Vol. II. Issue 59
29 Av 5779 / August 30, 2019
TheLehrhaus.com



RE'EH



# THERE ARE JEWS EVERYWHERE: DIVINE REVELATION THROUGH THE OTHER IN MALAMUD'S "ANGEL LEVINE"

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**Introduction**

Recent mass shootings and policies targeting immigrants have been fueled by fear of "the stranger." Nowhere is the mandate to treat the stranger as an equal more pronounced than in the Bible. And yet, somehow, biblical ethics themselves - the argument from empathy - apparently is insufficient. Sadly, our current frenzy of nationalism cries out for a moral voice that not only harks back to these Jewish sources of ethics, but extends them to redefine what it means to be a Jew. Such a voice belongs to Bernard Malamud (1914-1986), a Pulitzer-prize winning writer who grappled with post-Holocaust anti-Semitism, the Civil Rights Movement, and the savage racism of the 1950s and 60s.

Malamud's work was written off a decade ago because he wrote primarily about the Eastern European Jewish immigrant experience in mid-twentieth century New York.[1] Not only has that generation all but died off, but the newer generations of Jewish American writers are writing about bringing Judaism into American life. In any case, no one speaks with or hears the Yiddish-inflicted English that many of Malamud's characters use. Nonetheless, his works about race relations - which are ultimately about how to relate to the Other, an essential aspect of the immigration debate - are as relevant today as they were sixty-five years ago.[2] His short story "Angel Levine," published in *Commentary* in December 1955 and collected in *The Magic Barrel* (1958), is particularly timely.[3]

Born in Brooklyn in 1914 to Russian immigrant parents, Malamud enjoyed a close boyhood friendship with a black child, taught English to immigrants in night school, and taught in Harlem. These experiences led him to respond sympathetically to the state of race relations in the 50s, and to their deterioration in the 60s, particularly between Blacks and Jews.[4] To address these, he sought to project a broader notion of Jewishness. In accord with this aim, he wrote several short stories and a novel (*The Tenants*, 1971), to bring what was, for him, a particularly Jewish, i.e., universal, humanity to bear on the problem.[5] It is for this reason that Malamud's Jews have been generally seen as metaphoric and emblematic of humanity.[6]

[1] See Cheryl Miller, "Why Malamud Faded," *Commentary*, June 2008.

[2] For more on Malamud's fiction, see my "Bernard Malamud's The German Refugee, A Parable for Tishah *be-Av*" Lehrhaus.com July 12, 2018.

[3] All references will be to *The Magic Barrel*. New York: Pocket Books, 1972.

[4] In an interview, Malamud described the impetus for writing "Angel Levine," "Black Is My Favorite Color," and *The Tenants* this way: "I was aware of anti-black feeling in the vaguest sort of way... I used to make it a point to sit next to blacks on the subway. I remember a certain sadness and a strangeness. Perhaps it was just the fear of the other man's differences. Perhaps these were feelings I worked from in... Angel Levine" (Conversations with Bernard Malamud. Ed. Lawrence Lasher, Jackson: U Mississippi Press, 1991: 147).

[5] See my "The Art of Racism: Blacks, Jews and Language in *The Tenants.*" *Studies in American Jewish Literature*. Vol 15. 1996, 24-48).

As Malamud put it in a 1980 interview: "I was concerned with what Jews stood for, with their getting down to the bare bones of things. I was concerned with their ethicality – how Jews felt they had to live in order to go on living."[7] This is perhaps why, late in life, as president of P.E.N. (The American Center for Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, and Novelists), Malamud became an activist, campaigning against Soviet and South African oppression of their writers, the development of publishing conglomerates, and attacks on First Amendment rights.

In "Angel Levine," the story of Manischevitz, a Job-like character who must believe that a black man from Harlem is an angel from God, Malamud weaves together strands of our biblical, historical, traditional, and ritual pasts to remind us that there *is* a source of guidance for our troubled times.[8] For Malamud, paralleling a number of themes in the thought of Hermann Cohen, following these threads leads to a new definition of revelation. Cohen believed that God's revelation was a revealing of Himself in terms of his morality. Moreover, since the only way we can know God (his image) is through His acts, His morality, our acting morally is the only way we can follow His will. Doing so, then, involves finding and acting on the ethical in oneself, which is the image of God. In this sense, being a Jew is about seeing your own godliness in the stranger, here, a black man from Harlem.Thus, Malamud not only offers a new definition of revelation, but also sets forward a novel, programmatic path to see the Other in a radically new light.

**"Angel Levine": A Summary**

Manischevitz, a poor tailor, has suddenly lost everything. When he prays for his dying wife Fanny's health, a black angel-on-probation appears in the tenement apartment and explains that he had been Jewish in life, but will not be able to produce miracles or attain full angel status until Manischevitz believes he is an angel from God. Levine tells Manischevitz he can be found in Harlem, and leaves. As his own health fails, the tailor travels to Harlem and meets his black counterpart: a tailor, to whom he says nothing. Directed to Bella's, a honky-tonk, Manischevitz sees Levine dancing with Bella, but says nothing to him either. Later, with Fanny at death's door, the now-desperate tailor speaks to God in a synagogue; finding Him absent, Manischevitz looks into his own heart and finds no hope.

Having lost even his belief in God, Manischevitz later dreams of Levine with "small decaying opalescent wings" (Malamud 54), and is convinced Levine could be an angel. The beleaguered man again travels to Harlem, where Bella's is now a synagogue. So continues Malamud's use of magic realism, in which elements of fantasy co-exist with reality. Here, the technique might suggest the hand of God guiding Manischevitz to his revelation. In the synagogue he sees four black men wearing yarmulkes discussing the nature of souls, questioning why, if souls are without substance, the men happen to be black. The tailor asks where he can find Levine, and is directed to Bella's, which is now across the street.

There, Manischevitz tells Levine he believes the black man is Jewish, but when Levine asks if the white man has anything else to say, the tailor is silent. He imagines a whirring arrow on a wheel, like those used in board games, marked yes, no, believe, and decides to believe. He tells Levine: "I think you are an angel from God" (Malamud 57). Immediately, they return to the apartment, and Manischevitz follows Levine up to the roof, from which he ascends on "a pair of magnificent black wings" (58).

A black feather drifts down, but it was only snowing. The tailor's wife is miraculously cured and Manischevitz tells her: "A wonderful thing, Fanny. There are Jews everywhere" (58). So ends the story.

**Revelation from Without**

As noted, after Fanny becomes even more ill, the tailor seeks a visibly deteriorated Levine in Harlem, but says nothing to him. Manischevitz then "[spokes] to God in a synagogue, but God had absented himself. The tailor searched his heart and found no hope" (54). Absent the man's decision to believe that Levine is an angel and to verbalize that belief, Manischevitz's words to God fail, and his heart is empty. This language echoes *Deuteronomy* 30:11-14:

> This commandment which I command thee this day, it is not too hard for thee, neither is it far off...
> It is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say: 'Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, and make us to hear it, that we may do it?
> Neither is it beyond the sea, that thou shouldest say: 'Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, and make us to hear it, that we may do it?'
> But the word is very nigh unto thee, in my mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it.

Using his encounter with the Other, Manischevitz must turn inward and find God's words in *his own heart* and speak them to Levine. That is God's definition of following His commandments. Jeremiah also emphasizes this when he declares that God will make a new covenant with the house of Israel:

"I will put My law in their minds
and inscribe it on their hearts.
And I will be their God,
and they will be My people.
No longer will each man teach his neighbor or his brother,
saying, 'Know the Lord,'
because they will all know Me." (*Jeremiah* 31:33-34)

In other words, knowing God means that His laws are written on the heart. Manischevitz's heart is empty because he does not know God, even though he says repeatedly that "he had always been a religious man... a faithful servant who had from childhood lived in the synagogues, always concerned with the word of God" (Malamud 48, 50). Here, Malamud is pointing out the difference between observance and ethical action. For him, being a Jew is not just being faithful to ritual and observance; it is following the injunction of *Exodus* 22:20: "And a stranger shalt thou not wrong, neither shalt thou oppress him; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Furthering the Exodus theme, the fact that Malamud names his character Manischevitz puts us right at the Seder table, a humorous shorthand for all the history, memory, symbolism - and resulting ethical obligations - that the name evokes. And the scene of the four Black questioners in the Harlem synagogue is an obvious reimagining of the Seder's four questions.

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[6] See Edward Abramson. "Bernard Malamud and the Jews: An Ambiguous Relationship." *The Yearbook of English Studies* Vol 24 1994, 146-156.

[7] Interview with Michiko Kakutani, *NYT* 15 July 1980, 67, reprinted in Lasher, *Conversations with Bernard Malamud*, Jackson: U Mississippi P, 1991, 92-95

When the tailor seeks Levine in Harlem a second time and visits the synagogue, the four black men - one old, one thirteen, and two physically impaired - are discussing the meaning of *Neshoma*: "The substanceless substance from which comes all things that were incepted in the idea – you, me, and everything and body else" (Malamud 55). The four questioners go on to ask whether this 'spirit' has a color, and if not, then why are they colored? The young boy answers:

> God but the spirit in all things... He put it in the green leaves and the yellow flowers. He put it with the gold in the fishes and the blue in the sky. That's how come it came to us. (56)

So begins Manischevitz's journey toward revelation. When he confronts Levine, he tells him, "You are Jewish. This I am sure" (57). Levine says, "Anything else yo' got to say?... Speak now or fo' ever hold off." Through blinding tears, the tailor asks himself whether he should "say he believed a half-drunken Negro to be an angel."

Now Manischevitz imagines the whirring pointer: "[He]" was recalling scenes of his youth as a wheel in his mind whirred; believe, do not, yes, no, yes, no. The pointer pointed to yes, to between yes and no, to no, no it was yes. He sighed. It moved but one still had to make a choice. 'I think you are an angel from God.' He said it in a broken voice, thinking, If you said it, it was said. If you believed it you must say it" (57-58).

Manischevitz finally realizes that God's word is in his heart and mouth: "If you believed it you must say it." Yet note the word whirring. Not only does it allude to the whirlwind out of which God speaks to Job, but it is also repeated in the story's final image. Manischevitz hears a "whirring of wings" when Levine flies off. This whirring evokes God's presence in Manischevitz's mind and heart – the divinity within, another step toward Manischevitz's revelation.

**Revelation from Within**

Upon their return from Harlem to Manischevitz's apartment, Levine assures Manischevitz that his wife has been cured. Then the tailor

> followed Levine up three flights of stairs to the roof. When he got there the door was already pad-locked.
> Luckily he could see through a small broken window. He heard an odd noise, as though of a whirring of wings, and when he strained for a wider view, could have sworn he saw a dark figure borne aloft on a pair of magnificent black wings.
> A feather drifted down. Manischevitz gasped as it turned white, but it was only snowing.
> He rushed downstairs. In the flat Fanny wielded a dust mop under the bed and then upon the cobwebs on the wall.
> "A wonderful thing, Fanny," Manischevitz said. "Believe me, there are Jews everywhere." (Malamud 58)

Now we can see the purpose for the fantasy image of the black feather turning to snow: It's the visual representation of the gap closing between black and white, between racism and acceptance, made possible not only by Manischevitz's revelation that Levine is an angel from God, but by his action of *telling* the stranger so. In other words, Malamud is urging us to reach out to those whose humanity has been diminished by others and *in doing so, we will discover our own humanity*. Yet when Manischevitz exclaims that there are Jews everywhere, he seems unaware that this now includes him.

Still, the black feather's turning to white snow represents a redemptive moment for the tailor; he has mended his own prejudice. Perhaps this is why, after his initial outburst at God, Manischevitz "realized... that he was expecting to discover something about himself" (Malamud 48.) Early on, Malamud has reminded us that revelation from without leads to revelation from within. He raises the stakes, however, by suggesting that this mode of revelation brings godliness into the world by demanding that we act on our beliefs. By treating the Other properly, we gain revelatory insight into our own Jewishness, and ultimately our humanity.

**Conclusion**

Malamud once said, "The purpose of the writer is to keep civilization from destroying itself" (Lasher 6).[9] How we relate to the Other, such as the immigrant, lies at the core of our very civility. In some sense, just as we are all Jews, we are all tailors. We shape our attitudes, valuations, and prejudices toward people based on the measures we take of them.

In Manischevitz's revelatory cry, "There are Jews everywhere," lies Malamud's plea that we believe in each other's humanity. His is almost like a voice heard in today's wilderness, a moral voice that has so much to offer when we really need it. Malamud beseeches us to be attuned to the inner call of our souls to be authentic Jews, to do what God has been telling us to do for millennia: To treat the stranger as we would treat ourselves. This is what it means to be a Jew, not just in the 20th century, but in the 21st.

## Haggai: Prophet of Elul

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On what basis is *Hodesh Elul* seen as ushering in the season of repentance?[10] Conventional wisdom maintains that, after having been granted atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf, Moses reascended Mount Sinai on 1 Elul. This launched a second

[8] Actually, Malamud is paraphrasing Camus' 1957 Nobel Prize for Literature Acceptance Speech. See "Beginning the Novel" in Alan Cheuse and Nicholas Delbanco. *Talking Horse*. NY: Columbia UP: 100.

[10] Of course, there are numerous associations between the term Elul and repentance. For instance, the classic association between Elul and the phrase "*Ani le-dodi ve-dodi li*" (cf. Song of Songs 6:3), as well as the Hasidic bon mot "the king is in the field" suggest a heightened level of divine intimacy during Elul. Meiri (*Hibbur ha-Teshuvah*, *Meishiv Nefesh* 2:2) posits that during Elul God uniquely enables us to prepare for the approaching Days of Judgment. In support of this view, Meiri, based on a *midrash*, extends the Talmud's application of the verse "Seek the Lord while He can be found, Call Him while He is near" (Isiaiah 55:6) from the Ten Days of Repentance to *Hodesh Elul*. These explanations and others, however, do not explain why the entire month of Elul is specifically selected for this period of intimacy or preparation; as *Arukh ha-Shulhan* (*Orah Hayyim* 581:1) maintains, they are best characterized not as full-fledged sources but as allusions.

period of forty days and nights spent in celestial study, after which Moses descended with the second tablets on 10 Tishrei, Yom Kippur.[11] This position, popularized by Ran (*Rosh Hashanah* 12b *be-alfas* s.v. "garsinan") and *Tur* (*Orah Hayyim* 581), is based on the the midrashic account of *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* (chap. 46):

> Rabbi Joshua, son of Korhah, said: Moses was on the mountain for forty days, reading the Written Law by day and studying the Oral Law by night. After forty days he took the tablets and descended into the camp on the seventeenth of Tammuz, shattered the tablets, and slew the sinners of Israel. He spent forty days in the camp until he had burnt the calf and powdered it like dust of the earth, destroyed idol worship from Israel, and established every tribe in its place. Upon the new moon of Elul the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: "Come up to me on the Mount" (Exodus 24:12), and have them sound the *shofar* throughout the camp, for Moses has ascended the Mount, so that they do not go astray again after the worship of idols. The Holy One, blessed be He, ascended with that *shofar*, as it states, "God ascended with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet" (Psalms 47:5). Therefore the Sages instituted that the *shofar* should be sounded on the new moon of Elul every year.

The *midrash* is intriguing, particularly in its mysterious description of God's ascent with the *shofar*, to which we will return. Regardless, following *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*'s chronology, we can well understand the commentaries' depiction of Elul as ushering in the season of repentance: it was during these forty days leading to Yom Kippur that Moses reestablished the relationship between God and His people.

However, its popularity notwithstanding, this conclusion is not necessarily warranted. Nowhere does the *midrash* identify the month of Elul with repentance; in fact, it does not even mention the practice of blowing the *shofar* throughout the remainder of the month. It is only after citing the *midrash* that *Ran* (ibid.) adds, "On this Ashkenazim relied to blow throughout the month of Elul, morning and night; and from here we may account for those places where they arise early [for *Selihot*] beginning with *Rosh Hodesh Elul*."[12]

What is more, *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*'s timeline has no explicit basis in the biblical text. Even granting the *midrash*'s general timetable, a quick calculation indicates that Moses would have been required to ascend the mountain not on 1 Elul (which only contains 29 days, equalling just 39 days with the addition of Tishrei's first ten days) but on the last day of Av. While one might respond that the standard of a 29-day Elul was only set during the time of Ezra (see *Rosh Hashanah* 19b), *Seder Olam Rabbah* (6), followed by *Bekhor Shor* (Deut. 10:10), record Moses' ascent as having taken place on the final day of Av. There is considerable debate, then, whether or not Moses ascended on 1 Elul.[13] Given these concerns, might there be an alternative basis for the significance of *Hodesh Elul*?

In fact, there is an extremely strong candidate for this distinction: the opening prophecy of Haggai. Let us set the stage by reviewing the biblical background to Haggai's prophecies, delivered during the years immediately prior to the Second Temple's construction. Earlier, Cyrus had called upon the Jews to return from exile and rebuild the Temple (Ezra 1:1). The Samaritans, however, furiously opposed the reconstruction efforts, and, during the reign of Artaxerxes, petitioned successfully for a royal command halting the work (Ezra 4:7-23). The Jews became dispirited, and abandoned the project until a year after Darius' ascent to the throne (Ezra 7:24).

Enter Haggai. The two chapters of his book, particularly the first, are dedicated to urging the people to overcome their hesitation and proceed with the reconstruction. Haggai delivers his first prophecy on 1 Elul, repeatedly invoking the language of repentance:

> In the second year of King Darius, **on the first day of the sixth month**, this word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbavel son of Shealtiel, the governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Yehotzadak, the high priest:
>
> Thus said the Lord of Hosts: These people say, "The time has not yet come for rebuilding the House of the Lord."
>
> And the word of the Lord through the prophet Haggai continued:
>
> Is it a time for you to dwell in your paneled houses, while this House is lying in ruins?
>
> Now thus said the Lord of Hosts: **Consider how you have been faring [*"simu levavkhem al darkheikhem"*]**!
>
> You have sowed much and brought in little; you eat without being satisfied; you drink without getting your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one gets warm; and he who earns anything earns it for a leaky purse.
>
> Thus said the Lord of Hosts: **Consider how you have fared [*"simu levavkhem al darkheikhem"*]**:
>
> Go up to the hills ["*alu ha-har*"] and get timber, and rebuild the House; then I will look on it with favor and I will be glorified, said the Lord. (Haggai 1:1-8)

Given that the biblical year generally begins in Nissan, it is evident that the sixth month refers to Elul (R. Yosef Kara to Haggai 1:1, *Da'at Mikra* ad loc.).[14] On *Rosh Hodesh Elul*, then, Haggai exhorts the

[11] Or third period of forty days, see *Tanhuma* , *Ki Tissa* 31:1.

[12] Relatedly, as noted by *Bah* (*Orah Hayyim* 581 s.v. "tanya"), *Ran* and *Tur* seem to have a somewhat different text of *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*. In *Ran*'s version, the *midrash* concludes by recording that on the basis of the events at Sinai, the Jews began blowing the *shofar* on *Rosh Hodesh Elul* to inspire the people in repentance and to confuse Satan. Even according to this text, as *Ran* makes clear in the continuation, the *midrash* speaks exclusively about blowing the *shofar* on *Rosh Hodesh* proper. *Tur*'s (ibid.) citation of the *midrash* does include a reference to blowing the *shofar* throughout the month, but this appears to be a far later and less reliable citation.

[13] See also *Rashi* to Exodus 33:11, R. Eliyahu Mizrahi ibid., *Tosafot Bava Kama* 82a s.v. "kedei," and *Bah* (*Orah Hayyim* 581) s.v. "be-Rosh."

[14] While in *Sefer Ezra* there are indications that the months are actually counted from Tishrei, *Da'at Mikra* (ibid.) convincingly argues from internal evidence that Haggai's book certainly follows the bulk of Tanakh in counting the months from Nissan.

people to recognize that their agricultural failure is a direct outgrowth of their misplaced priorities: "Because My House which lies in ruins, while you all hurry to your own houses!" Haggai thus appears to provide an explicit biblical basis for 1 Elul launching a period of repentance.[15] Indeed, *Kaf ha-Hayyim* (*Orah Hayyim* 581:15; see also *Kaf ha-Hayyim Orah Hayyim* 429:6) cites *Nezirut Shimshon*, who goes so far as to recommend that one read the beginning of *Sefer Haggai* on the first of Elul. Further, the verses go on to state that "They came and set to work on the House of the Lord of Hosts, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month" (Haggai 1:14-15), indicating that Elul opens with a call to repentance a and continues with this theme throughout the month.

What are we to make of this biblical precedent? We may begin by noting a subtle textual similarity between *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* and Haggai: the verse describing Moses' ascent to the mountain reads "*aleh eilay ha-harah*," "ascend to Me to the mountain," paralleling Haggai's charge of "*alu ha-har*," "ascend to the mountain," to collect materials for the construction of the Temple. In both instances, the charge of climbing a mountain inaugurates the period of repentance.

Yet this correspondence primarily underscores the extent to which these models for *Hodesh Elul* diverge. The respective ascents differ in regard to the nature of the mountain, who is instructed to go up, and for what purpose. Moses climbs the mountain of God. Haggai's listeners, however, go up to an anonymous mountain. In Exodus, only Moses ascends, whereas in Haggai the entire nation must alight. Moses, according to the midrashic literature, studies Torah with God for forty days and nights, while the Jews of the Second Temple period engage in the decidedly mundane process of wood collection, albeit to construct the Temple.[16]

These glaring differences are presumably born of their respective contexts. In Exodus, the nation had effectively shattered the Sinaitic covenant by sinning with the Golden Calf. What is more, at no point does the nation repent for its misdeeds. To the contrary, while God accepts Moses' pleas and is persuaded not to decimate the Israelites, His reconsideration is an outgrowth of Moses' argument from the desecration of God's name, as well as his invocation of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy, rather than a result of actions taken by the Jews themselves.

*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* reinforces the motifs of the Exodus narrative. According to the *midrash*, the *shofar* blast announces Moses's ascent to the mountain in order to avoid the very real possibility that, thinking Moses has died, the people will again be ensnared by the sin of *avodah zarah*.[17] Apparently, while the nation has been granted clemency, there is little reason to conclude that they have repented as a nation. Moreover, the *midrash*'s esoteric depiction of God's concurrent ascent with the *shofar* blast suggests that He, along with Moses, withdraws His presence from the nation, indicating His continued displeasure with their actions.[18]

The contrast to Haggai could not be more clear. Here, while the people have erred, they have not sinned egregiously, and the prophet addresses himself to the entire Judean community (albeit numbering only some 50,000 strong). Specifically, instead of engaging in an act of rebellion, the people are guilty of hypocrisy and apathy. Their sin is not one of commission but of omission: they have failed to overcome the challenges confronting the rebuilding project.

Seeking to stir the people, Haggai exhorts four times in his sefer, "*simu levavkhem al darkheikhem*" (1:5,7; 2:15,18). As *Da'at Mikra* notes (1:5 note 12), this locution is unique to *Sefer Haggai*. Quite literally, the prophet urges the people to "pay attention." And it is not so much a spiritual message as a practical, albeit religious, one. Haggai is the pragmatic Religious Zionist, calling on all people to drop the excuses, roll up their sleeves, and engage in the rebuilding efforts.

Further, unlike Moses, who must separate from the nation, Haggai and his contemporary Zekhariah may have personally joined the people by engaging in manual labor themselves. The verse states, "Thereupon Zerubbavel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Yehotzadak began rebuilding the House of God in Jerusalem, with the full support of the prophets of God" (Ezra 5:2). *Malbim* (5:1) appears to maintain that the prophets were instrumental merely inasmuch as they called on the populace to build. *Rashi* (ibid., s.v. "ve-sarav"), on the other hand, seems to take the verse at face value: the prophets practiced what they preached, engaging in heavy lifting as they concomitantly urged the people to follow suit. The contrast to the aftermath of the Golden Calf, whereupon Moses was specifically separated from the nation, could not be thrown into sharper relief.

It is no surprise, then, that Haggai's universal, practical message and personal model resonated with the entire nation:

> Zerubbavel son of Shealtiel and the high priest Jeshua son of Yehotzadak and all the rest of the people gave heed to the summons of the Lord their God and to the words of the prophet Haggai, when the Lord their God sent him; the people feared the Lord. (Haggai 1:12)

Yet a glaring question remains. With few exceptions, the classical commentaries omit *Sefer Haggai* in their discussions of *Hodesh Elul*. Why?

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[15] Rabbanit Shani Taragin makes this point in a brief lecture available at: http://www.hatanakh.com/en/lessons/chagais-rosh-chodesh-elul-teshuva-derasha.

[16] This is similar to the call in Nehemiah 8:15 for the Jews to climb to the mountain and collect materials with which to construct *sukkot*.

[17] In this, *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* adopts the view that the Jews sinned upon arriving at the erroneous conclusion that Moses had died on the mountain; see also *Tanhuma* (Buber) *Ki Tissa* 13 and *Rashi* Exodus 32:1. It is also worth noting that *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*'s *shofar* blast, which indicates God's ascent from the mountain, provides a bookend of sorts with the initial *shofar* blast of Sinai, which signaled God's descent onto the mountain.

[18] See also *Nedarim* 38a, which claims that "the Torah was given initially only to Moses and his descendants, as it is stated: "Write for you" (Exodus 34:27), and it is also stated: "Hew for you" (Exodus 34:1), meaning: Just as their waste is yours, so too their writing is yours. However, Moses treated the Torah with generosity and gave it to the Jewish people. And about him, the verse says: "He that has a bountiful eye shall be blessed, as he gives of his bread to the poor" (Proverbs 22:9)." Note that both proof texts are drawn from the narrative regarding the second set of tablets, suggesting that Moses's final forty days primarily are not centered on the relationship between God and the Jewish people, but between God and Moses.

A number of factors may be at play. First, as noted elsewhere, the rabbis sought to link nearly all the biblical holidays to the Jews' first year as a nation, suggesting that the annual cycle of holidays mirrors that original yearlong series of events. The *midrash* does just this. Second, *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*'s narrative enables us to view Elul as a period of preparation for Yom Kippur, heightening the stature of this holy day and extending its "footprint"; this is lacking in Haggai's prophecies. Third and perhaps most interesting, Haggai's prophecy was delivered during a period of Judean resettlement, with lessons that were particularly poignant at that time, but less so in later stages of Jewish history. The events of the Golden Calf and its aftermath, leading to Yom Kippur, were seen by the Rabbis as models for the full sweep of Jewish history.

If this final reason for the historical sidelining of Haggai's prophecy is correct, today's period of a renewed return to Zion might be precisely the moment to reintroduce Haggai's clarion call. As Rav Soloveitchik argued passionately in his classic 1956 plea *Kol Dodi Dofek*, albeit at a very different moment in Israeli history, we can in no way be lackadaisical in our support of *Medinat Yisrael*. Stated in 2018 terms, as American Jews we cannot take for granted the next generation's support for Israel, both materially and attitudinally, nor can we take for granted the relationship between the diaspora and Israeli Jewish communities.

Further, Haggai's exhortation of "*simu levavkhem*," an attack on apathy, is acutely relevant in our time, although ironically perhaps most of all in Jewish communities beyond Israel's borders. The great challenges confronting our generation, at least on Modern Orthodox American soil, resemble less the outright rebelliousness of the generation of the desert and more the dispassion and misplaced priorities of Haggai's returnees.

This year, I will be following *Kaf ha-Hayyim*'s recommendation to read *Sefer Haggai* on *Rosh Hodesh Elul*. Indeed, perhaps the time has come for a renewed appreciation of Haggai's inspiring message not only for 1 Elul, but the entire month to come.

## Philanthropy is Great, It's Where You Give That Matters

**HILLEL DAVID RAPP is the Director of Education at Bnei Akiva Schools of Toronto.**

I appreciate Rabbis Kelman and Soffer taking the time to respond to my article and further enrich the conversation about affordability in Jewish education. In their respective critiques, I believe both writers miss the fundamental point of my argument.

In his response titled "Philanthropy Works; We Just Need More of It," Kelman writes: "It is undoubtedly true that the cost per student has risen dramatically over the years. However, Rapp's solution—asking donors to stop giving money to schools, thereby forcing serious cost cutting—is extremely unlikely to help, and quite certain to make the problem worse."

Firstly, I would say I wholeheartedly agree with Kelman's title. As I make plain in my essay, philanthropy will save Jewish education. There is little doubt that if we desire a Jewish education that is broadly available to any Jew who wants it, there is a great need for philanthropic support to assist those who can not afford it. More philanthropy would undoubtedly be better. My argument is about *where that philanthropic money is best spent*. I believe that donors seeking to make Jewish education more affordable should stop giving to Jewish schools, and instead give directly to the consumer of Jewish education via an independent bank. This is simply because giving money to Jewish schools has not, in fact, made Jewish education more affordable. For the most part, the costs of Jewish education keep rising even as donations keep increasing.

Any why wouldn't they keep rising? The only way any business or organization is going to lower the cost for a given product or service is if someone else can offer the same product or service at a lower cost, and if the consumer is free to choose between the two. In the market for Jewish education, both of these conditions are imperiled. The market is limited to a relatively small number of schools whose steadily rising costs are buttressed by increased philanthropic subsidy. There is little incentive for a school to lower costs, and there is limited freedom for the consumer to choose to go elsewhere for the same product. As long as schools can keep raising money, increasing the number of families receiving subsidy, they can simply tell families to request subsidy instead of thinking about lowering the cost. Further, as long as schools can successfully invest in cultivating donors, they can sustain the rising costs.

But herein lies the problem. When schools must increasingly invest in cultivating donors to subsidize more and more of their customers, they are incentivized to maintain that subsidy at the cost of their customers' desires. This is a fairly typical result when any market is subsidized. The consumer is mostly stripped of his ability to impact price because price is now informed by the scale of the subsidy.

Let's consider a family with four children, earning a total household income of $300,000 per year with an $85,000 tuition bill. The family can squeeze to pay $65,000, and the schools will accept that price. But this family also wants to do some renovations on its home, a purchase that would be in reach for a public school family in the same economic position. So while the family can pay $65,000, obtaining the $20,000 subsidy means it will be forced to forfeit the renovations. (I believe looking at family spending is a reasonable requirement for any tuition committee attempting to fairly allocate resources. It's a necessary evil resulting from a broken system.)

But what if this family said it only wants to spend $50,000 on Jewish education? What if 20 or 40 or 60 families earning around the same income say they would only like to spend $50,000? As it stands now, this consumer preference has minimal impact on market price because these families *can* pay $65,000 and the school has fundraised to cover the rest. The only options available to them are to forfeit a Jewish education or pay the $65,000.

Schools will undoubtedly say that they have done everything possible to lower costs as much as possible for this family. But is that true? Did the schools ever have a real economic incentive to lower costs to $50,000, which is what these families want? No, the schools' primary incentive was to raise enough money to subsidize costs down to $65,000, which may be what the family can afford, but may not be what they wanted.

Now consider the same families in a market where the schools must charge exactly what it costs them to educate each child. And let's assume nothing else changes. The tuition bill per family is still $85,000. But instead of the school offering a subsidy, an external philanthropic bank offers the same $20,000 subsidy to bring the effective fee down to $65,000. But because the bank is, well, a bank, it also offers a low interest loan of $15,000 payable over 5 years so families can have the choice to take a more affordable loan and have

that renovation done. Right off the bat, the consumer has more choice just because of a more flexible financing vehicle.

But the consumer also has much more power: now these families can say to schools, we actually don't want to take out a loan, and we still want that renovation. We are only willing to pay $50,000. The schools go to donors and say that they can't afford to provide an education at $50,000, and the donors say, well we're providing the same $10,000 in subsidy we did when we were giving it to the school. In fact, we're also providing a facility for a $15,000 loan that we were unable to provide when the financing went through the school. Your customer is telling you to cut costs. If the only way to do that is to cut service, then the customer will realize one of three things: 1. They would rather forfeit the home renovations and pay for the educational product they are used to; 2. They will take out those loans and get both; or 3. They would prefer to take their chances on a new educational product at a lower cost.

Now the purchaser of the education is completely in the driver's seat to decide on the price and product she wants. There would also be considerable incentive for schools to compete to provide the same level of educational service at $50,000. And the first school that could innovate in structure or offering toward that price point would capture this share of the market. Even better, in the process of that innovation, that school will likely change the landscape of Jewish education permanently.

This brings me to Rabbi Soffer's critique. He, as well as Kelman, argues that lowering costs is no simple task, and any such effort will certainly mean critical educational trade-offs. Soffer writes: "Small class sizes and individualized instruction means more teachers, which means more salaries. Providing the type of support that helps learners of divergent interests and abilities thrive is, simply put, expensive. Students are different, and learn differently, and Jewish day schools have a responsibility to engage each and every student… We should not apologize for these expenses. In fact, these resources should be our greatest pride, and we should demand that day schools not only continue to provide them, but double down their efforts."

Again, I wholeheartedly agree. I only ask, shouldn't it be the choice of each family purchasing the education what type of education they want? Who should be "demanding" what is provided in Jewish schools? Is it not the consumer of that education who is in the best position to demand what education is best for him?

What's important to remember here is that I am not advocating for one less dollar to be given to providing an affordable Jewish education. I support Kelman and Soffer in their calls for many more philanthropic dollars to be invested in Jewish education. However, sustained affordability has a much greater chance of being achieved when that money is given to the consumers of Jewish education, who are in the best position to assess the product they want to pay for.

When considering my argument I think it's worth reflecting on the notion that, if you are sympathetic to my points, it's likely you accept two fundamental premises.

First, you believe that the consumer of Jewish education, the family deciding on Jewish school, is in the best position to decide what is best for it economically and educationally. And while that family, generally speaking, needs every dollar of philanthropic support it can get, it is in the best position to decide on how to use that support and what to demand and accept from the products presented by competing schools.

Second, you likely believe that we have not yet exhausted every possible avenue to lower the cost of a Jewish education while maintaining high quality product. I am no stranger to school budgeting, and each year find myself making many difficult decisions over a myriad of trade-offs in an effort to provide the best possible educational program. And I agree that, within the current structure, there is no magic solution that does not involve increasing class sizes, decreasing resources, and sacrificing on talent and program.

But, as I have argued in these pages, I think it is foolish to assume that the current school structure, designed to achieve economies of scale in education circa the turn of the last century, is not ripe for a major disruption. Every other industry built on information sharing, whether it's news, entertainment, or politics, has undergone massive disruptions as a result of technological innovation and the ubiquity of accessible content. Why would education be different? While the "University-industrial complex" has maintained a strict presence as the gatekeeper of educational and often of career advancement, the edifice is beginning to show cracks all over the place.

Those who care about the future of Jewish education would be wise to take note: cheaper and better is not an oxymoron. It is a matter of creative will and the proper incentives to unleash that creativity.

## To Ensure Excellence in Jewish Education, Invest in Jewish Day Schools: A Response to Hillel David Rapp

**JORDAN SOFFER is the Head of School at Striar Hebrew Academy in Sharon, MA.**

Hillel David Rapp recently argued in these pages that the source of Jewish day school unaffordability is not "complex." To impress donors, schools assume unnecessarily high expenses, forcing schools to raise tuition and become more reliant on financial aid. This inflated dependency increases pressure on the school to assume yet more nonessential expenses as they again attempt to impress donors. Rapp's solution "is to stop giving money to Jewish schools. Let schools operate like any business and receive direct data from their end users via the most relevant economic signal — price." People will pay what they can, and we will develop schools that exists within those limitations: "In a non-subsidized market, if there is demand for a no-frills education, a school will find a way to provide a no-frills education at a no-frills price."

While I applaud Rapp's creativity, and sympathize with his frustration, I believe that his diagnosis of the problem is inaccurate and his proposed resolution severely misguided. If taken seriously, this would provide a disservice to all learners and completely neglect the most vulnerable learners in our communities.

The diagnosis is initially compelling, but ultimately unsubstantiated. The author suggests that rather than promote ingenuity and cost-efficient programming, our current paradigm incentivizes frivolous overspending in the hopes of securing major gifts. Educationally unsound decisions are made simply because they will entice donors. As an example, the author describes schools wasting money on hiring "fancy PR teams and professional party planners" in order to secure major gifts.

These "fancy" expenses, however, are not what is consuming our tuition dollars, and they are not what drive pedagogic decision making. Even SMART Boards and iPads are not what make schools expensive. The single greatest contributor to a high tuition is hiring enough faculty, and the right faculty. As noted by by predecessor Rabbi Yehudah Potok, Stephen Kepher once observed, "If you want lower rates of tuition then you have to have either large class sizes or low faculty salaries." Yet this is to forego our schools' greatest assets. Accordingly, Rapp's calculations are misleading, and his cycle is unsubstantiated.

Where I truly take umbrage, however, is less with his diagnosis and more with his proposed resolution.

No frills is a euphemism for no differentiation. Small class sizes and individualized instruction means more teachers, which means more salaries. Providing the type of support that helps learners of divergent interests and abilities thrive is, simply put, expensive. Students are different, and learn differently, and Jewish day schools have a responsibility to engage each and every student.

This benefits every single one of our children, and allows us to truly pursue our sacred duty as educators. Beyond small class sizes and individualized attention, if we want to provide speech, OT, special education, or any other resources, we will continue to rely on the donations of our dedicated philanthropists. Similarly, if we want to be able to challenge and serve gifted and talented students, we will rely on these donations. And this is not even to mention such "lavish" expenses such as providing art, physical, or music education.

Certainly, it is enticing to imagine a model that is economically sustainable and responds to the financial abilities of a given community, but when that model forces us to ignore unique student needs in the name of "no frills," we have sacrificed our identity on the altar of affordability.

Though the author never explicitly named these expenses, these are the costs that most often transform surpluses into deficits. We should not apologize for these expenses. In fact, these resources should be our greatest pride, and we should demand that day schools not only continue to provide them, but double down their efforts.

Providing a quality education is expensive. Schools are tasked with helping students to develop the creative skills necessary to engage with an ever-evolving world, while teaching the content knowledge necessary to allow students to pursue their dreams. Jewish education is even more expensive. Jewish day schools are additionally tasked with helping students develop positive character traits and a positive inclination towards Jewish life, while teaching the content knowledge necessary to be a fully participating citizen in the Jewish world.

The author writes that the source of unaffordability is not complex. That is false; it is extremely complex. Schools are trying to offer a top-notch education while embracing all student needs. It is easy to blame neglectful and haphazard spending for day school costs, but this is not the true source of high day school prices.

As the inheritors of Torah, and as teachers of our sacred tradition, it is our obligation to provide a top notch education and make space for as many learners as possible. "No frills" will quickly become "no room for differences," and that is a far greater risk to diaspora Jewry than day school prices. Instead of asking them to redirect their contributions, we must embrace and thank our generous philanthropists for partnering with educators in achieving this mission.

## Philanthropy works;We just need more of it

**JAY KELMAN teaches Jewish Studies at TanenbaumCHAT and is the Founding Director of Torah in Motion.**

Hillel Rapp has identified a serious impediment to solving the tuition crisis—namely, the spiraling costs incurred by day schools. This, according to Rapp, is caused in large measure by the pressure to raise the costs ever higher in an ongoing effort to attract more donations. He suggests that if schools would instead focus on the needs of the student body, market forces would ensure that affordable education were the natural outcome.

It is undoubtedly true that the cost per student has risen dramatically over the years. However, Rapp's solution—asking donors to stop giving money to schools, thereby forcing serious cost cutting—is extremely unlikely to help, and quite certain to make the problem worse.

Currently, high school tuition at Modern Orthodox schools typically costs between $25,000-$30,000, and, at elementary schools, $15,000-$20,000 annually. Even with these tuitions, most schools still have a budgetary shortfall. I do not think I am underestimating if I say that the average amount raised by tuition fees covers only some 90% of the budget (as an example, see here).

Let us now imagine that philanthropists follow Rapp's solution and stop donating to schools. Schools would be forced to cut costs, rather than trying "to showcase the best overall program to compete for our community's philanthropic resources." Let us further imagine that, through a thorough line-by-line review of the budget, we would allow our schools to cut costs by a whopping 50%.

Now, let us imagine what it would take to cut costs by 50%. With teacher salaries typically accounting for some 70% of the costs of running a Jewish school, we would likely have to begin there. To get to our 50% goal, teachers' salaries would have to be cut some 70%, a proposition I trust all realize is untenable. Perhaps we can limit the salary rollback to "only" 30%, thus saving slight below 20% from the budget. Is that the path we want to take? How many of our best and brightest can we attract to the field of education? But with no donor money coming in, we are left with little choice.

Cutting administrative staff in half might save another 10%; increasing class sizes to, say, 28 students (and thus cutting all elective course options with lower registrations), another 15% or so. Schools could cut out all remedial and enrichment programs, spend less on athletics, put off repairs and maintenance, and so on and so forth. Perhaps combining all of the above might allow us to reach our goal.

But who would want to go to such a school? And for those who do what kind of an education would they receive? You get what you pay for, and quality costs money.

Even with a 50% cut in costs, the annual tuition bill for a family with four children—a typical size of a Modern Orthodox family— would still be somewhere between $40,000-$50,000 a year. With no philanthropic dollars coming in, many families would still be forced

out of the day school system. And all the more so if those families have five or even six children. Asking donors to no longer support our schools is not the solution to the tuition crisis.

Furthermore, there is little evidence to suggest that costs are unreasonably high. According to the 2017 U.S. census data, New York State spent an average of $23,091 per pupil—and that for a single curriculum. If we were to assume Jewish studies take up 40% of the day, then that $22,000 rises to over some $35,000 per student. Even if we take the national average of $11,762, a dual curriculum should cost in the neighborhood of $20,000.

Notwithstanding the above, there is little doubt that many schools have done a poor job of controlling costs. Too many schools have bloated administrative teams, spend far too much on marketing, have class sizes that are too small, and are just plain lax when it comes to spending.

And it is here that philanthropists can make a real difference. But instead of asking donors to stop giving money, schools should ask for more money and greater donor oversight.

An example of the power of this type of giving is clearly demonstrated at TanenbaumCHAT in Toronto, where two philanthropists donated $15 million on condition that tuition would be lowered from $28,500 to $18,500 a year over five years. The $15 million covered only about half of the lost tuition, forcing the school to find ways to remain eligible for the money. One of the beautiful aspects of the plan was that the school was free to reach its target tuition in any way it wanted. The donors provided the funding, and let the educators decide how to best meet their conditions.

The results speak for themselves. After years of declining enrollment, the tide has turned. Because of the foresight of two philanthropists, the incoming Grade 9 class has gone from 198 students (before the gift) to 298 students in just one year, and to over 300 students for this upcoming year.

Philanthropy works. We just need more of it.

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