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HESED, GEVURAH, AND EMET: DO THESE ATTRIBUTES ACTUALLY DESCRIBE OUR FOREFATHERS?

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In kabbalistic and Hasidic thought, each of the forefathers is associated with a defining characteristic. Avraham is associated with the attribute of kindness (*hesed*), Yitzhak with that of strength (*gevurah*), and Yaakov with truth (*emet*). For example, [Zohar Hadash 33b](#) states:

Each and every one of our *Avot* knew the Holy Blessed One through his own *aspaklariah* (looking glass). Avraham knew Him through *hesed* ... Yitzhak knew Him by the level of *gevurah* ... Yaakov knew Him through the level of *tiferet*... which is called *emet*, and which unites [the

previous two *middot*], as it is written: “You will give *emet* to Yaakov” ([Micah 7:20](#)).¹

This threefold association has entered the pantheon of popular English-language Torah knowledge. A simple search finds it referenced at length on websites such as [Chabad](#), [Torah In Motion](#), [Aish HaTorah](#), [Torah.org](#), [Mishpacha Magazine](#), as well as throughout the Artscroll Humash—all without a citation to any specific source.

But these associations seem false! In the actual biblical narratives, Yaakov is deceptive, Yitzhak is weak, and even Avraham's kindness begins to collapse after light analysis. How then should we understand this kabbalistic association? This essay argues that the *Zohar Hadash* understood these three attributes not as virtues which our forefathers mastered but as qualities with which they each wrestled. In fact, the very use of the term *hesed*—a

¹ The verse continues, “[and You will give] *hesed* to Avraham,” which would itself be a fitting proof text for the first association.

rather loaded phrase in Avraham's life—may indicate that the *Zohar Hadash* intends to highlight not strengths but struggles of our ancestors.

The Discrepancy

Let us begin with Yaakov, whose attribute of “truth” is the most difficult to understand. His very name means trickery ([Bereshit 27:36](#)); he seemingly swindles Esav into selling his primogeniture ([25:29-34](#)); he deceives his blind father, by thieving Esav's identity, in an act that Yitzhak himself describes as *mirmah*, guile ([27:35](#)); he offers to work with Lavan for only the rare speckled, spotted, and black sheep, before intentionally manipulating the flock's procreation to profit himself ([30:31-43](#)); he absconds from the Haran clan in the middle of the night, which the Torah describes as “stealing Lavan's heart ... by not telling him that he was fleeing” ([31:20](#)). Back in Canaan, he tells Esav to travel ahead, because he will follow close behind and the two brothers will soon meet up again in Seir. Instead, Yaakov takes his family to Sukkot ([33:14-17](#)).

Further, Yaakov is himself the victim of immense lies. He wakes up beside not his promised wife, Rachel, but her sister, Leah ([29:25](#)). His own children sell his favored son, Yosef, down to Egypt and then invent an elaborate and bloody cover story ([37:32-34](#)). Finally, he remains silent as his two children, Shimon and Levi, deceive the city of Shechem into a defenseless massacre, themselves acting with *mirmah* ([34:13](#)). In sum: Yaakov's blessing and initial wealth are the product of two

deceits; his frustration and grief, the product of two more; his silence, the background to the killing of a deceived town.

Yitzhak's supposed “strength” offers a similarly weak match to the actual Yitzhak we know. The reader witnesses a tragic impotence in Yitzhak's latter years, when he sits blind and befuddled ([27:1](#)): when he is unable to distinguish between hunted game (supposedly his favorite food, [27:4](#)) and a goat meat substitute ([27:25](#)); between hairy skin and woolly coats ([27:22](#)); between his sons Esav and Yaakov ([27:23](#)); when he is powerless to decide the direction of his own legacy and blessing ([27:33, 27:37](#)); when the only wife he has ever loved connives against him ([27:8-10](#)). These verses paint the Torah's single most vivid portrait of, well, weakness.

Yitzhak's earlier life only adds to the portrait. When Avraham passes away and Yitzhak is left in control of the family water wells, competing clans move in and obstruct them. Two new streams that Yitzhak bores are immediately contested. It is a triumph when a single well obtains ([Bereshit 26:18-22](#)). Similarly, Yitzhak's attempts to pass Rivkah off as a sister rather than his wife fail dramatically, as Avimelekh catches the couple sporting; he righteously scolds a silent Yitzhak, and he later sends Yitzhak out of town ([26:7-11, 26:16](#)). But we are bound to mention one more moment of debility: *Akedat Yitzhak*. Constrained on the altar, Yitzhak lays with his neck bare, awaiting the fatal stroke ([22:9, 22:10](#)). His most iconic biblical moment is one

of perfect passivity.

Even Avraham's claim to *hesed* falls apart after some inspection. True, his generous reception of the three angelic strangers offers the reader a showcase moment of clear *hesed*. But, Avraham's full story is not at all defined by "kindness" and often runs directly counter to it. How is Avraham the epitome of *hesed* in raising the blade over his bound son? Where is the *hesed* in allowing Sarah to torment the lowly maidservant Hagar ([Bereshit 16:6](#)) or in exiling Hagar and her young child Yishmael into the blazing desert ([Bereshit 21:14](#))? When Avraham argues on behalf of Sodom, his claims are explicitly rooted in *mishpat* (justice) and not in empathy, mercy, or kindness ([Bereshit 18:23-25](#)). If anything, Avraham's exploits unite around the theme of *gevurah*! With courage he leaves his homeland and journeys to a land that God will eventually show him; with brute force and clear valor he raises an army that successfully rescues Lot from captivity; with exceptional willpower he circumcises himself at the age of 99 ([Bereshit 17:24](#)). The Avraham we know from the actual Torah exemplifies any number of virtues, but *hesed* is not particularly high on that list.

Yaakov's story is one of guile and deception, not *emet*; Yitzhak's persona is one of frailty and relative impotence, not *gevurah*; Avraham's character shows moments of profound *hesed*, amongst ample narratives that are simply unrelated to kindness if not directly counter to it. How then to make sense of these kabbalistic attributions?

Two Unsatisfying Strategies

The first strategy is the "selective" one, in which one waves away the various discrepancies and elevates only those few moments when each patriarch's story actually matches their attribution. This strategy is most commonly applied to Avraham, whose treatment of the three angelic guests is quite easy to "select" as representative of his *hesed*. The selective strategy can be used with Yaakov as well: Yaakov displays *emet* in his remarkably frank dialogue with Pharaoh ([47:9](#)); makes oath-commitments that he presumably fulfills in full ([28:20-22](#)); and recounts to Lavan his years of workplace integrity ([31:38-41](#)). Even with Yitzhak, a brief spotlight on *gevurah* can be made. Yitzhak faces open hostility over his wells, yet he manages to outmaneuver the competition and establish "ample space to increase in the land" ([26:22](#)). Highlight a few choice narratives, and the trifecta is complete. However, the selective strategy is ultimately weak and unpersuasive. It is difficult to accept that a patriarch epitomizes a particular attribute, when in so many narrative moments, those attributes are betrayed. What honor does it give a biblical character, to declare them the embodiment of a particular trait on the basis of one narrative and then watch as they fail to live up to that trait in other narratives?

(A cousin to the "selective" strategy is the "revisionist" reading, in which challenging verses are reread as innocent. For example, when Yaakov falsely tells his father, "It is I, Esav, your firstborn" [[27:19](#)], [Rashi](#) plays with the commas, producing the more accurate phrase, "It is I. Also, Esav is your

firstborn.” As one might imagine, extending this to every detail of Jacobian dishonesty quickly becomes a rather forced and difficult project.)

The second interpretative strategy is the “counterintuitive” approach, which works best in recasting Yitzhak’s attribute of *gevurah*. This strategy acknowledges that Yitzhak seems weak but asks us to reconsider our notion of strength. Is there not a strength in self-sacrifice and self-restraint? Is it not the supposedly weak ones who, in their very survival and gritty self-regard, reveal true power? When the *Zohar* attributes *gevurah* to Yitzhak, we are meant to pause for a moment, in surprise, before realizing the counterintuitive force of this kabbalistic claim. *True strength* is an internal capacity, not an external display. Recall Ben Zoma’s well-known code in [Pirkei Avot 4:1](#): “Who is strong? He who conquers his own desires.” The “counterintuitive” read of the *Zohar* affords a similar moral message.

But the counterintuitive read fails when applied to Yaakov and Avraham. “Who is truthful? He who has a questionable relationship to the truth” is a mantra thankfully omitted from *Pirkei Avot*; we would be remiss to impose this “moral” teaching upon our forefather Yaakov. Is there justification for Yaakov’s cunning decisions? Is there a certain hardball realism that even the righteous must engage in? Quite possibly. But let’s call that “wisdom” or “politik” or *netzah*—the kabbalistic attribute associated with survival, victory, and endurance. Calling deception truth does not broaden our understanding of truth; rather, it violates it. Further, applying the counterintuitive read to

Avraham adds little bite. What kind of newfound understanding of *hesed* would the *Zohar* point us toward? The mind struggles to capture a meaningful “*true hesed*”—meant to deepen our commitment and understanding of kindness—when reviewing stories of attempted child sacrifice and successful child banishment. The counterintuitive strategy comes up blank before Avraham and reads as forced, if not downright amoral, before Yaakov.

The straightforward read—Yaakov is in fact truthful—fails the evidence test. The counterintuitive read—truth ought to be redefined in light of Yaakov’s untruth—is equally problematic. What then is the *Zohar* thinking when it connects Yaakov to truth, Yitzhak to strength, and Avraham to *hesed*?

Theory #1: Attributes They Confront

The *Zohar* is not offering us the trait that each forefather masters; rather, it offers us the trait that they each confront. In effect, the *Zohar* offers a theme word that ties together their respective biblical careers. Understood this way, the *Zohar* is brilliant. Looking for one single thread that knits together almost all of Yaakov’s diverse stories? *Emet*: its challenges, its lack, its necessity. Many of his narratives revolve around one character knowing a certain truth, another left in the dark, and the ramifications that emerge. Will Yaakov choose truth? What was gained and lost in each of those choices? Will his uncle, his wives, and his sons be truthful to him? What will emerge when the truth is eventually uncovered? Yaakov is not the epitome of truth, but his stories do consistently revolve around that theme.

Likewise, Yitzhak is by no means the embodiment of strength. But his narratives turn on the realities of strength: its absence, its varieties, and its challenges. We meet Yitzhak as a defenseless infant, the first-ever subject to the cut of circumcision; the Torah then alludes that Yitzhak is bullied by an older brother who toys with him ([Bereshit 21:9](#), cf. [Rashi](#)); next, his arms and legs are bound, as he lays under Avraham's sharp blade and God's powerful command; he prefers his strong and aggressive son Esav, who is able to brandish weapons and bring home game; he maneuvers (not always gracefully) to maintain his family's safety amongst dangerous and strong clans; he navigates his own growing power, making strategic treaties and ultimately choosing to distance himself from rivals; he sits impotent at the end of his life, endowed with the titular power to decide his successor yet lacking the de facto ability.

Avraham's stories likewise orient around *hesed*: with moments of granting kindness, withholding kindness, overcoming kindness. We know Avraham is capable of immense *hesed* to strangers ([Bereshit 18:1](#)) and of modeling *hesed shel emet* in his burying of Sarah ([23:2](#), [23:19](#)). But it is this same Avraham who must "conquer his compassion" (cf. Rosh Hashanah Mussaf, [Yalkut Shimoni Bereshit 101:7](#)) in order to sacrifice his blameless son, and the same Avraham who, in the face of apparent need, gives up Sarah into the hands of two powerful men ([Bereshit 12:11-13](#); [20:2](#)). Likewise, Avraham clearly holds such overwhelming devotion to family that he drops everything, puts his own life at risk, and rescues Lot ([Bereshit 14:14](#)); but it is the same Avraham who is earlier tasked with leaving his

father and brothers behind ([12:1](#), [12:4](#)), and later, with exiling his own son ([21:14](#)). In each episode, Avraham confronts the call to *hesed*, sometimes manifesting that trait and at other times withholding himself from it.

Indeed, a simple rereading of the initial *Zohar Hadash* [passage](#) affirms this approach: "Our Avot knew the Holy Blessed One through their own *aspaklariah*... Avraham knew Him through *hesed*... Yitzhak knew Him by the level of *gevurah*... Yaakov knew Him through ... *emet*." It never states that each forefather mastered, epitomized, or championed these attributes. Rather, it asserts that these virtues were the *aspaklariah*—the looking glass, or windowpane—through which each forefather came to know God. To say that *emet* was the lens through which Yaakov experienced the Creator is not to claim that he mastered the attribute of "truth," but that his sacred life story keeps returning to that theme.

Theory #2: Attributes of Struggle

But a more radical read of the *Zohar's* claim is also available: these attributes are those with which each forefather struggled and even failed. By pairing Yaakov with *emet*, the *Zohar* calls attention to the fact that Yaakov is rarely truthful; by connecting Yitzhak with *gevurah*, the *Zohar* highlights how he almost never displays power. After all, saying that Yaakov experienced God through the lens of *emet* is to identify God—and not necessarily Yaakov—as a beacon of Truth; it is Yaakov who finds himself in need of that beacon. Perhaps Yaakov understood God through *emet* precisely because that was the

realm in which he was constantly struggling.

In fact, this more critical reading best fits the *Zohar's* choice of biblical proof text: “As it says, “*titen emet le-Yaakov*, You [God] will give truth to Jacob’ ([Micah 7:20](#)).” Give truth to him, because he is in need of it! The verse makes no claim that Yaakov possesses *emet* but instead implies a present lacking. Indeed, the fuller context of that *Micah* passage makes clear that the prophet speaks of sin and failure, and the wish for eventual change:

Who is a God like you, forgiving iniquity and remitting transgression ... He [God] will turn again and have compassion on us, He will subdue our iniquities; You will hurl into the depths of the sea all our sins. You will give *emet* to Yaakov and *hesed* to Avraham... ([Mikhaiah 7:18-20](#))

The prophet hopes that our present-day iniquities will be subdued and that with it, *emet* and *hesed* will one day be manifested in Yaakov and Avraham. Only a forced and out of context read of “*titen emet le-Yaakov*” would hear in it a call to attribute the virtue of truth to Yaakov. Rather, in the *Zohar's* choice to employ this verse, it offers a subtle critique of our ancestors. Turn to Yaakov not to see a victor in the battle for Truth, but one who struggled mightily with that challenge. Indeed, associations rooted in opposites are a running theme in kabbalistic symbolism, where the *sefirah* of *gevurah*

is commonly associated with the left/weaker hand, and the *sefirah* of *malkhut* (monarchy) is commonly associated with women, not men. That the *Zohar* might go out of its way to connect our patriarchs with an attribute they each lack ought not surprise.

Further, the very use of the Hebrew word “*hesed*” for Avraham may be part of the *Zohar's* critique. It is easy to forget that the biblical term *hesed* is a homonym, with two egregiously different denotations. We tend to be more familiar with *hesed* as related to kindness, love, grace, favor, and goodness. Yet that is clearly not the meaning in [Vayikra 20:17](#):

If a man shall take his sister, his father's daughter, or his mother's daughter, and see her nakedness, and she see his nakedness: it is a *HESED*; and they shall be cut off in the sight of the children of their people: he has uncovered his sister's nakedness; he shall bear his iniquity.

Unsurprisingly, *hesed* here is rarely translated as kindness or favor. Rather, it appears to mean something like disgrace or shame, with support provided from how *hesed* is used in [Mishlei 14:34](#) (“righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a *hesed* to any people”), [Mishlei 25:10](#) (“lest a listener *yehasdekha*—shame you—and your disgrace never be undone”), and in Aramaic (cf. [Rashi ibid.](#) and [Onkelos to Bereshit 34:14](#)).²

² Cf. [Ramban](#) for the position that *hesed* means kindness even in this verse.

With that in mind, let us now turn to the only time in which Avraham himself employs the term *hesed*: [Bereshit 20:12-13](#). Avraham had previously told Avimelekh that Sarah was his sister, and now he is forced to explain their relationship:

And Avraham said [to Avimelekh]:
“Because I thought: Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife's sake. And moreover she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and so she became my wife. And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said unto her: ‘This is your *HESED* which you shall do unto me; at every place where we shall come, say of me: He is my brother.’”

Which *hesed* does Avraham here employ? The straight read is that Avraham speaks of the favor, or the kindness, that Sarah shall do for him. Yet it is possible to read this as Sarah's disgrace that she shall do for him, in forfeiting her body into the hands of a powerful stranger. Either way, the appearance of this particular word, in this specific context, is remarkable. *Hesed* appears both times in instances of sibling/mate confusion. [Vayikra 20](#) is about treating a sister as a spouse; [Bereshit 20](#) is about treating a spouse as a sister.

When the *Zohar* pins Avraham with “*hesed*,” it is aware of this moment in Avraham's career—the

only time in which Avraham himself uses the term. The *Zohar's* word choice highlights this episode for us and effectively asks us to consider which “*hesed*” the *Zohar* has in mind: Avraham of loving-kindness, whom we see at various points in his narrative, or Avraham of a few disgraceful episodes, including the very difficult *hesed* choice to treat his spouse as a sister. In effect, it is possible to read this phrase in the *Zohar Hadash* as speaking “tongue in cheek”: sure, Avraham's story is marked by acts of “*hesed*,” but not necessarily in the virtuous sense. The very choice of this term by the *Zohar Hadash* alludes to the possibility that each attribute was not an area of perfect mastery but of substantial struggle, for each of our patriarchs.

Conclusion

The attributes which kabbalistic sources associate with our forefathers (truth, strength, and kindness) are at odds with how the patriarchs are actually portrayed in Torah narrative (often dishonest, almost always in a position of weakness, occasionally quite kind but also marked by an essential callousness). If we assume that this kabbalistic thread celebrates the forefathers as champions of each respective trait, the above discrepancy is a substantial problem. We are left with two somewhat forced and unconvincing strategies for resolving that discrepancy. The “selective” strategy asks the reader to ignore those parts of our patriarchs' lives which do not match the kabbalistic attribution. The “counterintuitive” strategy asks the reader to put aside their own baseline understandings of truth, strength, and even kindness.

However, we need not assume that this kabbalistic thread sees the forefathers as championing these traits. Nothing in the *Zohar Hadash* indicates that the forefathers own, master, or are themselves the source of these virtues. Rather, it asserts that each patriarch “knew God through the looking glass” of these virtues. The virtue is located outside them and is central to their experience, but it is not necessarily something that they themselves embody. As such, it is reasonable to understand this kabbalistic thread as stating that the forefathers repeatedly *confront* their respective attribute: sometimes exhibiting it, sometimes challenged by it, constantly weighing if and how to bring that virtue into the world.

But a fourth, more critical understanding is also possible. Perhaps to “know God through the looking glass” of a virtue means to *struggle* with that virtue. It is possible that *Zohar Hadash’s* intention in this passage is to highlight Yaakov’s tendency toward *mirmah*, guile (*Bereshit* [27:35](#); [34:13](#)) and Yitzhak’s frequent positions of impotence. This “struggle” read is bolstered by the *Zohar Hadash’s* biblical proof text (*Micah* [7:20](#)), a verse that speaks of Yaakov and Avraham lacking their respective attributes and which appears in a passage about Jewish spiritual failure. A more critical reading is also aided by awareness of how the term *hesed* actually occurs in Avraham’s narratives. It is never used to describe his grand acts of kindness; it instead occurs when he asks Sarah to give herself to Avimelekh, a context which eerily echoes the much more negative meaning of the term *hesed*

¹ Norman Lamm, “[The Unity Theme and its Implications for Moderns](#),” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, 4:1 (Fall 1961): 44-65. The article was reprinted,

(“disgrace”) in [Vayikra 20:17](#). Ultimately, the discrepancy between these attributes and the patriarch’s biblical portrayal is best resolved by recognizing that the original kabbalistic sources did not claim that these virtues actually describe our forefathers.

Indeed, virtues like Kindness, Strength, and Truth cannot possibly be embodied completely by any mortal being. It is fairly bold of later sources to construe Avraham as the model of kindness, Yitzhak as the champion of strength, or Yaakov as the embodiment of truth, when only God is capable of such uncorrupted virtue. As the Psalmist ([117:2](#)) tells us—weaving together all three attributes into testament of praise: “For God’s *kindness* has *overpowered* us, and *true* is the Lord forever—Hallelujah!”

HALAKHAH: NAVIGATING BETWEEN UNITY AND PLURALITY

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Book Review of [Staying Human: A Jewish Theology for the Age of Artificial Intelligence](#)

In the early sixties, Rabbi Norman Lamm published [an article in Tradition](#) in which he stressed the importance of the *unity theme* in Judaism: the metaphysically monistic idea that in an important sense all of reality is *really one*.¹ God’s own oneness

with substantive revisions and replies to the critique of Rabbi Wurzbarger, in Norman Lamm, [Faith and Doubt: Studies in](#)

is of course a cardinal Jewish principle. Those who think of God as the *only* reality—all the rest of “this” being a mere illusion—have a fairly quick route from God’s own oneness to the very strong monistic conclusion that the diversity and distinction we seem to encounter is a *mere* seeming.² But even those of us who won’t go that far down the acosmic road will likely take seriously that God is the *ens realissimum*—the *most* real being (a plausible interpretation of *Yesodei Hatorah* 1:4). And even those who don’t understand how one thing could be “more real” than another will still think that all of creation depends in a rather deep and intimate way on God, and so that the selfsame divine creative imprint is to be found everywhere and “all at once” (at least from God’s perspective) in all things.³ This leads naturally even if not inevitably to the conclusion that the diversity and distinction we encounter, even if real, is at best second-class, at worst highly misleading. As R. Lamm puts it right at the beginning of his essay, “The theme of the *Shema*...underlies every single aspect of Jewish life and thought and permeates every page of its vast literature. So powerful is this vision of God’s unity that inevitably it must express the corollary that the divine unity is the source of a unity that encompasses all existence” (42). Fragmentation and fracture are like ontological shadows. Deep down beneath, or lying just beyond, all the differences we

see, is the Master of the Universe—whose oneness accounts for the organic unity of the whole cosmos.

A year later, Rabbi Walter Wurzburger published a reply, in which he stressed the importance, especially for halakhic Judaism, but also for a moral outlook more generally, of a metaphysical pluralism: of the existence, depth, and even ultimacy of genuine distinctions in the world.⁴ He noted that the texts and practices R. Lamm marshaled in support of the unity theme are extra-halakhic—they overwhelmingly derive from Kabbalistic sources, and aren’t generally taken to have the normative force of Halakhah proper; they include such things as the recitation of *yihudim*, and of *k-gavna* and the *Lekha Dodi* hymn. Notwithstanding R. Lamm’s beautiful interpretation of the prohibited 39 categories of labor on Shabbat—as in one fell swoop we integrate our personalities and lives that are otherwise so fragmented into the variegated pursuits of our workdays—halakhic manifestations of the unity theme seem to be thin on the ground. And it’s not hard to understand why. Distinction and difference are at the heart of Halakhah, and of normativity more generally. Pretty clearly there has to be a plurality of things, some sacred and some profane, some kosher and some non-kosher, some good and some evil, in order for Halakhah and morality to even make any sense. And if Halakhah

[Traditional Jewish Thought](#) (KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 2007), 42-67.

² For an excellent recent philosophical analysis of this sort of view, see Samuel Lebens, “[Nothing Else](#),” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11:2 (2019):91-110.

³ For an elaboration on what’s meant here, see sec. 1.1 of my “[Dependence, Transcendence, and Creaturely Freedom: On](#)

[the Incompatibility of Three Theistic Doctrines](#),” *Mind* 130:520 (2021): 1099-1127.

⁴ Walter S. Wurzburger, “[Pluralism and the Halakhah](#),” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, 4:2 (Spring 1962): 221-240.

and morality run deep—if they are part of the basic furniture of reality—then the distinctions needed to make sense of them would have to run equally deep.

I understand if this all seems rather abstruse. People’s attention spans and patience for abstract theology must have been much greater back in the sixties. (Or, illustrious Jewish thinkers simply cared less about whether their audience could relate. I don’t know which of these is right.) But I actually think the core issue was and remains pressing, religiously, morally, and societally. As R. Wurzburger himself acknowledges, the monistic impulse is part and parcel of the religious one; it’s hard to imagine an authentic religious orientation that leaves fragmentation as ultimate or final.⁵ It’s unsurprising that the mystic is so often a monist. But, on the other hand, it’s undoubtedly true that as halakhic Jews we constantly find ourselves drawing distinctions. How do we hold on to these tendencies together? The issue is morally pressing because of the myriad ways in which the question of monism vs. pluralism connects to a host of ethical questions, including what the correct theory of right and wrong action is, what might rationally justify purely altruistic behavior, and how we ought to balance individual liberty against the collective good. William James, no fan of monism himself, saw clearly just how much the *issue* of monism matters: after brooding over the subject for many years, he concluded that it was “the most central of all philosophic problems, central because so pregnant. I mean by this that if you know whether a man is a

decided monist or a decided pluralist, you perhaps know more about the rest of his opinions than if you give him any other name ending in *ist*.”⁶ And it was pressing at the societal level—at least in Western liberal democracies—because of the (perceived or real) widespread social atomization that came along with capitalism, division of labor, and increased specialization. R. Lamm was explicit that he was attempting to combat, or at least curtail, the ills of exactly these socially fragmenting trends. His article was meant as a bulwark against the excesses of pluralism.

The pendulum has arguably now swung *very* far the other way, a development that serves as the backdrop to Harris Bor’s timely book, [*Staying Human: A Jewish Theology for the Age of Artificial Intelligence*](#), (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2021). The subtitle isn’t perfect; the book isn’t so much about artificial intelligence as such, as about the specter of a technological singularity, in which an artificial superintelligence emerges—a being vastly more intelligent than humans—and in the process effectively swallows us pitiful little human beings, “integrating” us into a single, enormously powerful and knowledgeable system. If you don’t have any futurist or science-fictional sympathies, you might be rolling your eyes. I for one—bracketing my religious convictions for a moment—think this scenario has a non-trivial chance of coming to pass in the not-too-distant

⁵ See the first note in Wurzburger’s article.

⁶ William James, [*Pragmatism*](#), Lecture IV “The One and the Many”.

future. The thought of many of us plugging permanently in to the Metaverse—whether for kicks or of necessity— all the while being supplied with nutrients unawares, is no longer just [an abstract philosophical thought experiment](#) proposed to test the truth of hedonism, or just a [science fictional dystopia](#): it's *realistic* science-fictional dystopia. (Again, that's bracketing my religious convictions.) But whatever you think of the future, the present is already much more like this scenario than we'd like to dwell on for very long. Every time Gmail uncannily predicts exactly what I was about to write next, I get a little nauseous. Every day that more power and information is transferred to just a few corporations, I get a little more nervous. When the news tells us of an [academic paper](#) or [poem](#) composed entirely by AI, I get anxious. How long until we're superseded and subsumed? The ills of a creeping, flattening, singularity are increasingly evident. But very few people are trying to address these ills through a Jewish lens.⁷ As I see it, Bor's book is meant as a Jewish bulwark against the excesses of monism, a mirror image of R. Lamm's article.

It's not just technological advances that are heading in the monistic direction. There are intellectual currents that seem to be flowing the same way. Study of Spinoza, whose metaphysical system sees

all of us as mere modifications of a single, infinitely intelligent and powerful substance, has experienced a renaissance over the last few decades. And interest in Spinoza hasn't been confined to the halls of the academy: as Bor notes, a number of recent books have tried to package Spinoza's philosophy for a more popular audience.⁸ Beginning around a decade ago, philosophers started to take seriously the possible truth of monism itself—not just as an interesting historical curiosity—after it had been effectively moribund for over a century.⁹

What does Judaism have to say in response? You might find it surprising that much of Bor's book, which is supposed to present a *Jewish* theology for the age of artificial intelligence, is dedicated to Spinoza and Heidegger. The former is famously a borderline case of a Jewish philosopher; the latter was famously a Nazi sympathizer, and, more to our point, pretty clearly *not* a Jewish philosopher. But despite them taking up the bulk of the book, their role, as I see it, is primarily to set up the dilemma, not to address it. Spinoza is portrayed as the arch-monist; his philosophical system as a paradigm of rationalism, necessity, uniformity, abstraction, and enlightenment, with all their attendant advantages. Heidegger is portrayed as the arch-pluralist; his

⁷ For some of the exceptions, see Hava Tirosh-Samuels, "[In Pursuit of Perfection: The Misguided Transhumanist Vision](#)," *Theology and Science* 16:2 (2018):, 200 – 222, and David Zvi Kalman, "[Levinas Would Have Banned Facial Recognition Technology. We Should Too](#)," *Tablet Magazine* (January 12, 2021) (accessed August 18, 2022).

⁸ See e.g. Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, [Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity](#),

(Nextbooks/Schocken, 2009); Steven Nadler, [Think Least of Death: Spinoza on How to Live and How to Die](#) (Princeton University Press, 2020).

⁹ The seminal article is Jonathan Schaffer, "[Monism: The Priority of the Whole](#)," *Philosophical Review* 119:1 (2010): 31-76.

philosophical work as championing subjectivity, freedom, heterogeneity, concreteness, and the need for mystical insight, with all of *their* attendant advantages. The purpose of laying out their views is to exhibit the attraction of each pole. Each philosopher serves the intended purpose well enough.

Of course, that doesn't mean no other philosopher could have served that purpose as well, or better. I would have preferred James to Heidegger. The former addresses the question of monism vs. pluralism much more directly and in greater detail, and systematically plumps for all the interrelated advantages that Bor highlights.¹⁰ But maybe that's a matter of taste. And some social scientists might point to the huge increase in political and social polarization, especially over the past decade, and characterize it as a Babel-like fragmentation of the relatively unified mid-century society that Rabbis Lamm and Wurzburger inhabited.¹¹ Maybe that's right. But that just means that in our age we're somehow suffering from the ills of monism *and* the ills of pluralism at the same time. That does nothing to mitigate the need for reflection on what's right and good in both monism and pluralism.

Bor's central insight, and his central thesis if I have him right, is that the *mitzvot* provide us a distinctively Jewish way of simultaneously living the two poles. As he puts it:

Halachah requires us to walk the Way conscious of that which has been revealed by the Torah, both divine otherness and oneness, the God of heaven and earth. Everything we encounter on the way is real and concrete, to be taken at face value. Every facet of the material world makes demands upon us and must be known, scrutinized, theorized, and acted upon according to directives and principles which require forethought, application, and intentionality. At the same time, through the practice of Halachah, we nurture the ability to reach beyond the material to the one in which we all partake, *Dasein's* ground, the ground on which Halachah's paths stretch across. (180-181)

To be sure, living a life of *mitzvot* doesn't necessarily provide us with an intellectually satisfying reconciliation. But it should have been clear to anyone who read the exchange between R. Lamm and R. Wurzburger that providing such a resolution might well be an impossible task. Each side acknowledges the truth on the other side—and agrees that monism and pluralism are apparently

¹⁰ In addition to Lectures III and IV of his [Pragmatism](#), see his [A Pluralistic Universe](#).

¹¹ Jonathan Haidt, "[Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid](#)," *The Atlantic* (May 2022).

irreconcilable. They differ only regarding which we should be attending to. (For a light-hearted reprieve from the heaviness of this discussion, you might watch [the PTA-meeting scene from the Simpsons](#), which reflects a similar dynamic.) If Bor is right, though, the Way of Halakhah provides us an opportunity to experience and symbolize a duality that we can't fully wrap our heads around.

It's in the details of his interpretation of the Jewish calendrical *mitzvot* that Bor is most penetrating. His suggestion (189) that "Rosh Hashana is the moment of creation when humanity became separate from God. God is encountered in his transcendence...Yom Kippur takes us back to the God of oneness, immanence, the God that preceded creation..." is substantiated by his examination of the laws and liturgy of the two days (189-195), and seems to me, at any rate, to be true to our religious phenomenology. Our detachment from the physical world, our letting go of petty differences, and our embrace of divine purification and cleansing, leaves us with a feeling of wholeness, of ceasing to be pulled this way and that. There's definitely something jarring about his formulation that "Yom

Kippur is Spinoza's festival" (193), but it points toward something true.

Sukkot then manages to dwell on both themes together: the "removal of physical protection from the elements", in order to then sit "under the Succah...absorbed metaphorically into the *Shechinah*", coupled with the binding together of the four species and shaking the bundle in all directions, makes palpable the unity and wholeness of reality. There is no greater joy than that. But it is a joy that also finds expression in the seventy bull offerings, traditionally taken to symbolize the vast variety of peoples and languages. Again, Bor argues, the symbolism is borne out in the laws and liturgy of Sukkot, and it's true to our religious phenomenology. Indeed, I think there's still more halakhic and aggadic evidence for the centrality to Sukkot of the monism/pluralism duality than Bor adduces.¹²

Bor moves through the rest of the Jewish calendar, weaving between unity and difference. It's hard to do justice to his many fascinating interpretive suggestions. But his discussion of Shabbat, which

¹² The position of R. Akiva (*Mishnah Sukkah* 3:4) that we take only one of each of the four species seems evidently connected to his own daring formulation that "*Pri Etz Hadar*, this is the Holy One Blessed Be He...*Kapot Temarim*, this is the Holy One Blessed Be He...*va-anaf etz avot*, this is the Holy One Blessed Be He...*ve-arvei nahal*, this is the Holy One Blessed Be He (*Pesikta De-Rab Kahana, Piska* 27). And yet we don't forgo any of the individual and distinctive species—we can't get by with just three of them (*Tosefta Sukkah* 2:10). A good number of *Rishonim* actually endorse R. Akiva's position as a matter of Halakhah (Ramban commentary on Leviticus 23 and his glosses on Rabad's *Hibur Hilkhoh Lulav, Or Zarua* Part 2, *Siman* 308). In what seems to be too striking to be a mere

coincidence, a number of *Rishonim* working in the same milieu—or connected familiarly—also insisted that the leaves of the lulav be completely bound together, to symbolize the absolutely unity in the world of the *sefirot* (*Mar'ot Ha-tzov'ot*, R. David ben R. Yehuda He-hasid, grandson of Ramban, cited in *Ginzei Hag ha-Sukkot*, Y.Y. Stahl(ed.), 14 ff.; *Sefer Rokeach Siman* 220); and yet those same *Rishonim* approvingly cite the custom that on *Hoshana Rabba* we unbind the leaves of the lulav, symbolizing a return to the world of plurality. Again, we find a way to experience and symbolize both underlying unity and genuine difference. See also R. Yaakov Nagen's fascinating *Water, Creation, and Immanence: The Philosophy of the Festival of Sukkot* [Hebrew], (Maggid Books, 2013).

caps the book, is perhaps the most profound. He notes that “On Shabbat, the roles we generally perform are forbidden or forgotten. I am not a lawyer. My friend is not a dentist, teacher, or producer.” (226) This paradoxically gives rise, as Bor notes, to two opposing ways of being. On the one hand, the suspension of roles makes it so that “existence is undifferentiated, but this is not an indifference ‘which yawns at us,’ to use Heidegger’s words, but an encounter with oneness.” (ibid.) On the other hand, the suspension of roles allows us to temporarily resist the all-consuming and objectifying march of technology, the latter of which makes each of us a mere role-player, a tool in some larger project that isn’t one’s own. On Shabbat we manage in one fell swoop, and by virtue of the very same cessation of labor, to encounter both the oneness of the whole and our ineliminable individuality. “Shabbat allows us to be bored not by or with something but in a profound way. It values us in our uniqueness. It connects us with others. Unlike the technological worldview, it provides an experience of the All, without seeking to obliterate us.” (227)

Bor’s book contains no concrete proposals for contending with the sweeping impact of artificial intelligence in general, or the prospect of a singularity in particular. As I see things, that’s an urgent desideratum, and more Jewish thinkers and halakhic authorities need to take it up. But the book makes a compelling case that a halakhic way of life is an excellent preparation for what lies ahead.

Whatever its merits in addressing the future, it has already enriched my experience of Halakhah in the present.¹³

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