern canon. Nonetheless, the simple acknowledgment that Moses’ origin story shares elements with Sargon’s earlier one raises thorny questions. If the Torah borrowed from common legends circulating at the time, could it be, as suggested by Professor James Kugel, that the Torah’s account of many things is not fully historical?¹⁵ Introducing the concept of the type-story lends itself to questions which have no easy resolution from an Orthodox perspective.

Further Reflection

Why might *The Koren Tanakh of the Land of Israel* be more willing to dive into the world of modern scholarship than its predecessors?

It could have to do with the topic: in many ways, Egyptology and archaeology are safer from an Orthodox perspective than the documentary hypothesis. Much of the contemporary scholarship cited by the *Humash* simply explains how the Torah’s initial readers might have understood the text and does not conflict with a traditional outlook. And while the *Humash* acknowledges troubling questions about the dating of the Exodus, it is largely cautious in its reliance on academic approaches.

In this regard, another comparison to the Hertz Pentateuch is instructive. The tenor of R. Hertz’s polemics reflect a scholarly community that was far more hostile to Judaism, particularly when it came to archaeological discoveries and the culture and literature of the ancient Near East. In 1902, Friedrich Delitzsch, one of the founders of Assyriology, delivered a series of lectures entitled “[Babel and Bible](#),” which endeavored to show that new archaeological finds from the ancient Near East—unearthed with increasing frequency in the early twentieth century—demonstrated that Israelite religion and literature were derivative of ancient Near Eastern culture. Delitzsch’s lectures ignited [the Babel-Bible controversy](#) of 1902 to 1905, a fight with anti-Semitic overtones and echoes of Christian supersessionism. The controversy [led](#) Solomon Schechter, newly installed at the Jewish Theological Seminary, [to pronounce Delitzsch’s work](#) not “higher criticism” but “Higher Anti-Semitism,” where “every discovery of recent years is called to bear witness against us and to accuse us of spiritual larceny.” So of course, Hertz, a product of Schechter’s seminary, was quick to push back against ideas that suggested that Judaism was dependent upon the surrounding pagan culture or that the historical record was unclear.

R. Hertz’s discussion of Egyptian culture is a case in point. He writes, “Egypt never discarded the low animism and savage fetishism of its prehistoric days, and remained always ‘zoomorphic’ in its conception of God.”¹⁶ He approvingly notes the Pharaoh Akhenaten’s attempts to impose monotheistic worship of a sun god, but he writes that after Akhenaten,

“[W]e go back to the old spells and mumbo-jumbo again.”¹⁷ He contrasts Judaism’s approach, asserting that the “whole story of Israel is one of long protest against idolatry and inhumanity.”¹⁸ While the Israelites, he argues, affirmed life, the Egyptians, with their mausoleums and cultic practices, were obsessed with death. He surmises that the Torah declines to speak of the World to Come to ensure that no credence be given to Egyptian beliefs.¹⁹

Dr. Shalomi-Hen’s introduction to ancient Egypt in the Koren volume could not be more different. It lacks any overt agenda, mapping the geography of Egypt, the history of the New Kingdom, and the society’s religious and cultural tenets in a fair and balanced manner (2-3). To be sure, the volume acknowledges “again and again . . . stark contrasts within the Torah against the accepted norms of the prevailing culture of the period and place” and that “*Tanakh’s* narratives and laws are massively distinct from the surrounding cultures” (xx). At the same time, R. Hertz’s polemical tone is absent from the writing. Hertz candidly discussed history, archaeology, and the academic insights of his time. But King Tut, more famous for his tomb than for his life, could never have been on the cover of his *Humash*.

The Koren Tanakh of the Land of Israel is the product of a new age. Much of biblical criticism does not have quite the same edge anymore; Delitzsch’s theories carry far less weight today. Critical scholarship may have [its problems and biases](#), but its practitioners are no longer actively trying to foment anti-Semitism. Many contemporary biblical scholars are Jewish, and some are religiously observant. Perhaps this explains, at least in part, the willingness of this new volume to explore Egypt on its own terms.

Further, the *Humash’s* willingness to raise difficult questions suggests that there may be larger communal trends at work here as well. Drs. [Marc Shapiro](#) and [Adam Ferziger](#) have suggested that in recent decades, Modern Orthodox Jews have grown more willing to openly address the conflicts between academic biblical studies and Orthodox beliefs. Ferziger and Shapiro focus in large part on the Dati Leumi community in Israel, exploring how some of its Torah personalities (men and women) have begun to address biblical criticism head-on and lend cautious support to some of its theories. It could be, then, that under Koren’s auspices, the Dati Leumi approach is slowly migrating to America.

Significantly, in addition to this new *Humash*, Koren recently released two other volumes under its Maggid Press imprint. [To This Very Day](#), an English translation of a work by Rabbi Amnon Bazak, comprehensively addresses a number of issues raised by biblical criticism from an Orthodox perspective. Bazak’s analysis, while quite thorough and informative, is not ground-breaking: he hews to Rabbi Mordechai Breuer’s *shitat ha-behinot* approach, positing that God wrote the Torah in multiple voices and from multiple perspectives, an idea has been around in English-speaking Orthodox circles for some

time—it was explored in an [Orthodox Forum volume](#) from the mid-1990s, for example. On the other hand, the other new Maggid book, Dr. Joshua Berman’s [Ani Maamin](#), is more original and arguably more radical. For example, to resolve contradictions between laws presented differently in various parts of the Torah, such as in Exodus and Deuteronomy, Berman suggests that the Torah was [not initially intended to be a legal code](#); its contradictory laws are non-exclusive examples of how God’s will might be performed depending on the circumstances. (Incidentally, Berman also lends anecdotal support to the idea that there is a surge of interest in biblical criticism in the Orthodox community; in a [recent article](#), he noted that even some Haredim have shown interest in his book.) And just a few months ago, [18Forty](#), a new online Orthodox resource aimed at helping readers find meaning through exploring Jewish texts and ideas, spotlighted academic biblical scholarship by interviewing Berman and several others.

While it is true that [thetorah.com](#)—a popular online repository of critical biblical scholarship aimed at traditional Jews—has been around for nearly ten years, it is common knowledge that it does not present an Orthodox viewpoint. Many of the articles on the website reject Mosaic authorship of the Torah and adhere to a range of nontraditional positions. Koren, on the other hand, is trying to position itself squarely within the Modern Orthodox mainstream. And from that vantage point, *The Koren Tanakh of the Land of Israel* may be the boldest of Koren’s new offerings which highlight academic scholarship. Unlike the works of R. Bazak and Dr. Berman, it is not a companion book or a stand-alone commentary, but a *Humash*. In it, God’s words share space with a broad exploration of an idolatrous culture foreign to many readers. And unlike the Hertz *Humash*, it does not shy away from difficult issues and contradictions, but lets problems sit and percolate. When one closes this coffee-table book, King Tut’s penetrating stare remains. The reader departs enlightened, but is also left with questions.

¹ The meaning of *vav* has long been a point of debate among biblical translators. Dr. Philip Birnbaum, in his largely forgotten 1983 translation, criticized what he saw as the ungrammatical tendency to use “and” obsessively, noting that some *vavs* change a word from future to past tense or vice versa (*vav ha-hipukh*) and should not be translated at all. Philip Birnbaum, [The Torah and the Haftarat](#) (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1983), ix. Dr. Robert Alter, on the other hand, [feels](#) that the incessant “ands” are part of what makes the Bible feel biblical.

² Among many other examples, R. Kaplan [translates yom ha-shevi’i as “Saturday”](#) and often [omits words like “said,”](#) using quotation marks to indicate dialogue instead.

³ David Stern, [The Jewish Bible: A Material History](#) (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 94-96.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 112. Not everyone was thrilled by such creative artwork. R. Judah he-Hasid wrote in [Sefer Hasidim](#) that “one who hires a scribe to write the *Masorah* . . . should make a

condition with the scribe that he should not make the *Masorah* into drawings of birds or beasts or a tree, or into any other illustration . . . for how will he be able to see?" Ibid., 114. Stern suggests that the inclusion of such unusual images in the Torah may have been an act of scribal rebellion; the scribe intended to show the world that he was an artist, not a mere copyist. Ibid., 115-16.

⁵ Ibid., 107-08.

⁶ Stern also points to a 1908 black-and-white illustrated bible by [the cultural Zionist artist E.M. Lilien](#) that featured rather erotic images. Ibid., 196.

⁷ These photos were taken from the [Koren Humash Yisrael](#) by R. Menachem Makover, where they were contributed by *Makhon ha-Mikdash* and Professor Zohar Amar (xxiv-xxv). All in-text citations are to the book under review.

⁸ Meir Zlotowitz, trans. & ed., [The Megillah: the Book of Esther](#) (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1976), x.

⁹ J. H. Hertz, ed., [The Pentateuch and Haftorahs](#) 2nd ed. (London: Soncino Press, 1960), vii.

¹⁰ There are also some parallels to *Mossad ha-Rav Kook's* Hebrew *Da'at Mikra* series, but the new *Humash's* exploration of ancient Near Eastern ideas is far more broad. The Jewish Publication Society's scholarly commentary also provides much ancient Near Eastern context, but it does not take Mosaic authorship of the Torah as a given and dabbles (albeit conservatively) in source criticism, which Koren does not touch.

¹¹ Hertz, vii.

THE SYNAGOGUE AFTER CORONA: FROM CRISIS TO OPPORTUNITY

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We are turning a corner in the battle against COVID-19. The [first vaccine](#) in the United States has been distributed. Just as we have been forced to adjust to the "new normal," the news of societal immunity has many of us fantasizing about returning to the "old normal."

But will it really be the "old normal?" In his book [Post Corona: From Crisis to Opportunity](#), Scott Galloway presents two theses in the realm of business that impact synagogue life as well. First, he argues, COVID-19 is not creating new changes in society but accelerating them. The trends were already present, but the crisis has forced us to reckon with this impact more directly than we may have expected. An example is remote work: it was done before COVID-19, but has now become far more common. Second, there is opportunity in every crisis, especially severe crises.¹ By evaluating future options wisely, getting ahead of the accelerated trends, and

¹² Ibid., 396.

¹³ The series introduction states that "questions of biblical chronology . . . cannot be resolved," and moreover, that "[c]ertain idiomatic elements of biblical language, such as numbers, cannot be read literally" (xvi). This position not only explains the commentary's willingness to disregard the historicity of *Tanakh's* given date between the Exodus and Solomon's Temple, but it also explains its comment that the number seventy (such as the seventy descendants of Jacob who went to Egypt) and other common numbers found in the Bible do not represent "an exact historical quantity" but instead have "allegorical and typological meaning" (4). The same could probably also be said of the 600,000 Israelite males in the desert, although the commentary does not address the issue, perhaps due to space limitations; maybe the matter will be addressed in a subsequent volume, such as Numbers. For a discussion of the question from an Orthodox perspective, see Joshua Berman, [Ani Maamin: Biblical Criticism, Historical Truth, and the Thirteen Principles of Faith](#) (New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2020), 45-52.

¹⁴ Hertz, 395.

¹⁵ James L. Kugel, [How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now](#) (New York: Free Press, 2007), 208-09.

¹⁶ Hertz, 396.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 397.

¹⁹ Ibid.

being willing to reevaluate what we already know, companies can succeed in a post-pandemic world.

This is particularly pertinent to the future of the synagogue. COVID-19 did not merely press the pause button on the regular synagogue experience. Instead, the adaptations we made during this time inevitably will shape our expectations for prayer and community moving forward. We have tasted the seductive fruit of [convenient](#) and [shorter prayer services](#), be it in our own living rooms or in a neighbor's backyard, which had neither a rabbi's sermon nor lengthy announcements. Our experiences attending *shiurim* have changed as well; we could listen to a *shiur* on our couch, perhaps with the camera off, pajamas on, and a few other screens open. All of these possibilities existed to some degree before COVID-19, but the trends have likely been accelerated by the pandemic. Moving forward, synagogues may be

challenged to convince Jews to once again fill the pews. Some believe that many [millennials](#) (a generation of which I am included) are less likely to belong to institutions altogether. This is due to the fact that grassroots and start-up mentality often speak more to millennials than establishment organizations, [including synagogues](#), with their long institutional history and protocol. Granted, Orthodox Jews need some sort of community structure for religious and social purposes, but we should not take synagogue demand for granted.

It therefore is critical that communal leaders articulate what we have to offer and make the case that being part of a centralized synagogue community is still a meaningful and worthwhile investment of time, money, and energy, even as they make appropriate post-pandemic adjustments.²

Why We Need Synagogues

COVID-19 has demonstrated in multiple ways that we need robust synagogues, even more than previously thought.

First, while one can pray anywhere, dedicated space is important. We often think the purpose of synagogue is to join the *minyan*, but *Shulhan Arukh (Orah Hayyim 90:9)* rules that one who cannot pray with a *minyan* should still pray in the synagogue. *Mishnah Berurah (90:33)* explains that it is a place set aside for sanctity. This principle perhaps is not just a directive for greater piety but also speaks to the core of our prayer experience. While we did our best to see the upsides of turning our homes into mini-synagogues during the pandemic, we maintain the notion of sanctity by distinguishing between the holy and mundane, between home and synagogue. It is easier to communicate with God and hear God's voice if the place we go for that conversation is different from the place where we communicate with friends and hear the noise of mundane entertainment and news. Particularly in light of the increasingly common pursuit of mindfulness, we can experience that in synagogue.

Additionally, it is important to consider the virtue of a verse articulated in Proverbs (14:28): *be-rov am hadrat melekh*, "the king is glorified among the multitudes." This is not just a halakhic concept but a spiritual and experiential one. There is an energy that a community can create that one cannot replicate at home. Certainly, davening a weekday *minhah* with 90,000 people at the *Siyum ha-Shas* creates a different energy than davening with a smaller *minyan*. While that may be a once-in-a-sabbatical experience, the principle stands that power is found in numbers. For those blessed to have larger *shuls*, singing *Lekhah Dodi* with 200 people feels very different than it does with 20. Even those who pray with a *minyan* might make the choice between praying at synagogue and going to the more convenient *minyan* closer to home.

Another element of synagogues is the *shiurim*, classes delivered by a rabbi or layperson. At points, I have wondered why anyone would want to come listen to me teach Torah

when everyone has the best speakers and teachers available through an internet connection. Especially during COVID-19, many organizations and institutions were able to draw upon top scholars and lecturers. Yet at the end of the day it is meaningful for people to learn with those with whom they have a connection. Inspiration can come from an online speaker, but *connection* comes from learning with someone with whom one has a prior relationship. While YUTorah and Torah Podcasts will still be popular post-pandemic, perhaps even more so than beforehand, there is much to gain from the learning that takes place with others in the same room. The speaker draws energy from the audience, and that energy creates a dynamic that is difficult to replicate online.

It is widely accepted that in-person learning for children is better than Zoom classes. While the content is the same, the community built in school along with the presence of learning together is qualitatively different in school; likewise, the content of a Zoom *shiur* may be similar to what is offered in person, but the environment could not be more different. It is hard to stay focused on the screen where the *shiur* is taking place when there are other windows looking to grab our attention. To hear the voice of God through Torah, being in that sanctuary or *Beit Midrash* with the phone on silent and focusing on the speaker, sources, and the people around us can make the experience of learning Torah transformative in the way we all dream it will be for each and every one of us.

A third element of synagogue life that is even more difficult to create virtually than prayer and learning: the social-communal relationships generated by synagogue participation. As engagement expert Ron Wolfson writes, synagogue "is not about programs. It's not about branding, labels, logos, clever titles, websites, or smartphone apps. It's not even about institutions. *It's about relationships.*"³ While the primary, expressed purpose of synagogue is our relationship with God, there is a lot of truth to the notion that we come to synagogue to connect with other people. Our social engagement with others froze in place during COVID-19. As a rabbi, I was still able to connect with and support my members through phone calls to individuals and electronic communication with the community at large. That network was pre-existing, and the connections had already been built during my time as a rabbi prior to the pandemic. But suppose the current situation were to continue as is for the next five years? Over time, it would be difficult to renew support systems, and it would be especially hard to create new relationships and networks. Indeed, friends of mine who moved to a new community over the summer shared that they were largely disengaged religiously and socially from their new community. While thankfully we are seeing the end come nearer, we can create more successful relationships by being part of an expansive and dynamic social network. There are benefits to our well-being through cultivating casual friendships beyond our closest inner circles, and we have been missing that during the pandemic.⁴ Showing up to a robust synagogue community can bring us

those friendships, including with people of a different generation who have a lot to offer and teach us.

Synagogues should be seen as centers for Jewish experience - religiously, culturally, and socially. While many aspects of synagogue life can be fulfilled through other models, the collective functions of a synagogue hopefully make it experientially compelling to not only passively join but actively work to maintain and grow.

How Might Synagogues Adjust?

While leaders should make the case that people should come back to synagogue, we must also consider how the synagogue experience will look post-pandemic given the way people experienced Judaism during the pandemic. Will we return to the two or three hour services that took place previously? How will that impact the decisions of those who have been praying in smaller *minyanim* or at home until now? The only thing that might prevent people from running to the *hashkamah minyan* that takes place in many synagogues is the early hour. But should every *minyan* follow the *hashkamah* approach of speedy davening? What does that mean for creating prayer that is reasonably efficient but also creates substantive meaning? A related issue is the matter of High Holy Day services. In my synagogue, we began at 8:30 am and finished at 11:30 am on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. For some communities, that is not all that different from the length of regular Shabbat services. Putting aside [halakhic considerations](#) of eliminating *piyyutim*, should we continue on this path? On the one hand, some may find they have more time to learn Torah, eat lunch at an earlier hour, or find it easier to sit through the services without feeling Judaism is a burden. On the other hand, will Shabbat and *Yamim Tovim* feel the same in the absence of basking in the holiness of the synagogue?

A helpful way to frame this is to think about what actually makes prayer meaningful. For example, one way in which services have been kept shorter has been by curtailing singing. This was done both to limit the time people spent gathered together and because singing can be a dangerous way of spreading the virus. I personally miss the singing at synagogue tremendously; I feel a deep loss of soulful expression. To take an extreme case, I found myself quarantined on Yom Kippur. I sang some *piyyutim* alone to try to give myself some sort of "Yom Kippur experience," but I much prefer doing that with my community than by myself. And I suspect I'm not alone in feeling that way.

But others do not feel that way. When I was in college, there were two Orthodox *minyanim* on Friday nights: "Carlebach" and a non-singing *minyan*. Most attended the former, and while some thought the latter was too separatist, perhaps going forward we will embrace the ability to provide multiple options where possible. Even in a "main *minyan*" setting, some middle ground may be sought. *Ba'alei Tefillah* will have to be ever more mindful of ending at a reasonable time for the

majority, and *gabbaim* may need to balance a leader who sings a lot with someone who leads efficiently. It will also may behoove us to reevaluate the extended time that comes with walking around the whole sanctuary with the *Sefer Torah* and extra *mi she-beirakhs* that only bring people meaning if they are having a really good conversation with their neighbor. Instead of restoring these practices once they either become safer or because time permits, the absence of these practices during pandemic worship may be welcomed as permanent changes.

Sermons are another piece of services that take time. While most synagogues expect the rabbi to give a sermon, it could be worthwhile for synagogues and rabbis to explore whether the regular model of fifteen-minute sermons could look different post-pandemic. During COVID-19, even after Shabbat services resumed, I emailed out sermons that people could read at their own leisure, while still giving a brief *devar Torah* at the end of services. Rabbis will still speak post-COVID, as we have a responsibility to educate, and it can be meaningful to have this in-person learning opportunity on Shabbat. But while the well-developed fifteen-minute sermon will still have its place, perhaps rabbis could vary the script by occasionally sharing an insight into the *siddur*, raising a question before the Torah reading with an answer at the end, or even just a short, powerful idea to give food for thought instead of a formal sermon. This would also allow rabbis to invest more time in fine-tuning the quality of their sermons when they do speak and streamline their most essential messages. Even one of the greatest *darshanim* of his time, Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l, [wrote](#) that early in his career, he was advantaged by rotating the delivery of sermons, and the task became more challenging once he was required to speak weekly. Reenvisioning the sermon slot has the potential to increase the impact of the Torah that is shared in synagogue.

Similarly, even as there is greater meaning to be found in live participation in *shiuirim*, many people who do not typically attend *shiuirim* in person did join on Zoom throughout the pandemic. Coming out at 8:00pm is not practical for many people. While I of course hope people will join for *Ma'ariv* and my *shiuir* in person post-pandemic, I'm not ready to give up on Zoom entirely for this reason. We should take every opportunity to reach as many people as possible.

Even the medium of in-person *shiuirim* could change. Shabbat afternoon outdoor classes, while initially offered to accommodate people who were not coming indoors, may be worth continuing simply for the sake of providing different environments for gathering and learning.

The same applies to events that are not learning centered. While we hope events ranging from comedy to supporting Israel will gain in-person audiences, perhaps homebound seniors or parents supervising children will still be able to participate via Zoom.

A final takeaway to be considered going forward is the experience of women. Women had a different experience of “coming back to *shul*” than men did. In New York State, the governor originally allowed quorums of ten to gather for worship. This meant that Orthodox women were not able to attend synagogue for a month in New York. Even after women were officially able to come back to synagogue, many young mothers were not able to come to synagogue because of restrictions barring children from attending, which sometimes meant that young fathers were not coming to synagogue either. An absence of female presence can really affect the whole community. We need to acknowledge that COVID-19 has furthered the arguments for increasing women’s voices in the community, and signals the importance of increased female leadership in Orthodox communities under the [guidelines of the Orthodox Union](#).

This extends to other forms of inclusivity - as many others, including children and high-risk individuals refrained from coming to synagogue, we should become better attuned to who is missing in the seats and resolve that exclusivity beyond our control should not be replicated when it is in our control to be inclusive. As we move to truly reopen post-pandemic,

we should work ever harder to welcome every person who enters our doors and give them a seat at the table to help synagogues improve and thrive.

Hashiveinu Hashem Eilekha - it is in God’s hands when we are in the post-COVID world; *v-nashuvah* - but we will return to our holy spaces when that time comes. *Hadeish yameinu k-kedem* - may we find renewal that feels like returning to the “old normal,” but may it be a true renewal - an opportunity to reshape, reimagine, and rebuild.

¹ Scott Galloway, [Post Corona: From Crisis to Opportunity](#) (Portfolio/Penguin, 2020), xvi.

² Shortly before this piece was published, Rabbi Moshe Hauer, executive vice president of the Orthodox Union, wrote a beautiful [opinion piece](#) that deals with many of these themes.

³ Ron Wolfson, [Relational Judaism: Using the Power of Relationships to Transform the Jewish Community](#) (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013), p. 2-3.

⁴ Jennifer Latson, “The New Social Orbits,” *Psychology Today* (January/February 2020): 53.

A RESPONSE TO MOSHE KRAKOWSKI ON YAFFED AND HAREDI JEWISH EDUCATION

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In his [recent article in City Journal](#), Dr. Moshe Krakowski confidently claims that YAFFED, an activist group made up of former Hasidic school students, misrepresents the realities within Hasidic schools in New York.¹ Unfortunately, while Krakowski has done extensive research on the topic, the piece itself reads more as an apologetic, defending the Hasidic educational system from even moderate and legitimate criticism, while presenting ad hominem and unjustified attacks on activists working to modify the system in ways they deem both morally and pedagogically valuable.

Our intention in this piece is not to opine about the state’s oversight of educational services in Hasidic schools. However, we want to point out what we see as significant flaws in Krakowski’s argument.

Dr. Krakowski argues that:

1. Any attempt by government officials to regulate parental religious-educational autonomy represents a dangerous encroachment on freedom of religion. He

states that it is akin to nineteenth century attempts to “civilize” Native American children by denying them an education in their own culture, a historical approach universally derided today.

2. The education provided by Hasidic schools meets and even exceeds the highly problematic guidelines that government agencies attempt to impose on Hasidic schools.
3. YAFFED and its staff are not motivated by a genuine desire to improve Haredi education and the quality of life of future Haredi adults. Instead, their unpleasant experiences have created antipathy toward Hasidic life, which they irresponsibly try to destroy. As he puts it, “None of this was ever really about education. Education has instead served as a proxy for the antipathy that many have for how the Hasidic community lives.”

None of these claims are convincing, and the evidence which the article offers for them is highly problematic.

Misunderstanding and Misrepresenting the Right to Freedom of Religion

Krakowski presents a stark binary choice between the total overhaul of the Hasidic school system and maintaining the status quo of almost complete autonomy for schools. He claims that the state's attempts to clarify the minimal level of general education required of private schools and attempts to enforce that, "call into question the very idea of private education in the United States, as parents' educational choices may no longer matter in the face of state mandates."

This is an overstatement. Nobody has questioned the legality of private religious education, and there is no proposed legislation denying significant parental autonomy in school choice and curriculum. The only question is how much general education the state should require, and how it should enforce those requirements. Krakowski ignores the policy and administrative aspects of such legislation, and he does not consider the possibility that changes to the educational standards can be enacted in a culturally-sensitive manner.

The implication of Krakowski's false dichotomy is that the state should be prohibited from regulating religious educational institutions in any way at all. Neither of us is a lawyer, but to the best of our understanding, contemporary interpretations of the First Amendment do not suggest such a thing, and [substantial equivalency](#) rules are considered constitutional throughout the United States.

The misunderstanding of the separation of religion and state connects to a more egregious misunderstanding of the connection between parental autonomy and child well-being. Krakowski argues that if depriving children of basic literacy in math and civics is a form of "child abuse... [w]hy, then, do parents pay thousands of dollars to send their children to these schools?" This is a non sequitur. Parental good intention and willingness to sacrifice for their children say nothing about the content of parental treatment. Physically violent punishment can be abusive even if well-intentioned parents do it for what they perceive as the good of their children. So too, an argument can be made that denying literacy to children, under some circumstances, could be a form of abuse. YAFFED is making this argument, and Krakowski has yet to disprove it.

Indeed, his comparison to the forced transfer of Native American children to secular (implicitly Protestant) boarding schools in the nineteenth century is weak. Nobody is proposing the forced transfer of Hasidic kids to public schools, boarding or otherwise. Indeed, within the limits of the law and the First Amendment, the government provides limited funds for transportation, some materials, special education, and administration of Hasidic private schools. Hasidic communities in the United States are thriving precisely because the

American government permits freedom of religion and provides equal rights to religious citizens and secular ones. None of the current debates about Hasidic education in New York bear any comparison to forced attendance in secular boarding schools.

Misrepresenting the Quality of Secular Education in Hasidic Schools

Part of Krakowski's defense of the Hasidic school system depends upon a series of poor arguments claiming that Hasidic education already provides young boys with all the education they need to function in the workplace. Krakowski does not present systematically collected data that can defend this claim. Instead, he uses skewed sampling, poorly collected qualitative data, and proxies.

Krakowski correctly points out that the study of Talmud, the mainstay of Haredi boys' schools, includes a wide array of skills in literacy and higher-order thinking. But Krakowski does not bring evidence (nor are we familiar with any) that those skills transfer outside of religious studies to literacy and the skills necessary for the workplace, and the workplace is exactly the issue under discussion. The ability to unpack a Tosafot – a challenging task indeed – may or may not translate into the kinds of literacy and skills that enable individuals to support themselves. Moreover, Talmud is not steeped in the practical or theoretical framing of science or math studies, and at least minimal STEM training is absolutely necessary for future success in the workplace.

To counter the argument that Hasidim struggle in the workforce, Krakowski claims that they do not have diminished earning power, as compared to the broader New York population, due to their education. However, he does not consider Hasidim who are unemployed or underemployed, comparing only between Hasidim and non-Hasidim who have full-time, year-round employment.

Moreover, Krakowski cites evidence that Hasidim have good knowledge of science from the fact that they use medical technology. He rejects as "absurd" the claim that Hasidim possess an inadequate "knowledge of science." After all, "Haredim are some of the most sophisticated consumers of medical treatment and expertise in the country." Clearly, however, use of a product is not identical to understanding or appreciating the methods required to create that product. Hasidic education enables consumption of technology, but it is not designed to understand or produce technology. If we want to understand how much Hasidim know of or value science, we cannot use consumption of medical technology as a proxy.

Lastly, Krakowski does not engage with the widespread and compelling evidence that Haredi education often leaves young people without basic job skills or cultural literacy. Krakowski rejects as unreliable the testimony of former students, such as YAFFED's executive director, who critique the current system. Even if their larger social and educational agenda is mistaken,

there is no reason to doubt their lived experience struggling to integrate into the non-Hasidic workplace due to lack of basic skills. In fact, Hasidic schools and leaders are vocal about the diminished value of general education and their interest in minimal compliance, at best, with language and math education.

The Reliability of Experiences of Ex-Haredim and Their Nefarious Agenda

We both have met and spoken at length with Hasidim from English-speaking countries who struggle with basic English, some of whom were deeply frustrated by their inadequate elementary school education. Yet, rather than engage with these claims, Krakowski calls into question the reliability and agenda of ex-Hasidic educational activists: "Accepting the claims of ex-Hasidim regarding their former schools is like relying on a divorcé for information about his ex-wife." This is a reductive comparison that, even if we were to accept, is clearly untrue. One can certainly learn a great deal about a person from an ex-spouse; one would be remiss to disregard any side of a complicated story.

Which leads us to significant questions about Dr. Krakowski's research method. Krakowski is an educational researcher who uses qualitative methods and in-person observation to make sense out of the current reality in Haredi boys' schools. But the blanket rejection of the perspective of a whole group of stakeholders in the community being studied is, to put it mildly, a violation of several basic elements of qualitative research. Phenomenologists, those who capture lived experience and interpret it, are methodologically prohibited from determining which players are "right" or "wrong" in a given cultural situation. Instead, they are tasked with offering a rich description of the varying perspectives and experiences of participants and stakeholders (including themselves) and how their position impacts their experience. A simple distinction between insiders and outsiders will not do.

After wholly rejecting the perspectives of ex-Hasidim, Krakowski goes on to accept the descriptions of those still within the Haredi school system not only as bearers of their own experiences, but as arbiters of the facts on the ground. These assumptions are problematic and serve to further marginalize an internal minority.

Weak Arguments and False Dichotomies

Krakowski's division of actors into those he trusts to tell the truth and those he doesn't ties into a series of oversimplifications and false dichotomies he sets up. The article speaks, for example, of the "complete absence of violent crime" in Hasidic communities. Hasidic communities

may well be less violent than other communities – though crime data is notoriously skewed due to the discretionary nature of police work – but overstatements do not lead to clarity. Indeed, the [recent riots](#) in Borough Park, documented cases of violent ["tznus patrols,"](#) cases of spousal abuse, and sexual assault suggest that violent criminal behavior exists in the community.

Krakowski further insists that the low level of English in some Hasidic groups is "a matter of culture rather than education." He uses this statement to suggest that the institutional school system is not a barrier to literacy; a family's choices, however, might be. But this seems to undercut his whole argument, namely that state intervention in the educational system should be seen as an attempt to eliminate Haredism. If he thinks – wrongly to our minds – that education can be separated from culture, why be concerned with state intervention at all?

Finally, as part of an effort to reject the perspective of YAFFED, Krakowski points out what looks like an embarrassing error. In its extensive report, YAFFED calls into question the legality of the education in 39 schools, when it turns out, according to Krakowski, that only "28 actually exist." In fact, Krakowski's claim is incorrect. According to [a letter](#) by Interim New York State Commissioner of Education (Dec. 19, 2019), the city chose not to investigate eleven schools for various reasons – including schools that had closed or changed their profile between the YAFFED report and the city investigation, addresses linked to administrative offices rather than school buildings, or schools that include many students older than high school. These schools do (or did) exist.

As stated above, our intent is not to provide a definitive statement on the changes that need to be made within Hasidic schools. Those determinations should be made by all of the stakeholders involved. But we do know that the conversation about that topic deserves better than this. We encourage others to engage in more precise and rigorous research on the topic, and look forward to an extensive review of the findings.

¹ After completion of this article, *City Journal* edited the original piece, changing some of the content, presumably in response to criticism and social media debate. Editing the content of a controversial article during the controversy itself makes it extraordinarily difficult to have a transparent discussion. We critique the article that was available to us when we were writing, the point of reference for most readers. It is hard to debate a moving target.

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