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## TOLDOT

### LIFE BETWEEN THE LINES

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*EDITORS' NOTE: This article was originally published in Hebrew by Rav Dov Zinger in Karov Elecha, an Israeli weekly publication, and was translated for the Lehrhaus. You can find the original [here](#).*

In general, educators dedicate time and energy to two topics: The first is establishing boundaries - boundaries between teacher and student, between the school and the home, etc. The second is about the content itself.

I generally tell people who deal with boundaries to first examine themselves. It's important to talk about boundaries, but to keep it in proportion. The "Mishmar ha-Gvul" (border police) is an essential force, but the army isn't comprised of only the *Mishmar Hagvul* - there are many other units in the army that are much more important than the border police.

In conversations about boundaries, it is important to consider proportionality; it's like the ratio between a vessel's capacity and the thickness of its walls. Having thick walls certainly matters, but that isn't the whole story. If we fret about boundaries, it may indicate that we are overlooking the real issue - the contents of the vessel. *When we focus only on the border police, we lose sight of the bigger picture. When we focus only on the vessel, we lose sight of the vessel's contents.*

Even when we do turn to the second topic - content, we tend to focus on the nature of the proper subject matter to be studied. How to teach Torah, what parts of Torah should we emphasize; *Bekiut* (covering ground) or *Iyun* (in-depth analysis); *Tanakh* or Talmud? How much *Tanakh*, how much Talmud? One method or another? Should we study additional subjects? All these questions relate to concrete study - i.e. the "letters of the Torah". However, in addition to the two commonly discussed topics mentioned above, there is a third area which deserves real attention - the area between the letters, that of the "White Fire" (*Aish Levanah*).

Our Rabbis tell us that the Torah was given "Black Fire on White Fire" (*Shekalim* 16b). In *Hilkhos Stam*, many laws of writing a Torah are dedicated to the rules of the 'black fire': the shape of the letters, the words of the Torah itself, which are written in 'black fire'. There are also laws dedicated to the 'white fire', the *Hilkhos Gevil*, the laws which deal with the parchment, the white *klaf* upon which the Torah is written. The white fire is the background on which the black fire of the letters of Torah, what we think of as the content, are written. **The**

**white fire is all about what takes place - preceding and embracing the letters.**

We must learn to be sensitive to the unofficial environment which really sets the tone for most of our interactions. What is going on among the students, what is the nature of their "Lingua Franca" - what type of conversations are they having? What happens between teachers and students, and what happens between one teacher and another? This is the nature of the parchment, the *gevil*, and it's hard to quantify or define precisely. This "between the lines" is the enigma of the entire world.

#### God is Curious

These days, as we mark the memory of our Temple, we find an interesting phenomenon. Researchers have succeeded in reconstructing facsimiles of the priestly garments, working models of the trumpets, and even a full scale *menorah*, but there is one thing that is still hard to create: The Cherubs, the *Keruvim*. This isn't just because they were created out of one solid block of gold, but rather because there is a certain inexplicable quality to the *keruvim*. To be more exact, it is the space between the two *keruvim* which is so mysterious. The relationship between the two *keruvim* reflects the relationship between God and *Knesset Yisrael* at any given point in time. God speaks from "in between the two *keruvim*."

There is an astounding verse (Malachi 3:16): "אז נדברו יראי ה' איש על רעהו ויקשב ה' וישמע" "Then two God-fearing friends spoke one with each other, and God listened and heard." The language of this verse is challenging. Why does the verse state that God heard the conversations of man, and not that they heard each other? One would expect it to say "and they heard each other" - that they succeeded in achieving a level where they really communicated with each other. However the end of the passage reads "and God listened and heard". This verse reflects a model of communication that is fundamentally different (although perhaps deeply similar), to the normal model of speaking to God, of prayer. Instead of man turning to God with the words of the *siddur*, man turns to his fellow in conversation. God is curious about the conversations between people, even those not directed at Him, and comes to listen to the conversations between one and her friend.

An additional aspect of this verse is the use of the word נדברו "they were spoken," which is a passive verb, and not דברו - they spoke, which would be an active verb. The implication of נדברו is similar to a verse I alluded to earlier, about the *keruvim*: "And the voice was heard that was spoken ("meedaber"- מְדַבֵּר and not midaber- מִדְּבַר - that spoke) from above the *kaporet*." This is a reflexive language, a type of hidden reality. For example, if I prepare a lesson and make notes about what I plan on teaching, then if I manage to get through

the material without being interrupted, I will have delivered what I intended to convey. However, it just may be that if the audience is engaged, and someone asks a good question, suddenly new approaches of understanding develop. Then wellspring of ideas flows freely, all due to what occurs 'between' the lines of the lesson, **between** the teacher and the students.

When two friends meet at this level, speaking "one to their friend," *ish el re'ehu*, an aspect of *nidbaru* emerges, a communication greater than the sum of its parts, not from either one but from **between** both sides. It is to this kind of a conversation that "God listens, and hears."

This explanation dovetails as well with the Mishnah in *Avot* (3:2): "Two who sit together and there are words of Torah **between them** (ביןיהם)..." The emphasis of this Mishnah is the "between", that there is something fundamental to the Torah 'between' two people, like the words that emerge from between the two *keruvim*. We have a newly created reality between two people. Similarly, our Rabbis say that "If man and woman merit, the *Shekhinah* is **between them**" (*Sotah* 17a). That which occurs between two people, the newly minted space of their conversation and relationship, is the white fire, the *Hilkhot Gevil*.

This is a challenging component of education, because when a teacher is in a class, she usually pays attention to what her own students are saying, and her own lesson plan, but attention must also be paid to the aspect of *heedabrut* (הידברות) - that which is spoken between the students, which is perhaps most important to listen to. How do they speak to each other, whom do they choose to speak with, and what do they talk about? At any given point in time the educational milieu of the students is most certainly influenced by the personal example being set by the behavior and language among the staff members.

When you give space for consideration of the conversations occurring at all levels of an institution, when you give attention to what happens between the lines, then you give space for the *Shekhinah* to dwell. The *Shekhinah* constantly searches for the 'between', the place of nonexistence, in which to exist. The culture and general atmosphere of an entire educational institution is directly influenced by the types of conversations students are having with each other, with staff members, and also by the conversations between staff members.

In Hebrew, we refer to a substitute teacher as a "*memaleh makom*", which literally means he "fills space", but in reality, the better teacher is one who is "*mefaneh makom*", who creates a vacuum for the students themselves to fill. Before the creation of the world, God contracted His presence in order to allow a space for the world to exist - "*Sod ha-Tzimtum*". Instead of filling the entire world with His visible presence, God contracted, removing His seen presence from His nascent world, thus allowing space for creation. So too, an educator who naturally tends to bestow -- "More than the calf seeks to suckle, the cow desires to nurse" (*Pesahim* 112a)-- should seek to emulate God's characteristics and also be cognizant of the *Sod ha-Tzimtum* and hold back.

When a teacher sits with her class, it is important that her persona not fill the vacuum, but she should rather create space to allow and motivate students to grow and flourish.

### The Heart Longs to Break

In his letter on education, Rav Kook writes that if our primary goal for children is that they grow up to be mature adults, then the

immaturity of the child at this stage is unimportant because it is but a stepping stone towards maturity. However, if we really accept the idea that the world merits its existence thanks to the Torah study of little children as is written: "*Ein ha-olam mitkayaim ella be-shevil hevel pihem shel tinokot shel beit rabban*" (*Shabbat* 119b), then the opposite is the case: we'd realize that children are the crown of creation and adults exist merely to feed them and teach them Torah!

My goal as an adult should not be to relate to them as a small child that I need to develop into a mature adult. From the child's perspective, life is here and now – they are the real thing! The conversational model of "each one spoke to his friend" is predicated first and foremost on my respect for you, as you are now. I don't wish to impose anything on you, to change you. I want to recognize you, to appreciate you and your essence, your *neshamah*. This isn't just true in our conversations with children, but also with other so-called 'adults'; our dominant desire is not to impose our will on the other, but to respect and appreciate the essence of the other, just as they are. Through speaking with others as they are, without personal agendas, both of us grow, together. The conversational meeting between us creates a presence, a betweenness. This space is defined by each of us, and is more than each of us.

It happens that sometimes when a child walks into a meeting with you, he sits quietly for three or four minutes and suddenly says "thank you" and walks out. What happened here?

Rabbi Nahman of Breslov has a beautiful Torah on this idea, which I will express in my own words. A *tzadik's* heart embraces his disciple, because the heart of the *tzadik* is a vacuum, as the verse states "my heart is empty inside me" (Psalms 109:22). The heart of the righteous leader acts as a vacuum so that it draws the heart of his disciple to empty itself into the heart of the *tzadik* and so, the two hearts are bound together.

The heart longs to break – it has something to say, to express, but we are naturally protective, closed off, defensive, afraid of vulnerability. We fear opening up, lest we be hurt in the process. This is the *orlat ha-lev*, the defensive covering of the heart, which serves to protect us from emotional damage. But if the student feels completely safe, protected, surrounded, then the heart of the student is able to break, to open up, in the comforting embrace of the heart of the teacher. The student is protected, comfortable and confident that nothing can hurt him. This is how we can create a meaningful conversation, even without saying a word. A meeting of the hearts that emerges from **between them**.

### Belief in My Own Words

In our yeshiva, we have something called a "*bli'tz*", which stands for *beli tziniut*: 'without sarcasm.' In these sessions, we create a sterile environment, a safe space in which we sit in a circle with the students and learn how to speak to each other in a different jargon – in a positive fashion. Words must be more personal and sincere. I open up by saying something sincere from my heart, from myself, because "words which flow from the heart, enter the heart." For example, I say that I am very concerned about the fact that other students don't comply with the "lights out" rules because it prevents others from getting to sleep on time.

This statement must be accompanied by a "playback." After speaking, I turn to someone in the circle and ask, "Did you understand me?" If they do, they repeat what I shared, in their own words. If they understood me, I express my appreciation for being heard, and if not,

I'll correct them. This happens again and again, until a circle of openness has been created.

Because as I write this we are currently in the "Nine Days," I am reminded of something that happened at the time of the expulsion from Gush Katif. I remember a conversation that happened in a class in which there were three students from Gush Katif. It was before the evacuation, and the students who weren't from Gush Katif were concerned for the emotional state of their friends. There was a sense that those from Gush Katif weren't acknowledging the possibility of evacuation, maintaining faith that this crisis would be averted. Their friends in class were concerned for them, and it led to a deeply emotional conversation.

At the end of the conversation, one student turned to his friend and said:

Because I love you so deeply and care about you so strongly, I want to know in any case what you feel, where is this bringing you? It will be *be-seder*, it will be okay, but *tahlis* are you scared? Do you dream about it at night? Is it concerning you? How do you want us to relate to this?

At the end of the day, a vessel was created, in which words matter and are respected, and no one can be pushed away. I believe in my words, that they will reach their destination, and be heard. A *bli"tz* is a clinic of sorts, or as we call it in Hebrew a *klinikah* (קליניקה), or as I like to call it, a *keli naki*, a clean vessel, a space in which I can open up to you, without fear of judgement, without concern of debate about what my feelings are.

In order for a student to express her heart, I need to help her remove the blockage, the *orlat lev* that stops one from opening up. This can't happen by force, as the coercion itself often leads one to get defensive and shut down.

## MRI

The Mishnah (*Negaim* 2:5) dictates that "a person sees all *negaim*, outside of his own." The Baal Shem Tov creatively reads this to say "a person sees all *negaim* outside; of his own." The Baal Shem Tov is teaching us that our perception of imperfection outside the self, flows from our own inner imperfections. Every flaw that we see in the world, or in the classroom, we see due to the flaws of the self, and they tell us that we have something to work on. This isn't just a cute phrase - no less than the Rambam (*H. Isurei Biah* 19:17) affirms it legally. When I take this idea seriously, if a teacher comes to me and describes all the issues occurring in a class, I respond, "Wonderful, you described everything to me, and now tell me what about this concerns you, where is this type of problem - in you?"

In one school, a teacher found one of the students to be cheating, and a staff member said, "We can't have this in the yeshiva! Here we don't lie - if he wants to lie, he can leave the yeshiva immediately." I told him: "You're right, but before we throw him out, I want to ask you the following question: 'why does this anger you so? It's true that he cheated, and he should leave, but why are you so upset about it?'" It took him much time, until in the end he told me:

"Do you know how much I worked on myself to be more truthful, how much I struggled not to tell lies, how much I hold back from telling lies - and he lies so easily!?"

In other words, the student's problem reflects on the teacher - this student triggered something in the teacher. I can't collide with

another car if he is travelling on route 6 and I am on route 4. If I meet someone struggling with something, it may indicate that I'm also struggling with the same thing and the actual meeting is an invitation for me to work on this issue in my own life.

A certain Rosh Yeshiva invited me to his yeshiva to speak to the students about prayer. I told him that I don't think that speaking only with the students would accomplish anything. Perhaps I'll give one talk full of beautiful ideas, but will that change anything? Real growth could come only from doing something together with the staff, working on the growth of the teachers.

This is true in dealing with family issues as well. If one's spouse or children are angering you, it may be time for you to turn the mirror around - for introspection. We give every teacher and rebbi a small instrument called an "MRI". What is an MRI? MRI connotes: הם-are-I. When you look at others, you should examine yourself.

There is a story about one of the Rabbis of Chabad who travelled from city to city. In each city people would pour out their hearts to him about their challenges, and he would give them advice - a "*tikun*". One Jew came to the Rebbe and poured out his heart about a particular struggle. Instead of immediately giving him advice and a blessing, as was the norm, the Rebbe fasted for 3 days and nights, and didn't accept anyone during that time. After 3 days, the Rebbe called the man in and gave him a *tikun*. The *hasidim* asked the Rebbe what distinguished this case, why did the Rebbe need 3 days? The Rebbe responded that the visiting Jew had discussed with him a certain disgusting sin, and the Rebbe couldn't find any bit of that matter in himself. At this point, the Rebbe said he understood that "God was hiding something from me, because it's impossible for a Jew like this to come before me if the issue wasn't connected to me as well. Therefore I fasted and prayed, and in the end I remembered a certain flaw that I have, however minute, that is connected to this sin. I found for myself a *tikun*, and only then was I able to give him his *tikun*."

In Hebrew we refer to a 'problem child' as a "תלמיד בעייתי", which I understand to connote that the problem is mine, the problem of the *talmid* (student) is my problem. (This is a play on words, because *בעייתי* in this context usually means 'problematic,' but can also mean 'my problem.')

Such a student is an invitation for self-reflection, for a clarification of my personal *avodah*, to better myself. In this interaction, something occurs **between** us; when one thing is changed, the change reflects and rebounds throughout both of us.

## Take Off Your Shoes

There is a special Jew named Yisrael Chevroni, who has studied the human body. He formerly was a senior engineer and judo instructor. He has written three important books, one of which is called "*Shikhul ha-Yekholet*" - "Improving Your Capabilities". Unfortunately, I have had problems with my back and after trying all of the conventional solutions, I went to see him. The first thing he told me was to take off my shoes, at which point he stared at my shoes for ten minutes, finally saying "I understand." He then sat on his chair and asked me to move my heel back and forth for an hour and rotate my ankle. He succeeded in restoring flexibility to my ankles.

The body is a complex holistic organism. It's quite possible that because I wear my *kippah* a bit to the right side, my head leans ever so slightly to the left, and as a result my shoulder angles to the left, until my whole body is influenced. Like someone who is often on the phone, or does the dishes while on the phone, and holds up the phone with his shoulder, he holds his shoulder in a way that ends up

hurting. When Yisrael Chevroni looked at my shoes, he saw how I walk, and through this he understood that my problem wasn't in my back but in my feet. Then he began to treat my right foot, and this changed the entire alignment of my body.

This holistic approach applies to the body, but we should be aware that the body and the soul are one unit as well. We should understand that physical pain, can come not just from wearing your *kippah* a certain way, but because of the way I feel about things happening at school. It's possible that I feel frustration about the way the students are acting in yeshiva, and my spiritual frustration may affect my physical comfort, and give me back pains.

When ants work together, symbiotically, they aren't receiving direct instructions about what to do, but rather work with a singular goal, and they intuitively feel what to do. The same is true about the body, with each of our limbs being part of a single organism, they understand what to do, each limb with its particular purpose. The same is true about social institutions, schools, and classes.

This understanding could be approached through a purely social lens based on existing research, but when viewed through a spiritual lens, more is gained. There is a collective culture, a complex singularity, to social institutions, cultures that can be influenced and understood. When there is a 'problem child' in a class, he's like my back pain - he may be just a symptom to a broader reality, but may not be a problem in and of himself.

If I 'deal with it' in the conventional manner, invite his parents in, involve the guidance counselor as well as the teacher together, and we deal with the issue, it usually doesn't help because often this addresses only the symptom, but not the broader reality or context. On the other hand, if I try and really understand what is happening, I may discover a systemic problem which expresses itself via the weakest link in the chain- the student with the problem, who somehow is drawn into reflecting or echoing the actual problem. By true introspection we may discover the real problem.

Couples often come to me for advice, and I regularly set them up with three chairs, because there is no such thing as two people alone, there is always an "in **between**", something that occurs between them. It's always very enlightening to see where they place the third chair, the chair of the "*beineihem*". I prepared the third chair for the *Shekhinah* who is here with us in the room, but sometimes one pushes the chair off to the side, or next to the spouse or places it between them.

When you get used to this approach, you learn to place significance on this sense of presence. We don't bring students to a mechanic's garage where we solve technical issues. We are dealing with intertwining souls yearning to ascend together. What we see in the field, in the classroom - is the earthly expression, the result, the projection. In Kabbalistic terms this represents the *Sefirah* of *Malkhut* - the earthly expression of God's rule. However, *Malkhut* yearns for "*Yihud*," for a connection to the spheres above so that the "*Shefa*," the bounty, can flow down to earth. It is our job to be like a plumber, to identify where this whole system gets stuck.

Therefore, the problems we face in the classroom are really deep invitations for introspection and analyzing the reasons why there is a blockage in the system. Oftentimes when you make a small change in yourself, maybe just a prayer and then all of a sudden you may find practical changes in others as well.

### How I Love My Phone

There's a well-known story about a group of teachers that came to one of the *gedolim*, and consulted with him about a student they wanted to expel from their yeshiva. The rabbi interrupted them, asking: "What is the name of this student, along with his mother's name?" The teachers didn't know. The rabbi responded: "If you didn't pray for him yet, return home and get back to work."

The question is: do you know the names of all your students and their mother's names, in order to pray for them? Many times we do this with the staff in our yeshiva, we pray for each other and for our students.

In this generation, there is a great new problem with smartphones, as if before there were phones, there were no other educational problems in previous generations. Before staff members discuss establishing rules and guidelines about cellphone use of their students, it's a great idea to speak with staff members about their own relationships with their cellphones. Staff members speak about their complicated relationships with their phones - for example about the question of being constantly available. How much they love phones, how much they hate phones - each staff member talks about their dependence on their phones. Studies show that the phone has practically become part of our body!

Once we have had this exciting conversation between us, then when the conversation shifts to speaking about students, the conversation is fundamentally different. Now the teachers are part of the conversation, something has changed, the narrative has changed completely. We no longer take a condescending view of the topic, because we now know that we are part of the problem, we are in this together. This helps humanize the conversation, and focus it. This is like preparation for *tefilah*. After preparing for prayer, you are able to pray in a much more precise, powerful way. Similarly, with a brief, in-depth discussion of the issue in advance, much time can be saved and put the student in the proper perspective as part of a single organism, an entity in which the students and staff are all one, in which all problems are shared by both the staff and the students, together - ביניהם !

*Translated by Aaron Toledano and Yehuda Fogel.*

*The translators would like to thank Yossi Baumol, David Fried, and Rav Dov Zinger for their invaluable comments and jokes in this process.*

## ON RELIGIOUS COUNTERCULTURE IN TRANSLATION

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The state of relations between diasporic and Israeli Jews remains a ubiquitous topic of discussion in the Jewish public sphere. One small corner of this discourse – populated largely by adherents of the overlapping sub-groups “Modern Orthodoxy” and “Religious Zionism” – has devoted itself to considering the circulation of contemporary trends of “Jewish thought” (for lack of a better term) between the Anglophone and Israel. The first obstacle to be hurdled in this transfer of ideas and texts is, of course, language. Whatever one might think of the perils of monolingualism in both Israel and the English-speaking diaspora, translations are indispensable. On the Israeli side, more of the writings of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American thinkers like Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Abraham Joshua Heschel – not to mention works by contemporary authors like Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks and Arthur Green – have been translated into Hebrew over the last few years. On the other hand, American readers have lately been exposed to a more recent cohort of Israeli rabbis. Foremost among these are Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Shagar) and Rabbi Menahem Froman, who were part of the same Religious Zionist/settler communities. To oversimplify the story, beginning in the 1990s, members of this milieu who were discontented with mainstream Religious Zionist *yeshiva* curricula and praxis began to combine neo-Hasidism with an openness to general culture and philosophy. In the past decade, Shagar and Froman have become (counter)cultural heroes amongst a certain subset of American Jews. It seems fair to assume that most of these Americans were initially exposed to Shagar and Froman through time spent studying Torah or living in religious communities in Israel. However, recent years have brought some significant translations and a flurry of digital media devoted to these two. A collection of Shagar’s translated essays, [Faith Shattered and Restored: Judaism in the Postmodern Age](#), published by Koren, provoked [numerous responses](#) (and [responses](#) to those responses). Suddenly, American Jews were engaging the concepts of “postmodernism” and “neo-Hasidism” and their role in contemporary Orthodoxy. Online platforms (such as [Lehrhaus](#), [Mosaic](#), [Tablet](#), and the [blog of Alan Brill](#)) have run profiles of Shagar, and interviews with his students and interpreters. Froman has also been the topic of [several articles](#), and his wry and playful aphorisms, published under the title [Hasidim Tzohakim mi-Zeh](#), have even been [publicized on Facebook](#) in translation, and rumor has it that they will see print soon.

Shagar and Froman, while influential in their time (and, perhaps even more so, posthumously), were far from the only figures in what might be called the neo-Hasidic settler counterculture. By now, this milieu boasts well-established institutions like the high school Mekor Hayyim, and *yeshivot hesder* including Bat Ayin, Tekoa, Siah Yitzhak, Mahanayim, and Otniel – the latter of which was founded by Rav Benny Kalmanson and Rav Ami Olami *hy”d*, both early students of Shagar. Froman also taught at Otniel for several years, and remains influential there. The latest contribution to the recent spate of translations emerges from the *beit midrash* in Otniel: Rabbi Yakov Nagen’s [Be, Become, Bless: Jewish Spirituality between East and West](#). The book’s origins are in *parshah* classes which Nagen taught at Otniel, which he then summarized as essays. These were published

on the Otniel website and in other outlets, and received an initial [translation](#) by several of Nagen’s students; the text now published by Koren was newly translated. These essays first appeared as a Hebrew book in 2013: *Le-Hitorer le-Yom Hadash: Kriyah Mithadeshet shel ha-Torah ve-haHayyim* [Awakening to A New Day: A Renewed Reading of Torah and Life]. The English title (with its nod to Elizabeth Gilbert’s [Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman’s Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia](#)) references one of Nagen’s central teachings: the need to fuse “Being,” associated with the contemplative spirituality of the “East,” and “Doing,” associated with the activist materialism of the “West.” Nagen argues that Judaism should be positioned ideologically between the “East” and the “West”: geographically speaking, he implicitly locates Jewish spirituality firmly between Asia and Europe; i.e., in Israel. Yet with this new translation, his teachings are poised to appeal to students of Torah worldwide.

When I perused Nagen’s book after it was first published in Hebrew, I had the strange experience of reading teachings which I had for the most part already heard first hand. In no small part thanks to Nagen, I studied for a year after high school at Otniel. When I was in Otniel, the only classes taught in English were taught by Nagen: once weekly, we studied Mishnah in a home in the *yishuv* using the literary approaches he elaborated in another of his books, [Nishmat ha-Mishnah](#), the “Soul of the Mishnah.” Most of my study with Nagen was in Hebrew. In his morning Talmud *shiur*, first studying *Masekhet Sukkah* (upon which he wrote his dissertation, published as [Mayim, Beriyah, Hitgalut: Haq ha-Sukkot be-Mahshevet ha-Halakhah](#) [Water, Creation, Revelation: The Holiday of Sukkot in Halakhic Thought]), and later *Sanhedrin*, he exposed us to manuscripts and their textual variations. We also gathered in his home on Friday nights after *Shabbat* dinner in the cafeteria, when he would give the classes on the weekly Torah portion which became *Be, Become, Bless*. His teachings stood on a solid foundation of rabbinic, kabbalistic, and Hasidic commentaries, and referenced, all in the same breath, Leo Tolstoy, the film *Groundhog Day*, and the Sikh founder Guru Nanak. Or take an [essay published recently on Lehrhaus](#), which mentions (in order of appearance) the *Zohar*, Rashi, Rabbi Yehuda Leib Ashlag, David Ben Gurion, Douglas Adams, the *Beit ha-Levi*, Martin Buber, and Emmanuel Levinas. What takes Nagen’s book beyond mere eclecticism is his insistence on bringing these references down to earth. He understands Otnieli pedagogy to involve asking how we personally connect with texts; frequently, at the end of studying a Talmudic *sugya*, he would pose a question to his students: “where do we encounter this in our lives?” *Be, Become, Bless* is thus as much a handbook for a more spiritual life as it is a commentary on the Torah.

Fittingly, then, this is Nagen’s most personal book; it is studded with anecdotes, such as his visit with his children to the Egyptian wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which provides a convenient commentary on the Exodus. In this vein, Nagen frequently quotes an aphorism of the novelist Paul Auster: “Stories happen to people who tell stories.” Nothing is random for a good storyteller. This principle also animates one of Nagen’s fundamental inspirations: the *Zohar*, with its tales of chance encounters and fantastic journeys. Nagen’s own journey from New York – where he grew up and studied, eventually receiving ordination from Yeshiva University – to the small town of Otniel, a *yishuv* in the South Hebron Hills, stands in the background. When he recounts stories of the tragically frequent terrorist attacks which have struck Otniel, it is impossible not to contemplate how far he has travelled from the comforts of Manhattan. Nagen is invested in interfaith dialogue and peace work, largely inspired by his close relationship with Froman, whose efforts to promote Israel-Palestinian reconciliation are well known. These days, Nagen references Islam as much – if not more – than, say,

Buddhism; he travels to [Egypt](#) and [Jordan](#), is friends with Palestinian Arabs and Bedouins, and takes part in interfaith peace initiatives around Israel. This aspect of his activity brings me back to one of Nagen's core audiences: young Jews who attended seminaries or *yeshivot* in Israel before studying on college campuses which frequently feature vocally anti-Zionist student groups and professors. Most of these students continue to identify as Zionists, but I suspect that many are also more ambivalent than before they encountered campus discourse. Of course, political tensions notwithstanding, these same campuses also have diverse and vibrant Jewish communities; American Jews are relatively secure and safe – certainly when compared to either Israelis or Palestinians. The appeal of Nagen's position may be as a religious discourse that offers an alternative to AIPAC, progressive (post-)Zionism, or radical Palestinian solidarity. That said, the discourse of political correctness is quite absent from the book. Nagen believes that a major source of the conflict is religion, and therefore [religion must be part of any future solution](#). His approach is less politically ambitious than that of Froman, who went so far as to meet with Hamas leaders; rather, Nagen practices and preaches a more grassroots "spiritual" diplomacy.

Froman is said to have once quipped that "The real cultural divide is not between the religious and the secular, but between the bourgeois and the bohemian." Like Froman, Nagen's counterculturalism in his Religious Zionist context is not limited to his political stance. He often speaks about his trips to India and Nepal, as well as to hippie festivals in Israel such as the [Rainbow Gatherings](#) and [Boombamela](#). Indeed, Nagen has a longstanding relationship with New Age circles; at times his tone resembles [Eckhart Tolle](#) more than Soloveitchik. He grapples with the religious implications of the unabated interest in alternative spirituality and in travel to India and elsewhere, which are common among Religious Zionist youth. To speak anecdotally, many (if not most) of my peers in Otniel travelled to India or Thailand; of these, most spent chunks of time studying yoga or meditation. On the other hand, Nagen's world is indebted to the popular culture of his American youth. His core secular text is [The Little Prince](#), and he is also happy to discuss The Beatles and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Thus, Nagen's work is both deeply American in its references and deeply Israeli in the issues it faces.

On a "trempe" I took with him some years ago, Nagen opined that "the world needs a kabbalistic Rabbi Jonathan Sacks." I understood this to mean that he aspired to combine the Lord's literary style and intellectual liberality with the cosmic mythos and eros of the *Zohar* and *Sefer Yetzirah*. He is, in a sense, a properly neo-kabbalistic inheritor of "left-kookian" universalism, who revels in the unity revealed in multiplicity. This stance helps explain why many non-Jews who have become interested in Nagen's teachings, such as [those who sponsored his trip to China, and who translated his essays to Mandarin](#). Nagen's musings on the place of Judaism and Israel in the global 21st century fully acknowledge that Jews are always in relation with many groups and cultures. From the perspective of intra-Jewish relations, I wonder if the "East" and "West" of the English title may also connote Israel and North America. Unlike Shagar and Froman, whose texts must overcome not only the language barrier but real cultural divides, Nagen's voice speaks to both American Jewry, consumed by loss of meaning and political infighting, and to his fellow Israelis, themselves often torn between utopianism and despair. His ability to bridge these gaps stems from his talent at finding affinities between unexpected texts, people, and places; one can only hope that he finds his own readers, near and far.

## THE PATRON SAINT OF RABBIS' SONS

ELLI FISCHER is an independent writer, translator, editor, and rabbi.

The father heard the voice of God, but the son ends up with the blade on his neck.

After *minha* at school one day, two boys decided, for reasons known only to teenage boys, to drop and do push-ups on the synagogue floor. One boy, from a well-heeled, non-observant family, attended the Jewish high school because, among the prep-school options, it was not a bad choice, and he could start on the basketball team. The other boy, the son of a prominent local Orthodox rabbi and among the eldest of a dozen or so siblings, was enrolled in the school after things didn't quite work out at an out-of-town yeshiva.

One of the school rabbis walks over to the boys and instructs them to stop. He then turns specifically to the rabbi's son and says, "You should know better."

As I watched this scene from a distance, I noted the look of pain, jealousy, and anger on the face of the rabbi's son. He wanted nothing more than to be like the other boy. It wasn't just the money, though it was hard to ignore the brand new SUV that the other boy got for his sixteenth birthday and upgraded it ("pimped it out," in the language of the time) with thousands of dollars' worth of rims and subwoofers and whatnot. It wasn't just the looks, the clothes, the ease with girls, or the basketball prowess.

It was the complete lack of expectations. No one ever told that other boy: "you should know better." When he did push-ups on the synagogue floor, ate *treyf*, drove on Shabbat, fooled around with his girlfriend, there was no guilt, no voice inside or outside of his head saying, "You should know better."

And, he knew that if that other boy would ever decide to become religious, they would tell the story at countless Shabbaton *Havdalah* ceremonies of how this boy "came from nothing" to become a Ben Torah, or some such. But the rabbi's son? If he does what is expected from him, well, it's expected. He's the rabbi's son. It's all mapped out for him. And if he doesn't? Well, then the whispering starts. "Did you hear? Rabbi X's son has a girlfriend. Rabbi X's son was seen without a *yarmulke* on his head. Rabbi X's son is 'at risk.' Rabbi X's son is 'off the derekh.'"

So when that school rabbi walked over and said, only to him, "You should know better," it was like a punch in the gut. But the rabbi's son held back, moved on, went to class. After all, he *did* know better.

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This is the story of Yitzhak. He was Avraham's son. That is how the Torah introduces us to him: "These are the descendants of Yitzhak, son of Avraham: Avraham sired Yitzhak." There is apparently so little to say about him that the Torah must repeat the obvious fact that he's his father's son right away. His identity is so derivative of his father's that even the story of his progeny begins with his father. His father sired him, cast away his oldest son to protect him, and picked a wife for him. Avraham heard God calling and answered the call, but Yitzhak was the one who ended up with the knife at his neck.

And indeed, Yitzhak shows very little originality in his actions. He did what his father did. He dug the same wells, used the same lines on

the same kings, and made the same deals. He is credited with being the first to *daven minha*, but maybe he just overslept and missed *shaharit*, the morning prayers instituted by his father. It happens even to rabbis' kids occasionally, though they know better.

Yitzhak was the first “*frum* from birth” (FFB), the first rabbi's kid, the first Jew to be born with responsibility, with expectations, with a charge to be a link in a chain and keep the flame alive. The short shrift he gets in the Torah prefigures the dearth of FFB literature today. *Ba'al teshuva* lit has a market. “OTD” lit is all the rage. But what is there to tell about the FFB? That he went to school and became an accountant, like his father before him, so he could afford to send his kids to day school, like his father, and impress his expectations on them, like his father did, so that if all goes according to plan his kids can do the same for his grandkids? With no dynamic character, with no clear beginning, middle or end, this is not even a story.

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Yitzhak faced the same problem that still faces rabbis' kids, FFBs, and, to an extent, the child of anyone who is seen as a role model, as someone whose footsteps are worth following: how much of me is me, and how much of me is an embodiment of the hopes, expectations, and demands of my parents? Can I honestly say “this is my God,” or only “the God of my fathers”? When one is habituated to do things a certain way from a young age, there are no external benchmarks by which one can chart personal development. On the outside, all appears the same. So the only way to learn where my predecessors end and I begin is through intense, grueling introspection.

Rabbi Simha Zissel Ziv, the Alter of Kelm (1824-1898), spoke to this point when he addressed a surprising *midrash* on a verse that appears soon after the Torah introduces us to Yitzhak, which asserts that the patriarch's prayers were answered, not Rivkah's, because “the prayers of a *tzadik ben tzadik* (righteous person, son of a righteous person) are unrivaled by the prayers of a *tzadik ben rasha* (righteous person, son of a wicked person).” This is counterintuitive: Isn't it harder to be a *tzadik ben rasha*?

Not necessarily, says the Alter:

Avraham, who lived among misguided idol-worshippers, immediately discerned and understood that they are lost, and so he began to search for truth, delving deeply into it. He thus found the truth. Yitzhak, however, was a *tzadik ben tzadik*. The road had already been paved for him by Avraham; for him it was old. Yet he delved into it as though it were new (*Be-ikvot Beit Abba - Tzefunot Ha-mussar* Vol. 2, p. 166, no. 154).

Yitzhak was not merely a *ben tzadik*, the dutiful son of a righteous man. He was a *tzadik ben tzadik*. He found that the wellsprings that his father dug were blocked, so he struggled against adversity, dredged them up, and made them his own.

The story of the rabbi's son is still boring. FFB lit will never make any bestseller lists. We will probably internalize those expectations and pass them onto the next generation. But along the way, invisible to the naked eye, many of us will face an identity crisis and choose the path of Yitzhak, the man who blazed our trail by not blazing a trail.

## AND EVEN IF THE PARENTS ARE PRESENT...

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Elli Fischer [discussed](#) Yitzhak using the frame-of-reference of a rabbi's child and the set of overwhelming expectations that may be brought to bear on such an individual. Zev Eleff [followed up](#) with a discussion of how professionally-engaged parents, like rabbis, doctors, and lawyers, are often unavailable either physically or psychologically to their offspring. Yet another level of complexity is added by R. Samson Raphael Hirsch in his discussion of why the twins, Yaakov and Esav, turned out as differently as they did, despite—or possibly because of—receiving the same type of upbringing in the home of Yitzhak and Rivkah.

The Torah relates: “And the boys grew up, and Esav was a man familiar with hunting, an outdoorsman, and Yaakov was uninitiated (in the ways of the world), a dweller in tents” (Gen. 25:27). How might we account for the inconsistency between Yaakov and Esav? R. Hirsch insists that the educational principle stated in Proverbs—“Educate the youth in accordance with his way” (22:6)—was not adhered to by Yitzhak and Rivkah, particularly when it came to dealing with Esav. R. Hirsch states:

They paid no attention to the hidden inclinations (of their children) ... a single Torah and a single type of education was provided for both of them ...

The great Jewish mission is singular and unique in its essence; however, the way it manifests itself is multiple and variegated, like the multiple personality traits in people, and the varieties of their manner of living ...

Requiring Yaakov and Esav to sit upon a single “school bench,” employing the same routines for educating them concerning a life of learning and thinking, was guaranteeing that one of them would be “ruined.” Yaakov drew from the spring of wisdom with an ever-increasing desire, whereas Esav only looked forward to the day when he could throw the old books “over his shoulder,” and along with them this entire approach to life, which he was led to understand in only a single-sided way to which his specific nature could not relate.

The importance of individualized instruction is usually thought to be a modern idea, so it is of note that a nineteenth century thinker advocated such an approach. But whereas professional educators are currently trained to take into consideration as much as possible the different personality traits and learning styles that they are likely to encounter in their classrooms, parents usually lack such preparation.

My wife, Joan, has often remarked that whereas one requires a license before she or he can drive, or provide complex services—there is no such prerequisite for being a parent. (Ironically, in day schools, general studies teachers must all be licensed, but this is often not the case with respect to the Judaic studies faculty!) Consequently, even if a child is fortunate enough to have parents who deliberately and self-consciously interact with him or her, whether that parent will be capable of or interested in addressing the child's individual needs is highly questionable.

Children will experience the luck of the draw in their upbringing. Some will benefit tremendously, some will suffer, and still others will

only succeed if they are capable of and motivated to overcome the limitations of the home-life and education that they will be given.

## THE RABBI-KID DILEMMA: ANOTHER ANGLE

**ZEV ELEFF is Chief Academic Officer of Hebrew Theological College in Skokie, IL.**

Yesterday, Elli Fischer [addressed](#) the psychology of “rabbi’s kids.” In his uncanny and unique way, Rabbi Fischer portrayed Yitzhak as the first rabbi’s son, saddled with ferocious burdens and formidable bullies. His representation resonates, to a point at least. I am the son of an anesthesiologist and an attorney; not a rabbi’s kid. Our son, Jack, a precocious one-and-a-half-year-old, will one day have much more to say on the matter. Meital, our opinionated four-year-old, will no doubt have a word or two on the matter in due time.

In the meantime, Elli’s comments remind me of the other half of the predicament: the challenge for all parents—rabbis, scholars, educators, overworked professionals—to find quality time with our children. For all of the talk of Jewish education, it is all-too-often about the schools and other institutions to which we outsource our tradition transmission. I’m more concerned about education in the home. Something closer to “Cats in the Cradle,” but with mothers and daughters, too.

Here again, Yitzhak is something of a patriarchal paradigm, particularly as described by Rabbi Naftali Zevi Yehudah Berlin. In his *Humash* commentary, Neziv heaped ample criticism upon Yitzhak’s and Rivkah’s relationship (Gen. 24:65). In fact, it’s the sort of sermon that would get a modern rabbi in loads of trouble. But this was the rosh yeshiva of Volozhin, who held much more clout than your average pulpiter. From the very first time they met, Rivkah was “afraid” of the her betrothed, averred Neziv. The latter appeared to her too removed from real life, enwrapped in otherworldly prayer. The disconnect—or the perception of it—between Yitzhak’s holy man life and his family persisted throughout the marriage, impacting the patriarch’s relationship with his sons, as well.

Neziv’s interpretation stands out to me, and not because it is something of a scriptural stretch. For me, it serves as an important reminder that family must come first. This, I learn from rabbi-friends, is especially challenging. Too often, pastoral predicaments interrupt important occasions and chances to teach and interact with their daughters and sons. But it’s also a challenge for committed parents, working very hard and long hours. For all of these well-intentioned individuals, there’s good—even noble—reason for their busyness.

Then there are the instances conjured up more by self-indulgence than selfless obligations. Consider the case of John Dewey, the unrivaled philosopher of education. In 1952 Dewey died, and some of his closest students gathered for an “evening of reminiscences” to honor their beloved teacher. There, one disciple related the following about the absent-minded Dewey at Columbia University:

There’s another story about his walking with a friend across a college campus, and a little boy coming along and saying, “Would you give me five cents?” Dewey looked down, was a little peeved, put his hand in his pocket and gave a nickel to the boy, and then said to his friend, “The trouble with boys in this city is that they’re always asking you for money.” The friend looked around and said, “Well,

Professor Dewey, isn’t that *your* son?” John looked and said, “Why, yes, I guess it is.”

Talmudists are not immune to scholarly preoccupation, even self-absorption. The same goes for community leaders. Rabbi Judah David Eisenstein was both. For New York’s Orthodox Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Eisenstein was an icon. His grandson also respected the elder Eisenstein, but was much aware of his failings:

Grandpa devoted his time to community affairs and to scholarship ... Despite his learning, which he had acquired from his grandfather in Meserich (or because of it), he neglected totally the education of his children. My father, the eldest, was expected to go to work at an early age to help support the family. Father had attended P.S. 2 and had taken the entrance examinations for City College. When he came home breathless with excitement, eager to report to his father that he had passed the examinations, Grandpa told him he simply could not continue at school. He would have to go to work.

The problem, then, is one of priorities. In 1988, Dr. Irving Levitz studied children of rabbis. A well-respected Long Island psychologist, Levitz reported that almost three-quarters of rabbi’s children believed that “their fathers [were] over-involved with synagogue life.” One interviewee testified that his rabbinical parent “wasn’t even there when he was there. His mind always seemed preoccupied.” Of course, it’s not just rabbis. It’s every parent. There are plenty of times that we can’t be “there.” But when we are “there” we ought to really be there.

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