Privilege and Power in the Torah

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The Torah is ambivalent about power, especially the power that settled civilizations can accumulate. While Jews are permitted to seek power, and indeed we are promised power as a form of reward for holy living, the Torah consistently raises concerns that power can be a source of great evil and of our undoing. From the cities portrayed in Genesis through the curses at the end of Deuteronomy, the Torah illustrates time and again how agriculture, kings, and military power can be sinister and incur God’s wrath.

In this discussion, I’d like to trace this theme through the Humash—mostly from the book of Genesis but citing examples from the other books as well. While the Torah does not oppose us constructing a strong and prosperous civilization, it implores us time and time again to remember that power is a gift from God, not an entitlement, and to be mindful of how we treat the weak. All human power is conditional on heeding these warnings. I believe that this ambivalence toward power is a core theme that underlies many of the Torah’s stories and laws and is a foundational teaching of Judaism.

Creation: Is Power a Blessing or a Curse?

The creation story that appears in Genesis 1, that of seven days, presents prosperity and power as a blessing. After their creation, God blesses Adam and Eve, telling them to be fruitful and multiply, to conquer the land, and to dominate the animals (Genesis 1:28-29). The verse then states that God gives animals “all green grass” to eat, while people eat “all grass which gives seed and all trees which bear tree-fruit with seeds.” This seems to allude to the fact that people are distinguished from animals because they eat seed-bearing plants, which they presumably obtain by intentional use of the seeds. This emphasis in the verse alludes to farming. We can now see that Genesis 1 casts reproduction, mastery of the world, dominion over the animals, and agriculture in a positive light.

By contrast, in the second version of the creation story (Genesis 2-3), the Garden of Eden is described by the text as a place devoid of any pursuit of power over animals, any human-initiated agriculture, and any reproduction. All these are introduced only as consequences of eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Adam considers the animals as companions; the woman and the snake interact as peers. God plants the trees. There is no mention in Genesis 2 of the trees being “seed-bearing.” Fruit trees, unlike the grain mentioned at the end of Genesis 3, do not need to be replanted annually. Man’s role is that of a caretaker. Man and woman feel no shame around nakedness because there is no significance to what will later be the reproductive organs. These three elements—power over animals, human-driven agriculture, and reproduction—are presented as the curses of the snake, the man, and the woman, respectively: punishments for the sin of eating the forbidden fruit. Woman’s son will bear enmity to the snake’s, man “will eat bread by the sweat of his brow,” and woman “will bear children in suffering” (Genesis 3:17 and 3:16). Human attempts at power are no blessing; they signify our desperate struggle at survival in a post-Eden world.

Thus we can see how the two creation stories offer diametrically opposed perspectives on the nature of human’s striving for power and prosperity. In the first account, the text presents power and dominance as an ideal, the blessing or telos which God intended. The second account presents it as a curse, a departure from the ideal state of Eden and a result of disobedience. The subsequent narratives in Genesis, as we shall illustrate, grapple with this fundamental question: how can we possibly achieve a powerful civilization in a manner that evokes God’s blessing?
Shepherds and Farmers

The Cain and Abel story continues these same themes—how can we build our power in a way that God will desire and bless? The two brothers choose different answers to this question. Abel is a shepherd, a nomad, while Cain is a sedentary farmer. God accepts Abel’s sacrifice of herd animals, but not Cain’s sacrifice from his produce. While many explanations have been offered for this outcome, a simple reading of the text is that the outcome constitutes an endorsement of the nomadic lifestyle and a rejection of agrarian settlement.

Abel comes into Cain’s territory, the field, and successfully offers a sacrifice which represents his lifestyle. He has presented a challenge to everything Cain stands for. In response, Cain kills him there. For this sin, Cain is given a twofold punishment that is essentially one—the land will not bear crops for him, and as a result, he will be relegated to living a nomadic life. This story sets the stage for a theme which recurs throughout Genesis: nomads are close to God, while sedentary, agrarian life is rotten to the core. It is, on the surface at least, an indictment of the very idea of civilization itself.

Cities in Genesis

Throughout Genesis, we learn how the forefathers are primarily nomadic herders, while those who abuse and torment them are primarily city dwellers. The cities that feature prominently in Genesis are uniformly places of corruption and evil. Egypt, Sodom, Gerar, and Shechem all have sinister leaders who menace visitors with sexual predation. The modern reader may pay little attention to the names of places, imagining that these are just generic locations with little deeper significance. But in the context of Genesis, which prizes the nomadic perspective, city-states are the exception to civilization patterns of the day, not the rule. The patriarchs are in a position of weakness whenever they deal with these kings, and they often suffer greatly at their hands. A visit to Gerar or Egypt is an occasion for sexual exploitation (in the cases of Sarah, Rebecca, and Joseph) and theft of property (as with Isaac’s wells) or enslavement (as Joseph threatens his brothers). A nomad passing near Sodom would be wise to avoid it entirely. In this way, the Torah presents the very idea of settled civilization as something fraught with moral peril. The message seems to be that we are simply better off being nomads.

The forefathers attempt various methods of interfacing with these cities, none of which are particularly successful. One method is keeping a low profile, such as when Abraham passes through Egypt or Isaac travels through Gerar. Another means is avoidance, as in Abraham’s refusal to engage with the king of Sodom and accept any of his gifts. Simeon and Levi present a third approach to engaging with the corruption of cities. They stoop to the most vile deception and violence—using subterfuge to annihilate an entire city—under the belief that the ends justify the means. Their attitude is that if our enemies go low, we go lower. This also does not seem to be an ideal approach, and the problem of how to respond to such predatory city dwellers remains unresolved until Joseph’s time, as we will see below.

Abraham - Walking before God, Walking in the Land

The Torah’s presentation of Abraham’s mission rejects the notion of embracing nomadism and simply withdrawing from any engagement with city dwellers. It emphasizes the importance of engaging with and caring about urban people.

As a nomad, Abraham naturally exists outside the cities and stands in contrast to them. But is his approach one of separatism from the inhabitants of cities? Comparing Abraham to other characters who appear earlier in Genesis, we can see the text emphasizes that it is not. Rather, Abraham’s mission is to engage with them, to concern himself with their well-being.

The term “to walk (le-hit’halekh) with God” appears several times in the early portion of Genesis. For example, we are told that Enoch walked with God and simply vanished because God had taken him. Noah had the inverse experience: he walked with God and remained in place while everyone else simply vanished in the flood. This phrase denotes being somewhat distant from mundane life, removed from sin, and separate from other people.

Abraham too is invited to a mission which sounds quite similar—he is instructed to walk the land. In Genesis 13:17, Abraham is told by God to go “up, walk the land (hit’halekh), through its length and its breadth, for I shall give it to you.” In contrast to Enoch and Noah, rather than walking “with God,” he will walk “in the land”—he will engage the world—as the expression of his holiness. The same verb, “to walk,” is reoriented to focus not on God, but on “the land.” The implication is that Abraham should pursue a path of engagement with other people, not one of isolation.

When do we see Abraham carry this out? Immediately after this passage in Genesis, war breaks out in Sodom, and Lot is taken hostage. It would be easy for Abraham to ignore this, since he and Lot have just parted ways, and Lot has chosen to live in a city that is manifestly evil. Yet Abraham doesn’t ignore Lot’s plight: he pursues Lot on an almost suicidal mission. Where five kings failed, Abraham’s attempts succeed, and he rescues all the captives taken in the war. He chases them “to Hova which is north of Damascus” (Genesis 14:15). This seems to represent the northernmost border of the land Abraham has been promised. It is named here to emphasize that Abraham has fully embraced his mission and engaged across the entire land with which God had entrusted him, even to its outermost reaches.
A second example of Abraham’s activist approach toward city dwellers is his petition to God on behalf of Sodom. Certainly this stands in sharp contrast to Noah’s apparent silence when informed of the impending flood. Abraham demonstrates passionate concern for the well-being of other people, whatever their misdeeds.

Abraham’s interpretation of sovereignty over the land, then, is not one of entitlement but one of responsibility. He applies the instruction to walk the land as a mandate to enforce justice throughout it, to stand up for the weak anywhere in the land. This is the beginning of a new approach of engagement with the world as a spiritual path. The subsequent stories of Genesis are the accounts of this engagement.

Joseph and His Brothers

The Joseph narrative reflects a synthesis of the disparate views on power which were articulated at the beginning of Genesis. Joseph is a man of agriculture and a powerful leader of a nation. Yet at the same time, he remains true to his roots as a member of the nomadic clan of Jacob. His reconciliation with his nomadic brothers resolves the conflict we first encountered with Cain and Abel.

The initial conflict between Joseph and his brothers is a mirror image of the Cain and Abel rivalry. Joseph is (inexplicably, at the time) interested in grain—he dreams of sheaves of wheat. The brothers are shepherds. They pursue them to the grazing land, their domain, just as Abel followed Cain to his territory in the agricultural field. The scene is set for a reversal of Abel’s murder. A reader can almost anticipate that the brothers will kill Joseph, securing the primacy of herders over farmers, thus righting the wrong of the Cain and Abel story. A reader might suspect that, as a reciprocal act of violence, the narrative will reject the thesis of the farmers and adopt the antithesis of the herders. From a certain perspective, this would constitute the victory of good over evil.

However, that is not how things proceed. Rather, the paradigm of zero-sum conflict is broken. Through a series of events, Joseph escapes with his life and winds his way to a position of leadership where he will reinvent agriculture and civilization in a new way. In this new position, Joseph consistently acknowledges God as he says in his constant refrain, “God has the solution” (Genesis 40:8).

What is Joseph’s solution? He provides Pharaoh not only with a prediction about the fertility of the upcoming years but also with an apparently novel plan of action: nationalize and hoard the food supply. In this process, he completely restructures Egyptian society. He gradually uses the leverage of the food monopoly to buy up the land, the animals, and the people themselves. He moves all people to live in cities—as opposed to dwelling in the fields. The simplest interpretation of Joseph’s act to “transfer the population to the cities, from one border of Egypt to the other” is not that Joseph moved people from one end of Egypt to the other (Genesis 47:21). Rather, he moved people from the fields to live in cities, and he implemented this policy across the entire land of Egypt. This, along with removing the animals from the fields, resulted in a hyper-productive monoculture of wheat farms.

In this way, Joseph’s story reflects a resolution of the nomadic-versus-agrarian dilemma. His nomadic credentials are impeccable. Joseph is a “stranger’s stranger”: cast out even from his nomadic tribe, sold into slavery, sexually exploited, and unjustly imprisoned. Yet he also possesses a unique Midas touch. Whatever degradation he is subjected to just strengthens him and advances him toward power. When sold into slavery, he quickly becomes the most trusted man in the household. When Potiphar’s wife attempts to victimize him, he takes the high road. While refusing to participate, he also does not take revenge. He then finds himself in a jail, which is more of a networking opportunity. His prison is “where the king’s prisoners were confined” (Genesis 39:20) - the other prisoners have royal connections. He is the first member of the nomadic family of Abraham to demonstrate a new option: stand for something better, and win. All the while, he stays humble and true to his roots, crediting God at every turn.

In this context, it is even more significant that Joseph makes room for his brothers to continue to be shepherds, especially by setting them up with a unique arrangement in the land of Goshen. In a certain sense, Joseph has just implemented Cain’s dream scenario—large-scale agriculture that monopolizes the entire land of Egypt. It has no place for herders. He is in a position to dictate terms to them and could easily force them to abandon their flocks. Instead, Joseph shies away from wielding his full power. He goes so far as to advocate on their behalf to Pharaoh, devising a unique arrangement which will preserve their herding lifestyle. He coaches them on how to present themselves as a family that has been herding for generations so as to be assigned to the land of Goshen.

Despite Joseph’s benevolent actions, it takes a considerable amount of time for his brothers themselves to recognize that he is fully committed to reconciliation. Joseph’s famous query to the brothers upon revealing his identity, “Is my father still alive?” can be seen as an implied threat. We know that Esau had planned to kill Jacob when their father would die, saying to himself, “Let but the mourning period of my father come, and I will kill my brother Jacob” (Genesis 27:41). In this context, it seems the brothers heard a menacing tone behind Joseph’s question: perhaps he was considering whether to kill them. If his father were alive, he would allow his brothers to live, out of respect for Jacob. If his father were dead, there would be no need for restraint; he would mete out a death sentence. This interpretation is consistent with their stunned silence—“His brothers could not answer him, because they were terrified of him” (Genesis 45:3). Joseph’s brothers were too frightened to answer what should have been a very simple
question. And for the rest of the book, even through their apparent reconciliation, they lived in a state of dread and uncertainty. Was Joseph simply delaying his revenge, out of respect for his father?

This tension reaches an apex after Jacob’s death. The brothers worry that now, finally, Joseph will kill them. They ask themselves, “Perhaps Joseph will bear us malice (yistimenu) and take revenge for how we treated him” (Genesis 50:15). The Hebrew word for bearing malice is an allusion to the Esau story, when the verse says that “Esau bore Jacob malice (va-yistom)” and schemed to kill him after his father Isaac died (Genesis 27:41). The brothers believe that Joseph may have shared Esau’s mindset, and now, after Jacob has passed away, he may finally take their lives and become the sole heir to his father’s legacy.

Instead, Joseph said to them, “Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God?” (Genesis 50:19). This conciliatory response resolves the issues which have been present since the Garden of Eden story. The root of the problems is presented there as man usurping God’s role as the arbiter of good and evil—“And you will be like G-d, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5). In time, this led to one brother murdering another. In contrast, Joseph declines to harm his brothers and defers to God, saying that only He can judge what is right and wrong.

Joseph now does in the realm of justice what he has done in the realm of agriculture—he acknowledges his subservience to a higher power. In letting his brothers live, as in letting them continue herding, he has backed away from wielding his power to dominate them. He has rejected a path of absolutism. He has chosen an approach of synthesis and reconciliation.

The curse of Adam also receives a positive reinterpretation through Joseph’s life. After Adam’s sin, God informs him that “you will eat bread through the sweat of your brow until you are returned to the land, for you were taken from there” (Genesis 3:19). This is a succinct summary of Joseph’s life. But in his context, the entire statement is a blessing. Joseph succeeded at providing bread for the entire world, and he was “returned” for proper burial in the land of Canaan from which he had been taken.

Joseph serves as an example for humanity. As human beings, we cannot escape the fate that was decreed upon us due to the sin of Eden. Mortality, dependence on food, and the need to reproduce will always be our lot. But, like Joseph, we can live in a way that makes the best of things, and turns the apparent curse into a blessing, by acknowledging God and acting benevolently with other people.

Remembering Egypt All Our Days

The ambivalence toward human power is not only found in the narratives of Genesis. No less important is the expression that is given in the observances of the holidays, presented (among other places) in Parashat Emor (Leviticus 23). The observances articulated there anchor a sense of gratitude and non-entitlement in the consciousness of Jewish farmers in the land of Israel.

Our holidays trace the agricultural cycle, but rather than an unbridled celebration of success, they temper our enthusiasm, cautioning us against getting too enamoured with our prosperity. For example, we observe Passover, which takes place at the beginning of the grain harvest, by eating the most minimal, humble version of bread. Similarly, Shavuot, occurring at the peak of the harvest, is mentioned in the Torah alongside the admonition that we should not harvest all our grain for ourselves; rather, we should leave some for the poor. Sukkot prescribes living in a transient booth specifically for the ezrah, those who own the land and permanent homes.

Therefore, our so-called agricultural festivals also contain explicit, stern warnings. As Jews, we need to constantly retell the story of how our nation began as strangers, and we need to continually experience firsthand how people live with more modest means. The Torah mandates that we fight back at every juncture where people might become entitled, complacent, or arrogant. Through these holiday observances, we are meant to maintain a kinship with the weak and disadvantaged that translates into how we relate to them.

We, products of the slavery in Egypt, are uniquely positioned to maintain empathy with marginalized people. And this empathy must be reflected even as we celebrate our current prosperity. The parallel section in Deuteronomy makes this a central theme of the holidays when it commands us to celebrate the holidays together with all the unfortunate and marginalized people; remember, you were a slave in Egypt yourself: “Rejoice before God, you, your sons and daughters, your slaves and maidservants, and the Levite in your gates, and the stranger, and the orphan and widow who are in your midst, in the place God will choose to dwell. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; guard and observe these laws” (Deuteronomy 16:17).

The Jubilee Year, the Hebrew Slave, and Houses in Walled Cities

The rules that Joseph created in Egypt, the ones that he credited God for giving him, establish the template for agriculture in Israel that these laws embody. In addition to the holiday observances, the laws of the Shemittah and Jubilee cycles (found in Leviticus 25) also govern agriculture in the land of Israel. These practices also underscore the same themes we have seen exemplified in the festivals: a moderating of the instinct to amass agricultural wealth.

There are several features that are present in both the Shemittah and Jubilee laws as well as the Joseph story. Most obviously, both the Joseph narrative and Jewish agricultural
law incorporate seven-year agricultural cycles. In addition, both systems are based on “royal ownership” of all the agricultural land. We are told that once Joseph completed his process of urbanization in Egypt, “the land belonged to Pharaoh” (Genesis 47:20). In a similar vein, Leviticus warns that “the land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is Mine, for you are strangers and sojourners with me” (Leviticus 25:23). In this conceptualization, private citizens are mere tenant farmers on the land of the sovereign God and can claim no personal entitlement to their fields.

The exception in both cases is urban land. Pharaoh moved people from the rural areas into adjacent cities (Genesis 47:21). In Israel as well, those houses which are found in walled cities are privately owned and can be bought and sold in perpetuity (Leviticus 25:30).

God has replaced Pharaoh, and this has ramifications for personal servitude as well. The Jewish people cannot be sold as slaves because “they are my slaves, whom I have freed from Egypt, they shall not be sold as slaves” (Leviticus 25:42). No future person can ever claim dominion over the Jewish people. The rabbis of the Talmud (Bava Metzia 10a) later expounded on this same verse to derive labor protections. A worker can quit even mid-day because he is not “a slave to a slave”—both the employee and the employer are slaves to God and beholden to His laws.

This template for agricultural civilization provides the solution to the quandary which hovers over Genesis—is it possible to create civilization, without becoming so power-focused that people lose their ability to serve God and collapse into the moral abyss that existed in Egypt, Sodom, and the like? Yes, provided that the ground rules of the civilization keep God in control and block people from accumulating the type of power disparities that lead to exploitation, such as permanent consolidation of agricultural land ownership and permanent servitude.

Kingship: A Blessing, National Aspiration, and National Undoing

As in the case of agriculture, the Torah goes out of its way to reign in the power that a king can accumulate. To understand this well, we need to briefly trace the theme of kingship from Genesis through Deuteronomy.

The barren patriarchs are promised that kings will be descended from them. This is presented as a blessing. To modern ears, this might sound like a personal aspiration—not only will you have a son; he will be very successful! He will have a very respected job!

However, in the context of the Genesis stories, it’s clear that the term “king” has much greater significance. As discussed above, the patriarchs were nomadic while their contemporary kings were the leaders of cities. To say that Abraham’s descendants will be kings is to say that they will cease to be nomadic and establish an urbanized civilization. This is a huge paradigm shift. Together with the spiritual vision which Genesis defines for these descendants, it implies that being kind and being holy need not always go along with being weak and stateless. We will become a strong, settled civilization while concurrently remaining true to the values of dependence on God and non-entitlement drawn from our nomadic herding roots.

The passage “I will set a king over me, as do all the nations about me” (Deuteronomy 17:14) illustrates that the notion of a king—as opposed to a chief—is something of an imported idea for the Jewish people. Modern readers often use this passage as an opportunity to reflect on the merits of monarchy versus democratic rule. But a republic was not the possibility the Torah was grappling with in this instance. Rather, the baseline for the Israelites was to be a nomadic tribe ruled by informal chiefs. They continued to live like this through the period of the Judges, even as many other surrounding nations were established with fortified cities ruled by kings. In a world that had been swept by the trend of formal civilization ruled by kings, the Israelites, among the last holdouts, contemplated following the other nations in a transition from nomadism and tribal chiefdom to a formal system of settlement and national kingship.

The verses in Deuteronomy continue to permit a king, provided that we establish a king of our own and do not place a foreign person over us. This prohibition is baffling. What nation would ever do such a thing? Do we imagine that America would seek a French president? This possibility would not make any sense in a modern context. Rather, the concern stems from the fact that we are not our own established civilization. In the transition away from being nomads, we might be tempted to agglomerate onto some existing powerful city-state. This the Torah prohibits. We are not to join any of the city-states which already exist, regardless of how enticing their power may be. They are too corrupt. We may only establish a new civilization, ruled by someone who literally holds the lessons of the Torah close, carrying a personal scroll at his side—“and he shall write himself a copy of this Torah upon a scroll from before the Levite priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read from it all the days of his life” (Deuteronomy 17:18). As with our agricultural festivals, our king is a potential locus of arrogance, and so he is subject to rules which cut him down to size. Only so many wives, only so many horses, only so much wealth. The king must remain cognizant of his subordinate role relative to God, and of the limits of his power and authority.

Our approach to festivals and kingship is one that emphasizes moderation and humility. The festival passages mentioned earlier don’t instigate joy; rather, they presume it and focus on moderating it. The passage in Deuteronomy 17 is similar for kingship. It isn’t a constitution; it doesn’t focus on the powers and the mission of the king. It presumes these and focuses on
moderating them. Just as farmers should not get carried away with their agricultural bounty, the king should not get carried away with his personal wealth, his national authority, and his military power.

We meet the king again in the context of the *tokhahah*, the litany of curses in Deuteronomy: “God will send you and the king whom you will place over you to a nation which you and your fathers knew not” (28:36). He appears alongside numerous bad agricultural and military outcomes—we will be defeated by enemies; our crops will fail. A cursory reading gives the impression that we will simply be punished in every imaginable way.

But the *tokhahah* is not merely an assortment of random punishments. Rather, it describes the systematic unraveling of civilization itself. There is no form of human power that can protect us from God’s power, which will be directed against us if we are undeserving of His blessing. We are told “our high walls will crumble” (Deuteronomy 28:52), and no strong leader will be able to shield us when “God will take you and your so-called king and summarily throw you out” (Deuteronomy 28:36). No amount of agricultural prowess will deliver our sustenance, as the Torah says, “You will farm hard but get little food” (Deuteronomy 28:38). While not directly implicating civilization as the root cause of evil, these verses walk very close along that edge. The theme isn’t merely how we will suffer; it is which types of power that we might currently believe in, which will be of no avail. No military leader, no farm, and no amount of fortification will protect us from God’s wrath if we incur it with evil deeds.

**Conclusion**

Abraham is promised that his descendants will be kings. Yet the initiative to appoint a king is ominously presented as a populist impulse. When everything goes sideways, when we violate the commandments and incur God’s wrath, we find the Torah king-shaming and civilization-shaming us. The terrible punishments of the *tokhahah*, it is insinuated, serve us right for placing our faith in high walls, fertile farms, and a king! How can these competing attitudes toward kings coexist in the same Torah?

The composite message that emerges—from Genesis through Deuteronomy—is that we are encouraged to construct a strong, prosperous, secure civilization. Joseph, more than any other character, embodies the ability to do this while concurrently being humble before God and compassionate to his brothers. He establishes a paradigm that curbs personal land rights and servitude, one that serves as the template for a Jubilee-based agricultural civilization in Israel.

But the laws of the king and the curses of the *tokhahah* warn us against getting swept up in our own power. We should not have any delusion that human power will protect us from the consequences of being evil and corrupt. If we do things that incur God’s wrath, none of our so-called power will be of any use. Everything will crumble in an instant, and we will find ourselves starving, stateless, and defenseless. This is why in our rituals, we consistently remind ourselves of the ephemeral nature of our power, of our history of servitude, of our nomadic roots, of our meager food and shelter when we wandered the desert. “So that you may remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt as long as you live” (Deuteronomy 16:6)—this consciousness must be at the core of our identity, at all times.

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1 Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik wrote about these two creation stories in *The Lonely Man of Faith*. The inferences in this article, while related, differ from his.
The Torah of the Kishkes

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Rabbi Shimon said (of the patriarch Avraham): No father taught him, nor did he have a rabbi, so from where did he learn Torah? The Holy One arranged for his two kidneys to become like two rabbis, and they would gush forth and teach him Torah and wisdom. (Bereishit Rabbah 61:1)

Moshe Koppel’s Judaism Straight Up: Why Real Religion Endures (Koren, 2020) is the latest installment in the author’s extended argument in favor of what he calls fully-internalized, intuitive, non-ideological, instinctive, natural, unself-conscious, and organic Yiddishkeit. On its surface, told through profiles of fictional characters like Shimen, Heidi, and others, the new book is a critique of the universalism that tries — and fails, in his telling — to replace community-based moral systems. But in truth it is a critique of any attempt to develop a moral community based on explicit principles that dictate the proper course of action. Such systems, which he terms “ideological”, are necessarily reductionist, disembodied, and distorting. This applies to universalism as much as it applies to every flavor of contemporary Judaism, all of which are in his sights.

To better situate Judaism Straight Up, let’s go back to Koppel’s earlier works in this vein, starting with Meta-Halakhah: Logic, Intuition, and the Unfolding of Jewish Law (Aronson, 1997). The “intuition” of Meta-Halakhah’s subtitle, a key element of Koppel’s account of lived Jewishness, connotes a source of information, judgment, or action that cannot be fully captured and formalized as a set of rules. Human beings are not always aware of the multitude of environmental factors and cues that influence our decisions, of how we prioritize our values and needs. Often — more often that we might deem comfortable — our minds are like black boxes: sensory information enters, and we decide that one person is credible while another is not. Interestingly, this sort of decision-making is described in many languages in terms of body parts other than the mind. We feel it in our hearts, the pits of our stomachs, or our kishkes. Perhaps we have a gut feeling, because something smelled funny or left a foul taste in our mouths. The midrash cited at the beginning of this article speaks of how Avraham learned Torah from his kidneys. This means that while Avraham did not have any text to study or corpus to master, he was able to intuit what God wanted from him. His gut feeling was itself Torah.

Koppel is a professor of mathematics and computer science, and an expert in artificial intelligence. The sort of conundrum posed by phenomena like intuition is precisely the sort that occupies people who are trying to develop algorithms that enable machines to think like humans. In Meta-Halakhah, Koppel introduces concepts of computability to argue that intuition is comprehensible and not reducible to a static model. Any attempt to translate intuition into a set of instructions or routines will, of necessity, lose something.

Within this theoretical framework, Koppel argues that Halakhah develops in a manner that is neither random nor predetermined, but autonomous, based on the collective intuition of its adherents. The history of Halakhah, per Koppel, is the history of organic development of norms within communities of practitioners, punctuated at times of crisis and upheaval by attempts to summarize and codify practice. These codifications then provide the basis for continued organic variously development.

Meta-Halakhah reads several key rabbinic texts in light of his theory of halakhic development, to great effect. For instance, it has long been noted that rabbinic literature seems to incorporate two opposing views about the nature of dispute: one that sees it as the students’ failure to learn from their masters, and another that idealizes dispute as different aspects of a single divine truth. Many scholars assume that there is simply a multiplicity of voices within the rabbinic tradition, that the rabbis dispute the nature of dispute.

In Koppel’s hands, however, these attitudes become two sides of a single coin. Dispute arises, according to the Talmud, when students fail to apprentice (le-shamesh) under their masters. Apprenticeship is the type of learning in which one develops intuitions and instincts by holistically absorbing the attitudes and teachings of a master. The Talmud privileges apprenticeship — shimush — as the optimal form of study: “Others say: Even one who read (Scripture) and memorized (Mishnah), but did not apprentice (ve-lo shimesh) Torah scholars is an ignoramus. Rabbi Huna said: The law accords with the Others” (Berakhot 47b).1 From this perspective, dispute is a function of becoming distant; it indeed implies a loss of intimacy and intuitive grasp. It is necessary to engage in cognitive, conscious effort to recover what was lost, and this process, though less than ideal, can nevertheless indeed yield new insights and realize latent potentialities in the contents being interpreted. There is no conflict in understanding dispute both as a result of lost intimacy and as a means to develop Torah more fully.

During the decades between the publication of Meta-Halakhah and Judaism Straight Up, Koppel published several articles that further developed his ideas. The first was “Yiddishkeit Without Ideology: A Letter to my Son” (Tradition 36:2 [Summer 2002]). Here Koppel adopts a curmudgeonly persona to argue against an overly bookish conception of Judaism and in favor of a homier, grittier, more reflexive Judaism. Commenting on a school he attended, he writes:

The place suffered from a Litvish coldness that had adapted neatly to the American technocratic mindset to produce a somewhat formal and not very heimish version of cookbook Yiddishkeit. You asked somebody there if it was okay to daven in your gatkes, they...
started pulling books off the shelf.... [T]hey tended to undervalue the little hard-to-pin-down gestures and manners that give substance to Jewish distinctiveness. (p. 47)

The titular non-ideological Judaism of the article refers to Koppel’s argument that it is not necessary to bring one’s ideas about Judaism and one’s personal commitments into perfect alignment. On the contrary, “I shouldn’t have been defining either my Yiddishkeit or my commitments at all. To do so is to reduce Yiddishkeit to ideology, which is exactly what it is not” (p. 49). Institutions, which tend toward book knowledge and ideology, failed to impart or sustain “normal heimish Yiddishkeit, full of humor, creativity and authentic yiras shamayim that simple Jews have lived naturally in communities around the world for thousands of years.” Institutions, he argues, teach Yiddishkeit as a second language, “awkwardly constrained by poorly internalized rules of grammar.” It is by being immersed in Jewish communal life that one learns Yiddishkeit as a first language.

In this article, Koppel also introduces us to his grandparents, Polish hasidim whose judgments were made based on instincts that were far from romantic or ideological. They supported the State of Israel simply because they thought it was good for the Jews and had seen the alternatives. Koppel writes to his son:

Have you ever stood at a Yom Hazikaron ceremony and wept for those who did not survive to share our astonishing fortune at having a state, for the awesome sacrifices we Jews have made to preserve that fortune, for the suffering of our ancestors for millennia... and at the same time cringed at the mind-blowing inanity and vapidity of these pompous, imitative, goyish ceremonies? I hope that one day you will.

The years after the publication of “Yiddishkeit Without Ideology” coincided with the heyday of Jewish blogging. One of the more interesting blogs, “Ben Chorin,” was written by a self-described “post-denominational frummer yid.” In an early post, the anonymous blogger wrote something about Yom Yerushalayim that clearly echoes the paragraph quoted above: “Can’t we be happy about not getting killed without working it into some grand concept? And can’t we be sad about Jews getting killed without working that into some grand ideology? Lamentably, around here the answer to both questions seems to be ‘no’.”

I do not mention this to “out” Koppel as the blogger behind Ben Chorin, though he has neither confirmed nor denied the fact; as will become clear, he made no real attempt to hide this fact (even when “citing” Koppel). The blog addressed a broader array of topics than those tackled in Meta-Halakhah and “Yiddishkeit Without Ideology,” as befits a bona fide polymath.

My own introduction to Koppel’s writing was through the blog. It was consistently thought-provoking, funny, and trenchant, but I also felt that I had found someone who had worked through a lot of the questions that I was working through and reached conclusions that were on the right wavelength. Perhaps most importantly, he disliked a lot of the things that I disliked, but he articulated why these things could stick in my craw. Moreover, blog readers learned that Ben Chorin/Koppel was born to Holocaust survivors and grew up in the US, but the family is now entirely in Israel. In historical terms, they had a cup of coffee in America. I am about 20 years younger than Koppel, and aside from some important geographical differences, the basic contours of the story are the same: My grandparents were all survivors, my parents were born in the US, and they, with all their descendants, now live in Israel. The brief American leg of our family’s journey has ended.

But I did not always frame my experience in these terms; for a long time, my American-ness loomed large in my own consciousness, distancing me both from recent generations in Germany and Transylvania and from my present and future in Israel. For Koppel, the instinctive Jewishness of the old country, and the hope for a return to the same in the new one, bracket the American experience as a historical anomaly. His contextualization of his own Jewish experience has helped me embrace my own.

The blog eventually became a sounding board for the ideas that would underpin Koppel’s next publications. For about six months in 2010-2011, there appeared on Ben Chorin a series of blog posts that set out to, in the author’s words, “take a long view of religious-political issues” by clarifying the distinct roles that ought to be played by states and religious communities and asserting what happens when they usurp each other’s roles. He then applies his conclusions to the Jewish community in the State of Israel.

The central metaphor of this series, through which he develops his central theses, is apparent from the title of its article form, which appeared in Azure in the autumn of 2011: “Judaism as a First Language.” Expanding on a distinction he made in “Yiddishkeit Without Ideology,” he discusses how a community that speaks Judaism as a first language, not as a set of formalized rules, will instinctively balance three “flavors” of morality: universal morality, which, as its name indicates, is theoretically not contingent on any particular community and includes concepts like autonomy, fairness, and justice; community-based morality, which includes concepts like duty, loyalty, honor, and respect for authority; and divinity-based morality, which covers ideas like purity, sanctity, and self-restraint. He sometimes treats the latter two flavors as one so as to contrast universalist morality with any form of morality specific to a community. This admittedly reductive variation on Jonathan Haidt’s writings allows him to advance his central argument, namely, that a community whose “first language” is the norms and values of the
prevailing society, and whose Jewish “second language” is subject to assimilator pressure, will fall into disequilibrium. Some members will cave to the assimilatory pressure and others will become culturally isolationist, privileging morality based on community and divinity over universal morals. The center will not hold.

For Judaism to be learned as a first language, as it ought, it needs an “an economically and politically self-sufficient society committed to Jewish social norms,” something that has been absent for the greater part of Jewish history. It is here, however, that Koppel expresses guarded optimism that Judaism can re-emerge as a first language in Israel, provided that people allow it to evolve naturally and that the State does not usurp communal roles.

Koppel returned to these themes – and to blogging – in 2017, when he started a new blog called “Judaism Without Apologies,” this time under his real name. Structurally, this series, which constitutes the first draft of Judaism Straight Up, is very similar to “Judaism as a First Language.” It too takes up the theme of community-based morality versus universal morality, but with a stronger emphasis on elaborating why universalism simply cannot form the moral basis for a durable society. In addition to the moral sociology of Haidt, Durkheim, and others, which appeared in the earlier publications, Koppel spends a good part of “Judaism Without Apologies” (and Judaism Straight Up) developing the idea of “signaling,” the measures taken by members of a community to demonstrate that they have skin in the game and thus have credibility within the community.

In my yeshiva years, a close friend came up with the concept of “frum points” to describe the social capital that can be accumulated and spent within traditional communities. Drawing on the fields of behavioral economics, network theory, game theory, and sociology, Koppel develops the economizing of frumkeit into a theory with great explanatory power (but which still makes for a fun diversion during morning seder). It is through “frum points” that hierarchies of piety emerge and authority accumulates, and it is through them that communities internalize the relative gravity of different norms.

In Koppel’s telling, communities develop signals in the form of seemingly arbitrary traditions that may have independent meaning but also serve to demonstrate a member’s trustworthiness. Observance of certain taboos, for example, show one to be capable of self-restraint, an indispensable quality of any productive member of a community. The relative value of signals can change with time and place – in Israel, for example, sending to a Jewish school, living within an eruv, and keeping kosher are not nearly as costly as elsewhere, so costlier signals, like stricter kashrut standards and eschewing all secular education, emerge – and tradition itself is constantly adapting to this flux. This adaptability, whereby communities autonomously and unself-consciously recalibrate the value of signals, is what gives traditional communities longevity. The entire fourth chapter of the book, and several other sections to boot, are devoted to the assertion that, in contrast to traditional communities, attempts to form communities on the basis of abstract, absolute, universal principles alone are doomed to fail.

Part of the charm of Judaism Straight Up is the cast of characters he develops. Instead of addressing ideas and attitudes in the abstract, he introduces us to Shimen, a clean-shaven Gerrer Hasid who survived the Holocaust, and Heidi, a Jewish American who was raised with some tradition, for which she still has a soft spot despite having developed an aversion to particularistic moral systems. The next generation includes Ben and Itzy, Shimen’s Modern Orthodox and Yeshivish cousins, and Amber, Heidi’s progressive daughter who has no qualms about marshaling state power to enforce equality and punish specific types of speech. And each has an Israeli analogue – Bentzi, Itcha Meir, and Adi, respectively. Shimen is the hero: non-ideological, loyal to his friends, fair and honest in business, and viewing the world through a deeply Jewish lens. He is a Jew by instinct and intuition. All the others fail to varying degrees, though there are signs that the Israeli cousins are starting to develop a new common language and way of being.

I have a few quibbles with the details of Koppel’s presentation. For one, he portrays the process by which traditions adapt as a naïve one – the community spontaneously reacts to disequilibrium until the response that best restores equilibrium is accepted, and the others are rejected. While he does not weigh all community members equally, one still gets the sense that equilibrium is restored almost automatically when a weighted majority of community members adopts a particular approach. My view, which underpins much of my research, is that the “supply-side” plays a much larger role. That is, would-be makers of opinion and policy develop elaborate, self-aware strategies to persuade their audiences. They operate in a competitive environment and are aware of this fact. To give a concrete example, I am far from certain that USDA-certified milk would have been accepted as the default kashrut-standard in American Orthodoxy if not for some very deliberate rhetorical strategies deployed by Rabbi Moshe Feinstein.

Another quibble is with his use of the term “tradition.” By and large, he recognizes it as something anchored but flexible and adaptable. On a few occasions, however, he treats it as something far more rigid. On page 43, he refers obliquely to “traditional norms regarding the inception and end of life.” In the Jewish context, it is hard to pin down what norms he is referring to and where they come from, but in a very real way, these norms have changed significantly in living memory. I am not referring to questions of terminating pregnancy (though Koppel may be), but to the way that Jews instinctively respond to things like stillbirths and infant mortality. In our generation of family planning, superior medical care, and genetic testing,
people are far more likely to mourn the loss of a baby or even a fetus than in centuries past, when such tragic phenomena were far more common, and they are much more likely to give spontaneous ritual expression to such grief—observing aveilut, saying Kaddish—even against an explicit ruling of Shulhan Arukh. This in no way implies that these shifting norms make transgressing the sins of feticide or infanticide any more or less severe. The point is, rather, that the norms concerning when a child is considered a bona fide “life” for the purposes of mourning has shifted before our eyes.

Early in the book, Koppel tells us that he will try to do justice to the worldview of Heidi and Amber. This second quibble indicates, I think, that he did not ultimately do them justice. My concern is not that he is unfair to characters who are ultimately the products of his imagination. They are his creations, and he can do with them as he pleases. Rather, the book is a sustained argument for the interdependence of different types of morality. Certain needs are hard-wired to the human condition, and that without religious communities to address those needs, humanity may revert to more primitive instincts, elements of which can be seen in Amber’s “ersatz religion.” While this can be a valuable heuristic—treating recycling as a form of sacrifice to the angry god of the environment comes to mind—being too dismissive of Amber’s moral claims carries a risk of insufficient attention to the universalist flavor of morality, which remains, in Koppel’s account, indispensable.

Beyond these quibbles, there is an issue that I wish Koppel had fleshed out a bit better. He makes a compelling case for the virtue and necessity of tradition and the flaws of its would-be replacements. His contention that tradition can be reconstituted after a breakdown is likewise comforting and largely convincing, even if one suspects that it might take much longer than we might hope. The problem is what we do in the meantime, and what we do when the intuitions that we developed over centuries are no longer appropriate. To take an example, Koppel does not tell us what Shimen’s parents did during World War I. If they were like hundreds of thousands of other Polish Jews near the front in Eastern Europe, they ran. Two of my grandmother’s brothers mutilated themselves to avoid conscription into the Austro-Hungarian military. These and other habits were useful given the Jewish situation as an oft-persecuted minority. In the land of Israel, both before and after the founding of the state, these habits became detrimental. This is certainly not true of all, or even most, habits formed in exile and the Diaspora, but it is certainly true of some of them, and the patient approach is inadequate when bullets are flying. Koppel does not address what happens when instincts and intuitions must be reversed, and with some urgency.

I will conclude with a bit of a confession: I did not read Meta-Halakhah until preparing this article. When I did, I was pleasantly surprised to find that several ideas and interpretations that I wrote about in the article I contributed to Tradition’s 25-year retrospective on Haym Soloveitchik’s watershed article, “Rupture and Reconstruction” are similar to what Koppel articulates in Meta-Halakhah.

Upon realizing this, I texted Koppel to assure him that I had not read the book before penning the article. He responded with disappointment. He prefers when people internalize his ideas to the point that they think they came up with them by themselves. It is hardly surprising that he wants his readers to internalize his ideas, absorb them into their vocabularies, and view the world through their lenses. After rereading some early Ben Chorin posts, I can allay his disappointment. I indeed internalized ideas that Moshe articulated in the blog—where I first encountered them—in later essays, and now in Judaism Straight Up. They became part of my bloodstream and got into my kishkes.

Perhaps the best example is something Moshe wrote in a post from 2007. He recounts that he occupied himself over Pesah with two books: Daniel Dennett’s Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon and Rabbi Asher Weiss’ response on the laws of Pesah, published in the back of Haggadat Minhat Asher. The former is a broadside against religion, the latter a relatively dry legal correspondence. Yet Koppel found himself experiencing “extreme frumkeit swings” as he alternated between the books, as each had a “powerful and deniable” impact. He explains with a parable:

Think of being Jewish as being in a play that lasts for centuries and has a cast of millions. It’s an avant-garde production in which the members of the audience are also participants. There’s a very old script but the actors get to ad lib a lot and, although the original printed script itself is unaltered, it is overwhelmed by the ongoing accretion of handwritten interpolations. New actors join the show and are instructed by older actors who eventually leave the show. The director is never seen.

Now when I say that my frumkeit swings upward I don’t mean that I’m reading my lines from the script more precisely. I mean that I’m into the play. This happens when the play “works”, when one can read one’s lines with a sense of authenticity, when one can sense the director’s invisible guiding hand. Often, though, this is not the case because the stars who have mastered the script and get the best lines seem to lack the subtlety of character to grasp the plot’s meaning.

Rav Usher’s teshuvos are so masterful and so attuned to the underlying meaning that my sense of identification with the play is restored. In teshuva after teshuva, he responds to questioners looking for idiotic chumrahs […]. In each case, he goes through all the relevant sources dispassionately marshaling
proofs for and against. And in each case, in the end he says the equivalent of “Oh come off it, that’s perfectly idiotic.” [...] In other cases, he is machmir with exactly the same degree of brilliance and common sense.

As for Dennett, his book is effective not because of any argument he makes but rather because he makes you change perspective. He focuses your attention not on the stage but on the scaffolding behind the stage. That scaffolding is indeed the same for the Greatest Show on Earth and for an amateur off-off-Broadway production. Which is exactly why it’s not where you want to be looking if you want to get into the play. It is this misdirection on Dennett’s part that really does “break the spell”.

Koppel (regretfully, he tells me) does not use this metaphor in Judaism Straight Up, but it usefully frames the book’s entire purpose: to get us to “think of being Jewish as being in a play.” Viewing Judaism as a drama allows us to absorb the attendant distinctions between front stage, back stage, and off-stage and between stilted, adequate, and virtuoso performances. It provides a rubric for considering the relationship between script and performance. Even if Dennett is right that all religions, like all dramatic performances, have similar structural features and evolved to meet specific human needs, it does not mean that they are all the same, nor does it mean that one can simply opt out of being human, of being part of the show.

Whether one chooses a linguistic or dramaturgical metaphor, the upshot is that what marks success is not technical execution or memorization of lines and rules. Such an approach leads to a stilted, mechanical speech and performance that will hardly be compelling. Speaking a language and playing a role in a drama demands internalization to the point where the words and lines become second-nature, intuitive. It’s got to get into the kishkes.

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1 One who consults the Koren Steinsaltz translation of the Talmud will see that the passage is translated, “and did not serve Torah scholars.” This troubled me because I was the translator of that chapter eleven years ago. I consulted my draft, and sure enough, I translated the passage as above. I had not, at that point, read Meta-Halakhah, but by then I had already developed similar ideas resolving the conflicting sources about the nature of dispute.

2 The story is told that R. Velvel Soloveitchik (the Brisker Rav) left Palestine for Switzerland when war was imminent in the late 1940s. Rav Herzog is said to have told him, “We have a mesorah (tradition) that there will not be a third galut (exile).” The Brisker Rav answered, “I have a mesorah that when they shoot at me, I run.” There is little doubt that the Brisker Rav’s behavior indeed embodies the “traditional” Jewish reaction to warfare. There is also little doubt that such an approach by the masses would have rendered a Jewish state unsustainable.

3 The comment thread on this post actually records an important moment in my life: when I began taking an interest in Rabbi Asher Weiss.