



Vaera

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Amidst the war unfolding in Israel, we have decided to go forward and continue publishing a variety of articles to provide meaningful opportunities for our readership to engage in Torah during these difficult times.

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“CERTAINTY HAS NEVER BEEN MINE”: THE DENOMINATIONAL ECLECTICISM OF DAVID ELLENSON

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David Ellenson, Reform rabbi and eighth president of the Reform movement’s Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC), spent the last evening of his life at The Jewish Center in New York, a Modern Orthodox synagogue. He was there to celebrate the life and work of an Orthodox rabbi: his friend, Jacob J. Schacter, University Professor of Jewish History and Jewish Thought, and Senior Scholar at the Center for the Jewish Future, at Yeshiva University.

No one was surprised to see David Ellenson at an

Orthodox synagogue paying tribute to an Orthodox rabbi. He boasted numerous Orthodox friends and acquaintances, and he had been invited by no less than Rabbi Norman Lamm to speak at Yeshiva University.

Nor was anyone surprised when Shuly Rubin Schwartz, Chancellor of the Conservative movement’s Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), observed in a [memorial tribute](#) that “three successive JTS chancellors were blessed to call [Ellenson] both a colleague and a friend.” For years in Los Angeles while teaching at HUC, Ellenson had been a “pillar” of the “Library Minyan” of a Conservative congregation, Beth Am. In 2014, JTS had also awarded him an honorary degree.

David Ellenson, indeed, numbered among the most admired and beloved Jewish religious leaders of our time. He was respected by

Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Jews alike, and he was unique in his ability to appear totally comfortable in various Jewish settings across the American Jewish religious spectrum.

How did Ellenson become such a paragon of Jewish religious pluralism, the embodiment of what his friend, Professor David Myers, [once labeled](#) “denominational eclecticism”?

The answer begins in the city of [Newport News](#), located at the southern end of the Virginia Peninsula, where his paternal grandparents settled after they emigrated from Russia around the turn of the 20th century. Newport News was something of a boomtown at that time. A railroad line connecting it to Virginia’s capital city of Richmond had opened in 1881, and by World War I, the sleepy fishing village and its sister city, Hampton, had grown into the largest coal export point in the world as well as a major shipyard. David’s father, Samuel Ellenson, after graduating from Harvard Law School and marrying, returned home to Newport News to practice law; that is where David grew up.

Fewer than 2000 Jews lived in Newport News when David was young. Almost all of them traced their roots back to eastern Europe. In the middle decades of the 19th century, when Central European Jews had settled in America and spread Reform Judaism across the South, Newport News had not yet been incorporated. As a result, the Jewish community that David Ellenson knew was dominated by Orthodox and Conservative Jews.

The city’s first Reform synagogue only formed in 1955.

The Ellensons—a substantial clan with myriad uncles and aunts and cousins—belonged to the city’s most traditional Orthodox synagogue, Adath Jeshurun, the only Newport News synagogue at that time with a traditional *mehitzah* separating men from women. David’s father served for years as Adath Jeshurun’s president. His mother Rosalind (Stern), a graduate of what was then known as Boston’s Hebrew Teachers College, taught him Hebrew (“in an Ashkenazic accent”) as well as Jewish texts. David gained the skills “to lead every variety of Orthodox services” at Adath Jeshurun. He described himself as having been “an eager student.”¹ Years later, when he visited Orthodox synagogues, he took pride in his ability to *daven* and navigate the traditional prayer book. He also knew the vocabulary common to traditional Jews—the lingo, the Yiddishisms, what Chaim M. Weiser called [FrumSpeak](#). Even as president of HUC, when meeting traditional Jews, he would “code-switch” to make everyone feel comfortable.

In small Jewish communities like Newport News, Jews knew one another even if they worshipped apart. This was especially true of David’s mother, who was active not only within Adath Jeshurun but also in the Jewish Community Center, the Jewish Federation, Hadassah, and the National Council of Jewish Women. “My mother inculcated a love for Israel, a commitment to Jewish values,

¹ David Ellenson, [Jewish Meaning in a World of Choice: Studies in Tradition and Modernity](#) (Philadelphia: JPS, 2014), xiv-xv.

and a concern for the welfare of the less fortunate in the deepest recesses of my heart,” David wrote in his book, [Jewish Meaning in a World of Choice](#). “She was completely committed to *Kelal Yisra-el*, and when one of my rabbis wanted me to be active only in the Orthodox National Conference of Synagogue Youth (NCSY), she protested strongly and insisted that I also be engaged in AZA (B’nai B’rith Youth), which brought together teenagers from across the denominational spectrum in our small Jewish community.”² From a young age, thanks to AZA, David learned to interact with Jews of every sort. He would continue to honor his mother’s commitment to *Kelal Yisrael* throughout his life. When inaugurated as HUC’s president, he went so far as to insist that a fully kosher lunch be provided to the guests and participants. He wanted to make sure that his many friends who kept kosher would not feel excluded.

In an autobiographical preface to his book [After Emancipation](#), David alluded obliquely to the “ambivalences and fissures” of his life in Newport News. He characterized the community as both “a place of intimacy” for him and “a place of alienation.” He felt deeply lonely: “I was in the South and I partook of, and was informed by, its heritage and manners—but as a Jew I was not of it... Part of me felt I never really belonged.”³

² Ibid., xv.

³ David Ellenson, [After Emancipation: Jewish Religious Responses to Modernity](#) (Cincinnati: HUC Press, 2004), 15.

⁴ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, [Halakhic Man](#), trans. Lawrence Kaplan (Philadelphia: JPS, 1983), 142n4.

As he came to realize only much later, the loneliness that he experienced—the “ambivalences and fissures” that tore at him—echoed the experience of many other modern Jewish thinkers struggling to meet the conflicting demands of modernity and tradition. One recalls Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s discussion of loneliness, [his admission](#) that religious truth and sincere faith emerge “out of the straits of inner oppositions and incongruities, spiritual doubts and uncertainties, out of the depths of a psyche rent with antinomies and contradictions, out of the bottomless pit of a soul that struggles with its own torments...”⁴ Ellenson grappled with those same challenges.

Ellenson, though, was raised with a much simpler vision of Orthodoxy than Soloveitchik’s. “The rabbis who taught me in my youth,” he recalled, “always seemed to imply that proper *emunah* (belief) and a life of halakhic observance and *zemirot* (Sabbath and holiday songs and hymns) would mend whatever ills marked the human or my personal condition.”⁵ After that failed (“I could neither conjure up the type of faith they seemed to demand nor submit myself to the discipline of practice they clearly prescribed”), he discovered deeper truths in the writings of modern religious thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard and great sociologists of religion like Émile Durkheim and

⁵ Ellenson, [After Emancipation](#), 16.

Max Weber.⁶ Eager to learn more and to apply those insights to Judaism, he applied—after receiving his MA from the University of Virginia—to all three of the major non-Orthodox rabbinical programs at that time: Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform. He sheepishly admitted years later that he chose Reform not out of any deep conviction but because his Orthodox father [convinced him](#) that “if he wanted to make a living as a rabbi, he should go to HUC.”

Questions and doubts continued to torment Ellenson in rabbinical school as he endeavored to forge an approach to Judaism that combined “a knowledge of texts and history with the methodology of the social sciences and philosophy.”⁷ In response, he entered the doctoral program in religion at Columbia University, eventually pursuing his PhD in tandem with his rabbinical degree. He found himself drawn to great minds across the Jewish religious spectrum, from the Columbia humanist Joseph L. Blau, to the Reform scholar Fritz Bamberger, to the Conservative rabbi-historian Arthur Hertzberg, to the pioneering Orthodox social historian Jacob Katz. He learned much, he realized, from all four of them. Thanks to them and others, he also became—in his own modest, understated, southern way—a *yodea sefer*, familiar with a wide range of texts from ancient to modern. He could cite many of them effortlessly in their original language—and even by heart. Traditional Jews who encountered him were amazed.

⁶ Ibid., 15-16.

⁷ Ibid., 17.

As he studied, Ellenson likewise interacted with brilliant graduate students from across the spectrum of Jewish life who, later on, remained his friends after they assumed senior Jewish Studies positions within the American academy. That became his path too: he decided to forge a life in scholarship and teaching rather than in the active rabbinate. He had concluded from his studies that no movement in Jewish religious life held a monopoly on truth.

“Certainty has never been mine, and conflicting emotions and a sense of distance from my surroundings has always marked me,” he confessed, in perhaps the most self-revealing sentence that he ever wrote.⁸

That, of course, was the key both to his “denominational eclecticism” and to his friendships across the Jewish spectrum (and beyond). In our charged and polarized time, when so many profess absolute certainties and associate only with men and women of their own kind, David Ellenson found truth and goodness in people of many kinds, and they loved him back in return.

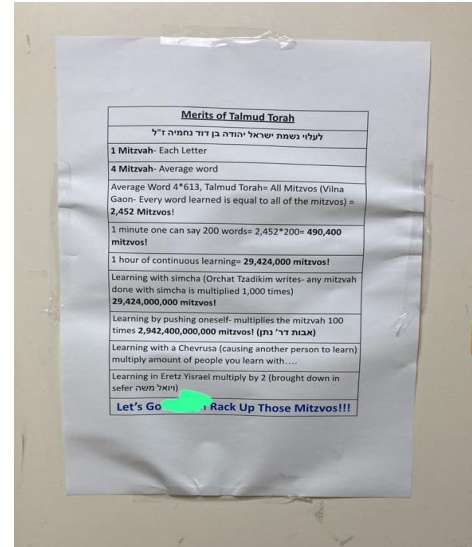
⁸ Ibid., 15.

RACK UP THOSE MITZVOT!

Tzvi Goldstein graduated from Yeshiva University with semichah and a degree in Psychology.

On a recent visit to a gap-year yeshiva in Israel, I noticed the following calculation hanging on the wall next to the *beit midrash*, titled “Merits of Talmud Torah”:¹

Each letter of Torah is its own *mitzvah*. Assume an average word has four letters — so each word is four *mitzvos*. Because “*talmud torah k'neged kulam* — learning Torah is equal to all of the *mitzvos*,” multiply that by 613, equaling 2,452. A person can say some 200 words in a minute — that’s 490,400 *mitzvot* in a minute. If you learn for an hour, you’re up to 29,424,000 *mitzvos*. Learning with *simchah* — times one thousand. Learning with a *chavrusa*? Times two. Learning in Eretz Yisrael? Again times 2. At this point, you’re easily past the millions, just for an hour of learning.



The sheet concludes, “Let’s go, _____ Yeshiva — rack up those *mitzvos*!” The title of the sign, “Merits of Talmud Torah,” combined with the almost video-game-like nature of the “point multipliers” and the exhortation at the end, highlighted for me — almost to the point of caricature — one of two diametrically opposed approaches to learning Torah specifically, and the full sweep of *avodat Hashem* (divine worship) more widely.²

Shlomo and Shloimy

American Orthodoxy is commonly divided into a number of sub-groups: Hasidish, Yeshivish/Haredi, Centrist/Modern Orthodox, and Liberal/Open Orthodox.³ While it is difficult to

¹ In addition to the sources quoted, [the shiurim of Rabbi Michael Rosensweig](#) contributed heavily to my thoughts about these topics. Thank you as well to Rabbi Tzvi Sinensky and Jonathan Engel for their help in preparing this article for publication. Specifically, Rabbi Sinensky's questions and comments helped me clarify and develop many important points.

² It is also interesting to note the parallel between this particular program’s operating system, which relies heavily

on incentive programs, and the religious motivation for learning that they were presenting to their students: learn Torah to “rack up *mitzvot*.” The language used struck me as reminiscent of a video game point system — complete with point multipliers!

³ Of course, there are others; these four suffice for the purposes of this article.

define each group, it is possible to provide a sketch that approximates each group — in other words, if you spoke to someone for five minutes on a plane, these are the questions you would ask to get a sense of the “box” to put them in.⁴ For my purposes, I want to focus on the middle two — Centrist and Yeshivish.

What does your standard Centrist — let’s call him Shlomo — look like?

He probably went through the yeshiva day school system, splitting his day between *limmudei kodesh* in the morning and *limmudei hol* in the afternoon. He was likely involved in a number of extra-curriculars, including a sports or debate team, followed a professional sports team and a few television shows, and communicated with his friends over Whatsapp and Snapchat on his smartphone. Secular college may have been on his radar for a bit; he took the SATs and ACTs fairly seriously, if just to keep his options open. He didn’t learn much Torah outside of school, but he attended *minyana* throughout the week and was careful about keeping Shabbat. He learned at a gap-year yeshiva in Israel for a year or two, during which time he began to take *Avodat Hashem* and *Talmud Torah* much more seriously, and then returned to the States for a college education at Yeshiva University. By this point, he likely wears colored button-down shirts with dark pants; once in a while, he’ll throw on a polo. He takes *seder*

and *shiur* seriously and listens to *shiurim* when he has spare time. At some point, he’ll marry, get a job after finishing his degree, and settle in a community similar to the one in which he grew up.

What does your standard Yeshivish fellow — let’s call him Shloimy — look like?

He probably went to a *yeshiva ketanah*, a school that prioritized *limmudei kodesh* and downplayed the importance of whatever *limmudei hol* was featured. He attended *Avos u-Banim* programs with his father from an early age, and had his own extra-curricular learning projects that he furthered on his own time. He enjoyed playing sports with his friends, but rarely watched a professional sports game; communication with friends was through texting, no Whatsapp. The big decision after high school was which *beis medrish* he would go to; he ended up going to Philly, where he learned for seven years. After getting married, he moved to Lakewood and learned for another five years, at one point leading an afternoon seder *chaburah* for younger *avreichim*. Finally, he began cutting back on *sedarim* in order to provide for his growing family: he started by teaching at a couple of local *chadarim*, and then started his own business from his basement with the help and guidance of a good friend. He’s worn a white shirt with black pants since he was young, and he always has a

⁴ Limiting an individual to a box and ignoring any possibility of nuance, originality, or uniqueness is wrong, and often hurtful (see <https://rabbiefremgoldberg.org/don-t-put-me-in-a-box-the-death-of-nuance>). I use “box” here as a type of container, a heuristic label that we use to help us navigate

the world. Heuristics by nature are shortcuts, and not always correct; at the same time, they provide helpful guidance in making decisions or navigating choices when we don’t have all the information that we’d like to have available.

sefer in the crook of his arm.

Of course, these descriptions are hopelessly general and do not reflect the obvious range and fluidity within both communities, but they should serve as a basic description of who we're talking about.

Hashkafic Underpinnings

But how do our two friends, Shlomo and Shloimy, think about their lives? What is the context within which they make their decisions? In other words, what is the *hashkafah*, the worldview, that animates Centrist and Yeshivish Orthodoxy?

Colloquially, Centrist Orthodoxy is defined in one of two ways: either through a reference to *Torah Umadda*, [closely associated with](#) Rabbi Norman Lamm, or through Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's *Torah im Derekh Eretz*, [understood as some sort of synthesis between higher modern culture/experience and halakhic observance](#).⁵ For example, Rabbi Avi Ciment, in a series of articles on the state of Modern Orthodoxy in 2022, defined it this way:

In the nineteenth century, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch was the first noted Frankfurt rabbi and Jewish philosopher who

articulated the fundamental position of Modern Orthodoxy: the idea of being faithful to halacha while engaging with the secular world. In America, Rav Soloveitchik, z"l, furthered this idea with *Torah Umadda*, combining Torah with worldly knowledge within America's first Orthodox University, Yeshiva University. In concept, this was a great way to serve Hashem. Become the "ultimate Jew" by educating yourself in both secular and holy things, while remaining steadfast in your religious principles and traditions...⁶

In 1966, Rabbi Shimon Schwab [penned a pamphlet](#) containing a series of imagined debates between adherents of the Torah-only (Yeshivish) and *Torah im Derekh Eretz* schools. He defines each group this way:

The serious Torah student in America today is confronted with two conflicting viewpoints. One: the formerly Eastern European ideal of exclusive Torah study, neglecting all secular disciplines

⁵ My goal here is to demonstrate the popular conception of Modern Orthodoxy. Rabbi Ciment is quoted not as an authority on Modern Orthodoxy but as an example of the colloquial definition of what defines the movement.

⁶ "The Modern Orthodox Conundrum: Part One," *The Jewish Press* (November 16, 2022), located at <https://www.jewishpress.com/indepth/opinions/the-modern-orthodox-conundrum/2022/11/16/>. Ben Shapiro

used a similar definition in an article published the following month, "Modern Orthodoxy's Moral Failure," *The Jewish Press* (December 12, 2022): <https://www.jewishpress.com/indepth/opinions/modern-orthodoxys-moral-failure/2022/12/12>. Finally, for what it's worth, *Wikipedia* currently presents the same definition — an attempt to synthesize Torah with the modern world — in its article on Modern Orthodox Judaism: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern_Orthodox_Judaism.

and pursuits which we may call the "Torah Only" principle. The other: the formerly Western European (Hirschian) Weltanschauung which combines Torah study with the "ways of the earth," commonly called "Torah im Derech Erets" (T.I.D.E.).⁷

This also gives us our colloquial definition of Yeshivish Orthodoxy: in a word, Torah only. The only pursuit of value in life is *limud ha-Torah* (Torah study); everything else can be pursued only as a *bedieved*, a begrudging compromise as opposed to a full-on embrace. Of course, this community is scrupulous about the performance of every *mitzvah*, fulfilling the letter of the law as well as additional stringencies. However, schooling is oriented towards maximizing high-level Torah learning for as long as possible. Marriages are built on the premise that the husband will stay in learning at least for the first few years, with the wife working to support the family while also shouldering the load of running the household. *Parnasah* is a necessary evil that must be taken care of, but as minimally as possible.

⁷ Rabbi Shimon Schwab, *These and Those* (Philipp Feldheim, 1966), 7.

⁸ See Rav Schwab's challenges to both sides in *These and Those*, 17–24.

⁹ Cited in Gil Perl, "A Modern Orthodox Hedgehog for a Postmodern World: Part 1," *The Lehrhaus* (December 2, 2019), located at <https://thelehrhaus.com/commentary/a-modern-orthodox-hedgehog-for-a-postmodern-world/>.

¹⁰ The same Rambam who prescribed — and himself taught — a broad exploration of the physical world in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* (chapters 2-4) to develop love and awe for

However, there are a number of issues with both definitions.⁸

Regarding *Torah Umadda*, Rabbi Lamm himself is quoted as stating that it was never meant to be an ideology, but a pedagogy.⁹ By engaging with the entirety of Hashem's creation, one can develop an all-encompassing understanding of "the One who spoke and created the world." It is not, though, even according to Rabbi Lamm, the only way to develop a relationship with Hashem.¹⁰ For those intellectually blessed enough to handle it, *Torah Umadda* is a powerful model for achieving a deep, all-encompassing relationship with Hashem and relating to Him through the world that He created — but it is not broad enough to serve as the basis of an entire worldview, which is meant to touch on all areas of life. However I manage to develop my relationship with Hashem, whether through *Torah Umadda*, Torah study, or other forms of relationship-building such as *tefillah*, I still need a framework to guide the rest of my decisions and to orient my life.¹¹

The same is true regarding the above conception of *Torah im Derech Eretz*, synthesizing Torah with the world — maintaining fidelity to Torah while

Hashem presented a different path in his *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot (Mitzvat Aseh 3)*, relying on the study of Torah to generate love for Hashem.

¹¹ The Rambam may respond that *yediat Hashem* is actually meant to be the guiding principle of a person's life, making *Torah Umadda* a perfect candidate for an all-encompassing worldview. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, though, identifies this approach as borrowed from Greek philosophy and incompatible with the Torah's focus on action (see his *Nineteen Letters*, (tr. Joseph Elias) (Feldheim Publishers, 1995), 264.)

also taking advantage of the best of culture.¹² It is a fruitful exercise, and can unquestionably yield important insights. But at the end of the day, developing such syntheses is a means, not an end; they reveal important insights which can then be used for something more fundamental. Assuming the purpose of life is meant to be more than fidelity to Halakhah together with human exploration, synthesizing Torah with the world is a tool for a broader end— a powerful, meaningful one, but a tool nonetheless.

Regarding Torah-only, tradition itself rejects such a narrow focus on learning alone. “Rabbi Yosi said, One who says I have only Torah — doesn’t even have Torah. Why not? Rav Pappa explained, The Torah writes, ‘And you should learn... and you should do.’ One who does retains his learning; one who does not does not have his learning.”¹³ Rambam¹⁴ writes that the juggernaut status

accorded to *Talmud Torah*, expressed by “*ve-Talmud Torah keneged kulam*,” flows from learning’s orientation toward practice: “*talmud meivi lidei ma’aseh*.” Finally, downplaying education toward the skills needed for *parnasah*, arguing that it takes away from time that would otherwise be spent learning, contravenes *Hazal*’s directives about preparing children for supporting themselves¹⁵ and creates a community dependent on the largesse of others to survive, which Halakhah sees as negative.¹⁶ Thus, “Torah only,” meaning Torah at the “expense” of the rest of *Avodat Hashem*, cannot be the definition of the worldview itself, as it runs into too many problems *minei u’vei*, from within the halakhic system itself. It, too, must rather be an expression of a different core value which is fully in consonance with the range of the halakhic system — albeit a potentially overzealous one, as I will explain below.¹⁷

¹² See “The Best” at *Tradition Online*, located at <https://traditiononline.org/thebest/> for some examples. Where Rabbi Lamm’s *Torah Umadda* relates to utilizing *madda* for the purposes of *yediat Hashem*, this presentation of *Torah Im Derekh Eretz* relates to a split focus: one must follow the dictates of Halakhah and plumb the depths of Torah, while also benefiting from the offerings of secular society.

¹³ *Yevamot* 109b.

¹⁴ *Peirush Ha-Mishnayot, Peah* 1:1. The Maharsha makes a parallel comment in *Hiddushei Aggadah, Sukkah* 29b, s.v. “*bishvil arba devarim*.”

¹⁵ *Kiddushin* 29a.

¹⁶ See the sources quoted in the beginning of *Tur, Hoshen Mishpat* 255.

¹⁷ There are a number of other distinctions between these two camps, such as women’s roles, Zionism, and orientation

towards other denominations and non-Jews. These are all more clearly outgrowths of a more foundational worldview, not a worldview in of themselves. In other words, imagine a new school trying to define what makes it unique. It could assemble a *cholent* of different values and arrange them in a list: we stand for Israel, secular studies, *hesed*, *Torah Umadda*, etc. But such a list remains random, with nothing to bring everything together. It will be very difficult to educate toward such a scattered list of values in a meaningful way. It would be much more powerful to distill the school mission into one line and then list the practical expressions of that core idea. For example, if the school chose *hesed* as the core of its identity, it can highlight the different ways *hesed* is expressed in its curriculum and extracurricular programs. In the same way, none of the above issues, important as they are, are essential enough to lie at the center of a worldview. Instead, they are outgrowths of a worldview. They are more apparent on the surface, and therefore useful when delineating distinctions between the groups, but they do not stretch deep enough to serve as the essence of the worldview.

Therefore, I suggest a different approach for both camps. My goal is to identify one idea that sits at the philosophical core of each approach, around which everything else can revolve.

“To What Should Man Direct His Focus?”

Assuming Hashem exists and created the world with a plan in mind, the most fundamental question one can ask is what that plan is. What was Hashem’s intention in creating our world and placing thoughtful humans within it? Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzato, the Ramhal, weighs in on this question. Synthesizing the beginning of his [Derekh Hashem](#) with the beginning of his [Mesilat Yesharim](#), we can state that Ramhal teaches that Hashem, as the most perfect being, is a *meitiv* — One who benefits others. Since Hashem is the ultimate, perfect being, His beneficence will be the most ideal possible. As physical pleasure is limited whereas spiritual pleasure has the capacity to be unlimited, it follows that the best benefit Hashem can bestow is of a spiritual nature. Thus, Hashem created a world with opportunities for people to earn closeness and connection to Hashem Himself in the next world, which is a source of unimaginable pleasure:

The foundation of *Hasidut* and the root of complete service is to have clarity regarding one’s obligation in his world... *Hazal* have taught us that man was created only to draw

pleasure from Hashem... which is the true pleasure... And the place of this enjoyment, in truth, is *Olam Haba*... However, the path to reach this destination is through this world.¹⁸

For Ramhal, then, this world is an opportunity to invest in *mitzvot* and avoid *aveirot* so as to earn for oneself the highest berth possible in the World to Come.¹⁹

Rav Soloveitchik disagreed vehemently with this perspective. In his [Halakhic Man](#), the Rav presents three archetypes: Cognitive Man, a man of science whose life is oriented toward understanding this world; *Homo Religiosus*, a man of spirit whose life is oriented toward connection with God, and Halakhic Man, the man of Halakhah. What identifies this third archetype, what seems to be the Rav’s ideal persona? He writes that while Halakhic Man also centers his life around connection with God, he travels in opposite directions to the *Homo Religiosus*:

The only difference between *homo religiosus* and halakhic man is a change of courses — they travel in different directions. *Homo religiosus* starts out in this world and ends up in supernal realms; halakhic man starts out in supernal

¹⁸ Other passages from the Ramhal, such as Chapter 19 of [Mesilat Yesharim](#) and passages in [Da’at Tevunot](#), indicate a more nuanced picture. However, the choice to open these two works with the same idea indicates that the Ramhal understood it to be the *ikar*, with later material serving to add nuance.

¹⁹ This explanation speaks to one perspective within the Torah Only camp. For a perspective such as that of the [Nefesh Ha-Hayyim](#), for example, who explains the overwhelming importance of *Talmud Torah* as due to the metaphysical impact it has on this world, this explanation alone would not fit.

realms and ends up in this world. *Homo religiosus*, dissatisfied, disappointed, and unhappy, craves to rise up from the vale of tears, from concrete reality, and aspires to climb to the mountain of the Lord... Halakhic man, on the contrary, longs to bring transcendence down into this valley of the shadow of death — i.e., into our world — and transform it into a land of the living.²⁰

Rav Soloveitchik was not the first to describe this perspective, along with its related rejection of transcendence-seeking; Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the *Ba'al Ha-Tanya*, presents a similar approach.²¹ In *Tanya* 36, he writes:

²⁰ *Halakhic Man*, (tr. Lawrence Kaplan)(Jewish Publication Society, 1984) 40.

²¹ My thanks to Rabbi Reuven Taragin for bringing this source to my attention.

²² The Rav's exposure to *Tanya* as a child is well known, and presumably impacted his perspective on this most fundamental question. However, there remains considerable distance between the *Ba'al Ha-Tanya's* prioritization of this world and the Rav's. For the *Ba'al Ha-Tanya*, our goal is a metaphysical one: to bring Hashem's light into this world through the performance of *mitzvot* (see *Tanya*, chapter 37). For Rav Soloveitchik, bringing Hashem into this world entails creating a society that operates according to Halakhah. Dov Frank pointed out a contemporary *nafka minah* (practical application) to these two perspectives: the reaction to the recent phenomenon of observant Jews in professional sports. Many Chabad rabbis applauded and supported the recent draftees (see, for example, <https://www.facebook.com/JewishDC/posts/so-cool->

Hazal's comment is well-known (*Tanhuma Naso* 16, *Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:6) that the purpose of the creation of this world is because Hashem desired a *dirah be-tahtonim* — a dwelling place in this world... and the purpose of the unfolding descent of the worlds from level to level was not for the sake of the upper worlds... but for the sake of this lower world — for this was Hashem's will... that Hashem's unlimited light would illuminate the darkness and *sitra ahra* of this world, more than His light illuminates the upper worlds.²²

The *Ba'al Ha-Tanya* also rejects the approach of

[mazel-tov-jacob-steinmetzthe-new-york-native-is-believed-to-be-the-first/2934474740154385/?locale=zh_CN](https://www.chabad.org/news/article_cdo/aid/5723377/jewish/An-Observant-Jew-Makes-for-an-Uncommon-Texas-AM-Football-Player.htm), and Selah Maya Zigelboim, "An Observant Jew Makes for an Uncommon Texas A&M Football Player," *Chabad.org*, December 1, 2022, located at https://www.chabad.org/news/article_cdo/aid/5723377/jewish/An-Observant-Jew-Makes-for-an-Uncommon-Texas-AM-Football-Player.htm). Rav Hershel Schachter, *shlita*, on the other hand, called it a "hillul Hashem ba-rabbim," "A Kiddush Hashem??" *TorahWeb.org*, located at (https://www.torahweb.org/torah/special/2022/rsch_shab_bos.html). According to the Chabad approach, the presence of Jews wearing a *kippah* on a sports field brought Hashem's light into a place where it had not yet had a chance to shine; this is an important step forwards and should be celebrated. According to Rav Soloveitchik's understanding, since playing professional sports on Shabbat contravenes a number of elements of the laws of Shabbat, not to mention the spirit of Shabbat, it represents a step away from perfecting this world.

focusing on earning *sekhar* in *Olam Haba*, instead arguing for the primacy of *Olam Haze*. Of course, neither the Rav nor the Alter Rebbe would disagree that there is a world of spiritual sublimity awaiting a righteous person after death. They instead argue that while this will happen, it is not meant to be a person's focus while they are living. Rather than centering the reward of the afterlife, a person should focus on the task he is called to accomplish.²³

Building a Home for God

What does life look like if one adopts the perspective of the Rav as opposed to the Ramhal?²⁴ The rest of [Halakhic Man](#) answers that question. "Halakhic man's ideal is to subject reality to the yoke of the Halakhah" (29). By first developing the ideal picture through the study of Torah, and then working to facilitate that ideal picture in this world, a person works to create a society that can play host to Hashem's presence. "The ideal of halakhic man is the redemption of the world not via a higher world but via the world

itself, via the adaptation of the empirical reality to the ideal patterns of Halakhah. If a Jew lives in accordance with the Halakhah... then he shall find redemption. A lowly world is elevated through the Halakhah to the level of a divine world" (37–38).

Halakhic man dedicates his life to generating holiness — Hashem's presence — in this world, by applying the ideals of the halakhic system to it (46, 108). This is symbolized, the Rav teaches, by the Mishkan. Moshe Rabbeinu, and later Shlomo Ha-Melekh, questioned how the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, could be housed by a man-made structure. How could God have a place on earth? But Hashem responded, "I am not of the same opinion as you. But twenty boards in the north and twenty in the south and eight in the west. And more than that, I will contract My divine presence in one square cubit" (pgs. 47–48). In fact, the Rav notes, this was Hashem's ideal all along, starting from the moment of Creation: "The principal abode of the divine presence is in the lower realms"! (55)²⁵ By implementing the

²³ See *Pirkei Avot* 1:3. This disagreement, pitting the primacy of this world against the world to come, appears to be the subject of an old argument. *Berachot* 35a notes a seeming contradiction between two verses. A verse in the second paragraph of *keriat Shema*, "*v-asaf*ta *d'ganekha* — and you should gather your grain," instructs a person to be involved in harvesting his grain, presumably after having done everything else necessary to plant and grow it. The verse in *Joshua* 1:8, "*v-hagita bo yomam va-laylah* — and you should toil in it (*Talmud Torah*) day and night," seems to direct a person to focus his attention exclusively on learning, to the exclusion of all else. How can both be true? Rabbi Yishmael explained that the two verses exist in harmony. A person must balance his commitments, making time for both *derekh erez*, the demands of daily life, and for learning Torah. (His comments in *Menahot* 99b indicate that every spare moment outside of one's *derekh erez* responsibilities should be dedicated towards learning.) Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai disagreed. For him, the two verses describe two different realities. One is meant to be totally

dedicated to *Talmud Torah*, a la *Joshua* 1:8. As long as the nation is dedicated to serving Hashem, their physical needs will be met miraculously, through the work of non-Jews. If the Jewish people are not dedicated to serving Hashem, though, they will be forced to "gather in their own grain," as described by the verse in *Keriat Shema*; "meditating day and night" on *Talmud Torah* will not be possible. Thus, Rabbi Yishmael serves as a precursor to Rav Soloveitchik and the Centrist perspective, while Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is a forerunner of the Ramhal and the Yeshivish school of thought.

²⁴ While some, such as Professor Dov Schwartz, argue that [Halakhic Man](#) does not represent Rav Soloveitchik's worldview, I am following the face reading of the essay, corroborated with quotations from parallel works.

²⁵ This language comes from a number of *midrashim*, especially *Bereishit Rabbah* 19:7 and *Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:2.

laws of the Torah, the ideals of righteousness and loving-kindness introduced by the Torah, in this world, Halakhic Man “approaches the level of that godly man, the prophet — the creator of worlds” (see 90–91, 94).

According to this perspective, man is seen as Hashem’s partner in creating the world.²⁶ This is the language of *Bereishit Rabbah* 3:9: “Rabbi Shmuel bar Ami said, from the beginning of creation, Hashem desired to make *shutafim ba-tahtonim* — partners with those below...” Hashem created the setting, the context within which man was meant to operate, and then empowered man to finish the job (101). By applying the Torah — both as a value system and through adherence to its instructions regarding all areas of life — to this world, we mold it into a place, “twenty boards in the north and twenty in the south,” that can host the *Shekhinah*. The Torah provides us with the instructions we need to build not only Hashem’s (symbolic) physical home in this world, but to craft an entire society that reflects His values and can therefore welcome His presence.²⁷ We accomplish this by first exploring the Torah’s position on a myriad of issues and questions,²⁸ and then working to apply those ideal positions to our reality as best as possible.

It Takes All Types

To accomplish this, we were going to need much more than just the *kohanim* and *levi'im* involved in operating the Mishkan. To build and run a country, we need all types: engineers and electricians, doctors and designers, plumbers and politicians, teachers and tailors, soldiers and sailors. Every person, not just the intellectual elite who can plumb new depths in a *sugya*, has something to contribute to this project of crafting Hashem’s *dirah ba-tahtonim*. In fact, Yaakov Avinu made this point to his children as they transitioned from family to community.

The Torah records that Yaakov summoned his children to his deathbed toward the end of his life (Genesis 49:1). He turned to each one and remarked on a unique quality or trait. After finishing with the last son, the Torah comments, “*Va-yevarekh otam ish asher ke-virkhato beirakh otam* — He blessed them, each according to what was in character with his particular blessing” (49:28). Rav Hirsch notes an inconsistency in the verse: it starts with the singular (*k-virkhato*) but proceeds to the plural (*otam*). Wouldn’t it have been more correct to say, *ish asher ke-virkhato beirakh oto*? Rav Hirsch explains that this nuance indicates a profound idea: “Each one benefitted from the general blessing of the community, while

²⁶ Rav Soloveitchik refers to man serving as Hashem’s “partner in creation” a number of times in *Halakhic Man*; see 71, 81, 99, 101, and 105.

²⁷ See footnote 33, where the Rav writes that “this yearning of halakhic man for the complete realization of this ideal

construction in this world... is the central idea of Judaism”; this idea is developed in the beginning of the second part of *Halakhic Man*.

²⁸ Due to the nature of *Talmud Torah* and the rule of “*eilu v-eilu divrei Elokim hayyim*,” there will be a range of positions for most issues.

the special blessing of each one enhanced the community.” Yaakov’s blessings to each child were not meant to benefit the lives of each individual tribe; rather, each tribe was called to use its unique nature to enhance and contribute to the rest of the tribes.

This is particularly powerful when we remember that the ultimate goal was for the tribes to create a fully functioning society in Eretz Yisrael, where all types — doctors and carpenters, lawyers and artists — truly are necessary. By acknowledging and validating each tribe’s unique gift, Yaakov was ensuring that the society they would eventually create would have everything and everyone it needed to thrive.

In the same way, Rav Soloveitchik’s this-world-centered worldview calls every individual to recognize and cultivate his unique strengths and dedicate himself to utilizing those strengths in building a more perfect world. Everyone has a role to play; everyone has something to contribute to this national (and universal) project. In this way, it would be possible for Bnei Yisrael to actualize their calling as *shutafin ba-tahtonim*, partners with Hashem in creating a world that could play

host to the *Shekhinah* by implementing its vision and reflecting its values.

Torah Only

Life lived according to Ramhal’s perspective, with its emphasis on preparing for the promised pleasure of the World to Come, is not oriented towards building anything meaningful in this world. Instead, each individual is directed to do what he can to maximize his time in this world for the best ROI in the next world possible. Supporting society as an honest accountant and delving into the relevant *sugyot* and *masekhtot* for guidance regarding the values he is meant to embody, for example, is not seen as an ideal. All the hours poured into certification and work could have been better spent on more direct *Avodat Hashem*, Torah and *mitzvot*.²⁹ Torah, the best *sekhora*, occupies a unique position according to this perspective; when it comes to generating *sekhar* and closeness to Hashem, *Talmud Torah* is unmatched.³⁰

The parallel between this passage and the sign that I saw hanging outside the *beit midrash* is clear: both speak the language of *mitzvot* as “points” accrued toward some future reward. If

²⁹ Additionally, the Ramhal’s worldview lends itself to a more individualistic perspective, less oriented towards a sensitivity to the community. After all, a person’s “*hovato be-olamo*” is to prepare himself for the World to Come; what does involvement with the community or their concerns have to do with that, beyond pragmatic needs?

³⁰ For example, the Vilna Gaon, commenting on the Mishnah’s declaration “*v-Talmud Torah k-neged kulam*,” compares learning Torah with other *mitzvot*:

And the Tanna chose to teach that *Talmud Torah* has no minimum to show that a person must hold the Torah very, very (*meod meod*) dear, for every word that he learns is an independent *mitzvah*... And the rule that one is not meant to pause his learning even to perform another *mitzvah* if it can be done by someone else is logical; since each word is a great *mitzvah* which is equal to all the other *mitzvot*, when one learns a single *daf*, he accomplishes many hundreds of *mitzvot*. If so, of course it is better to accomplish a hundred *mitzvot* rather than just one!

this is true about Torah versus other *mitzvot*, how much more must it be true about *parnasah* and other forms of involvement in this world. Even when a person determines that a source of *parnasah* is necessary, the first thought should be not what am I uniquely attuned to, but what can make me the most money in the shortest amount of time — so that I can get back to the *beit midrash*.³¹

Centrist and Yeshivish

To me, this question is what actually divides the *hashkafot* of Centrist and Yeshivish Orthodoxy. The core question is not about *Torah Umadda* or something else; it centers around where Hashem wants us to spend our time, energy, and attention: on developing this world or in preparing for the next.

A Centrist, someone animated by the thought of the Rav, Rav Hirsch, and Rav Lichtenstein,³² will understand that his or her responsibility is to mold and impact this world, bringing it into line

with Hashem's original blueprint. Rav Hirsch develops this idea throughout his writings. For example, the first half of his [Nineteen Letters](#), ostensibly responding to an old friend with questions about the current state of Judaism, takes us all the way back to Creation to understand what Hashem's intention was in creating the world. Only from there can one understand Judaism, which is a later stage of that original project.³³

Rav Hirsch notes that one of the clearest features of the world, both from our observation of it and from the Torah's description of its creation, is the interdependence of all its components.³⁴ Each piece has a role to play, inextricably linked to everything else in the world: "Now, look at this entire host³⁵ of creations—how, though greatly differing from each other in their properties and purpose, they have been linked in one great harmonious system... each supporting the whole and the whole supporting each one."³⁶ Nothing exists for itself; everything gives in order to take

³¹ See, for example, Rav Moshe Feinstein's unexpected comments about the real motivations of students who claimed that they were drawn to the field of medicine for altruistic reasons in *Igrot Moshe, Yoreh Deah* 4:36. In the same *teshuvah*, he argues that income has no correlation with one's choice of profession or college degree, and one should therefore choose a profession that is much less demanding in the amount of time one needs to dedicate to it.

³² See the first chapter of *By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God* (Maggid, 2016) for Rav Aharon's presentation of man's "*hovato be-olamo*." As he writes in the conclusion to his article "A Consideration of Synthesis from a Torah Point of View," "The Torah is neither world-accepting nor world-rejecting. It is world-redeeming" ([Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Learning](#) (Ktav, 2003), 103).

³³ Letter 2.

³⁴ See [Rav Hirsch on Avot](#) 5:1 — "The world was created with ten utterances." The Maharal explains the *mishnah* similarly, based on the symbolic relationship between the numbers ten and one.

³⁵ In [Rav Hirsch's Commentary to Genesis](#), he notes that the Torah's description of creation as a *tzavah* — host, a word most often used in a military context, conveys the same idea: a mass of forces combined into a single unit through fealty to one commander.

³⁶ Letter 3.

and takes in order to give.

Superficially, though, there seems to be one exception: man himself. Man only takes the world's bounty; what does he give back? Rav Hirsch writes that this cannot be; man must also be enlisted in God's service, just like everything else: "Man's purpose is to be a *tzelem Elokim*—a likeness of God. You are to be more than everything else; you are to exist for everything else. Everything bestowed upon you... all are merely means to action, *l-ovdah u-l'shomrah*, to further and to safeguard everything."³⁷ Man is meant to be a "brother and a fellow worker,"³⁸ in fact the firstborn son, administering the resources of this world and furthering it in accordance with God's Will.

While this was the ideal, it quickly came crashing down. Adam and Havah put their own pleasure and understanding of the world before God's command, leading to their dismissal from Gan Eden. After a number of similar missteps and false starts (Kayin and Hevel, *nefilim*, flood, and the

dispersion, to name a few), Hashem therefore appoints Avraham to father a nation that will serve as a reminder to the rest of humanity of the potential of a life lived properly — a life lived with God at the center.³⁹ Thus, Hashem's plan for the world, and *Klal Yisrael* specifically, is about creating a world down here which reflects the *Malkhut Hashem*.⁴⁰

Someone who takes this approach to heart now has direction for every aspect of his life. In addition to investing significant amounts of time in Torah learning, he will also figure out what talents, interests, and abilities he was blessed with and invest in cultivating them so that he can use them to benefit the world in some form. This is where *Madda* fits in: in almost all cases, "*hokhmah ba-goyim*" serves to cultivate one's interests and aptitudes in service of building a more perfect society.

This perspective also offers guidance on what professions a person should seek out. Most careers can be oriented towards this vision — or

³⁷ Letter 4.

³⁸ Letter 5.

³⁹ Letter 7.

⁴⁰ For more, see these selections from his Commentary to the Torah: Genesis 3:8 — "On this verse our Sages remark: "*Ikar Shekhinah ba-tahtonim (Bereishis Rabbah 19:7)*. Originally, God wished to establish His Presence on *earth*... To reopen the gates of Paradise; to *restore* peace and harmony on earth, peace for both man and beast; to bring the *Shekhinah* back to earth — that is the aim of the Torah and its reward, as proclaimed on every page of the Holy Scriptures."

Genesis 12:2 — "In the midst of a world where mankind's stated aim is '*naaseh lanu shem*,' and its ambition is to

increase its power and extend its domain no matter what the cost, the nation of Avraham is — in private and public life — to heed only one call: '*heyeh berakhah*.' Its life is to be devoted to the Divine aims of bringing harmony to mankind and to the world and restoring man to his former glory."

Leviticus 16:14: "The fulfillment of the Torah on earth is the condition under which God's Presence will come from above to dwell on earth... Soaring upward to God... must not remain only an inner exaltation. If this is a truly Jewish exaltation, then *ahat l'-ma'alah* will be followed immediately by *sheva l-matah*... our whole earthly existence must join the "one which is above" in an eternal bond... the Jew seeks God's nearness here on earth... he is to consider the purpose of all his activity — namely, to infuse the terrestrial with the celestial."

away from it. A lawyer can ensure that our society operates according to *tzedek* and *mishpat* — or he can assist in the twisting of *tzedek* and *mishpat*. A wealth manager or financial planner can facilitate thousands of dollars in charity, ensure our institutions have the funds they need to thrive, or help people navigate the number-one concern in our community nowadays — financial solvency. Or they can make rich people richer. The blue-collar world is also very much a part of this vision; no society can survive without electricians, plumbers, carpenters, builders, and more.⁴¹ Ideally, each person is meant to identify the way they can contribute and figure out how that leads to a job that supports them and their family.

As stated above, this isn't on the agenda of a Yeshivishe *yid*. He's looking for the opportunities that will lead to "*I-hit'aneg al Hashem v-leihanot mi-ziv Shekhinato*" — Torah and *mitzvot*. This perspective disincentivizes the self-exploration and understanding needed to uncover one's unique interests and talents; investing in anything outside of learning should be quashed, not cultivated! Why go to college for four years when your next-door neighbor can teach you the basics of selling doorknobs on Amazon in just a few weeks? Every hour saved is another hour for learning Torah, for *yediat Hashem* (knowledge of Hashem), for unimaginable *sekhar* in the World to Come.

The Importance of Talmud Torah

Another point of distinction between the two approaches is the significance of *Talmud Torah*.

For the Ramhal-inspired Jew, learning Torah is granted juggernaut status among the 613 *mitzvot*. On a very basic level, as the Gra explained above, every word of Torah is considered an additional *mitzvah*, such that an hour spent on *Talmud Torah* is "worth" much more than an hour spent on another *mitzvah*, such as *kibbud av v-eim*, *bikur holim*, or *shiluakh ha-kan*.

For the Centrist, Torah is the guidebook that allows us to divine the values of the Divine. It details which ideals Hashem's perfect society is meant to express. Truth is important — but as a general rule, it bows to peace (*Yevamot* 65b). Spreading awareness of Hashem and His involvement in our lives is paramount — but that steps back in the face of *kavod haberiyot*, human dignity (*Megillah* 3b). This is why Torah occupies such a prominent space in our lives: because without it, we would have no way of navigating the ethical dilemmas of daily life. "Torah is great, for it facilitates practice" (*Kiddushin* 40b).

Three of the most prominent thinkers associated with the Centrist camp, Rav Soloveitchik, Rav Lichtenstein, and Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, express this approach to Torah learning.

Rav Soloveitchik encapsulates it in a single line, the famous last line of [The Halakhic Mind](#): "Out of the sources of Halakhah, a new world view awaits formulation." The only true source of a uniquely Jewish worldview, a *hashkafah*, is the Halakhah. By mandating certain experiences and proscribing others, a set of values is objectified and

⁴¹ Very few professions seem to be unredeemable, although they do exist, especially within the entertainment and leisure sectors.

disseminated for everyone to assimilate. Learning Torah, then, serves to clarify the contours of that worldview, with the granular level of detail offered by the world of Gemara and halakhic analysis.⁴²

In [*The Lonely Man of Faith*](#), the Rav presents this same idea as serving to unify Adam I — the aspect of humanity focused on conquering and developing the world — and Adam II — the aspect of humanity focused on developing a relationship with God. There is an inherent tension between these two aspects of a person, creating what seems like an unbridgeable gap between them. But in reality, both are expressions of God’s will; both must be incorporated into the same unified persona. How can that be accomplished? “Notwithstanding the huge disparity between these two communities...the Halakhah sees in the ethico-moral norm a uniting force. The norm which originates in the covenantal community addresses itself almost exclusively to the majestic community where its realization takes place. To use a metaphor, I would say that the norm in the opinion of the Halakhah is the tentacle by which covenant, like the ivy, attaches itself to and spreads over the world of majesty.” Halakhah serves as the infusion of Adam II’s relationship with God into Adam I’s project of developing the world.⁴³

⁴² Rav Soloveitchik expands on this approach to *Talmud Torah* in [*Halakhic Man*](#). He describes the paradigmatic Halakhic Man, distinct from Cognitive Man and Homo Religiosus, as approaching reality “with his Torah, given to him at Sinai, in hand. He orients himself to the world by means of fixed statutes and firm principles... Halakhic man, well furnished with rules, judgments, and fundamental

In these three works, including *Halakhic Man*, Rav Soloveitchik consistently describes *Talmud Torah* as our opportunity to divine, to the best of our ability, the Divine blueprints for this world, which we are then charged with actualizing.

Rav Lichtenstein is perhaps most explicit about this approach to learning in the recently published [*Values in Halakha: Six Case Studies*](#). The premise of the book is exactly this point: Torah is meant to be mined for a nuanced set of values that are expressed through the halakhic system: “Far from representing, ipso facto, an element of hubris, the attempt to interpret Halakhah in categories of values constitutes a necessary phase of *kabbalat haTorah*, “the receiving of the Torah... Properly conceived, moreover, it is no usurpation but rather the exercise of a divinely mandated duty” (148–149). One of the goals of learning Torah is to define the values expressed by the halakhic system, allowing them to be internalized and expressed throughout one’s life.

According to Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, this approach to learning is expressed by the Gemara in *Nedarim* 81a about *Birkhot Ha-Torah*. The Gemara quotes Jeremiah 9:11-12, expressed as Hashem’s explanation for why He destroyed *Eretz Yisrael*: “...*al mah avdah ha-aretz? Al azvam es Torati asher natati lifneihem v-lo shamu be-koli v-*

principles, draws near the world with an a priori relationship. His approach begins with an ideal creation and concludes with a real one” (19). Learning provides a person with the blueprints for the ideal world, which man is then tasked with actualizing in our world.

⁴³ See 67.

lo halkhu bah.” The Gemara explains that this means the people of that generation did not make *Birkhos Ha-Torah* before learning. This explanation is surprising; as the *Bah (Orah Hayyim 47:3)* points out, that seems to be a relatively minor offense, surely not one which justifies destroying the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* and sending everyone out to exile!

Rav Hirsch explains that the lack of a *berakhah* before learning indicates that they were approaching it with the wrong attitude: “Only if we take the Torah to heart and study it as God’s Torah, given to us by God for the engendering of proper thoughts, emotions, resolutions, speech and actions which find favor in His eyes, in order that we may arrange our whole lives in His service, only then...are we able to live a good life before God...if we are not imbued with this spirit, then Torah study may fail to to achieve its true purpose, which is the sanctification of life on the basis of Torah” ([The Hirsch Siddur, Birkhos Ha-Torah](#)).⁴⁴

Conclusion

I contend that while this distinction — seeing *Olam Hazeih* as primary, as opposed to *Olam Haba* — is one of the most important elements of Centrist Orthodox *hashkafah*, it is also deeply underappreciated. Returning it to the forefront has the potential to craft an identity of authentic,

personally meaningful *Avodat Hashem*, and to revitalize our relationship with *Talmud Torah*. By endorsing an individual’s unique skills and talents, it reaches out to people with the message that we — the community, the nation, the world — need what you have to offer to change our world in a very real, concrete way. Hashem needs you (in a manner of speaking) as His partner in the creation of the world! If you accept that charge and want to do it right, *Talmud Torah* becomes necessary, especially in topics that relate to your unique area of expertise. It is there where it is most likely that a person can contribute a new insight, something that can legitimately be called his unique share in Torah.

Schools should be oriented towards both points, as well. One of the challenges of the current reality is that many schools serving Centrist populations teach and embody ideals that align more with the Yeshivish perspective. This creates confusion when those students eventually encounter the ideas of the Centrist thinkers and notice the difference in worldview. Teaching this version of Centrist *hashkafah* has the potential to significantly improve the educational experience. First, Torah would be seen as relevant to the lives of the students, as they will be taught to notice the Torah’s value system and how it integrates into their lives. This entails a very different curriculum than simply learning the first few *daf*

⁴⁴ The *Bah* himself offers a similar explanation, using wonderfully evocative language:

[If they had learned Torah properly, by immersing themselves in the source of the Torah, Hashem Himself,] they would have become a chariot and temple to the *Shekhinah*, as the *Shekhinah* would have been entirely inside of them, as they would have become the temple of Hashem. The *Shekhinah* would have fully established its dwelling

place inside them, and the entire land would have been enlightened by His glory. This would have connected the Upper Palace with the Lower Palace, “and the Mishkan would have been united...”

Torah learned with the proper mindset is meant to bring Hashem’s presence to bear on *Olam Hazeih*, rather than removing a person from this world and catapulting him to the next world.

of a given *masekhta* with a number of commentaries. Second, schools could find ways to identify and invest in the unique skill sets of their students, not only as a way to draw them in to school assignments, but as a way to help them identify their interests and set them on a path towards meaningful lifelong contributions to the *klal* — as a *lehatkhila*, not a *bedieved*.

As Rabbi Schwab writes in the conclusion to [These and Those](#), both approaches are valuable; both add important dimensions to *Klal Yisrael*. There are indications that elements of these two camps, at least in America, are in some ways merging; while there is beauty in the reunification of *Klal Yisrael*, it would be a shame if that led to a dilution or rejection of the significant perspective championed by the Centrist camp.

If this is correct, there is much work to be done. Luckily, we have an entire community that can dedicate themselves to the task; imagine how much can be accomplished!

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