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WHERE IN MY APARTMENT SHOULD I LIGHT MY HANUKKAH LAMPS?

DAN MARGULIES

I have been living in dorms and apartments since the Hanukkah of 2008 and have often felt that the instructions given to apartment dwellers are incomplete, contradictory, or confusing. The reasons for this confusion reach all the way back to the original *sugyot* in the Talmud which discuss the basic laws of Hanukkah lamps. These *sugyot* raise questions for how to apply the laws which were developed in the ancient world to that of the modern urban apartment dweller, and have bearing on the practical application of the laws of Hanukkah to the ideal place for lighting the Hanukkah lamps.[1]

The discussion of the ideal location of the Hanukkah lamps begins in the *baraita* quoted in *masekhet Shabbat* 21b, which gives three distinct instructions:

> The Rabbis taught: One is required to place the Hanukkah lamp at the exterior of the entrance of one's house. If one dwells in an upper story, one should place it in the window which faces the public street. And during a time of danger [due to persecution] it suffices to place it on one's table [inside the house].

In pre-modern times and using pre-modern construction technology, these instructions were straightforward. However, modern construction techniques enable us to build multi-story buildings (major cities often have apartment buildings with dozens of stories!), which raises a significant question that was barely addressed in pre-modern times—what to do if the window is too high?

Regarding the absolute height of the Hanukkah lamp, the Talmud quotes the position of Rabbi Tanhum (*Shabbat* 21b-22a):

> A Hanukkah lamp which was placed higher than 20 cubits is disqualified, like a *sukkah* and [the beam across] an alley [required for an *Eruv*].

In talmudic times, when two-story buildings were commonplace in urban areas, but three-story buildings were almost unheard of, these two halakhic requirements did not contradict. Even in Rome itself, the height of *insulae* was limited by the Emperor Nero to within 60 Roman feet or around 17 meters. To place the Hanukkah lamp in the window of a second story apartment almost certainly meant that it was still lower than 20 cubits.

Although Rif (9b) follows the order of the *gemara* (21b) and records these two questions of the placement the Hanukkah lamp separately, Rambam in *Hilkhot Hanukkah* 4:7 juxtaposes the two, implying that they exist in a certain amount of tension:

> If one dwells in an upper story one should place it in the window which faces the

[1] I strongly recommend Rabbi Moshe Walter's extensive article in *Hakira* 16, which touches on many of these issues and cites many valuable sources. Additionally, Rabbi David Brofsky has a brief discussion of this question in *Hilkhot Mo'adim* p. 353-354, although he does not go into detail or name his sources.

> public street. But a Hanukkah lamp which was placed higher than 20 cubits accomplishes nothing since it will not be noticed.

By including these two *halakhot* in the same paragraph, Rambam implies that if one's upper story apartment window is higher than 20 cubits, one would not fulfill the *mitzvah* by placing the lamp in the window. One must light elsewhere in order to perform the *mitzvah*; it is impossible to do so in a window higher than 20 cubits.

Ritva (*Shabbat* 21b, Moshe Goldstein ed.) addresses this question explicitly, but arrives at the opposite conclusion. We should not read the 20 cubit maximum height as the determinative criterion for the Hanukkah lamp; rather, since one who lives in an upper story apartment has no other option, the requirement to place the lamp in the window is determinative:

> And if one dwells in an upper story one should place it in the window which faces the public street. And this was stated without qualification, meaning that even if it is higher than 20 cubits above the people in the public street, we measure according to him [the apartment dweller] since it is otherwise impossible.

According to Ritva, the only reasonable way to understand the 20 cubit requirement is to see the measurement from the perspective of the person lighting the lamp—is it 20 cubits above the floor of the apartment? If the lamp were required to be within 20 cubits of street level then it would be almost impossible for people living above the second floor of an apartment building to perform the *mitzvah*.

Ritva's line of reasoning is somewhat paralleled by Raaviah (#843) who states, quoting his father Rabbenu Yoel, that the 20 cubit requirement only applies to someone lighting a lamp out in the street (as is ideal), but in cases where one lights indoors, as permitted by the *gemara* in times of persecution, and which became customary among most Ashkenazi Jews even in times of safety (cf. Tosafot *Shabbat* 21b s.v. de-'i; Rema 671:7, 671:8, 672:2; *Arukh Ha-shulhan Orah Hayyim* 671:24), there is no maximal height:

> "A Hanukkah lamp which was placed higher than 20 cubits is disqualified, like a *sukkah* and [the beam across] an alley." I received from our master my father and teacher [Rabbenu Yoel Halevi] that this applied specifically in their times when they would place it outdoors; however, for us who place it indoors it is suitable even higher than 20 cubits, like what was said about the *sukkah* "that if the walls extend to the roof it is suitable even taller than 20 cubits since it will catch the eye." But in my [Raaviah's] mind there is room for one who is discerning to distinguish these cases.

Rabbenu Yoel's recommendation is to place the Hanukkah lamp in the window despite it being above 20 cubits from the street, because of the principle that the eye follows the walls up even beyond 20 cubits. Besides being questioned by his own son Raaviah, his opinion is quoted and rejected by *Tur* (*Orah Hayyim* 671) as well as other later codes.

The position of Ritva escaped discussion in the subsequent halakhic literature because his commentary to *Shabbat* was not printed until 5750 (1989); however, the debate around the application of the 20 cubit maximum height when lighting indoors continued, centered around the position of Rabbenu Yoel. Rabbi Hizkiya da Silva in his *Peri Hadash* (*Orah Hayyim*

671:5) claims:

> It is obvious that if the window is above 20 cubits that one must place it at the entrance of his house.

Rabbi da Silva's reading is based on Rambam. The juxtaposition of the 20 cubit maximum to the window placement seems to suggest that the requirement to place the lamp in the window is delimited by the maximum height; thus, as Rabbi da Silva concludes, it should be impossible to fulfil the requirement by placing the lamp in the window if that window is higher that 20 cubits from street-level. Even if the lamp cannot be placed in a location where passersby in the public street will see it, nonetheless, it can be placed at the entrance of the apartment where it will be more visible to both the residents of the apartment and anyone who passes their doorway, and which fulfils the other Talmudic ideal for placement—just outside the entrance.

Others proposed alternative interpretations, bringing Rambam closer to the more permissive positions of Rabbenu Yoel and Ritva. Rabbi Mas'ud Hai Rakkah in his *Maaseh Rokeah* commentary on Rambam's *Mishneh Torah* suggests:

> "If one dwells in an upper story one should place it in the window which faces the public street." It seems that this refers to [placing it at] the interior, like the interpretation of Rashi, for if it referred to placing it at the exterior, it is possible that it would be above 20 cubits if the upper story were that tall.

According to Rabbi Rakkah, those apartment dwellers who place their Hanukkah lamps in the window are meant to place them at the interior side of the window—the lamp is barely visible to the passersby in the public street anyway (even below 20 cubits) and its primary purpose is to be visible to those living in the apartment. The 20 cubit measurement is measured from the public street, but like Rabbenu Yoel and the Ritva, is inapplicable when one lights indoors.

The position of Rambam and *Peri Hadash* is adopted by later *poskim*; though some of them continue to bring Rabbenu Yoel back into the conversation. Notably, Rabbi Shmuel Loew in his *Mahatzit Ha-shekel* super-commentary on *Shulhan Arukh* writes (671:6):

> The 20 cubits are certainly to be measured from the street level and not from the floor of the house, since the reason one does not fulfil the *mitzvah* [if the lamp is] above 20 cubits is because it does not catch the eye, and it is crucial that it catch the eye of passersby in the public street. However, for us [who because of circumstance light indoors and thus] where the [primary purpose is to serve as a] reminder to the residents of the house, it is sufficient if it is within 20 cubits of the floor of the house. Nonetheless, it seems that even for us, if the window is above 20 cubits from street level, it is better to place it near the entrance within one handbreadth of the doorpost, since above 20 cubits it does not serve as a reminder for the passersby in the public street and it serves as a better reminder to the residents of the house if it is near the entrance.

Here we can see Rabbi Loew engaging with the rationale of Ritva and Rabbenu Yoel—that

the 20 cubits should be measured from the floor of the house—even though he prefers the conclusion of Rabbi da Silva that the 20 cubits be measured from street level. It seems that although he is convinced that Ritva and Rabbenu Yoel's position is not adopted as the *halakhah*, he recognizes that since in his day it had become customary for most Ashkenazi Jews to light indoors, the position of Rabbenu Yoel is still worth engaging with. A similar line of reasoning can be found in Rabbi Yosef Teomim's *Peri Megadim*, *Mishbetzot Zahav* 671:5, although Rabbi Teomim ends up slightly more supportive of the position of Rabbenu Yoel to light in the window.

The position of Rabbi da Silva and Rabbi Loew, adopting the less flexible interpretation of Rambam's position and rejecting the position of Ritva, is adopted by later *poskim* such as Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (*Shaar Ha-tziyyun* 671:33, 42) and Rabbi Shlomo Ganzfried (*Kitzur Shulhan Arukh* 139:8). This also appears to be the position of Rabbi Yehiel Mikhel Epstein (*Arukh Ha-shulhan Orah Hayyim* 671:22).

Rabbi Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg was asked regarding someone who lives on the fifth story of an apartment building. He responds (*Seridei Esh* 3:61:1) with full endorsement of the position of Rabbi da Silva.

> [The answer] is obviously like what *Peri Hadash* wrote in §270 [*sic*] and quoted by *Mahatzit Ha-shekel* that one should put the lamps by the entrance… However, one who lives on the fifth story and cannot place the lamps at the entrance to the courtyard must certainly place the lamps by the entrance of his home like *Peri Hadash* wrote, and they serve no purpose to the interior.

Rabbi Weinberg makes clear that ideally one who lives in an apartment would light their Hanukkah lamps at the entrance to the "courtyard," presumably referring to the entrance of the building itself or its stairway, but that if this is impossible for logistical reasons, the next best place is the exterior of the entrance to the apartment itself.

A decade later, Rabbi Shmuel Ha-levi Wosner was asked the same question (*Shevet Ha-levi* 4:65), and defended the common practice to rely on the position of Rabbenu Yoel (and Ritva) to light in the window even above 20 cubits.

> At the heart of the question is [the fact] that our case [of being] above 20 cubits is not comparable to the case of above 20 cubits mentioned in the Talmud and *Shulhan Arukh* §671. [In the case referenced in the Talmud] one does not fulfil the *mitzvah* even minimally, since in that case [where the lamp is outdoors] even the residents of the apartment are above 20 cubits [from street-level]. However, in our case [where one lights] indoors, and [measured with respect to indoors] there are people lower than 20 cubits, one fulfils the *mitzvah* this way since [the lamp] is visible to the residents of the apartment. So it seems from *Peri Megadim Mishbetzot Zahav ad loc.* §§5 who wrote that one may light in the window even above 20 cubits since there is still some level of visibility for passersby in the public street … And the truth is that there are neighbors in the other directions who can see the Hanukkah lamp since for them it is lower than 20 cubits.

Rabbi Wosner is determined to defend the common practice which had developed (perhaps

due to the general leniency regarding the placement of the Hanukkah lamps as attested by Rema and *Arukh Ha-shulhan* et al.) to place the Hanukkah lamp in the window (like Rabbenu Yoel and Ritva) and not by the entrance (like *Peri Hadash*). He cleverly suggests that although in Talmudic times a high apartment was so uncommon that a Hanukkah lamp placed in the window and too high above the public street would be invisible and thus inadequate for the *mitzvah*, nowadays, because apartments are often built close enough together, the window of one is visible by neighbors in a nearby building at nearly the same level. According to Rabbi Wosner, this satisfies the requirement that the Hanukkah lamp be within 20 cubits of a place where it is visible by passersby, and thus the window, not the entrance, is the correct place for the Hanukkah lamp, even in a high apartment.

Around the same time, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein was asked about the same question and responded (*Iggerot Moshe Orah Hayyim* 4:125) with a description of his own personal practice. (N.B. Rabbi Feinstein lived at 455 FDR Dr. in New York—a large multi-story apartment building.)

> And this is how I practice—I light in the window which is visible to passersby. This was the practice of my esteemed father *ztz"l* and many other greats of previous generations since the time that it became impossible to light outdoors. And this is proper according to the [letter of the] law and this is found in *Mishnah Berurah* §§38 and this is how you, my esteemed colleague, should practice.

Rabbi Feinstein, basing himself on *Mishnah Berurah*, who cites his ruling from *Magen Avraham* 671:8, concludes that although lighting in the window sacrifices the ideal of being within 20 cubits of street-level, it is still practically the best way to ensure the maximum number of passersby see the Hanukkah lamps.

It is clear from his recommendation that Rabbi Feinstein sees the ideal placement of the Hanukkah lamp as hinging primarily on maximizing the experiential *pirsumei nisa*—publicizing the miracle. Regardless of any textual arguments for or against, Rabbi Feinstein tries to maximize the number of people who will actually see the Hanukkah lamp, even if it is placed more than 20 cubits above street-level. The alternative to this "practical" approach would be to view the entire question of the placement of the Hanukkah lamp formally, with strict parameters derived from the classical sources. Rambam, *Peri Hadash*, and Rabbi Weinberg are certainly in the formalist camp, while Rabbenu Yoel, Ritva, Rabbi Rakkah, Rabbi Wosner, and Rabbi Feinstein see the ideal placement of the Hanukkah lamp as a more elastic requirement, or at least see the formalisms as at most an ideal to strive for when there are no other competing concerns.

However, it is possible that these *poskim* only adopted the position mandating placing the Hanukkah lamp by the entrance because they were unaware that the position of Rabbenu Yoel (which was rejected by many contemporary and subsequent authorities) was corroborated and strengthened by the comments of Ritva which remained obscure until their publication in 1989. Thus, it would be worthwhile to consider the position of a *posek* who post-dates the publication of Ritva's commentary to *masekhet Shabbat*.

Although Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef, the current *Rishon Le-tzion* and Sephardic Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel, cites the position of Ritva, he nonetheless adopts the position of Rabbi da

Silva, ruling that apartment dwellers must light their Hanukkah lamps by the door and not the window if they live 9.6 meters above street level (*Yalkut Yosef Moadim — Hanukkah* §11, *Kitzur Shulhan Arukh Yalkut Yosef Orah Hayyim* 671:20).

In conclusion, although it would seem from the *gemara* that apartment dwellers living in lower stories should light their Hanukkah lamps in the window facing the public street, and there is some basis to maintaining this practice even in multi-story buildings where the window is above 20 cubits (as advanced by Rabbenu Yoel, Ritva, Rabbi Rakkah, Rabbi Wosner, and Rabbi Feinstein), many other prominent *poskim* reject that line of reasoning and maintain that a person living in a high story (above 20 cubits) should preferably light by the entrance and not the window. How one sees the application of the requirement and goal of *pirsumei nisa* greatly affects the conclusion one draws from exploration of this question.

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The Hasmoneans as a Paradigm for Modern Jewish Sovereignty

Shimshon HaKohen Nadel

With the miraculous return of the Jewish People to their ancestral homeland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, new questions arose which for 2000 years were but the subject of dreams. Among them: Can a democratic government be established in the Land of Israel or must a king be appointed? Must we appoint a Sanhedrin? What would be the mechanism for this? In the absence of a Jewish government, can we create our own army or civil-defense groups, or must we rely on the secular government for protection?,

Following the Second Aliyah, defense organizations like Bar-Giora, Hashomer, and Haganah were formed to protect the *yishuv* from theft and violence. At the time, there was much opposition by leading rabbis who questioned if members of the nascent Jewish settlement had the authority to 'go to war' against their enemies without a king or a Sanhedrin.

In a responsum (*Mishpat Kohen* 144) written to Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Pines in 1916, Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook defends the creation of Jewish militias and Jewish self-defense and justifies establishing a Jewish sovereign nation, even without a king or Sanhedrin.

Rav Kook argues that concerning issues of sovereignty, there may be a distinction between the ideal approach and one dictated by reality.

For example, Rav Kook points to an apparent contradiction in the Rambam: In *Hilkhot Melakhim* 1:3, Rambam rules that a king must be appointed by the Sanhedrin and by a prophet. Subsequently, in *Hilkhot Melakhim* 5:1, Rambam rules that a Sanhedrin must appoint the king, leaving out any mention of a prophet. Rav Kook reconciles the apparent contradiction by suggesting the latter ruling applies when there is no prophet. In such a case, an appointment by the Sanhedrin suffices.

Similarly, while ideally the King of Israel should descend from the House of David, Rambam (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 1:8-9) allows for a King from another tribe of Israel to rule on a temporary basis. Rav Kook defends the Hasmoneans, *kohanim* from the Tribe of Levi, and writes that while they should have at first refused the monarchy, or at least returned the throne to the House of David once peace reigned, they were appointed by the "consent" of the Sanhedrin and the Jewish Nation.

It is this same "consent of the Jewish Nation" that forms the basis for Rav Kook's argument justifying the creation of a modern Jewish sovereign state. He writes, "When there is no king, since the laws of government concern the general welfare of the Nation, the rights of government return to the Nation." The Jewish People have the right to self-determination and are granted the authority to create a government.

Rav Kook goes as far as saying that "any lawmaker that arises in Israel has the status of king concerning governing the state." He cites Rambam (*Hilkhot Sanhedrin* 4:13), who rules that

the Exilarch (*Reish Galuta*) in Babylonia had the status of king, and writes, "all the more so when there are leaders chosen by the Nation when she is in her sovereign land."

It is curious that Rav Kook draws upon the Hasmonean Dynasty. While the Hasmoneans are certainly the heroes of the Chanukah story, their end was not a pretty one. Plagued by corruption, political assassinations, and assimilation, they ultimately succumb to the very Hellenization that they had fought so hard against.

In his commentary to Deuteronomy 49:10, Ramban is particularly critical of the Hasmoneans. He indicts them for usurping the throne from the House of David as well as desecrating their priesthood, and sees their downfall as divine punishment.

It has even been suggested that the Sages intentionally downplayed the success of the Hasmoneans, which may explain why only a few, scant references to the Hasmoneans are found in the Talmud. In fact, the very topic of Hanukkah occupies only a minimal space in the Talmud. And when relating the Hanukkah story, the Talmud focuses solely on the miracle of the oil, leaving out the military victory (*Shabbat* 21b).

But Rav Kook saw the Hasmonean Dynasty as a paradigm for the creation of modern Jewish nation on its soil, in spite of their flaws. While they were not the picture of perfection, they restored Jewish sovereignty and ruled for over a century. Similarly, Rav Kook understood that it would be the secular Zionists and pioneers who would build the modern State of Israel.

This is consistent with much of Rav Kook's thought. He believed that, "in all aspects of life the secular awakens first, and afterwards the holy must awaken to complete the resuscitation of the secular" (*Ma'amarei ha-Ra'aya*, 404). In relation to the State of Israel, his son, Rav Z.Y. Kook, drawing upon *Me'ilah* 14a, would often say, "First we build, then we sanctify."

As the eight days of Hanukkah were established by our Sages as days of "thanksgiving and praise" (*Shabbat* 21b), now might be an appropriate time to reflect on how fortunate we are to have a Jewish State, even if it is still a 'work-in-progress.'

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On Candlelight

Matt Sienkiewicz

It was a hit because it's catchy, it's dancy, and the guys can really sing. And, let's be honest, the Hanukkah pop song pantry is pretty bare. There's some esoteric Matisyahu, some historically confusing Woody Guthrie, and a bunch of Adam Sandler nonsense. After that, my nana's endless stash of sugar free *kichlach* starts looking relatively appetizing by comparison. So that's the simple explanation, the *peshat*: The Maccabeats' "Candlelight" works because it sounds pretty good and the competition is limited in both scope and quality.

But what, beyond its obvious sonic merit and colorful video, made the Maccabeats' adaptation of Taio Cruz's "Dynamite" a sensation capable of garnering tens of millions of YouTube hits?

Such analytical journeys often benefit from a kickstart of personal experience, and for that my own will have to suffice. On whatever day in 2010 I first heard "Candlelight," my initial reaction was one of joy, but also something else. The song was both fun and funny. Now, sure, it's a playful concept and there's something clever in its execution. But, for me at least, that wasn't it. In fact, I remember being struck primarily by the song's lyrical sincerity--think about the song's bridge, an almost embarrassing paean to the Great Menorah. My amusement, I think, resulted instead from a clash of expectations. In my worldview, admittedly disproven by the case at hand, the cultural spheres of Orthodox Judaism and danceclub sugarpop existed on different planes, never to be mixed. Seeing them in such an unapologetic embrace resulted, for me, in a sense of comic incongruity. Like a roller skating dog, "Candlelight" provoked a satisfying and comedic feeling of "that can't be and yet it is."

Of course, "Candlelight" is more than just funny and perhaps to those more familiar with the culture of Yeshiva University, it wasn't all that incongruous in the first place. Nonetheless, my reaction identifies a central quality of the song's construction: it is, above all, hybrid. This descriptor is used in a variety of fashions these days, with different industrial metaphors having significant ramifications on how we come to understand the nature of cultural products such as "Candlelight." Is the song a hybrid like a car might be, having two separate traits that work together in symbiosis but remain fundamentally separate? Is it a case of Jewish tradition grafted onto American culture, the suture tight but the seams apparent?

Or is "Candlelight" a hybrid like a pluot, in which the component elements are identifiable yet inseparable, combining to make something somehow both new and old, one and two? Just as you can't take apart the pluot and point to the plum parts, maybe it's not so easy to separate a Maccabeat's experience of singing *niggunim* on Shabbos afternoon from his humming along to a pop station a few minutes after nightfall. The one might be constantly informing and transforming the other, resulting in "Candlelight" and a bunch of other other catchy, category-bending tunes.

The beauty of the song, and perhaps some element of its popularity, results from it being readily interpretable through both lenses. Like Jewish-Americans themselves, the song offers a simultaneous feeling of cultural distinctiveness and deep, thorough integration into a

sprawling and vibrant Americanism. Attempting to define the slippery notion of the hybrid as it relates to minority cultures, the post-colonial theorist Anjali Prabhu suggests two primary orientations for thinking about the phenomenon: diaspora and creolization. Diasporic thinking, she argues, looks back in time to an originary point, with a particular focus on the anchoring effect of collective traumas, passed down from generation to generation. It stares backward, overlooking the the diverse historical experiences of group members in order to identify something upon which a sense of unity, strained though it might be, can be built. Creolization, on the other hand, is focused on the now. It points to the inevitable truth that people don't live in an originary past and that what it means to be a member of a minority group today is the result of a historical process deeply informed by a variety of external influences. Furthermore, it is a perspective steeped in the idea that minorities not only transform fundamentally in the cauldron of a host culture, but also that these hosts will be transformed in turn by the presence of new minorities. The diasporist says we are American-Jews because we live in the United States and can point back to a tradition indelibly inscribed on an ancient past. The creolist counters that we are American-Jews because we have changed in America and America has changed us.

"Candlelight" is remarkable in its ability to attest to both things at once. Its narrative, the Hanukkah story, is a paradigmatic tale of collective, ancient, diasporic trauma. It is a battle against the Mighty Greeks who threaten to strip the Jews of their origin story in the name of an all-consuming Hellenism. The Jews fight back and are wounded. But they survive, emerging with a signature image by which to remember the ordeal. In the song's aforementioned soaring bridge, the Maccabeats ask us all to envision collectively the miraculous menorah, its single drop of oil overcoming the indignities of the temple's defilement and the fear of fading away. It is a magical, perhaps mythical, moment back to which we can all return when our differences start to obscure our unity.

This backward-looking diasporic orientation is hard to deny. But what of the more intertwined, creolized version of hybridity? From this perspective, a picture emerges in which even the ostensibly secular, non-Jewish elements of "Candlelight" come to evoke the fundamental complexities of American-Jewish life and identity. First, there's the song's engagement with popular music and particularly the holiday pop genre. If Jews can co-create "White Christmas" and "Santa Baby," then certainly there's something nicely parallel in the fact that Taio Cruz and Mike Tompkins (upon whose arrangement "Candlelight" is based) are credited on the most famous Hanukkah song of the 21st century. Interfaith cultural collaboration is not something that American-Jews do, it's part of who American-Jews are, with plenty of gold records to prove it. "Candlelight" serves to extend and expand this aspect of American-Jewish identity.

The a capella nature of the track also attests to a certain creolized aspect of American-Jewish culture. The genre is, of course, synonymous with the American college campus, an institution held in famously, if perhaps stereotypically, high regard by the Jewish community. American-Jews attend college at an unusually high rate and make up larger portions of faculty than pure population numbers would suggest they should. Does this make college or a capella somehow Jewish? Certainly not in any exclusive fashion. It does, however, point to the undeniable fact that American-Jewish life has been profoundly impacted by the secular American college campus and vice versa. That Yeshiva University has a famous a capella troop simply cannot be understood via a worldview in which cultures are stable entities or

art forms are considered the "property" of one demographic group or another. The Maccabeats are neither a pure expression of essential Jewish culture nor evidence of adulteration by the non-Jewish world. They are part of an ever-evolving cultural collaboration in which Jews of various backgrounds have long participated. The creation and success of "Candlelight" are testaments to this complexity.

Are all of these elements consciously apparent to the listener? Perhaps not. And yet there is nonetheless a sense in which the Maccabeats' utterly unapologetic embrace of seeming contradiction remains a central aspect of the song's joyous nature. "Candlelight" is many things at once. It is both a serious ode to faith and a smirking joke about popular culture. It is simultaneously wholly original and utterly, plagiaristically derivative. It is, like the rest of American-Jewish life, both diasporic and creolized. Belonging to a minority culture often requires a willingness to accept paradox not as a temporary means of getting by, but as a fulfilling, potentially permanent way of life. "Candlelight," with admirable joy, puts this contradiction to music. It is also, of course, pretty catchy.

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Playing Dreidel with Kafka and Rabbi Nahman

Joey Rosenfeld

Sometimes, two great souls, separated on the pages of Jewish history by great distances in time, space, and disposition, are shown to have a certain closeness at their root and enter into dialogue with one another. One need not establish a historical or even theoretical relationship in order to discern a point of convergence between two witnesses to the particularly Jewish experience.

Two such souls are Rabbi Nahman of Breslov (1772-1810) and Franz Kafka (1883-1924), whose narrow bridge of similarity has not been traced outside of overzealous attempts at biographical parallelism or reductive comparisons of certain themes. However, as Rabbi Nahman writes, at times one *tzaddik* asks a question without an answer only to be answered by another *tzaddik* from a distant time and place. Their dreamlike correspondence across the void of time is written in air, neither one knowing that their questioning and answering relates to the other. In this essay, I would like to imagine a dialogue between Rabbi Nahman and Kafka about the *dreidel*, the spinning top that gyrates at the edge of the abyss in the dim Hanukkah candlelight.

In the rabbinic imagination, the celebration of the Jewish triumph over Greece goes beyond the historical Hasmoneans and their war against the Seleucids to commemorate the distinction between Judaism and Hellenism, between the analytic tradition of Athens and the non-rational tradition of Jerusalem.

In the eyes of the rabbis, the transient triumph of Hanukkah represented much more than the military, political victory emphasized by history. The war was over more than the right to practice Judaism openly, more than a resistance to the temptations of Hellas; it was a battle for a particularly rabbinic way of thinking, for knowledge that cannot be tested by logic because it lies beyond the limits of logic and reason.

Described by Maharal of Prague as the "interiority" of thought ("*pnimiyut ha-sekhel*"), the rabbis' attention to the contradictions and paradoxes at the heart of logical thinking led them beyond Greece's dependence on observation of empirical reality, which typifies what he calls the "exteriority" of thought ("*hitzoniyut ha-sekhel*").

In an attempt to occupy a middle path excluded by Aristotelian logic, rabbinic thinking attunes itself to the gaps and breaks that disrupt the absolutist pretensions of a thinking that self-assuredly claims to grasp the absolute. Human reason contains a violent, reductionist impulse, which seeks to view everything through the lens of the empirically knowable and dismiss all else as nonsense. It denies the existence of the transcendent and attempts to demonstrate that beyond the immanent order stands nothing but the immanent itself. The supernatural is domesticated by the laws of nature; rational thought is confined to the measurable and observable. It believes only in what it sees, reducing all else to the realm of illusion, imagination, and the irrational.

Operating outside the laws of non-contradiction, the rabbinic mind can occupy the non-place where opposites coexist in their mutual opposition. In contrast to the Platonic mind, wherein external identity veils an inner duality of form and matter, the rabbinic mind hears the murmuring of an internal unity within an external duality.

Instead of the static space of Greek truth we find the dynamic unfolding of "these and those" ("*eilu va-eilu*") perpetually spoken in the sustained utterance of revelation. If the Greek quest of Odysseus is the nostalgic homecoming to some originary truth, the Jewish wandering of Abraham is a movement towards the ever-receding limit of thought where faith is born.

Something happens, however, when reason breaks down. The origins of philosophical thought can be said to lie in the human subject's effort to know, with absolute clarity, the nature and identity of that which is perceived. Knowledge, thus defined, provides thinking subjects the necessary grounds to engage reality with certainty and self-assuredness. Rational categorizations demarcating the boundaries between one thing and the other create the semblance of an ordered world in which the laws of logic dictate the true and the possible. When the internal limits of rationalism are exposed, the ordered nature of things is undermined, throwing the thinking individual into a state of confusion and doubt.

In the ruins of reason the thinker peers into the vestiges of knowledge with hopes of discovering some trace of certainty, only to find contradictory fragments, which only deepen the doubtful nature of things. Arrested at the limit of thought, the thinker gazes out towards the coming abyss that surges in the absence of rational order. The systems that once operated assuredly now malfunction, substituting one in place of the other and the other in place of the one. In the morphing of self into other and center into the borders that demarcate it, the parameters that define things waver, revealing the void of meaninglessness that undergirds all meaning.

This tittering on the edge of reason, this crack-up in laughter at the crack-up of rationality, produces anxiety within the Greek hero, the lover of wisdom, the philosopher. In the throes of en*light*enment's darkening, the philosopher feverishly grasps at the remnants of reason in hopes of catching a part that will arrest the movement of imagination's play. In Kafka's parable, "The Top," we find the philosopher in the grips of madness trying, in spite of his incessant failure, to retain a vestige of rational certainty that in his mind promises to restore reason to its initial prestige:

> A certain philosopher used to hang about wherever children were at play. And whenever he saw a boy with a top, he would lie in wait. As soon as the top began to spin the philosopher went in pursuit and tried to catch it. He was not perturbed when the children noisily protested and tried to keep him away from their toy; so long as he could catch the top while it was spinning, he was happy, but only for a moment; then he threw it to the ground and walked away. For he believed that the understanding of any detail, that of a spinning top, for instance, was sufficient for the understanding of all things.
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> For this reason he did not busy himself with great problems, it seemed to him uneconomical. Once the smallest detail was understood, then everything was understood, which was why he busied himself only with the spinning top. And whenever preparations were being made for the spinning of the top, he hoped that

> this time it would succeed: as soon as the top began to spin and he was running breathlessly after it, the hope would turn to certainty, but when he held the silly piece of wood in his hand, he felt nauseated. The screaming of the children, which hitherto he had not heard, and which now suddenly pierced his ears, chased him away, and he tottered like a top under a clumsy whip.

Kafka's philosopher gravitates towards the children at play. The carefree attitude of young playfulness evokes a certain uneasiness within the philosopher. The meaningless rotation of things symbolized in the spinning top brings the philosopher face to face with the metamorphic nature of things when stripped of their rational constraints. Ignoring the "noisy protest" of the youngsters, who intuitively know the power of nonsensical play, he seeks to violently arrest the movement-of-thought so as to "catch the top" in its spinning, thus shedding enough light, "sufficient for the understanding of all things."

The paradoxical spinning, wherein the specific coordinates of the top remain indeterminate, results in the top's impossible presence both here and there at once. In eluding the here-and-now, the top occupies a space of simultaneity that moves in both directions at once, frustrating the efforts of the philosopher to catch it. When he does manage to catch the top, the illusory promise of reason's gift fades in his hands leaving only a "nauseating" reminder of the limits of rationality.

The philosophical quest sets out from the primordial ground-of-being and seeks to return back to its point of departure with a newfound grasp of the whole. Guarded by the laws of logic, the eagle-eyed philosopher sees a totalized whole whose laws of homogeneity dictate an equivalency between each and every thing. To understand the intelligible principles of the ideal is to grasp the sensible qualities that constitute the real, like Kafka's philosopher who believed that "the understanding of any detail, that of a spinning top, for instance, was sufficient for the understanding of all things."

Yet despite the philosopher's repeated failure in his quest to arrest the movement of the top, Kafka's antihero cannot free himself from the bounds of reason. The "hope" that persists in spite of the failure, the sense that could have led the philosopher beyond the path of rationality, is just as quickly transformed into the drive towards "certainty". The "breathlessness" of the chase, the suffocation of wonder, reignites the philosopher's craving for absolute knowledge, perpetuating the circular drive towards knowing, whose ending returns to its beginning, the "nauseating" sense of that which remains beyond reason.

For Kafka, life in (t)his world is marked by a certain type of invisibility. The pervasive sense of being watched, gazed at from a faceless beyond, introduces a sense of anxiety particular to the Kafkaesque gesture. Never certain of who or what is surveilling, the anonymous characters are always already under a judgment about which they have no say. The dreamscape of K's journey towards the unassailable castle morphs into the nightmarish impotency of the subject with respect to a faceless bureaucracy. There is lawlessness at the heart of the law, capriciousness at the heart of order. The "flawless bureaucracy" that executes the ordering, regulating, functional laws of existence is shown to be a system of flaws that accumulate around a gaping hole at the heart of being.

Law, for Kafka, represents not only the man-made laws of judges and governments but also the laws of nature, history, and even selfhood. In the collapse of law, the boundaries that separate order from disorder, fairness from cruelty, and self from other, are erased, resulting in an upheaval that displaces everything from its proper place. Nowhere is this upheaval more apparent than in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, wherein Gregor "woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, and found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin."

More unsettling than the absurd morphing of human into insect is the mutability of categories and species assumed to be absolute, which is disclosed in the morphing of one into the other. As the order of law comes undone in, and is replaced by, the lawlessness of order, like a spinning top where up is down and down is up, where center is marginalized and margin is central, the philosopher loses hope in rationality, himself becoming "like a top under a clumsy whip."

For Rabbi Nahman, the limit of rationality is a given, not only in the external sense that the thinker's capacity to think is limited and thus incapable of grasping the essence of thought, but even in the inherent sense that the secrets of existence remain beyond the confines of the imperfect tool of reason. For Rabbi Nahman, the point where reason reaches its limit and breaks down is the transitional point from which the individual can transcend rationality and move on to where faith alone grasps that which remains beyond reason.

Deeply aware of the philosophical questions that the great Jewish rationalists raise in their various works, Rabbi Nahman was less impressed by the questions themselves and more concerned with their rationally-derived answers, which remained contingent at best. Demanding of his adherents a strict attention to the pitfalls inherent in the rational approach to the world, Rabbi Nahman called for a sacred ignorance that led the spiritual seeker beyond rational knowing towards a sort of mystical "unknowing", which is "the apex of knowledge" and could be realized only through faith.

In contrast to Kafka's philosopher, who saw the metamorphosis of the sensible into the nonsensical as an allusion to the disorderly abyss that lay beneath the semblance of order, Rabbi Nahman saw the maddening gyrations of existence as a hint towards the unity of faith and the faith of unity that undergirds the natural order of things. Like Kafka's philosopher, who tried to grasp the spinning top so as to arrest the disappearance of reason, Rabbi Nahman saw the spinning of the very same top as the vertiginous dance that leads the spinner to the palace of madness where faith becomes reason.

Describing his irrational system of faith that is born in the breakdown of reason, Rabbi Nahman writes:

> Their books contain questions as to the order of Creation: How is it that a star merited to be a star, or that a constellation deserved to be a constellation? What was the sin of the lower creatures, animals and all the rest, that consigned them to their lowly state? Why not just the opposite? Why is a head a head and a foot a foot?
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> … This entire pursuit, however, is a vain one. One should not ask such questions of God, who is righteous and upright. For in truth, the entire universe is a spinning top, which is called a *dreidel*. Everything moves in a circle: angels change into men and men into angels; the head becomes a foot and the foot a head. All things in the world

> are part of this circular motion, reborn and transformed into one another. That which was above is lowered and that which was below is raised up. For in their root all of them are one.
>
> There are separate intellects, which are angels, completely separated from matter; there are spheres, which are composed of the most refined matter, and there is a lower world, which is fully corporeal. Even though each of these is surely derived from some particular place, in their root they are all one.
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> Therefore the universe is a spinning top, on which everything turns and is transformed. Right now one thing may be highest, and it is considered a head, while that which is at the bottom is called a foot. But when they spin around again, the head will become a foot and the foot a head, men will become angels and angels will be men.... Everything in the world is a *dreidel*, moving in a circle, for in truth they are all one in their root. (*Sihot ha-Ran*, no. 40; translation from Arthur Green, *Tormented Master*, 309-10)

The instability of things, the spinning mutability of seemingly stable identities, discloses the fragility of this-worldly order. The very progression that brings the philosopher, the lover of wisdom typified by the rationalism of Athens, to the brink of the abyss where the "breathless" and "nauseating" chords of meaninglessness threaten to drown the mind of reason leads the rabbinic mind, in its embrace of the paradoxical truth of being, to find a path that leads beyond.

For this reason, writes Rabbi Nahman, we celebrate the spinning madness, the random rotation of this world, specifically on Hanukkah, when the faith of Jerusalem takes shelter from the reason of Athens in the opaque clouds of unknowing:

> This is why we play with the *dreidel* on Hanukkah, as Hanukkah is linked to the Temple, and the essence of the Temple is linked to this element of the rotating wheel...of "the elevated degraded and the degraded elevated"; for God embedded His presence in the Tabernacle and in the Temple, which is the aspect of "the elevated degraded", and the opposite, wherein the form of the Tabernacle in its entirety is traced above, is the aspect of "the degraded elevated". This is the element of the *dreidel*, the element of the rotating wheel, where everything returns, repeats, and reverses." (*Ibid.*)

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