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CONTENTS:

- Gedwiser (Page 1)
- Kutliroff (Page 5)

SHOFTIM

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THE WATERS OF CONSOLATION: RABBAN YOHANAN BEN ZAKKAI AND HIS STUDENTS

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Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai is famous as the Rabbi who shepherded the Jews through the destruction of the Temple. He ensured that at least one refuge for the sages (Yavneh) would remain, and established several enactments to commemorate the Temple in the new post-temple reality. In so doing, he helped blunt the full force of tragedy by providing a path forward. But what happens when the shepherd of the generation himself needs comforting?

A story in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*[1] presents exactly such a situation. In this essay I will first present a close reading of that story and what it says about the psychology of mourning. I will then suggest that the story can also be read allegorically, connecting Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's personal loss to the national trauma of the destruction through which he lived.

The passage begins with a slightly expanded retelling of two *mishnayot* from *Avot*: *Avot* 2:8, which introduces the five students of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, his nicknames for them based on their individual virtues, and his estimation of their relative worth, and 2:9, in which Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai sends his students out to discern the good and bad paths for life, and in each case prefers the response of Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh over the others. In the interest of space I will not dwell on these passages nor the slight differences between *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* and *mishnah Avot* here.

Avot de-Rabbi Natan then introduces an entirely new element in the portrayal of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's relationship to his students with the following passage, which has no direct parallel in the Mishnah:

> When Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's son died, his students came in to console him.[2]

In contrast to the previous passage (*Avot* 3:9; *ADRN* Version A, 14:5), where Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai told his students to "go out and see" (*tse'u u-re'u*) the good and bad paths for life, now it is they who "come in" (*nikhnesu*) to him. Just as each student previously presented an answer for his teacher's approval, now each student will attempt to console his teacher, who, the continuation of the story suggests, has been mourning for too long. And as before, Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh's answer will stand out.

> Rabbi Eliezer entered and sat before him and said, "Rabbi, may I say something before you?" He said to him, "say." He said to him, "Adam the First had a son who died, and he accepted consolation. How do we know that he accepted consolation? As it says, 'And Adam again knew his wife.' So too you accept consolation." He said to him, "is it not enough for me that I am troubled with my own problems, but you remind me of the pain of Adam?"

Rabbi Eliezer sets out to "prove" to his teacher that he should accept consolation and get on with normal life the same way he has probably set out to prove countless halakhic postulates before: by citing a verse. The attempt fails, however, because Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai relates to the biblical example not through halakhic thinking but through empathy. It's not that Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai needs to know, intellectually, that moving on is the right thing to do. He needs to feel, emotionally, that it is. And bringing in an example of another bereaved parent does not help Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai move on - it only adds to his sadness.

Psychologist Susan Silk formulated an approach to grief and suffering that helps explain Rabbi Eliezer's mistake, which she calls "Ring Theory." Silk asks us to imagine the people impacted by trauma as arranged in concentric circles. The most impacted person (say, the person suffering a health crisis) is in the middle; the second-most impacted is in the next-smallest circle. Immediate family are in closer circles than extended family; close friends are closer to the inside than acquaintances. The basic principle then becomes "comfort in, dump out," which is to say, one should bring positive, supportive thoughts ("comfort") in toward those more directly affected, and process one's own negative reactions ("dump") with those further removed.

[1] Version A, 14:6.

[2] This translation is my own.

Rabbi Eliezer has "dumped in" by bringing additional sadness to the most affected person, the mourner himself, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, and Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai calls him on it.

The rest of the students enter in turn, and the same general scene repeats three more times:

> Rabbi Yehoshua entered, and he said, "would you like me to say a thing before you?" He said to him, "say." He said to him, "Iyov had sons and daughters and they all died on one day, and he accepted consolation over them. So too you accept consolation. How do we know that Iyov accepted consolation? As it says, 'God gave God took, let the name of God be blessed.'" He said to him, "is it not enough for me that I am troubled troubled with my own problems, but you remind me of the pain of Iyov?"

> Rabbi Yosi entered and sat before him. He said, "Rabbi, would you like me to say a thing before you?" He said to him, "say." He said to him, "Aharon had two adult sons, and they both died on one day, and he accepted consolation over them, as it says, 'and Aharon was silent.' Silence is nothing but consolation. So too you accept consolation." He said to him, "is it not enough for me that I am troubled troubled with my own problems, but you remind me of the pain of Aharon?"

> Rabbi Shimon entered, and he said, "would you like me to say a thing before you?" He said to him, "say." He said to him, "King David had a son who died, and he accepted consolation over him. So too you accept consolation. How do we know that David accepted consolation? As it says, 'David consoled Batsheva his wife, and he came into her and lay with her and she gave birth to a son…' So too you accept consolation." He said to him, "is it not enough for me that I am troubled with my own problems, but you remind me of the pain of David?"

Each rabbi tries the same gambit: prove to his teacher that it is possible, and desirable, to move on after the death of a child, and then Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai will be compelled to do so.[3] But Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai is "stuck" in his grief not because he doesn't understand that it is possible, for *others*, to accept consolation, but because he lacks an emotional framework that allows *him* to move out of his most intense mourning in a way that feels authentic to his experience. Enter Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh:

> Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh entered. When he saw him, he said to his attendant, "take my things and come after me to the bathhouse, because he is a great man and I cannot withstand him."

The pattern of the previous four interactions is already broken by the first line of the story. The first one to speak is not the student asking permission, but the teacher commenting to his attendant on what he expects to happen next. Getting ready to go to the bathhouse symbolizes Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's expected acquiescence to "accepting consolation." The picture of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's mourning is suddenly much more vivid: It's not just that he has been sad or depressed about his son's death, but apparently he has been observing the *halakhot* of mourning, which forbid bathing for the week of *Shiva* immediately after burial,[4] well beyond when those laws technically apply. It seems that Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's ordinary functioning is impaired, and his students are not trying to hurry him past his grief, but rather to help with what even he might agree is a genuine problem.

Of course, no one can force Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai to change his approach; he has to be receptive to their help. His response to the mere sight of R. Elazar, before the latter even says anything, is therefore important. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai signals his openness to changing based on whatever R. Elazar has to say before he knows what it is - and it turns out that this trust is not misplaced.

> He entered and sat before him, and he said, "I will tell you an analogy. What is the thing like? A person to whom the king entrusted a package. Every day he would cry and scream and say 'woe to me, when will I get out of this responsibility in peace?' So you, Rabbi, you had a son. He read Torah, (*Tanakh*), Mishnah, laws, and *aggadot*, and he departed from the world without sin. You should accept consolation when you return your package intact."

R. Elazar, first, respects the basic premise of "comfort in, dump out" by not bringing any additional sadness into Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's orbit right now. Instead, he brings an attempt at a positive or comforting thought, a reframing of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's experience in a way that may allow him to move on.

R. Elazar uses a *mashal*, an analogy. This technique lowers Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's defenses by avoiding a direct confrontation, instead presenting a seemingly unrelated scenario for his consideration.[5] This indirect approach, combined with Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's predisposition to be convinced by Rabbi Elazar, gets through to Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai.

> He said to him, "Rabbi Elazar my son, you have consoled me as people console."

The root for consolation, *n.h̲.m.*, can also mean to change one's mind (see, e.g., Ex. 13:17; see also Rashi to Genesis 6:6 s.v. *el libo*), perhaps because both entail approaching the same facts anew and leaving with a different conclusion. When Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai says "you have consoled me" he means, you have helped me reframe my experience - the same painful loss as it was before - just enough that

[3] The biblical personalities seem to be organized in order of their appearance in history, according to the rabbis: Adam, Iyov, Aharon, David. As to why the students seem not to learn anything from the previous failed attempts, I believe the simplest answer is that the story presents them as "entering" one by one. The different biblical precedents all do have different valences, discussed more below. Adam's son was murdered, Iyov's died by seeming divine caprice, Aharon's died through their own sins, and David's son died because of David's sin. These differences are worthy of exploration in their own right, but do not on their face show any sort of progression that would explain why one example would be expected to succeed where the previous ones had failed. If anything, the final example of David, whose son died because of his sins, seems like the least likely to console a grieving parent.

[4] See *Ta'anit* 13b; *Shulkhan Arukh Yoreh Deah* 381:1

[5] This power of analogy is well illustrated by, for example, the prophet Natan's parable in II Sam. 12.

it feels reasonable to change my practice and re-enter at least some of the routines of normal life.

How has R. Elazar succeeded where the others failed? In addition to “dumping in” additional trauma onto his suffering teacher, each of the biblical personalities cited can be understood to frame the death of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s own son in a distressing way.

Adam’s son Hevel was murdered by Adam’s other son, Kayin. When R. Eliezer compares Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s loss to Adam’s, he invites him to look for an obvious cause of death, such as a murder, which may only highlight the absence of anyone to blame in Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s case. In the absence of an obvious cause, further, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s thoughts had a number of unhealthy places to turn, each of which could be triggered by the subsequent students.

R. Yehoshua’s invocation of Iyov, for example, invokes the spectre of suffering inflicted by God but induced by the Satan seemingly for its own sake, or to torment (and thereby test) humans. Telling the grieving parent that his suffering is a test of faith is not comfort; it adds a religious burden (is Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai passing the test?) while also raising the possibility of anger at God.

R. Yosi’s analogy to Aharon opens a different possible wound. Aharon’s two sons died because they brought “alien fire, which [God] had not enjoined upon them” (Lev. 10:1). In other words, their own improper actions caused God to kill them. R. Yosi has, essentially, suggested to Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai that his son died because the son deserved it - not a comforting thought.

R. Shimon’s suggestion invokes a spectre that is in some ways the opposite, but is equally unhealthy. David’s infant son died totally innocent, by definition, but it was David’s own sin that caused his death. Carrying the analogy through fully would suggest to Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai that he was at fault for his own son’s death - again, adding to his burden rather than reducing it.

R. Elazar, in contrast, offers a framing that explicitly negates the most painful suggestions of his colleagues. Since Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s son was not the victim of another human’s crime (as R Eliezer implicitly suggested), Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai needs a way to approach the son’s death that does not involve a vindictive God (per R. Yehoshua’s Iyov analogy), a sinful child (per R. Yosi’s Aharon analogy), or paternal fault (per R. Shimon’s David analogy). R. Elazar’s parable offers the way forward.

R. Elazar is careful to note that Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s son “read Torah, (*Tanakh*), Mishnah, laws, and *aggadot*, and he departed from the world without sin.” The recitation of what the son learned, beginning with the Bible and Mishnah, recalls the father’s presumed role in teaching his son the Torah. The death is not Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s fault. The statement that in addition to being properly taught, the son did not sin, absolves the decedent as well; his death was not his own fault.

The third party (in addition to the son and the father) who has been implicitly blamed by the previous students is God. R. Elazar’s parable seems intended to absolve God of vindictiveness -- God is, after all, simply recalling a deposit that was God’s all along. At the same time, the analogy preserves God’s ultimate power to act with what seems to us as caprice.

I will confess to not finding this last counterargument entirely compelling (and would certainly advise careful thought before deploying it in practice to a grieving person). Indeed, Rabbi Elazar’s entire approach is quite fraught, as grief is not generally amenable to “arguments,” no matter how sensitive. Perhaps this is why the text stresses that Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai anticipated being consoled even before Rabbi Elazar spoke. By directing his attendant to gather his bath things, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai may have signalled his openness to an “argument.” R. Elazar’s argument, in turn, was not a blunt assertion, but a framework with which to reframe all the hurtful and painful thoughts raised by the previous students and put them at bay. In this way, the student consoled his teacher “as people console.”

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s acknowledgement is strangely phrased. What does it mean to console “as people console” (*ke-derekh she-benei adam menahamim*)? What does this add to the simple statement, “you have consoled me”? What would be the alternative to consoling as people console?

Perhaps Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai is implicitly criticizing his other students, whose attempted consolation has not been “as people console” but rather as something else. The four initial students tried to convince Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai not by speaking to his emotional state, but through texts. That is, they attempted to console as people study texts, but not as people console. R. Elazar understands that different modes are appropriate for different settings.

Avot de-Rabbi Natan does not tell us more about R. Yohanan’s reaction, leaving us to assume that he in fact went with his attendant to bathe, then resumed his normal life. But the passage does offer a curious epilogue as to the fate of the students:

> When they left him, [R. Elazar] said, I will go to Damasit, to a nice place with nice waters. [The other students] said, we will go to Yavneh to a place where many students of the sages love the Torah. He, who went to Damasit, to a nice place with nice waters, his name became smaller in Torah. They, who went to Yavneh, to a place that students of the sages are many and love the Torah, their names became greater in Torah.

When we last left Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, he was praising R. Elazar, it would seem, for not getting too caught up in textual/halakhic discourse where it was not appropriate. But the story ends with an implicit caution: don’t stray too far away, either, or your Torah stature will diminish - and indeed, Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh is not quoted once in the entire Mishnah outside of *Avot*.[6]

The cause of R. Elazar’s downfall is also interesting: an attraction to pleasant waters. This conclusion recalls prior appearances of water motifs. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai told his attendant to ready his things for the bathhouse because he could not “withstand” R Elazar (“*eini yakhol la’amod bo”*). But the water imagery started even

[6] A parallel passage in *Shabbat* 147a adds that R. Elazar’s lessened stature was not incidental, but due to a loss of expertise, and portrays R. Elazar as unable to read even a simple verse from the Torah. I have written more about that passage, and the contrasting personalities of R. Elazar and R. Eliezer as depicted in Mishnah *Avot*, elsewhere.

earlier. When Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai describes his students in mishnah *Avot*, he calls R. Elazar "*ma'ayan ha-mitgaber*," generally understood to mean a spring that is continuously increasing in strength.[7]

The expansion on this in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* adds an interesting detail. There, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai describes R. Elazar as "*nahal shotef u-ma'ayan ha-mitgaber* . . . "[8] - a stream or wadi flowing strong with water. This image introduces something of an edge - a strong stream can be overpowering, even dangerous. We can sense, further, a hint of the same edge when Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai said he would be unable to "withstand" R. Elazar's consolation attempt - the waters will knock him over. And indeed, R. Elazar is the only one of the students who does not ask permission before he begins to speak, or even pause for Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai to react before he has said his whole piece. R. Elazar just gushes in.

In our story, R. Elazar puts his powers to good use, but perhaps his desire to retire to a place of "nice waters" suggests some sort of a retreat from overpowering others. After all, if part of his success depends on his ability to overpower, how is what he did really different, *ex ante*, from how his colleagues tried to force Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai to move on?[9]

Most of the story presents a psychological lesson about comforting the bereaved: do not "dump" additional suffering in, but instead bring them a framework to understand their experiences without destructively blaming themselves, the deceased, or God.

At the same time, the hints of violence (the flooding wadi that knocks Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai over) raise an insurmountable problem with encountering others in their vulnerability. When someone is hurt or lost and needs guidance, some amount of persistence, or insistence, may be required to get through to them. At the same time, once the consoler is in the mode of pushing past defenses, and when the consolee is vulnerable or with defenses down, it is very easy to overstep and overpower. Perhaps this is "the way people console" - with empathy and sensitivity built on a pre-existing relationship, but also with a persistence that can cross boundaries, for better or worse. R. Elazar has consoled in the normal human way, avoiding the permission-seeking of his peers, and thus to some degree necessarily involved an intrusion onto Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai.

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The story works through Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's personal loss with psychological subtlety. I would like to suggest that the story can also be read allegorically as referring not only to Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's personal loss, but the national loss of the Churban as well.

The phrase "*nahal shotef*" itself appears in Isaiah 66:12[10]: "For thus said the LORD: I will extend to her prosperity like a stream (*nahar*), The wealth of nations like a wadi in flood (*nahal shotef*); And you shall drink of it. You shall be carried on shoulders and dandled upon knees." The next verse continues: "As a mother comforts her son so I will comfort you (*anahemkhem*); You shall find comfort in Jerusalem."

From a literary perspective, *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* is foreshadowing R. Elazar's success in comforting Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai from the very first description of him - the *nahal shotef* is already associated with consolation, *nehamah*, from Isaiah. When the text later introduces Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai in mourning, the reader has a hint which student will be the best consoler. Like a flooding wadi, R. Elazar then sweeps Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai to the bath.

The literary connection to Isaiah suggests, ever so faintly, an analogy between Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai and the Jewish people after destruction - both in need of consolation. This connection, in fact, fits well with the biographical information for which Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai is best known (see *Gittin* 56a-b): Feigning his death to be smuggled out of a besieged Jerusalem, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai approached the Roman general (soon to become Emperor) Vespasian. When Vespasian gave him an opportunity to make a request, he requested "Give me Yavneh and its sages." By failing to ask for Jerusalem to be saved, he apparently acquiesced to the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple, trying instead to salvage at least some refuge for Torah scholars to rebuild.

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai was no doubt consumed with self-doubt over his actions: had he, in fact, been an agent of salvation by guaranteeing the security of at least some sages? Or had he missed an opportunity to save Jerusalem? Perhaps the deceased son in our story can be read as a metaphor for this loss of Jerusalem. It is the destruction of the temple that Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai was unable to move past.

Carrying on the analogy, the responses of the four initial students could be read to blame the destruction on: criminals, akin to Kayin who killed Hevel (and indeed the *Gemara* in *Gittin* places a good deal of blame on the Jewish Zealots for the fate that befell their fellow Jews); a vengeful God akin to Iyov's; the people of Israel for their sins, akin to Aharon's sons; and Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai himself, akin to David. Indeed, the same passage in the Talmud records opinions apparently blaming Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai for not asking Vespasian to spare Jerusalem.

R. Elazar's consolation, for its part, can also easily be read into the same allegorical vein. He encourages Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai not to blame himself, and to take pride in the Torah knowledge his spiritual descendants have amassed. As for the physical destruction, the Temple was a deposit from God, and it is not our place to determine when it should be "returned."

If the interaction is an allegory, it also casts the end of the story in a new light. R. Elazar successfully consoles Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai that he did the best he could by saving the sages, but it seems that R

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[7] "A spring that [ever] gathers force" (Joshua Kulp translation on Sefaria); "A spring flowing stronger and stronger" (*Artscroll Siddur*).

[8] The full cite reads- "A wadi in flood, and a spring that grows ever stronger, whose waters grow stronger and go outside, to fulfill that which is written (Prov. 5:16) 'Your springs will gush forth In streams in the public squares.'"

[9] Alternatively, perhaps it is his very overpowering tendency to break through boundaries that causes him to strike out on his own rather than more meekly follow the pack.

[10] Isaiah 66 is the *haftarah* for *shabbat rosh hodesh*.

Elazar himself is perhaps too comfortable with the precarious status-quo of Torah study post-destruction. His colleagues, sensing the urgency of consolidating Torah as much as possible, go to Yavneh, living out Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's vision for that place. R. Elazar, in contrast, leaves his colleagues for a place of nice water. Perhaps the same power of reframing that allowed R Elazar to successfully console Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai has allowed R Elazar to convince himself that things are better than they are, and that his presence in Yavneh is not essential.

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Comfort is powerful, but it is also dangerous. It is often someone willing to intrude a bit, a wadi flooding over its banks, who brings the needed consolation. At the same time, that person must remain hyper-aware of the limits and dangers of the interaction. The comforter must be careful not to carry his interlocutor away, and not to be carried away himself. R. Elazar successfully breaks down Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's unhealthy boundaries. But the same power of optimistic reframing, perhaps, leads him to break his own bonds with his community.

Isaiah, in contrast, looks forward to a time when it is God comforting Israel like a flooding wadi. Then it will not be a question of reframing a loss in a tolerable way, of convincing Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai that saving Yavneh was the best he could do, but rather in undoing the loss itself. "You shall find comfort in Jerusalem."

Rationalism, Mysticism, and the "Off-the-Derekh" Phenomenon

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There is a popular misconception that Modern Orthodox teenagers abandon halakhic observance because of a pubescent pattern of rebellion and disdain for authority and law. This is problematic for two reasons: One, it disrespects the intelligence of the people in question; two, it fails to address the apparently growing trend of disillusionment among this group and its actual causes. Instead of resorting to this available stereotype, let's paint a picture.

Yosef grew up *frum*-from-birth in a middle-of-the-road, Modern Orthodox neighborhood in a nameless American suburb. He has been under the impression, for the previous fifteen years of his life, that when the sun sets on Friday night, the world changes. The rules of nature are literally altered. Of course, he knows that if he flips on a light switch, he won't be struck down with lightning; in fact, he knows no *immediate* consequences will occur at all. He may have complex beliefs about the long-term nature of reward and punishment, but he is not an unscientific or primitive person, and his Shabbat experience is not in contradiction to this. He just knows, in his heart, that Shabbat is *different*; once a week, the world is fundamentally distinguished from its regular state. Then, once, in an uncharacteristic and basically innocent moment of dissociation—maybe it's a complete accident—he presses the home button on his iPhone. The screen blares. The light glows there hauntingly. He freezes for a moment—and nothing happens. Yosef knew, of course, that nothing would. But what he is surprised, and perhaps unnerved, to discover is that he feels exactly the same. He picks up his phone, fumbles it around in his hands, and feels quite identical to how he feels doing this on a Tuesday. Yosef has come to a profound and disturbing realization—the world that Halakhah describes is a figment of his imagination. An inquisitive, honest, and bright person, he cannot sincerely practice a religion that, he thinks, asserts a false model of reality.

Yosef and countless Jewish teenagers like him have a common conception of Halakhah, as do a whole slew of other members of their community who might not ever test the legal boundaries of their tradition. They all regard Halakhah as a truth claim, a description of the way things really are. This truth claim does not, for most typical American Jewish young people, rely much, if at all, on mystical categories like hidden worlds, demonic consequences, or the drawing down of divine favor. More probably they think about Halakhah as a kind of picture of reality, or maybe a blueprint for an ideal civilization. Their conception is, in short, a *rationalist* one; it is mainly empirical, or at least assumed to be, and it tries to explain the world on its own terms. Kosher food is of a different essential nature than non-Kosher food, a *siddur* must not touch the ground, and to sleep through *Shaharit* is to disturb the fabric of the universe, and all this without resorting to planes of experience other than the observable. In this worldview, none of these facts are particularly "Jewish"; they are simply true, and Judaism is taken to be a description of that truth. When that description fails upon experimentation, people like Yosef are prompted to abandon it. Apologetic answers by his teachers referring to secret processes occurring in heaven or, on the other hand, the moral superiority of the halakhic system, will not satisfy Yosef, who has no interest in the unseen, and who knows that plenty of other societies around the world function perfectly well without Halakhah; anyways, he doesn't want to be part of a system that regards those people in such a way. When it comes down to it, he can no longer follow Halakhah because in his mind, Halakhah is supposed to be *true.*

To delve further into this line of thinking and the problems it entails, we will develop the categories of rationalism and mysticism in the history of Jewish thought. Although it is a fanciful exaggeration to say that these two models have been defined exclusively by their conflict—they evolved out of each other, and some of the most seminal Jewish thinkers, especially in the past century, made their mark by integrating the two—it is definitely the case that they represent two different religious modes of thinking about the world. The interaction between these two modes has characterized Jewish history since the inception of Rabbinic Judaism—just after the height of Greco-Roman philosophy, which set the stage for both movements' attitudes through the ancient dialogues of Plato and Aristotle and their later permutations—and in the past thousand years developed a particularly strong character. The conversation around producing a subtle and accurate definition of these terms has been exhausted already by countless experts (see virtually the entire scholarship of Gershom Scholem and Moshe Halbertal), but here I want to offer a new and, admittedly, more creative interpretation: Rationalism is the attempt to explain things *on behalf of themselves,* and mysticism is the attempt to explain things *on behalf of a culture*.

Rationalism is primarily interested in offering an explanation of our surroundings in a scientific way, attempting to get to the essence of things as we observe them. It is typically interested in causal explanations, and will bow to the will of empiricism, which it might consider part of its own methodology. For the rationalist, the simplest and most "sensible" explanation tends to be best. In short, rationalism is the search for *truth*, in its most self-evident meaning. Even the notion of revealed truth, that which is true by dint of God

communicating it, which can run counter to the logic of the world as we experience it, is assimilated into the realm of the scientific: since truth is identified with the divine, whatever God says is self-evidently true. Maimonides represents the most prominent exponent of this way of thinking, but other medieval formulations of rationalist Judaism can be found in the works of Saadiah Gaon, Hasdai Crescas, Gersonides, and Joseph Albo, as well as dozens of others who consider themselves students of their schools.

Mysticism, on the other hand, has never cared much for the truth; at least, not the kind of truth rationalism seeks. The truth of mysticism is not the truth of objects *as they are*, but the truth of the world as it impresses itself upon the human soul, or, more specifically, the soul of a culture. The mystics have never had high regard for empirical proofs for or against God, the validity of Halakhah, or any other religious category; for them, science is variously seen as a parallel language that has no bearing on the religious conversation (a view best seen in the contemporary work of R. Shagar), a stultifying corruption of the religious impulse (a view most strongly expressed in the work of R. Nahman of Bratslav, who names specifically Maimonides' *Moreh Nevukhim* as a dangerous text), or as having its purpose, but being subservient to that of mysticism (a view epitomized by the statement of Moses of Burgos, quoted by Isaac of Acre, that "the philosophers whom you praise… the place of their heads is the place of our feet"). The mystics are by no means interested in the simplest explanation; instead, they are attracted to grand, mythical depictions of the cosmos and its dramas.

To be sure, the mystics of course believe in the factuality of the world they describe, in the same way any culture believes in its own mythology. But the mystic takes a different avenue to his truth from the rationalist; rather than empiricism or philosophy, the mystic uses especially the tool of experience and personal vision, tools which have long frightened orthodox institutions precisely because they don't fit neatly into the world as we observe it or into the compartments of cool, objective logic. Not only that, but the literality of a system—its capacity to reflect literal truth—has, frankly, always been a boring question to the mystics. Kabbalists refer to themselves as masters of *sod*, the secret, the hidden patterns that comprise life, and they stray away from *peshat*, the description of the world as it appears to the human eye. The project of defining the world according to a colloquial concept of truth is simply not an interesting one to them.

The longstanding rationalist opposition to mysticism—which existed to an extent in the past millennium, and became especially pronounced in the modern period in the wake of the Enlightenment—is based on exactly the kind of thinking that left Yosef in the religious lurch. A naive criticism of mysticism points out the apparent ridiculousness of a mythology when studied from the perspective of the literal—obviously, says the rationalist, Zeus does not throw down lightning bolts, the Amazon did not descend from a serpent, and God's feminine aspect was not exiled from her castle. This classic critique fails to understand that the goal of the mystic is not truth in the same sense as rational truth. What drives the Jewish mystic to explain the world is not a belief that this explanation approaches the "scientific" nature of things, but the desire to create a unique depiction of the world that is distinctly *Jewish*. Even as it draws its influence from Greek, Christian, and Muslim thought, the God of Kabbalah is definitively a Jewish God, and the universe Kabbalah describes is rich, mythical, and full of color wholly unlike the worlds painted by other cultures. And not only is the creativity of Kabbalah deeply imaginative, but it also bears the hallmark of the uniquely Jewish imagination. Imagination and identity are tied up with each other. This is characteristic of the mystical gesture in all religious thinking—the mystic wants to construct not a truth claim, but a *narrative*, a story characterized by its highly personal nature, with which the identity of the storyteller is intimately tied up.

This fact—the mystical tendency to construct a model based on identity and storytelling rather than empirical truth—leads to an interesting explanation of a major discrepancy between American Modern Orthodoxy and its Israeli counterpart, *Datiut-Leumiut* or Religious Zionism. The latter draws its philosophy from two streams: Zionist thought and the thought of its religious founders. Zionism was by definition a movement dealing in questions of Jewish identity. It was not interested in the way things "really are," but in defining the nature of a Jew, partially by assembling this character from history but also by building it from the ground up. As for its early religious founders, most notably R. Abraham Isaac Kook but also his son Zvi Yehuda and pupil David Cohen, they were entrenched in the worlds of Kabbalah and Hasidism. Their thought was largely able to gain traction precisely because their mystical worldviews accorded with the popular Zionist gravitation toward questions of identity and narrative rather than questions of rational truth. To be sure, all of these thinkers drew a strong influence from rationalist texts as well, but their approach toward these works is marked with a clear mystical tendency to draw from them a uniquely Jewish character, rather than to pontificate about the nature of the world as such. Such an approach can be seen in David Cohen's magnum opus *Kol Ha-Nevuah*, in which he identifies a common, emergent Jewish ethic in both Jewish philosophical and Kabbalistic works and their histories.

As for American Modern Orthodoxy, while questions of identity certainly played a role in its formation as much as they do in any culture, they were not nearly answered as purposefully and carefully as those asked by the Israeli Zionists. Instead, the mid-20th century movement inculcated contemporaneous American attitudes of rationalism: R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik based much of his philosophy on neo-Kantianism, drawing from the same wellspring of Western philosophy that helped push its civilization toward secularism. The Rav, of course, utilized this kind of philosophy specifically to construct a religious Jewish identity, but a clear tilt from the explicit and esoteric mysticism so prevalent in religious Israeli writings of the same period can be detected in his works, as well as other major figures associated with Yeshiva University, such as R. Bernard Revel and R. Norman Lamm.

But the truth is that even R. Soloveitchik's philosophy displayed distinct mystical tendencies, and one of his most popular philosophical works, *Halakhic Man*, attempts a depiction of the idealized Jewish figure in a manner quite similar to Hasidic texts. Much of this philosophy draws from the halakhic worldview of the Brisk dynasty, whose progenitor (and namesake of Soloveitchik) Yosef Dov Ha-Levi, or *Beit HaLevi*, draws often from the *Zohar* as a source for the idea of Halakhah as a unified, abstracted body. The Rav himself had a strong affinity for *Tanya*, the foundational text of Chabad. His son-in-law, R. Aharon Lichtenstein, notable in his attempt to virtually wring Torah dry of any kabbalistic inclination, wrote his dissertation on the 17th century philosopher Henry More, who was influenced by Kabbalah in its Christian incarnation. And despite his supreme regard for the intellect, Lichtenstein regarded his own faith as a matter of surrender, beyond analysis and interrogation. None of these facts are, of course, mentioned by the teachers in Yosef's high school, whose arguments for Jewish identity tend to be limited in sophistication to appeals to tradition and the miracle of Jewish survival, neither of which Yosef actually identifies with as an individual.

The argument for the primacy of one movement over the other is not the point; on the contrary, as noted, foundational Jewish thinkers of the modern period have attempted to unite rationalist and mystical streams in Torah. Unique to the Jewish tradition, many great theologians have also been great legal scholars—the best thinkers have seen the two schools as complementary. What matters is that the brand of Jewish rationalism taught in the American Day School system, in which the model is taken to an absurd extreme, is outdated both in its effectiveness in keeping people observant and in its comparison with the direction of current thought more broadly. The world's thinking people, and especially young adults, do not engage much anymore in questions of "the way things are" or "the way things should be," but in questions of identity, in questions of where *I* belong, and how a pluralistic society can be built in which every member is her best self. We should consider it a tremendous and mournful loss that the answer "Because you're Jewish" to the question of why a fifteen year old should keep Halakhah is seen as condescending, restricting, and insufficient; if an answer phrased in terms of identity and narrative is any of these things, we have wrongly conveyed the sense of Torah.

While a technical increase in the education of Jewish mystical ideas is certainly lacking, teaching more *Likkutei Moharan* in high school is not necessarily the answer to the "off-the-*derekh*" phenomenon—although a curriculum based around a thinker who dealt with precisely the same questions of faith that maturing religious minds do would be a welcome addition. A qualitative shift is more important, whereby we can move past our intellectual insecurity, our fear of the mysterious and that which eludes proof, and incorporate the realm of myth, storytelling, and personal narrative into Jewish education. Latent questions of identity in Modern Orthodoxy, rather than those of halakhic truth, should be brought to the fore and discussed openly. In no way does this shift have to come at the expense of rationalism, as *Dati-Leumi* thinkers already demonstrated a century ago. But if Yosef regarded Shabbat as a facet of his own identity rather than as a description of an empirical reality, his willingness to abandon it might find itself up against the barrier of culture. The pluralism of the modern age is enriching, and not threatening, so long as the narratives of every party are understood by those parties to be extensions of culture and not depictions of reality. This sense of culture so fundamental to the character of mysticism is conspicuously absent from Modern Orthodox discourse.

Educating Jewishness would additionally cultivate in teenagers a strong humility, so that they would not feel threatened by the narratives (rather than the truth claims) of other cultures; it would work to diminish the discomfort in the right-wing Modern Orthodox world with "secular college," where competing depictions of reality could draw Yosef away from his roots. As long as those roots are justified by the fact of their Jewishness, and not their empirical accuracy, there need not be an anxiety of learning about the roots of non-Jewish peers.

The conversation of faith, mysticism, and identity needs to stop being taboo in Modern Orthodox circles, both because this taboo is wrong and because it is damaging to our own enterprise. I suspect the resistance to broach these topics in the public sphere of Jewish education is due to a private insecurity on the part of the educators as to their own faith and identity; the easiest way to avoid dealing with a question in oneself is to suppress it in one's peers and students. Since the way a culture educates its youth is a reflection of its own values, raising the level of discourse in our schools regarding these topics is a crucial step in returning our own faith to God. If Yosef were exposed to the sense of Jewishness at the core of our mystical tradition, he would rise to the challenge of modernity as a proud and humble Jew, prepared to face the world of truth outside and the altogether different world within himself and his tradition.

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