

THE Jewish OBSERVER

Adar 5764 • March 2004
U.S.A. \$3.50/Foreign \$4.50 • VOL XXXVII/NO. 3

THE TORAH JEW AND THE MEDIA

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

RABBI ARYEH Z. GINZBERG

RABBI YONOSON ROSENBLUM

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THE JEWISH OBSERVER (ISSN) 0021-6615 is published monthly except July and August by the Agudath Israel of America, 42 Broadway, New York, NY 10004. Periodicals postage paid in New York, NY. Subscription \$24.00 per year; two years, \$44.00; three years, \$60.00. Outside of the United States (US funds drawn on a US bank only) \$12.00 surcharge per year. Single copy \$3.50; foreign \$4.50.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: The Jewish Observer, 42 Broadway, NY, NY 10004. Tel: 212-797-9000, Fax: 646-254-1600. Printed in the U.S.A.

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March 2004
VOLUME XXXVII/NO. 3

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WHY THE MEDIA MATTER

The professor was peeved. Here, the Drew University academic complained to *The New Jersey Jewish News*, he had submitted a news article to the national Jewish newspaper *Forward* exposing how “the yeshiva world has become so extreme,” in fact “the equivalent of the Taliban,” and *Forward* attached a headline to the story that conveyed a totally different impression.

The *Forward* article, about a Beth Medrash Govoha *avreich’s* *sefer* addressing the special nature of *Klal Yisroel*, was far from admiring in its portrayal of the *sefer*, accusing its author of “break[ing] new ground” with “full-blown racist theories” that have “no precedent in rabbinic literature.”

In reaching its conclusion, the arti-

cle cites numerous points that allegedly appear in the *sefer* – although as my colleague Chaim Dovid Zwiebel pointed out in correspondence with *Forward*, many of those citations were gross misinterpretations and distortions of what the *sefer* actually said.

Still and all, the professor cum journalist did have a point. As a result of some behind-the-scenes *shtadlonus* by Agudath Israel and other prominent Orthodox figures, the thrust of his original submission had indeed been changed, and some of the most outrageous elements of his diatribe were omitted. And *Forward’s* headline did note the fact that distinguished chareidi rabbanim had disavowed claims the professor had placed in the author’s mouth.

The inherent bias with which the professor approached his subject, as well as his residual ire at *Forward’s* softening of his message, is as good a hook as any with which to introduce the topic of the good, bad and ugly of the Torah community’s

interaction with contemporary media.

Misleading or erroneous items about Orthodox Jews or Judaism routinely appear in the press, in everything from general readership periodicals like *The New York Times* to the Jewish weeklies published in scores of cities across the country. Whether it was a *Times* article contending that the *mekom hamikdash* is not Judaism’s holiest site, or *Hadassah Magazine’s* assertion that *halacha* considers an expectant mother to be the final arbiter of her fetus’s fate; whether a Jewish academic’s misreading a passage from the *Rambam* as, *chas v’shalom*, condoning spouse abuse or a sociologist’s claim that the chareidi world has made no efforts at *kiruv rechokim*, misinformation about Torah Jews and Torah Judaism abounds in the public sphere.

And those examples (each duly responded to by Agudath Israel) are only from recent months.

Rabbi Shafran serves as Agudath Israel of America’s Director of Public Affairs and as the American director of Am Echad, the Agudath Israel-inspired educational outreach effort and media resource.

A DECADE OF DEMONIZATION

Back in the 1990s, canards about the Orthodox Jewish community were bandied about with even more abandon by misinformed or unethical journalists (who often proudly wrapped themselves in the hallowed robes of the “fearless public servant”). Woodward and Bernstein* wannabees merrily threw not just caution but any semblance of fairness and accuracy to the wind, in their quest to see who could most vividly portray Orthodoxy as backward, intolerant or downright evil, and win whatever prize might be available for such achievement.

Whether fabricating from whole cloth a particularly ugly Orthodox reaction to a provocative women’s prayer-service at the *Kosel Ma’aravi* or contending that Orthodox Jews do not consider their non-Orthodox brothers and sisters to be Jews; whether portraying buses in Bnei Brak which are gender-separated in accordance to the wishes of the riding public as the equivalent of Jim Crow practices of the 1950s American South, or falsely asserting the existence of an epidemic of *kiddushei ketana* (child bride incidents) in the New York Orthodox Jewish community, reporters who claimed to be motivated by high journalistic ideals routinely flouted rudimentary journalistic standards, relying on hearsay, rumors and their own fecund imaginations.

And in that carnival atmosphere, there could be precious little hope that serious but nuanced issues like religious standards in Israel or what goes in this country by the name of “Jewish religious pluralism” could possibly receive fair, thorough and thoughtful airings.

TACKLING THE TACKINESS

Agudath Israel has long maintained the importance of shouldering the difficult and largely thankless task of attempting to wrestle the media mon-

* Pulitzer-prize-winning reporters for the *Washington Post* whose newsbreaking expose of the Watergate break-in precipitated the end of the Nixon presidency.

ster. Under the tutelage of legendary Agudath Israel leader Rabbi Moshe Sherer, זצ"ל, and with the guidance of, *lehavdil bein chaim lechaim* the Rosh Agudas Yisroel, the Novominsker Rebbe, שליט"א, organizational spokesmen, myself included, have reacted – and encouraged and assisted others to react – in op-ed articles, letters-to-editors and correspondence with journalists when misrepresentations of Orthodox Jews and their beliefs have appeared in the press; and we have proactively helped prevent the publication of such misinformation by offering essays on a variety of religious and social issues, and by making ourselves and other responsible Orthodox voices available to reporters from non-Jewish and Jewish media alike.

We labor under no illusions in that endeavor, and maintain a healthy skepticism about the state of contemporary journalism, and in particular Jewish journalism. Much in those fields, even when not blatantly driven by political or social agendas, is nevertheless generously spiked with the preconceptions, biases and bigotries of its processors. There can be little doubt that (as Rabbi Aryeh Zev Ginzberg so eloquently points out elsewhere in this issue) there is something inherently objectionable in the commission of journalism.

But in the end, there can be only two choices with regard to the media: make the *hishtadlus*, the effort, to deal with it, or leave it alone to communicate whatever it wishes to millions, Jews and non-Jews alike.

Taking the latter path may be easy, but it is also irresponsible.

OUTREACH, ACTIVISM AND AUTHENTICITY

To be sure, the American chareidi world has its own media, *baruch Hashem*, these days, with high quality, responsible newspapers and periodicals that disseminate objective news and Orthodox perspectives on the issues of the day.

But those publications are, unfortunately, not read by most of the general public, or even, more unfortunately still,

by the majority of American Jewry. Some may regard those majorities as unworthy of our time or effort, as effectively beyond hope. But we do have an obligation to present the truth to the larger marketplace of ideas, and certainly a deep responsibility to all our fellow Jews. As our *Gedolim* have repeatedly reminded us, every Jewish soul is precious, and so very many American Jews are today on the verge of oblivion. The experience of recent decades, moreover, should serve as a constant reminder that even Jews from the farthest reaches of society are not beyond returning to their ancestral heritage. And whether we like it or not, those Jews get their information – and misinformation – from the media.

Any suspicion I personally ever had that it might be a waste of resources to seek to ensure that Torah viewpoints appear in the non-*frum* or non-Jewish media have been effectively dispelled by the number of communications I have received from readers far and wide whose *neshamos* have been touched by Agudath Israel comments published in such organs. And as every newspaper editor knows, for every letter-writer, caller or e-mail sender who bothered to communicate, there are hundreds of others who were similarly affected but didn’t put phone to ear, pen to paper, or fingers to keyboard. I have no doubt that Orthodox writers in the non-Orthodox press (of which there are, *baruch Hashem*, quite a few) have had a similar experience.

What is more, in our media-conscious – indeed, media-driven – world, interaction with the press is really little more than a logical extension of the *shtadlonus*-efforts that have always been an important part of Jewish perseverance in *galus* (and of Agudath Israel’s work). Although the word *shtadlonus* may more immediately conjure up the image of intercession with governmental institutions, officials, and courts, Jewish communal activism today has come to encompass as well dealing with the formidable and constant stream of information that feeds public – and in fact, as is often the case, governmental – perceptions.

And, especially with voices regularly speaking for Judaism that have no competency or right to do so, it becomes particularly important to ensure that authentic Jewish voices are audible above the din. Indeed, on more than one occasion, the *Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah* (Council of Torah Sages – Agudath Israel’s supreme policy-making body) has itself asked Agudath Israel to take out prominent advertisements in major media to make perfectly clear to the world that objectionable actions or stances by individual Jews or Jewish groups are disavowed by true upholders of the Jewish religious heritage.

A DANGEROUS NEIGHBORHOOD

To be sure – as I can unhappily attest from personal experience – there are considerable risks entailed in the venture of media interaction. A reporter bent on promoting a jaundiced view of Torah-committed Jews or Judaism can twist even the most straightforward comment into something very different from its intent. Words can be taken jarringly out of their context, and sentences mangled with malice aforethought.

The good news is that such utter unconcern with truth or fairness is relatively rare. In my near-decade of dealing with the media on behalf of Agudath

A reporter bent on promoting a jaundiced view of Torah-committed Jews or Judaism can twist even the most straightforward comment into something very different from its intent. The good news is that such utter unconcern with truth or fairness is relatively rare

Israel, only one reporter’s name resides on my “do not talk to” list, for having repeatedly exhibited a disdain for accuracy and a ridiculously obvious anti-Orthodox bias.

More common – although meriting no small amount of caution themselves – are reporters who may harbor preconceptions about, or even bias against, the Orthodox world or its beliefs, but who at least make a determined effort to prevent their prejudices from informing their reportage. Sometimes they are successful, all too often they are not.

CASTING LIGHT, OFFERING INCENTIVES

The unsuccessful efforts of several such reporters, as well as the transgressions of some of their

colleagues in the first category, were the focus of an article I penned nearly four years ago for *Moment Magazine*, a non-denominational Jewish monthly read, overwhelmingly, by non-Orthodox Jews. The magazine’s cover art perfectly captured the essence of the piece; it portrayed a stack of supermarket tabloids whose headlines screamed the genre’s characteristically outlandish allegations – but about Orthodox Jews (“El Nino: Orthodox Plot!” read one of the quotable screamers). The article itself examined a number of irresponsible media claims about the Orthodox community that turned out to have been without basis.

The reporters at fault for those stories were understandably disturbed by the public exposure of their not-very-well-hidden biases. One, at the time a writer for the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, asked me no less than four times over ensuing years for copies of the article, in order to identify the “clear errors” it supposedly contained. I faxed it once, mailed it once, and e-mailed it twice, and to date I haven’t received a response. Another (at the time a *New York Times* correspondent) seemed thereafter to no longer report on religious matters, and eventually left the paper. Whether or not being presented with the evidence of their shoddy reporting made them or their superiors doubt their objectivity, there can be little doubt that the possibility of the exposure of their journalistic sins is a considerable incentive for reporters to be more careful about letting their biases show.

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Indeed, just the knowledge that Orthodox Jews are watching and are unafraid of calling attention to journalistic sloppiness has an effect, and makes media interaction not only worthwhile but part of basic self-defense. Especially in light of recent months' exposure of a number of major media reporters as liars and the resignations of top officials at *The New York Times* and the *British Broadcasting Corporation* as a result of journalistic irresponsibility, letting reporters or editors know when they have erred, and being available to them when they are writing their stories, are potent means of promoting responsible and accurate reportage.

COMPOUND INTEREST

Aside from the invisible fruit of story-ideas dumped and rumors ignored, efforts to rein in the press can bring about positive admissions of error and even changes. Take references over past years in *The New York Times* to Yigal Amir, Yitzchak Rabin's assassin, as "ultra-religious" and even as a "Torah scholar." Letters to *The Times* by Agudath Israel Executive Vice President Rabbi Shmuel Bloom and myself taking issue with those descriptions have been published in the paper, and an article that appeared on January 20 about Amir finally characterized him, accurately, only as a "ferent nationalist."

Or consider a report in that same paper on May 7 that referred to the car accident that touched off the Crown Heights riots of 1991 and described the Orthodox ambulance crew as having chosen to treat the Jewish driver of the car rather than the black child whom it had struck. An immediate protest from our offices (that included quotes from a court's findings on the events) resulted in the publication of a prominent correction the next day, noting that the police had ordered the ambulance crew to leave with the driver, who was being attacked at the time by a mob.

Or another correction that recently ran in *The Times*. As mentioned

above, an article on a Middle East peace plan presented the *Kosel*, rather than the *Har HaBayis*, as "Judaism's holiest spot." It stated that "Israel would cede sovereignty over a flash point shrine... known to the Jews as the Temple Mount.... Israel would retain control of the Western Wall, Judaism's holiest site." This was misinformation with an apparently political/diplomatic aim – to imply that since Israel would receive "Judaism's holiest spot," it had little reason to oppose the plan in question.

But whatever the merits or demer-

its of the plan, the historical distortion was glaring, as we pointed out in a series of e-mails to the paper's ombudsman. As a result of those efforts, a correction finally appeared on the last day of 2003.

Likewise, Agudath Israel letters and opinion pieces in papers like *Forward* or the *New York Jewish Week* have offered responsible points of view in opposition to those of their editorial pages, and helped set the record straight regarding a number of issues that had been misrepresented in news stories.

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- Only 400 invited guests may be seated at the *chassuna seuda*.
- The *kabbolas panim* smorgasbord should be limited to basic cakes, fruit platters, a modest buffet, and the caterer's standard chicken or meat hot dishes.

- The menu for the *seuda* is limited to 3 courses followed by a regular dessert.
- No Viennese table and no bar.

THE MUSIC

- A band may consist of a maximum of 5 musicians (one of the musicians may act as a vocalist) or four musicians and one additional vocalist.
- A one-man band is recommended.

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Accomplishments like those may seem minor, but when they are multiplied by the numbers of people who are exposed to them, and compounded by the effect they have on future reportage, the yield is not minor at all.

ELUSIVE OBJECTIVITY

And then there are the truly objective and professional reporters, those who have no axes to grind, nor scores to settle, but only a determination to present a fair and accurate picture of their subjects. These are rare birds, indeed, but they do exist. One such correspondent (a non-Jew, as it happens) for years covered religion for *The New York Times*. As a self-imposed act of penance for mistakenly implying in print that there was only one yeshiva in the Orthodox world, he took it upon himself (after being apprised of his error by Agudath Israel) to make a trip to a large out-of-town yeshiva campus. He subsequently produced a thoughtful and objective portrait for his paper of the idealism and Jewish scholarship he perceived there. Unfortunately (and, perhaps, tellingly), he has since left the field of journalism for academia.

The bottom line, though, is that, bad, mediocre or wonderful, the media does just what its name implies: it mediates — between facts and the public. Keeping the medium from distorting its message is not a task to be taken lightly, and it is certainly not one to be ignored. ■

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With Kindness and RESPECT

My family has recently experienced a most difficult week, the observance of *shiva* following the passing of my mother, Mrs. Selma Finkelman, ז"ל. In this time of loss and sadness, we drew strength from the opportunity to share with others many lessons we learned from my mother, and we drew strength from the memories that others shared with us.

Particularly inspiring were the condolences calls paid by non-Jews who crossed paths with my mother; inspiring, because these memories, perhaps more than any other, bore testimony to what Rabbi Yisroel Lefkowitz, her employer for the last 30 years, said of her: "She was a living *kiddush Hashem*. Our employees, both Jew and non-Jew, looked to her as someone to emulate."

As one gentile put it, "Nowadays, most people use G-d as their spare tire; but your mother used Him as her steering wheel."

Rabbi Finkelman, a *rebbe* in Yeshiva Darchei Torah, Far Rockaway, NY, is a frequent contributor to these pages, most recently, "The Chazon Ish זצ"ל" (Nov. '03). He is the author of several biographies published by ArtScroll Mesorah Publications.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF AVRAHAM

In truth, this should not be inspiring at all, for as our Sages taught: "Every Jew is obligated to say: 'When will my actions touch those of my forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov?'"¹ And *Sifrei* comments regarding the commandment to love Hashem:² "Make Him beloved to all people as did your forefather Avraham."

We are familiar with the Torah's description of Avraham's magnanimous kindness towards the angels who were disguised as wayfarers,³ and of the wayfarers' inn that he established and through which he taught others to recognize and praise Hashem.⁴

Our Sages relate that Avraham would not wait for guests to arrive at his door. Instead, he would actively search for guests. Upon finding them and bringing them to his inn, he would inquire what sort of foods they were accustomed to eating. He would then serve them food and drink that was superior to whatever they were accustomed to eating.⁵

After eating and drinking their fill, Avraham's guests would bless him and

he would respond, "Do you think that you have eaten of what is mine? You have eaten of the One Who spoke and the world came into being!" The guests would then acknowledge the beneficence of Hashem, the One and Only G-d.⁶

What inspired Avraham to demonstrate such benevolence? The late Manchester Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Yehuda Zev Segal זצ"ל, explained:

Avraham may have had an innate tendency toward *chessed*, but this was not the driving force behind his benevolence. Avraham strove to help his fellow man because he had come to recognize His Creator's existence and he perceived that G-d's purpose in creating this world was "to give of His goodness unto others."⁷ Avraham understood that Hashem desires that man emulate His attributes. Hashem knows the needs of His every creation and provides for each according to his or her particular situation. As a parallel to this attribute, Avraham perfected within himself the quality of *nosei b'ol im chaveiro* – sharing his friend's burden. When Avraham would see a wayfarer coming down the road, he

imagined himself as that hungry, weary and lonely wayfarer. The way in which the wayfarer was welcomed reflected Avraham's unrelenting, incomparable pursuit of *chessed*.⁸

KINDNESS FOR ALL

The great people among us have always excelled in their *chessed* towards all human beings and in this way, they sanctified the Name of Hashem.

Bernie, the gentile custodian of Beth Medrash Govoha, revered its Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Aharon Kotler. No effort was too great for Bernie if there was something that Reb Aharon needed.

The night of Reb Aharon's passing, Bernie stood in the lobby of the yeshiva building with his head bowed in mourning. "The Rabbi was a saint," he told someone. "You see the coat that I am wearing? Rabbi Kotler gave it to me."

* * *

Rabbi Mendel Kaplan was a much beloved *maggid shiur* at the Talmudical Yeshiva of Philadelphia.

An obese, gentile woman of advanced years lived on Reb Mendel's block. Each morning, she would walk to a restaurant several blocks away for breakfast. One wintry morning, as this woman was plodding through the deep snow to the restaurant, Reb Mendel drove by. From the other side of the avenue, Reb Mendel rolled down his car window and called to her, "Mary, wait! I'll take you!" With some difficulty, he turned his car around in the snow and gave her a ride to the restaurant. After she finished eating, she was shocked to see the rabbi's car still at the

curb in front of the restaurant. Reb Mendel had waited the entire time to take her back home.

The woman later met Reb Mendel's wife and related the entire episode. "Your husband is not a person," she concluded, "he's an angel."⁹

However, Avraham's lovingkindness towards his fellow man is not his only legacy to us in regard to our relations with non-Jews, as is beautifully explained by Rabbi Eliyahu E. Dessler in *Michtav M'Eliyahu*.¹⁰

RESPECT FOR ALL

The final test of Avraham's life came when he returned from the *Akeida* to find that his wife, Sarah, had died. He knew that it was G-d's will that she be buried in the Cave of Machpeila, and for this he needed to deal with the lowly *Chittim*, a Canaanite tribe. As Rabbi Dessler explains, the *Chittim* knew that G-d had bequeathed their land to Avraham, which is why they referred to Avraham as "a prince of G-d."¹¹ Nevertheless, they sought to deny him ownership of the parcel of land that he desired.¹²

Thus, at a time when Avraham had to weep over his righteous wife and eulogize her, he also had to deal with a lowly people who, while acknowledging their respect of him, were at the same time being difficult about honoring his request.

And how did Avraham react? He spoke to them with exemplary respect and bowed to them more than once.

Surely, says Rabbi Dessler, Avraham was not flattering them in order to get what he wanted. Heaven forbid for Avraham to engage in such deception! He accorded them great respect because he knew that this is what Hashem expected of him.

Rabbi Dessler explains:

The root of this requirement lies in our obligation towards a human being because he is a human being. As the *Mishna* states: "Beloved is man, for he was created in G-d's image."¹³

...It is also taught that Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was always first to extend greetings to someone — including a non-Jew — when meeting him in the street.¹⁴ Let us consider the stature of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai. He was fluent in Scripture, *Mishna*, *Gemora*, *Halacha*, *Aggada*, Scriptural derivations, Rabbinic enactments, astronomical cycles, *gematrios*, speech of the Heavenly angels, and the workings of the Heavenly chariot.¹⁵

...He was the *Nasi* (Prince) of the Jewish people at the time of the Second Destruction; all the needs of the nation rested upon his shoulders. Yet he was never too preoccupied with his thoughts to forget to extend greetings to anyone — including a non-Jew. [Apparently,] he felt such conduct to be obligatory and this feeling guaranteed his utmost devotion to showing respect for all human beings.

IN EVERY GENERATION

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Rabbi Chaim Twersky, a distinguished Rav and a former chaplain at Maimonides Medical Center, once addressed a group of nurses and in the course of his remarks, mentioned the name of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein. "Oh!" exclaimed Shirley, a non-Jewish nurse. "I know Rabbi Feinstein. He's a real rabbi!"

Rabbi Twersky could not imagine how this woman could know Reb Moshe, and said that she must be confusing this Torah sage with someone else. No, Shirley insisted, there was no mistake. She was speaking of the famous Rabbi Feinstein. She had been the house-nurse for one of Reb Moshe's newborn great-grandsons, at whose bris Reb Moshe served as sandak. As he was being wheeled out following the bris, Reb Moshe made a point of turning around in his wheelchair to say good-bye to the nurse. This show of respect had made an indelible impression on her.

This nurse called Reb Moshe's family after his passing to express her condolences. "I remember how the Rabbi smiled and wished me a good day," she recalled. "I could see that in his eyes I was important."

* * *

The day on which Rabbi Avraham Pam was to enter the hospital for major surgery, he left the Mesivta Torah Vodaath building to be driven home by Rabbi Avrohom Biderman. They started to walk to the car when Rav Pam abruptly turned around and said that he had to return to the yeshiva. They entered the building's lobby, where a Hispanic maintenance worker was mopping the floor. "Good morning," said Rav Pam with a smile. The worker returned the greeting and Rav Pam left the building.

"I always say 'Good morning' to him," Rav Pam told Mr. Biderman. "But I was so preoccupied with my thoughts that I did not greet him when we left the first time."

* * *

Soon after Rabbi Mendel Kaplan passed away suddenly, someone brought his car to the auto shop that he had always used. One of the gentile workers recognized Reb Mendel's car and asked, "Where's the Rabbi?" When told that Reb Mendel had passed away, the man sat down and began to cry. "I know all I am is a simple mechanic, but the Rabbi treated me like I was a

special human being," he explained. "He used to take an interest in my life and that made me feel like a million dollars. No one in the world made me feel as good as the Rabbi did."

LESSONS FROM MY MOTHER

In my parents' neighborhood, there lives an elderly woman whom my mother would phone daily and visit every Shabbos. During the shiva, we were visited by this woman's non-Jewish attendant. She was too overcome with emotion to speak; all she could manage to say was, "Your mother, your mother...!" I later asked my sister about this and she explained:

Whenever my mother visited the elderly woman, she always greeted the attendant and inquired about her well-being. When the attendant was broken after her own mother passed away, my mother hugged her as she expressed her condolences. The attendant later commented how much she appreciated this gesture. Whenever my mother brought *mishloach manos* for the elderly woman, she brought a gift of food for the attendant. Similarly, when she brought a Chanuka gift for the elderly woman, she would bring something for the attendant.

The day after my mother's funeral, a Hispanic man came bounding up the

TRANSPORTATION AND INSPIRATION

There is a car service one block from my parents' house, staffed by Jews from the former Soviet Union. When these drivers were informed that my mother had passed away a few days earlier, they expressed dismay that they had not been informed about the funeral. They would have come. For there was something about the way my mother spoke to them, about her *menslichkeit* and the way she tipped the drivers and always thanked them for the ride, that seems to have touched them all. They will miss her.

And so will we. But we take some measure of comfort from the lessons she taught, which hopefully will always remain an inspiration.

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stairs. He is the driver who runs errands for my mother's place of work. "I just saw the sign about your mother," he exclaimed. "I'm so sorry. She was such a nice lady ... such a nice lady!" And he began to cry.

In the doctor's office where my mother received chemotherapy, she made a profound impression on the staff, including a non-Jewish nurse. This woman was so taken by my mother's warmth and wisdom that she confided in my mother regarding her personal life and sought her advice. For

her part, my mother appreciated this nurse's kindness and on at least one occasion brought home-baked cookies to the office for this nurse to share with her children.

This was my mother's way throughout her life. Forty years ago, our family moved out of its tiny apartment above a store, which was adjacent to an apartment building. I was too young to take note of how my parents acted towards that building's superintendent; but I do know that as our moving truck pulled away, the superintendent cried.

A NATION APART

In no way does the above contradict our status as G-d's Chosen People. To the contrary, at the time of the giving of the Torah, the Jewish people were charged with the mission of being a *mamleches Kohanim*, a kingdom of ministers, who ultimately will lead all of mankind to an understanding and acceptance of man's Divine mission in this world. This can come about only if the other nations recognize in us the sublime way of life and through interaction with others that stamp us as a nation of Torah.

A young man in Brooklyn's Torah community works in Manhattan and often takes a taxi to work. One day as he alighted from the taxi an avenue block from his office, another Orthodox Jew entered the cab. The Hispanic driver told his new passenger: "You saw that fellow who just left this cab — do you know what he told me? He works a block away from here, but he gets out here because it's right by the subway. This way, I'm sure to get a new customer as soon as he gets out of the cab. So he walks a whole block just to help me out!"

"I see why G-d made you the Chosen People."

Nor does the above discussion contradict the need for a Torah Jew to maintain *havdala*, separation, from the non-Jewish culture around him and avoidance of social interaction with those of other faiths, lest he be adversely influenced by them. In fact, my mother had a heightened appreciation for the need to remain apart. For example, she was troubled by the proliferation of kosher eating places that specialize in foods of other nationalities. She would ask, "Have you ever seen a *treifa* (non-kosher) restaurant advertise that it sells 'kosher-style gefilte fish and kugel'? Of course not! So why must we eat Chinese or Italian food?"

This understanding was also reflected in her way of dress. She dressed tastefully, but the idea of being "in style" was anathema to her. She was from the school of thought once articulated by the Manchester Rosh Yeshiva, who said:

Who are the designers of these fashions and what guidelines do they use

11 Kids SPEAK

ילדים זועקים מקירות לבם...

בס"ד

To our dear compassionate brothers,

We turn to you, because we have nowhere else to turn. We are eleven siblings, and our family is penniless. We are drowning in debts and there is no ישועה in sight. We cannot complain to our parents for they are not to blame. Time and again they have tried to establish themselves on their own, but unfortunately failure has met every attempt. Our parents are crushed and degraded being that they cannot provide for even our basic needs. So now, instead of turning to them and seeing their anguish, their pain and their shame — we turn to you for help.

Poverty is a most bitter fate — it is no wonder that חז"ל compare the poor to the dead! A visit to our home would prove that this is no mere expression. Our parent's eyes are dull & lifeless — our home is devoid of joy! **PLEASE**, your kind assistance will not only feed our bodies, but revive our spirits as well.

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in originating their designs? They are secularists and, more often than not, immoral. Their goal is to design a style that will attract the attention of men. In other words, these styles are a direct contradiction to the attribute of *tzenius*, modesty, that is the hallmark of Jewish daughters. This is not to say that a Jewish woman cannot dress nicely. Certainly she can, but she must do it with *tzenius*.¹⁶

Havdala means to recognize our status as G-d's Chosen People and maintain a higher standard in all areas of life, a standard that unequivocally identifies us as the nation of Torah. It means to insulate ourselves, our families and our homes from the decadent culture of secular society. *Havdala* does not mean to view people of other faiths as non-entities, to be insensitive to their feelings and needs. This sort of attitude can only lead to *chillul Hashem*.

A famous Talmudic passage states that when a Jew deals honestly in business and speaks pleasantly, then people say of him, "Fortunate is the father who taught him

Torah, fortunate is the teacher who taught him Torah!"¹⁷ Rabbi Matisyahu Salomon noted that the term "people" includes non-Jews. A Jew must ensure that at all times his behavior and manner of speech is of a type that glorifies *Hashem's* Name before all human beings. Such is the way of Torah.

A LIGHT FOR OUR BRETHREN

In concluding his discussion of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai's way of greeting non-Jews, Rabbi Dessler writes:

And if this is how he felt towards non-Jews, then surely this was true in his attitude towards Jews, of whom it is stated, "Beloved are the people of Israel, for they are called Children of *Hashem*."¹⁸

Let us not forget that *kiddush Hashem* is not limited to sanctifying G-d's Name in the presence of non-Jews. To the contrary, the verse from which we derive this *mitzva* states, "And I [*Hashem*] will be sanctified

among the Children of Israel."¹⁹ In another essay, Rabbi Dessler writes that a person must first work to sanctify *Hashem's* Name before other Jews by teaching them the proper way, and from there he should proceed to the next level, to sanctify His Name before the nations.²⁰ ■

¹ *Taana D'vei Eliyahu Rabba*, Ch. 25.

² *Devarim* 6,4.

³ *Bereishis* Ch. 18.

⁴ *Ibid.* 21,33. See *Rashi*.

⁵ *Avos D'Rav Nosson* Ch. 7.

⁶ *Sota* 10a.

⁷ *Derech Hashem* Ch. 2.

⁸ *Inspiration and Insight*, Vol. II, p. 151.

⁹ From *Reb Mendel and His Wisdom*, by Rabbi Yisroel Greenwald, published by ArtScroll/Mesorah.

¹⁰ Vol. IV, pp. 245-247.

¹¹ *Bereishis* 23,6; see *Ramban*.

¹² See *Malbim* to *Bereishis* 23,5.

¹³ *Avos* 3:18.

¹⁴ *Berachos* 17a.

¹⁵ *Sukka* 28a.

¹⁶ *Inspiration and Insight*, Vol. I, p. 298.

¹⁷ *Yoma* 86a.

¹⁸ *Avos* 3:18.

¹⁹ *Vayikra* 22:32.

²⁰ *Michtav M'Eliyahu*, Vol. III, p. 118.

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Junk Genes

In The Eye Of The Beholder

“FILLER” NO LONGER

In journalism, there is something called “filler,” referring to items of little or no newsworthiness, which are printed only to fill up what would otherwise be empty white space in the columns of a newspaper. That’s how scientists used to relate to vast amounts of seemingly purposeless human genetic material. They called it “junk DNA,” a kind of genetic filler that the processes of evolution had blindly deposited inside us, taking up space for no particular reason.

Scientists do not think that way anymore, at least not about DNA. For one of the most important breakthroughs in genetic research in the first years of the new century concerns “junk DNA.” As *The Washington Post* reported late last year: “The huge stretches of genetic material dismissed in biology classrooms for generations as

Rabbi Rutman teaches *Gemora* to beginners in Yeshivas Ohr Yaakov, which is located in Zichron Yaakov in *Eretz Yisroel*. This article appeared in the November 13th, 2002 edition of *The Jewish Tribune* (UK). His article, “Something to Think About” was featured in *JO* May ’03.

‘junk DNA’ actually contain instructions essential for the growth and survival of people and other organisms, and may hold keys to understanding complex diseases such as cancer, strokes and heart attacks...” The report went on to say that “the new analyses shocked scientists...” My goodness, there’s a lot more that matters in the human genome than we had realized,’ said Eric Lander, director of genome research at the Whitehead Institute for Biomedical Research in Cambridge, Mass., and a primary author of the new work. ‘I feel we’re dramatically closer now to...being able to understand the basis of disease.’” (from Justin Gillis, “Genetic Code of Mouse Published,” *Washington Post*, December 5, 2002)

The textbooks are being revised to reflect this major discovery. One has to wonder, though, whether those who were responsible for the original erroneous text will be revising their attitudes, as well. Rabbi Avigdor Miller pointed the finger of blame at atheism in general, evolutionism in particular. This is because if you think of the world as an accident, it doesn’t have to be perfect; on the con-

trary, imperfection should be built in. An imperfect evolutionary scheme can be expected to produce useless and destructive things. To the secular scientific mind, the discovery of waste or dysfunction at the heart of creation is not only not a disappointment, it is a confirmation of first principles.

Jewish tradition teaches a very different attitude toward the world that *Hashem* created. In *Avos* (4:3) it says: “Do not be scornful of any person; do not be disdainful of any thing, for you have no person without his hour, and you have no thing without its place.” *Shlomo Hamelech* teaches: “One who despises something will suffer from it” (*Mishlei* 13,13).

His father, *David Hamelech*, experienced this truth personally on three occasions. The Midrash relates that King David questioned the need for insanity, fleas, and spiders. When he was captured by Achish, King of Gath, he escaped harm by feigning insanity (*Shmuel I* ch. 21). When David wanted to take the spear of the sleeping King Shaul, a flea bit Shaul and caused him to lift his leg, thus allowing David access to the spear (*Shmuel I* ch.26). Lastly, when

David was hiding from Shaul in a cave, the Holy One sent a spider to spin a web across the entrance. Shaul came, saw the web, and thought, "Surely no man has entered here," thus sparing David once again from harm. (*Aleph Beis deBen Sira, Otzar HaMidrashim* 47.— See ArtScroll *Ethics of the Fathers*, p. 223.)

More generally, *Tiferes Yisroel* says that the *Mishna* cautions against denying significance to any part of G-d's creation. No matter how puny, repulsive or harmful, every creature has its role to play in manifesting G-d's glory in the world. Even the lowliest insects perform an important function in purifying the air of disease-carrying microbes. And if they are not needed in this time and place, they are needed elsewhere. As it says: "All that the Holy One, Blessed is He, created in His world, He created solely for His glory" (*Avos* 6:11).

THE GENES OF THE WORLD

There is a certain poetic justice, too, in the discovery of purpose in the seemingly useless parts of the human genome. There is a well-known passage in the *Zohar* that states that "G-d looked into the Torah and created the world." This is commonly compared to a builder consulting a blueprint. Just as a builder follows the plans drawn up by the architect when building the physical structure, so too G-d used the Torah as the blueprint for creation, the plan from which he formed the physical universe.

Rabbi Akiva Tatz explains that the analogy is closer to that of genetic code. "The Torah is not simply a plan in the sense of an architect's drawings; it is a plan in the sense of genes which themselves actually carry out the construction of the organism which results from the code carried in those genes.... The Torah is the genetic material of the world." Genes are not a passive plan describing what is or should be, but "they are the reason that the body looks as it does, they are the instructions and the mechanism which construct the physical. In fact, the body is a reflection of the genes!" (*Worldmask*, p. 14.)

Furthermore, as Rabbi Moshe

Shapiro teaches, the physical world is a manifestation of Torah, of all the revelations of G-d contained therein. As such, the world reflects the laws of the Torah. One of the fundamental laws of the Torah is that a single word or letter missing from (or mistakenly added to) the traditional text renders it invalid. In other words, nothing in the Torah is superfluous, and its entirety is perfection. The physical world, which reflects the Torah, is therefore also letter-perfect; nothing lacking, nothing superfluous. As the *Mishna* in *Ethics of the Fathers* says, "Everything has its place" (see *Mama'akim, Bereishis*).

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How wonderfully fitting, then, that the lesson of the purposefulness of all creation should be learned from the human genome. For just as there is nothing superfluous in the Torah, which is the genetic material of the world, so too is there nothing superfluous in the genetic code itself.

**DISCOVERY AND CELEBRATION
– ONE ROCK AT A TIME**

On the other hand, one who believes in a Creator and a purposeful world, though he will

not be able to explain perfectly every phenomenon in nature, need not be daunted or discouraged by functions that do not seem exactly to sing joyfully of a Higher Intelligence. It is enough, as Rabbi Miller has noted, that we see the signature of the Creator on one rock in the desert; it is not necessary to see it on every rock. But the fact that we see it in so many places is reason for celebration.

Just because we cannot explain everything does not mean that we do not understand anything. On the con-

trary, one who believes in a Creator Whose wisdom accounts for the infinite wonders of the universe should also realize that he cannot expect to fathom all the manifestations of that wisdom. “*Ma gadlu ma’asecha...How great are Your works!*” The greatness of creation is in the recognition that there is a power and a wisdom that is beyond us. If we would understand it all, it would diminish its greatness, not magnify it.

All of this does not mean, however, that the Torah Jew should disdain the accomplishments of science, or view it as a threat to Jewish belief. Science at its best is a deep description of the world *Hashem* created; and as such, there really should be no conflict between science and Torah. When there does appear to be conflict, careful analysis is required to pinpoint where the error lies, either in the interpretation of scientific data or the interpretation of Torah. Sometimes, there is no ready solution; but as the saying goes, nobody ever died from a *kashya*.

Actually, it would be inadequate and misleading to say that theoretically there is no conflict between Torah and science. Not only is science compatible with Torah; it is a necessary part of it. The *Kuzari* points out that large sections of Jewish law demand a knowledge of the physical world. Calculating the months and leap years of the calendar requires a knowledge of astronomy, avoiding forbidden mixtures of plant species needs a knowledge of agronomy, a proper understanding of the parameters of *sukka* construction cannot be had without trigonometry. The Vilna Gaon’s admonition – that to the extent that one is ignorant in secular disciplines, so will his comprehension of Torah be impoverished – still stands. The Gaon himself mastered many disciplines, and became known to the world of mathematics for his authorship of *Kramer’s Theorem*.

TWO PATHS, ONE GOAL

Indeed, because these branches of knowledge are so integral to Torah law, *Yaaros Devash* states that it must

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be that they were transmitted with the Torah itself at Sinai. Time and the rigors of exile and persecution did their work, however, and the knowledge was largely lost from tradition. The authentic advances of modern science represent a recovery of that which was once part and parcel of Torah wisdom.

Nevertheless, as is quite obvious, the pursuit of science certainly does not necessarily lead to belief in Torah, or even in the existence of G-d at all. It's perplexing. The *Rambam* (*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah* 2,2) states that the path to recognizing the Creator is through the contemplation of nature. How can it be, then, that so many scientists, who have devoted their entire lives to studying the physical world, whose intimacy with the wonders of the Creator far surpass that of the average person, seem nevertheless unmoved to any religious belief?

At the very beginning of the *Baal HaTurim's* commentary to *Bereishis*, he quotes the *Midrash Rabba*: "For this reason, [the Torah] began with a 'Beis' and not an 'Aleph,' because *Beis* is a language

of blessing [*baruch*], and *Aleph* is a language of cursing [*arur*]. Said the Holy One, Blessed is He, I will begin with a *Bais*, with the language of blessing, and perhaps it will stand" (*Chagiga Yerushalmi* 2:1).

The question is asked: In *Parshas Yisro*, the Ten Commandments begin with the letter *Aleph* ("Anochi HaShem Elokecha..."). Why is it that the creation must commence with a letter of blessing, whereas the giving of the Torah can start with a letter associated with cursing?


Rabbi Zev Leff has suggested that the answer lies in a proper understanding of the abovementioned statement of the *Rambam*. The *Rambam* did not mean that the two paths to G-d are equal. True, nature can inspire a person to the love of G-d; but Torah study is the preferred path. For Torah contains the explicit teachings of G-d's existence and His laws; the physical world, on the other hand, speaks primarily to those who are looking for G-d. It is usually only they who hear the song of praise to the

Creator in every living thing. Those who wish to ignore it will find explanations for natural phenomena in evolution and a host of other natural forces. It is for that reason that the story of creation had to begin with a *Beis*; the language of blessing was necessary to counter the tendency to view nature as a power independent of any Divinity. The Ten Commandments, on the other hand, which on their own proclaim the existence of G-d, did not require it. So there, the starting point and encapsulation of all Torah could begin with the first letter of the *Aleph-Beis*.

It is little wonder, then, that scientists are not flocking to religion. They perceive in the physical universe what they wish to perceive, what they are trained to perceive. Even the discovery that the junk in the genetic code was only in the eye of the beholder is not likely to shake the underlying assumptions of the average scientist. But for those of us who behold the signature of G-d in the wonders of nature, these latest discoveries should be a source of inspiration. ■

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A Visit With The Rebbetzin

A Cold, Rainy Morning in Bnei Brak

“I knew I shouldn’t have told my mother that I was going to see a *Rebbetzin* for advice. She would never understand. How could she? I should rather have told her about my shopping spree.”

So said one of the eight women sitting in the anteroom-cum-porch waiting to meet Rebbetzin Kanievsky, the wife of the great sage, Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky שליט"א. A friend of mine had convinced me the day before that we needed a spiritual overhaul, and that getting a *beracha* from the *Rebbetzin* would do the trick. We set out the following morning in very inclement weather — biting cold wind and sporadic, heavy rain — on a bus to Bnei Brak. Thankfully, I had made sure to bundle up my one-year-old son, because our wait would be long and frosty. I had never met the *Rebbetzin* — I had heard of her *chessed* and her *tefilla*; and, having been on the receiving end of her prayers when my newborn son was admitted to intensive care, I felt duty-bound to personally thank her for her part in the Divine plan. However, I had no idea what to expect.

We had pre-arranged with a local res-

Chaya Rivkah Jessel of Moshav Matityahu was *niftar* on 12 Teves. In this article, written before her illness, she describes her first visit to Rebbetzin Kanievsky. Later, during the short three months of her illness, which included two more encounters with the *Rebbetzin*, Mrs. Jessel found the memory and influence of these visits an extraordinary source of strength and inspiration.

ident to write our names on the list early in the morning, as our hour-long journey precluded our arriving there in time to ensure an audience. We entered the tiny enclosed porch, every available space occupied by a chair, and checked to see where our names were on the list. Oh, no. We were numbers 10-12, and number *one* was still inside. We only had two hours to spare; if we missed the 12 o’clock bus, we’d be late picking up our kids from kindergarten. And so began a two-hour journey of the spirit, where our characters were constantly challenged.

The first glitch became apparent when a rather stern woman informed everyone in the room that she was number ten on the list. My friend very politely said that our names occupied places ten through twelve. “Well, I’ve been waiting here all morning. I was here before you, and I’m going in when it’s my turn.”

It was useless to reply that although we had indeed arrived after her, our names had been filled in much earlier that morning. She in fact was there first.

Then a woman arrived and asked to “just go in and get a *beracha*.” She promised to only take five minutes. Half an hour later, and she was still inside. Apparently the *Rebbetzin* decided to keep her there longer than she had anticipated. So be it. But how were we going to make that bus? It was so tempting to fall into the routine response of ill-judging others.... Perhaps [most certainly!], the very holiness of the room, the house, the personage, prevented us from erring in this

way. Instead, we worked on ways to give her the benefit of the doubt — I said that most likely someone had entered this very waiting area and asked permission to push ahead of those in line in order to have the *Rebbetzin* intercede when my baby’s condition had become critical. Who was I, then, to begrudge this woman her time in getting a *beracha*? Who knew what burden she needed to offload and what Heavenly assistance she required to get through the day?

Becoming One With the Message

A few minutes later, and a regular turned up and entered the room without her name being on the list. Something else was going on here, and we, with our Western, one-dimensional mindsets, could not fathom the nuances of the rules and regulations of this otherworldly realm. There *was* an order, but one we were too far removed from to appreciate. It could just be that from the Divine perspective, we had to wait, and that obviously those other people were ahead of us, even though their names were “missing” from the list.

I tried to put a positive spin on things with comments such as, “Well, even if we don’t get to go in this time, the wait in this room and the spiritual work we’re doing here is obviously worth it.” Funny enough, the more I said this, the more I gradually became one with the message — yes, it *was* worth it, struggling with my lower self, in the cold, with a wriggling, curious baby, and the minutes ticking by.

I tried to envisage the *Rebbetzin*: Was she rather stern and somewhat removed from the sometimes-petty grievances brought before her? What could she possibly have in common with the average petitioner? She, who had absorbed, from her earliest years, the grace and fortitude of her illustrious family and in-laws*. She, who had made do with so little for so long, could she understand our pampered existence that rolls with cars, cell phones, and modern conveniences? And then, in my case, would she be able to connect with me, a *ba'alas teshuva* with rudimentary Hebrew, scant *yichus*, and a host of post-modern issues and concerns?

11:30. I looked at my watch and then at the women in the room. Still four more women ahead of us, and who knew just how many other "regular" visitors? We had to leave by noon. I kept saying that the wait was worth it, and each time I internalized the message, I could feel the tension draining away from my shoulders. Finally, at a quarter to twelve, it's our turn. My friend goes in. I turn to my other friend and we try and visualize what is happening in there. I spoke more to myself than to her when I murmured that I will probably not get what I'm asking for, but most definitely what I need. I mean, she's not a psychiatrist or anything, but still....

My Turn at Last!

Eleven fifty. My turn! I wheel in the stroller, the *Rebbetzin* is sitting on a swivel chair facing the wall. She seems small and frail, a kerchief covering a dark brown *sheitel*. And then she turns around, and I am too moved to speak. Her face. What radiance. What a smile. What a welcome. All my questions and worries and doubts about her ability to hear me dissipate as she plays gently with my baby.

*Her father is Rabbi Yosef Shalom Eliyashiv שליט"א of Jerusalem, leading authority in *halacha*; her mother is the daughter of Rabbi Aryeh Levine זצ"ל, "tzaddik of *Yerushalayim*." Her husband is the son of the late Steipler Gaon and of the sister of the *Chazon Ish* זכרונם לברכה!

I introduce myself and my little miracle. She makes much of him, clapping her hands in genuine glee when she hears that he has had, *baruch Hashem*, a full recovery.

I then briefly outline the three areas I need help with. Regarding the first, she recommends reading *Iggeres HaRamban* every day, and proceeds to give me a copy of the famous letter in Hebrew. She then encourages me to say the prayer "*Nishmas*" when things have improved. And for a general tool of *tikkun hamiddos* (character improvement), she ends by suggesting learning two laws of *shemiras halashon* (guarding one's tongue from slander) every day.

Realizing that my time is up, I ask hesitantly if this is indeed a program of *tikkun hamiddos*, "just" reading the *Ramban's* letter. It sounds too easy. Don't I need to fast and wear sackcloth? What about a speechfast? She laughs. A beautiful laugh full of confidence in the healing properties of speaking gently to all people. "That's all you need."

Before I leave, I hand her a list of our names to add to her prayer list. She stands up and pulls me to her and kisses me on the cheek. She probably does that to all her female supplicants — and I'm sure they all felt as I did, that she really cares "about me."

Carrying the Rebbetzin With Me

We run to the bus, fold up the stroller, clamber inside, pay the fares, sit down, and still

we're not quite present. A part of us is still lingering in that room, and for the duration of the ride home, we try and recapture the feeling by talking about our five-minute visits. I was not surprised to hear that my friend was also advised to read the *Ramban's* letter. It made sense. Even though she and I have different needs and temperaments, the spiritual impact of controlling one's tongue and temper is so great that our "cure" is the same.

I sighed that I wished I could carry the *Rebbetzin* with me, since being in her presence was so healing. That's when I realized that I *do* have her with me — all I have to do is think of her smile, and I'm back in the safety and warmth of her embrace. ■

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OF VENUES AND AGENDAS

Interaction with Representatives of Other Faiths

We may endeavor to lead Torah-guided lives within the sanctuaries of our *batei midrash*, protected from influences of a spiritually hostile world. Then, when we step forth into broader society for any number of reasons – pursuing a livelihood, making purchases, searching for information, seeking help or medical attention – we do so taking our *beis midrash* sensitivities and perspectives with us. We are People of the Book in every sense of the word.

Sometimes, we must venture far beyond *beis midrash* parameters, into areas that are in conflict with our beliefs. For example, throughout our history, we – individually or communally – have had encounters with leaders of non-Jewish religions. When doing so, we have invariably sought to conduct ourselves with courtesy, deference and dignity, while honoring strict lines of demarcation. To this day, for example, Agudath Israel and Catholic leaders talk to each other with respect, but our communications traverse an immovable barrier. We are we, and they are they.

Our political agendas may give us common cause with them in such areas as government aid to non-public education, and opposition to “gay rights” or abortion on demand, so in regard to such issues, we often work cooperatively. But religious convictions and identities remain separate, distinct. There were times when our rabbinical and lay leaders set out to plead their case with spokesmen of other faith groups in the classic role of *shtadlonim* – representatives of our people, speaking on its behalf. In so doing, never – except in cases of governmental coercion – have we engaged in theological discussions, comparing forms of worship and belief, or ecumenism. We have not ever entered

their houses of worship, nor have we invited them to join us in ours.

What, then, are we to make of a story in *The New York Times* that is headlined: “Talmudic Scholars Look Up and Find Cardinals Among the Rabbis”? (January 20, '04). The story continues:

“In a study hall filled with the hubbub of Talmudic debate, the men wearing scarlet sashes and large crosses made their way between tables, sometimes sitting to chat with the young scholars, sometimes marveling at the intensity of study.

“A delegation of Roman Catholic cardinals from the United States and abroad visited Yeshiva University, taking a first-hand look at a bastion of American Jewish Orthodoxy while on a two-day visit to strengthen Jewish-Catholic ties.”

This particular visitation was part of a larger conclave, described in *The Jewish Week* (Jan. 23, '04) as “a gathering this week of leading rabbis and some of the world’s most influential Catholic cardinals.

“[This was] a conference convened... at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in downtown Manhattan in a glass-walled room overlooking New York Harbor. Dressed in their full religious regalia of red-buttoned black robes, bright red sashes, large crosses and red ... [skull caps], a dozen cardinals – some rumored to be leading contenders to be the next pope – and as many rabbis each delivered papers over the course of the gathering on Monday and Tuesday. Many of the presentations were scholarly explications of the Jewish and Christian Bibles and of the respective religious perspectives on interfaith dialogue.”

The *Forward* (Jan. 23 '04) published a more detailed account of the proceedings:

“The unofficial title of the symposium was ‘The First Among the

Commandments.’ Most of the cardinals delivered religious papers on the commandments to love G-d and one’s neighbor that quoted heavily from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Participants said that because there were no exchanges of views beyond the prepared papers, it did not formally qualify as theological dialogue. Still, it skirted close – dangerously so in one rabbi’s view – to such debates.”

Some Troubling Questions

While positive results may well emerge from the face-to-face encounters between rabbis and bishops, theological discussions serve no purpose. Our faiths differ on matters so fundamental, that dialogue is not only pointless, it is counterproductive. On what basis, then, did Orthodox rabbis engage in interfaith dialogue – or even dialogue about dialogue – with princes of the Church? There has been unanimity in the ranks of Orthodoxy about eschewing such dialogue for generations! No less a spokesman for Modern Orthodoxy than Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik זצ"ל made it unequivocally clear that there are absolutely no grounds for interfaith dialogue. One need not search far to demonstrate the traps inherent to such exchanges, and note how the lines of distinction, which have preserved us for generations, can become blurred.

And then the impression conveyed by that yeshiva visitation: Among the guests who “made their way between the tables, sometimes sitting to chat with the young scholars” was Jean-Marie Lustiger, Cardinal of Paris. Born a Jew, he dropped his given name “Ahron Dov” when – after being entrusted to non-Jews by his parents – he converted to Catholicism at a young age, just after World War II. One

of the students of this institution of higher learning offered the following in the school newspaper: "Though he chose to convert to Catholicism at the tender age of thirteen, the Archbishop has consistently refused to shake his Jewish heritage. His mother was killed at Auschwitz in 1943 and to this day, he recites *Kaddish* for her." By saying *Kaddish*, this prince of the Catholic Church has "refused to shake his Jewish heritage"? Have we so thoroughly assimilated the fashionable mantra of inclusiveness that we can

embrace a cardinal as one of our own? True, high on our agenda of programs and activities is promotion of fostering *shalom* – peace and positive relationships with other groups – but never has this goal called for concessions in standards of conduct or surrender of basic convictions.

Defining "Kiddush Hashem"

The hosts of the event and its student reporters banded about the words "*Kiddush Hashem*" in

describing the reception the cardinals reportedly received in the *beis midrash* and their enthusiastic response to what they had witnessed there. In our national memory, that phrase has been associated with a wide range of conduct that exemplifies the highest standard of Torah honesty and integrity. At its noblest, it refers to those who choose death or torture rather than yield to inducements to water down or abandon their faith, regardless of the consequences they might suffer, or the inducements they may be offered. Surely the sacred memories of our nation's martyrs are violated by use of these hallowed words in this particular context.

True, it is tempting to bask in the approving limelight of the liberal media that rate religious Jews on the basis of how willing they are to compromise their principles in favor of "tolerance." And for Jewish leaders who sincerely wish to gain support for important causes – especially in these times of growing anti-Semitism – such a meeting may seem to represent a significant coup. But leadership requires judgment and equilibrium. We fear that these may have been overwhelmed when *Kiddush Hashem* was re-defined. ■

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There were Jews who seemed somehow gratified by the phenomenon it described. But the January 14 front-page *Wall Street Journal* article entitled “You Don’t Have to Be Jewish to Want a Bar Mitzva Party” made many others among us wince.

The article provided just what its headline threatened: an account of how non-Jewish children have begun pestering their parents for celebrations that resemble those held for their Jewish friends’ bar- or bas-mitzvas. Needless to say, it wasn’t the spiritual aspect of the events for which the youngsters pined.

“The kids who had great bar mitzva parties were elevated socially,” one Catholic mother was quoted in explanation of why her daughter’s coming of age was celebrated at a beachfront banquet hall – with a Hawaiian surfing theme.

Another faux-mitzvah bash, the paper reported, “cost \$75,000 and included a tent with chandeliers, DJs and dancers.”

The optimistic spin was spun by the executive vice president of the Board of Rabbis of Southern California, who contended that the proliferation of such astonishing excess shows “how much the

Jewish people and Jewish customs have become mainstream.”

To those of us, though, who perceive self-centered immoderation as diametric to the very meaning of the phrase bar-mitzva, the emulation of some Jews’ indulgences by broader society shows instead how the example we set can, sadly, sometimes be more of a blight than a light unto the nations.

Excess among Jews, of course, is not limited to particular parts of the American Jewish community. Even the chareidi community is not devoid of examples of self-focused intemperance. That is why our Torah leaders have long decried the materialism they have observed creeping into our community, and why a number of them saw fit not long ago to issue guidelines for the size and elaborateness of weddings, which they regard as having become more spectacle than spiritual.

Thankfully, though, there are young Jews whose awareness of what Torah is leads them to make selfless rather than self-centered choices, who are quiet but profound examples of what others should emulate.

The development of Jews with altruistic Jewish sensibilities is empowered by conscientious, committed Jewish parents and responsible Jewish schools. Because

permeating so much of Jewish living and learning is the idea that life is not about indulgence, but dedication; not about getting, but rather about sacrificing – for others, for ideals, for *Hashem*.

A mere two days after the *Wall Street Journal* article appeared, readers – albeit of a less widely-read periodical – were shown a very different sort of example set by a young Jew on the cusp of Jewish adulthood. It appeared in *Hamodia*, which recently went from a weekly to a daily. In its January 16 edition, the paper offered a guest column written by one Chavi Friedman, six months shy of her twelfth birthday.

It was a first-person account of Miss Friedman having been awoken in the wee hours of the morning by her crying baby sister, with whom she apparently shares a room. *Should she bring the infant to her mother?* the writer wonders. “No,” she decides, “it wouldn’t do to wake up the whole house.”

Instead, despite the toll she knows it will take on her school day, she decides to try to lull her sister back to sleep. As she “grouchily stares” into the baby’s eyes, she remembers what her great-grandmother and her great-great aunt, survivors of a Nazi concentration camp, recounted to her. Each day in the camps, her grandmother’s sister, knowing that inmates who appeared more emaciated than others were candidates for execution, would surreptitiously share part of her own ration of moldy bread with her slimmer sister.

In the camps, Chavi reminds herself, “food was life.” And so she chides herself that “if my aunt could give a away a piece of her life each day, how can I not give a few minutes of sleep to my sister each day?”

“I look at my tiny sister,” her essay concludes. “Her eyes are closed, a content look is spread across her sweet little face. It’s 5:40. Not bad. I lovingly hug my little sister and put her back into her crib. Then I go back to sleep.”

Miss Friedman’s essay is entitled “Sacrifices.”

This one, equally aptly, is entitled “Examples.” ■

Rabbi Shafran serves as Agudath Israel of America’s Director of Public Affairs and as the American director of Am Echad.