

THE FAITHFUL MODERNIST AND THE SYNTHESIS BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Jack Shechter

The Music in Jewish Learning

A favorite book of mine, one that has remained fixed in my mind, is Samuel Heilman's *People of the Book*. Dr. Heilman is a professor of sociology at Queens College in New York and a Modern Orthodox Jew.¹

He describes a study he undertook of the various *Chevra Shas* (Talmud study circles) in the New York area. These consist of interested laypeople who gather weekly to study and carefully examine the classic rabbinic texts and commentaries composed in Palestine and Babylonia some 1,500 years ago and earlier. The texts are entirely in Hebrew and Aramaic, but translated and discussed in English. Dr. Heilman wanted to discern the pattern and main characteristics of these learning enclaves, and what motivated the participants to be so deeply involved in what the contemporary Jew could justifiably consider arcane subject matter— compiled long ago and for another milieu.

Heilman himself attended one of these study circles for a full year. A novice in this kind of study, he attended the circle faithfully, listened intently to the proceedings and, as he himself said, had difficulty understanding the material. He had little background in Talmud, and his Hebrew/Aramaic was not strong. Yet he was diligent and persistent. When asked why he attended in this way, he responded, "I come here for the music."²

¹ Heilman, Samuel. *The People of the Book: Drama, Fellowship and Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1983).

² *Ibid.*, pp. 68-71. See Heilman's depiction of chanting and singing in the process of Talmudic study.

What I am discussing here is what I think Professor Heilman meant by “the music” of Jewish learning, which might yield some insight into the nature of study in the traditional Jewish mindset. I then describe the modern mode of study, how it differs from the traditional one—and what an affirming combination of the two modes produces: among other things, a faithful modernist.

The Role of Texts for Community

Let’s first examine the difference between “reading” a Jewish text, as moderns understand the word “reading,” and “learning” (*lernen*, as the Yiddish has it) Jewish texts, the latter terminology used by traditional Jews.³

Reading is essentially a solitary activity. We sit alone as we read. We pause often, think to ourselves, mark up the book, take notes, go back and re-read a passage. It’s usually quiet in our study or the library. We’re enveloped in ourselves and in the people and ideas in the volume being examined.

Traditional Jewish reading is not reading in the modern sense. It’s quite different. It’s learning; it’s studying in a social context. Witness the Yeshiva. Here Jewish learning takes place in a hall amid a cacophony of voices. This is the *Beit Midrash* (the study hall). Here students study either in pairs or threesomes, reading out loud and talking animatedly back and forth. One who enters is immediately engulfed by the chatter and conversation of the learners.

I remember this experience vividly from my own school days at the Orthodox Yeshiva Chaim Berlin I attended through high school, from my college years at Yeshiva University, and from observing my son Reuven studying this way in the Yeshiva University *Beit Midrash* he attended for five years en route to receiving rabbinic ordination.

The atmosphere is nothing like that of the silent home study or library carrel or the staid classroom we’re accustomed to. Reading in

³ The analysis of the difference between “reading” and “learning” is found in general form in Barry Holtz’s introduction to his *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts* (New York: Summit Books 1984). For detailed description of traditional “learning,” or *lernen*, see Heilman’s first chapter, *ibid.*, “Looking into ‘Lernen’: An Introduction into the Talmud Study Circle.”

the Yeshiva takes place amid an incessant din. It's reading in talk; it's reading by discussion; indeed, it's not reading at all—it's studying, it's learning, it's *lernen*.

What, then, is happening here? The study experience is not a solitary activity during which the person reflects on the text. Rather, *it's a way of communal communication. The Jew studies in order to become part of the Jewish people and to connect to its value system. Study here is a ritual act of the community.* This is what Professor Heilman meant when he talked about "the music" of the *Chevra Shas*. It was a learning environment that provided what he called "sentimental education."⁴ This was a way for the Jew to connect to the Jewish community of the past as his own, and to gain access to the values of his tradition as embedded in that community—and to live out those values by the very act of study.

I'm thinking of a furniture salesman I know. He works hard all day, comes home, has dinner, and announces to his household, "I'm going to the *Beit Midrash* to learn." He's really not all that interested in the subject of the accoutrements of the ancient *Beit Hamikdash* (temple), or the consequences to the owner of an ox who gored his neighbor's cow, or about a soon-to-be married virgin receiving 200 *zuzim* (Jewish coins used in Roman Palestine) or a non-virgin 100 *zuzim* as stipulated in the *ketubah* document.

When he studies Talmud this way, through discussion he is catapulted back into the Talmudic world; time and place are erased and the student is back in the academies of Sura and Pumbedita in Babylonia 1,500 years ago. Here the learner joins in the discussions, voices his opinions, is refuted or defended by Ravina and Rav Ashi and the other great teachers and masters of other ages. This is the way the traditional student of today seeks to place himself vertically, as it were, within the Jewish tradition, continuing it into the present.

This kind of learning connects the student to the rich emotional world embedded in the classic texts. These are not just books on or off a shelf. They live in the context of hours of human give-and-take, of challenge and enlightenment in the framework of community. The texts here are interactive—in the way the reading is lively dialogue, in the way students speak in their *hevruta* (study circle) in which they debate and ponder the texts aloud.

⁴ Heilman, *ibid.*, pp. 67 and 97f..

The Role of Texts for Religious Experience

The classic texts of Judaism play yet another role in the life of the Jew: they point to the central religious facet of the Jewish enterprise. This is another basic reason why the traditional Jew studies his texts with such passion. He wants to know what God expects of him, how and why he ought to live as a diligent, faithful Jew. And so, the texts appear everywhere in his ritual life . . .

a) *In the prayerbook* . . . which abounds with material taken from the Bible, Talmud, medieval Jewish poetry, the Zohar, even from the theology of Maimonides; for example, the *Yigdal* hymn which contains the 13 principles of the Jewish faith, and the *Adon Olam* purported to be authored by the medieval Hebrew poet Solomon Ibn Gabirol, affirming the oneness of God.⁵

b) *In the Torah readings* . . . on the Shabbat and holy days, which have as their constant companions sections of the Pentateuch and Prophets. The biblical Song of Songs is chanted on Passover, the book of Ruth on Shavuot, Ecclesiastes on Sukkot, Esther on Purim, Lamentations on Tisha B'av. A rabbinic literary work, the Haggadah, is used on Passover, and on Hanukah medieval liturgical poems are read. The texts are always there—throughout the year and throughout the life cycle—in the rituals of birth, Bar and Bat Mitzvah, marriage and death.

c) *In the home rituals* . . . where, for example, the *kiddush* chanted over wine on Friday evening is essentially composed of quotations from Genesis 2:1-3.

d) *The role of the master teacher* tells about the religious context of traditional Jewish learning. It is no coincidence that the overseer of the *Beit Midrash* is called *mashgiakh rukhani*—"spiritual supervisor." This teacher is someone who guides the learner through the often difficult textual materials. He helps unravel thorny issues, prods the students to think for themselves, shows them a *derekh in lernen*—a

⁵ The author of the *Adon Olam* has not been definitely established. Joseph Hertz in his *The Authorized Daily Prayerbook* (1946), p. 7, and Jonathan Sacks in his *The Koren Siddur* (Jerusalem: Koren 2009), p. 577, both cite the attribution of the poem by some to Ibn Gabirol.

methodology of study—and encourages interaction among his charges. The master here has a special kind of authority. It's an authority based on his personal piety, on his reputation for diligence, and especially on Torah-wisdom; it is based on his mastery of the biblical and rabbinic literary corpus, or on a profound grasp of a particular facet of this corpus. Indeed, Jews venerate the learned teacher, which continues the long tradition of respecting the instruction, the insights, and the legal judgments of the sages of old.

To summarize: The traditional mode of Jewish study is for the purpose of strengthening community (both “vertically,” *i.e.*, community of the past, and “horizontally,” *i.e.*, community of the present), and to re-experience the religious life and value system of those who preceded in time those who study.⁶

The Modern Mode of Study and Its Impact on the Traditional Mode

Up to this point, we've explored the traditional mode of Jewish study and learning. A core of Jews these days, as they delve into Jewish texts, remain fixed in that tradition. However, most Jewish students today do not remain so fixed. Most are highly educated in the secular methods of study; they've been reared in an educational system where study is much more like “reading”—alone at home or in a library, or in a university classroom that is usually a silent place where the instructor holds forth. This modern educational modality differs significantly from the traditional way...

a) *One different way is study for historical information...*

Biblical, rabbinic, liturgical and other Jewish literature has been and continues to be used as important sources of data about past history. They have been mined for knowledge about the language and literature, the life and religion, the culture and institutions of various early civilizations. To cite but a few examples:

⁶ It should be noted that this paper does not attempt to identify how or when what is depicted here as the “traditionalist” model of study developed other than to say that this is the model associated with Ashkenazic study practice as of the eve of World War II.

- Biblical archaeology has shone much light on ancient Canaanite and Egyptian religion and culture.
- Plumbing the treasures of rabbinic literature, the great Talmudic scholar Professor Saul Lieberman has uncovered much about the Hellenistic world during the first three centuries of the Common Era. Thus, for example, *Kohelet Rabbah* 11:1 records a Gentile judge being credited with the just acquittal of a Jew. The Rabbis record the pagan emphasis on the value of hard work, a value Jews needed to emulate. Semi-proselytes were held by the Rabbis in high esteem. Even the better people of heathendom were viewed as good and honest.⁷
- Study of biblical times has shed much light on nascent Christianity—what Jesus and the apostles, all of whom were Jews, imbibed from their Jewish roots.
- Jewish scholars, such as the eminent historian Salo Baron in his monumental study of the Jewish experience, have documented the great era of Islamic literary and cultural life during the Middle Ages. This flourishing period was shown to have impacted the Jewish Spanish “Golden Age,” which produced a bevy of prominent Jewish poets, literary and philosophical figures such as Judah Halevi, author of the famous *Kuzari*.⁸

Moreover, those who study the history of Judaism via its literature in these ways need not necessarily be, nor, in fact, were and are practicing Jews. Indeed, they may not even be Jewish. Witness, for example, the seminal German Bible scholar Julius

⁷ Lieberman, Saul. *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary 1942), pp. 76-77.

⁸ Baron, Salo. *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. 7, ch. 32 (New York: Columbia University Press 1967).

Wellhausen,⁹ who helped reveal the actual complexity of the Pentateuch; William Foxwell Albright, the prominent archaeologist whose work has illumined many ancient biblical places and their characteristics based on his studies of the ancient Near East; Paul Lapp, my teacher of biblical history at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, who followed in Albright's footsteps; John Bright, whose *History of Israel* has anchored the period of the Patriarchs in concrete history;¹⁰ and George Foote Moore, whose volumes on Judaism during the classical rabbinic period are themselves classics.¹¹ These scholars have opened up new and revealing vistas, and have deeply affected the ways in which a modern religious Jew studies, prodding him and her to look anew at many of the basic suppositions of traditional Jewish life and thought.

b) *Another differing way is the focus on objective data . . .* The critically oriented Jewish scholar approaches the texts with an objective, critical eye, through a lens that sees things as they are, not as he wants the materials to be. Indeed, in this perspective, the Bible and rabbinical literature—all of Jewish literature for that matter—must be examined with critical care. For example, modern Bible scholars have discerned multiple strata in the biblical materials—not heretofore observed. Lawrence Boadt has succinctly summarized the essential character of the modern approach to study of the Pentateuch in this way:

Drawing on the history of how the various strata came to be, the modern Bible student now could discover four different authors and their literary styles, and he could picture clearly the different times and places from which each source came. This analysis shows the development in which the early

⁹ Wellhausen's well-known hostility to Judaism ought not to morph into denial of his seminal contribution to unraveling the various sources of the Pentateuch.

¹⁰ See Albright's *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press 1957), Lapp's *Biblical Archaeology and History* (New York: World Publishing Company 1969), and Bright's *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1981).

¹¹ See G. F. Moore's three-volume *Judaism: In the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1954).

and mostly oral traditions of Israel were gradually written down and preserved in four documents, and then combined to make one Pentateuch. This is the famous documentary thesis known as JEDP (letters for each of the four sources) and accepted by the vast majority of modern students of scripture.¹²

I would include among these critically oriented scholars in our time: Nahum Sarna, Mark Smith, Jon Levenson, Ziony Zevit, Benjamin Sommer, Michael Fishbane, and some dozen others whose work is contained in the collection found in the *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel*. Their trenchant analytic writings in the world of biblical scholarship accept the documentary hypothesis as a given.¹³

In contrast to this perspective on the Pentateuch, the fundamentalist students of the Bible refuse to see these five books as they are, but rather as they want them to be, that is, that they are *in their entirety* the product of Moses at Mount Sinai, the work of this *single author* during *one specific time* in history. They do this by employing creative rabbinic exegesis and midrashic imagination, making scriptural texts to mean what they want them to mean.

¹² Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament* (New York: Paulist Press 1984), p. 94.

¹³ A selection of the works of these scholars:

- Nahum Sarna. *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books 1986);
- Mark Smith. *The Memoirs of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2004);
- Jon Levenson. *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: Harper 1985);
- Ziony Zevit. *The Religions of Ancient Israel* (London: Continuum 2001);
- Benjamin Sommer. *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge University Press 2011);
- Michael Fishbane. *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (University of Chicago Press 2010);
- Jacob Neusner and Baruch A. Levine (eds.), *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1987).

The elements described here constitute the modern approach to scripture and rabbinic literature: the unearthing of historical information, the new view of the complexity of biblical writings, the consequences of the external contexts in which Jews have lived, the emphasis on objectivity. These do, indeed, render the modern approach different from the traditional study of texts by the pious Jew of the past, and the pious today in many quarters. For, as we have seen, in addition to the latter's study as a way to link to community, the traditional learner has another basic motive in mind as he approaches the texts: how does the God of Israel, the *Ribono Shel Olam*, the Master of the universe, want me to live? For him these texts communicate ultimate truth—truth about God, about the world, about what God wants of His people. Questions about historical reliability, about outside cultural, political and economic influences, about technical accuracy, are basically irrelevant to his overriding religious objectives. However, for the adherent of the modern approach to study, these objective factors remain quite relevant and unavoidably compelling.

To summarize: The modern mode of study is more objective than the traditional mode generally and specifically with regard to scripture. It seeks to see the Jewish experience and its literature in the context of the larger societies in which these have functioned, revealing in the process a good deal about the culture, religion and institutions of the non-Jewish world, and via these, in significant measure, of the Jewish world as well.

Can the Twain Meet?

Here, then, we have two apparently conflicting objectives in the study of Judaic texts—that of the traditional and modern, what I have called “learning” and “reading.” The question now is: Can the two modes of exploration be seen as in unity with each other so that they, in fact, can strengthen rather than weaken each other? Indeed, can they be seen as in harmony rather than conflict, or must they remain in permanent tension?

A fascinating story about Yosef Yerushalmi, the late professor of Jewish history at Columbia University (a classmate of mine in the Rabbinical School at the Jewish Theological Seminary) appeared in

the *New York Jewish Week*. The story reveals the unresolved tension between Yerushalmi's modern mode of historical studies that focuses on the objective facts of the Jewish experience versus the traditional view of Jewish history as influenced by the hand of Providence. After his passing, a heretofore unpublished and unknown novel that Yerushalmi wrote was published in *The New Yorker* magazine.¹⁴ It concerned a character simply called Ravitch who is a scholar of Jewish history with a restless spirit who yearns for peace of mind. The article goes on to tell about Yerushalmi's book, *Zakhor*, which was about the tension between Jewish memory and Jewish history—and more broadly between the ancient, spiritual and religious life versus the modern, secular and academic one.

"Many Jews today are in search of a past," Yerushalmi wrote, "but they do not want the past that is offered by the historian."¹⁵

Yerushalmi, who taught at Harvard and Columbia, was never quite sure he wanted the history he had to offer either. He was religiously observant in his youth and later ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary, but then abandoned the life of the pulpit for one of the professor's podium. The dilemma he faced was similar to Ravitch's: Should he embrace the emotional pull of faith, or should he dismiss it and risk finding only comfort in the facts?

"I think his life conflict was unresolved," Ophra, Yerushalmi's wife, said of the Ravitch character. And how about her husband, Yosef? Was the conflict unresolved too? "Perhaps," she ventured: "Like everyone, we all carry unresolved conflicts within us."¹⁶

And then there is Professor James Kugel, the long-time professor of Hebrew literature at Harvard University, and later at Bar Ilan University and a practicing Orthodox Jew. A highly creative and prominent scholar of biblical literature, Kugel in his *How to Read the Bible* describes both the traditional and modern modes of scriptural study, notes their fundamental differences, indicates that neither can be considered invalid and ignored, yet makes no effort to integrate the two in a way they might amplify and reinforce each other. To the contrary, he asserts in the closing pages of his book:

¹⁴ Yosef Yerushalmi, "Gilgul," *New Yorker* magazine, August 4, 2011.

¹⁵ Yosef Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press 1983), p. 97.

¹⁶ *New York Jewish Week*, August 2011.

“My own view is that modern biblical scholarship and traditional Judaism are, and must always be, completely irreconcilable.”¹⁷

A faithful modernist cannot and need not accept the unresolved tension between the traditional and modern modes of study as exemplified by Professor Yerushalmi, nor can he accept the two modes as irreconcilable, as indicated by Professor Kugel. He agrees with Benjamin Sommer, Professor of Bible at the Jewish Theological Seminary, who equates Kugel’s view on the irreconcilability of traditional Judaism and biblical scholarship to sticking one’s head in the sand:

An honest response (to critical biblical findings which challenge traditional faith) cannot be to pretend that the challenge does not exist. Nor can a Jewish response be to bifurcate, so that one has a Jewish soul and a secular mind, coexisting uneasily in a single body but not communicating with each other. A Jew is commanded to serve God with *all* one’s mind, with *all* one’s soul, with *all* one is. A Jew whose intellect believes that biblical criticism makes valid claims, but whose religious self pretends otherwise...is rendering God service that is fragmented and defective.”¹⁸

Both Professors Yerushalmi and Kugel represent those immersed in modern historical and biblical scholarly endeavor, yet are also persons of religious commitment rooted in the tradition. They see conflict between the two realms, but leave it unresolved. By way of contrast, here I search for an affirming relationship between the two realms. I believe that the two can not only be seen as in harmony with each other, but can and do strengthen one another. This hopefully will lead us to a unified modality embodied in what I have been calling the faithful modernist.

¹⁷ James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), p. 681.

¹⁸ Benjamin Sommer, “Two Introductions to Scripture: James Kugel and the Possibility of Biblical Theology” in *Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 100, No. 1 (Winter 2010), p. 174.

What Does the Modern Study Approach Contribute to Harmony With the Traditional Approach?

First, faith and basic traditional affirmations are often enhanced by modern critical thinking. When, for example, a contemporary bible researcher detects multiple strata in the texts of the Pentateuch that reveal the hands of different writers and different eras in biblical life, we cannot conclude that the Pentateuchal texts are the product of a single hand and their provenance in but one period of time and clime. However, for the faithful modernist, what these researches do show is that *the Divine speaks to humanity in all eras of Jewish life and to the many faithful in their own period and place who are attuned to God's will.* Indeed, genuine faith and basic traditional affirmations about the Divine role in human life are thereby enhanced rather than diminished.¹⁹

This is what is meant by the notion that the God of Israel is the God of history. The faithful modernist sees God as having manifested His presence and revealed His will not only in early biblical times, but in the prophetic era as well—in His communication with the great prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Amos, Hosea and Micah. Yet more: His presence and will were manifest when, earlier, God guided His people during the Exodus from Egypt—and into the Promised Land, when He went into exile with Israel in Babylonia, when He led His people back to

¹⁹ Jeffrey Tigay in his foreword to Nahum Sarna's *Studies in Biblical Interpretation* (JPS, 2000), p. XII, writes this about Sarna's attitude about modern biblical criticism and its religious implications:

"In its general outlines," Sarna has written, "the non-unitary origin of the Pentateuch has survived as one of the finalities of biblical scholarship." Nor does Sarna see this as a problem for religious faith. *God can work through four documents as effectively as through one, unfolding His revelation in successive stages as well as in a single moment of time.* He notes further that even the most traditional Jew must admit that this happened in the second division of the Bible, the Prophets, which developed over several centuries.

the land in the Persian era, when He girded the strength of the Maccabees during the revolt against the Syrian Greeks, when He was with His people during the traumatic period of Roman oppression... and on and on through the vicissitudes of the Jewish experience down through the centuries—including our own when His spiritual presence is seen to be in the midst of the people, teaching, sustaining and inspiring them as they delve into a vast literature—past and present.

Indeed, the tenacity of the Jew in the face of constant hostility, his survival, and the triumph of his spirit have their source in the faith that God guides and redeems. *The texts of the Jewish people explored by the modern scholar tell us that experience with the God of Israel in Mosaic times was but a crucial beginning.*

In this and similar ways, modern critical thinkers will not be put off or cavalierly dismissed in the name of tradition. Faith is not allowed to be jettisoned by blindness to the findings of the critical mind, which is one of God's marvelous endowments on His human children. Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) was a prominent Spanish Jewish Bible commentator during the Middle Ages. His work occupies the standard editions of the Hebrew Bible. A guiding principle he employs in interpreting scripture was that the human intellect is a *Malakh Hashem*, "an angel sent by God" and he further emphasizes that "he who believes in something that contradicts the *sekhel* [that is, common sense, reason, logic] abuses the finest gift God has given him."²⁰ Ibn Ezra echoed his famous Muslim predecessor, theologian and jurist, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111), who emphasized that *lo bara Hashem b'riah yoter nikhbedet min hasekhel*, "God has created nothing more distinguished than reason" (translated from the Arabic into Hebrew by Rabbi Avraham ibn Hasdai [ca. 1230 CE], an enthusiastic scholarly partisan of Moses Maimonides who was a champion of rational thought in the pursuit of religious studies). So, too, Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274), the preeminent spokesman of the Catholic tradition, who saw reason in harmony with faith. Indeed, reason, Aquinas emphasized, was a

²⁰ See Ibn Ezra's introduction to his commentary on Genesis, where he surveys four different approaches to Bible commentary. In the third approach he also says, "The Torah was not given to the unintelligent; the intellect must be the intermediary between man and God."

divine gift highly to be cherished, for it buttresses religious faith rather than undermines it. (Aquinas' notion of a Prime Mover/Causeless Cause demonstrated his reasoned thinking about the existence of God.)²¹

And so, to turn again to the issue of the critical method of biblical studies, note the following example, amongst many others, of the consequence of such study.

When the book of Leviticus ordains in great detail the content and methodology of the sacrificial system to be employed in the Temple,²² it is clearly depicting the mode of worship of the Israelites after having settled in the Promised Land. Indeed, the Temple built by King Solomon (ca. 920 BCE) began its service well over 300 years after the period of Moses (ca. 1300 BCE). Yet, the Bible in Leviticus asserts that the various specific details about the sacrificial system were ordained by Moses himself, which was, as noted, centuries before the Temple was in existence and the Israelite settlement in the land. Such a claim is in religious fundamentalist circles justified by a faith assertion, to wit: Moses could depict specific rules and regulations via prophecy, in this case meaning the capacity to predict detailed events and regulations centuries into the future.²³

A faithful modernist, wedded as he or she is to rational thinking, avoids such a claim as a matter of principle, which clearly is at odds with common sense, with reason, with logic. Rather, he embraces the views of Ibn Ezra, al-Ghazali, Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas, who do not allow statements of scripture to contradict

²¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, "Question 2: The Existence of God, Article 2: Whether it can be demonstrated that God exists."

²² See, for example, Leviticus 5, chapter 9.

²³ The final twelve verses of the book of Deuteronomy, unlike the body of the book that is covered in autobiographical style, speak of Moses in the third person, *i.e.*, what occurred to and about him after he died. This indicates that these verses were not written by Moses. In fact, on Deuteronomy 34:1 Ibn Ezra explicitly says, "In my opinion, Joshua wrote from this verse on, for once Moses ascended the summit of Pisgah, when he died, he wrote no more." He then adds cryptically, "Or he wrote prophetically about himself." About this Ibn Ezra says, "If you understand the deep meaning of the twelve verses...you will recognize the truth." See Nahum Sarna on this in his *Studies in Biblical Interpretation*, p. 152.

God's finest gift to man—his critical mind. *What the Faithful Modernist does do in this representative instance is something strongly affirmative religiously.* What Moses did was to hear the Transcendent bid him to establish a basic principle of faith, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and might (Deuteronomy 6:5)—*ul'ovdo*, and "*worship* the Lord with all your heart and soul" (Deuteronomy 11:13). This basic principle—the obligation to worship, to thank and praise and beseech, to express dependence on a Power-not-human, on the One and only God of the universe—was to be implemented by the later stated leaders-priests of Israel. They were to employ the category of the sacrificial system, which was the prevailing mode of worship in their own time and clime. And further, this principle of recognizing the monotheistic God was to be implemented by the religious leaders of subsequent generations when the sacrificial system no longer obtained, again in accordance with the altered ways of worship in those later times. And so forth into modern times.

Such has been the pattern throughout Jewish religious history. Indeed, the social and economic, political and religious conditions inevitably change in the course of life's flow. *But, as a faithful modernist sees it, the core principles established in the Mosaic period do not.* For it was in that seminal period launched, he contends, at Sinai, that the obligatory principle of worship of the One God of Israel was established, along with the other fundamental principles of the faith. What subsequent generations have done—and continue to do—was to adapt the principles then planted and do so in accordance with their own conditions in order to make the teachings relevant to the needs of those generations. Indeed, these subsequent adaptations were seen as *implicit* in the teachings of the Mosaic period.

Abraham Geiger has articulated this perspective in this way:

The history of Judaism is wonderfully unique in that it spans a period extending from remote antiquity down to the immediate present. It is, therefore, not mere curiosity which acts as a spur to its study, not merely the desire to eavesdrop on the mystery of the origins of Judaism, but at least equally *the desire to detect the extent to which all of its later development was essentially already inherent in the growth and flowering*

*process of the original seeds. These beginnings are elusive...but without the revelation which only study of them affords, one can never succeed in gaining the proper insight into Judaism's subsequent history which lies more fully recorded before him.*²⁴

And later, Jonathan Sacks reinforced this perspective in striking modern terms, to wit:

In the earliest stages of an embryo, when a fetus is still no more than a small bundle of cells, already it contains the genome, the long string of DNA, from which the child and eventually the adult will emerge. The genetic structure that will shape the person it becomes is there from the beginning. So it is with Judaism. Bible, Mishna, Talmud and Aggada, even what a senior disciple is destined to teach in the presence of his master, was already stated to Moses at Sinai.²⁵

The faithful modernist does not need a literalist reading of scripture to establish for him abiding religious affirmation.

A practical result of this approach emerges: highly educated contemporary Jews who are "religious" by inclination yet have been profoundly influenced by modern/secular ways of learning, and are irrevocably committed to these ways, are persuaded to connect to the traditional fold. Why? Because, again, traditional religious affirmation and modern critical research have been found to be of one mind: *God's pervasive presence in the world and in the ongoing life of His people – and acceptance of His principal requirements on the part of that people.* The two realms are positively connected rather than being viewed at odds with each other.

²⁴ Geiger in Michael Meyer, *Ideas of Jewish History* (Wayne State University Press: Detroit 1974), p. 169.

²⁵ Jonathan Sacks (ed.), *Koren Sacks Rosh Hashanah Mahzor*, p. xii. For a similar perspective, see *The Tanya* by Shneur Zalman of Ladi, chapter 2, p. 169f..

A second contribution of modern critical thinkers to harmony with (living) tradition: the historical data they have unearthed provides new understanding of the phenomenon of adaptation and change that have contributed to Jewish sturdiness and survival through the ages. Certain currently accepted – and rejected – beliefs and practices have, in fact, been molded and remolded as a result of the impact of new findings and perspectives developed in different periods of time and in various locales in the world. Thus historical studies reveal the adaptive nature of Judaism, its patterns of thought and action understood as responses to changing environmental conditions. Absent such ability to change and adapt to new times and climes, the Jewish enterprise would have become fossilized.

A personal experience might serve as an illustration of that which is contrary to this phenomenon. While serving as a Rabbi in Pittsburgh, I once visited my alma mater, the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, and was invited to a gathering of seminary faculty and their wives at the home of Rabbi David Weiss-Halivni – a leading scholar of rabbinics and another seminary classmate of mine. They wanted to hear about the various initiatives at my synagogue in Pittsburgh they had heard about, and I was eager to hear their take on some of the religious issues of the day.

The five faculty wives present were the following: a Ph.D. in library science; a prominent landscape artist; an editor of children's books; a Ph.D. in psychology; and a Ph.D. in biology.

I asked the group what they thought about women serving in the rabbinate, being counted to a *minyan* along with the men, receiving an *aliya* at services.

All five women were adamantly opposed, citing the traditional ban on these matters. When I pointed out that they, along with many women doctors and lawyers and college professors are active in the "outside" world, meet and work with professional men and women all the time, they each responded: the religious public domain is different. When I asked why it was different, their response was that the religious realm has a different set of criteria on these matters.

These truly accomplished professional women have not integrated their general and religious public domains – a puzzling

dichotomy between the secular and religious ways of thinking and acting.²⁶

Of course, these women, along with their traditional male counterparts, have not had the last word on these matters insofar as the faithful modernist is concerned. The latter points to the fundamental principle long since established in scripture: “And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; *male and female* He created them” (Genesis 1:27). As such, both have equal status in God’s eyes and, therefore, as a matter of principle, equal status in human eyes, both personally and in community. Hence, the *Zeitgeist* of the 20th and 21st centuries, in contrast to that of the preceding centuries, has rightly led to the realization that the place of women in general and in the religious realm in particular has changed. The faithful modernist thus applies the biblical principle of human equality to women along with men in the public domain, let alone the personal one. Indeed, he views such as clearly implicit in scripture’s sacred dictum.

Third, modern studies in comparative religion have revealed striking similarities in sacred phenomena to that of the traditional notion. Examples of this are sacred places considered to be of supreme importance due to experiences with the deity, mountains considered to be the abode of the deity, the view that one’s own country is at the center of the earth, and law codes such as the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi (ca. 1880 BCE) which preceded in time the biblical codes and which have striking parallels to them.

In my book *The Land of Israel: Its Theological Dimensions*, I detail an aspect of this phenomenon. In a report titled “Their Gods Resided There,” published in the *Los Angeles Times*, we’re told that more than 20 Inca sites on mountaintops in the Peruvian Andes were discovered during a four-year period by Johan Reinhard, an American anthropologist and mountain climber. The Incas who labored up these mountains, some higher than 20,000 feet, *were worshipping the gods that they believed dwelled in and on those mountains and who communicated with them.*

²⁶ For one such analysis of this phenomenon, see Yael Israel-Cohen, *Between Feminism and Orthodox Judaism: Resistance, Identity and Religious Change in Israel* (Brill, 2012).

At least 50 such mountaintops with Inca ruins, remains and artifacts indicative of active worship of the gods were found on peaks from southern Peru to central Chile. Reinhard documented this mountain deity worship on the famous Machu Picchu. Other archaeologists report that there are Kenyans who still practice tribal religion and revere Mount Kenya as the home of their god.²⁷

To be sure, the content and implications of what occurred on these mountains (about the notion of one's country's centrality, about the non-Israelite codes) are significantly different than the parallel biblical phenomena. Indeed, the extra-biblical notions have been refashioned in accordance with Israelite principles. However, the phenomena in which the contents are embedded are often strikingly similar.

For the traditionalist this perspective opens up new vistas that soften ethnocentricity and invites a more inclusive approach. It offers place for others to share in the enterprise of religious development by suggesting that multiple ideational and ritual possibilities abound in the realm of religion. It induces such religionists to be open to the possibility that others—both within and without the Jewish fold—are in possession of compelling new knowledge and, more importantly, are equally affirmers of basic religious principle. When this perspective enters into the religious mindset of the traditionalists, the door of mutuality is jarred open so that “readers” and “learners” can see a way to value their different modes of study and a path found to appreciate the validity of other perceptions of the religious condition.

Fourth, contemporary critical research into the mystical strain in Judaism – the Kabbalah, Hassidism and its heretofore neglected literature – has revealed a great deal of spiritual and psychological value, which many modern religionists can and have embraced. Thus, for example, Gershom Scholem, known as the founder of the modern study of Kabbalah, has elucidated a category of Jewish thought, prayer and ritual practice that pursues insights into what many view as God's nature, good and evil, and humanity's role in the cosmos. Further, the writings of Arthur Green on Hassidism, the scholarly work of Daniel

²⁷ Jack Shechter, *The Land of Israel: It's Theological Dimensions* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010), pp. 180-181. The report referenced is in *The Los Angeles Times* (April 5, 1984), p. 8.

Matt with his new translation of and commentary on the classic Zohar have opened up fresh and enriching vistas for today's student and has, thus, contributed much to strengthening the contemporary religious enterprise.²⁸

Fifth, the modern study of biblical, rabbinic and subsequent Jewish literature presents another distinct result: its vast array of study aids, translations, commentaries, dictionaries, encyclopedias, critical editions of texts, histories, comparative religion studies et al. constitute a veritable treasure trove for all who wish to gain entry into the magnificent Jewish world of community and spirituality.

Finally, and especially significant, it is here where the modernist and traditionalist meet in harmony on the basics of the religious enterprise. When the faithful modernist internalizes and acts in the spirit of those two words, that is, he or she is truly "faithful" and authentically "modern," and the two elements are integrated in his or her outlook on the religious enterprise of our time...when this occurs, he or she does not cavalierly negate the inner religious quest so evident in the traditional texts of the faith. To the contrary, he or she uses the critical, historical and other elements of modern study to elucidate the richness and personal relevance of the classic Jewish texts. He or she brings to bear the techniques and fruits of contemporary scholarship to illumine the depth and spiritual significance of this literature for the contemporary seeker.

Historian Yosef Yerushalmi has unearthed a fascinating document that illustrates what a modern critical scholar can and does contribute to the traditional religious perspective on the character of the Jewish enterprise through the corridors of history. Yerushalmi himself does not say so, but his now storied document demonstrates, I believe, that historical data illumines traditional religiosity.

In the dark year of 1942, Yerushalmi tells us, a book was published in fascist Rome by a German Jesuit scholar, Peter Browe,

²⁸ See Gershom Scholem's *Origins of the Kabbalah* (English translation by Allan Arkush) (Jewish Publication Society and Princeton University Press, 1987) and his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1946); Daniel Matt (and Nathan Wolski and Joel Hecker)'s *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004-2017), and Arthur Green's *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Brazlav* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979).

titled *The Mission to the Jews in the Middle Ages and the Popes*. The last chapter deals with the manifest failure of the Christian mission to achieve its total goal. Some Jews had been converted everywhere, in Spain many, but medieval Jewry as a whole had not succumbed. This chapter, which Browe called "The Reasons for the Meager Success of the Mission to the Jews," is divided into three parts. The first is "The Reasons from the Christian Side" – namely, what was there in the Christian approach that precluded greater success? The second is "The Reasons from the Jewish Side" – to wit, what was there about the Jews that enabled them to resist?

At this point, Browe's hitherto consistent empiricism leaves him stranded. Having exhausted all the "reasons" he could find, Browe felt that the phenomenon was not fully comprehensible. And so, the last part of his chapter is entitled "The Reasons from God's Side." *Perhaps, in the end, God Himself did not want Judaism to be obliterated.* In conclusion Browe wrote:

This entire history of the Jewish people, its life and wandering throughout the centuries, the preservation of its race and peoplehood amid innumerable struggles and persecutions, cannot be explained out of purely political and sociological considerations...Only out of faith can we in some way understand the solution....²⁹

In the same vein, historian Heinrich Graetz, long before Yerushalmi, wrote this:

What prevented this ever-wandering people from degenerating into brutish vagrants or a vagabond horde of gypsies? The answer: during its desolate history of 1800 years in the diaspora, the Jewish people carried with it the Ark of the Covenant, which placed an ideal striving in its heart and transfigured the badge of shame on its garment with an apostolic radiance designed to educate the nations to the knowledge of God and

²⁹ Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, pp. 90-91.

morality...Such a people for whom the present meant nothing and the future everything *which seemed to exist by virtue of its hope, is for that very reason as eternal as hope itself.*³⁰

Conclusion

And so, we now come full circle. For the faithful modernist, a combination between the two modes of study—“reading” and “learning”—is his *modus operandi*. He embraces the traditional purpose of study that seeks religious guidance and affirmations. At the same time, he pursues the modern method and purpose of study that unearths striking and pertinent new data, values objectivity, and searches for spiritual meaning and affirmation. Both are indispensable and, combined, they can and do produce an amplified and enriched “music of Jewish learning” of compelling and enduring value for all Jews who delve into the textual stuff of Judaism.

For two decades, Jack Shechter served as Associate Professor of Biblical Studies and Dean of the Department of Continuing Education – renamed The Whizen Center for Continuing Education – at the University of Judaism (now the American Jewish University). Prior to his tenure at the University of Judaism, he served as Executive Director of the New England Region of the United Synagogue of America, followed by a decade as the Rabbi of Congregation B’nai Israel in Pittsburgh. He was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary and received his Ph.D. in Biblical Studies from the University of Pittsburgh, and is the author of The Land of Israel: Its Theological Dimensions and Journey of a Rabbi, both published by the University Press of America, and the forthcoming The Idea of Monotheism: A Guide to Its Evolution.

³⁰ Graetz in *The Ideas of Jewish History*, edited by Michael Meyer. New York: Behrman House, 1974, p. 231. See Meyer’s introduction about this passage by Graetz in this volume, p. 218.