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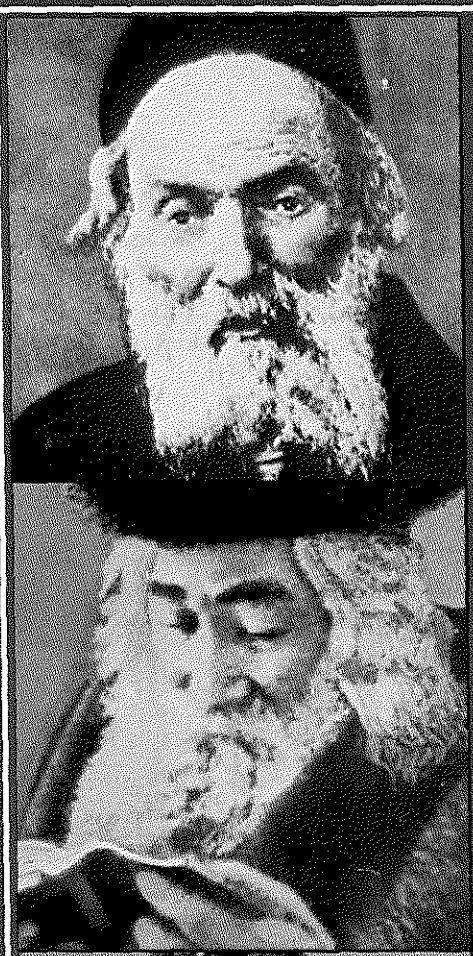
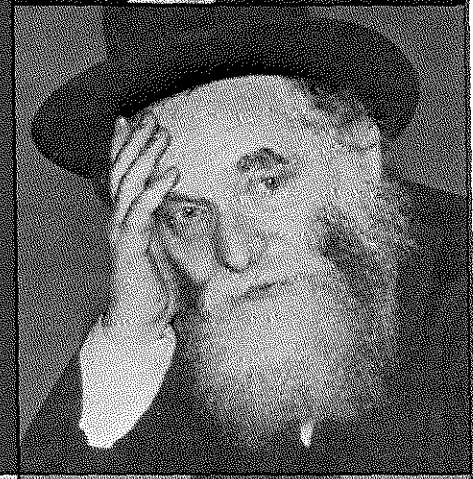
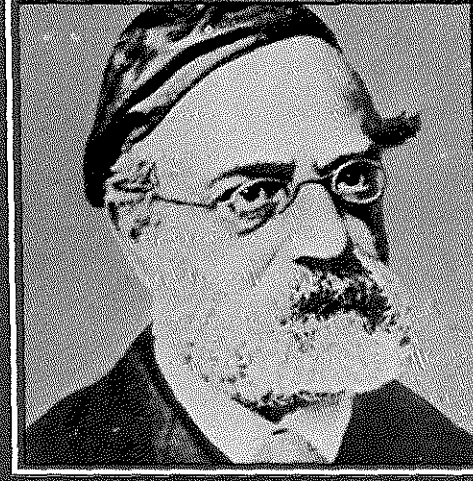


Daas Torah:

An Ancient Definition of Authority and Responsibility

Rabbi Berel Wein





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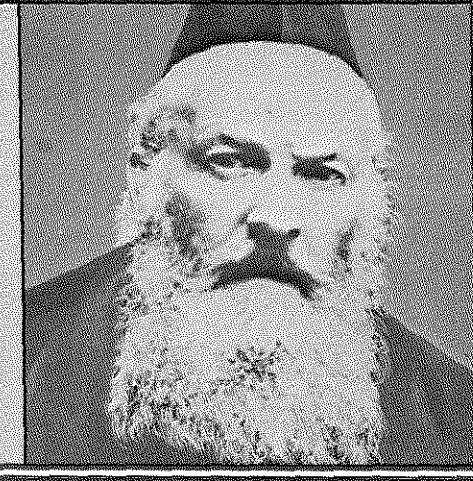

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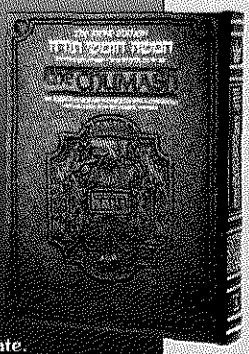

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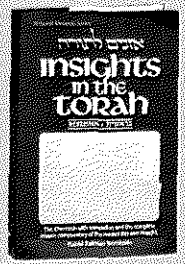

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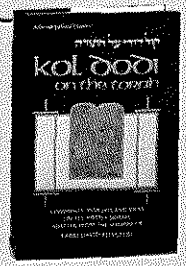

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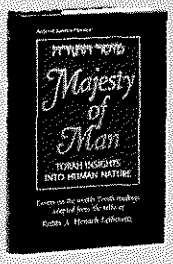

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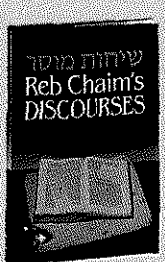

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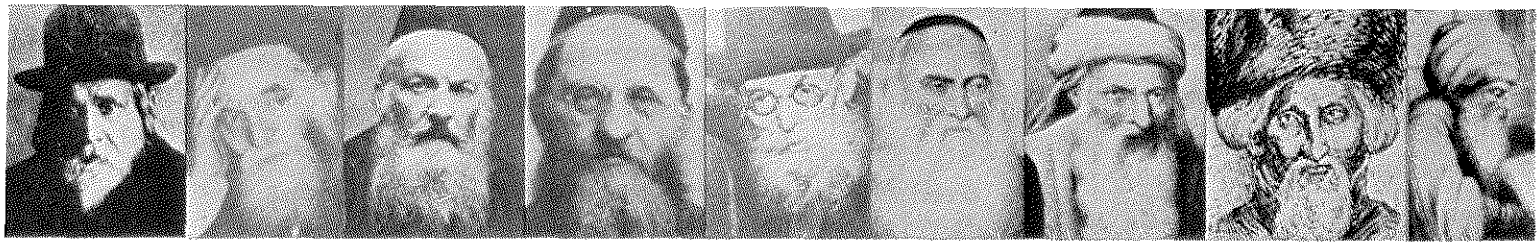
Rabbi Berel Wein

DAAS TORAH:

An Ancient Definition of Authority and Responsibility in Jewish Life



In a long, well-researched article, "*Daas Torah:* A Modern Conception of Rabbinic Authority," published as the lead chapter in a symposium entitled, *Rabbinic Authority and Personal Autonomy* (edited by Dr. Moshe Sokol, published by Yeshiva University Press, NY 1992), Lawrence Kaplan of McGill University examines the concept of *Daas Torah* as it pertains in modern-day Orthodox Jewish life. To put it mildly, Kaplan is displeased by the influence of this concept on our Jewish world. He believes it to be an invention of certain rabbinic leaders (mainly *Roshei Yeshiva*) and groups (mainly Agudath Israel, Degel Hatorah and the *Chassidim*).

In his view, *Daas Torah* is of recent creation, dubious validity, unable to stand up to the scrutiny of "true" (read: secular) Jewish scholarship, divisive in nature and repressive in operation. He also points out that *Daas Torah* is fallible, thereby, in his eyes, modifying any positive quality that the concept may possess. The article contains a certain bitter edge to it, belying the attempted cool, objective scholarly tone that Kaplan undoubtedly wishes to convey. He protesteth too much!

Rabbi Wein, of Monsey, N.Y., is dean of Shaarei Torah of Rockland County and the Bas Torah Academy, as well as *Rav* of the Congregation Bais Torah in the same community. A popular lecturer and writer, his *Herald of Destiny* and *Triumph of Survival* are histories of the Jews—in the Middle Ages and in the Modern era, respectively.

I. THE THRUST OF THE RESEARCH

"Rejectionists"—of What? "Accepting"—on What Basis?

Kaplan identifies *Daas Torah* as the dogma of "the rejectionist camp," which marks it for (dare I say it?) *his* rejection. Of what are members of this camp "Rejectionist"? Of modern values systems, which Kaplan characterizes as "modernity"—perhaps. But certainly not of knowledge or skills or technology. The Yeshiva world is not that of the Amish. A great proportion of those who subscribe to *Daas Torah* are intellectuals, professionals, people of modern skills and higher education. Why are they tarred with the pejorative term "rejectionist camp"? It would seem that he creates a straw man and then deftly cuts him up.

The author states that *Daas Torah* "deligitimates" all those who do not agree blindly with it, and therefore nullifies "the more accepting approach of the modern orthodox camp."[1] More accepting of what? Accepting of the value system, lifestyle and purely autonomous view of life? The only inhibitions that restrain the modern man are the ones that he decides upon. Why should the soft and complimentary phrase "accepting" be used in ill-begotten tolerance of what is often-times aberrant behavior and skewed thinking?

In Search of Beginnings

Kaplan makes a great issue as to when the words "*Daas Torah*" first appeared in Jewish life, and he traces the phrase back only to the early years of our century. He disagrees with those who attribute it to the *Maharal* of Prague or to Rabbi

Yisroel Salanter. However, what difference does it make when and where these two Hebrew words first appeared in public Jewish life? The concept that they represent—that "The very same priest whose mind was suffused with the holiness of the Torah of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Eliezer, of Abbaye and Rava, of the *Rambam* and *Ravad*, of the *Beis Yosef* and the *Rama*, could also discern with the holy spirit the solution to all current political questions, to all worldly matters, to all ongoing current demands"[2]—is as ancient as Israel and its Torah. The Torah is replete with examples of holy men speaking out, advising, criticizing and educating the Jewish people on matters of life, government, conflict and society. The concept of *Daas Torah* is what saved the Jewish people at the time of the Hasmoneans and the Second Temple. The people listened to Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach and not Alexander Yanai, to Hillel and not to Herod, to Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai and not Agrippa or Josephus. That is how Israel has survived until today.

Studying the Words of the Sages

Kaplan certainly must sense that his *pilpul* about the origins of *Daas Torah* is somewhat misleading and irrelevant. Therefore, in the second major part of his article he searches for the theological and spiritual underpinnings of *Daas Torah*. He focuses upon two words that appear in a *B'raisa*[3] in the sixth chapter of *Avos*, which includes "*emunas chachamim*" (faith in Torah scholars) among the 48 requirements for acquiring Torah. After a number of tortured possible reformulations of these words and the concept that they represent, Kaplan, in essence, limits its application to matters of *p'sak* (halachic decision). He claims that attempts to associate *emunas chachamim* with *Daas Torah* are a product of 19th-century *Chassidic* society, and, as the twentieth century role of the Lithuanian rabbi and *Rosh Yeshiva* came to resemble more the position of the *Chassidic Rebbe*, it entered the Yeshiva world as well. But, he contends, the rabbis of the *B'raisa* only intended to convey halachic authority, not *Daas Torah*. In his focus on what (to him) does *not* refer to *Daas Torah* in the first *B'raisa*, he ignores another *B'raisa* in the sixth chapter of *Avos*. It states[4] regarding those who study Torah for the sake of Torah *(lishma)*, "that one can benefit from such a person in advice and wisdom, for it is written[5], 'Counsel and wisdom are Mine, I am understanding, to Me belongs courage.' " In the commentary attributed to *Rashi* concerning this statement in *Avos*, the explanation is "I [i.e. G-d] am wisdom and courage to those who study [My Torah] in order that they may be able to be a help to human beings." Thus, the scholar, the holy man, who has no personal agenda, who seeks no public office or title or tenure or financial gain, is blessed with insight, goodness and Divine help in attempting to aid others.

> The author states that *Daas Torah* "deligitimates" all those who do not agree blindly with it, and therefore nullifies "the more accepting approach of the modern orthodox camp." More accepting of what? Accepting of the value system, lifestyle and purely autonomous view of life?

This belief is so basic in Jewish thought that it should not require repetition and emphasis.

Insightful analysis, honest opinion, and good advice, on either personal or communal issues, are hard to come by in our world. Whom *should* we ask? The professionals who attempt to run Jewish life? The politicians who lost our trust long ago? The thinkers and scholars whose private lives and public persona are less than exemplary? Where *should* one turn for advice, for counsel, for background and perception, perspective and a historical view? The Jewish people have always found their heroes, mentors and guides amongst the great Torah figures. It is the arrogance of the twentieth-century secular "scholarship"-oriented, Jewish world that allows it to think that somehow the concept of *Daas Torah* is irrelevant to our modern, educated society.

II. MAKING ROOM FOR PERSONAL AUTONOMY

Two Roads to Submission

Kaplan's article points out correctly the main bone of contention between those who support *Daas Torah* and those who wish to deny it. He phrases it in the terminology of "submission." Basically, he feels that submission is bad; a modern, educated Jew should make up his mind for himself in all matters. He states: "For at the heart of the rejectionist (that word again—BW) approach is the view that unquestioning submission to authority, the authority of *halacha*, of the *gadol*, of G-d, is the highest religious value."[6]

But is this not so? Is not submission to G-d and His Torah the *entire* basis of Jewish faith? Is that not the theology of *mitzvos* and ritual, of tradition and family?

"Unquestioning" is an overstatement on the part of Kaplan. What is *halacha* if not "questioning"? Whatever *Daas Torah* is, it is not blind acceptance without attempting to understand, interpret and reason. But after we have exhausted all our resources of understanding and reason, when we reach the area of faith and obedience, then *Daas Torah*, like *mitzvos* and *halacha*, prevails. There are those who have the ability to be "unquestioning," so great is their trust in their mentor. There are those who question, study the matter, and only then accept. But in the end, the "ethic of submission" pertains to all.

Kaplan does not like the "ethic of submission" because it "is abso-

lutely opposed to the modern values of intellectual autonomy and self-expression."[7] So what? These "modern values" have yet to bring much benefit to a suffering twentieth century. If "modern values" conflict with basic Torah beliefs and precepts, then a Jew must sacrifice some "modern values." In no area of human life, home, family, career, health, politics or nature are we given complete autonomy or unlimited self-expression. Only in dealing with Torah and its scholars, Kaplan maintains, are we supposedly entitled to free rein because of the superiority of these "modern values."

Again the author himself senses the difficulty inherent in his approach. He states, "Of course, I hasten to add, any Orthodox approach, be it traditionalist[8] or modern, must make room for authority and submission, within its world view. However, the modern Orthodox approach, precisely because it is both modern and Orthodox, also seeks—within, of course, the authoritative framework of *halacha*—to make room for such modern values as intellectual autonomy, creativity, critical independence and self-expression." Kaplan now agrees to an "ethic of submission," but one which accommodates modern values. Yet, he knows, as do we all, that there will be a place and moment in everyone's life when submission and modern values will collide. What then? To say that the Modern Orthodox approach accommodates "intellectual autonomy, creativity, critical independence and self-expression," implying that the traditionalist camp does not, is false and dangerous nonsense. The knitted *kippa* is as much a uniform and a form of submission as the *shtreimel*. *Daas Torah* in no way prevents creativity and self-expression from developing. Instead, it gives it a standard and guide by which it may be nurtured for the benefit of Torah and Israel.

Addressing the Classic Tensions

One also senses that underlying Kaplan's basic thesis is the notion that rabbis and *Roshei Yeshiva* should stick to Talmudic lectures and answering questions regarding the *kashrus* of Bazooka bubble gum, and other such halachic matters. The Talmud teaches us that "all matters of the community are upon the rabbinic scholar" (*Mo'ed Kattan* 6a). The classic tension between leader and people, rabbi and congregant, teacher and student has always existed in Jewish life. Over the past centuries, secular Jewry has been successful in narrowing the role, stature and influence of rabbinic scholars in Jewish life. They parrot the age-old cry of "what benefit do the rabbis bring us?"—the plaint of the *apikores* (*Sanhedrin* 99b).

In our current American Orthodox scene, where rabbis can be voted out,

where there is no organized sense of community, and where democracy often overwhelms morality, the concept of *Daas Torah* is more urgent and necessary than ever before. Who should speak out on major issues if not the spiritual leaders of the people? Why should we feel that Jewish political leaders in Israel and in America, almost all of whom are debased in the public arena of power, greed and fame, know better and are better qualified to decide for Jewry moral and survival issues than the men of Torah, who have devoted every fiber of their existence to guaranteeing Jewish survival, without pursuing personal gain thereby?

The counter attack of tradition, which the popularity of *Daas Torah* represents in Orthodoxy today, and which so repels Kaplan, is the attempt to redress the wrong choices of the past two centuries of Jewish life. The harshness of the attack on *Daas Torah* serves only to confirm its vitality and value.

It is important to note that the author's own mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, זצ"ל, was an advocate of *Daas Torah*. (See his words earlier in the text of this article at footnote 2.) Professor Kaplan, after quoting Rabbi Soloveitchik's words, states enigmatically that "it is no coincidence that this eulogy (of Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzenski of Vilna) was delivered at the second annual conference of the Agudath Yisroel of the United States, at a time, moreover, when Rabbi Soloveitchik was a vice president of the Agudah."[9] By this he seems to imply that Rabbi Soloveitchik would not have espoused his "elegant expression... of *Daas Torah*"[10] at a different forum or time. I know of no such statements, written or oral, of Rabbi Soloveitchik where he retracted his words stated at that conference. To suggest that Rabbi Soloveitchik would have tailored his deeply felt beliefs on bedrock issues of Jewish thought and life in order to accommodate his hosts or audience, is unfortunate and inaccurate. Professor Kaplan is therefore correct in stating that Rabbi Soloveitchik's words are "an elegant expression... of *Daas Torah*." In rejecting the general notion of *Daas Torah*, however, Professor

Kaplan declares himself not bound by Rabbi Soloveitchik's pronouncements on the matter.... I am troubled as to why Kaplan chose to limit and provide political shading to his teacher's words.

III. *DAAS TORAH*—OF WHOM?

Kaplan raises the valid point as to whose *Daas Torah* is correct. He points out the conflicting opinions of many great men of Israel today on important societal issues. "Such a development [the conflicting opinions of the great Torah scholars], however, renders the notion that a *Daas Torah* viewpoint on a particular issue is the sole legitimate Torah viewpoint on that issue both tenuous and implausible."[11]

According to his definition of *Daas Torah*, he is seemingly correct. But again, in spite of—or perhaps because of—the scholarship involved in the article, he has missed the point. When Shammai and Hillel debated whether it was beneficial to man to have been created, or other matters of theology and policy, both of their opinions were *Daas Torah*. *Daas Torah* is the distilled thoughtful opinion of a great Torah scholar on a particular issue. The fact that another great Torah scholar does not see the issue the same way does not compromise the integrity of the concept of *Daas Torah*. That is the obvious implication of "these and those are the words of the living G-d." I would suggest that the reason this admittedly sophisticated concept is so difficult for "modern" circles to accept is because many scholars (and others) looking at *Daas Torah* from the outside, and not experiencing it from within, confuse *Daas Torah* with infallibility. That is an error of monumental magnitude. We have no perfect people, no infallible leaders. *Daas Torah* is the best reasoned opinion of this sage on a particular issue. Since, for his followers, or for those who consult him, or for the general Jewish public who defer to him, this is the best opinion available, it should be followed. Whether the opinion was "right" is beyond human judgment. For knowing what is "right" is to read G-d's mind—a talent that none of us has.

The concept of *Daas Torah* is what saved the Jewish people at the time of the Hasmoneans and the Second Temple. The people listened to Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach and not Alexander Yanai, to Hillel and not to Herod, to Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai and not Agrippa or Josephus. That is how Israel has survived until today.

The "Escape" Clause to Daas Torah

This brings me to Kaplan's final section in his article. In it he quoted[12] the tragic saga of the late Belzer Rebbe, Rabbi Aron Rokeach, זצ"ל, and his brother Rabbi Mordechai, זצ"ל, in the Second World War. They escaped from Hungary to Israel in 1944, shortly before the invasion of Hungary by the Germans, and the subsequent destruction of Hungarian Jewry. In a farewell address, Rabbi Mordechai assured the faithful that no harm would befall Hungarian Jewry. Tragically, that was not the case. Kaplan, almost in unrestrained glee—*I gotcha now*—thereby concludes that *Daas Torah* has no validity.

Using this story as the clincher in his argument against *Daas Torah* is a literary low blow. Who *was* right regarding the impending Holocaust? Again, by granting *Daas Torah* infallibility, Kaplan then proceeds to destroy it. His case against the "traditionalist" (his word, not mine) rabbis and viewpoints of the Holocaust was made in an earlier article of his.[13] But

it is irrelevant to the concept of *Daas Torah*. The Holocaust cannot prove right or wrong, prescience or blindness, wisdom or foolishness. G-d alone can deal with it, and in the recesses of His infinite Wisdom do the awful answers lie. But to imply, as Kaplan does, that the *Rebbe* willfully misled his followers and fled to save his own skin, abandoning his flock, is calumny.

Kaplan concludes his article[14] sarcastically by stating: "Indeed, the career of *Daas Torah* is by no means over." He is correct—except that *Daas Torah* has no "career." It is part and parcel of the existence of the eternal people of Israel. It helps guarantee the survival of Israel and is, in itself, one of the main tenets of Torah life. It should not be dealt with in a cavalier fashion, as though the age of modernity no longer requires its services or need acknowledge its historical legitimacy. For it upholds the supremacy of Torah above all else in Jewish life. As such, it helps Torah fulfill its blessing of being our lives and the length of our days. ■

[1] Page 23 of the Kaplan article.
[2] "A Eulogy of Rabbi Hayim Ozer Grodzenski," by Rabbi Joseph D. Soloveitchik, *Hapardes* Vol. 14, no. 7, September 1940, quoted by Kaplan on page 9 of his article.
[3] The sixth chapter of *Avos* is, unlike the first five chapters which are a collection of *Mishnayos*, a collection of *B'raisos*, styled in the form and language of *Mishna*.
[4] At the conclusion of the first *B'raisa* in Chapter 6, *Avos*.
[5] *Mishlei* 8,14.
[6] Kaplan, pp. 23-4.
[7] *Ibid*.
[8] The "traditionalists," whoever they are, are somehow not modern. Shades of the canards of the *Haskala*, long dead, but whose venom is still poisonous!
[9] Kaplan, p. 9.
[10] *Ibid*.
[11] Kaplan, p. 51.
[12] Taken from the final chapter of *Hasidut Polin*, by Menachem Piekarz. Piekarz's book, though excellent in some respects, is marred by the fact that although he is writing on a subject about which he apparently knows a great deal, he, like most scholars of the secular genre who write about Torah and Orthodoxy, misses the point. For instance, Piekarz quotes the famous quip of the Gerrer Rebbe in the '20s that he had tens of thousands of *Chassidim* who ate on Yom Kippur (meaning the small children of the great and numerous Gerrer community), in order to prove that religious observance of *mitzvot* among *Chassidim* declined in that period of time!
[13] "Rabbi Isaac Hutner's *Daat Torah* Perspective on the Holocaust—A Critical Analysis," *Tradition*, Vol. 18, no. 3 (Fall '80).
[14] Kaplan, p. 60.

Learning From the Jewish People's Extraordinary History

The study of history is usually based on the accumulation of facts from records and personal testimonies, interpreted according to the perspective of scholars and their system of values. Jewish history is by its very nature a different matter. As the Telsher Rosh Hayeshiva, Rabbi Mordechai Gifter שליט"א pointed out in these pages, our history must be studied from the standpoint of זכור ימות עולם בינו שנות דור ודור *"Remember the days of yore, understand the years of every generation" (Devarim 32,7). In attempting to understand any event or trend in Jewish history, "one must invariably begin with Creation and the Creator. As the Vilna Gaon explained, to understand 'the years of every generation,' one must start with 'remembering the days of yore'—the Six Days of Creation. For in those days lies the complete plan of the development of the universe and humankind in it. This, the Gaon taught, is the only way to understand history." (JO, May 74)*

Rabbi Yitzchok Hutner זצ"ל, late Rosh Hayeshiva of Mesivta Rabbi Chaim Berlin/Kollel Gur Arye, elaborated on this theme, saying that Jewish history is an aspect of Torah, and has inherent "kedusha—that which is most holy and sacred. This sanctity stems from the fact that ישראל ואורייתא חד הוא *—'the Jewish people and the Torah are one' (Zohar, Acharei Mos, 73), thus intimately relating the proper study of Jewish history with the study of Torah. Yet, unfortunately, just as in the study of Torah itself we are familiar with the phenomenon of* מגלה פנים בתורה שלא כהלכה *—those who distort and misinterpret the meaning of the Torah (see Avos 3:11)—so is there an even more subtle danger from those who distort the meaning of Jewish history." (JO, Oct. 77)*

When a person appreciates Jewish history from a Torah perspective, his emuna and faith will be strengthened from its study. There are, however, those who deny the Ribbono Shel Olam's role in the events of man, including whatever happens to the Jewish People. This lack of faith becomes the premise upon which they base their interpretation of history, as they staunchly maintain that religious belief should not intrude on academic objectivity. But, can one simultaneously be objective while being committed to a lack of faith?

Well-known author and lecturer, **Rabbi David Gottlieb**, *of Yeshiva Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem, challenges their attempt to do so in the pages that follow. If one studies Jewish history honestly and objectively, one cannot remain a non-believer.*

As a Basis For Formulating Strategies For Continuity

Rabbi David Gottlieb

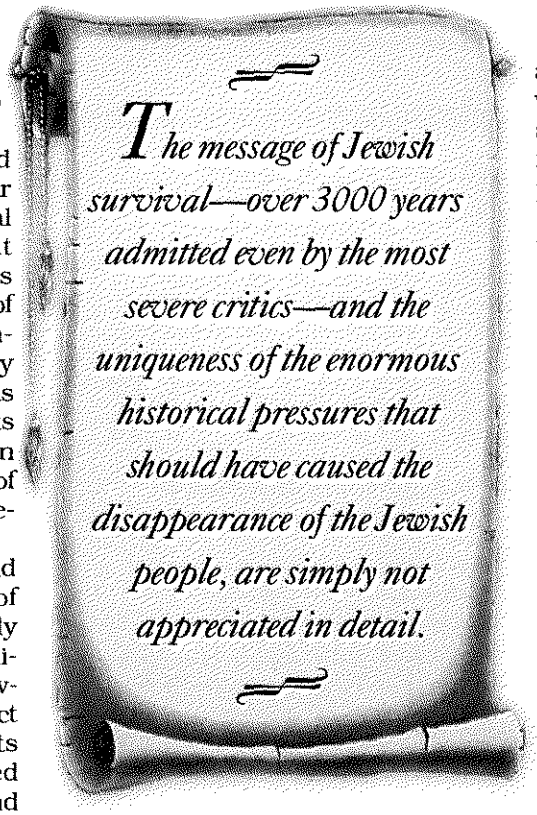
JEWISH SURVIVAL
the Fact and its Implications

I. THE UNIQUE JEWISH EXPERIENCE: WHY IT MATTERS

Jewish survival has long enjoyed widespread attention. It is clear to all that the Jewish historical experience is unique in ways that cannot easily be explained. This has attracted the ambition of historians of all stripes to try the mettle of their favorite theories on this extraordinary phenomenon. For Jews, this fact has more personal implications. It sets them apart from the common human experience and gives them a point of pride in their connection to an indestructible people.

In spite of all this professional and personal interest, the message of Jewish survival has been doubly missed by historians and (non-traditional) laymen, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. First, the nature of the fact itself has not been appreciated. Its extent—over 3000 years admitted even by the most severe critics—and the uniqueness of the enormous historical pressures that should have caused the disappearance of the Jewish people, are simply not appreciated in detail. The result is that the superficial suggestions offered to explain Jewish survival are taken seriously, when a survey of the details would show them to be clearly incompetent.

Second, there is a failure to focus specifically on WHAT has survived. In particular, no account is taken of the many experiments of large populations of Jews with other cultural forms which have not survived. This failure has allowed the assumption that anything done with the mere tag "Jewish" qualifies as an essential continuation of Jewish historical experience.



The tragic part of these misreadings of history is that they become the basis for all sorts of formulae to guarantee the continuity of our people, and the launching of ambitious programs that are, and will continue to be extremely costly—in misspent dollars, misplaced hope, and misapplied energy and talent. The purpose of this essay is to rectify both mistakes mentioned above—the superficial readings of the Jewish historical experience, and the overlooking of what really survived. We will start with a survey of the features that make Jewish survival so difficult to explain. The most popular theories designed to explain Jewish survival will then be tested against the facts, and—as you will see—they will be found wanting. Finally, we will use the many failed cultural experiments of Jews in all historical periods to define what truly constitutes a continuation of what is eternal in Jewish history.

II. THE FACTS OF JEWISH SURVIVAL

Jewish history divides into two major periods: from its inception to the destruction of the Second Temple, and from that date to the present. Each period presents its own obstacles to historical explanation. We start with a survey of the unique features of each.

Ancient Jewish history comprises at the very least 1,000 years from the time of King David to the destruction of the Second Temple. (This much is admitted by all; the prior 800 years from the time of the Patriarchs is controversial in some secular circles and since we are writing for their perspective, we will omit that era from this discussion.) For approximately ninety percent of this period, i.e. for all but the exile in Babylon, there was a large concentration of Jewish population and an independent Jewish state in the Land of Israel. (Of course, "independence" allows for significant pressure from expanding empires like Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, etc.) What is striking about this period is the unparalleled uniqueness of Jewish belief. Principles shared by virtu-

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ally every ancient culture are replaced in Jewish sources by sharply contrasting ideas.

The other cultures enjoyed general agreement in their cultural specifics for two reasons: First, their beliefs reflect common circumstances (the constants in the human condition in the ancient world—birth, death, war and peace, dependence upon poorly understood natural phenomena, etc.). Second, cultures in contact affect one another: ideas are borrowed and mutually modified. Judaism is assumed to have shared the first factor with all other cultures. [1] After all, the Jews were subject to all the vicissitudes of life; and its geographical position ("the crossroads of three continents") made it extraordinarily susceptible to the second—whatever cultural trends were au courant. Its uniqueness is thus very difficult to explain by any conventional factors. What follows are six examples of distinctive Jewish beliefs. [2]

[1] This is the assumption of the neutral historian, which we accept here in order to show even him the uniqueness of Jewish survival. We know that miracles and prophecy made Jewish historical experience utterly unlike that of other nations.

1. Monotheism. Polytheistic idolatry is the rule in ancient religions. The restriction of worship to a single deity is almost unknown. [3] The reason is simple: natural phenomena are so disparate that they are inevitably assigned to different deities, and then each of those deities must be served or else the natural forces under their control will injure the errant community. The uncompromising commitment of Judaism to one G-d only is without substantive parallel in the ancient world.

2. Exclusivity. Each ancient nation had its own pantheon of gods. Yet each recognized the appropriateness of other nations worshipping its own pantheon. The universalism, and consequent exclusivity, of Judaism are absent from ancient religions. [4] Thus, aside from Antiochus's attempt to eliminate Judaism, there are no religious wars in the ancient world![5] When one country conquered another, the second was usually required to acknowledge the chief god of the conqueror, and the conquered were usually happy to comply: the very fact that they lost the war proved that the others' chief god was indeed very powerful. The rest of the religion of the conquered nation was left intact. Only the Jews proclaimed a universal and exclusive concept of deity: our G-d is the only one, all others are fantasy.

3. Spirituality. Ancient religions associated gods very closely with physical objects and/or phenomena. The "god of the sun" is the sun, as god, and so with the moon, the sea, the lightning bolt, etc. The same holds for physical processes like fertility, life and death. The only ancient religion to declare that G-d has no physical embodiment, form, or likeness is Judaism.

4. G-d as absolute. Ancient religions picture the gods as limited in power. Many start with a genealogy of

[2] See Kaufman, *The Religion of Israel*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), chaps. II-IV.
[3] The "solar monotheism" of Akhenaton in ancient Egypt is not parallel—see Kaufmann, pp. 2, 226-7.
[4] See *Bereishis* 43,32 where Jews visiting Egypt eat separately from the Egyptians because the Jews' food is a religious abomination to the Egyptians!
[5] See Bickerman, "The Historical Foundations of Postbiblical Judaism," in L. Finkelstein ed., *The Jews—History, Culture, Religion*, v.1, pp. 106-7.

To ancient cultures, Jewish beliefs appeared absurd. The historical problem is to explain how a people originated and preserved so extreme a set of beliefs without being overwhelmed by the unanimous consensus of all other nations.

the gods. That means that certain powers predate them and are out of their control. Only Judaism understands G-d as the creator of all that exists and completely unlimited in His power over creation.

5. Morality. The gods of the ancient world are pictured as petty tyrants acting out their all-too-human desires in conflict with men and with one another. Aside from taboo actions, which sometimes overlap with moral concerns, no condition of absolute moral perfection applies to those gods. Only the Jewish G-d is defined as meeting that description.

6. Normative conduct. All ancient cultures permitted some forms of homosexuality, and for many, its religious application. The only exception is Judaism, which opposed all forms of homosexuality, whether religious or merely hedonistic.[6]

How Odd the Jews

To ancient cultures, these Jewish beliefs appeared absurd. They contradicted the common experience and convictions of all mankind. Maintaining them branded Jews as quixotic outcasts. The historical problem is to explain how a people originated and preserved so extreme a set of beliefs without being

[6] See Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

overwhelmed by the unanimous consensus of all other nations.

This problem cannot be solved by attributing Jewish perseverance to the general success of Jewish cultural achievement. There weren't any; the Jewish nation did not enjoy any outstanding secular successes that could have served as the means of preserving Judaism. There was no far-flung Jewish empire, no revolutionary innovations in mathematics, medicine, economics, architecture, the arts, philosophy etc. Had there been such, we might have explained the survival of Judaism as a mere accompaniment of an otherwise successful society.

One final characteristic of ancient Judaism must be noted. Throughout the ancient period Jews did experiment with other forms of religious belief and practice. The prophets testify to Jewish idol worship. (This must be understood as syncretism: not an abandonment of Judaism in toto, but an amalgamation with local conditions. "The Jewish G-d took us out of Egypt, so He is very powerful, so of course we celebrate Passover. However, if you want your garden to prosper, a sacrifice to the local *baal* will help!") During the Babylonian exile, a significant percentage of Jews intermarried and adapted their beliefs to the Babylonian milieu. When Greek culture became dominant in the Middle East, many Jews became Hellenized.

During the end of the Second Temple, the Sadducees rejected the traditional Oral Law and substituted their own adaptations of Jewish practice. Needless to say, all these efforts eventually failed. Thus the survival of Judaism stands in contrast with those competing Jewish cultural forms, which ultimately expired.

Surviving in the Diaspora

Now we turn to the second period of Jewish history: from the destruction of the Second Temple to the present. During this period, Jewish communities were widely spread among a variety of antagonistic majority cultures, without any central authority or control.

What ought to be expected of Judaism under such conditions? From the experience of other cultures, we should expect large-scale cultural borrowing and influence. Yemenite Jews should show the influence of Arab-Moslem culture and religion, French Jews the influence of Catholicism, Russian Jews the influence of Eastern Orthodoxy, etc.

This approach reminds me of the remark of one historian: "It is true that we cannot explain Jewish survival. But we will!" Translation: "I believe with perfect faith that everything can be explained naturalistically and therefore there is no need to believe in G-d."

How critical should these influences be? Let us take as a comparison the development of Christianity during the same period. At present there are hundreds of different Christian sects, each with its own version of the original doctrines and events of early Christianity. That means that the original information cannot be reliably recovered. And this occurred to a religion that was in a majority position from the time of Constantine, with both central authority and control. Whatever the details of the historical forces that led to the loss of their origins, those forces should have applied to Judaism with infinitely more power. The fact, however, was quite the opposite in this case: there is no serious disagreement concerning the content of Jewish belief, practice and experience of 1900 years ago. (Here we must be careful not to misunderstand the contemporary division among the so-called "branches of Judaism." They do not differ concerning what Jews of 1900 years ago believed and practiced: there is no doubt that *Shabbos* was celebrated on Saturday, that pork was forbidden, that the coming of the Messiah and the rebuilding of the Temple were the goals of Jewish history, and that

they believed every letter of the Five Books of Moses to have been dictated by G-d at Sinai. They differ only concerning how much of the Judaism of 1900 years ago should be practiced today. This is not at all paralleled to Christianity, in which matters of equal centrality are very much in debate.) Thus the survival of Judaism during this period is utterly unexpected, violating the normal progress of cultural transformation.

As in the ancient period, this second period saw Jews experimenting with modifications of Judaism. The Karaites resurrected the heresy of the Sadducees in denying the traditional Oral Law. The Marranos tried to deal with the Inquisition by feigning Christian practice in public while living as Jews privately. Both of these experiments were historical failures: the Marranos have completely disappeared from the Jewish people, and the Karaites are a scattered and obscure dying sect of minimal presence. (The more modern experiments at modifying traditional Judaism still exist and thus, strictly speaking, we cannot yet judge their historical fate. But if past experiments are any guide....) Again, the survival of Judaism as we know it was not without competition from other Jewish allegiances.

* * *

The following, then, are the features of Jewish survival which we have surveyed: (1) 1000 years of national independence (excepting Babylon), during which (2) Jewish belief is of unparalleled uniqueness, (3) unaccompanied by any outstanding secular success, and (4) succeeding in competition with various experiments at modifying the content of traditional Judaism. This is followed by (5) 1900 years of minority status among varied antithetical majority cultures which, (6) by comparison to Christianity during the same period, ought to have caused the disappearance of Judaism, and (7) again saw the failure of experimental modifications of Judaism. Now let us use these aspects of the historical record to test the adequacy of the popular explanations of Jewish survival.

III. POPULAR "EXPLANATIONS" OF JEWISH SURVIVAL

The most common theory of Jewish survival is persecution: the will to spite the oppressor's goal to annihilate one's people and culture.[7] The idea is that the Jewish People's resolve to maintain their unique identity is a response to their being defined as alien by the non-Jewish world. If only Jews were accepted as equals and given access to non-Jewish society, Judaism would disappear.

[7] See, for example, J.P. Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew.*

This theory fails on three counts. (a) It does not even apply to the period of national independence. (b) The last 1900 years has not been a period of uniformly severe persecution. Judaism survived the "golden age" of Spain, and traditional Judaism is enjoying a renaissance in contemporary America. (According to the theory, we should have expected the group with strongest Jewish identity to disappear the fastest in the absence of persecution as the prop for its existence; this is precisely what is not happening.) (c) We are not the only culture

that has been conquered and persecuted. Christianity and Islam conquered and destroyed scores of pagan cultures, which obligingly ceased to exist. Why did persecution not produce their survival? (Or are only the Jews spiteful enough?)

A second theory to explain Jewish survival asserts that **Jews simply have a special ability to preserve their culture.** (Whether this ability is genetic or acquired, the theory does not say.) Even so vague a suggestion can be refuted by the historical record: if there were such an ability, why did it not enable all those Jewish groups that experimented with modifying traditional Judaism to survive also? Where are the Jewish polytheists of the First Temple?—the Babylonian and Hellenistic Jews?—the Sadducees, Karaites and Marranos?

A third theory holds that certain aspects of Judaism—beliefs, values, laws, customs, social forms, etc.—**have enabled it to survive.** For example, it is asserted that dietary restrictions serve to separate Jews from non-Jews, helping us different ones preserve our identity. This theory fails for two reasons.

(a) No reason is given to think that these specific, distinctive aspects of Judaism should contribute to survival rather than being irrelevant or even harmful. For example, a small minority of immigrants could find dietary restrictions an embarrassment. The tension of being socially isolated could lead to abandoning that practice, which would then weaken observance generally and thus hasten assimilation. In general, the facts that only Judaism has survived, and that only Judaism has a particular feature A, does not imply that A contributes to Judaism's survival; that has to be independently argued.

(b) This theory begs the question at issue in a subtle way. The point of the theory is to provide a naturalistic explanation of Jewish survival, even if the aspects of Judaism cited by the theory is ultimately a failure. (Compare explaining why George is the only human to run the mile in three minutes by citing his extraordinary leg muscles. If we cannot explain why only his legs are so strong, we still do not understand his achievement.)

Let us suppose that a list of features unique to Judaism can be found that can be seen to contribute to Jewish survival. How is it that only Judaism has such features? Surely other cultures had brilliant men capable of innovating such features for themselves. If not, surely others could have taken them from us. (It will not do to argue, as does Yechezkel Kaufmann[8], that the unique aspects of Judaism are due to Moses' genius, and that genius has no rules by which its products could be expected. In order to be appreciated as such, genius must produce recognizable solutions to recognized problems. Otherwise the innovation will not be labeled genius, but insanity. If the explanation of Judaism's unique aspects is Moses' genius, then others would definitely have learned his techniques from us.)

Finally, there are those who would give up the hope to find a single explanation for Jewish survival. They argue that **each of the cited explanations contribute some portion of the overall effect.** Persecution *does* produce some will to resist; Jews *are* gifted at cultural longevity; *some* features of Judaism naturally contribute to survival and may have originated randomly. No one element by itself produces survival—that is the reason it was so easy to find counter-examples to the theories based on one explanation alone

This approach also fails, on three counts: (a) No evidence has been supplied that persecution, and genius contribute to survival *at all.* If persecution promotes survival, then at least some of the other persecuted cultures should have survived. If there is a Jewish genius for survival, then at least one of the cultural experiments should have succeeded. And the naturalistic explanation of Judaism's unique possession of survival characteristics has not yet been provided. Thus in the light of the evidence we have three times zero. (b) It is not clear that other cultures that disappeared did not share all three features. For someone to assert, without proof, that none of the cultures that disappeared through persecution possessed people gifted at preserving traditions and features fostering survival, would be mere cultural parochialism. (c) Without specifying the details of the combination of the elements of explanation, this approach is too vague to be taken as a serious attempt at explanation. What kinds and what extent of persecution contribute to survival? What gifts in particular enable people to preserve a culture? What features of a tradition contribute to help it survive?

[8] Kaufmann, p. 225.

(This approach reminds me of the remark of one historian: "It is true that we cannot explain Jewish survival. But we will!" Translation: "I believe with perfect faith that everything can be explained naturalistically and therefore there is no need to believe in G-d.")

IV. THE PURPOSE OF THIS REVIEW OF FAILED THEORIES

The moral of this review of failed theories is clear: there is no serious candidate for a naturalistic explanation of Jewish survival. How then *can* Jewish history be understood? Only as traditional Jewish sources understand it: as G-d's Providence manifest through His relationship with the Jewish People. When Esther learns of Haman's plot to destroy the Jewish people, she asks: "What is this, and why is this?" She is not content with a description of the political intrigue with its social, psychological and economic background. Those are relevant, but superficial considerations. The underlying causes are determined by G-d's Providence—what purpose of His these events are designed to serve. Only thus can they be truly understood.

This moral carries a double lesson:

(1) If Jewish history cannot be understood naturalistically, then the blind application of naturalistic methodology to the details of Jewish experience is a mistake. Imagine a botanist studying the flora of a garden. After he examines and classifies the flowers, shrubs, grasses and trees, he comes across a butterfly. "What sort of plant is this?" he thinks. "It has no roots, it flies...!" As long as he tries to apply the methods of botany to a butterfly, he will not understand! Similarly, an attempt to understand facets of Jewish history by comparison to those nations whose history is naturalistic cannot produce understanding. For example, to explain similarities of certain Jewish and non-Jewish ideas by asserting that we must have taken our ideas from others just as all other nations do, will be a totally unjustified comparison. **If we were subject to cultural influence like all other nations, then we would not be here!**

(2) More importantly, as Santayana said, those who are ignorant of history are condemned to repeat it. One sort of ignorance is the failure to understand. The Torah warns us not to attribute our history to chance (see *Vayikra*, Chap. 26). **If we do not penetrate beneath the surface to see the Divine Providence in our history, then tragedies will follow one another in seemingly chance fashion until we finally realize that all attribution to chance is bankrupt.** Repeating this sort of mistake brings national disaster. More is at stake then academic incompetence: **Recognition of Providence is the key to ending Jewish suffering and exile.**

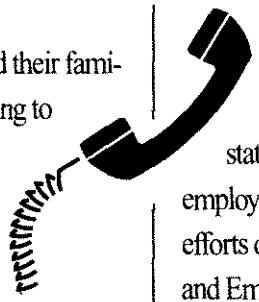
Participation in Jewish Survival

Jewish survival is a point of pride for many contemporary Jews, and motivates their identification with Judaism. However, all too often the Jew fails to ask: What is it that survives? Each individual Jew dies. Jewish cultural experiments have led to historical dead ends, no less than the cultures of non-Jews. What has survived is a specific cultural form—specific beliefs, values, laws, literature, attitudes—in a word, classical Torah Judaism. To participate in Jewish survival is to relate positively to that which has survived: to study and practice it. To engage in yet more experiments at transforming traditional Judaism in the light of the times is to ally oneself with the failures of the past experiments and to remain out of contact with genuine Jewish survival.

Finally, the supernatural element of Jewish survival must be squarely faced. Since there is no reasonable naturalistic explanation, those who must seriously study such phenomena from an academic, objective perspective, entertain the possibility of a supernatural explanation, and investigate it with as much objectivity as they can muster. They should be capable of rejecting the deliberately narrow attitude of the philosopher who said that, had he heard G-d speak at Sinai he would have sought the nearest psychiatrist. When a consistent phenomenon defies all recognized explanations, they should find the courage to explore other avenues, as difficult as it must be for the avowed secularist. But if he is intellectually honest, the searching Jew will finally discover the ultimate Source of Jewish survival, and no longer propose glib alternatives that can only lead to dead ends. ■

Sometimes, Talk *Is* Action

Alleviating the suffering of out–of–work breadwinners and their families can be just a matter of talking to the right people. Your own employer, for example. Or the personnel director at your place of work. Speak to friends, relatives, even the guy who sits next to you on the bus every morning. Ask them if they have or know of job openings. Then pass the information along to Agudath Israel's Professional & Management Employment Services.



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Director of Operations
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Fund Manager
Industrial Engineer
Information System Manager
Law Associate
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Marketing Executive
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Personnel Directors
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Programmer
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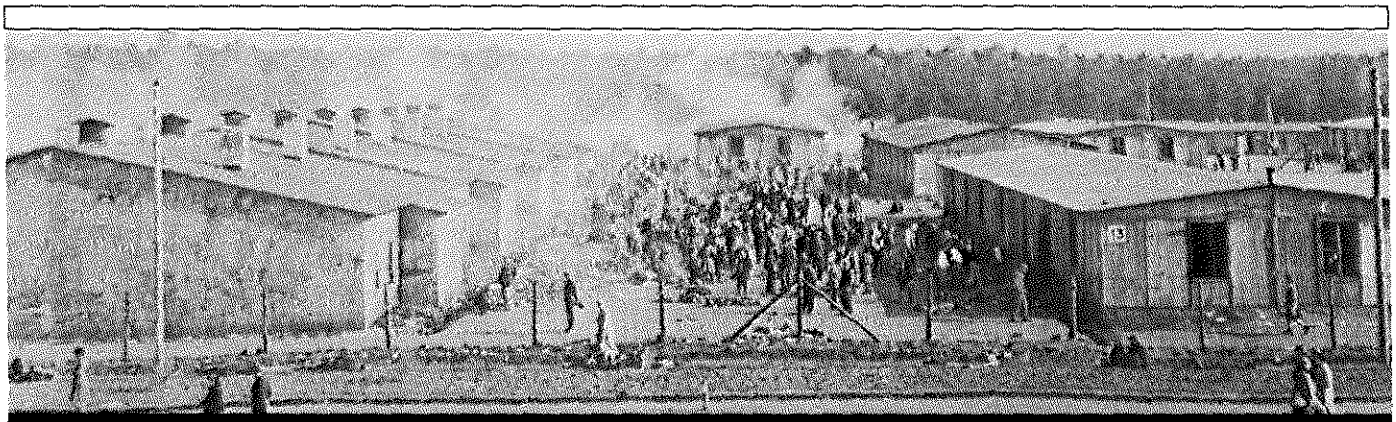

Fighting Ignorance of History...and of *Emuna*

A university campus is a prime venue for those who are peddling radical views that are rejected by mainstream thinkers. The average student's lack of experience and naivete, combined with a sense of self-congratulatory idealism, make him an attractive target for alternative views on what was once axiomatic. Thus, those who preach carefully disguised, "politically correct" malice can expect the youth, especially the "educated" ones, to spread the venom they've sown so insidiously, to bear a bounty of bitter fruit.

A Holocaust revisionist has tapped into this market. He found that he could place lengthy diatribes of anti-Semitism as advertisements in college publications for a fraction of the cost of comparable ads in conventional newspapers. Whereas most editors would reject these provocations of hatred, students—taking pride in their openness—are pleased to accept them.

Thus the student newspaper of the University of Miami was approached to publish an ad, that claimed (we quote): "We are the only ones pointing out the falsehoods and misrepresentations surrounding the [Holocaust] Museum and lack of integrity of those who represent it." Sure enough, the editors accepted it, falling in step with other universities that did likewise.

This "open" approach is misguided for a number of reasons. First, it permits propagandists to present outright falsehoods as truths. Then, as a direct result, the ad presents Jews as liars. In addition, Holocaust survivors suffer intense grief and pain, as they face anew the gnawing question—*Who will remember?*—now compounded by a new concern—*Who will believe us?* After having endured so much, are they to be told that their accounts of incredible suffering, their ordeals, are fabrications?

May I illustrate this last point with a personal experience: Recently, I was sitting with my late father, הכ"מ, and תבלחט"א, my mother in the Miami International Airport before their return to New York. I mentioned the Holocaust, which was not a frequent topic of conversation amongst us because of the torturous memories the subject would evoke. After my remark, my father reflected on the transports of 10,000 *Yidden* from Plinsk, Poland. The first transport, consisting of the old and infirm, went directly to the crematoriums of Auschwitz. My maternal grandparents were among that group of *Kedoshim*. My late father, Reb Mordcha Becker, was in the second transport, which took place in October, 1942. From a group of close to 2,300, Mengele "selected" 63. The rest went to the gas chambers. Of those 63, only my father and three or four others survived. My father cried out, "Could you believe that people claim it never happened? *A za chitzpah*—What *chutzpah*!" The old pain and suffering was now heightened with a wrenching twist.

Fostering the Search For Truth

A few days later, I learned that the University of Miami newspaper was solicited by revisionists to run their ad. Students can make mistakes—terrible ones, at that. That's when the administration should step in. When Edward T. Foote, University President, was approached, he responded with the following:

> **"Universities exist as institutions to help human beings learn, and through learning to lead the most productive, and happiest lives. At the heart of the enterprise is intellectual freedom. Students and faculty members are free at universities to question, challenge, and wonder, to agree or disagree, to form their own opinions, to defend their own beliefs, to shape their own values. The founding principle of universities is that through the free exchange of information and ideas, the most truth—and from it, the highest human understanding—is likely to emerge."**

Besides exhibiting indifference and callousness, this statement underscored exactly where the administration failed: at fostering the emergence of truth. The process of education should be one of working with the facts and then disseminating them. It would certainly be a mockery of basic educational principles to designate one semester debating whether or not the American Revolution took place, and then start the next semester learning about it. Similarly, there are no two views regarding the Holocaust, deserving debate. Fifty years ago the truth "emerged"—unequivocally.

Rabbi Becker, a *musmach* of Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim, in Forest Hills, N.Y., is *Rav* of the Young Israel of Kendall, Florida, and director of Gesher Institute, an outreach center in Miami.

Speaking Up in the Face of Falsehood

"From where do we see that if a student sits before his *Rav* and sees merit for the indigent and liability for the wealthy;where do we see that he can not remain silent? *'Mid'var sheker tirchak'*—distance yourself from falsehood" (*Shavuos* 31a).

The Talmud explains that if one witnesses a violation of *Emes* and stands by in silence, he becomes an accomplice to espousing falsehood.

I joined Arthur Teitelbaum, Southern Area Director of the Anti-Defamation League, at a campus Hillel meeting to plan a response to the newspaper ad. A public forum was scheduled for April 12, 1994, the day of the campus newspaper's distribution. At the forum, to my utter disbelief, a Jew—a grandchild of an Auschwitz victim—spoke on behalf of the University, defending its position.

I expressed my outrage, but walked away shaken, having learned then and during the ensuing days one of the most significant lessons of my life. A substantial number of Jewish students did not see the problem. Many in the community defended the liberal openness of challenge and debate. I finally understood what had become of a basic premise of Judaism. If despite living eye-witness testimony, people can be drawn to debate irrefutable recent history, how much more can they fall prey to distortions regarding the events at *Har Sinai* over 3,300 years ago—IF they are even aware of them.

The events at Har Sinai *at the time of the giving of the Torah are recorded and documented. This testimony has been passed down through the annals of history. Our ancestors were charged to transmit* midor ledor*—from generation to generation—that which they had seen. The Tribe of Levi was entrusted to guard the* Aron Ha'edus*—the Holy Ark that carried the testimony of our heritage. Although the testimony has survived the test of time among those who cling to its teachings, its message has become distorted because of Torah revisionists. By falsely presenting "another view," they have managed to chisel away at the rock of our faith, giving legitimacy to the illegitimate.*

As I walked away from the rally, pained and stunned that the truth could be so distorted, I realized that it was possible for people to waste their lives debating that which is indisputable. Even if they finally see the truth, so much has been lost in the interim.

The New York Times (July 8,1994) cited a 1994 Roper Poll that indicated that 91% of the population are certain that the Holocaust occurred. Mr. Roper expressed satisfaction with the results; the fact that a small percentage of respondents were unsure should alleviate Jewish fears and concern. Alleviate? The 9% figure represents a substantial number of people. We are dealing with highly publicized documentation and eyewitness testimony, and yet close to 10% are not convinced it took place. Just imagine the statistics fifty years from now!

Dealing with the Holocaust: Reaching In...

The *Rambam* in the beginning of *Hilchos Taani'os* states that it is a positive command to cry out for every tragedy that befalls the *tzibbur.* Furthermore, reacting with *teshuva* can prevent a recurrence of calamity. If *teshuva* is not achieved, however, and people remain clinging to their ways, additional *tzaros* will follow. Although the Holocaust has served as the rallying cry of many who are not observant, its message may not be forgotten by those who are observant. The Torah commands three *mitzvos* regarding Amalek: *Remember, Blot out their name,* and *Don't forget.* The magnitude of the destruction in Europe exceeds by far any of the *tzaros* of the past. Does it demand awareness, analysis and remembrance? Absolutely. The subject deserves greater attention in our circles than it has been receiving. Perhaps the time has come to incorporate the facts and *hashkafa* necessary to deal with the Holocaust into the standard Yeshiva syllabus. Fifty years after the fact, it is no longer safe to assume that "of course our children know."

...And Reaching Out

Memorials, monuments, and museums have been dedicated worldwide to serve as testimony to the Nazi atrocities that extended far beyond the imagination. Although these measures have their place in the scheme of things, we have seen the development of a large nucleus of Jews with a Holocaust-based identity, where the Holocaust

If despite living eye-witness testimony, people can be drawn to debate irrefutable recent history, how much more can they fall prey to distortions regarding the events at *Har Sinai* over 3,300 years ago—IF they are even aware of them.

has served not only as the major component of their Jewish identification, but defines its full extent—and its limits, as well.

The Torah warns us about this phenomenon, which may be the reason that some in the religious community have distanced themselves from the topic. In *Parshas Emor*, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch deals with the prohibition of the *Kohanim* to come in contact with the deceased. He states regarding paganism, "Death and mourning are the most fertile soil for the dissemination of their religion." By contrast, "Judaism teaches us not how to die but how to live...." Restricting the *Kohanim* from involvement with the dead emphasizes the fact that the thrust of their spiritual leadership must revolve around the Torah as the way of life.

Dwelling on the Holocaust can leave an emptiness and void, focusing as it does on loss and tragedy. Furthermore, in reaching out to the uneducated, Jewish suffering could have a negative impact. It causes some to pull back in fear, rather than embrace *Yiddishkeit*. Is the image of our people to be *THE VICTIM* or *THE CHOSEN*?

Despite these concerns, confronting death and mortality can serve as a catalyst to learn the lessons of life. Indeed, how many people have embarked on their search for spiritual meaning at their time of sorrow? Relating to *Churban Europa* can serve as a potent impetus for stimulating Jewish awareness. With extended efforts, dwelling on the glory of pre-Holocaust Europe and the spiritual heroism during the War, it is possible to direct the profound feelings that have been triggered, and to fill the vacuum with *emuna* and *yiras Shamayim*. The objective must be to become a member in good standing of "*Mamleches Kohanim v'Goy Kadosh*."

Is Silence Always Golden?

My approach in outreach has changed. I have become more outspoken and direct. Unadulterated Torah must be *taught* and stated clearly. Otherwise you can find people engaged in fruitless debate for years!

Regardless of one's opinion about the college campus, it is there that so many Jewish youth are lost. With the consent of Jewish university editors and administrators, an atmosphere has evolved where the dissemination of *sheker*—falsehood and the slander of *Klal Yisroel*—has been accepted. The survivors are pained to hear that the horrors they recall are being labeled fabrication. They deserve the dignity of knowing that *Klal Yisroel* stands by their side. By the same token, we must be forthright in our stance on basics in *emuna*, beginning with the events at *Har Sinai*. It is our obligation to make certain that we find within ourselves and our communities the resources to respond to challenges to that which is (or should be) self-evident:

"There is a time to be silent and there is a time to speak." (*Koheles* 3:7) ■

Nisson Wolpin

A Mechanech For All Times, a Teacher For All Ages

A tribute to Rabbi Yehoshua Silbermintz, זצ"ל

Ari was not functioning in the fourth grade in Yeshiva Toras Emes. Promises and incentives, threats and punishments, all made no dent in his refusal to respond. As a last resort, he was demoted to grade three. On his second day in the class, he raised his hand and asked a question.

"Wonderful" exclaimed the *Rebbe*. "Say it again, Ari, so the whole class can hear your *kashye*! And make sure to see me during recess. You're going to get a can of soda as a prize!"

Today, thirty years later, Ari—a popular *Rebbe* in a leading Mesivta high school—looks back to that day as a turning point in his education. The excitement that that *Rebbi* generated at that moment continued to mount day after day, until Ari returned to the fourth grade the following September as a highly motivated student.

* * *

Jeffry went to Talmud Torah (congregational afternoon school) when he was ten because his parents felt that an early start would make his *Bar Mitzva* training less of a trauma. "What a way to spend my afternoons," he muttered. "It's gonna be a bore!"

But it wasn't. The *Moreh* was fun, and he always smiled. He taught a Hebrew song from the prayer book. And he made being Jewish a great thing, something to be proud of.

Jeffry became Yisroel. His Talmud Torah teacher helped him get into a yeshiva high school, and years later, got him a job as a counselor in a private boys' camp in the mountains, where the teacher served as head counselor. He was there when Yisroel needed guidance in *shidduchim*, and he was there as mentor, friend, and fellow celebrant at many a future milestone in Yisroel's life. Today, Yisroel — an active figure in outreach—still remembers that man: "He is, and always will be, the single most important influence in my development as a *baal teshuva*. His guidance and good wishes remain an indestructible foundation for the *lomdus* of the *Rebbe'im* and *chavrusos* from whom I have been privileged to learn in recent years."

* * *

Nochum hated to see younger East Siders while away their *Shabbos* afternoons at the local playground. So he decided to organize Pirchei groups for the kids, beginning with a gala *Melave Malka*. He called up "Mr. Pirchei"—an older, ex-

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perienced hand—for help. The response: "I've got another engagement that night. But I'll be there."

The kids came—a lively, ravenous group. It took just a few minutes for the noise to escalate to pandemonium and for place settings to evolve into flying missiles. Nochum and his assistants were helpless. Suddenly, a jovial fellow entered, raised his hands for silence—and got it. "We're going to all sing together—'*Kail Nekamos Hashem*.' You all know it. And—" a moment's suspenseful silence—"whoever sings especially *lebedik* gets a prize." He held up a bag full of trinkets and doo-dads. "Let's go!"

And they went.

The Melave Malka: a huge success.

Pirchei Agudath Israel groups became a regular *Shabbos* afternoon event on Broome Street.

* * *

Avraham loved an extra challenge. So when Pirchei Agudath Israel sent a letter to his local branch that they were sponsoring a *Siyum Hashas* based on hundreds of individuals learning a minimum of one *perek Mishnayos* by heart,

Avraham was the first in his group to memorize a *perek*. The next year, he committed several *Mesechtos* to memory, and by the time his *Bar Mitzva* arrived, he memorized the entire *Shisha Sidrei Mishna*. This earned him a trip to the national *Siyum* celebration in New York, where he was a top winner. Not too many years later, Avraham, as a *beis midrash* student in Telshe, made a *siyum* on *Shas*—the complete *Talmud*.

"No goal is unattainable if it is broken down to small steps. This I learned from my experience with the Pirchei *Mishnayos Baal Peh*, and the great encouragement I always received from the national director."

* * *

Strange neighbors: a very *Chassidishe* bungalow colony and a sleep-away camp for American yeshiva boys, next door to each other on a Catskill mountain top.

Their *Shabbos Seuda* over, the bungalow families left their homes for a stroll in the soft night air. Lively sounds wafted over the trees, beckoning the strollers to the camp dining room. The visitors entered—and were amazed at the spirited singing—a haunting "*Racheim bechasdecha...*," followed by a joyous (almost rowdy) "*Ho-aderes ve'ho-emuna tzu vemen, tzu vemen....*"

"What is the occasion?" a *shtreimel*-bedecked visitor asked.

"*Shabbos Kodesh*," answered a counselor.

"Every *Shabbos*?"

"Every *Shabbos*."

"It seems like *Simcha Torah*," said the visitor in admiration.

"Who's that clean-shaven fellow in the middle leading the *zemiros*?"

"Oh, that's the head-counselor. You should see his *Simchas Torah*! Then we really go to town!"

* * *

Malka had been euphoric over her engagement to Simcha, but now she was unsure. His family was cold, unaccepting. Maybe she wasn't good enough for a young man of such *yichus* (noble lineage). Perhaps she should get out before it's too late....The telephone rang....11:15 p.m.—a wrong number? "Malkie?" The voice was familiar—of course! "I just wanted you to know how much Simcha admired the way you handled yourself at his parents' house yesterday."

The encouraging voice, joined by his wife's reassuring words on an extension line, continued. Questions were fielded, doubts were recognized and then dispelled. Finally, at 12:30 a.m., the telephone session was over. The *shadchanim*—friends (close as next-of-kin)—put everything into perspective. Malka was facing an uphill climb, but it was going to be worth it, with Simcha—and their dear, dear friends—at her side.

* * *

An uncanny ability to touch so many people, both *Klal u' prat*, community and individual, in such a variety of settings, spanning several epochs in Jewish America—this was the hallmark of Rabbi Yehoshua Silbermintz (known universally as "Josh"). His unusual, broad-ranged effectiveness was undoubtedly in line with the response of Rabbi Elazar ben Arach to the question posed by Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai: "What is the proper way that a man should choose?" Rabbi Elazar's answer was "*Lev tov*—goodness of heart." His reply encompassed the responses of all his colleagues—the good eye, the good friend, the good neighbor, and the ability to divine the future (see *Avos* II, 13).

Lev tov, according to the *S'forno*, describes the person whose actions emanate from a pure source, driven by a motive of *l'shem Shamayim*. A person so motivated inevitably attains a host of many other worthwhile attributes as well. Josh's *l'shem Shamayim* and love for his fellow

Jews equipped him to succeed in a wide array of undertakings, and enabled him to reach thousands of individuals directly, tens of thousands indirectly.[1]

Indeed, through his direct one-on-one contact, through his leadership training programs, through the contests and competitions, publications and mass gatherings that he directed, through the communal work and behind-the-scenes lobbying that he conducted, his *lev tov* and his *l'shem Shamayim* had incalculable impact.

HARDLY REMARKABLE, YET TRULY REMARKABLE

Reb Yehoshua Silbermintz's background is hardly remarkable. One of four sons born to Reb Yoseif Shmaryahu and Ita Rochel Silbermintz in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, Josh went to the local yeshiva, Torah Vodaath, as did hundreds of other boys from the neighborhood. His major talent was a lilting singing voice with perfect pitch. His major strengths were his infectious joy and an uncanny ability to know the insides of a boy's heart. Coupled with a dead-serious attitude toward all responsibilities—both *bein adam laMakom* and *bein adam lechaveiro*—he was by all accounts the consummate *mechanech* (pedagogue).

His prosaic background notwithstanding, his life was truly remarkable. Indeed, the bare facts trace a gradual escalation—from *talmid* in Mesivta Torah Vodaath (where he established a close, ongoing relationship with Rabbi Avraham Pam, שליט"א), to Yeshiva Bais Yosef (where he earned *semicha* from Rabbi Avraham Jofen, זצ"ל); from Talmud Torah teacher to *Rebbe* in Yeshiva Toras Emes for forty years (his classroom was a *must* for Beth Jacob Seminary students to observe, so as to learn the nitty-gritty of classroom management and to witness the magic that love and excitement can generate); devoted husband, father and grandfather (his wife, nee Millicent Bachman, was always at his side as active partner and encouraging helpmate); from Pirchei leader in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn over fifty years ago, to initiator and coordinator of local and national events—first as a volunteer, and then for a quarter of a century as the official national director of Pirchei Agudath Israel; head counselor of Camp Agudah and then Camp Munk (where his detailed record and careful assessment of each step in the camp calendar and every event in the season was duly noted and filed away, to be studied when planning the next season, and to be shared with the administrations of other camps, to give Jewish camping a professional image and—working with Rabbi Yechiel Arye Munk, זצ"ל—endowing the experience with an enhanced Torah content)—in all phases, he was the paradigm *askan* (activist), totally dedicated to the needs of *Klal*, and, directing his talents accordingly, a gifted *mechanech*. The *lev tov* that pulsated within him was, as mentioned, accompanied by

[1]This interpretation, as well as some other insights in this article, is part of a longer tribute to Rabbi Silbermintz, written by Rabbi Shaya Cohen, national director of Priority One, an outreach organization with headquarters on Long Island.

other aspects of his personality, in such intensity and purity that their impact was phenomenal.

Thus, he combined meticulous, detailed planning with spontaneity and joy. He could be creative and innovative, yet completely subservient to *Gedolei Yisroel*. Even when he was approaching seventy, he knew exactly what would excite little boys; and that profound sense of *achrayus* (accountability) that animated him as a teenager, stayed with him through dramatically changing conditions, to his last breath. The stories that follow are chosen to illustrate his special gifts, his *achrayus* for *Klal*, and his role as *mechanech*—their source and their application—as a tribute to Josh, and as the stuff of inspiration and instruction for the reader.

YOUTHFUL JOTTINGS: FROM HIS OWN WORDS

In an interview with historian Dr. David Kranzler six years ago, Josh underscored the good fortune that was his by virtue of belonging to the Agudath Israel youth movement, his experiences and the lessons he learned.

Josh recounted the various forces that molded the "survivors" of that era: For one, they were introduced to the concepts of *daas Torah* when the great *Rosh Hayeshiva* of Baranowitz, Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, הי"ד, addressed his Zeirei group.

As a member of the *Poilisher Shtiebel*, the senior Mr. Silbermintz was challenged by the president of the *shtiebel* as to why he allows his sons to *daven* with the Zeirei Agudath Israel, instead of with the parent generation. *"Zei vellen oisvaksen goyim,"* he predicted. Now, that man spent every free moment in Torah study, along with others, for the *Poilisher Shtiebel* was open 24 hours a day, always filled with people learning Torah.... Years later, Josh met the president's son who confessed to keeping neither *Shabbos* nor *kashrus*: "Three days a year I do my father a favor and I go to the *Shtiebel*. That's the only time I ever *daven*." The same happened to quite a few members of that second generation. The parents were *yereim* and *shleimim* (devout Jews), but they gave their sons no place in the scheme of things.

Rabbi Moshe Wolfson, שליט"א, who is the *Mashgiach Ruchni* in Mesivta Torah Vadaath, and *Rav* of Emunas Yisroel, spoke at a national Torah assembly of Zeirei Agudath Israel several years ago, and put it all in perspective:

> *As a youngster, I went to Torah Vodaath—the best yeshiva around in those days. After I graduated elementary school, there was a gathering of the boys in my class, and I realized that, of those forty boys, only four remained Shomer Shabbos. I was fortunate because I used to come to "the club," Pirchei Agudath Israel, and we had a leader by*

the name of Mr. Tress. He gave us a Torah hashkafa; *and he imbued us with a spirit, to remain a* Yid, *to be* marbitz Torah, *to work for Torah. That helped me remain faithful to Torah.*

Rabbi Wolfson's recollections are, unfortunately, an accurate reflection of the fate of far too many youngsters of that era.

Daas Torah *and* Achrayus *to* Klal

Josh recounted the various forces that molded the "survivors" of that era: They were introduced to the concepts of *daas Torah* when the great *Rosh Hayeshiva* of Baranowitz, Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, הי"ד, addressed his Zeirei group at 157 Rodney Street in Williamsburg, during his visit to America in 1939. "Ask questions and I'll try to give you answers from the Torah," he said. So they posed questions—about *chinuch*, about politics, and whatever else—and he shared his *daas Torah* with them. He had a reputation for being strong minded, yet in some ways he impressed the boys as being more broad-minded than many so-called liberals. "When I came to America," he said "everyone said there's no future for Torah in America. It's not true. I traveled throughout the United States, raising funds, and I saw that the beautiful, *Yiddishe Kinder* here are in some ways superior to the children in Europe; more *temimus'dik* (sincere), for sure. But you need people to teach them. The reason American children do not learn Torah is because there's no one to draw them close and show them any interest. It is your task to be *marbitz Torah*! These children will respond to your efforts!"

"At our meetings," Josh recalled, "our Pirchei leader, Reb Elimelech 'Mike' Tress, would tell us whatever he had heard about the Knessia Gedolah (the International Congress of Agudath Israel in Marienbad, in 1938). Even though he often repeated the same information, he had us spellbound because he conveyed it with such warmth and such *hartz*. Our group functioned until we were 14."

Josh recounted that he and his friends had witnessed how Mr. Tress invariably spoke with a *Rosh Yeshiva*—any *adam gadol*—with great deference and *kavod haTorah*, and how he always accepted their views.... "We also wanted to share in that approach," he recalled.

"Similarly, Rabbi ('I am *Mr.* Mendlowitz!') Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, *menahel* of Mesivta Torah Vodaath, had a tremendous impact on us [Josh continued]. In his *mussar shmuessen* in the *Beis Midrash*, he would constantly return to the theme that we must have an *achrayus* for other people. He founded *Aish Das* (forerunner of Bais Medrash Elyon) in Monsey as a *chinuch* institution to prepare *mechanchim* for the future. We were deeply moved by his actions. We were especially impressed with how he had felt that he must bring

> **"Mr. Tress helped me to learn to focus on my goals and to draw courage from my achievements. *Forget about the criticisms!"***

m'challelei Shabbos boys closer to Torah. He invited out-of-town boys to the Mesivta, in effect running the first Shabbaton in America."

Learning to Lead

When Josh was 16 years old, Mr. Tress called a meeting of the members of the old Pirchei group (disbanded by then). He said, "You're the future of *Klal Yisroel*. You have to lead others and become involved in *Klal* activities." Some of them responded to his call by volunteering in the Zeirei office, others eventually became involved in *chinuch*. (Rabbi Moshe Neuman, for example, will undoubtedly attribute the fact that he's *menahel* of the Bais Yaakov of Queens to the spirit and sense of *achrayus* that prevailed in that Pirchei group.)

Reb Elimelech Tress, זצ"ל

Josh became a Pirchei leader at 16, when he was approached by Gershon Kranzler to lead a group of Talmud Torah boys on Moore Street, in Bushwick. This entailed an hour's walk in each direction. On the first two *Shabbosos* he taught them the *Parsha—Chumash* and *Rashi*—which, considering their weak background and lack of interest, was ridiculous. The third *Shabbos*, B.G. (his initials) gave him such a hard time, that Josh announced that he was finished with *chinuch*. The next *Shabbos* B. walked to Josh's house to ask his forgiveness; he promised to be good from then on. ("He was a *vilder chaya* [wild] then," said Josh. "When I met him ten, twelve years ago in *Eretz Yisroel*, he had the same excitable personality, only now he's involved with Torah.") Mr. G. (his father) spoke Yiddish with his son, but was anti-religious. When B.G. refused to open the light on *Shabbos*, Mr. G. locked him in the bathroom (it was 95 degrees), and told him, "Sweat it out (the windows were closed) until you learn to listen to me, and put on the light on *Shabbos*." He did not give in. Many members of that group with similar backgrounds, became leading figures in Torah life.

Rolling With the Punches

"When I was about 20," Josh recalled, "I was walking to Willoughby Street to lead a different Pirchei group. Even though many of the boys there attended yeshiva, they would sneak off to the movies on *Shabbos*. I singled out one boy to read the Torah, to give him a sense of importance. Instead, his father berated me for giving his son 'a job' without pay. This insult, coupled with several other disappointments, convinced me that walking to Willoughby to take care of a *minyan* and *Shalosh Seudos* was not worth the effort.

"When I told Mr. Tress of my intentions, he said to me: 'I'm involved with *Hatzolah* (rescue activites during the war). Whenever I go to Chicago, to Detroit, to raise money, they exclaim, *What wonderful things Zeirei is accomplishing for the Jews in New York—for the people in the Army!* When I come home to 616 Bedford Avenue, all my old friends attack me with complaints about what we are and are not doing. When people criticize you for your work in the public arena, you must rise

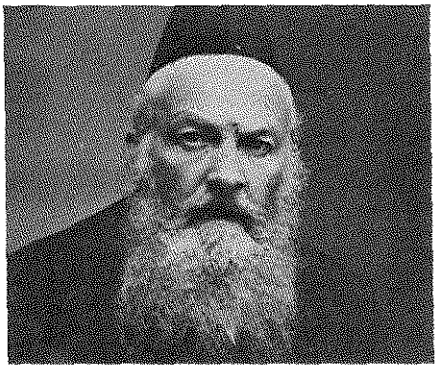
above the situation, and just not listen. You know what you want to accomplish. *You* know it's worthwhile. Just do it, and forget about what people are saying.'

"I had remained with Pirchei until then because I thought I was experiencing *hatzlocha.* You lead a group of *mechallelei Shabbos* kids, you see them change, and you know that you have something to do with their becoming *shomrei Shabbos.* Now Mr. Tress helped me to learn to focus on my goals and to draw courage from my achievements. *Forget about the criticisms!*"

THAT SPECIAL DEDICATION

The youthful enthusiasm, acceptance of guidance from Torah authorities, and selfless dedication to *Klal* that surfaced in his Zeirei Agudath Israel days were all there as Josh continued to teach, lead and guide others throughout his life.

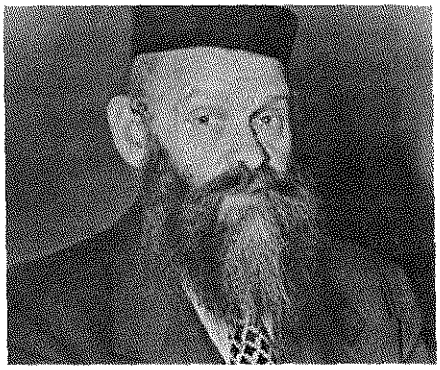
In 1942, Josh was among those who formed the Inter-Yeshiva Student Council, which was organized to convince yeshiva elementary school



Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, הי"ד

graduates to continue their yeshiva education on the high school level. These volunteers spoke to 8th grade classes, and spent many evenings visiting boys at home, conveying to their parents the importance of yeshiva high school. Over the years, hundreds of boys continued in their Torah education as a result of these efforts.

He used his musical gifts to serve as a *chazan* on *Yamim Noraim.* One former *talmid* remembers coming to *shul* on Yom Kippur in Utica, New York, and recognizing the voice of the *chazan.* When he approached his former teacher from many years be-



Reb Shrage Feivel Mendlowitz, זצ"ל

fore, Rabbi Silbermintz looked at him and told him his name, Bar Mitzva *Parsha,* and date of birth. The student was so touched by Rabbi Silbermintz's recall that he reestablished contact with him, which led him to become a *baal teshuva* and ultimately a recognized *talmid chacham.*

That uncanny ability to focus on details, to touch individuals with his unconditional love, surfaced in other ways: He made a practice of sending wedding anniversary cards to friends and associates from over the years. The card always arrived a few days in advance of the intended

date—to celebrate in anticipation, and to subtly remind the spouse who may have forgotten.

Whenever a *talmid* in his class in Toras Emes asked a "good *kashye*," he would note it on a postcard, and mail it to his parents. In a particular case, he sent two postcards—one for the parents of the child, and one for the grandparents (in this case, a *Chassidishe Rebbe*). The grandfather telephoned Rabbi Silbermintz to express his joy and his gratitude. The child, of course, blossomed under the well-planted recognition.

In Pirchei, in the classroom, as in the camp setting, he would take note of a particular talent that a fellow had, and then give him assignments—in speaking, in writing, in leading a group—to develop that talent in service of *Klal*.

PIRCHEI AGUDATH ISRAEL: GROWTH AND CHANGES

Jewish America changed radically in the years between 1934 and 1994; Torah education developed and matured; and the needs of youth changed accordingly. Under Rabbi Silbermintz, the role of Pirchei Agudath Israel as a vehicle for complementing the yeshiva experience also evolved over the decades: from keeping boys away from the movies on *Shabbos* a half century ago, to weekly groups for fun, information, friendship and group identification a generation ago, to *Mishnayos Baal Peh* as a central, galvanizing activity, to a panoply of educationally enriching programs today—all as part of a larger, all-embracing Torah community. Pirchei Agudath Israel still serves its original function of providing a sense of identity to an observant boy who otherwise might feel isolated (the Tucson, Arizona, branch of Pirchei consists of one boy who participates in almost all contests, gets mail addressed to him from 84 William Street, etc.), the emphasis in these past few years has been on special activities and areas of study not touched by the conventional yeshiva. One can not calculate the invaluable results of these pro-

> The youthful enthusiasm, acceptance of guidance from Torah authorities, and selfless dedication to *Klal* that surfaced in his Zeirei Agudath Israel days were all there as Josh continued to teach, lead and guide others throughout his life.

grams in terms of lives affected, *mitzvos* performed, Torah knowledge amassed.

• Residents in nursing homes and retirement facilities are lonely, often out of touch with the important days in the Jewish year. Josh organized members of Bnos Agudath Israel (which he unofficially advised and guided over the decades) to visit these facilities regularly; brought Pirchei kids and musical entertainment groups to perform periodically—bringing happiness and live *Yiddishkeit* to seniors, the joy of doing *mitzvos* to juniors.

• Why shouldn't children recognize, collect and revere likenesses of the holy countenances of our *Gedolei Torah*? Children filled albums with thousands of pictures as part of a "Know Your *Gedolim*" competition, and received prizes from Rabbi Silbermintz. No effort was required of the children other than to collect pictures of *Gedolim*—from old magazines, recent newspapers, cherished wedding albums, or any other format in which they were found. This contest led the participants to focus on greatness in Torah and imbued them with respect for all *Gedolim* of all generations. Many a home still has bulging scrapbooks filled by their children.

Wolf Karfiol—one-time member of a Pirchei group led by Josh, subsequently an active member of Agudath Israel, and close friend and *chavrusa* of Rabbi Silbermintz—reported[2] (in a long, touching tribute to Josh) that he perused over 150 issues of the Pirchei periodical, *Darkeinu*. In the pages were listed the winners of contests dealing with *Shmitta, Pirkei Avos, Shmiras Halashon-Sefer Chofetz Chaim, Hilchos Tefillin* (to be mastered before Bar Mitzva), *Shnayim Mikra V'echod Targum, Kibud Av V'Eim*, Understanding Your *Tefillos, Motza'ei Shabbos* learning programs for fathers and sons....Among the winners listed were many children who subsequently became leaders of Torah Jewry, both as *Rabbonim* and *baalei battim* (lay leaders). Participating in these contests taught them two invaluable lessons: the importance of Torah study, and the value of belonging to a *Klal*.

Mr. Karfiol tells of a friend whose 12-year-old son began learning *Hilchos Tefillin* in *Mishna Berurah*. When the father took out his own set of *Mishna Berurah* to review with his son, he found an award sticker in the inside cover for having won the set as a prize in a Pirchei contest. Rabbi Silbermintz's signature as Pirchei Director made the award official. How many thousands of others have such prizes in their homes and will on some future occasion tap into the memories of their past accomplishments achieved because of Pirchei Agudath Israel and Rabbi Silbermintz?

Someone calculated that over one million *Mishnayos* were learned under Pirchei auspices over the 31 years that it sponsored its study, and hundreds of thousands of hours were spent in Torah study by those who participated in all of the above contests. What a glorious reception these accumulated *Mishnas* and hours must have given Rabbi Silbermintz when he ascended to the *Yeshiva Shel Maalah* on the sad *Erev Pesach*, 5754, when his *neshama* left our surroundings!

THE RANGE OF HIS ACTIVITIES

Because of Josh's love for children and his extraordinary success in *chinuch*, one might lose sight of the fact that the driving force within him—in *chinuch*, as in other pursuits—was an *achrayus* to *Klal*, an *achrayus* that involved him in many other undertakings.

He was a major force in bringing *Hatzolah* (the volunteer emergency medical service) to Crown Heights, and then to Flatbush, when he moved there.

As an active member in the Agudist Benevolent Society, he

[2] This, as well as other points in this article, are taken from Mr. Karfiol's tribute.

Writing a letter in a Sefer Torah in Camp Munk.

worked with others to see that every aspect of *kavod hameis* be honored, and that the plight of the mourners be softened as much as possible. In fact, it was he that suggested that the legs of the standard padded folding chairs be sawed down to accommodate the requirement that *aveilim* sit within three *tefachim* (handbreadths) off the floor.

He personally processed hundreds of thousands of dollars of loans through the Agudist Benevolent's *Gamach* (free loan fund). While he generally involved his family in his numerous undertakings, none of them ever knew who came for what on behalf of whom in the *Gamach*.

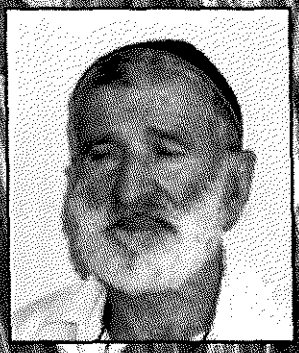
One of his favorite aphorisms was: "Don't be a thermometer, be a thermostat. It is not enough for you to measure the climate in the room. If it is cool or lukewarm in a room, it is your task to raise the level of enthusiasm, to make it piping hot."

One of his favorite aphorisms was: "Don't be a thermometer, be a thermostat. It is not enough for you to measure the climate in the room. If it is cool or lukewarm in a room, it is your task to raise the level of enthusiasm, to make it piping hot."

He saw it as his mission to fire his *talmidim* and his charges with the very same dedication to *Klal* that he was imbued with—a dedication ignited by the words and deeds of Reb Elimelech ("Mike") Tress, the inspiring calls to action of Mr. Mendlowitz, and the lofty model projected by Reb Elchanan. As a matter of course, then, scores of his "boys" learned the lessons of Pirchei Agudath Israel well, and are today's *Roshei Yeshiva, mechanchim*, responsible *baalei battim*, and members and leaders in the Agudath Israel movement.

When Rabbi Silbermintz was honored by Agudath Israel of America in 1986 with the presentation of its prestigious Moreinu Yaakov Rosenheim Memorial Award at the annual dinner, his words of acceptance moved the entire assemblage. He said that although his life's work of *harbotzas haTorah* and the path he had taken for himself had not been an easy one, he had never regretted his choice, and if he had the opportunity to do so again, he would do it with the same dedication and *brenn*. Although he will be sorely missed, the fruits of his efforts and the impact of his inspiration are still very much alive today. ■

If you think "Shmitah 5754" ends on Rosh Hashanah...



Think again!

Dovid Malka, Ovadia Levy, Mordechai Ofir and the 3,493 other farmers who observed Shmitah this year *will* be back in the fields soon after Rosh Hashanah, but they *will not* have any income until the fields produce again, some 4-6 months later.

In fact over $1,000,000 is still needed to tide the farmers over until then.

Now is the final opportunity to show your support for these heroes of the spirit and to participate in a mitzvah that comes around only once in seven years – by sustaining the Shomrei Shviis until they can once again earn a livelihood from the land.

Help make the mitzvah complete! Support Keren Hashviis so that it can continue to subsidize the farmers until their fields are productive again.

YES! I wish to help the more than 3,400 farmers who are observing Shmita 5754 in Eretz Yisroel. Enclosed is my contribution of $_____ to help sustain these heroes of the spirit until their fields can once again become productive.

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Exodus From Work

I am finally bringing myself to write about this because I do not think it is right to leave this chapter of religious discrimination unrecorded. I'll begin right in the middle of the story—Halloween, 1992. I'm at a party. Masks abundant. Make-up shrieking to be noticed. Who's hiding what? It's a Friday afternoon. *Shabbos* starts in three hours.

It's my play being presented at the hospital I work at as a recreation therapist, and I'm told by my boss—who will be doing voice-over narration for one of the ghouls—that he may let me leave early enough for *Shabbos* that day. Depends if all the work gets done. I know he has absolutely no say as to whether I leave or not. When it's 4:00 p.m., I will leave this facility and drive to a friend's nearby apartment, planning my arrival—G-d willing—before sunset. It's a burden on my friend to put me up and a burden on me not to have the comfort of my own apartment (I sleep on his sofa), but I feel that I will do everything in my power to observe *Shabbos* and my employer's work demands—and leaving one hour before candle lighting time to make a 30-40 minute drive home is something that I am not going to push for in this present oppressive climate.

The Halloween play has all the appropriate shrieks and goblins and even a happy ending (I like happy endings). The audience of hospital residents (we don't call them patients), from children to those at or around 100 years old, applaud the play heartily. I make it back to the cast party at five minutes to four. My boss tells me I can leave, which I do.

The Director of Personnel told me that his grandfather had been very religious, but when he came to America he had to make a living so he gave up some of his religious obligations. The implication was, shouldn't I do the same?

Somehow, some way, there had been a change of heart at the hospital I worked at. The year before they had been very accommodating. My father, may he rest in peace, had passed away and I was allowed to change my schedule so that I could always make it to the afternoon service to say Mourner's *Kaddish* and I could leave early enough for *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov*. But as the Torah states, "Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who knew not Joseph." Once treated royally, now turned into slaves. Things changed in Egypt for the Jews, so why should it be such a surprise that it happened to me?

The issue had begun to simmer when I asked my boss—prior to the weekend we set the clocks back—if I could make up the time I missed for leaving early on Friday by working later during the week. (The previous year when I left early on a Friday, I had not been able to work extra during the week; I simply was not paid for it.) My boss informed me that not only couldn't I make the time up, I might not be able to leave early on Friday.

When I took issue with that, I was told to speak with the Director of Personnel, which I did. After all, in my view there was nothing urgent about my late Friday afternoon work that could not be done earlier in the week. And I was the only full-time therapist there who worked consistently on Sundays, so I thought I was bringing my fair share to the table.

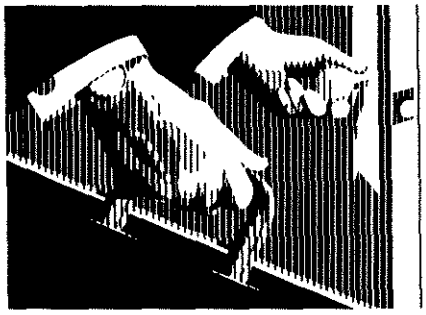
The Director of Personnel told me that his grandfather had been very religious, but when he came to America he had to make a living so he gave up some of his religious obligations. The implication was, shouldn't I do the same?

Now, I like to consider myself a company man, but at this time I decided to listen to what the Big Boss says about the Sabbath. Not that serving two masters was easy.

The next month was fraught with tension as I was told repeatedly that my ability to leave before my normal quitting time of 5:00 p.m. on Friday would be decided on a week-by-week basis. Since I was able to stay with friends nearby, I could work until almost the last possible minute.

I enlisted the aid of my union representative to help extricate me from this predicament, but that did not seem to be getting me anywhere. He was quoting contract in effect that said it was up to the employer to reasonably accommodate me, but in so many words they

Alan Magill, a professional writer and performer, is a recreational therapist in the Aishel Avrohom Nursing Home, in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn.



did not have to if they could say they needed my work. I kept telling him that there was a law that protected me, that superseded any contract, but he did not know of the law and I did not have access to a copy of it.

Around that time, my boss informed me that I would have to work a Saturday—all staff worked it—for a holiday party. I told him I couldn't. He told me if I didn't come in I would be brought up on charges. I had to pick a day off during the week preceding *the* Saturday so I would not work more than five days that week. I saw no point in it since I knew I would not be there Saturday, but I was informed that if I did not pick a day off, one would be picked for me.

The upshot of it was, I lost a day's pay as I was forced to take a day off during the week and, of course, did not show up Saturday. Around that time, I called Rabbi Harold Furst (a family I had stayed with near the hospital) and spoke with the Rebbetzin. I asked if I could stay there the following *Shabbos*. There was a hesitation before she responded, "Yes." I asked, "It's not too much trouble, is it?"

"No," she said, but added that I shouldn't have to leave work so late. Basically, she told me that I shouldn't give in to them, for they were wrong.

And she was absolutely right.

Soon after, I was informed I would have to work my full Friday shift until 5:00 p.m. on a regular basis. This was when candle lighting was around 4:15 p.m. Given absolutely no latitude even to make it to a nearby friend, I informed my boss that I would be leaving at 3:00 p.m. that Friday. Since there would be a Special Event going on at that time at which I had some responsibilities, I asked if I could take on responsibilities that were for the beginning of the program. I was informed I couldn't as I was expected to work the entire program (which I would have if I was told I could leave at 4:00 p.m.). I asked if I could inform the rest of the staff about my early departure so as to alleviate any problems that the residents could incur since I would not be at my post. I was told I couldn't, and furthermore, if anything happened to a hospital resident in my area of responsibility it would be my fault.

I believe very deeply in respecting one's boss, but this was a time I had to go above his wishes. Other people's health was involved. At the next staff meeting, I informed my co-workers I would be leaving at 3:00 p.m. that Friday, before I was virtually shouted down by my boss. I was once again threatened that I would be brought up on charges, this time publicly.

When that Friday came, and 3:00 p.m. came, I felt such a freedom, such a sense of purpose, such a peace, such a connection to my faith.

I got up from my desk and walked out.

I didn't just walk out of a hospital; I walked into something eternal.

Around that time, an inquiry of mine to Agudath Israel had resulted in them mailing me a copy of the law that protects religious rights and it related to my situation. My union representative was eager to see it and I mailed it to him. Apparently he had a conversation with the director of personnel. Soon after, my boss called me into his office and said that my schedule would be changed to 7:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m. on Fridays if I agreed to it.

I agreed.

I hope this article is a source of inspiration for anyone who is going through what I went through. There are laws that protect, it's not just up to the goodness of somebody's heart.

I noted earlier that I like happy endings. A week after I was given the 7-3 shift on Fridays, I was offered and accepted a job at a nursing home that would respect my religious obligations.

As for the hospital, I had won my religious freedom, and it was the right time to leave. And now, I'm more sensitive to seeing "walking into *Shabbos*" as not something to be taken for granted, but to be cherished. ■

All We Take With Us

Here comes a tale of what happened to us,
When we left Eretz Yisroel.
We sent back a lift with all of our stuff.
Big deal. That's a story to tell?

Well, the part that is worth telling
Is we'd lived there for over ten years,
Becoming observant, re-directing our lives,
We returned here with many fears.

How could we ever manage to keep our values straight?
Would Torah start slipping behind?
And then our lift came. We opened it up.
What we were looking for—we did find.

Nearly all our possessions, all of our things,
Had been stolen from us. All our stuff.
The uninsured crates had been broken into.
"Leaving Home wasn't enough!?!"

We realized later, we'd need this "potch,"
Given with complete love, though we'd cried,
The message it brought didn't hit right away.
Only after the pain could subside.

You see, there was just one box left untouched,
One crate into which no thieves had pried.
Can you guess what was in that one heavy box?
All our Torah books were packed inside.

That one box was all that remained.
The symbolism was not lost.
This experience left an indelible mark,
At comparatively little cost.

That's really all we can take with us.
In the other boxes we'll find... nil.
Just the Torah box goes from one world to the next.
So which need we work the hardest to fill?

How could we ever manage to keep our values straight?
What would save us from slipping back yet?
The invaluable lift we were hoping for came.
What we need is precisely what we get.

Mrs. Goetz, a published author, lives in Baltimore. She was represented by a poem, "Dear Mom," in JO Summer '91.

Letters to the Editor

PARENTAL ROLE IN THE PREVALENCE OF *CHUTZPA*

To the Editor:

One of the signs of *Ikvesa d'Meshicha* is *chutzpa yasga*. There is no shortage of examples to verify this statement. The question is, "Are we parents (albeit unintentionally) aiding the issue?" Are parents maintaining their dignity as parents (without being tyrannical) or are they bringing themselves down to be on par with their children?

What image is a mother projecting of herself when she lets her daughter freely choose clothes from her own wardrobe to wear, and when she continually seeks her daughter's advice and suggestions, as if she expects her to know better?

Over the past decade there has emerged, *Baruch Hashem*, a proliferation of wonderful, inspiring and educational Jewish books in the vernacular. However, not everything written is "fit to print," and not everything that is printed for adults is suitable for children. Yet parents indiscriminately send their children to (Jewish) libraries without screening the books the girls take out. Many books are strictly for adults, especially certain *halacha* books, and those on child-rearing and marriage-related subjects. Some books are suitable for older teenagers, but not for 11-12-year-olds. I have heard repeated examples of teenagers turning back on their parents, criticizing, analyzing and disrespecting them after they have pored through books like Miriam Adahan's *Appreciating People* and other books on child-rearing and human relations.

It behooves adherence to *tzenius* as well as common sense for parents not to display certain *halacha* and adult-related books on bookshelves for easy access to curious teenagers (including babysitters). These books should be placed discreetly out of sight. It seems superfluous to have to say that when mothers talk to each other about certain "*veiberische zachen*" (feminine topics), they should make sure that they are out of earshot of teenagers and younger children—yes, even in bungalow colonies!!

A recent experience "took the cake." I attended a public *shiur* for ladies entitled, "The Remarkable Challenge of Raising Young Adults," to be followed by a question and answer session on the subject, "Developing Your Teenager's Self-Esteem." Common sense would dictate that mothers not bring their daughters that evening. I was disturbed to see a mother and teenage daughter sitting in front of me. After twenty minutes into the *shiur*, I braced up the courage and gently suggested to the mother that maybe it would have been more appropriate to leave her daughter home that night. She laughed, shrugged her shoulders and replied, "The place is full of girls!" I personally noticed only a few girls in

the audience, but as the *shiur* progressed, more and more girls walked in and sat down, avidly lapping up all the advice on how their parents should handle them!

Is there any wonder, after such "equal" treatment, that teenagers disrespect their parents? Of course it is of utmost importance to establish a healthy, friendly relationship between parents and children, and we do our best to keep the lines of communication open so that they feel comfortable enough to confide in us and relate to us their inner feelings, thoughts and conflicts. But, if we consider them our equals, not only will they not respect us, they will judge *us* as well—and not necessarily favorably.

NAME WITHHELD BY REQUEST
Brooklyn

WHY AREN'T WE DANCING AND SINGING FOR BEING JEWISH?

To the Editor:

I was taken aback by the Second Looks column, "120 Reasons," in your March '94 issue.

I was very interested in seeing this article because I have been posing this question ("If you had a choice, would you choose to be Jewish?") to many *frum* women, and culling very strange responses.

How far have we gone from the fierce loyalty of our ancestors who were willing to burn at the stake for the truth of *Hashem Echad, Am Yisroel* and *Torah Echad*? How far have we gone from the last generation which can be typified by the story told of a Jew being monstrously beaten by a German, *yemach shemo*, only to answer, "I'd still rather be me—a Jew—than you!"

Is it really tempting to live a life of nothingness—a life empty of meaning—empty of "*Ahava Rabba Ahavtanu*," empty of love of G-d, empty of *Olam Habba*? To whom is this tempting?

To a Jew who has tasted *Shabbos, tzenius, Succos, Pesach, Bar Mitzva, chasuna*, the *kedusha* of a Jewish marriage, *kollel*?

Is it tempting to be a tree?
Is it tempting to be a giraffe?
Is it tempting to be a *golem*?

The Kotzker *Rebbe* said that any Jew who does not dance and sing when he says *Shelo Asani Goy* has not said it properly. Why aren't we dancing and singing? Where is our thanks to *Avoseinu shebat'chu b'cha*, and where is our great anticipation that we can trust that the future belongs to those willing to be proud of the past and thrilled with the present? There is something more important than the work; it's *Kirvas Elokim li tov*—"To me, closeness to G-d is good." What will make us worthy in front of *Beis Din Shel Ma'ala*?

The answer is: *Not for a moment, not for a split second thinking*, "What would I choose? I wonder...."

MRS. DENA WEINBERG
Yerushalayim

Rebbetzin Weinberg is the head of EYAHT, Aish Hatorah's College for Women, in Kiryat Sanz, Jerusalem.

The author responds:

Thank you for your reply. I fully agree with the thrust of your sentiments. Your comments to my article, however, are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of my actual message. In quick summary, my article stated my trepidation about whether, had I been created a non-Jew, I would have had the same conviction as this *giores* had in converting—not, *chas v'shalom*, on my conviction as a Jew to remain a Jew.

MALKA MILLMAN

CORRECTION

In Yonason Rosenblum's PS on Israel's Pursuit of a Secular Jewish Identity (Sept. 94), several words were inadvertently omitted from a quote from Yair Tsaban. The full quotation should read:

> *Prior to Zionism, there had always existed a feeling that the Jewish People and the other peoples of the world stood on opposite sides of the river. Zionism came to take the Jewish people to the other bank of the river, in order to give the Jew a sense of identity with the other nations of the world.*

הקול קול יעקב

בס"ד

ישיבת הר"ן רמות, ירושלים
מיסד ע"י הסטייפלר גאון זצ"ל
ע"ש איש אלוקים נורא
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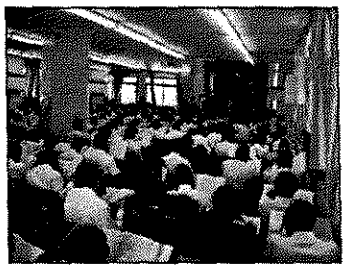

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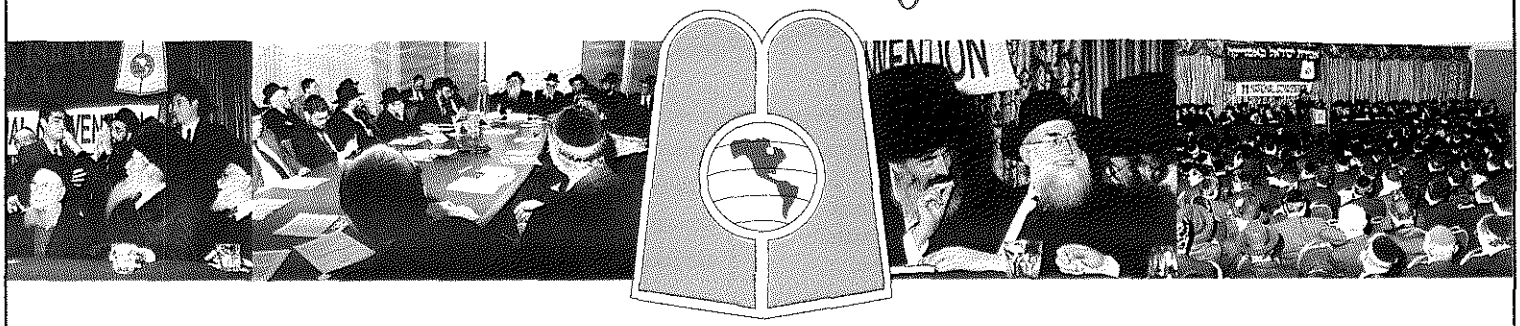

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