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VAYISHLAH

A MODERN ORTHODOX HEDGEHOG FOR A POSTMODERN WORLD

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PART I

Introduction

Modern Orthodoxy is in need of a Hedgehog Concept.

Jim Collins, the best-selling business writer, coined this term almost two decades ago when he looked at companies that made the leap from “good” to “great.”¹ More often than not, these organizations had something at their core that they passionately believed they did better than anyone else in the world. And their success resulted in large measure from orienting the organization’s “resource engines” toward this singular goal.

While Collins didn’t extend his analysis to the realm of religion, a brief glance at the sub-denominations that constitute contemporary Orthodoxy suggest the same might well be true. That is, each of them seems to have an authentic Torah value at their core, which they believe they do better than anyone else in the world. The Yeshiva world has *talmud Torah*. The Hasidic world has *dveykus*. The Dati Leumi world had *yishuv Eretz Yisra’el*. Chabad has *kiruv*. Though each community advocates full-fledged adherence to all 613 *mitzvot*, a single value is elevated above the rest. And, more often than not, the community’s schools and shuls, their curricula and customs, their choices of where to live, who to marry and what professions to seek are all oriented towards this particular goal. Like in the business world, this focus becomes a point of pride for members of each community and fuels a passion for their chosen way of life that often translates to the next generation.

American Modern Orthodoxy has no Hedgehog. Whether by design or by default, it emphasizes moderation in all things. A little bit of this and a little bit of that, but not too much of anything. The result has been painfully clear in our schools and our shuls for quite some time now. It’s hard to be passionate about a little bit of anything.

Some might contend that *Torah U-Madda* (Torah and secular knowledge) is Modern Orthodoxy’s Hedgehog. I have [argued elsewhere](#), though, that *Torah U-Madda* is fatally flawed as a Hedgehog Concept because unlike the Torah values at the center of

¹ Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't* (New York: Harper Business, 2001), 90.

the other sub-denominations, *Torah U-Madda* can only be actualized by the community’s intellectual elite. While the Yeshiva community’s Hedgehog of *Talmud Torah* (Torah study) also falls within the intellectual arena, it can be fulfilled through the study of an Artscroll Mishnah, reviewing Chumash with Rashi, or by writing a check to one’s local Yeshiva or Kollel.² It’s a far cry from the academic aptitude and higher order thinking necessary to synthesize the worlds of secular learning and culture with that of Torah and *mesorah* (tradition), as demanded by the ideology of *Torah U-Madda*. Indeed, one could well argue that on an average day in a Modern Orthodox Yeshiva day school, each student engages in the *mitzvah* of *Talmud Torah* - the Hedgehog Concept of the Yeshiva World - through their study of Chumash, Navi, Mishnah, or Gemara. Very few, however, despite the school’s rigorous dual curriculum, engage in the act of *Torah U-Madda*.

Perhaps more importantly, though, when I first presented this idea at the Orthodox Forum in 2010, someone raised this very contention. And, before I could respond, a reply came from a far more qualified authority: Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, who quite literally wrote the book on *Torah U-Madda*. He stated rather emphatically that “*Torah U-Madda* is not an ideology, it’s a pedagogy.” That is, *Torah U-Madda* is a means toward an end. It’s a way of arriving at knowledge of the Creator through the avenues of science and the arts. It’s not an end unto itself nor was it ever intended to be. The goal of *Torah U-Madda* is an intimate knowledge of and relationship with God. The study of Shakespeare and Milton, Kant and Kierkegaard, molecular biology and quantum mechanics, coupled with Rambam and Rav Chaim, Penei Yehoshua and Pitchei Teshuvah, may well be the most sophisticated, nuanced, insightful, and inspiring way to arrive at such. But even the founding fathers of Modern Orthodoxy would agree that there are other paths and other methods for getting there. *Torah U-Madda*, then, becomes a point of privilege for those select few who can achieve it, and is either discarded or distorted by those who cannot.³

As such, if Modern Orthodoxy is to succeed in stoking the flames of religious pride and passion so that the next generation is eager to embrace and extend it, the search for a Hedgehog must go on.

² And even so, the extreme emphasis on a value that is ultimately cognitive in nature has disenfranchised its fair share of young people in that community over the years.

³ Rav Aharon Lichtenstein famously quipped “In this setting, the Rambam frequently does not so much compete with Michelangelo as with Michael Jordan, or even, lamentably, Michael Jackson.” See his *Leaves of Faith, The World of Jewish Learning*, vol. II (New York: Ktav Publishing, 2004), 324.

Identifying the Hedgehog

At its most basic level, a Hedgehog Concept for Diaspora Modern Orthodoxy must qualify as an “authentic Torah value.” That is, it must be something that all streams of Orthodoxy recognize as part of the Divine Will, even if their community chooses not to highlight it. *Kiruv*, for example, is recognized as furthering the Divine mandate even in the *dati yishuvim* of Yehuda and Shomron, while *yishuv Eretz Yisrael* - in some form - is regarded as a Torah value even in the Chabad outposts of Phnom Penh.

In addition, it must be something that capitalizes on Modern Orthodoxy’s unique positioning at the intersection of religious and secular, isolation and immersion, fidelity to the past and faith in the future.

For this Hedgehog Concept to energize movement, it must also be a Torah value that is, for lack of a better word, transcendent. It must provide fertile ground for intellectual exploration in both the theological and *halakhic* realms; be actionable in a wide array of scenarios and circumstances by a different types of people; and must speak both to those steeped in the current intellectual and cultural ethos and those who are not.

Lastly, this value has to hold some degree of preexisting pre-eminence in the minds of Modern Orthodox Jewry. It must be something to which the present and historical culture of Modern Orthodoxy accords particular weight.

In Part 1 of this essay I will suggest that a compelling case can be made that the value of *Or Goyim* (light of the nations) fits the above definition remarkably well. In Part 2 I will offer a description of how it could look in practice if the Modern Orthodox community were to take this idea to heart.

Historical Roots

Israel was called in His exalted name for His honor and His dominion; in order that His honor and His dominion will be revealed through them across the entire world. And if it is impossible to reveal the honor of His dominion in any way other than this (i.e., through exile), we must not protest, for it is for this purpose that we were created.

And it is like a human king who constantly engages his troops in the labor of war - night and day they know no rest! - and they are put at risk and suffer casualties. They cannot protest even the slightest, for such did not stem, Heaven forbid, from evil intentions of the king. Rather it is because he must expand his kingdom, and his rule in the provinces depends upon it, and they [the troops] enlisted for the express purpose of protecting the kingdom with their bodies and souls.

So it is with the King of Kings, the Holy One Blessed Be He. He created His world for the express purpose of filling all of creation with His honor, as I wrote in Bereishit (2:4). And it is for this purpose that we were taken to be His nation and His servants: so that this purpose would come to fruition through our hands. As such, no matter what circumstances are necessary for us to arrive at such, we must not protest even the slightest.

This is a transcendent call to arms. It identifies *Or Goyim* not merely as another mitzvah, but as the primary task of the Jewish people, the purpose for which they were created, and the singular vehicle through which the world can arrive at God’s intended *telos*. It is both larger than life and the essence of life. It offers direction, meaning, and mission to a Jew’s time upon this Earth, not to the exclusion of other *mitzvot*, but as a way of framing and encapsulating them. And, perhaps most radically, it implies that the Torah’s loftiest ideal can only be achieved by those who are “expanding His kingdom” beyond the cloisters of the Land of Israel, thereby spreading “His honor and His dominion...across the entire world.” In other words, according to this text, the act of winning honor for God amongst societies of the Diaspora ranks amongst the Torah’s highest callings; one for which a Jew ought to spare no expense and fear no sacrifice.

If forced to guess, a learned reader might suggest this text has Hasidic roots. Due to its vague similarity to the Lurianic idea of uncovering the Divine sparks scattered throughout the world. Others might suggest a Western European origin. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch is one of the few Torah luminaries over the past two hundred years who was known to extol the virtue of *Or Goyim* seemingly over and above the Zionist ideal. Given no other context at all, though, it would not be surprising if many well versed *talmidei hakhamim* (Torah scholars) suggested that this passage derives from a work that is not “Orthodox.” Roshei Yeshiva don’t talk this way. Orthodox communities don’t act this way. It’s not a *perek* (chapter) in the Rambam or a *siman* (clause) in Shulchan Aruch. It’s not what we teach in our schools or preach in our shuls.

It would surprise them, no doubt, to learn that the author of this paragraph was not just a Rosh Yeshiva, but *the* Rosh Yeshiva. It was written by Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (Netziv), Rosh Yeshiva of the world’s largest and most renowned yeshiva for nearly half of the 19th century. And it isn’t tucked away in an unpublished manuscript. It is sitting on the shelf of every Yeshiva, in the *Devarim* volume of *Ha’amek Davar*, *perek 29, pasuk 1*.⁴ Even more surprising, perhaps, is the fact that this passage is not a singular aside or tangential comment by any means. It is but one of many comments running throughout Netziv’s Torah commentary that emphasizes the unique and powerful role of *Or Goyim* in Jewish life.

For example, Avram has his name changed to Avraham, according to Netziv, not to reflect God’s blessing that many nations will descend from him, but to reflect

God’s instructions to Avraham that His will is that he [Avraham] share his knowledge in order to be a father to many nations, so that they will come to recognize God. And for this he was called ‘av hamon goyim,’ like a father who sets his son [on the path] of proper thinking. (Ha’amek Davar, Genesis 17:4)

In the book of Shemot (Exodus), this individual instruction to Avraham becomes the destiny of the entire Jewish people. Netziv therefore explains that the *sefer* is referred to in the geonic *Halakhot Gedolot* as the “Second Book” not merely because it finishes the story of the Jewish people’s transformation from a family clan into a nation, but because it is part and parcel of the creation story:

Meaning, the purpose of the world as a whole was that there would be one nation, God’s portion, His people. And

⁴ Translation is my own.

this was not fulfilled until Israel was taken out of Egypt and arrived at their purpose, to be worthy of becoming a light unto the nations and to strengthen them regarding knowledge of the God of the Universe...this is the purpose of creation which was created for His exalted honor. (Ha'amek Davar, Introduction to Exodus)

And, if the Jewish people became worthy of this noble task when they stood at the foot of Har Sinai, they further committed themselves to it standing atop of Har Eival:

Just like at Har Sinai there were burnt offerings and peace offerings and rejoicing over having been taken as God's nation and into His service, so too at Har Eival, which is where we were chosen as a "covenantal people." Like Isaiah the prophet said (42:6) "I created you and appointed you as a covenantal people, a light of nations." Meaning, to engage all nations in the covenant (which is faith) so that they abandon paganism and adopt monotheism. And a covenant was already established on this matter with Avraham our forefather, as I wrote in Bereishit (17:4), and today it was established with all of Israel. And it started at Har Eival with the writing of the Torah in seventy languages. But this noble purpose would only ultimately be reached through exile and diaspora... And because it is now that they merited this task of the honor of God being revealed through them throughout the world, they therefore were commanded to build altars and to rejoice. (Ha'amek Davar, Deuteronomy 27:5)

As Netziv was developing, teaching, and writing these ideas in the tiny Lithuanian hamlet of Volozhin, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch was penning very similar sentiments in the enlightened German city of Oldenberg:

Indeed, Yisrael's loss of its outward glory will appear to you now as being part and parcel of its destiny through which God's providence was to be manifested. Moreover, Yisrael's mission was not hindered by its exile, nor was its greatness diminished, for it became evident that "greatness" has different meanings and Yisrael's state of dispersion opened a new and unique field for the fulfillment of its mission.

...Is it not the highest level of human greatness to be the bearer of the Almighty's teachings regarding God and man's mission? To teach, by one's destiny and way of life, that there is a higher goal than wealth and pleasure, science and culture, and that all these should serve as a means to the fulfillment of that goal?... After all, Yisrael has no other task than to acknowledge as its God the One Who calls and educates all human beings to His service, and to make Him known as such, through its destiny and way of life!⁵

The notion that Jews are called upon to share the Torah's teachings with the world at large, and that doing so speaks to the very essence of a Jew's mission in this world, was expressed not only in the Yeshiva world of Netziv and the Neo-Orthodox world of Rav Hirsch, but in 19th century Hasidic circles as well. Reb Nossan of Breslov, the great scribe and teacher of the Breslover community following the death of

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, records the following in his *Likkutei Halakhot*:

Yet, in truth, it is known that all of the worlds were created only in order to recognize and know the Exalted One, as it says in the Zohar (2:42, 2:5) "in order to know Him." Therefore everything was created so that the Jewish people would accept His Torah, which is the holy knowledge with which one recognizes and knows the Exalted One. And therefore all greatness and royalty is reserved for Jews who perform His will, who merit this knowledge for which everything was created. And therefore only they are called "man," as our sages said, because one who doesn't have [proper] knowledge is an animal in the form of a man, as explained in the beginning of the Torah as written above. And for this reason everyone is obligated to engage in settling the world (yishuv ha-olam). That is, in bringing true knowledge to others - for this is the essence of settling the world as is explained there and as I mentioned above. And when the Jewish people merit to do His will, they are obligated to try with all of their power to bring this knowledge to the Nations of the World as well, as it is written "tell of his Honor amongst the nations, etc.." And it is written "proclaim His wonders amongst the nations, etc.," and likewise in many other verses. (Yoreh De'ah, Laws of Redeeming the Firstborn, 5:13)

Visionary and creative as Netziv, Rav Hirsch, and Rebbe Nachman were, they certainly did not invent the notion of *Or Goyim's* pivotal role in the thought and practice of observant Jewry. It is latent in Abaye's interpretation of the command to love God that we must make God beloved amongst His creatures,⁶ in R' Hanina's homiletic that the windows of the Beit Hamikdash are narrow on the inside and wide on the outside in order to let the light shine outward onto the world,⁷ and in Rashi's comment that Shabbat is intended as a sign "for the nations" of God's relationship with the Jewish people.⁸ It is made explicit when Rambam writes that the essence of the mitzvah of Kiddush Hashem is to "publicize this true faith in the world" and when Seforno interprets the Jewish people's call to be a "kingdom of priests" as a call "to teach and instruct the entire human race to call in the name of God."⁹ In other words, these 19th century authors inherited a long, though often dormant, *mesora* that stretches back to the concepts of *am segulah* (chosen people) and *mamlekhet kohanim* (kingdom of priests) in Exodus and Deuteronomy. The *mesora* works its way beyond the iconic verses in Isaiah and the universalist motifs of the book of Psalms, ultimately manifesting itself in eschatological passages of our liturgy and the halakhic and aggadic material of Hazal. And as much as we know today of that *mesora*, there is undoubtedly much more that has yet to be uncovered.

20th Century American Modern Orthodoxy

Despite the fact that the American Modern Orthodox community that blossomed in the second half of the 20th century drew heavily on both the Eastern European world of the Yeshiva and the Western European world of *Torah Im Derekh Eretz*, the concept of *Or Goyim* did not retain the hallowed place it had in the worldviews of Rav

⁶ See Yoma 86a.

⁷ See Vayikra Rabba 31:7.

⁸ See Rashi on Exodus 31:13.

⁹ See Seforno on Exodus 19:6.

⁵ Joseph Elias, *The Nineteen Letters: The World of Rabbi S.R. Hirsch* (New York: Feldheim, 1995), 198.

Hirsch and Netziv. Instead of focusing on what Judaism could give to society, a niche claimed by and quickly associated with Reform Judaism, American Modern Orthodoxy, under the banner of *Torah U-Madda*, focused on what it could - or should - get from the society around it.

Twentieth century Modern Orthodox thought, therefore, is dominated by the largely unspoken question of how best to navigate and marshal the intellectual and cultural opportunities offered by modernity's unprecedented advances in philosophy, science and technology - in a context of unprecedented political freedom and tolerance - in order to strengthen one's personal *avodat Hashem*. Thus the central motifs in the writings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Rabbi Norman Lamm, and Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, amongst others, are the development of one's relationship with God through *teshuvah* (repentance), prayer, and Torah study; on finding the proper balance between ethics and law, intellect and experience, autonomy and submission, individual and community; and on which elements of the broader culture to let in and which ones to keep out.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's *Kol Dodi Dofek* offers an illustrative example of the contrast. Much like Netziv, Rabbi Soloveitchik refers to two "covenants" forged by the Jewish people prior to their entry to the Land of Israel. Whereas Netziv locates these covenants at Har Sinai and then Har Eival, Rabbi Soloveitchik locates the first one in Egypt prior to the exodus and the second one at the foot of Har Sinai. Far more important than the location of the covenants, though, is their content.

Netziv sees the covenant at Har Sinai as the Jewish people's induction ceremony. It was where they were "betrothed" to God and informed of what it looks like to live as God's people. As described above, though, it was only at Har Eival that they received their "mission." It was at that second covenant that they were called on to be an *Or Goyim*.

Rabbi Soloveitchik's understanding of the pre-conquest covenants, as articulated in *Kol Dodi Dofek*, is quite different. The covenant in Egypt was about national solidarity forged by the shared experience of oppression and hardship. This is where the Jewish people became distinctly aware of their "otherness" and keenly sensitive to the plight of their brethren. This is what Rabbi Soloveitchik calls the Covenant of Fate. Once this covenant was in place, the Jewish people were ready to be elevated through the Covenant of Sinai, which he calls the Covenant of Destiny. And whereas one might have expected a Covenant of Destiny to continue the themes of "Yisrael's mission" as articulated by Rav Hirsch, or the higher "purpose" as spelled out by Netziv, Rabbi Soloveitchik moves in a different direction completely. The Jewish people's destiny, according to Rabbi Soloveitchik, is to freely and passionately draw near to God.

How does destiny differ from fate? In two respects: fate means a compelled existence; destiny is existence by volition. Destiny is created by man himself, who chooses and makes his own way in life. Fate is expressed in a teleological sense, in a denuded existence, whereas destiny embodies purpose and objectives. Shared Fate means an inability to rebel against fate. It is, as with the tragedy of Jonah the prophet, about the lack of alternatives to escape the God of the Jews; "And God hurled a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was about to break apart" (Jonah 1:4). Shared Destiny means having free will to strive for a goal (a decision freely willed to be sanctified to an ideal) and a yearning and

longing for the Master of the Universe. Instead of the blind fate that pursued him, Jonah in the end chose the exalted destiny of the God of Israel. "I am a Jew, and I fear the Lord, the God of the heaven" (Jonah 1:9)¹⁰

This, in a word, has been the project of American Modern Orthodox theology. It has sought to move beyond an existence forged by fate, by actively leveraging the freedoms of modernity in order to construct a life of sanctity and proximity to the Creator of the World. Its focus has been on shaping its own destiny, rather than the destiny of those around them.

Perhaps the most glaring absence of the concept of *Or Goyim* emerges from the pages of "[Confrontation](#)," Rabbi Soloveitchik's influential essay on interfaith dialogue. The piece is best known for the restrictions that Rabbi Soloveitchik put, and which the Rabbinical Council of America later adopted, on what subject matter should or should not be engaged in an interfaith context. However, there is no mistaking the fact that Rabbi Soloveitchik, in the same essay, clearly articulates those areas in which we ought to join forces with our non-Jewish peers:

We, created in the image of God, are charged with responsibility for the great confrontation of man and the cosmos. We stand with civilized society shoulder to shoulder over against an order which defies us all. (p. 20)

This obligation for the betterment of mankind, however, is decidedly universal in Rabbi Soloveitchik's thinking. That is, our obligation is no different than the obligation of monotheists of other religions, which is precisely why we can band together to carry them out. In areas, though, where Jews differ from Christians, we must, according to Rabbi Soloveitchik, keep to ourselves. In this dichotomy it is hard to find space for the concept of *Or Goyim*; that is, the notion that we, as Jews, are uniquely obligated to bring the core values of Torah Judaism to the world at large. If these are universal values relating to the human condition, then, in Rabbi Soloveitchik's conception, it would seem that others are as obligated as we are. If they are particular values relating to one's relationship with God, then, according to Rabbi Soloveitchik, they don't belong in the public square. In fact, Rabbi Soloveitchik goes so far as to say that the story we must tell the Christian community is less about our sense of duty to "to perfect the world under the Sovereignty of the Almighty," and more about our need to remain distant and apart.

As a charismatic faith community, we have to meet the challenge of confronting the general non-Jewish faith community. We are called upon to tell this community not only the story it already knows - that we are human beings, committed to 'the general welfare and progress of mankind, that we are interested in combating disease, in alleviating human suffering, in protecting man's rights, in helping the needy, et cetera - but also what is still unknown to it, namely, our otherness as a metaphysical covenantal community. (p. 20-21)

It is interesting to note that some forty years after Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote "Confrontation," his great nephew, Rabbi Dr. Meir Soloveitchik, took up the issue again in an essay entitled "[A Nation](#)

¹⁰ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "[Kol Dodi Dofek, The Vision of the Religious Zionist Movement; Loneliness and Separateness 6.](#)" Sefaria.

[Under God: Jews, Christians, and the American Public Square.](#)” After building upon the foundations of his uncle in arguing that there is, in fact, a place for Jews to engage Jewishly in the public square, the younger Soloveitchik makes a move his uncle did not:

*The Jewish people, as God’s representatives here on earth, are uniquely obligated to ensure that society continues to define itself as one that is under God; but the truth is that the Rav’s writings indicate that this is also a universal obligation incumbent upon all “men of God.”*¹¹

Indeed, the Rav did see it as a “universal obligation.” The time may have come, however, for the Modern Orthodox community to refocus itself on the fact that we “as God’s representatives here on earth, are uniquely obligated” to carry this mission forward.

Some might justifiably argue that the passionate Zionism of American Modern Orthodox communities will create an impenetrable barrier for a Hedgehog Concept that is inherently suited for the Diaspora. Those communities, though, would do well to consider both the paucity of actual *olim* (émigres) from the United States each year¹² and the newly documented ideological frailty of those who stay behind.¹³

Others may argue that the original vision of *Or Goyim* was an eschatological one. It was offered as a prophetic vision of what God would bring about in the End of Days, not a vision for action in our day. It may be so. But such arguments are at least equally valid, if not more so, regarding the earliest sources for Zionism. If they have been overcome once, they can be overcome again. The most compelling objection, however, might simply be that *Or Goyim* won’t resonate in the minds and souls of today’s youth. A Hedgehog Concept that doesn’t tug at the heartstrings, is no Hedgehog Concept at all. How then, the Modern Orthodox community might embrace such an idea in a way that authentically actualizes its ancient ideals while simultaneously appealing to the postmodern sensibilities of Modern Orthodoxy’s up and coming generation, will be the focus of Part II.

PART II

In Part I, we suggested that the Modern Orthodox community would be well served by identifying its Hedgehog Concept, that is, a transcendent Torah value which the Modern Orthodox community is uniquely positioned to actualize and around which its adherents and institutions can rally. After laying out prerequisite criteria for such a concept, including a rich textual tradition that has yet to be fully explored, we suggested that the concept of *Or Goyim* may well fit the bill.

From Or La-Goyim to Or Amim

As noted in Part I, a Hedgehog Concept imbues an organization (or in this case, a denomination) with an additional layer of focus, purpose, and passion. That sense of mission offers every newcomer a lens with

¹¹ Meir Soloveichik, “A Nation Under God: Jews, Christians, and the American Public Square,” *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 14 (2006–07): 81.

¹² According to the Jewish Agency, there were [3,052 new olim](#) from the United States in 2018. According to Brandeis University, the [total Jewish population](#) of the United States is 7.5 million.

¹³ See Nishma Research, [The Successes, Challenges, and Future of American Modern Orthodoxy](#), November 4, 2019.

which to view the world, and a goal to which they ought to aspire. The Hedgehog Concept is why the young mother raised on the preeminence of *Talmud Torah* (Torah study) willingly holds down a full-time job in addition to caring for her six kids so that her husband can continue to learn in *Kollel* (full-time adult Torah study program). It’s why the young father formed from the crucible of Bnei Akiva and Hesder chooses to raise his family within missile range of Gaza. To achieve a status similar to that of *Talmud Torah* in the yeshiva world or *Yishuv Eretz Yisrael* (settling Israel) in the Dati Le’umi world, therefore, a Hedgehog Concept for Modern Orthodoxy must resonate with the community’s younger generation.

For young adults steeped in a postmodernist culture, however, the notion of a “light unto the nations” likely strikes a rather dissonant chord. In a world where uncertainty is the only certainty, it is often hard enough to arrive at a set of immutable truths that we, ourselves, hold self-evident. Charging every Jew not only with eking out his or her own path to truth, but with steering others off their chosen paths and onto ours seems likely to cause our young people to recoil rather than to engage. If, as Lyotard would have it, the essence of Postmodernism lies in “incredulity toward metanarratives,” then refocusing our Judaism on the story of our selection by God as a “Kingdom of Priests” whose national telos is “to perfect the world under the Sovereignty of the Almighty” seems like a strategy doomed to fail.

The placement of a letter, however, can make all of the difference.

Simply stated, the phrase *Or La-Goyim* has, at best, tenuous roots in our mesorah. It appears nowhere in Tanakh, nowhere in Talmudic or Midrashic literature, and - save for a single instance in the commentary of the Abravanel (Isaiah 49:6) - it doesn’t appear (as far as I can see) in the literature of the Rishonim either. The phrase, as it appears in the words of Isaiah, contains the letter *lamed* before the word “or,” not before the word “goyim.” As such, it signifies possession rather than direction. Its meaning is not “to,” but “of.” God, through His prophet, is calling on the Jewish people to be a “light of the nations,” not a “light to the nations.”

I the Lord, have summoned you in righteousness, And I have grasped you by the hand. I created you, and appointed you as a covenantal people (*le-berit olam*), as a light of nations (*le-or goyim*). (Isaiah 42:6)

He said: ‘It is too light a thing that you should be My servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the offspring of Israel; I will also make you a light of the nations (*u-netatikha le-or goyim*), that My salvation may stretch to the ends of the earth.’ (Isaiah 49:6)¹⁴

From this more accurate reading, a softer concept emerges that works quite well with postmodern sensibilities. The resonant call of *Or Goyim* for the 21st century is not to proselytize, but to publicize. It seeks not to convert, but to converse. Rather than take its cue from *Aleinu’s* liturgical call to “to perfect the world under the Sovereignty of the Almighty,” as perhaps Rav Hirsch and Netziv did, this softer call emerges from *Hodu’s* introductory instructions to “praise Hashem, call in His name, proclaim His deeds among the nations,” and its closing call to “tell of His glory amongst the nations, His wonders amongst the people.”

¹⁴ Translations are my own.

It jumps off the page of the siddur just a few paragraphs later when the word “kol” - meaning “all” or “everyone” - is repeated twelve times in the second half of *Ashrei*, beginning with a vision of all of God’s creations and righteous ones thanking and blessing Him by “telling of His kingship” and “speaking of His might” so as “to make known to all of mankind His might and the majestic glory of His kingship.” As Rambam writes in his *Sefer HaMitzvot* (Positive Mitzvah #9) with regard to the mitzvah of Kiddush Hashem, “the essence of this mitzvah is that we are commanded to publicize (*le-farsem*) this true belief in the world and not to fear any harm that may hurt us [as a result].”

Or Goyim, then, is a charge to take the treasure chest of wisdom, guidance, and instruction that comprises our *mesora*, proudly place it on the proverbial table of global discussion, and help others, unfamiliar with it, to understand its content. As such, it need not get bogged down in postmodern questions of subjective versus objective truth, rationality versus irrationality, and reality versus unreality or hyperreality. My *mesora* is my truth. The rhythms of halakic life are my reality. My calling is not to convince you of their certitude, but to humbly offer you a glimpse of their beauty.

Still, the unfortunate reality is that in modern Jewish parlance - both in English and in Hebrew - the word *goyim* has an inescapably pejorative connotation. More than describing those who do not share our faith and beliefs, it all too often conveys a whiff of racial superiority that is anathema to the up and coming generation of Modern Orthodox Jews. Therefore, I suggest we look not to Isaiah 42 or 49 for this concept’s most effective appellation, but to Isaiah 51 instead:

Listen to Me, My people, and lend Me your ear My nation,
for teaching shall go forth from Me, in a moment I will bring
my justice as a **light of nations (*Or Amim*)**. (Isaiah 51:4)

While *Or Amim* cannot survive in a world of radical postmodern pluralism, it is poised to thrive in a deconstructed world of postmodern multiculturalism. Radical pluralism often leaves no space for professions of faith or assertions of truth of any kind, and thus the conversations and exchanges necessary for *Or Amim* to take root and blossom are all too often muted and repressed. In a society, however, which explicitly honors a multiplicity of voices - even if none have privilege over the other - the opportunities to actualize the ideal of *Or Amim* are limitless. Indeed, in a world paradoxically defined by access to infinite information and yet crippled by the confines of echo chambers, *Or Amim* calls on the Jewish people to make sure that their heritage is on full display in this unprecedented marketplace of ideas, and that its reach extends well beyond its local audience.

When actualized in a multicultural world, the ideal of *Or Amim* has the power to energize and inspire the full breadth of the community to view their daily interactions with the world around them as an opportunity to fulfill the Divine Will. Jewish doctors seek out opportunities to offer uniquely Jewish insight into the dilemmas of end of life issues and universal healthcare. Jewish geneticists publicly offer a Torah perspective on the roles of man, God, science, and the act of procreation. Jewish lawyers find forums to infuse a Jewish Law perspective into debates over privacy, intellectual property, and the rehabilitative vs. punitive role of punishment. Jewish artists and musicians infuse their work with an explicitly Jewish spirit and disseminate it well beyond the confines of the Jewish community. Jewish salesclerks and technicians spend less time apologizing for their early departure every Friday afternoon, and more time inviting

their associates to join them for a Shabbat meal and experience the joy and serenity of sacred time and space.

And, while there are undoubtedly Jews who do all of the above today, the concept of *Or Amim* transforms the behavior from *de facto* to *de jure*. Much as the Hedgehog Concept of *kiruv* (outreach) ensures that the Chabad *shaluah* doesn’t bemoan his remote outpost thousands of miles from the Jewish vibrancy and vitality of Crown Heights, but relishes it as his or her opportunity to do what he or she was put on Earth to do, so the concept of *Or Amim* ought to inspire the Modern Orthodox doctor or cashier, hedge fund manager or plumber, guitarist or marketing associate to see their daily engagement with secular society as a unique opportunity to fulfill the *retzon Hashem* (will of God) in ways that few, if any, others can. In doing so, the bifurcation and duality that so often plagues the Modern Orthodox experience - Judaic Studies and General Studies, *Torah U-Madda*, secular and religious, work and home, personal and professional - begin to melt away. In its place rises a more holistic religious weltanschauung that encompasses all facets of a Jew’s daily life.

Educating an *Or Amim*

If the charge of *Or Amim* is for the Jewish people to offer the rich teachings of Jewish tradition to the wider world, then the Jewish people’s knowledge and understanding of its own teachings are a necessary prerequisite. And while such might seem obvious, the reality is that when Judaism does make an appearance in today’s American public square, it is often in the form of cultural phenomena that have no real basis in the vast corpus of Jewish law, lore, or literature: bagels, lox, kosher = blessed by a rabbi, Chanukah presents, etc. It also comes in the form of decontextualized platitudes and soundbytes that often stray quite far from their original intent (e.g., *mi-dor le-dor*, *tikkun olam*, *tzedeq tzedeq tirdof*, etc.).

Or Amim aspires to something deeper, more substantive, and more authentic. At the same time, one of Judaism’s most salient characteristics is its tolerance, or perhaps even encouragement, of disagreement and debate. Thus, there ought to be no assumption that *Or Amim* plays out in any uniform fashion. Judaism doesn’t have one script. Its contributions to the issues of the day will undoubtedly vary depending on the contributor, the context, his or her background, and his or her predilections. Judaism, however, has always insisted on arguments grounded in its texts. As such, *Or Amim* performed *ke-dat u-ke-din* (according to Jewish law) ought always be able to answer the question of “*mena hanei milei*” or “*menalan*” - from where in the tomes of our tradition does this teaching, this insight, this argument, or this perspective emerge?

Rigorous Jewish education, therefore, remains as necessary as ever in a community that rallies around *Or Amim*. As much as the internet has brought with it unprecedented access to Jewish texts and Jewish ideas, those who see themselves as called upon to share the Torah’s depths with the wider world cannot rely on crowdsourced translations and summarized approximations to achieve their lofty goals. Instead, both boys and girls raised in such communities must gain the language and analytical skills necessary to access our texts in their original form. They must also gain familiarity with what type of information one can find where in our massive library, lest Google direct them to *Orhot Hayim* when what they were looking for was to be found in *Orach Hayim*.

The educational demands of *Or Amim*, however, fundamentally differ from that of *Torah U-Madda*. In the former, a student must be able

to ground their practice, beliefs, and values in the texts of the *mesora* (or, at the very least, know where to look in order to find such grounding) and bring such texts to bear on real-world situations. In the latter, knowing those Torah texts is just the beginning. The real work comes in integrating such texts and ideas with those from other cultures and societies. A noble endeavor, for sure, but beyond the reach of way too many. The flexibility of *Or Amim* to be applied in different ways by different people in different circumstances can allow for different students who have mastered such texts with different levels of sophistication, nuance, and breadth to each feel successful in carrying out their community's sacred mission. The rigidity of a *Torah U-Madda* framework, however, sends those who are incapable or uninterested in its lofty intellectual ideals to seek spiritual satisfaction elsewhere.

Although an *Or Amim* framework still demands a high quality secular education, the primary function of such study is as a portal into broader society, its culture, and mores, rather than as a portal to knowledge of God.¹⁵ We might say that *Torah U-Madda* is, at its core, interdisciplinary, while *Or Amim* is multidisciplinary. The former seeks an often elusive state of harmony and integration, while the latter allows for cacophony and dissonance. And, while the synthesis of Rabbi Belkin and Rabbi Lamm might still be the ideal for those suited to its call, with a refocus on *Or Amim* as Modern Orthodoxy's Hedgehog, unsuitability is no longer a barrier to entry.

That having been said, to take full advantage of *Or Amim's* power to energize and elevate the Modern Orthodox community, changes to the way in which it educates its youth ought to be made. First of all, it requires what we might call a refinement of its curriculum. For young Jewish adults to become passionate about their unique capacity to fulfill God's mandate to become an *Or Amim*, they must first fully understand that such is His mandate. We must do so in a way that speaks not just to a student's intellect, but to the core of her identity. *Or Amim* can't be taught in a special *shiur*, a high school elective, or even a mandatory year long class on the topic. It must be integrated into all aspects of a child's Torah learning throughout his or her educational journey. To do so doesn't require replacing the core Yeshiva Day subjects of Chumash, Navi, Mishnah, and Gemara. But it does mean that in selecting which *sefarim*, *mesekhtot*, and *perakim* (books, tractates, and chapters) to learn, schools make a point of including the texts upon which this value is based.

Raising a generation on the importance of *Or Amim* means sensitizing teachers and administrators to the importance of delving deeply into the *berakhot* (blessings) of Avraham Avinu, the *Av Hamon Goyim* (father of many nations), and their promise that his descendants will be a blessing to the inhabitants of the Earth. It means focusing on the story of the Ten Plagues not only as a means toward achieving freedom from bondage but (Ex. 7:5) "so that Egyptians should know that I am the Lord." It means that in addition to emphasizing the centrality of the Beit HaMikdash (Temple) in cultivating the relationship between God and the Jewish People, the secondary role ascribed to it by none other than King Solomon himself, must be duly noted as well (Kings 1 8:41–43):

Or if a foreigner who is not of Your people Israel comes from a distant land for the sake of Your name - for they shall hear about Your great name and Your mighty hand

and Your outstretched arm - when he comes to pray toward this House, hear in Your heavenly abode and grant all that the foreigner asks You for. Thus all the peoples of the earth will know Your name and revere You, as does Your people Israel; and they will recognize that Your name is attached to this House that I have built.¹⁶

And it means that when King Solomon concludes his dedication speech by asking God to (Kings 1 8:57–60) "be with us as He was with our fathers" and "to incline our hearts to walk in His ways... so that all the nations of the world will know Hashem is God, there is no other," students in a Modern Orthodox school should tingle with a sense of pride and purpose, feeling as if Solomon were talking directly to them and giving them their mission, should they choose to accept it.

Likewise, the curriculum of a Modern Orthodox Day School that wishes to raise a generation passionate about *Or Amim* has to spend time unpacking the concepts of *mamlechet kohanim*, *goy kadosh*, and *am segula*. Rather than avoid the sensitive and complex questions regarding "chosenness" that ought to emerge from rituals like the daily recitation of *birkhot ha-Torah*, teachers in Modern Orthodox Day Schools ought to engage them and challenge students to consider the question of "chosen' for what?" They ought to explore the *sugyot* (sections) of *kiddush Hashem* (sanctifying God's name), the contours of *darkei shalom* (laws intended to prevent hostility between Jews and their neighbors), and the intricacies of *sheva mitzvot benei noah* (the seven Noahide Laws). It should ensure that students recognize the passages in their daily *tefillah* (prayer), and throughout the *tefillot* of the *yamim nora'im* (High Holy Days) that echo this call to arms.

Just as the book of Joshua, with its narrative of Israel's conquest, has a special place in the curriculum of Dati Le'umi schools, so ought the book of Isaiah to have a special place in the Modern Orthodox curriculum. If a product of a Dati Le'umi school in Israel ought to take pride in the fact that each and every time we open the Aron Kodesh we say "*ki mi-tzion tetze Torah*," (the Torah comes forth from Zion) the product of the American Modern Orthodox school ought to be equipped to offer a gentle reminder of how that verse (Isaiah 2:3), in its original context, begins:

And the many nations shall go and say: "Come, Let us go up to the Mountain of the Lord, to the House of the God of Jacob; That He may instruct us in His ways, And that we may walk in His paths." For instruction shall come forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem (*ki mi-tzion tetze Torah u-devar Hashem mi-yerushalayim*).¹⁷

In addition to tweaking the points of emphasis in its curricular content, Modern Orthodox schools would do well to consider the pedagogical implications of engaging kids in the value of *Or Amim*. Critical as it is that the full-fledged pursuit of *Or Amim* take place only after one has "filled their belly" with rigorous Torah learning, in order to truly prepare and excite the next generation about fulfilling their mission as an *Or Amim*, Modern Orthodox Yeshiva high schools could benefit from creating circumscribed yet authentic opportunities for their students to experience the encounter which this mitzvah requires.

¹⁵ To be distinguished, importantly, from secular studies in other communities where its function is solely as a gateway into a profession.

¹⁶ New JPS translation.

¹⁷ Translation is my own.

To do so, teachers, borrowing from the Project Based Learning playbook, can create learning experiences for students in which they master a small area of Torah content and then share their learning with an authentic audience outside of the Jewish community. Whether it be using social media to share the experience of Shabbos with those debating the merits of powering down, or offering insight into *bal tashchit* (do not waste) to a legislator working on conservation, the merits of such experiences are twofold. Not only will they afford educators the opportunity to guide students in how best to convey Jewish ideas - passionately, respectfully, and humbly - in non-Jewish spaces, but like Project Based Learning in all subject areas, the real-world application and the feedback from authentic audiences will often inspire students across the academic spectrum to put their best foot forward in ways that classroom tests and assessments simply do not.

Lastly, the fulfillment of *Or Amim* would benefit from opportunities for “specialization” within Torah learning as students advance through their undergraduate and graduate years - and beyond. Today, most post-secondary Torah learning opportunities, whether they be in Yeshivot or Seminaries, Jewish colleges, University Hillels, or shul adult-ed programs, are designed to promote Torah generalists. All students in a particular yeshiva, in a particular year, learn a particular *mesechta*. The staples of shul adult-ed classes are Daf Yomi and, more recently, Tanach Yomi, classes on *Parashat Hashavua* (weekly Torah portion), and the like. For the student who has seven to ten years to devote to such study, this is the surest path to producing bona fide *talmidei chachamim*.

For most of the post-high school population of the Modern Orthodox community, however, for whom Torah learning is either a full-time engagement but limited to a year or two at most, or a part-time avocation that enriches and complements their full-time occupation, this approach may not be the most effective in advancing the aims of *Or Amim*. In addition, then, to the opportunities to expand one’s breadth of Torah knowledge, there ought to be opportunities to strengthen one’s command of particular areas of Torah that are germane to one’s unique position in life. That is, lawyers ought to be able to regularly access in-depth - and in-person - *shiurim* on the conceptual and practical elements of the Torah’s view on tax law, criminal justice, intellectual property, inheritance, and a host of other relevant legal matters. Current or aspiring medical professionals ought to have regular access to accomplished teachers of Torah who can guide them on Jewish medical ethics and the practical *halachot* of healthcare. Current or aspiring business owners need to learn the intricacies of Jewish labor law, the *halachot* of finance, the Torah ethics of marketing and competition, to name just a few. Current or aspiring communal professionals ought to deeply understand the Torah’s conception of communal priorities, the obligations of *tzedaka* (charity), and the ethics of agenda-driven fundraising.

All of the above are adjustments, rather than overhauls. Yet, when done in concert with one another and across communities, the long term impact on developing young men and women who are passionate about their mission as *ovdei Hashem* (servants of God) could be extraordinary.

A Hedgehog for Modern Orthodoxy, Not for the Modern Orthodox

One final word of caution. Encouraging the cultivation of a Hedgehog Concept for American Modern Orthodoxy runs the very real risk of exacerbating the identity politics rampant in society today. The quest to define what Modern Orthodoxy is, can quickly become a quest to define who is Modern Orthodox. It can be taken as an opportunity -

or as an excuse - by some to sharpen party lines and to further splinter an already fractured global Jewish community.

If understood, and conveyed, properly, however, *Or Amim* ought to have the opposite effect. *Or Amim* is being posited as a defining element of Modern Orthodoxy, not as a means of defining who is Modern Orthodox. That is, the Modern Orthodox community ought to feel no sense of ownership over the concept nor ought it to engender any sense of exclusivity. Rather, the Modern Orthodox community ought to see itself, by virtue of its geographic and socio-economic realities, as particularly well-suited to carry out this vital, ancient charge of the Jewish people. Recognizing such an opportunity ought to energize and excite many in the Modern Orthodox community.

At the same time, the renewed focus by the Modern Orthodox community on this ideal ought to foster a deep sense of connection between self-identified members of the Modern Orthodox community and those Jews who identify differently but who, despite the way they dress, what they eat, the shul in which they do - or don’t - daven, are similarly engaged in bringing authentic Torah ideas to the larger world. Much as Chabad, as a community, might be uniquely positioned to carry out the Torah ideal of *kiruv*, they don’t own it. Their emphasis on *kiruv* stems from a deeply held belief in the theurgic power of mitzvah performance to bring the world closer to redemption. Whether the instigator and inspiration for the performance of a mitzvah comes from within the Chabad community or from without, however, has no bearing on the value of the act itself. As such, Chabad *shluchim* themselves ought to feel a sense of kinship to others in the Jewish world who are similarly engaged in revitalizing traditional Jewish life for Jews. They are both engaged in the - or one of the - most precious of God’s commands.

Or Amim ought to be approached from a similar vantage point. A bareheaded Reform Jewish colleague who articulates a well-sourced Jewish view of communal responsibility for the underprivileged, and a Jew with *pe’os* (earlocks) tucked around his ears who can explain to his associates the sanctity that Jewish Law accords to physical touch, ought no longer to be seen as just a member of the same people as their Modern Orthodox co-religionists, but as soulmates equally engaged in fulfilling one of life’s most noble causes. And those Jews who live cloistered in Jewish enclaves whether in Kiryat Motzkin or Kiryas Joel, and therefore cannot actualize *Or Amim* to the same extent, ought not to be seen as “less than,” but as “different than.” There are opportunities to fulfill facets of the Divine Will that their particular circumstances offer to them which Jews living in Boca or Bergenfield don’t have. And, to return to Collin’s terms, they ought to create “resource engines” to drive their Hedgehog Concept, the same way that Modern Orthodox communities ought to create the infrastructure necessary to drive their own. Instead of exacerbating communal rifts, doing so can serve to heal them while energizing a new generation to passionately pursue a life of Torah learning and Torah living.

REISH LAKISH AND RABBI YOHANAN ON THE POWER OF REPENTANCE: A REAPPRAISAL

LEONARD GRUNSTEIN founded and served as Chairman of Metropolitan National Bank and then Israel Discount Bank of NY.

The captivating story of Reish Lakish's repentance after a chance encounter with Rabbi Yohanan is well-known.¹⁸ Reish Lakish was a bandit leader¹⁹ and former gladiator.²⁰ Rabbi Yohanan had gone out for a swim. Reish Lakish mistook him for a woman because of his striking beauty²¹ and leapt into the river intending a frolic. Instead, he was confronted with Rabbi Yohanan, who responded to the threatening posture of Reish Lakish with the disarming and inspirational response, "Your strength [is] for Torah." Rabbi Yohanan did not reflect on Reish Lakish's negatives, including his inappropriate life-style and conduct. Rather, he emphasized the positive and, in a complimentary fashion, suggested how much Reish Lakish could accomplish if he applied his obvious powers to Torah.

Reish Lakish didn't miss a beat, retorting that Rabbi Yohanan should devote his beauty to courting women. Still, Rabbi Yohanan did not deride Reish Lakish's fascination with physical beauty. Instead, he used the opportunity to deliver a powerful message. He offered that if Reish Lakish were to repent, he would have the opportunity to marry R. Yohanan's sister, who was even more beautiful than her brother. Once again, Rabbi Yohanan deftly channeled Reish Lakish's apparent ardor and innate strengths towards a positive outlet. Marriage and the sanctity of Jewish home life, including mutual respect and faithfulness between spouses, after all, are exemplars for the integration of the spiritual and material aspects of life.²²

Reish Lakish was inspired, agreeing to give up his old life and devote himself to the pursuit of Torah study and its practice. The transformational effect was almost immediate. When he tried to go back and collect his weapons, he was emotionally unable to do so. The two became brothers-in-law, friends, and study partners. Each brought different life experiences, personalities, and perspectives to their discussions. It was not unusual for them to respectfully disagree in their conversations with one another.

Yet words are powerful tools, and can motivate others to do good or cause great harm, as portrayed in the continuation of the saga of Reish Lakish and Rabbi Yohanan.²³ The Talmud reports they were learning together in the *beit midrash* when a hapless contrempts erupted that led to unintended and catastrophic consequences. The halakic matter under scrutiny was the law of ritual purity applicable to a sword, knife, spear, hand sickle, and harvesting sickle. The

¹⁸ *Bava Metzia* 84a. See also *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 43:5.

¹⁹ See Rashi's commentary to *Bava Metzia* 84a. He was also a security guard in an orchard as noted in *JT Moed Katan* 3:1.

²⁰ See *Gittin* 47a, which refers to the fact that he sold himself to the Ludi, which the Jastrow dictionary interprets to mean gladiators. In Latin the word 'Ludi' may be translated as games (i.e., gladiatorial games of combat in the Roman arena). See also the use of the term Ludin in the *JT Terumot* 8:3 and *Avodah Zarah* 2:3. Cf. Rashi (*Shabbat* 10a s.v. "Ludim") and Maharsha (*Gittin* 47a), who define Ludim as a nation of cannibals.

²¹ See *Bava Metzia* 84a and *Berakhot* 15b describing Rav Yohanan's extraordinary beauty.

²² *Sotah* 17a.

²³ *Bava Metzia* 84a.

scholars debated the precise moment when the completion of the manufacturing process occurs, whereby the raw iron ore is transformed into a utensil and rendered susceptible to ritual impurity.²⁴ Rabbi Yohanan argued it was when the blade was formed upon being fired in the furnace. Reish Lakish disagreed, asserting that it did not become a vessel until it was hardened in water and sharpened through polishing. Was this just an argument about form versus functionality, or is there more to the discussion than meets the eye?

Consider: if it was a purely legal discussion, Reish Lakish could have done a much better job arguing his position.²⁵ He might have characteristically²⁶ argued legal precedent in opposition to Rabbi Yohanan's position. His brief could have included the Mishnah in *Keilim*²⁷ directly on point, which contradicts the view asserted by Rabbi Yohanan. Indeed, Reish Lakish could have even confronted Rabbi Yohanan²⁸ with one of his own rulings that militated against the argument he was making. It is therefore difficult to accept that this was just another legal argument. There appears to be more to it; indeed, what happened next is supportive of this conclusion.

It began when Rabbi Yohanan made a gratuitous comment that was not well received by Reish Lakish. Instead of gracefully acknowledging the cogent reasoning of Reish Lakish's position²⁹, Rabbi Yohanan remarked that a bandit knows the tools of banditry. He might have meant it as a backhanded compliment or presumed Reish Lakish was immune to this kind of trash talking. After all, each of them, on occasion, had engaged in the playful banter of friends and colleagues.³⁰ Moreover, they typically had vigorous exchanges of

²⁴ The Hebrew term is *tumah*.

²⁵ See Hida's *Petah Einayim*, s.v. "ha-sayyaf."

²⁶ See *JT Gittin* 3:1, which notes that Reish Lakish does not typically disagree with Rabbi Yohanan on the basis of his own reasoning. Rather, he cites a Baraita that contradicts Rabbi Yohanan, and bases his opposing opinion on it. If it were just a difference of opinion, then he would typically yield and relinquish his own view in deference to Rabbi Yohanan. However, this does not always appear to be the case. For example, earlier in the *JT Gittin* (1:4), a debate between the two is reported regarding whether a *shtar* (in this case a loan document) witnessed by non-Jews is enforceable to collect a loan. Reish Lakish argues in favor of this relaxed standard and asserts that the *shtar* is valid and enforceable, so as not to shut off the flow of loans to borrowers. Rabbi Yohanan disagrees, arguing the *shtar* is invalid.

²⁷ *Mishnah Keilim* 14:5.

²⁸ See *Hullin* 25b, as well as, Rashi, s.v. "hoel."

²⁹ Rabbeinu Hananel notes that Rabbi Yohanan bows to Reish Lakish's expertise.

³⁰ They each had healthy and well-developed senses of humor, which enabled them to artfully turn a phrase. As to Rabbi Yohanan, see, for example, *Behorot* 18a, *Bava Batra* 107a, *Megillah* 11a, and *Pesachim* 62b. As to Reish Lakish, see, for example, *Megillah* 28b and *Bereishit Rabbah* 80:1. Interestingly, it was Rabbi Yohanan (*Berakhot* 31a), who taught in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai that it is forbidden to fill one's mouth with levity in this world. Ritva, (*Berakhot* 31a s.v. "assur") explains that this is because it allows the evil inclination to take over in the midst of the self-satisfying humor of the moment. The Talmud goes on to record that Reish Lakish took this lesson of his teacher Rabbi Yohanan to heart, and never filled his mouth with levity in this world. How ironic that this illustrious pair of Sages, so committed to avoiding the evils of humor, appear to have fallen prey to it and allowed what might have been intended as innocent banter to get out of control, as depicted in *Bava Metzia* 84a.

ideas. How did this one precipitously degrade into a clash of personalities? Apparently, Reish Lakish interpreted Rabbi Yohanan's remark as a sarcastic slight. Who would have believed that he would take so hard a reference to his former profession? In fact, while Rabbi Yohanan's comment was unkind, it did confirm Reish Lakish's expertise in the particular area under discussion. Reish Lakish might just as well have reveled in the notoriety, and strutted his stuff. Yet he didn't. His reaction was emotionally charged. Reish Lakish painfully demanded to understand why Rabbi Yohanan was verbally abusing him.³¹ Rabbi Yohanan seems to have misunderstood what Reish Lakish was saying³², because he proceeded to explain how he had benefited Reish Lakish instead of addressing the hurt Reish Lakish felt.³³

Indeed, this does not appear to be the only misunderstanding which occurred on that day. Reish Lakish responded to Rabbi Yohanan, "I was called Rabbi before and I am called Rabbi now." Rashi and Rabbeinu Tam dispute what exactly Reish Lakish meant, as the term 'Rabbi' may be defined as any master³⁴ or teacher.

Rashi³⁵ interprets the retort to mean that Reish Lakish was a master when he was a gladiator or bandit leader before, and master of Torah now. From this perspective, the response was a clever play on words. Rabbeinu Tam,³⁶ however, views Reish Lakish's statement more ominously, as harking back to an earlier time, before Reish Lakish became a gladiator and bandit leader. He asserts that Reish Lakish had studied Torah in his earlier life and had even become a Rabbi. He then lost his way and became the disreputable person Rabbi Yohanan encountered at the Jordan River. Under Rabbi Yohanan's tutelage, he became a Rabbi once again. From this point of view, Rabbi Yohanan's comeback takes on a taunting and even sinister tone.

Perhaps this is how Rabbi Yohanan understood it, as opposed to how (consistent with Rashi's interpretation) Reish Lakish may have meant it. The difference in perspectives and the possible misunderstanding it entailed might help explain why Rabbi Yohanan reacted in the seemingly insensitive way he did. After all, the term Rabbi was a title of no small distinction conferred on those who were masters and teachers of Jewish Law. Rabbi Yohanan seems to have been particularly fastidious about the use of the title³⁷ and protective of the dignity of the position.³⁸ Thus, the response by Reish Lakish may

³¹ See *Hokhmat Shlomo*, s.v. "u-Mai Ahanat."

³² It appears he took the beginning of Reish Lakish's remark, 'what benefit did you provide me' literally, instead of appreciating the substance of the entire statement as an expression of pain.

³³ The word used was "ahanat," which might refer to *hona'ah*, meaning oppress or abuse, as in *ona'at devarim* below, or *hana'ah*, meaning benefit.

³⁴ One of the definitions of the term Rabbi, see also *Avodah Zarah* 17a, where the term is also used to denote a master, this time of weaving.

³⁵ See Rashi (*Bava Metzia* 84a s.v. "Rav Karu Lei").

³⁶ As noted in the Tosafot (*Bava Metzia* 84a s.v. "Ei Hadrat Bakh").

³⁷ See, for example, how he initially treated Shmuel when he was elevated to be Rav's successor as head of the academy in Bavel (*Hullin* 95b). When Rabbi Yohanan first corresponded with Shmuel, he did not address him as Rav, as he had done with Shmuel's predecessor Abba Arihta, who was typically referred to as Rav in the Talmud. Shmuel had to work hard to convince Rabbi Yohanan of his bona fides; only then were his efforts rewarded by Rabbi Yohanan finally addressing him as Rav Shmuel.

³⁸ See, for example, *JT Moed Katan* 3:7 and *Bava Kama* 117a-b.

have been perceived as extremely demeaning to the elevated title and status of Rabbi that Rabbi Yohanan sought to establish as the norm.

Reish Lakish's perceived flippancy may also have triggered a more serious concern in Rabbi Yohanan's mind about Reish Lakish's commitment to his new life as a penitent. In Rabbi Yohanan's view of repentance, there was no assurance of a permanent transformation (as more fully discussed below). Might he then have overreacted to the seemingly mocking manner in which Reish Lakish referred to his previous history of changing from one role to another and back?

The personal nature of the dispute deepened even further with Rabbi Yohanan's reply that he benefitted Reish Lakish by bringing him under the wings of the divine presence. This insensitive riposte further struck at Reish Lakish's vulnerability as a penitent. It also demeaned Reish Lakish's own role in transforming himself. Reish Lakish had made extraordinary efforts and demonstrated iron will in overcoming his sordid origins to become a revered sage. Moreover, as opposed to Rabbi Yohanan's initial words, there was no mistaking the intent of this second remark: Rabbi Yohanan was reminding Reish Lakish, the penitent, of his past life.

Indeed, the prohibition against reminding the penitent of his or her past life is ancient in origin and traces back to the Bible. The Mishnah³⁹ rules that the Bible's prohibition⁴⁰ against exploiting someone else applies not only to monetary matters, but also to verbal mistreatment.⁴¹ This includes reminding a penitent of his or her earlier deeds.⁴² It even extends to telling someone suffering from an illness or affliction that it is a result of his or her own folly or misdeeds.⁴³

Imagine the hurt Reish Lakish must have felt. He was first referred to as a bandit, even if only in jest or as a backhanded compliment. He was then further abused by being reminded that his repentance was only due to Rabbi Yohanan's intervention. The dialogue is evocative of how exceedingly easy it is to violate the rules against verbal abuse. It doesn't have to be meant as an insult to inflict harm; inadvertently uttering an insensitive or regrettable comment can also cause pain and suffering. It is well nigh impossible to anticipate the impact a remark might have on any particular individual. Some people are more vulnerable than others and might silently take umbrage at a statement perceived to be callous or judgmental.

³⁹ Mishna *Bava Metzia* 4:10 and *Bava Metzia* 58b.

⁴⁰ Leviticus 25:17.

⁴¹ Among other things, this also includes intentionally embarrassing someone by using a nickname (*Bava Metzia* 58b; see also *Tur, Hoshen Mishpat* 228).

⁴² Preserving human dignity is so important that it even overrides a Rabbinic decree (*Berakhot* 19b). Indeed, the Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 59a) excoriates any person who publicly embarrasses another, describing all sorts of dire consequences for violating the prohibition. The Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 59b) stresses how sensitive a person must be to avoid violating these strictures. Thus, even using the word "hang" in an instruction to hang a fish is inappropriate, when the directive is issued to a member of a family that experienced the hanging of an ancestor for a crime. This is because it might be perceived as demeaning. See also *Shenei Luhot ha-Berit, Torah She-bikhtav, Sefer Vayikra, Torah Or, Kedoshim* 57.

⁴³ *Sifra, Behar*, Chapter 42.

Both Reish Lakish and Rabbi Yohanan were devastated by the unfortunate exchange of harsh words. Reish Lakish became deathly ill.⁴⁴ After Reish Lakish passed away, Rabbi Yohanan also lost his zest for life. He bemoaned the loss of Reish Lakish and became deeply depressed. He too passed away a broken man.

It is a truly unfortunate tale of two great and wonderful people needlessly causing each other incredible pain and suffering. It begs the question: what motivated them to act and react in the way that they did?

Rabbi Yohanan, Reish Lakish, and Repentance

Another debate between Reish Lakish and Rabbi Yohanan might provide a clue as to why Reish Lakish had such a profoundly negative reaction, and Rabbi Yohanan missed the cues. The Talmud⁴⁵ records that Reish Lakish believed that a single pang of guilt in a person's heart is more painful than a hundred lashes. While Rabbi Yohanan appears to have expressed a somewhat similar sentiment, he views the suffering of the penitent to be far less extreme than that claimed by Reish Lakish. He limits the pain inflicted to something worse than a few lashes.

The difference of opinion may appear to be just one of degree, but might extend beyond that to the very nature of remorse. Reish Lakish cites a verse in Proverbs,⁴⁶ which describes how an intelligent person's reaction to words of rebuke is more effective than physically hitting a fool a hundred times. Words can hurt and the pain can be virtually immeasurable. They can leave an indelible imprint on the person.⁴⁷ Perhaps this is why Reish Lakish reacted so painfully to the reminder of his past misdeeds.

Rabbi Yohanan bases his view on an abstruse verse in Hosea,⁴⁸ which prima facie seems to have only peripheral relevance to his position.⁴⁹ The context, though, provides a clue as to why Rabbi Yohanan reacted so harshly to Reish Lakish's riposte. The verse describes a form of ostensible repentance⁵⁰ that is not heartfelt but born of desperation, a sentiment hardly calculated to result in real and

⁴⁴ The Talmud records that Reish Lakish's wife reached out to her brother, Rabbi Yohanan, to reconcile with Reish Lakish and pray for his recovery. However, despite her tearful and extremely personal and heartfelt entreaties, Rabbi Yohanan stubbornly refused to do so. The emotionally charged dialogue is discomfiting. She begs him and he not only demurs, but offers instead to replace Reish Lakish's role in supporting her and bringing up her children. She refuses her brother's insistent offer.

⁴⁵ *Berakhot* 7a.

⁴⁶ Proverbs 17:10.

⁴⁷ See Rabbi Ya'akov Tzvi Mecklenberg's *Ha-Ketav Ve-Hakabalah* commentary on Exodus 6:6.

⁴⁸ Hosea 2:9. The verse speaks of an errant wife, abandoned by her erstwhile lovers, who must perforce return to her first husband. The allusion is to the ills of idol worship, which is compared to flirting with others, while the first husband is the one true God.

⁴⁹ The literary device employed in the verse is the image of an errant spouse, desperately having to return home alone to an original spouse after having been abandoned by her erstwhile interim companions. It is certainly a distressing situation, which accounts for Rabbi Yohanan's use of the verse to support his contention. However, as Reish Lakish posits, it does not compare to the level of pain experienced by someone who has genuinely repented from a life of debauchery, yet is chided about his or her sordid origins.

⁵⁰ See Malbim's commentary on Hosea 2:9.

permanent change. Indeed, it would suggest a transitory condition. Thus, if circumstances changed and there were other prospects, the individual might just pack up and leave again.

Hearing Reish Lakish cavalierly brag about being a Rabbi one day,⁵¹ gladiator and bandit leader the next, and then Rabbi again might have triggered this very concern. After all, no one is immune⁵² to impure influences. Perhaps Rabbi Yohanan was worried that Reish Lakish's bravado and trust in himself were misplaced. Anyone might be tempted to backslide and revert to an unsavory habit and lifestyle; why was Reish Lakish any different, even after all the years of sincere repentance? Moreover, Rabbi Yohanan may also have been concerned that others might be seduced by the charming story of Reish Lakish's transformation into believing it was easy to be a villain one day and a saint the next: by the same token, the opposite might occur. This more pessimistic appreciation of the nature of repentance may help explain Rabbi Yohanan's reaction that day.

In striking contrast, Reish Lakish had an entirely more optimistic perspective on the nature of repentance. He focused on the transformative effect it could have on the penitent. While he notes that repentance, even if inspired by fear of punishment, converts a person's intentional sins into unwitting errors, he then posits that there is yet a higher level of repentance. It requires the purer motivation of love of God, which results in intentional sins being transformed into merits. These are wonderful sentiments,⁵³ but how does it all work in practice? How does this extraordinary transformation occur?

The Maharsha⁵⁴ describes repentance arising out of fear as the recognition by a person that he or she should not have sinned. In essence, had the person realized the consequences of sin, he or she would not have committed the sinful conduct. The sin is, therefore, retrospectively deemed to arise out of a moment of folly, not willful intent or rebelliousness. However, repenting because of love of God means doing more than just regretting and correcting the prior sinful behavior. It requires doing many more good deeds, which far outweigh the initial sin. The penitent actively seeks out opportunities to perform good deeds. Thus, in effect, the original sinful conduct generates exceedingly more good deeds than might otherwise have naturally occurred. This is why it may be said that the sin, which caused this new meritorious behavior, is accounted as a merit. In a sense, it establishes a new pattern of good behavior that supplants the prior sinful one.

⁵¹ Per Rabbeinu Tam's interpretation, as noted above.

⁵² See, for example, the notorious case of Rabbi Elisha ben Abuya, who became the heretic ignominiously known as Aher (*Hagigah* 15a-b).

⁵³ Reish Lakish also has an interesting perspective about the nature and purpose of sin. In a somewhat humorous remark, he notes that had our ancestors not sinned, we would never have been born into this world. This is because, as Psalms (8:2-6) notes, everyone would have been immortal but for sin. This is a fascinating way of expressing the fact that no one is perfect: it's not about looking back, but moving forward with the proper positive motivation. In this regard, Reish Lakish also cautions against looking back and regretting earlier good actions (*Kiddushin* 40b). He also notes that even suffering has its place, because it cleanses a person's transgressions (*Berakhot* 5a).

⁵⁴ Rabbi Shmuel Eidels in his Maharsha commentary on *Yoma* 86b s.v. "Na'asu Lo k-Shegogot."

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik⁵⁵ delves into the psychological and spiritual underpinnings of Reish Lakish's thesis. He explains the notions of repentance motivated by fear versus love as the difference between blotting out sin and elevating it. The base level of repentance arising out of fear allows a person, figuratively, to be transported back to the time before the person embarked on the path of sinning. The intervening period of sin is wiped out as if it had never occurred.

The higher level of repentance out of love of God, though, is not a clean break with the past and the obliteration of memories. It permits the person to identify with the past and still return to God, with a strength and power that he or she did not have previously. The intensity of sin, drive that impels it, and sense of guilt and shame that overwhelm a person are strong forces that are redirected by the penitent towards doing good deeds. This is how the penitent, effectively, comes closer to God.

The power of sublimation is thus enormous. It channels energy into positive behavior. This positive aspect of sublimation creates a zest and vigor for leading a virtuous life, with greater intensity than might otherwise have been the case. Ironically, the springboard for this awesome effect is the sinful conduct. It motivates the sinner to channel previously antagonistic forces into a cohered force now overwhelmingly directed in the positive direction of seeking out and doing good deeds.

Rabbi Soloveitchik also posits that with sin comes a sense of loneliness caused by God receding from the sinner. The spiritual vacuum created can be filled by chasing after God's presence through doing good deeds. There is a compound effect that is veritably palpable of not only pushing forward, but also of being pulled in that positive direction.

These profound concepts help explain the source of the power that animated the transformation of Reish Lakish. All of his seemingly toxic character traits of aggression, physical strength, agility and mental acuity, previously harnessed in the pursuit of an evil profession, were miraculously transformed. They became the tools of a wise sage, pursuing the noble cause of studying and teaching Torah, as well as empowering the performance of good deeds.

Reish Lakish's response to Rabbi Yohanan about being a Rabbi before and a Rabbi now, according to Rashi's interpretation, now takes on a whole other dimension of meaning. He indeed possessed all the qualities of a great Rabbi before, but used his innate character traits and skills to become a gladiator and bandit leader instead. Then, triggered by his encounter with Rabbi Yohanan, he propelled himself forward by sublimating those same traits and skills to serve a higher purpose. He succeeded magnificently in transforming himself into the extraordinary person he became. Reish Lakish's motto that a person should always incite his or her good inclination to overcome the wicked one⁵⁶ is consistent with this theme. In essence, it's about positive motivation to do good and not just reining in baser instincts.

In light of the foregoing, we may suggest that the subject of raw iron being formed into a tool may be symbolic of a deeper philosophical debate. The Talmud sometimes describes the educational process of

students studying Torah together as the grinding of iron tools one against the other to sharpen them.⁵⁷ The question may have revolved around the preferred pedagogic technique for educating a person to handle⁵⁸ impurity. There is, after all, no course of study that can immunize a person from sin. As the Talmud⁵⁹ notes, there is no death without sin. Instead, it's about equipping a person to be able to deal with impure influences and not be permanently and fatally contaminated by them.

The reference to the hot furnace and its molten and harsh environment might symbolize the severe language used to condition and restrain a person's baser instincts. In this construct, Rabbi Yohanan is expressing the view that it requires heat to steel a person to enable him or her to bear the impure influences in the world. It requires fiery, albeit harsh, talk to imprint the message of God. The person might then be formed into a tool that can bear contamination.

The water and gentler process of polishing may refer to the kinder approach of playing to a person's strengths, instead of attacking his or her weaknesses.⁶⁰ Providing encouragement by emphasizing the positive, and reinforcing it over time through a polishing process, can have the salutary effect of energizing a person to overcome one's faults and propel him or her toward personal growth and refinement.⁶¹

Rebuke, by contrast, often fails to effect positive change. Moreover, it can cause more serious problems of rebellion and depression. Indeed, no matter how well-intentioned this kind of approach may be, Reish Lakish was crushed by it.⁶² Why should a person try if one no longer believes in his or her own self-worth? Preserving self-respect is critical, so that it can be a valuable ally in the internal struggle to be better. Remember, in their initial encounter at the Jordan River, Rabbi Yohanan did not berate Reish Lakish about his tawdry circumstances or deride his weaknesses; he instead appealed to the gladiator's strengths. As Reish Lakish lived it, his transformative experience was about engaging his positive impulses,

⁵⁷ See *Ta'anit* 7a, based on Proverbs 27:17, as well as *Genesis Rabbah* 69:2. However, it is important to note that while scholars may fight like enemies, when studying Torah together, they do not leave until they love each other (see *Kiddushin* 30b and Rashi, s.v. "et vahev basufah").

⁵⁸ The Hebrew term *mekablin* literally means able to receive.

⁵⁹ *Shabbat* 55a.

⁶⁰ See, for example, *Bava Batra* 21a, which discusses how the original system of *yeshivot* for educating the young in Israel was established. In connection with the initial effort that failed, it notes how a teacher's angry remarks would cause an older student to rebel and get up and leave. The Talmud also prescribes methods of discipline that are not harsh. Thus, it states that corporeal punishment may only be administered for disciplinary purposes and then only with a shoelace (i.e., not with a belt or whip, so as not to injure the child). The Talmudic text goes on to say that if the child does not study (and presumably does not disrupt others' learning), the child may remain in the company of his classmates. It notes that eventually he will pay attention to his studies (because of peer pressure). On this basis, Rashi on the text states that one should not reject the child or punish him excessively.

⁶¹ It is much more effective to positively reinforce the good, rather than focus only on the bad, or use hurtful words. See, for example, *Otzar ha-Midrashim, Alpha Beita de-Rabbi Akiva* (Version 1) 10.

⁶² So was Rabbi Kahana (See *Bava Kama* 117a-b).

⁵⁵ See Soloveitchik in *On Repentance, The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, ed. Pinchas H. Peli, the "Blotting Out Sin or Elevating Sin" (esp. pages 248-265).

⁵⁶ *Berakhot* 5a.

not denying wicked urges. Reish Lakish's positive attitude is inspiring. This might also be why Reish Lakish's wife rejected her brother Rabbi Yohanan's approach to tutor her children.⁶³ While the goal of refinement may be the same, each person's path may be as different as humanity is diverse.⁶⁴

The raw and compelling presentation in the Talmud stresses that even great Sages can make mistakes, and even seemingly tough people can be vulnerable. We can't know each other's hidden weaknesses, and it is irresponsible to think everyone is wholly alike. There are sensitivities we may never be fully aware of, or only recognize when it is too late. And sometimes, beyond not yielding the intended result, there are also unintended consequences which can prove catastrophic.

Bracketing the Narrative

The narrative about Rabbi Yohanan and Reish Lakish is bracketed⁶⁵ by other tales, involving a who's who of great Sages, that also illustrate these seminal principles.

This aggadic section begins with the tale of how Rabbi Elazar ben Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai became a Roman sheriff. The story begins with Rabbi Elazar reproaching someone else for assuming the unseemly position of a Roman sheriff. A short while later he also finds himself in the same untenable position of being forcibly drafted to assume the role of Roman sheriff.⁶⁶

Although he set about doing his assigned job correctly, intending to arrest only those he was certain were criminals, he was nevertheless disparagingly referred to as "vinegar the son of wine" by his rabbinic colleagues. The import of their demeaning remark was that he was like vinegar, the spoiled result of wine, in contrast to his father, Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, a man of genuine stature and distinction and thus like a fine wine.

They may have had a right to criticize him. After all, he was acting as an agent for a foreign power occupying Israel and enforcing laws that were not strictly in accordance with Jewish law. This included such matters as the relaxed evidentiary requirements under Roman law as compared to Jewish law, and the overly harsh and excessive punishments meted out by the Roman authorities. Nevertheless, the offensive language they used was abusive and unacceptable, and the fact of the matter is that it didn't help; it only hurt.

Then, one fateful day, Rabbi Elazar encountered a laundryman who vilified him by using the same epithet of vinegar the son of wine. This time, though, the disrespectful remark was perceived by Rabbi Elazar as an insult to the office of rabbi rather than merely a personal slight.

⁶³ As Proverbs (22:6) counsels, educate a child according to his or her way, and then even when the child grows up, he or she will not depart from it. The *Midrash Rabbah* thereon notes that it is also important to do so while the person is young and before his or her character is hardened. As *Kiddushin* 30a notes, this certainly means before their mid-twenties. According to another Gemara (*Bava Batra* 21a), it is best to begin between the ages of six and seven.

⁶⁴ See *Berakhot* 58a and *Eiruv* 13b. See also *Bamidbar Rabbah* 21:2 and 13:16.

⁶⁵ *Bava Metzia* 83b-85a.

⁶⁶ The Talmud does question this judgment by implication when referring to another case, where it notes that the option was available to flee the jurisdiction to another land where Rome did not hold sway.

He thought the person wicked and had the offender arrested. In doing so, he veered from his usual ethic of only arresting those he was certain committed a crime. He later regretted his peremptory decision and sought to ransom the individual, but to no avail.

Rabbi Elazar's instincts about the person, though, proved to be correct. Interestingly, he notes that the individual might have avoided these difficulties had he simply followed the advice of Proverbs⁶⁷ that a person who keeps his mouth closed and tongue in check keeps his soul out of trouble. In essence, harsh rebuke was not effective in changing Rabbi Elazar's conduct. It only caused harm to all parties concerned, which could have been avoided had the parties only refrained from making the abusive remarks.

At the offender's execution, those gathered tried to console Rabbi Elazar. They advised him that the offender was indeed extremely wicked, and, together with his son, had committed the unspeakably vile sin of having sexual relations with a young betrothed woman on Yom Kippur. Nevertheless, Rabbi Elazar continued to blame himself for his impetuosity. He had acted on mere suspicion, not certainty. This violated the commitment he made to himself only to arrest those he knew committed a crime, so as to justify his acting as Sheriff on behalf of the otherwise oppressive Roman regime. His self-rebuke and guilt were overpowering, and as a result he became ill and suffered mightily. He was also sensitive to what he perceived to be a negative perception of him by his colleagues. Nevertheless, he is viewed most favorably by the Talmud, and he more than atoned for any indiscretion by his afflictions and suffering.

The Talmudic text then concludes with a crescendo, offering an implicit paean to Reish Lakish's life experience, and the positive and encouraging approach that best suited him. It records that Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi visited the town where Rabbi Elazar ben Shimon had lived, and inquired whether the righteous person had a son. Rebbe learned that Rabbi Elazar did bear a child, but the son had lost his way. His name was Yosi, and he was an extremely handsome man and the darling of women of ill repute. In a decisive moment, Yosi willingly accompanied Rebbe. The latter ordained Yosi a rabbi and arranged for his uncle Rabbi Shimon ben Issi ben Lakonya to tutor Rabbi Yosi.

Rabbi Yosi found that studying was an arduous process. Early on, Rabbi Yosi would often say that he wanted to give up and go back home. Yet his uncle convinced him to stay, not by speaking harshly, but by complimenting the progress he had made. He said the Sages wanted to make Rabbi Yosi into a wise sage, envelope him with a golden cloak of ordination, and call him Rabbi. The encouragement worked: eventually, Rabbi Yosi vowed never to go back home and return to his old ways. Instead he matured and joined the distinguished academy of Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi.

When Rabbi Yosi arrived at the academy and spoke, those who heard his voice said he sounded just like Rabbi Elazar ben Rabbi Shimon, his father. They graciously accepted and praised him by applying to him the verse⁶⁸ "the fruit of the righteous is a tree of life." They also recognized the role of his uncle and teacher, praising him by invoking the same verse⁶⁹ they used to compliment Rabbi Yosi. It is a beautiful and most relevant aphorism that captures a theme common to most of these stories, to wit: "a wise man captivates people."

⁶⁷ Proverbs 21:23.

⁶⁸ Proverbs 11:30.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

The message is timely and cogent. Respectful disagreement does not permit ad hominem attacks. Even one who is well-intentioned must be extremely sensitive to how our words might be perceived by the listener. We may not intend to hurt someone, but that doesn't relieve the pain a person may suffer as a result of a regrettable remark.

I remember well the lesson my mom taught us about how we must be careful with our words. She would invoke the Yiddish proverb that "*a pattach fargeiyt ober a vort shteyt*," "the sting of a slap dissipates, but the pain caused by a hurtful word endures." She wanted us to be refined individuals, who understand that words could hurt and the pain was lasting. My dad, of blessed memory, a man of few words and great wisdom, would counsel, "You never regret what you didn't say."

Another critical lesson is that playing to a person's strength, rather than decrying his or her weaknesses, can inspire a person to be better. Modern psychology⁷⁰ shares the Talmud's view about the effectiveness of stressing the positive and avoiding the ill effects of outright negative rebuke. I am reminded of a song⁷¹ that I often heard in my own youth, in the 50s, on the radio and record player, about accentuating the positive. The Talmud's view might be summarized along the lines of the original song, with some adaptation, as follows:

Accentuate the positive;
Don't rebuke the negative;
Be kind and encouraging;
No reminding of past sins.

Pursuing enlightenment and endeavoring to achieve genuine nobility is a life-long process. No one is perfect and, as God intended, it's all about genuinely striving to reach our full potential, through study and performance of good deeds and all the other commandments. The goal is to achieve the life of balance so aptly described by Maimonides.⁷² Blessed be the journey from strength to strength.

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⁷⁰ See, for example, "Accentuate the Positive, Eliminate the Negative," by Dona Mathews, PHD, dated 11/29/17, in *Psychology Today*.

⁷¹ Johnny Mercer wrote the lyrics. The song was recorded in 1944 by Bing Crosby and the Barry Sisters.

⁷² Maimonides, *Shemonah Perakim*, Chapter 4.