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TAZRIA - METZORA

THIS MONTH'S LEHRHAUS OVER SHABBOS IS SPONSORED BY
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AHARON WEISER FROM EBENSEE (MAY 6, 1945),
AND THE YAHRZEIT OF HOWARD'S FATHER,
AHARON BEN REUVEN ELIEZER, ON THE 25TH OF NISSAN

ORTHODOXY'S RESPONSE TO BIBLICAL
CRITICISM: A REVIEW OF JOSHUA
BERMAN'S ANI MAAMIN

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Joshua Berman is that all-too-rare phenomenon – an accomplished academic Bible scholar who is also a fully committed Orthodox Jew, indeed a learned Orthodox rabbi. His new book [Ani Maamin: Biblical Criticism, Historical Truth, and the Thirteen Principles of Faith](#) is required reading for any thoughtful contemporary Orthodox Jew troubled by potential challenges to traditional faith arising from contemporary academic biblical studies.

Berman divides the book into two parts. Part I, "The Tanakh in Historical Context," deals mainly with the necessity to read and appreciate Tanakh in its Ancient Near Eastern context, the historicity of the Exodus from Egypt, and challenges posed by academic biblical source criticism to the divinity of the Torah. Part II of the book, "Appreciating Principles of Faith and the Principle of Torah from Heaven," traces Judaism's principles of faith, particularly concerning the origins of the Torah, from the Mishnah and Gemara, through Saadia Gaon and Rambam's Thirteen Principles of Faith, and on to the reception history of Rambam's principles in later halakhic, liturgical, and homiletic compositions.

Part I draws substantially on lengthier and more detailed discussions in Berman's previously published academic work, particularly his [Inconsistency in the Torah: Ancient Literary Convention and the Limits of Source Criticism](#) (Oxford University Press, 2017), presenting the material in more popular and concise form in this book. One chapter (Chapter 7) summarizes the arguments of Berman's [Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought](#) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Far from constituting unnecessary duplication of previously published material, this strategy is fully justified and indeed necessary. What Berman has to say in Part I of *Ani Maamin* is of great importance for thinking Orthodox Jews. It would have been most regrettable for this substantial global community to miss out had Berman's audience been restricted to his fellow professionals in the field of academic biblical studies. By presenting his analyses and conclusions in a serious but accessible way in this new volume, Berman's main lines of argument come through clearly and elegantly to that wider readership of reflective Orthodox Jews. Those who want further detail and a full scholarly presentation can go on to learn more from Berman's previously published academic writings, which I, for one, certainly plan to do.

A central claim of Part I is that the Tanakh, including the Torah, must be read in its ancient context and in particular in light of the literary conventions of the Ancient Near East, not through the anachronistic literary canons of nineteenth-century source critics and their contemporary successors. Berman mounts an utterly convincing scholarly assault on source criticism (also often referred to as "Higher

Criticism”), the attempt to identify hypothesized pre-existing sources from which the Torah is supposedly composed. In Chapter 5, for example, Berman makes a devastating case against the methodological assumptions of source criticism using the example of the Flood narrative of the Book of Genesis. Berman importantly goes beyond defensive mode in also showing how rejecting the postulates of the source critics and approaching the Torah as a unitary composition can facilitate deeper understanding of and insight into the text. An example is Berman’s brilliant demonstration of the extended and intricate chiasmic structure of the entire Flood narrative of Genesis chapters 6-9.

In Part I, Berman also defends the historicity of the Exodus. His robust defense of a literal reading of *yetziat mitzrayim* coupled with his argument, based on evidence from the Torah itself, that the Torah’s statement that there were 600,000 men of fighting age leaving Egypt should not be taken literally, may prove to be too “left wing” for some and too “right wing” for others. But this is exactly where an informed Modern Orthodox approach to the historicity of the Torah’s narratives should be: deploying expert academic knowledge in defense of our traditional understanding of Torah, yet prepared, when the evidence is strong enough, to view some details in a new light.

This brings us to a central point which we can illustrate with further reference to Part I of the book. Berman demonstrates the many parallels between the Kadesh Poem of Ramses II, a long inscription celebrating Ramses’s victory over the Hittite empire at the town of Kadesh in 1274 BCE, and Exodus Chapters 14-15, the narrative of the splitting of the *Yam Suf* and the *Shirah*. Berman persuasively argues that the evidence suggests the antiquity of the *Shirah* and its dating at the time of Ramses II as an act of cultural appropriation. What Berman does not note in this discussion, or at any juncture in the book, is the obvious point that a significant shift of perspective is required here. Prior to being aware of the parallels between the *Shirah* and the Kadesh Poem of Ramses II, we, traditional Jews over a period of millennia, took the *Shirah* to be a totally original composition, fashioned, as it were, out of whole cloth. Given our recently-gained knowledge of the Ancient Near East, we now realize that it is very plausible to understand the *Shirah* as a piece of cultural appropriation. As Berman shows us, the *Shirah* uses the language and themes of ancient Egyptian literature to portray God as far outdoing the greatest achievements of Pharaoh. This new perspective in no way undermines traditional belief in divine authorship of the Torah or its traditional dating, but we should acknowledge that it constitutes a significant shift in our understanding.

Similarly, when Berman cites the visual parallels between Rameses’ throne tent and the Tabernacle as supporting the historicity of Exodus, his argument is persuasive, but again we should acknowledge that a perspectival shift is involved in understanding the design of the Mishkan in this derivative way rather than as the totally original divinely-commanded design that the generations preceding us took it to be.

Again, in his discussion of the Genesis Flood narrative, Berman identifies, on the basis of contemporary academic biblical scholarship, no fewer than seventeen plot elements common to the Gilgamesh and Genesis Flood narratives. Moreover, these appear in both texts in precisely the same order. Berman concludes: “Rather than claiming that the Genesis Flood account represents the redaction of two pre-existing sources, we should maintain that the Torah’s account represents a significant reworking of a well-known Mesopotamian template, but now in accordance with the Torah’s ideology” (120). Here again Berman has shown how Ancient Near Eastern texts, a significant feature of academic biblical studies, can be deployed to radically undermine another, namely source criticism. But here too we should acknowledge the perspectival shift. Previous generations of traditional Jewish believers viewed the narrative of the *mabul* as created, as it were, *ex nihilo* - but we must now understand that narrative as a deliberate reworking of an earlier text. The broader point concerning Berman’s book is that while he shows to great effect how questionable source criticism is on multiple levels, he does not fully acknowledge the challenges posed to traditional understandings of some parts of the Torah by our knowledge of the Ancient Near East, as well as the benefits it brings. Those challenges are surmountable, but they need to be explicitly recognized and addressed.

On other occasions our knowledge of the Ancient Near East deepens our prior understanding of Torah without generating a sense of discontinuity with the ways in which previous generations of Jews understood the text. Berman shows how, for example, awareness of the structure and content of Ancient Near Eastern vassal treaties enhances our understanding of the covenant of Sinai, the *mitzvah aliyah la-regel*, and the overall structure of the Book of Deuteronomy, as well as our appreciation of how these parts of the Torah would have impacted powerfully on the Torah’s first recipients, who lived in a world in which vassal treaties were a central feature of political life. Berman also utilizes the historical prologues characteristic of vassal treaties to explain inconsistencies between narratives in the Book of Deuteronomy and the rest of the Torah in an ingenious way. Discrepancies between narrative details are not contradictions but quite deliberate indications of God’s displeasure with Israel subsequent to her lack of fidelity as a vassal in the wilderness years.

Aside from the larger strengths of the book, Berman often provides valuable small nuggets along the way. Close to the beginning of the book, for example, he rightly castigates self-identifying Orthodox Jews who “proclaim acceptance of ‘the findings of biblical criticism’” without any attempt to subject biblical criticism itself to appropriate critical scrutiny and submitting, as Berman very cleverly puts it, to “*Daas Mada*” (xviii). I also enjoyed the brief but fascinating insights from an insider into the double standard applied in the academy to the Bible and comparable ancient texts as well as Berman’s remarks concerning the influence of conservative versus liberal culture wars on academic biblical studies.

Part II of the book is a little shorter than Part I. Berman's discussion of Rambam is particularly impressive in its detail and depth, and I learned much also from his often fascinating reception history of Rambam's Thirteen Principles. Part II, like Part I, also contains much excellent analysis. It is unclear to me, however, precisely what the relationship is between the first and second parts of the book. Obviously, some of the issues addressed by Berman in Part I constitute potential challenges to Rambam's Eighth Principle of Torah from Heaven, but exactly how the discussions of Part I and Part II are intended by Berman to relate to each other remains somewhat unclear.

The book is also open to some minor criticisms on assorted particular issues. First, it would have been helpful for Berman to explicitly distinguish traditional Jewish beliefs concerning the origins and composition of the books of *Nakh* from those that relate to the Torah itself. Second, the discussion of Chapter Six seems to depart to an unnecessary degree from the central focus of Part I by discussing the halakic process down through the ages and raising very large issues concerning change in contemporary Halakhah. Third, Berman argues in Chapter 7 that the Torah's revolutionary political thought "reveals its divinity." It seems to me that the argument is framed too ambitiously here. Certainly, the equalizing political, social, and economic prescriptions of the Torah are very striking when compared to the rest of the Ancient Near East, but this does not constitute, in philosophical terms, a sufficiently strong argument for the Torah's divinity. Fourth, Berman's Afterword provides a close and illuminating reading of the episode of *tanur shel akhnai* but it is unclear to me how this helps deal, as Berman seems to think it does, with challenges from academic biblical studies to traditional belief other than those stemming from Lower Criticism.

Any points of criticism notwithstanding, Berman has written an important book, both in terms of its highly informed treatment of academic biblical studies from an Orthodox perspective and its wide range of valuable insights on topics central to the concerns of thinking Orthodox Jews.

AN ESSENTIAL JEWISH TEXT ON THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

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During World War I, the Turkish nationalist leadership of the Ottoman Empire portrayed ethnic Armenians as a fifth column, aligned with Russia against the interests of the Empire. The incitement reached a murderous frenzy in the spring of 1915, when the Ottoman military began to round up and deport Armenian leaders and intellectuals from Constantinople to concentration camps in eastern Turkey. These deportations were followed by forced imprisonment of millions in labor camps, massacres of Armenian men, death marches of Armenian women, children, and elderly people into the Syrian desert, and widespread sexual abuse. By 1922, an estimated 1.5 million Armenian people had been killed.¹ In Jewish communities, the subject of the Armenian Genocide is often raised in the context of, and as providing context for, the Holocaust—our own national calamity. However, a 1915 spy cable, considered in detail below, provides a provocative, contemporary Jewish perspective on the events in Armenia.

Background

Most historians of the war period consider the Ottoman atrocities to meet the legal definition of genocide. But this scholarly near-consensus has not translated into political consensus. The Republic of Turkey, which succeeded the fallen Ottoman Empire following the war, denies the occurrence of any genocide and pressures other governments to adopt the same position, sometimes as a precondition for the maintenance of diplomatic relations.² This strategy has succeeded to a surprising extent. For instance, the government of Israel has consistently declined to recognize the Armenian Genocide, despite longstanding support for recognition by politicians as ideologically disparate as the late Yossi Sarid of Meretz, Ayelet Shaked of Yamina, and current president Reuven Rivlin of the Likud.³ In the United States, although resolutions in support of recognition passed both the Senate and the House of Representatives with resounding bipartisan support in 2019, the Trump Administration publicly rejected them.⁴ (The White House's position, too, is bipartisan; President Obama declined to describe the events as genocide despite promising to do so in his 2008 election campaign.)⁵

¹ John Kifner, "Armenian Genocide of 1915: An Overview," *The New York Times*, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/ref/timestopics/topics_armeniangenocide.html.

² *Ibid.*

³ See Raphael Ahren, "Why Israel still refuses to recognize a century-old genocide," *The Times of Israel* (April 24, 2015), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/why-israel-still-refuses-to-recognize-a-century-old-genocide/>; Aaron Kalman, "MKs say high time for recognition of Armenian genocide," *The Times of Israel* (April 23, 2013), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/mks-say-high-time-for-recognition-of-armenian-genocide/>.

⁴ Jennifer Hansler, "Trump administration won't call mass killing of Armenians a genocide despite congressional resolutions," *CNN* (December 17, 2019), <https://www.cnn.com/2019/12/17/politics/trump-administration-armenian-genocide/index.html>.

⁵ Nahal Toosi, "Top Obama aides 'sorry' they did not recognize Armenian genocide," *Politico* (January 19, 2018),

Even major Jewish communal organizations in the United States, among them the Jewish Federations of North America and the Orthodox Union, have not taken a public position on the Armenian Genocide.⁶

For Jews today, the historical meaning of the Armenian Genocide is inextricably bound with that of the Holocaust. We know that the Ottomans' success emboldened the Nazis; to justify his deadly pursuit of "living space" for Germans, Hitler reportedly said, "Who today remembers the Armenian extermination?"⁷ And Jewish leaders frequently invoke the Holocaust experience as a motivation for extending support to Armenians in their pursuit of genocide recognition. In a 2015 resolution, the Jewish Council for Public Affairs declared, "The Jewish communities, as the targets of one of the worst genocides of the twentieth century, have a bond with the Armenian people here in the United States and abroad. We have a moral obligation to work toward recognition of the genocide perpetrated against the Armenian people."⁸ On the Knesset floor in 2018, then Meretz chairwoman Tamar Zandberg similarly explained her motion in support of recognition: "Both in our case and the Armenians', the great powers knew about the murders and did nothing to stop them. This is why we are saying to the world, never again. Never stand on the sidelines again...."⁹

However, Jews learned of the Ottoman atrocities, and articulated Jewish reactions to them, long before the Holocaust began. During World War I, when news reports of the killings reached the United States, renowned Reform rabbi and public figure Stephen Wise emerged as a leading advocate for U.S. intervention on behalf of the Armenians. In a 1918 letter to his wife Louise, Rabbi Wise explained, "I would speak with the tongue of angels for the Armenians and against their oppressors. If a Jew is not to be the champion of any wronged people, who should be?"¹⁰ At the same time, in the Zionist *Yishuv* in Ottoman-controlled Palestine, a small network of amateur spies called *Nili* sought with desperation to assist the Armenians. The documents left behind by *Nili*, explored further below, express a

uniquely Jewish imperative to act on behalf of Armenia and mourn its dead.¹¹

Nili's Struggle for Armenia

Nili—the name is a Hebrew acronym for "*netzah Yisra'el lo yeshaker*"—"the Eternal One of Israel will not lie" (I Samuel 15:29)—undertook espionage operations to assist the British war effort against the reigning Ottomans. Their ultimate goal was to enlist British support for the establishment of a Jewish nation-state in Palestine following a victory by the Allies (including the United Kingdom) over the Central Powers (including the Ottoman Empire). The group, which included only a few dozen members, based its operations in Zikhron Ya'akov and acted without any authority from the formal Zionist leadership in Palestine.¹²

Nili's founders, 39-year-old agronomist Aaron Aaronsohn and his 25-year-old assistant Avshalom Feinberg, acted on their impression that British forces in the Middle East lacked clear intelligence about the facts on the ground in Palestine. After several unsuccessful attempts to contact the British military in Egypt, Aaronsohn managed to travel to London and coordinated a bold communication strategy. Between February and September 1917, the Royal Navy's *HMS Managam* (nicknamed "Menachem" by the Jewish spies) made frequent secret moonless night landings on Atlit beach, near Aaronsohn's experimental farm that had come to serve as an ad hoc base for espionage operations. During the Atlit visits, *Nili* members transmitted intelligence they collected concerning Ottoman troop movements—one of their leading field spies was Ottoman military officer Eitan Belkind—and oppressive government acts like the 1917 expulsion of Jews from Tel Aviv. The *Managam* also smuggled in financial assistance for the *Yishuv* sent by Jews in Allied countries, which had previously been subject to an Ottoman wartime embargo.¹³

The plight of the Armenians was a major concern and rallying cry of the *Nili* members. Two of them left eyewitness accounts of the atrocities: Aaron Aaronsohn's sister Sarah Aaronsohn, who assumed a leadership role in the organization during Aaron's stays in Egypt, described seeing piles of corpses of massacred Armenians during her late 1915-early 1916 journey from her husband's home in Constantinople back to her family's home in Zikhron Ya'akov. (Unfortunately, our only written account of what Sarah saw is secondhand, filtered through the words of her brother.)¹⁴ Belkind

<https://www.politico.com/story/2018/01/19/armenian-genocide-ben-rhodes-samantha-power-obama-349973>.

⁶ See Eric Cortellessa, "Why some US Jewish groups now recognize the Armenian genocide, and others don't," *The Times of Israel* (December 13, 2019), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/why-some-us-jewish-groups-now-recognize-the-armenian-genocide-and-others-dont/>.

⁷ Kevork B. Bardakjian, "Hitler's Armenian-Extermination Remark, True or False?," *The New York Times* (July 6, 1985), <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/07/06/opinion/l-hitler-s-armenian-extinction-remark-true-or-false-103469.html>.

⁸ "Resolution on Armenian Genocide," *Jewish Council for Public Affairs* (October 16, 2015), http://engage.jewishpublicaffairs.org/p/salsa/web/blog/public/?blog_entry_KEY=7642.

⁹ Lahav Harkov, "Knesset approves motion on recognizing Armenian Genocide," *The Jerusalem Post* (May 23, 2018), <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Knesset-approves-motion-on-recognizing-Armenian-Genocide-558191>.

¹⁰ Claire Mouradian, "Jewish Coverage of the Armenian Genocide in the United States," in *Mass Media and the Genocide of the Armenians: One Hundred Years of Uncertain Representation*, eds. Joceline Chabot, Richard Godin, Stefanie Kappler, and Sylvia Kasparian (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 221n1.

¹¹ In an influential 1995 book, Israeli historian Yair Auron argued that the people and institutions of the *Yishuv* received extensive, timely information on the events of the Armenian Genocide and largely reacted with apathy. In Auron's telling, the *Nili* spies represented the exception to the disappointing general rule of the time and place. For the English edition of the book, see Yair Auron, *The Banality of Indifference: Zionism and the Armenian Genocide* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2000).

¹² Chen Malul, "N.I.L.I.'s Story Told Through the Diary of the Man Who Gave It Its Name," *The National Library of Israel* (November 5, 2017), <https://blog.nli.org.il/en/nili/>; "Mahteret Nil'i," Beit Aaronsohn-NILI Museum, <https://www.nili-museum.org.il/%d7%9e%d7%97%d7%aa%d7%a8%d7%aa-%d7%a0%d7%99%d7%9c%d7%99/>.

¹³ Malul, *ibid*; "Mahteret Nil'i," *ibid*; Hershel Edelheit & Abfaham J. Edelheit, *History of Zionism: A Handbook and Dictionary* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 358-359.

¹⁴ Yair Auron, "[Jewish Evidences and Eye Witness Accounts About the Armenian Genocide During the First World War](#)" (lecture, T.C.

similarly reported witnessing massacres during his Ottoman military service (although his account was first published in his memoirs 60 years later and may have been influenced by Holocaust imagery).¹⁵ The Armenian Genocide appears many times in *Nili's* records and communications: sometimes in terms of Jewish self-preservation, as in Aaron Aaronsohn's November 1916 warning to his British handlers that the Jews would be "next in line";¹⁶ sometimes in terms of solidarity against a common oppressor, as in Aaron's plea for "the poor nations and races under the Turkish despotism, be they Armenians, Greeks, Jews, or Arabs";¹⁷ but other times in terms of deep-rooted empathy informed by *Tanakh* and Jewish historical memory. Though many *Nili* texts exhibit this empathy, few are as striking as this passage in Feinberg's November 22, 1915 intelligence report to British intelligence officer Lieutenant Leonard Woolley:

My teeth have been ground down with worry. Whose turn is next? When I walked on the blessed and holy ground on my way up to Jerusalem, and asked myself if we were living in the modern era, in 1915, or in the days of Titus and Nebuchadnezzar? And I, a Jew, forgot that I am a Jew (and it is very difficult to forget this "privilege"); I also asked myself if I have the right to weep "over the tragedy of the daughter of my people" only, and whether Jeremiah did not shed tears of blood for the Armenians as well?!

Because after all, inasmuch as the Christians – of whom not a few sometimes boast that they have a monopoly over the commandments of love, mercy and brotherhood – have been silent, it is imperative that a son of that ancient race which has laughed at pain, overcome torture and refused to give in to death for the last two thousand years, should stand up...It is imperative that a drop of the blood of our forefathers, of Moses, of the Maccabees who rose up in the scorched land of Judea, of Jesus who prophesied on the banks of the blue sea of Galilee, and the blood of Bar Kochba... That a drop of the blood which was saved from annihilation should rise up and cry: Look and see, you whose eyes refuse to open; listen, you whose ears will not hear, what have you done with the treasures of love and mercy which were placed in your hands? What good have rivers of our spilled blood done? How have you realized your high ideals in your lives?¹⁸

Feinberg's report, originally written in French, apparently reached Lieutenant Woolley in Cairo, but it did not immediately lead to further contact between *Nili* and the British military. How Woolley reacted to an intelligence report laden with impassioned Biblical allusions is unknown, but it is our great fortune today that the report's contents survive.

In this passage, Feinberg strives to convey to Woolley a uniquely Jewish perspective on the Armenian Genocide. However, this Jewish perspective is not static; it evolves, both emotionally and logically, over the course of two poignant paragraphs. At the outset, Feinberg

Istanbul Universitesi International Symposium: The New Approaches to Turkish-Armenian Relations, March 15-17, 2006) ("Auron Lecture"), 11-15, http://www.ihgilm.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Jewish_Evidences_Part2.pdf.

¹⁵ Ibid, 15-17.

¹⁶ Ibid, 19.

¹⁷ Auron, *The Banality of Indifference*, 384.

¹⁸ "Auron Lecture", 6-10.

worries about his own people—"Whose turn is next?"—mourning their possible fate with the words of Lamentations, the quintessential work of mourning. His "*teeth have been ground down with worry*" (Cf. Lamentations 3:16). He sees the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem by Babylonian Emperor Nebuchadnezzar—recounted in Lamentations—and the destruction of the Second Temple by Roman Emperor Titus, and he fears a similar calamity.

Feinberg then begins to look beyond his self-interested perspective, to "*forg[e]t*" his Jewishness. He considers that his weeping "*over the tragedy of the daughter of my people*" (Lamentations 2:11, 3:48, 4:10) must be accompanied by weeping for the murdered Armenians. To ground this empathy in the Jewish tradition of mourning, the letter alludes to the *midrash* according to which Jeremiah's lamentations reach beyond his contemporary moment and encompass the tragedies of the future: "*Bakhoh tivkeh ba-laylah* ['she surely weeps at night']—why does the verse include two weepings [i.e., two iterations of the Hebrew word for weeping]? Rabbah said in the name of Rabbi Yohanan: one for the First Temple and one for the Second Temple" (*Sanhedrin* 104b). In Feinberg's telling, just as Jeremiah shed tears for the Second Temple, which was built and destroyed long after his death, so must he have shed tears for the mass murder of Armenians over two thousand years later. In this most complete form of empathy, Jewish national mourning is not simply a model for mourning the Armenians, it *includes* mourning the Armenians.

The mourning gives way to righteous anger. Feinberg accuses the Western Christian powers of neglecting their supposed commitment to "*love, mercy and brotherhood*," as far as the Armenians, themselves a Christian minority, were concerned. His solution is to re-appropriate the nominally Christian ethic of empathy as something essentially Jewish. The Christians' "*monopoly*" is broken, their way has become the way of idols "*whose eyes refuse to open*" and "*whose ears will not hear*" (Cf. Psalms 115:5-6, 135:16-17), and "*Jesus who prophesied on the banks of the blue sea of Galilee*" reemerges as a Jewish "forefather" inspiring Jewish action on behalf of others. Feinberg foresees that he may be called to give his life for others as Jesus was purported to do, invoking Jesus' announcement of his fate "*on [my] way up to Jerusalem*" (Cf. Mark 10:32).

After traveling through worry, weeping, and anger, Feinberg arrives finally at action. He no longer derives his inspiration from Jeremiah, the prophet of mourning, but rather from the military leaders of ancient Israel: Moses, the Maccabees, and Bar Kochba. (The one arguable Lamentations reference in this part of the passage—"look and see" (Cf. Lamentations 1:12)—is not an expression of lamentation but a demand that the peoples of the world do not look away from the tragedy of the Armenians).

Feinberg did ultimately give his life for the *Nili* cause. In January 1917, out of frustration over the failure to establish regular contacts with the British—the *Managam* routine had yet to begin—Feinberg set out to cross the Sinai Peninsula on foot with fellow spy Yosef Lishansky, in order to reach British Egypt. On January 20, Feinberg and Lishansky were discovered by Bedouins loyal to the Ottoman Empire. During a firefight with Ottoman officers, both Lishansky and Feinberg were wounded; Lishansky escaped first to Egypt and then back to Palestine, and Feinberg died in the Sinai. His body was not discovered until Israel conquered the peninsula in 1967.¹⁹

¹⁹ Israel Defense Ministry, "Avshalom Feinberg," *Yizkor* (Hebrew), <https://www.izkor.gov.il/%D7%90%D7%91%D7%A9%D7%9C%D7%95>

FEELING “OFF” ON YOM HAATZMAUT

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Feinberg’s death played a role in the violent fall of *Nili*. In September 1917, a carrier pigeon carrying an encrypted message from Sarah Aaronsohn to offshore British contacts was intercepted on the property of Ahmad Bey, the Ottoman governor of Caesarea. Although the Ottomans could not interpret the message, it heightened their awareness of possible espionage activities in Palestine. Shortly afterward, *Nili* spy Na’aman Belkind (Eitan’s brother) sought to cross the Sinai on foot in an effort to investigate Feinberg’s disappearance. Belkind was arrested and divulged information about *Nili* under the pressure of interrogation. In October 1917, Ottoman forces surrounded Zikhron Ya’akov. Sarah Aaronsohn committed suicide to avoid capture, and Lishansky and Na’aman Belkind were hanged in Damascus.²⁰

More than a century later, the example of *Nili* and the searing words of Avshalom Feinberg now serve to rebuke the Jewish institutions, including the Federations, the Orthodox Union, and, by far most importantly, the government of the State of Israel, for their failure to honor the tragic history of the Armenians out of deference to geopolitics. Perhaps needless to say, if a western government were to deny the historical consensus of the Holocaust in order to improve relations with, for instance, Iran, the decision would be condemned as beyond the pale of moral society. But we need not search for analogies in modern history to make this point; Feinberg’s Biblical sensibility challenges us to consider a particularized empathy that is deep-rooted in Jewish national memory. Whether or not Jeremiah foresaw the Armenians, he cried for them.

The atmosphere in the room was somewhat tense. Present that morning were nine of us local rabbis and five members of Knesset, representing a wide array of political affiliations and viewpoints. The MKs were on a whirlwind tour of North American Jewish Communities, and we were the only group of rabbis they would meet with during their entire trip. Each of my colleagues spoke, respectfully but forcefully, about the challenges they faced as American rabbis and what they wanted to see in a relationship between the American rabbis and Israel. It was no surprise that denominational acceptance and pluralism were special areas of concern, though some ventured into much more controversial political territory. I was the only rabbi of an Orthodox synagogue in attendance, and I had not yet spoken my turn.

The moderator took great care that an Orthodox voice should be heard, and when I was called upon, I could feel all eyes on me. What did a religious Zionist Orthodox Rabbi who doesn’t live in Israel have to say about the Diaspora/Israel relationship? What did I think about the concerns of my colleagues? The following is what I told Michal Rozin of Meretz, Deputy speaker of the Knesset, Dr. Nachman Shai of the Labor Party, Majority Leader of the Knesset, Tzachi Hanegbi of the Likud, Meir Cohen of Yesh Atid and Revital Swid of the Zionist Union about what I think are the *real* challenges in the relationship between American and Israeli Jewish communities. The following are my thoughts on why I disagree with my colleagues and why this time of year makes me feel somewhat uneasy.

The Torah records the prohibition against consuming *hadash*, grain that took root after the sixteenth of Nissan of one year and is harvested before the same date of the following year:

Until that very day, until you have brought the offering of your God, you shall eat no bread or parched grain or fresh ears; it is a law for all time throughout the ages in all your settlements (Vayikra 23:14).

It is this last clause that leads to a widespread discussion among halakhic authorities in the Diaspora. Most Rishonim rule that *hadash* is prohibited everywhere, both within and outside the Land of Israel, on a biblical level, though several medieval halakhists maintain that outside of Israel, this prohibition is only Rabbinic in nature. Several early modern Ashkenazic commentators note that the climate and agricultural cycle of Poland, their country of residence, made it exceedingly difficult to properly observe the laws of *hadash*. They therefore combine several leniencies into a permit to consume “new” grain products throughout the year. Interestingly, though, there is no analogous discussion in the Jewish communities of the Middle East and North Africa, which were traditionally meticulous about *hadash*.

The laws of *hadash* demonstrate, as do so many other laws, that the Torah’s optimal observance is in the Land of Israel. Although we remain obligated in all commandments outside the land, our performance of them—especially of those that are seasonal—is, by definition, “off.” Starting with the second day of Pesah, there is a several-month reprieve during which all Jews everywhere may eat any kosher grain product. Soon this period will end, and we will be reminded once again that we are misaligned—“off”—from the land of Israel.

http://www.zionism-israel.com/bio/biography_avshalom_feinberg.htm); Israel Defense Ministry, “Yosef Lishansky,” *Yizkor* (Hebrew), https://www.yizkor.gov.il/%D7%99%D7%95%D7%A1%D7%A3%20%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%A9%D7%A0%D7%A1%D7%A7%D7%99/en_06b29ac212446b4341f2ff92c3ead817.

²⁰ “Mahteret Nil”i,” [op cit](https://www.nili-museum.org.il/%d7%97%d7%91%d7%a8%d7%99-%d7%a0%d7%99%d7%9c%d7%99/); “Havrei Nil”i,” Beit Aaronsohn-NILI Museum, <https://www.nili-museum.org.il/%d7%97%d7%91%d7%a8%d7%99-%d7%a0%d7%99%d7%9c%d7%99/>.

I think it that this is a critical lesson to consider around the time of Yom Haatzmaut. Attitudes toward the State of Israel divide different Jewish communities even on the liturgical level: Does a particular synagogue recite the prayer for the government of Israel or not? With or without reference to “the first flowering of our redemption”? Does it at least recite the prayer for the welfare of IDF soldiers? These year-round questions are made more acute at the beginning of the Hebrew month of Iyar: Do we recite *Hallel* on Yom Haatzmaut, do we recite *Tahanun*, or (like Ben-Gurion, according to a legendary quip) neither? If *Hallel*, full or half? With or without a *berakha*? On the fifth of Iyar, or on the day determined by the Israeli government?

These liturgical issues, which may affect no more than five minutes annually, are often definitive of how one chooses to affiliate and even identify, even for people who rarely or never attend the synagogue during the week. Thus, these finer points of observance have become ideological litmus tests (or “*tzitzis*-checks”), but they obfuscate a more serious, foundational issue: the ways in which we Diaspora Jews are “off” from our Israeli counterparts.

Thus I told the visiting MKs that beyond the political and religious issues (and in Israel, those are often interchangeable) that my colleagues were so passionate about, the more serious reality is that American Jews (even Orthodox Jews) are misaligned from Israel in several important ways.

The first major way in which we are unaligned is that American Orthodox Jews are often unaware of the cultural and religious lives of our Israeli brethren. We inhabit a different cultural space with disparate influences; we read different books, listen to different music, and have different public intellectuals, authors, and poets. Moreover and more importantly, American Jews are often unaware of the impressive variety and creativity of Israel’s religious leaders and thinkers. We tend to hear about the religio-political controversies—the Temple Mount, women’s services and mixed services at the Kotel, questions of “Who is a Jew?”, and other areas of intersection and overlap between religion and politics.

But some of the most exciting developments in Jewish thought, law, and scholarship are taking place in Israel, and we have no idea what they are and who is driving them. Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun is the father of an exciting stream of text-based Tanakh study, whose popularity is widespread in Israel, but is not particularly well known outside of Israel; Profs. Yair Zakovitch and Avigdor Shinan, the leading “secular” Tanakh commentators, are even more obscure outside of Israel.

Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (“Rav Shagar”) is virtually unknown in America outside the readership of *The Lehrhaus*, Prof. Alan Brill’s blog, and another rarefied corner or two. Rabbi Dr. Yehuda Brandes is a pioneering figure in the realm of Talmud study and teaching: his work is premised on the idea that the division of the Talmud into legal and nonlegal elements is an artificial one, he integrates academic methods into his close Talmudic readings, and his highly-developed pedagogical method is now being used to train a generation of Talmud teachers at the Herzog College, where he serves as the academic head. And yet, most Diaspora Jews have never heard of him or read any of his writings.

Rabbi Chaim Navon and Dr. Tomer Persico draw thousands of readers to their thoughtful, learned Facebook posts (where they often respond to one another) on religion, economics, politics, and everything in between, but they are inaccessible to those who are not fluent in Hebrew. Sivan Rahav-Meir, a *haredi* woman and media personality, draws huge crowds from across Israel’s political and

religious spectrum for her lecture on the weekly Torah portion. Former MK Dr. Ruth Calderon’s inaugural Knesset speech went viral, but it was a flash in the pan, and her readings of Talmudic narratives remain underexplored.

In the realm of Jewish law and religious scholarship, only recently have Rabbi Eliezer Melamed, the Rosh Yeshiva of the Yeshiva in Har Bracha, who is revolutionizing the religious Zionist halakhic world with his eminently reasonable and balanced halakhic approach, and the brilliantly creative Rabbi Osher Weiss, gained currency outside Israel.

In the academy, one need only peruse the table of contents of the recently-published *Ha-gedolim* to get a sense of some of the new directions in Jewish scholarship. Each chapter profiles a different rabbi who influenced the formation of Israel’s *haredi* community, but the chapters themselves are distillations of master’s and doctoral theses on these seminal figures. The fascinating thing is not only that the scholarship is being produced, but also that it is being read by laypersons and sold in popular bookstores. It is not uncommon to see someone reading Prof. Benny Brown’s monumental work on Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz (the “Hazon Ish”) or Dr. Maoz Kahana’s dazzling study of the way Rabbi Yehezkel Landau (“Noda Bi-Yehuda”) and Rabbi Moshe Sofer (“Hatam Sofer”) each responded to the currents of their times.

While American Orthodox Jews debate the roles, function, and titles of women in communal leadership, Rabbaniyot Michal Tikochinsky, Esti Rosenberg, Tova Ganzel, and Malka Puterkovsky, to name some of the most prominent, have created institutes for advanced Torah study for women, integrating their graduates into communal frameworks with minimal comment and controversy. Prof. Vered Noam, in addition to being a Talmudist and *talmidat hakhamim* of the first rank, has penned several searing articles on women and Orthodoxy in mainstream, widely-read publications. Yet many of us have never heard of any of these women. The late Chana Safrai, in addition to being a pioneer of Jewish women’s study, began a project with her father and brother to produce a commentary on the entire Mishna that would bring history, botany, archaeology, and other academic disciplines to bear on the text. The result is over a dozen full-color volumes of the Safrai Mishna have been published, but rare is the American Jew who has heard of them.

The truth is that even if we did know who Israel’s most exciting thought leaders are, their writings would be all but inaccessible to too many American Jews, as only a small fraction of this output has been translated into English. The Mishnah in Pirkei Avos tells us (2:1), “Be as scrupulous about a light mitzvah as about a severe one.” What is a “light mitzvah?” Rambam explains that this refers to *mitzvot* like making a festival pilgrimage to Jerusalem or **teaching Hebrew**. Rambam listed this as a prime example of a mitzvah that really ought to be taken far more seriously than it is.

The great American intellectual Leon Wieseltier recently published a magisterial working paper titled “Language, Identity, and the Scandal of American Jewry,” in which he bemoaned this lack of Hebrew proficiency of American Jewry:

The American Jewish community is the first great community in the history of our people that believes that it can receive, develop, and perpetuate the Jewish tradition not in a Jewish language. By an overwhelming majority, American Jews cannot read or speak or write Hebrew, or

Yiddish. This is genuinely shocking. American Jewry is quite literally unlettered.

The assumption of American Jewry that it can do without a Jewish language is an arrogance without precedent in Jewish history. And this illiteracy, I suggest, will leave American Judaism and American Jewishness forever crippled and scandalously thin.”

What this means is that American Jews—even those who have benefitted from extensive Jewish educations—are often at a loss when encountering foundational Jewish texts, such that, as Wieseltier put it, “We are a community whose books and whose treasures—our books are our treasures—are accessible almost entirely in translation.” And we know that something is lost in every translation (if you don’t believe me, try reading Harry Potter in Hebrew). Regardless of one’s political affiliations, Americans who are limited in their Hebrew knowledge aren’t exposed to the nuanced political writing that appears in Israeli papers, only to the juiciest (and often mistranslated) bits that filter into the English media. As a result, we are woefully ignorant of what Israelis are really thinking, saying, and doing.

This is what I told the MKs, and this remains our challenge. When we celebrate Yom Haatzmaut, we should feel a degree of cognitive dissonance that attends the celebration of the independence of a country we don’t live in. This dissonance can be productive. It can inspire eventual *aliyah*, though that is not for everyone, and certainly not *right now*. It can also spur some introspection and evaluation, even amidst a joyous celebration. To what degree do we, in our lives, truly manifest a connection and an alignment with Israel in any deep way? If we keep asking ourselves this question, perhaps we will conclude that the lip service of a few prayers and perhaps a check to an Israeli charity or political action group is not sufficient. Perhaps then we will begin to explore and attempt to understand Israel’s incredibly rich musical, intellectual, spiritual, material, artistic, religious, and, last but not least, deeply and authentically *Jewish* culture.

LEAVINGS OF SIN: RAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN ON TESHUVAH

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Editors' Note: This essay is republished in honor of the fifth yahrtzeit of HaRav Lichtenstein zt"l.

Introduction

The yeshiva “academic year” begins in Elul, a heady and intense time leading up to the Yamim Noraim that centers around *teshuvah* and self-improvement. The mere memory of that season is liable to invoke feelings of divine longing and spiritual awakening in yeshiva alumni. Despite these stirrings, it can be difficult to embrace the Yamim Noraim spirit for those whose lives are structured not around a yeshiva schedule but around vocational, familial, and other responsibilities. While classically the *shul* rabbi’s *shabbos shuvah derashah* was meant to break this monotony and inspire spiritual inspiration, the prevalence of the rabbinic *derashah* nowadays (at least in the US) dulls the intensity of the *derasha* experience. It is perhaps for this reason that the more noteworthy *teshuvah derashot* over the past half-century have been offered not by *shul* rabbis but by *rashei yeshiva*. Most famous among these, at least in the Modern Orthodox world, are the annual *teshuvah derashot* of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, offered from 1964 to 1980, and those of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, offered from 1985 to 2010 at either the Gruss Institute in Jerusalem or a New York synagogue.

While *derashot* are most potent in the moment, with the indelible impression they make upon their listeners, quality lectures of this sort also have the capacity to be of enduring value. To that end, Pinchas Peli collected and published seven *derashot* of Rabbi Soloveitchik in his journal *Panim el Panim* and then in a volume, *Al ha-Teshuvah*, which has since been [translated](#) into English. Most recently, consumers of *teshuvah* literature will be most excited to learn, twelve of Rav Lichtenstein’s *teshuvah derashot* have been published, by the Mishnat HaRAL project through Maggid books. *Return and Renewal: Reflections on Teshuva and Spiritual Growth*, adapted and edited by Michael Berger and Reuven Ziegler, affords access to Rav Lichtenstein’s teachings on *teshuvah* to a general audience. This publication not only allows for the broader public to study and consider Rav Lichtenstein’s teachings regarding repentance, but also consolidates his thoughts on *teshuvah* for consideration as part of his broader *hashkafic* and theological writings.

The topics presented in the book have some range, but all are centrally focused on repentance. They include:

- a. considerations of certain halakhic issues regarding *teshuvah* – whether it is an obligation or not, and gradations of sin and repentance;
- b. the timing of *teshuvah* – does it stem from a norm or a time of crisis, and *teshuvah* at different stages in one’s life;
- c. the experience of sin and repentance – undoing and rehabilitating a relationship with God, the motivating factor of *teshuvah*, experiencing *teshuvah* from a place of mediocrity; and
- d. the interaction between *teshuvah* and other themes, such as truth, integrity, humility, and joy in *avodat Hashem*.

The book’s writing style follows Rav Lichtenstein’s inimitable fashion, with complex sentences (somewhat attenuated, given the

transcribed oral presentation format) drawing upon both traditional Jewish sources and the occasional reference to classical Western literature to support its arguments. The study mixes halakhic analysis with spiritual reflection and includes some consideration of communal concerns as well. As one would expect from Rav Lichtenstein, the analysis relies not on pat generalizations and platitudes, but on a deep and broad consideration of each topic, establishing the scope of the topic at hand and staking out particular positions on various issues.

In particular, the style in many of the essays utilizes the “mapping out the topic” approach that would be familiar from Rav Lichtenstein’s Talmud lectures. For one representative example, the essay “*La-Kol Zeman: Teshuvah* within Four Time Frames of Our Lives” analyzes the temporal aspect of *teshuvah* in a variety of ways: is *teshuvah* occasional, responding to a particular sin, or annual, to be carried out on a yearly basis independent of sin? Is it meant to be perennial, drawing upon previously resolved sins as part of the *teshuvah* process, or not? And to what extent should *teshuvah* be perpetual, carried out daily, because today might be one’s last opportunity?

Comparing *Return and Renewal* and *On Repentance*

As regards content, given the proximity and similarities between Rav Lichtenstein’s and Rabbi Soloveitchik’s *teshuvah derashot*, a comparison between *Return and Renewal* and *On Repentance* is in order. It is only reasonable to compare the *teshuvah* writings of one great theologian and leader of Modern Orthodoxy with those of his son-in-law and *talmid muvhak*, who occupied a similar position for much of that audience. An analysis will reveal several points of contact, but also several distinctions between the two works.

Many classic Soloveitchikian themes of *teshuvah* are noticeable immediately upon consideration of Rav Lichtenstein’s study: the heightened role of confession within repentance; the concept of standing before God; the power of free will; repentance in response to a shock; the concept of breaking the covenant; the exclusivity of *avodat Hashem* as servitude to God; *teshuvah* as elevating sins; the comparison between seeking out sins and seeking out leaven before Pesah; crisis as a *mehayyev* (obligating force) of *teshuvah*; and a future-oriented rather than past-oriented view of spiritual activity. Some of these can be traced further back as classical Maimonidean or Brisker themes, while others are more particularly the Rav’s contributions. In any event, Rav Lichtenstein engages his father-in-law’s *teshuvah* discourse by drawing upon these themes, at times citing the Rav. In fact, the volume’s central distinction between two types of sin, to be analyzed below, is explicitly attributed to the Rav (p. 16):

The Rav z”l used to speak frequently of “sin,” meaning specific actions, and “the ways of sin,” the whole context of lifestyle and personality out of which sin develops and by which it is sustained.

At the same time, however, Rav Lichtenstein evidences a fairly explicit shift away from certain Soloveitchikian themes. In comparing Rav Lichtenstein’s writing on *teshuvah* to the Rav’s, the argument from silence is instructive – Rav Lichtenstein leaves out almost completely any discussion of the Temple service on Yom Kippur, whose repentance-related themes comprise a core part of the Rav’s *On Repentance*. Relatedly, Rav Lichtenstein avoids significant treatment of less prosaic topics such as the nature of the atonement afforded by the day of Yom Kippur itself, the metaphysics of sin and its stain, and the role of suffering in expiating sin. While avoiding these more abstruse metaphysical topics, Rav Lichtenstein

substitutes for them more experiential perspectives. Rather than emphasizing the metaphysics of sin and its impact on the broader world, he focuses on the phenomenology of sin, how it impacts upon the sinner and his or her relationship with themselves and with God. Rather than discussing the nature of Yom Kippur in the Temple of years past, Rav Lichtenstein turns to contemporary religiosity, considering what sort of introspection might be necessary for various communities. Even among more prosaic areas of Halakha that appear frequently in his volume, Rav Lichtenstein avoids overly involved discussion of the halakhic nuances. While these appear more frequently in *On Repentance*, *Return and Renewal* prefers to mention or gesture at them and then move on to focus on the more practical upshot from these discussions. For example, while the Rav dwells at length on the question of whether *teshuvah* can be commanded (*On Repentance*, pp. 15-18), Rav Lichtenstein notes the question (pp. 64-65) quickly, and then spends much more time contemplating whether *teshuvah*, and divine service more generally, is most spiritually meaningful and effective if commanded or if merely presented as an opportunity (pp. 65-68).

There would appear to be two ways to explain this divergence between the topical preferences of these two *gedolim*: one based on audience and genre, and the other based on discrepancies between the religious worldviews of the Rav and Rav Lichtenstein.

As regards audience and genre, Rabbi Soloveitchik’s *derashot* from 1962-1974, on which the book is based, were given in Yiddish to an audience presumed to be able to follow some fairly complex halakhic reasoning and attracted Torah scholars outside of Modern Orthodoxy’s immediate orbit. By contrast, Rav Lichtenstein’s *derashot* were given from 1985 to 2010 in English either at Kehillath Jeshurun in New York, or at the Gruss Institute in Jerusalem, aimed at a general rather than a yeshiva audience. The audience’s interest would have been best accommodated by minimizing excursions into complex issues of the Temple service of Yom Kippur, and even complex exposition of questions in *lomdus* relating to *teshuvah*. The use of more familiar textual sources would allow for paying attention to other matters close to the hearts and minds of the audience, including communal and humanistic concerns.

At the same time, however, the discrepancy might also be explained by reflecting on the distinct worldviews of the two presenters. For the Rav, for whom “out of the sources of Halakha, a new worldview awaits formulation,” (*Halakhic Mind*, p. 102), halakhic argumentation is necessarily the beginning and end of any discussion about *teshuvah*. For Rav Lichtenstein, Halakha is certainly the core and basis of the entire institution of *teshuvah*, but many other sources of insight exist as well. In particular, contributions from humanistic sources, Jewish and otherwise, provide important reflections on how the process and experience of *teshuvah* should be viewed. For example, Socrates’ aphorism that “the unexamined life is not worth living” is cited approvingly several times in the volume (pp. 16, 71, 147, and 150). While this approach might not be the focus of a *shiur* in Gemara and *lomdus*, for a more general reflection on *teshuvah*, this broader palette of prooftexts is appropriate for Rav Lichtenstein. In a sense, then, the works on *teshuvah* by these two colossi reflect their approach in their disquisitions on Jewish thought more generally; whereas the Rav was more likely to go into extended and often abstruse halakhic discussion than was Rav Lichtenstein, the latter was more likely to take a broader perspective on the topic at hand and to cite humanist thinkers as sources of authority. Parenthetically, one might compare this distinction regarding these two thinkers’ use of non-Jewish sources to their particular approaches to ethics outside of halakha, in “[Does Jewish Tradition](#)

[Recognize an Ethic Independent of Halakha](#)” and [Halakhic Morality](#), as I may do on another occasion.

The Volume’s Key Question: Moral Repentance or Religious Repentance?

As noted above, there is really one primary *hakirah*, a particular question, that runs through the various essays in this volume – the distinction between *teshuvah* as fixing one’s sins and *teshuvah* as returning to a better relationship with God. In fact, the theme appears so many times that it approaches the point of redundancy. One wonders whether an alternative organizational structure of the volume might have succeeded in integrating this theme, such that it appeared as a single, lengthy essay rather than being presented again and again (albeit from different perspectives) throughout the volume.

Many questions throughout the volume tie into this core question of moral repentance (fixing one’s behavior) versus religious repentance (fixing one’s relationship with God). Two sources on repentance in the Torah (Numbers 5 and Deuteronomy 30) and two versions of contemporary confession (*aval anahnu hatanu* versus the *al het* listing) each distinguish between a sin-oriented and relationship-oriented *teshuvah*. There are at least five aspects to sin, as is laid out several times in this volume (pp. 44-45, 62-3, 90, 122-3), which map onto the two categories. The impetus for *teshuvah*, whether it is based on a particular sin or on one’s situation (whether individual or communal, whether a state of mediocrity or a crisis), also splits among these two questions. Whether combating sin should ideally be a struggle or not, the nature of communal repentance, and even the distinct emphases between Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur, tie in to this fundamental question pervading the entire volume. As was so often the case for Rav Lichtenstein’s *hakirah*, the reader is asked to [embrace both sides](#) of the *hakirah*, and to strive for *teshuvah* to both repair the sin and the human-divine relationship.

Themes Relating to Rav Lichtenstein’s Broader Oeuvre

While this central question dominates many of the essays from their various perspectives, additional perspectives and issues are taken up throughout the volume as well. Many of these integrate well with themes key to Rav Lichtenstein’s worldview more generally, as one might have expected. Possibly most prominent among these themes is the close relationship between *teshuvah* and *avodat Hashem*, divine service in general. If *teshuvah* is meant to repair one’s religious ways, an understanding of *teshuvah* must confront the nature of religiosity overall. Thus, the halakhic Jew’s dual focus on the detailed regimen of *mitzvot* and the sweeping relationship with God (p. 39-40, and addressed at length in Rav Lichtenstein’s Orthodox Forum article on [“Law and Spirituality”](#)) correlates well with both the topic of *avodat Hashem* and with the primary question of this volume. The theme of commandedness, and the related expectation of a strong work ethic, which is so core to Rav Lichtenstein’s conception of religiosity (for both Jews and non-Jews), and discussed (among other places) in [“To Cultivate and to Guard”](#) (*By His Light*, ch. 1), appears several times as well (pp. 8-9, 24, 66-67, 89-90, 114, 134-35).

A good example of Rav Lichtenstein’s characteristic nuance appears in the chapter on “Mediocre *Teshuvah* and the *Teshuvah* of the Mediocre” (pp. 97-120). While noting, on the one hand, that the Torah is less opposed to mediocrity than are certain 19th century thinkers, and that there is still value to *teshuvah* of this nature, Rav Lichtenstein also argues that such *teshuvah* is “grievously inadequate” (p. 110) and that it is the role of the one doing *teshuvah* to do everything they can to escape the limitations of mediocrity. Still, if someone does the best he or she can, and yet falls short of a full and perfect *teshuvah*, God accepts the *teshuvah*, weighing the

effort more heavily than the results, and yielding a process attainable by non-elites.

Teshuvah and Religious Humanism

Certain cases in the volume would appear to reflect Rav Lichtenstein’s broader [orientation as a religious humanist](#), as well. One example of this is his nuanced position (noted above) opposing elitism that excludes most religious practitioners, while at the same time having high expectations for the average person in his stirring push against mediocrity. This religious humanist framework allows each individual to pursue religious excellence on their own level.

Additionally, the question as to whether one should have a certain happiness as they go through the process of *teshuvah* is resolved with a “personal, intuitive answer” of “an emphatic yes” (p. 217) and only afterwards proven from sources. This position derives primarily not from a halakhic or *hashkafic* source, but from Rav Lichtenstein’s developed religious humanist reflex that spiritual activities, even when difficult, must be attended by joy. A flourishing religious individual, fulfilling his or her telos of serving God, must be happy, even while fulfilling the difficult task of *teshuvah*.

Rav Lichtenstein’s strong and consistent advocacy of guilt as a healthy religious reaction to sin throughout the volume (see pp. 62-64, 79-81, 89, 93, 110, 131, 208, 215) reflects his religious humanist worldview where what is demanded of a person is more than conforming certain actions and beliefs, but living a life “as ever in my great Taskmaster’s eye,” where failure of necessity entails a deep-seated guilt.

Related to this is the view that “*teshuvah*... is itself a crisis” (p. 130), as the religious individual’s personality and life is torn apart as they attempt to reform themselves to properly stand before God again. The humanism inherent in the focus on the experience of the person in their religious experience facilitates the development of these novel formulations.

While being understanding of human weakness and not artificially assuming everyone is an elite scholar, and taking the human experience seriously throughout, this volume still strikes a fairly demanding pose (as one might hope for a *sefer* on *teshuvah*): It urges people not to accept the mediocre excuses of the *beinoni* (p. 105) and strongly rejects an attitude of fatalism in light of free will (e.g., pp. 1-4). The appropriate modulation of expectations for the religious practitioner is yet another expression of Rav Lichtenstein’s religious humanism.

Commentary on the Modern Orthodox Community

In addition to the development of *teshuvah* themes of general interest, one feature of the volume is the explicit reflection on the Modern Orthodox community, and, at times, its contrast to more Haredi communities. Acolytes of Rav Lichtenstein will be familiar with some of these reflections from his articles “The Future of Centrist Orthodoxy” in [Leaves of Faith vol. 2](#) and [“Centrist Orthodoxy: A Spiritual Accounting”](#) (*By His Light*, ch. 12), but the added valence of *teshuvah* provides for new perspectives and makes these comments pack an additional punch.

As in those volumes, a critical angle is often taken towards Modern Orthodox apathy. For example, the community is accused of lacking the proper passion in prayer (p. 31):

For the Modern Orthodox Jew and his community in particular, the inclination and the capacity to

pray properly and with passion, with a plaintive *cri de coeur* issuing *mi-ma'amakim*, from the depths, is often sadly deficient.

In his discussion of *tim'hon levav*, or the role of wondering, Rav Lichtenstein critiques both the Haredi and the Modern Orthodox worlds for failing to find the proper balance between introspection and self-certainty (pp. 155-56):

[For the *Charedi* world] there is no *tim'hon levav* at all – just passionate certitude, never to walk against your best light, yet never examining what is the nature of that light.... In the Centrist world, by contrast, there is a surfeit of *tim'hon levav*... While the *Charedi* world is so certain that it, and it alone, has absolute, comprehensive, detailed truth, the individual in the Religious-Zionist world often doubts its ideals and its ideology, its goals and its methods. Riven by conflicting loyalties, driven by a quest for integration, he finds himself in a state of tension. He likes to see that tension as creative – it has an appealing ring – but on the other hand, he's not quite certain.

Certitude can't come at the expense of introspection, nor can an abundance of wondering at the propriety of one's religious community and its goals come at the expense of passion in living that life. This honest reflection on the limitations of both communities in this connection, is developed at length in the essay "Centrist Orthodoxy: A Spiritual Accounting."

The comfortable state of Modern Orthodoxy is representative of the modern era and its relative stability (certainly as compared to the poverty and high mortality rates of years past), which can lead to a sort of calmness and even lack of focus. To that end, Rav Lichtenstein notes the risk of being lulled into a sense of security (pp. 73-74):

I need to focus upon the besetting sin, the inherent danger, of the Modern Orthodox community, the danger against which we need to be on our perpetual guard. That danger is, quite clearly, *heise'ach ha-da'at*, spiritual and religious inattentiveness.

One notes a similarity in themes to his previous essays, "Bittachon: Trust in God," in [By His Light](#) and "My Soul was Faith," in [Seeking His Presence](#), as the community is charged to be attentive, to both investigate spiritual deficiencies and do what they can to fix them.

Conclusion

The essays collected in this volume aim primarily not at a *lomdish* analysis of *teshuvah* but at the phenomenological perspective of a religious humanist. Traditional Jewish sources, studded by references to the Western canon, form the backdrop against which success or failure to live up to one's personal or communal religious obligations must measure up. This volume develops the concept that sin creates a rupture, both on a local level and as it reflects on the relationship between the *oved Hashem* and his God, each of which must be repaired by the penitent. The many insights into repentance included in the volume are deeply nuanced, and are of a piece with Rav Lichtenstein's writings more broadly.

The subtitle of this study by Rav Lichtenstein is "Reflections on Teshuva and Spiritual Growth." That description is certainly accurate, but what the volume offers goes beyond that. Each essay contains within it a charge – some more explicit than others, often directed at the individual, at times directed at the community – pushing for growth in *avodat Hashem*. For a religious community that has produced few *musar* books, this volume's subtle yet powerful religious thrust is significant. Even where the text does not explicitly call upon the individual in the second person, the tone and humanity of its pieces, the piercing ability to reach people on their own level, forces the reader to confront his or her own situation as they read this text.

The presumed readership of this volume is American and English-reading Orthodoxy writ large. To a large extent, this community might be described, with a critical eye, as composed of two groups: those who see Judaism as a mere adornment, embraced primarily to enhance quality of life, on the one hand, and those fully focused on studying Torah (and facilitating such study), to the absolute exclusion of any other endeavor. This volume, framed by the context of *teshuvah*, offers a third way: a Judaism that is based on the divine command and the imperative of *avodat Hashem* – divine service and maybe even servitude – but also offers a broad, textured approach to the world, one that values literature and the humanities, eschews religious extremism, and accepts the world's complexity. Of course, this worldview can be gleaned from Rav Lichtenstein's other writings as well, but it is in some ways more powerful to see such an integrative religious worldview come to life in a series of *derashot* on *teshuvah*.

Although Rav Lichtenstein has left this world, his enduring legacy – as regards *teshuvah* but also about *avodat Hashem* in general – lives on, as this volume furthers the return and renewal of his teachings.

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