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Articles:

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The Brachos Bee and Becoming American Orthodox Jews

Zev Eleff

In March 1971, Torah Umesorah held the inaugural Brachos Bee for Orthodox day schools in New York. It was Rabbi Dovid Price's idea. Four years earlier, the principal of Yeshiva of Prospect Park had concocted the blessing bee for his Brooklyn-based school. It had worked. The Prospect Park youngsters embraced the game. To expand the competition, Price recruited about a hundred elementary and middle schools to quiz their students on the proper blessing to recite on all kinds of foods and other miscellanea like seeing rainbows and oceans.

School competitions narrowed the field. The pupils hailing from fourteen schools who managed to memorize blessings for the tougher items like peaches and cream, ice cream sandwiches, and roasted chestnuts moved on to the finals at Torah Umesorah's headquarters on Fifth Avenue. There, Price and his team of judges led a series of written and oral exams before crowning male and female champions in three age brackets.

Of course, Price and Torah Umesorah patterned their competition after the spelling bee. The Brachos Bee was therefore a clever expression of acculturation. Or, a "coalescence," as Sylvia Fishman and Yoel Finkelman have each termed it. The Brachos Bee drew from American forms of intense competition—historians long ago documented America's disavowal of Britain's "gentlemanly sport" culture—and child-centered education. The contests helped inculcate religious observance and standardize halakhic practice. These aspects of the Brachos Bee also ensured that a variety of Orthodox enclaves could cooperate with one another and absorb American culture.

Adapting the Spelling Bee

The spelling bee is an old institution. Americans in the early nineteenth century made use of spelling competitions as a savvy method to drill youngsters—immigrants and first-generation Americans—on English words and pronunciations. With the aid of radio, spelling bees gained renewed popularity in the interwar period. In 1925, the National Spelling Bee began in Louisville, Kentucky, leading educators to herald the "Spelling Bee's Revival."

In 1941, the E.W. Scripps Company acquired the sponsorship of the popular contest. In 1953, it became the custom for the National Spelling Bee winner to visit the White House and with FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. During the 1960s, the champions routinely appeared on a segment of the *Ed Sullivan Show*. It was, then, something of a cultural phenomenon. In December 1969, for instance, the National Spelling Bee loomed large in the very first *Peanuts* film, much to the chagrin of runner-up Charlie Brown.

Torah Umesorah looked to claim a version of the successful spelling bee as its own. Whereas the spelling bee was intended to Americanize its young participants, the Brachos Bee aimed to inculcate a baseline of religious observance. After all, Orthodox Jews tend to

recite a lot of blessings during their trice daily prayers and before eating food. Shalom Auslander's recollection of a schoolwide Brachos Bee match underscores the parallel between the two contests:

> The blessing bees began easily. Dov Becker got tuna (*shehakol*, the everything-else blessing), Ari Mashinsky got matzoh (*hamotzei*, the blessing for bread), and Yisroel Tuchman got stuck with kugel, which he thought was *ho-adamah*—food from the earth—but really was *mezonos*—the blessing on wheat. Three other kids got taken out by oatmeal, borscht with sour cream claimed two others, and by the end of the first round, almost a third of the students were already back in their seats.

The competitive spirit characterized the boys' and girls' Brachos Bee competitions. For example, the *New York Times* reporter depicted the following fierce scene among the Junior Girls Division in March 1976:

> Fast and curious the questions came: what is the blessing appropriate to almonds, American cheese, angel food cake, apples … Down went contestants—on buckwheat, chives, éclair eggplant, grits, kasha, parsley. Finally, Reana Bookson, aged 6, stumbled on rhubarb, leaving Elaine Witty, 8, triumphant winner.

The Brachos Bee, then, was simultaneously an entertaining method to obtain a better command of Jewish blessings and a Judaization of a popular American educational pastime. This sort of cultural coalescence was the hallmark of a particular brand of Orthodox Judaism in the United States. Torah Umesorah provided support and services to all types of Orthodox day schools but its administration and rabbinic leadership identified with the Orthodox Right. This cohort eschewed affiliation and interaction with the non-Orthodox and non-Jewish realms.

Take, for instance, Rabbi Yaakov Feitman's description of "Baseball Syndrome." Writing in the April 1976 edition of Torah Umesorah's *Jewish Parent*, the writer lamented how "Baseball, that most American of pastimes, recurs again and again in American Jewish literature as a metaphor of Americanization—and, in the process, de-Judaization."

Yet, the Orthodox Right did incorporate aspects of American culture, so long as its adherents could reinforce its steady need to remain apart from it. The Brachos Bee was proof.

Their moderate coreligionists did not usually agree with this stance. The Orthodox rank-and-file were less sanguine about such separatism. True, Orthodox Jews established their own boy scout troops, but mostly to accommodate kosher eating and scheduling prayers. Children from Religious Zionist homes also competed in Israel's International Bible Contest—known as the *Hidon Ha-Tanakh*—but this had no American analogue.

Many Orthodox Jews at that time embraced healthy participation in mainstream American culture. In the spring of 1963, Orthodox Jews rallied behind a group of Yeshiva University students competing on NBC's *College Bowl* quiz show. Thousands tuned in and hundreds gathered in front of the Midtown Manhattan television studio to cheer YU's Mighty Mites

squad as it stunned Louisville, trounced UNLV, and then lost a close one to the eventual season champion Temple University.

Less than a decade later, Dovid Price's Brachos Bee offered something different. It was patterned after an American game but intended just for Jews. Despite this, Orthodox parents and educators liked that the Brachos Bee seemed to unite all varieties of Orthodox young people. The Modern Orthodox competed with the children of the so-called Yeshiva World. The rare ecumenical opportunity convinced Orthodox Jews that they could duel alone, away from non-Jews and other non-Jewish influences.

Similar forces guided the formation of New York's so-called Yeshiva Basketball League (officially, the Metropolitan Jewish High School League) and the emergence of a multi-genre Orthodox popular literature. Yet, neither sports (too coeducational for the Orthodox Right) nor Orthodox books (too culturally narrow for the Modern Orthodox) could compare to the Brachos Bee's appeal to a wide swath of Orthodox children and teachers. Its focus on Jewish literacy and good-natured competition for elementary and middle school-aged girls and boys (in separate divisions) was deemed too wholesome to resist.

Blessing Along the American Orthodox Frontier

In 1972, Price expanded the competition beyond New York, and dug deeper into Torah Umesorah's non-profit coffers to sport prizes like tape recorders and wristwatches. The "out-of-towners" fared well against the Gothamites. Finalists for the second year's championships hailed from Milwaukee, Montreal, New Orleans, and San Diego.

The competition grew. The following year's event included more than 400 schools. Affording themselves a moment of self-adulation, Torah Umesorah leaders congratulated themselves for a contest that had "evoked widespread interest and admiration."

San Diego's participation was something of an aberration. Most West Coast schools were located too far away to compete in the New York-based competition. In 1975, Los Angeles's Hillel Hebrew Academy and Emek Hebrew Academy hosted their own Brachos Bee contest amid considerable fanfare. The Emek match was judged by Israel's Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. Rabbi Yosef quizzed the children on basic blessings and made sure the pupils knew the "historical roots and spiritual concepts involved."

The craze was soon formalized in the West. In May 1977, Rabbi Eliezer Wenger and Torah Umesorah formalized the West Coast section of its National Brachos Bee enterprise. While serving as a teacher at New England Hebrew Academy in Boston (both Wenger and Hebrew Academy were affiliated with Chabad), Wenger grew enchanted with the Brachos Bee idea. After relocating to San Francisco, Wenger convinced Torah Umesorah to migrate the blessing bee westward. He recruited schools from Arizona, California, and Oregon.

Wenger also published his popular two-volume *Brachos Study Guide* to level the playing field and encourage youngsters to memorize their blessings. Along with an NCSY blessing book, Wenger's textbooks became the go-to manuals for the Torah Umesorah competition. Withal, Wenger published nine editions of the guidebook from 1978-1991.

The blessing books were also very helpful for Orthodox educators. It helped familiarize the less culturally inculcated youth to kosher cuisine. Wenger recommended that the "teacher should take time to explain about certain foods and if possible to bring a sample to class." The textbooks also introduced Jewish children to leading luminaries like Rabbis Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, Moshe Feinstein, and Pinchas Hirschsprung. The author also offered some guidance on how to drum up excitement for the Brachos Bee:

> To maintain the excitement of the Brochos Bee, it is necessary to constantly display pictures of foods on the classroom walls and bulletin boards. An excellent source for beautiful color pictures of fruit and vegetables is your local grocer, supermarket or fruit store. Ask them to save for your use extra display pictures which they obtain from their distributors. These pictures are large, colorful and impressive. Writing to Government agencies, dairy associations and the various food manufacturers can also prove productive.

In its first two years, the West Coast showdown took place in the Bay Area. The competition received considerable attention from Jews and non-Jews. In 1978, San Francisco Mayor George Moscone greeted the finalists, praising "their determination to preserve the sturdy traditions of Judaism." The pageantry helped convince all those involved that their Brachos Bee was no less American than its spelling bee counterpart.

Rabbi Wenger emerged as a Brachos Bee pied piper, much to the delight of Dovid Price and Torah Umesorah back in New York. In 1979, Wenger accepted the principalship at Landow Yeshiva-Lubavitch Educational Center in Miami Beach. Once settled, he founded the Florida division of the Brachos Bee. Wenger believed in the power of blessings. To him, it was no mundane religious act. He taught his students—and anyone else who would listen—that the many blessings recited by observant Jews remind them to be grateful for food and all other forms of sustenance. "I think if more people realized these things and were thankful," told Wenger to a Fort Lauderdale newspaperman, "they'd lead better lives." He was also proud of the range of Orthodox children who competed in the annual contest.

In Florida, Wenger followed the same successful model that he had executed in the West Coast. In May 1982, Miami Beach Mayor Norman Ciment—Torah Umesorah happily reported that Ciment was the "only Shomer Shabbos mayor in the United States"—attended the final round of the Florida Brachos Bee. In his introductory remarks, Mayor Ciment extolled Wenger and the other program organizers for starting a competition that "reinforces emphasis on those ideals and ethics which give religion its true meaning, teaching holiness and humanity." In other words, the Brachos Bee was just as Jewish as it was an American-styled game.

In 1984, the itinerant Wenger moved to Cincinnati and formed the Midwest Brachos Bee competition. Also sponsored by Torah Umesorah, Wenger assembled schools from Cleveland, Chicago, Columbus, Detroit, Indianapolis, and Louisville. The Midwest region also provided a testing ground for Torah Umesorah to experiment with computerized sections of the quiz.

Competing in the Bee

Still, Wenger—for all his bountiful and boisterous Brachos Bee pride—could still not compete with Philadelphia's rabbinic firepower. In the 1980s, the local Torah Academy was the premier training ground for Brachos Bee champions among the 500 schools and 4,000 boys and girls who faced off in the annual contest. Back then, Torah Academy served a wide range of Orthodox children, never pushing too hard on "divisive" issues like Zionism or coeducation, at least in the younger grades.

In 1981, Ahron Shlomo Svei won the Senior Boys Division of the Brachos Bee. He was the son of Rabbi Elya Svei, the head of the Talmudical Yeshiva of Philadelphia—the "Philly Yeshiva"—and member of the conservative Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah. Apparently, Rabbi Svei did not mind the competition and interaction with Modern Orthodox Jews.

Two years later, Rabbi Svei's younger son, Mayer Simcha, claimed another Brachos Bee championship for Philadelphia. The youngster memorized more than 1,000 blessings for foodstuffs, and other blessings on smelling and seeing things. The junior Svei earned a perfect score on the final exam and outmatched his counterparts in the oral round. "I've had good role models," said the 12-year-old, whose pastimes included Torah study and basketball. "My brother has been a good influence and my father is a rosh yeshiva, a head rabbi for the Philadelphia yeshivas."

In addition to Mayer Simcha Svei, Eliyahu Gold, Torah Academy's Shlomit Zeiger and Malka Kamenetsky also placed high in their respective division finals. Most of these children were raised in well-known rabbinic households.

In 1984, Torah Academy boasted another blessing champ. That year, Yehuda Mandelbaum, 10, won the Intermediate Boys Division. Mandelbaum's triumph was far more understated than the Svei brothers. "I wasn't too confident because there were so many other kids," explained Mandelbaum, "and I had only two weeks to study while most others had more," he said. "I thought I'd come in fifth place, not first."

But competition was a means to elevate all contestants. Boys in the Intermediate Division were trained to answer questions with cleverer questions. For instance, when a judge asked for the blessing on applesauce, the youngster atop the podium offered a counter-question: "Home-made or store bought?" To borscht: "with or without potatoes?" Perhaps trickiest of all was pizza. Judges expected the following response: "One slice for a snack or a two or three for a full meal?" More confounding, still, was Kellogg's Crispix, but merciful Brachos Bee organizers left that rice-corn combination food off competition blessing lists.

All Bees Come to an End

Torah Umesorah disbanded its National Brachos Bee competitions sometime in the 1990s. By this time, there were too many Orthodox day schools to include in the regional rounds. In addition, teachers and school administrators figured that they could create sufficient excitement and effectively teach the laws of blessings in schoolwide or citywide Brachos Bees without the expense and inconvenience of a final round at Torah Umesorah's offices.

For instance, Chicago's Associated Talmud Torahs—and local educator, Rabbi Yitzchok Bider— formed a local competition for Orthodox day schools in 1993. The inaugural competition rewarded champions with a $50 Israel Bond. The finalists received an

ArtScroll blessing book and all participants received NCSY's *Guide to Blessings* pamphlet. From 1993-1997—the ATT ran four competitions (it was temporarily suspended in 1996), attracting about 40-50 middle school-age girls and boys who dutifully studied from a makeshift blessing textbook authored by a local Arie Crown Hebrew Day School teacher.

Today, scores of schools hold a Brachos Bee, many as part of yearly *Tu Bi-Shevat* festivities. The Brachos Bee is no longer a national event, bringing together Orthodox Jews who may not otherwise agree or cooperate with one another. Still, the Brachos Bee remains a creative coalescence of American and Jewish ideals. It therefore symbolizes the unique way that Orthodox Jews adapt and embrace their American surroundings.

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Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein and Academic Talmud Study

Avraham (Rami) Reiner

Translation: Elli Fischer

In the spring of 2013, the organizers of the sixteenth World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem decided to hold a special session called: "Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein: Thought, Talmudic Methodology, and Cultural Influence," in honor of the Yeshivat Har Etzion Rosh Yeshiva turning eighty. This was fairly significant. The Congress, which takes place every four years, is the largest and most important platform for the various branches of academic Jewish studies. In the history of the Congress, the number of sessions devoted to the discussion of a living human being can be counted on one hand.

I was privileged to chair that session and would like to share my remarks on that occasion about Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, which were also directed to him, as he was in attendance:

> I came to Yeshivat Har Etzion to study with Rabbi Lichtenstein, having sensed that he possesses the Torah of truth and no falsehood could be found on his lips, which is exactly what I was looking for. I can speak only for myself, but it seems to me that I was far from alone in this respect.
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> The more I studied, the more profound, multifaceted, and broad was his influence on me. I was exposed to Talmudic erudition that captivates the heart and mind, unparalleled devotion, boundless integrity, and a breadth of knowledge and horizons that, until then, I never knew existed, and whose significance I certainly did not appreciate.
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> After completing my years in yeshiva, I turned to academic studies. It was clear, almost expected, that I would study literature, under Rabbi Lichtenstein's influence. Talmud was my second course of study. This led inevitably to a rift. The philological and historical study of Talmud, *halakhah*, and related fields was persuasive, attractive, even compelling, but it was very different from the conceptual, ahistorical mode of learning that I had studied in yeshiva with Rabbi Lichtenstein. The love of Torah and the quest for truth that my peers and I had acquired in yeshiva compelled us to seek out a new and different path for approaching and understanding the Torah, the Talmud, and the works of halakhists of every generation. Some of us experienced this rift as a form of bereavement, of becoming orphaned from a father even as he still lived. We knew that in Rabbi Lichtenstein's eyes, the humanities were acceptable, even encouraged, but not so for academic Jewish studies, and especially the fields of Talmud and Jewish law, which were so close and so relevant to what we had studied in yeshiva.
>
> The scholarship in which we engaged, based on historical and philological methods, felt like a science, almost an exact science, of the sort that often penetrates the truth

> fully and succeeds in arriving at the basic foundations of the questions it addresses. We academic scholars, who engage in critical scholarship, often sense that the true Torah is in *our* mouths, that no falsehood can be found on *our* lips, and that the implements for arriving at the truth of Torah are in *our* toolbox.
>
> Alongside these feelings were the sensibilities, beliefs, and voices that we brought with us from yeshiva. Sometimes it seemed as though these two parallel sets of feelings never intersected, do not intersect, and, according to the Euclidean axiom, will never intersect.

From the opening remarks of the session in 2013, we now turn to the present. It has been more than two years since Rabbi Lichtenstein's passing. The above remarks represent a view from the academy, but what was Rabbi Lichtenstein's view? Is there a full articulation of his attitudes to academic Jewish studies, their contents, their contributions, their advantages and disadvantages, and even the risks they may entail?

I wish to emphasize that my concern here is specifically the academic study of the Talmud (in its broadest sense, including the study of its interpretation and codification)—the very works to which Rabbi Lichtenstein devoted his life and energies. I am *not* concerned with Rabbi Lichtenstein's attitudes toward the humanities and to the great works of the human spirit; in this respect, Rabbi Lichtenstein's actions and writings amply convey his attitudes.

It is well-known that he studied English literature at Harvard, and he never concealed the fruits of those studies; to the contrary, he incorporated them into his spiritual and educational doctrine, both written and oral. The first four chapters of *By His Light* are based on lectures he delivered to English-speaking students during their first year at Yeshivat Har Etzion, and the book attests reliably to the yeshiva's general intellectual and educational atmosphere. I will cite a few short examples from these chapters, allowing readers to absorb some of the music that students at Yeshivat Har Etzion absorbed from Rabbi Lichtenstein's classes and discourses.

In a discussion of the redemptive quality of personal effort, he cites Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* as representative of one viewpoint: ""For Carlyle, the great prophet of work is the late eighteenth-century, early nineteenth-century German writer Goethe" (13).

Later, discussing the same issue:

> In terms of two poems by Tennyson, if our choice is whether to join the indolent Lotos Eaters or "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" with Ulysses, there is no question as to where we would stand (25).

Elsewhere in the book, he writes:

> This activist approach … parallels the activist Jewish approach with respect to spiritual endeavors. In Christian theology there is a time-honored tradition—rooted in the words of Paul and transmitted by Augustine, Luther and others—that sees human redemption as being dictated solely from Above. In Luther's formulation, any human attempt to achieve spiritual or ethical perfection is a grave error, for it bespeaks arrogance (121).

Later in the same essay, Rabbi Lichtenstein writes:

> In his essay, "Beyond Tragedy," Reinhold Niebuhr writes, "Christianity is a religion above and beyond tragedy. Tears as well as death are swallowed up in triumph." This is because, for Christianity, suffering is transformed by becoming the foundation for personal redemption. Let it be stated explicitly that Judaism is not "beyond tragedy," nor does it "swallow up" suffering. Jewish tradition educates the person to accept suffering, but also to bemoan it (134).

Rabbi Lichtenstein goes on to discuss the differences as well as points of similarity between Judaism and Christian traditions, taking both seriously.

The importance of these quotes lies not in their content but in what they communicate incidentally: that the image of a student of Torah, of one who desires closeness to the Almighty, is not determined solely by the presence of Nahmanides and Rashba, Rabbi Hayyim Soloveitchik of Brisk and *Ketzot ha-Hoshen* on his or her bookshelf. It can also be shaped by deep familiarity with names like Carlyle and *Sartor Resartus* that are largely inaccessible to the common Talmudic acolyte, and names like Paul, Augustine, and Luther, which are hard to digest for those who have filled their bellies with the Talmud and its commentaries.

The list of works cited by Rabbi Lichtenstein is impressive, but it is far from arbitrary.[1] It is worth noting that Hebrew and Yiddish writers and poets like Agnon, Amihai, Zelda, Uri Zvi Greenberg, and Sholem Aleichem are all but absent from his writings. Bialik is cited once, which may be the exception that proves the rule.

For Rabbi Lichtenstein, the turn to literature, especially English poetry, even if it is overtly Christian, emerges from a worldview in which this material can foster universal values that are indeed religious values of the first rank. As he writes in the same series of essays:

> Thus, our specific Jewish commitment rests on our universal commitment, and one cannot address oneself only to the specific elements while totally ignoring the general and the universal ones. Therefore, in delineating what a *ben-Torah* should be striving for, the initial level of aspiration is a general one: to be a *mensch*, to hold basic universal values, to meet normative universal demands (22).

Rabbi Lichtenstein's systematic thinking and its implications precede their practical implementation. What he thought must be done—namely, exposing his students to a rich

[1] There is much work still to be done on Rabbi Lichtenstein's selective use of Jewish and non-Jewish sources. For preliminary treatments, see Alan Brill, "An Ideal Rosh Yeshiva: *By His Light: Character and Faith in the Service of God* and *Leaves of Faith* by Rav Aharon Lichtenstein," *The Edah Journal* 5:1 (2005), 1-18; William Kolbrener, "Religion and Culture: An Ambivalent Life," in Y. Sarna (ed.), *Developing a Jewish Perspective on Culture* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 2013), 169-183; idem, "*Torah Umadda*: A Voice from the Academy," *Jewish Action* 64 (2004), 25-33; Jeffrey Saks, "The Best that has been Thought and Said by Rabbi Lichtenstein about the Role of Literature in Religious Life", *Tradition* 47:4 (2015), 240-9.

cultural world with substantial religious meaning, even if that world is not Jewish—he did, without hesitation or compunction, even in the context of his discourses as a Rosh Yeshiva.

Over the years, Rabbi Lichtenstein articulated his view on the relationship between Torah and general knowledge on several occasions.[2] One who studies these essays will quickly recognize that the "general knowledge," "culture," and "science" to which Rabbi Lichtenstein relates in them never refers to the academic study of Judaism (or, "scientific" study of Judaism, as expressed in the German term "*Wissenschaft des Judentums*").

If, in his philosophical and didactic essays, he occasionally relates to academic Jewish studies with a passing reference, when it comes to his Talmudic writings such references simply do not exist. Rabbi Lichtenstein delivered thousands of lectures and wrote thousands of pages of novellae on Tanakh and Talmud, and yet he does not relate at all to the academic study of Talmud; he seems to have avoided it entirely.

The accomplishments of academic Talmud study, built atop the legacy of philological-historical study, which is in turn influenced by fields both proximate and distant, such as history, literature, and comparative religion in addition to geography, philosophy, hermeneutics, legal history, psychology, and other disciplines, has made very significant strides in recent generations.

Our ability to properly understand our sacred sources—Mishnah, Bavli, Yerushalmi, Geonic Literature, *Rishonim*, and *Aharonim*—hinges on their textual, linguistic, and contextual examination in addition to their comparative study alongside proximal counterparts from cultures that neighbor them temporally and geographically and in their social and religious contexts. So that this discussion does not remain too abstract, I will illustrate with a brief example that Rabbi Lichtenstein was familiar with, as is evident from one of his articles.

The series of benedictions recited each morning according to the Jewish prayer rite (*"Birkhot ha-Shahar"*) includes a subset of three *berakhot* praising God "Who has not made me a gentile," "a slave," and "a woman," respectively. Traditionally, Jewish women replace the latter benediction with a formulation that, while beautiful and meaningful in content, is troublesome within its gendered context: "Who has made me according to His will."

The three *berakhot* that praise God for what He has not made us, and only they, have their source in *Tosefta Berakhot* (6:23). However, it was noted already by the first generation of *Wissenschaft* scholars that "it is reported variously of Socrates or of Plato that each morning he thanked heaven for having been born male and not female, free and not a slave, Greek and not barbarian."[3] A bit more scrutiny reveals that the apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians: "for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ; there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female" (Galatians 3:27-8).

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[2] His most exemplary articulation can be found in Aharon Lichtenstein, "Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict," in *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration?* ed. Jacob J. Schacter (Northvale: Aronson, 1997), 217-92.

[3] Moses Hadas, *The Living Tradition* (New York: New American Library, 1967), 31 [cited in "Confluence and Conflict," 278].

There is no doubt that a comparison of these sources can explain the original—and current—meaning of these three *berakhot*. However, there is no room for such a question in Rabbi Lichtenstein's Talmudic methodology, just as there is no room for virtually any higher critical question addressed within academic disciplines related to the Talmud, its interpretation, and its practical application.

As a result, it was quite possible for Rabbi Lichtenstein's students to become familiar with an impressive list of personalities, of which I have mentioned but a few, but to never encounter names like Zunz, Jost, Weiss, Fraenkel, or J.N. Epstein, the founding fathers of modern academic Talmud study whose work forms the basis of the entire field. To my mind, the central question remains: How could Rabbi Lichtenstein, with his great mind and greatness of spirit, who possessed so much Torah and wisdom, simply not pay attention to them?

Moreover, underlying Rabbi Lichtenstein's Torah and wisdom were his integrity and truthfulness. But how could they endure without any attempt to understand that which as most precious to him—the Talmud and its world, the *halakhah* and its concepts, the medieval commentators and their formulations—without the academic tools that were developed using the same methods, and in almost the same settings, as the humanities that are so important in other facets of his religious and intellectual life?

The solution to this puzzle can perhaps be found in another element of Rabbi Lichtenstein's disposition: his phenomenal powers of concentration, which students saw with their own eyes and many have described, and his focus of those powers on serving the Almighty. Once he arrived at the conclusion that something is spiritually correct and important, it became a priority for him, and he worked to advance it, at the expense of other matters.

Rabbi Lichtenstein viewed abstract, conceptual, "Brisker" Talmud study, which he had learned from his mentors, as the predominant mode of Talmud study. His belief in the power of this interpretive methodology, its substantive and aesthetic advantages, and its religious meaning led him, we can suggest, not to engage in anything that required the investment of time or other resources in this field. As mentioned, he likewise barely mentioned modern Hebrew thought and literature.

He also completely ignored the world of *Kabbalah*. Rabbi Lichtenstein spoke in extraordinarily glowing terms about Ramban as a Biblical exegete, an interpreter of the Talmud, and as a halakhist,[4] and he often prefaced his name with the descriptor "light of our eyes." However, as my friend Dr. Kalman Neuman has pointed out, Rabbi Lichtenstein never addressed the kabbalistic portions of Ramban's teachings,[5] the portions that Ramban himself calls "the way of truth" ("*derekh ha-emet*").

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[4] See: Isaac Hershkowitz, "Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein and Nahmanides: Between Personal Admiration and Intellectual Influence," *Daat* 76 (2014): 69-82 [Hebrew].

[5] My friend, Elli Fischer, points out that Rabbi Lichtenstein likewise makes very short shrift of the kabbalistic (and cabbalistic) pursuits of the subject of his doctoral dissertation. See Aharon Lichtenstein, *Henry More: The Rational Theology of a Cambridge Platonist* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 13-14, 90-91.

In other words, it was not only scientific Talmud study that remained outside of Rabbi Lichtenstein's interest. There were other fields of knowledge in which he chose not to engage, based on his view that they could not advance his major life-goal: serving God by studying and teaching Talmud according to the traditional Brisker method.

Nevertheless, this explanation does not seem exhaustive. It was not only that Rabbi Lichtenstein did not engage in this form of study; he fundamentally opposed it. To bolster this claim, let us return to Yeshivat Har Etzion in the early 1980s.

In 1978, Prof. Shamma Yehuda Friedman's article, "*Perek Ha-ishah Rabbah ba-Bavli*," appeared. Its title indicates its contents, and I deem it to be the best and most comprehensive article on the proper method for academic study of a Talmudic *sugya*. In the winter of 1979-80, several yeshiva students formed a group to study "*Ha-ishah Rabbah*," the tenth chapter of *Yevamot* in the Bavli, while hewing closely to Friedman's article. It was a revelation; the experience was one of discovering a primal truth for the first time.

The next summer, in issue 88 of *Alon Shevut*, the student journal of Yeshivat Har Etzion, an article by Aharon Mishnayot, a member of this study group, appeared. It was titled, "*Li-fshuto shel Talmud*" ("Toward the Plain Meaning of the Talmud"). One who attempts to locate this issue will not be successful; at the instruction of the heads of the yeshiva, copies of the issue were recalled and hidden away because of the aforementioned article. Aharon Mishnayot wrote to me about this episode:

> Rabbi Lichtenstein spoke with me in his inimitable style—without anger, and even with a bit of bashfulness. I was surprised that his main criticism was against my claim that the Yerushalmi tends toward straightforward explanations more than the Bavli does. Rabbi Lichtenstein explained that the halakhic tradition accords with the Bavli, whereas the implication of my words is that the Yerushalmi is to be preferred, in opposition to the said tradition. I was doubly astonished: by the severity that Rabbi Lichtenstein attributed to it and primarily by the fact that Rabbi Lichtenstein never addressed the content of the claim. His disregard for the truth-claims in my article did not comport, to my mind, with his uncompromising intellectual integrity. I was simply amazed.

Six months later, in the winter of 1981-2, a group of students from the Netiv Meir yeshiva high school came to spend a trial week at Yeshivat Har Etzion. As usual, yeshiva students were asked to give classes to their younger guests. One such student, Moshe Meir, gave a class based on an understanding of the Mishnah as it is, not on the basis of how the two Talmuds interpreted it.

Word of this class and its contents reached the heads of the yeshiva. At the annual Hanukkah party that took place shortly thereafter, Rabbi Yehuda Amital, the co-head of the yeshiva along with Rabbi Lichtenstein, delivered a discourse that is remembered by students of that generation as "The Hilltop Speech."[6] In it, Rabbi Amital suggested to Moshe that he go and establish another yeshiva on the next hilltop over, where he would be able to teach whatever he wanted. Moshe later recollected:

[6] See Elyashiv Reichner, *By Faith Alone: The Story of Rabbi Yehuda Amital* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2011), 39.

> At the time, I was occupied with the study of logic. The idea occurred to me to try to analyze *Mishnayot* in accordance with the principles of formal logic. I don't know if there was anything of substance there, but the conclusions certainly did not dovetail with the Gemara's analysis of the Mishnah.
>
> When the students came, I was asked to teach them a class. With youthful joy, I covered the blackboard with *Mishnayot* that had been formalized into logical formulas, and the students were very excited. The head of Netiv Meir in those days, Rabbi Kopelevitch, intercepted the students on their return and heard about their experiences at Yeshivat Har Etzion. In his agitation, he called Rabbi Amital and said to him [according to Rabbi Amital]: "I send you boys to strengthen their reverence for God, and you."
>
> A few days later, I went to discuss the issue with Rabbi Lichtenstein, and I tried to speak about freedom of thought in context of the love of Torah. I don't remember what he said to me, but I recall that I palpably felt an iron curtain descending and ending the conversation.
>
> Later, when I studied Wittgenstein's teaching that all thought and discourse rest on inescapable dogmatic presumptions, I remembered my conversation with Rabbi Lichtenstein.
>
> In retrospect, his view was a manifestation of authentic fideistic thought—to which many scholars aspire but never achieve. They are often unable to free their thinking from the limitations of dogma—an ability that our mentors, Rabbi Amital and Rabbi Lichtenstein, maintained until their last breath.

The complete neglect of academic Talmud was therefore not simply a neglect rooted in the desire to uphold, develop, and refine a Talmudic methodology, as I suggested earlier. This neglect was in fact opposition, which alerted some students to the tension between the quest for the truth that we absorbed in spades from the yeshiva heads and the attempt to understand the "true," "correct" Talmud, which we thought we could accomplish using modern scientific tools. And it was from Rabbi Lichtenstein himself that we learned to appreciate such tools.

Moreover, it was from Rabbi Lichtenstein that we learned of the attempt—his attempt—to integrate the culture of the American humanities, as taught in America's elite universities in the 1950s, with the scholarly tradition of Brisk. We, as young Israelis, were trying to integrate the discourse that was relevant to us in those days—the critical academic discourse—with the tradition of the study hall. In Israel at that time, and especially within the segment of society under discussion, men who combined Torah knowledge with academic learning were culture heroes of a sort.

Figures like E.E. Urbach, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, Jacob Katz, H.H. Ben-Sasson, and others who were even younger, had an influence beyond their academic institutions, and their discourse seemed relevant and meaningful specifically to Yeshivat Har Etzion students who had a role model, *albeit one with a different set of associations and contexts*, in Rabbi Lichtenstein. The broad, rich, unique world that Rabbi Lichtenstein brought to Yeshivat Har Etzion coexisted, in those

days, with his strong opposition to any whiff of academic Talmud study. Thus, some of Rabbi Lichtenstein's students ultimately continued their search for the truth, but they found it elsewhere, and in different kinds of truth. The driving force was Rabbi Lichtenstein's strength and spirit, but the end result was something far from his spirit, and far from the destinations toward which he strove.

The early 1980s were thus a time of ferment with respect to Rabbi Lichtenstein's attitudes toward academic Talmud study. What happened subsequently? It seems that the history of Herzog College, which is adjacent to, affiliated with, and influenced by Yeshivat Har Etzion, and for which Rabbi Lichtenstein served as rector, shows that sometimes lines that may never intersect can nevertheless grow closer. Thus, in 1980, a year that has already been mentioned in this article, the lecturer for a required course called "An Introduction to Oral Law" was none other than Rabbi Lichtenstein.

This was no coincidence. His desire to prevent the teaching of a historicist course led him to teach the course himself. In the early 1990s, as the college steadily grew and developed, prospective teachers of Talmud and *halakhah* were disqualified one after another as it became clear to Rabbi Lichtenstein, in his capacity as rector, that these teachers had been trained in academic Talmud departments.

From that point forward, however, and in contrast to everything we have thus far described, the Faculty of Oral Law at Herzog College developed in a different direction, to the point that eventually, every one of its members was the product of research institutions where they had studied Talmud and related disciplines. These facts speak for themselves, but they require us to consider what happened in the interim to enable Rabbi Lichtenstein's backtracking from his staunch prior opposition.

In 1999, Rabbi Lichtenstein delivered a paper at the Orthodox Forum, hosted annually by Yeshiva University in New York, titled, "The Conceptual Approach to Torah Learning: The Method and its Prospects."[7] In hindsight, this programmatic article can be viewed as Rabbi Lichtenstein's attempt to take stock of his life's religious and intellectual project: his conceptual method of studying Talmud.

A close study of this wonderful article, which addresses various Talmudic methodologies, reveals that it presents academic Talmud study as a somewhat reasonable option among the disparate options. We will present several selections from the article; the details are not important, but the music that emerges from them is.

Addressing the question of textual variants and ascertaining correct texts, Rabbi Lichtenstein wrote:

> Indeed, the Torah world should pay more attention to this component…. [A]ccess to its findings can and should be more widespread than it is today. We need not

[7] Published in Aharon Lichtenstein, *Leaves of Faith*, Vol. I, 19-60; *Lomdus: The Conceptual Approach to Jewish Learning*, 1-44. It has since been published in Hebrew as: Aharon Lichtenstein, "*Ha-gisha Ha-musagit-Briska'it Be-limud Ha-Torah: Ha-shitah Ve-atidah*."

> exaggerate ... Many of the points that have been raised with respect to textual accuracy apply equally to knowledge of realia. This, too, is the province of experts but accessible to a wider audience. This, too, can obviously be of critical halakhic import in some cases ... This is not to denigrate the importance of factual information or of those who labor to provide it. Anyone who engages in serious learning is indebted to them at some point, and the debt should be acknowledged.[8]

There can be no doubting that the tone and content of this article differ significantly from the rejectionist atmosphere that prevailed in the early 1980s; it reflects a certain softening, an understanding, and perhaps even a limited acceptance of the accomplishments of academic Talmud studies. This sort of framework is what allowed the Oral Law faculty at Herzog College to mature and to develop methods for the study and teaching of Talmud within a world that stands alongside the world of the yeshiva, of Yeshivat Har Etzion.

There would be no more fitting conclusion to this description of Rabbi Lichtenstein's gradual softening than a quotation of Rabbi Lichtenstein himself. In his response to the aforementioned panel at the World Congress of Jewish Studies, he said:

> When my wife and I planned to make *aliyah* to Israel, I explained to the yeshiva leadership that we want to live in Jerusalem. I was asked about this choice, and I answered that my sense was that I would be able to grow, to profit, and to become more productive, whether through my influence or through others' influence on me, from Jerusalem's academic community. I had hoped for cooperation between these worlds, that such a link would be strengthened. In retrospect, this goal was not achieved.
>
> I knew that there was a long history of lack of cooperation between the *beit midrash* and the academy. This is linked, in part, to the approach of Reb Hayyim [Soloveitchik of Brisk], and in part to the influence of Rabbi [Joseph B.] Soloveitchik himself on me. Thus, when my father-in-law [Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik] went to study in Berlin, his mother half-ran to his train just as it was departing and said: "Just don't study *Wissenschaft des Judentums*." These harsh words were uttered then, attesting to the rift that had already opened between the world of the academy and the world of the yeshiva....
>
> My hope at the time was that the encounter between academy and yeshiva would realize the potential of both, by broadening and deepening the subjects of study. I do not live, God forbid, in a state of constant struggle against the academic Torah world. There are things I oppose, but I do not feel that there is a state of discord or hostility between this world and me, and I have no interest in ever having such feelings. Personally, I felt that there was a need to strengthen this aspect of my world, and to a certain extent, it did not work out.
>
> I understand why the rift emerged. The panel discussion we just heard represents the mending of certain rifts in this area. I would hope to see that even when we disagree,

[8] Lichtenstein, *Leaves of Faith*, 48-49.

we cooperate and share a common purpose. I sincerely hope that, to the extent that the Almighty grants me the strength, I will be able to continue engaging these topics.[9]

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Now that Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein is no longer among us, we have no choice but to continue engaging these topics without him.

Our work remains far from complete.

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She-Hehiyanu: An Endangered Blessing Species

Johnny Solomon

It is customary to celebrate *Tu Bi-Shevat* by eating fruits and reciting the *She-Hehiyanu* blessing on them. This custom, however, has proved challenging in recent years as advances in technology have made it difficult to find new fruit—as defined by *halakhah*—to say the *She-Hehiyanu* blessing.

My aim here is to address the halakhic definition of new fruit—and why they are becoming harder to find—and explain how other forms of *She-Hehiyanu* are being re-evaluated in the modern age. Taken together, it seems that developments in today's world are making *She-Hehiyanu*an endangered blessing species in the lives of many Orthodox Jews.

Categories of *She-Hehiyanu*

While *She-Hehiyanu* is recited on many different occasions, all of these can be placed on a continuum on which, at either end, stand two different values: *zman* (time) and *simhah* (joy).

In terms of the *She-Hehiyanu* recited on holidays and the mitzvot associated with those occasions (*Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 473:1), its purpose is to acknowledge the sanctified *Zman* of the year. Though every blessing should be recited as an expression of joy, this *She-Hehiyanu* has little to do with personal s*imhah.*

[9] This is a translation and reworking of the notes taken by Noam Shalit at the event. I am grateful to him for making them available to me.

The *She-Hehiyanu* on fruit is recited on the first occasion that someone eats a particular seasonal fruit (*Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 225:3,6), and this *She-Hehiyanu* has both time-related elements (*zman*) and is a personal expression of joy (*simhah*).

Finally, *She-Hehiyanu* is recited upon purchasing a new item (*Shulhan Aruch, Orah Hayyim* 223:3), or upon seeing a close friend or family member who hasn't been seen for over 30 days (*Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 225:1). While there are some time-related elements (*zman*) to some *brachot* in this category, it is primarily an expression of joy (*simhah*).

She-Hehiyanu on Fruits

The connection between *She-Hehiyanu* and modern technology is not new. In a 1964 responsum addressing this issue (*Igrot Moshe*, *Orah Hayyim* 3:34), Rabbi Moshe Feinstein raised the question that fruit importation and long-term refrigeration may mean that many fruits are no longer to be considered seasonal.

Further developments in transportation and refrigeration have led numerous *poskim* to present more absolute positions on this issue. These include Rabbis Alexander Aryeh Mandelbaum (*Sefer ve-Zot Ha-Brakhah* 161-63), Simha Rabinowitz (*Piskei Teshuvot* vol. II, 916-18) and David Feinstein (*Responsa ve-Dibarta Bam* vol. II, n.45). All agree that one should presume—at least in the Diaspora—that *She-Hehiyanu* should not be recited unless you are certain that it is a seasonal fruit. In Israel, the *She-Hehiyanu* may only be recited on a limited selection of fruit. Apparently, then, the experience of holding a fruit and reciting *She-Hehiyanu* is one that few Jews are likely to have this *Tu Bi-Shevat*.

She-Hehiyanu on Seeing Close Friends

She-Hehiyanu on new fruit is not the only casualty of technology. The opportunity to recite the *She-Hehiyanu* upon encountering a close friend or family member after 30 days is because the absence of separation ensures that the moment of being reunited generates s*imhah*. But what if, in the interim, they communicated through technology, say, like Facetime or Skype?

Some have suggested that these new media have no bearing on the *halakhah* while others, like Rabbis Eliezer Melamed (*Peninei Halakhah: Brachot* 378) Alexander Aryeh Mandelbaum (*Libun Ha-brakhah* 393), rule that it should not be recited in this case since the perpetual contact afforded by mobile technology dulls our sense of joy and wonder.

She-Hehiyanu on Purchasing New Items

Moreover, a survey of recent halakhic works reveals a growing trend to discourage the recitation of *She-Hehiyanu* even on occasions when one would expect it to be recited such as in response to the purchase of new items (*Libun Ha-Brakhah* 410), or upon the receiving of valuable gifts (*Halikhot Shlomo: Tefillah* 283, n.70). While no clear reasons are offered for this, it would seem that this development is primarily based on economics and consumerism. We are no longer moved to spontaneously recite the *She-Hehiyanu* blessing upon the purchase or receiving of new items.

Some Reflections

Taken together, all the evidence points to the fact that significant improvements in transportation, refrigeration, technology, and material comfort is leading us to the situation that at least some forms of the *She-Hehiyanu* blessing are becoming an endangered species. Yet despite this being an outcome of our modern mode of living, it seems unfortunate. The *She-Hehiyanu* has much to teach us about appreciating and acknowledging God in even the most mundane of moments and its decline ought to make us wonder whether we are losing our sense of wonder of God. Certainly, we should relish the remaining opportunities to recite the *She-Hehiyanu*, such as when we purchase new items, or when we celebrate the holidays.

Ultimately, the challenge for future generations is to find meaningful ways to maintain our connection with God in an age when some of His gifts are hidden by the gifts of human development.

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