

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Beginning of the Redemption

Dov Fischer writes:

In "Geulah: Calculating the Ketz" (*Hakirah* 35, p. 187), Steven Oppenheimer writes:

Rav Ovadiah Yosef, זצ"ל, wrote that more than 200 rabbis, virtually all of the Gedolim of the generation, כמעט כל גדולי הדור, signed a Declaration that the founding of the State of Israel was *Athalta de-Genlah*, the beginning of the Redemption. (The source is *Yabi'a Omer* 6:41.)

Rav Ovadiah does cite such a letter by prominent rabbis printed in Rabbi M. Kasher's book "התקופה הגדולה", but there is no indication that Rav Ovadiah himself endorsed the position that the founding of the State of Israel constituted "אתחלתא דגאולה", a term Rav Ovadiah is careful to put in quotes. In this responsum written in the mid-1970s, Rav Ovadiah provides arguments both in favor and against *אתחלתא דגאולה* but he emphasizes the precariousness of Israel's military, diplomatic, moral, and spiritual condition. Its only redeeming quality, according to Rav Ovadiah, is that it affords a center for Torah study and for the burgeoning *teshuvah* movement.

The responsum relates to the question of reciting the blessing on *Hallel* on *יום העצמאות*. Rav Ovadiah rules that the blessing should not be recited due to the toll that the various wars (especially *העצמאות*)

took in both Jewish and enemy casualties:

ולפי זה בנידון דידן שעל ידי המלחמות נהרגו רבים מבני ברית ומשאינם בני ברית, אין לומר שירה. וההלל שאומרים בימי חנוכה, היינו על נס פך השמן.

Steven Oppenheimer responds:

Rav Ovadiah Yosef, before citing Rav M. Kasher, begins section 5 of his *teshuvah* with the following words:

ומלבד כל זה יש לומר כי הן אמנם רבים ועצומים מגדולי ישראל רואים בהקמת המדינה אתחלתא דגאולה (שו"ת יביע אומר חלק ו - אורה חיים סימן מא).

Moreover, one may say that there are many, great Torah giants who see that the establishment of the State of Israel is the beginning of the Redemption (my translation).

Rav Ovadiah then cites Rav M. Kasher and continues with a quote from Responsa *Yaskil Avdi*:

ומכיון שאין כאן אלא אתחלתא דגאולה, ואינה גאולה שלמה לכל עם ישראל, לכן אין לתקן לומר הלל גמור בתוך התפלה אפי' בלי ברכה, ורק אפשר לומר מזמורי ההלל לאחר סיום התפלה, בלי ברכה, כי פשוט שאין לנו להכנס בספק ברכה לבטלה. עכ"ד.

Since this is only *athalta de-Genlah* and not the complete Redemption for the entire Jewish People, therefore, we should not enact reciting the whole *Hallel* during *tefillah*, even without a *berakhab*. One may only recite *Hallel* after the conclusion of *tefillah*, without a *berakhab*, because we do not want to get into the issue of *safek berakhab le-vatallah*.

Pour Out Your Wrath

Alan Greenspan writes:

I was excited to see an article that might explain the source for the idea of an alternative text for שפך המתך: “*Pour out your love on the nations that know you*” as opposed to “*pour out your wrath on the nations that don’t know you.*”

Our family says the standard שפך המתך, but in addition we add an alternative translation similar but slightly different to the variation referred to in the article.

Instead of adding an additional paragraph of “*pour out your love on the nations that know you,*” we translate the traditional שפך המתך text as “*pour out your warmth on the nations that do not know you.*” The word “המתך,” normally translated as “your wrath,” is read homiletically as “your warmth,” from the *shoresh* “חום.”

For our family, the source of the tradition we are told dates to Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. We learned of this alternative reading from a close disciple of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach who said that the source was Rabbi Nachman, but I have nothing to confirm that the tradition predates Rabbi Carlebach. It is possible that this idea of “*pour out your warmth on the nations that don’t know you*” ultimately morphed into the paragraph you refer to: “*pour out your love on the nations that know you.*”

I would like to suggest that this may be the origin for the alternate

reading of this paragraph.

Shmuel Lesher responds:

I appreciate your interest in my article and thank you for sharing about your family’s Pesah Seder. While I have heard of this alternative reading, I have not encountered any textual evidence to support it.

In the homiletical realm, one might interpret the word המתך as “Your warmth,” but my focus was on textual accuracy.

Moreover, interpreting המתך as “Your warmth” does not align with the rest of the verse. Why would “the nations that do not know Your name” be deserving of this warmth?

We should also remember that regardless of how we might interpret the *Haggadah’s* text, the original verses in *Tehillim* (79:6-7) remain unchanged.

J. Jean Ajdler writes:

I read Shmuel Lesher’s interesting article and would like to note an error. The text of the *Haggadot* I consulted are all identical to the text of Psalm 79:6. The text mentioned by the author as the standard text is in fact that of the Prague Haggadah of 1526, which resulted from an erroneous confusion with Jeremiah 10:25.

In any case, this does not explain the additional ה at the beginning of הממלכות.¹

¹ A copy of the page of the *Prague Haggadah*, edited in 1526, is found

in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (first edition), vol. 7, p. 1087.

Shmuel Lesher responds:

Thank you for your interest in my article. Based on my research, you are correct that many *Haggadot* use the wording from *Tehillim* 79:6, employing the phrase אֵל הַגּוֹיִם. However, the oldest illustrated *Haggadot* I could find which include *Shofokh Hamatkeba* (of which I included photographs in my article) uses wording from *Yirmiyahu* 10:25, utilizing the phrase עַל הַגּוֹיִם.

Regarding the added ה to ממלכות, although I have not consulted all the original texts and manuscripts, the three illustrated *Haggadot* I utilized include this addition. It is possible the ה was added in error, but because I used these *Haggadot* in my article, I felt it was important to cite the text as it appears therein.

Same-Sex-Attraction and the Responsibility of the Community

Yosef Kanefsky writes:

In response to Rabbi Buchman's essay "Same-Sex Attraction and the Responsibility of the Community," I would like to offer a different perspective, from the point of view of a veteran shul rabbi. Based on my experience, I find that the three primary halakhic frameworks with which Rabbi Buchman evaluates the questions of including and welcoming gay Orthodox individuals and couples are misplaced, and that they therefore produce distorted

halakhic conclusions.

The framework of *Tokbahab*, with its aim of directing people toward more perfect observance of Torah and *mitzvoth*, is wrongly applied in this case. *Tokbahab* of gay Orthodox Jews tends to have exactly one result, the alienation of these Orthodox Jews from a life of Torah and *mitzvoth*. The more appropriate and productive halakhic framework is that of *areivut*, the responsibility we have to enable Jews to fulfill as many of the *mitzvoth* that are incumbent upon them as possible. We can successfully discharge this responsibility only through enabling gay Orthodox Jews to feel at home in their shul communities, where they are embraced as valued members. If our goal is the overall fulfillment of *mitzvoth* by as many people as possible, then *areivut* must be the operable halakhic framework in this situation.

Second is the framework of "*l-bakb'is*," which presumes that gay Orthodox Jews who marry or who otherwise form committed partnerships are doing so as a means of spitefully, angrily, defying Orthodox norms, halakhah, and God. Again, my experience has demonstrated repeatedly that this is not the case. Gay Orthodox Jews who marry are trying to achieve what almost all of us in the Orthodox community desire to achieve: a committed, loving relationship that can form the basis for building a Jewish family. While this is not the loving, committed relationship that the Torah and halakhah have in mind, the

imputing of rebellious, defiant intent is wrong. And wrong empirical assumptions invariably produce inaccurate halakhic conclusions regarding how people ought to be treated.

Finally, the framework that holds that as adherents of Torah we must encourage the “repair” of phenomena that we cannot reconcile with our understanding of Torah, is also not applicable in this case. Many of us recall that in 2012, the Rabbinical Council of America distanced itself from JONAH, the primary Jewish purveyor of reparative therapy “based on consultation with a wide range of mental health experts and therapists who informed us of the lack of scientifically rigorous studies that support the effectiveness of therapies to change sexual orientation, a review of literature written by experts and major medical and mental health organizations, and based upon reports of the negative and, at times, deleterious consequences to clients of some of the interventions endorsed by JONAH.” In a December 2012 statement, the RCA declared “...as Rabbis, we can neither endorse nor reject any therapy or method that is intended to assist those who are struggling with same-sex attraction... We maintain that no individual should be coerced to participate in a therapeutic course with which he or she is acutely uncomfortable.” Which is to say that same-sex attraction may very well be something that cannot be “fixed,” and that in many or most cases we should not try to “fix” it. Where does that leave us in terms of our understanding of

the Torah’s expectations and assumptions? This is a difficult question. There are many questions to which we do not know the answer. But why should gay Orthodox Jews suffer the brunt of our inability to plumb the depths of God’s mind? This is unjust.

I am aware that my perspectives, and apparently Rabbi Brander’s as well, may fall hard upon some ears. But I hope that they can be given a dispassionate listen and produce a more accurate recognition of the true nature of our halakhic responsibilities in this area.

Ysoscher Katz writes:

I was debating whether to write a response to Rabbi Buchman’s essay in the most recent *Hakirah*. For now, I decided not to. I do, however, have two short observations, one sociological and one conceptual, which I would like to point out. 1) The assumption that being a same-sex couple by definition implies a negation of איסורי כרת is factually incorrect. בידועי ומכירי קאמינא. There are, in fact, a significant number of Orthodox queer couples who, despite being in a relationship, refrain from transgressing that which is explicitly prohibited in the Torah.

2) I am very surprised that in the extensive discussion about the parameters of *tokhahab*, as far as I can tell, there was not even a mention of *Tosafot*’s important *shitah* (*Bava Kamma* 60b s.v. *mutav*, *Avodah Zarah* 4a s.v. *sh-hayah*) that בדבר שאנו יודעין בבירור שלא ישמעו אמרין מוטב שיהיו

שוגגין, along with the incredibly extensive discussion around this premise in other *rishonim* and *aharonim*. An exploration of this *shitah* would have nuanced the critique of Rabbi Brander. According to the way some *poskim* understand *shitat Tosafot*, R. Brander definitely has על מי לסמוך.

Koby Frances writes:

As a *frum* psychologist who specializes in issues of sexual desire in the Orthodox Jewish world, I found it relieving to read Rabbi Benzion Buchman's view about the larger Jewish problem of identifying as gay and pursuing same-sex relationships. Not only is such an authentic Jewish stance important to clearly state for religious and communal reasons, but it is also necessary on a psychological level to help steer young impressionable people away from the disempowering, but popular, gay label, which many believe to be Orthodox-compatible and which many more are adopting before they have a chance to consider the long-term life consequences of this identity and whether there are more accurate and empowering terms to explain their unique patterns.

Rabbi Buchman's article is also a painful reminder of how common issues of sexual identity have become in the Orthodox community and how little we still seem to understand about it. In my opinion, this lack of understanding and progress, however, is *not* just a result of the thorny and complicated issue itself. Rather, it is due to the limited and inaccurate words that secular

culture gives us to discuss these issues, which significantly handicaps our abilities to think rationally and scientifically.

Consider, for example, the statement "homosexuality is an illness." What does this even mean? How is "same-sex attraction" different than sexual desire, compulsive urge, or romantic crush? What is "sexual orientation" and how does one measure it? What is "conversion therapy" and what exactly does "changing an orientation" look like?

Adding to the mix are newer, but no less empty, terms like "homophobia," "heteronormative," "in the closet" or "gay-affirming therapy," terms that are often utilized to communicate some kind of moral message, but which are also not clearly defined.

Then there are those clinical terms used widely by Orthodox mental-health professionals and Rabbinical experts like "gender insecurity" (J. Nicolosi, "Shame and Attachment Loss" [*Liberal Mind Pub*, 2016]), "psychosexual immaturity" (J. Berger, *Hakirah* 12 [2011] 55), or "confirmed homosexual," (C. Rapoport, *Judaism and Homosexuality: An Authentic Orthodox*) which all ascribe a more global, but hard to pinpoint, psychopathology to people with same-sex attractions.

In my opinion, this nomenclature is far removed from people's actual experiences. As a community we are, therefore, only able to think about these issues using one part of our minds—our moral intuition and religious wisdom. Psychologically we still cannot find our way.

In that sense, I would like to offer a corrective and educate readers about three specific issues that *frum* people are commonly confusing with a “natural gay identity.” Scratching just beneath the surface reveals how each of these issues has nothing to do with one’s authentic nature and relationship potential and how each one can be directly and meaningfully addressed.

One issue I have identified is something psychologists call an “arousal template,”² which I prefer to name “lust-trigger.” A person with a lust-trigger will have a powerful, immediate, and involuntary arousal reaction to a very specific and recurring body part, physique, personality type or interaction, that can involve the same-gender or opposite gender. Other romantic or sexual feelings, whether with a random stranger or intimate partner, pale in comparison to these reactions, which can cause the person to wonder if they are inherently gay.

Lust-triggers are very common in the population and are all considered the same phenomenon, with a similar type of “origin story” and underlying psychological mechanics, no matter the gender, age, appearance or type of stimulus involved. The powerful and immediate “lust” reaction is usually experienced toward strangers that one sees in public or in the media. In close relationships with one’s “trig-

ger type,” however, this lust reaction fades, as the partner becomes more of a real person with real needs, quirks, and imperfections who can no longer be idealized as a fantasy fulfillment object.

There is nothing inherently problematic about lust-triggers, and in most cases, this should not get in the way of having a romantically and sexually satisfying relationship with “a non-trigger” type of person whom one chooses based on their actual compatibility. This is very good news for people with same-sex lust-triggers who can feel deeply reassured that they are no less capable than anyone else in developing a satisfying heterosexual relationship. A timeless and basic rule of attraction is that all humans were designed with the capacity to feel emotionally and physically drawn to those with whom they develop a close bond, whether they are of the same gender or opposite gender. Romantic and sexual feelings can then naturally flow between two people when there is also an interest in pursuing a more intimate connection.

Lust triggers are only problematic if: (a) they create paralyzing confusion and shame—in which case an understanding of its childhood origins can greatly reduce this, or (b) if they develop a preoccupation with actively pursuing arousal from that trigger—in which case they can learn to reduce these urges

² Money, John. *Lovemaps: Clinical concepts of sexual/erotic health and pathology, paraphilia, and gen-*

der transposition of childhood, adolescence, and maturity. (Ardent Media, 1986).

in therapy or, (c) if they are unfairly comparing their lust-trigger reactions to random strangers with their feelings for real people, such as a new partner or in an intimate relationship where arousal is generally not as immediate and consistent.

A second category are those who confuse normal social, emotional, and sexual patterns with “being inherently gay,” which is becoming increasingly common in our sexual orientation-obsessed culture. Some examples of these patterns include not feeling romantic interest or immediate and powerful arousal to members of the opposite gender; having crushes, fantasies, or sexual experiences with members of the same gender; or having mannerisms and interests perceived as gender atypical. In many secular communities, for example, teens and young adults are taught to sexually experiment with both genders as if it would be unusual if they enjoyed their same-sex experience.

In all these cases, it can be too easy for teens and young adults—who are already on the “lookout” for identity labels—to draw premature conclusions about their core selves and relationship potential, even when they have minimal “data” in the form of meaningful interactions and relationships with the opposite sex. In this case, providing people with accurate information and correcting their assumptions is key to helping them avoid inaccurate and disempowering labels.

In the third category are those who are strongly motivated to come out, even if they are aware of the

costs involved. They believe that this identity will make their life better and they are likely to dismiss any information that will tell them otherwise. People in this group might be mislabeling their patterns as “gay” per the first and second category. But they are also *emotionally drawn to the idea of being gay* and belonging to an LGBT community. This category includes:

- a) Individuals who use “gay” to rationalize a same-sex relationship that they had fallen into or that they wish to pursue.
- b) Individuals who use “gay” and the LGBT community to develop a positive sense of self and connection to others, specifically when they have a history of feeling different, “weird,” or socially disconnected.
- c) People who use “gay” as a kind of “exit ramp” from Orthodox life and dating/marriage expectations when they feel overwhelmed or turned off by this path. Included in this subcategory are religious women, in particular, who do not feel as if they could develop a fulfilling emotional connection with a man and those who have been previously hurt by a heterosexual relationship.

Here, too, accurately identifying the person’s underlying reasons for taking on “gay” can be helpful and can point the way toward more direct and meaningful solutions.

This brings us full circle to Rabbi Buchman’s essential message: If young people internalize that it is not just homosexual behavior per se that is *asur*—that coming

out, “being gay” and living a public homosexual lifestyle is even more fundamentally incompatible with authentic Judaism—they will then be less likely to consider this path and will have more reason to accurately identify their patterns and what is needed to move forward.

Indeed, as I see every day in my office, sexual orientation ideology actually dehumanizes people by turning them into “walking labels” with no agency or individuality. When we allow ourselves to put this ideology aside, with all its empty terms and slogans, and find the more precise issue at play, such as described here, we as a community will be able to be truly empathic and helpful.

Asher Benzion Buchman responds:

I thank Rabbis Kanefsky and Katz for expressing their viewpoints, but in fact, their “perspective” is that of Rabbi Brander that *tokhabah* that will not be heeded should not be given. This is the major point that I rebutted at length. I cannot encapsulate all that I wrote there in just a few paragraphs and thus I refer our readers to that essay. But I will reiterate that our obligations of *tokhabah* and *areivut* require that the Rabbinic leadership pass on to our youth that what the Torah calls *to’evah* cannot be mainstreamed into our community. In the modern world, the attitude that homosexuality is normative has led to the situation that what was once limited to 1–2 percent of the population is now professed to be 10 percent,

and a recent study said that 38 percent of Brown University freshmen identified themselves as non-heterosexual. The decay in the morals of the society we live in is already palpable. Following society’s lead will bring this decay into our midst.

As I noted in my essay, neither Rabbi Brander nor I have any expertise in the nature of same-sex attraction, and, like the RCA in 2012, “we can neither endorse nor reject any therapy,” but historically it has always been considered a mental disorder—and the change in attitude in most of the psychiatric profession is political not scientific. In fact, Orthodox psychiatrists have been treating it with the same rate of success as any other disorder. Dr. Frances, whose letter precedes my response, has his own theory about cause and treatment and his work is highly respected in Haredi circles. I suggest that those who are skeptical about the efficacy of treatment seek out the many Orthodox professionals who are involved in treatment. It is my prayer and the belief of Israel that salvation will come to the world from the Torah, and perhaps the most effective treatments to this disorder will come from our midst.

Regarding the issue of *l’hakel’is* raised by Rabbi Kanefsky, I noted briefly in my essay that public display may come under this category, but it is a complex issue, and in any event is irrelevant to my argument. What is relevant is that this conduct comes under the category of *yad ramah*. One last point: Rabbi Katz believes (no outsider can possibly know) that some couples he knows refrain from actions that carry *kares*

infractions. However, announcing their relationship with each other to violate the *lav* of *lo tikrevu l-galot ervah*, is to act *b-yad ramah* which is punishable by *kares*, the loss of *olam haba*. It is this public demonstration that Orthodoxy cannot accept.

As I quoted from the Rav in my essay: “Our task was and still is to teach the Torah to mankind, to influence the non-Jewish world... we are to teach the world the seven *mitsvot* that are binding on every human being.” To welcome into our midst those who show pride in their violation of a Noahide Law is to abandon Israel’s mission.

Phillip Birnbaum’s H̄umash

Dov Fischer writes:

I enjoyed the *Hakirah* article on Dr. Philip Birnbaum’s forgotten *Humash*. I come from a Haredi background and was not exposed to Birnbaum’s books. Twelve years ago, I picked up a Birnbaum *Selihot* and I could not stop thinking about it. It answered many questions.

You briefly mention the Kaplan *Humash*, which I believe is a concise encyclopedia of Jewish knowledge.

Yosef Lindell responds:

Thank you so much for writing. I appreciate your feedback.

I have been doing my best to preserve Dr. Birnbaum’s legacy, as I

believe he played a monumental role in educating American Jews in the 20th century. A couple of years ago (see my footnote) I spearheaded a project to replace his tombstone with a more fitting one.³

Shlomo Y. Luchins writes:

In his article, Yosef Lindell asserts that Rabbi J.H. Hertz subscribed to the multiple-authorship of Isaiah. I do not understand how he can understand this from his essay on the subject, in which he emphatically rejects the concept, saying that it is inconceivable that the Jewish people could have forgotten the author of the surging poetry of the second half of Isaiah and merely appended it to another book.

Yosef Lindell responds:

I thank Shlomo Luchins for his correction. My sentence concerning Rabbi Hertz’s opinion about the authorship of Isaiah was poorly worded. What I should have said is that Rabbi Hertz had no theological qualms with the academic view that Isaiah was composed by multiple authors, not that he accepted it. Rabbi Hertz writes that the “question can be considered dispassionately” because it “touches no dogma, or any religious principle in Judaism.” As Mr. Luchins correctly points out, however, Rabbi Hertz rejected the academic view because he found it less persuasive.

³ See <https://forward.com/culture/511038/philip-birnbaum-au->

[thor-translator-prayer-book-sid-dur-gravestone-correction.](https://forward.com/culture/511038/philip-birnbaum-au-thor-translator-prayer-book-sid-dur-gravestone-correction)

Rabbis Berkovits and Soloveitchik

Yaacov Krausz writes:

It is misleading to suggest, and I am sure that the author had no intention of suggesting, that R. Soloveitchik and R. Berkovits represented opposite poles in their approach to halakhah. I would, however, forgive the reader of the article if they came to that conclusion. Therefore, to clarify, I suggest that the view of religion that we can fairly characterize as obscurantist, frozen in time, anti-intellectual and fundamentalist, is typified by Haredi *posekim*. They can be placed at the opposite pole to both the Rav and R. Berkovits.

The concern that halakhah be a living tradition responsive to the needs of a changing world especially in light of the establishment of the State of Israel is definitely acute. Let us see how that has been accomplished by those within Orthodoxy who adhere to the Rav's philosophy of halakhah.

The State needs an army. The establishment of Hesder Yeshivot with the concomitant plethora of guides on the proper conduct of religion in all situations that a religious soldier might find himself has gone a long way to solving that problem.

The status of women: It was the Rav who gave his imprimatur and opened the door to what is now a flood of advanced Torah learning for women. There are women *yotzot halakhab* and women with the

title *rabbanit*.

The State needs a functioning healthcare system staffed by Jews. The Zomet Institute has responded to those needs and *posekim* have stepped up to give religious physicians the ability to care for their patients 365 days a year. Technology has advanced to the point where cadavers are no longer absolutely required for medical school training.

The issue of *agunot*, once considered intractable, has been relatively solved with the proliferation of prenuptial agreements developed by the RCA.

The celebration of Yom Haatzmaut and Yom Yerushalayim, and the use of *tekheilet* are now practically standard practice in the Religious Zionist community.

It is hard to know how much of this progress, this adaptation to the new realities that the Jewish nation faces, has been due to pressure from R. Berkovits and other such voices within the Orthodox community. I, for one, am happy to give credit to everyone who is עוסק באמונה בצרכי ציבור באמונה and thank David Curwin for continuing to point out the need for a vibrant halakhah that speaks to a bright future for Orthodoxy.

Halakhic Man in Gaza

David Gillis writes:

David P. Goldman opens his article *Halakhic Man in Gaza* (*Hakirab* vol. 35/Summer 2024) with the sentence: "The daily mass demonstrations by secular Israelis against judi-

cial reform during 2023 seem a distant memory.” Nothing in that sentence is true. To begin with, the mass demonstrations were not daily, more like weekly—a small inaccuracy, but one that already arouses suspicion of a willingness to adjust reality to suit a thesis. That suspicion is confirmed in the description of the demonstrators as “secular Israelis.” I assume that I would be classed as a religious Israeli: I am a citizen of Israel, living in Tel Aviv; I observe Shabbat and kashrut, attend a daily minyan and *shiur daf yomi*, give charity, and so on. I have even contributed to *Hakirah*. I also regularly attended demonstrations against the judicial reform. So did members of my family (among them reservists who later went willingly to the front), and of my shul, and, if one may judge from outward signs, many other people who identify as religious. That was in Tel Aviv. In Jerusalem, about which I can also testify first hand, the proportion of religious people in the crowd was pretty high.

Goldman goes on to state: “Fate intervened on *Simhat Torah* with a hard hand and reminded us that *sinat hinam* leaves us vulnerable to those who would destroy us.” The demonstrations did not express *sinat hinam*. We were resisting an outrageous assault on our protections against arbitrary and corrupt government. Nor were we just a vocal minority. Opinion polls at the time fairly consistently showed a majority of Israelis against the legislation. Moreover, I may have missed something, but not once did

I hear a speaker say anything detrimental about religion or religious people. Far from hatred, the protest movement evinced social solidarity and great love of country, which, when war broke out, were channelled into organized support for the war effort and for displaced people. The movement certainly did not represent the deracinated left of Goldman’s imagination that advocates “the dissolution of all nationalities.” The demonstrations were an outburst of patriotism, a display of national strength. Each was a sea of national flags. Each ended with singing *Hatikvah*.

What intervened on *Simhat Torah* was not “fate.” On a tactical level, the debacle was the result of arrogant and wrongheaded military thinking, but more fundamentally, it was the result of an apparently cunning political strategy that was actually delusional, and a failure at the top to question those military assumptions. In fact, according to the latest information that has been made public, at least parts of Israel’s intelligence community knew of Hamas’s preparations for an attack, codenamed “Walls of Jericho,” as early as 2021. Blaming the previous years’ demonstrations for Israel’s vulnerability echoes our government’s propagandists, as they try to deflect responsibility from where it lies.

Glibly labelling the protesters against the so-called reform as secular and their cause as *sinat hinam* places them in familiar categories, and may help some who think God is on their side to feel quite smug, but it is a convenient distortion, and

it undermines interest in the rest of Goldman's essay. Nor are the demonstrations a distant memory. At the time of writing, the assault on the rule of law shows signs of being renewed, and we know that we will probably have to take to the streets again, for, in Israel, the price of liberty has gone up.

See David P. Goldman's "Response to Hakirab Readers" in the current issue (Ed.).

Artificial Intelligence

David Campbell writes:

Rabbi Yitzchak Grossman's article on artificial intelligence and synthetic biology in *Hakirab* 35 offers some fascinating suggestions for developing a halachic lens on these subjects. However, I believe that R. Grossman has unfortunately conflated several concepts in his article, in part stemming from his decision not to define what he means by the term "intelligence."

It is not clear why R. Grossman's sources in tractate *Sanhedrin* regarding the creation of humans and animals through mystical means are applicable to the question of AGI. The assumption seems to be that complex computational systems can be considered a type of synthetic life, comparable to a golem. But this is a large jump. Even Meiri's view that these creations were brought about through unspecified natural means does not tell us how he would view AGI.

Bernardo Kastrup, a modern philosopher who holds PhDs in both computer engineering and philosophy of mind, notes that one could theoretically replicate the functions of a computer using a system of pipes, valves, and water. The belief that such an elaborate plumbing network could somehow yield consciousness is, in his view, a form of magical thinking, and R. Grossman offers us no reason to believe that the rabbis would differ.

Some of the authorities cited by R. Grossman would seem to undermine the comparison between a golem and AGI. R. Gershon Hanokh Henokh Leiner, cited as one of those who would be willing to attribute a human status to a golem, explicitly ties this status to the spiritual stature of the golem's creator, not some appeal to computational complexity. The article's treatment of more rationalist thinkers, such as Ralbag, is also problematic. R. Grossman claims that "Ralbag would assume that a true AGI (if such a thing is possible) would have free will," even proposing that Ralbag might compare it to an angelic being. But there is no basis for equating Ralbag's concept of *sekhel* with our modern understanding of "intelligence," particularly as the term is used with reference to AGI. Ralbag's *sekhel* is fundamentally dependent on its connection to the *Sekhel Ha-Poel*, an angelic repository of intelligible concepts, and R. Grossman offers no evidence that Ralbag would grant an inorganic computational system such a connection.

While I greatly value the work R.

Grossman has done to forward this important area of Jewish thought and halakhah, I am concerned that the conflation of our modern term “intelligence” with our sages’ ideas of *sekhel* or *neshamah* will lead future inquiries down the wrong track.

Yitzhak Grossman responds:

I thank David Campbell for his thoughtful and incisive critique of my article, the cogency of which I largely acknowledge. I do think, however, he overstates the strength of at least some of his objections.

Mechanical Materialism

Mr. Campbell argues that my implicit assumption that “complex computational systems can be considered a type of synthetic life, comparable to a golem” is “a rather large jump,” in support of which he cites Bernardo Kastrup’s view that “The belief that [a mechanical computer] could somehow yield consciousness” is “a form of magical thinking.”

Kastrup’s view is not new or unique to him—this is the argument of John Searle’s famous “Chinese Room” thought experiment against what he terms the strong AI hypothesis—the assertion that “The appropriately programmed computer with the right inputs and outputs would thereby have a mind in exactly the same sense human beings have minds,” and indeed the much earlier “Mill Argument” of Gottfried Leibniz against mechanical materialism:

Besides, it must be admitted that perception, and anything that

depends on it, cannot be explained in terms of *mechanistic causation*—that is, in terms of shapes and motions. Let us pretend that there was a machine, which was constructed in such a way as to give rise to thinking, sensing, and having perceptions. You could imagine it expanded in size (while retaining the same proportions), so that you could go inside it, like going into a mill. On this assumption, your tour inside it would show you the working parts pushing each other, but never anything which would explain a perception. So, perception is to be sought, not in compounds (or machines), but in simple substances. Furthermore, there is nothing to be found in simple substances, apart from perceptions and their changes. Again, all the *internal actions* of simple substances can consist in nothing other than perceptions and their changes. (*Monadology* 17, translation of George MacDonald Ross)

(I first encountered Searle’s Chinese Room thought experiment decades ago in Roger Penrose’s wonderful book *The Emperor’s New Mind*, Chapter 1: “Can a Computer Have a Mind?” pp. 17-23. Penrose thinks that “Searle’s argument has a considerable force to it, even if it is not altogether conclusive.”)

But as the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2024 Edition) concludes, Searle’s argument remains quite controversial:

Despite the extensive discussion there is still no consensus as to whether the argument is sound.

At one end we have Julian Baggini's (2009) assessment that Searle "came up with perhaps the most famous counter-example in history—the Chinese room argument—and in one intellectual punch inflicted so much damage on the then dominant theory of functionalism that many would argue it has never recovered." Whereas philosopher Daniel Dennett (2013, p. 320) concludes that the Chinese Room argument is "clearly a fallacious and misleading argument." Hence there is no consensus as to whether the argument is a proof that limits the aspirations of Artificial Intelligence or computational accounts of mind.

So, Mr. Campbell is certainly correct that my implicit assumption that a sufficiently sophisticated AI could be considered "intelligent" in the same sense that humans, golems, or other genuinely intelligent entities are is not at all self-evident, and I strongly regret not having acknowledged or discussed this issue in the article. But his point that I have offered "no reason to believe that the rabbis would differ" from the view of Kastrup fails to acknowledge that Kastrup's view is by no means unanimous among modern thinkers, and he offers no concrete argument demonstrating that the rabbis would necessarily accept it.

It is true that Dennett in particular—one of the "Four Horsemen" of the New Atheism—was one of the most prominent atheist and materialist philosophers of our time,

and his worldview was certainly diametrically opposed to that of our tradition. More generally, it might be argued that the primary objection to the anti-materialist position of Leibniz, Searle, and Kastrup derives from secularist materialism, and thus that our tradition would naturally embrace that position. Even more generally, it is probably true that mechanical materialism is a relatively recent innovation in the history of human thought, and the rabbis of the Talmud were almost certainly not mechanical materialists. These are profoundly important considerations, and unfortunately beyond the scope of this letter, but I readily concede that they should have been at least acknowledged in my article.

Intelligence and Free Will

Mr. Campbell objects to my claim that "Ralbag would assume that a true AGI (if such a thing is possible) would have free will" by arguing that:

There is no basis for equating Ralbag's concept of *sekhel* with our modern understanding of "intelligence," particularly as the term is used with reference to AGI. Ralbag's *sekhel* is fundamentally dependent on its connection to the *Sekhel Ha-Poel*, an angelic repository of intelligible concepts, and R. Grossman offers no evidence that Ralbag would grant an inorganic computational system such a connection.

While I concede to a very limited understanding of the Aristotelian notion of the Active Intellect,

which is indeed crucial to a full understanding of Ralbag's conception of the intellect in general, Mr. Campbell offers no specific refutation of my application of Ralbag's assertion of the logical impossibility of intelligence without free will to a computational AI. In the article, I cited Ralbag as declaring that:

[I]t is necessary that (man) be possessed of free choice, since he is possessed of intelligence. ... And one who says that it would have been better for man to not have free choice is saying that it would be better for him to not be possessed of intelligence, since his being possessed of intelligence requires that he be possessed of free choice.

There is no mention here of the Active Intellect.

I do acknowledge Mr. Campbell's fundamental point that it is difficult to import *any* opinions of the medieval scholastics on science and philosophy into the framework of modern science with any confidence of their remaining coherent, due to the vast conceptual gulf between the scholastics' fundamental understanding of the world and ours. I once again counter his objection that I have offered "no evidence" that Ralbag's arguments *would* apply to AI by noting that he has offered no evidence, or even a concrete argument, that they would *not*.

Once again, I thank Mr. Campbell for his critique of my article and agree that further discussion of the

Torah's perspective toward AI, whether by me or by other writers, should certainly attempt to grapple with the important fundamental questions he raises.

Schlissel Hallah

Aton Holzer writes:

Thank you, R. Prof. Zvi Ron, for an outstanding overview of the history of the *minbag* of *schlissel hallah*.

One factor not mentioned in the article might be worth mentioning. Until recently, bread was prepared mostly not with baker's yeast but with a sourdough starter. Sourdough starter is created by allowing a mixture of flour and water to ferment by means of lactobacillaceae and yeast in the environment; bread was prepared from the "mother" dough, and a small amount was removed to leaven subsequent doughs.⁴

This starter dough is known in Biblical parlance as *se'or*, and it had to be destroyed along with all *hametz* before Pesah. The fermentation process necessarily began anew after Pesah, and the new "mother" dough was ready in time for the last Shabbat in Nisan, (almost) always the first Shabbat after the holiday. A small amount from this dough would be used to ferment the next batch, in a method called "back-slopping," so that the mother dough was represented in every

⁴ I am indebted to my good friend, Rabbi Yehoshua Hershberg, *talmid*

hakham, scholar, and (onetime) amateur sourdough baker, for this information.

subsequent *hallab* until the following Pesah.

This reality gives the first batch after Pesah special significance—it is not merely the first *hallab* of the year, but is the “mother” of all subsequent *hallot*, present in all the following *Shabbatot* of the year. The sequelae of this are legion.

For one thing, the removal of the inoculum for back-slopping posed a serious halakhic issue. Fourteenth-century Provencal Halakhist R. Isaac Kimhi writes:

You wrote to me, my brother, about a certain French rabbi who did not want to eat the bread of Jews and instructed [his followers?] to purchase from the [non-Jewish] baker. You begged me to explain the matter to you, if I could. You should know, my brother, that this ruling was made some years ago by a few French rabbis... For it is the habit of the women of this land that when they put aside part of the dough in order to make sourdough, they take it out after removing the priestly portion [*halab*] from the dough. Therefore, it is now exempt from the priestly portion, and when it is used as sourdough for a fresh batch of dough, there are exempt and liable parts mixed together. The liable part is the fresh dough, provided it is large

enough to be liable for *halab*, and the exempt part is the sourdough added into it, which comes from dough that has already had *halab* taken from it...⁵

The halakhic mechanism for taking *hallab* from matzah involves, ideally, removing a baked matzah from a basket of matzot, or a portion from fully formed dough portions (*Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim* 457:1)—at the end of the process, since matzot are typically baked in small dough portions, often less than the necessary *shiur* for [taking] *hallab*, to avoid leavening. A custom to produce the first breads of the “sourdough year” akin to matzot, small and docked, would serve the purpose of necessarily delaying the taking of *hallab* to the end of the baking process, and thus reminding the baker to remove the sourdough inoculum *before* taking *hallab*. One reminder of the proper order, thus instantiated, would suffice for the remainder of the year.

Aside from the halakhic resonance of such a custom, the *hashkafic* significance of the creation of the “mother” loaf within the matrix of feminine Jewish spirituality should not be gainsaid. In the recent RCA *Siddur Avodat ha-Lev*, in whose editing I was privileged to take part, we excerpt from *Seder Tebinot* of 1648. The preparation of Shabbat *hallab* merits two distinct

⁵ MS Paris, folios 84b to 85a, cited and translated in Pinchas Roth, in “Rabbinic Politics, Royal Conquest, and the Creation of a Halakhic Tradition in Medieval Provence,” in Castaño, Javier, Talya

Fishman, and Ephraim Kanarfogel, eds. *Regional identities and cultures of medieval Jews* (Liverpool University Press, 2018), 173-191.

prayers in the short work—one for the taking of *hallah*, and another for placing the loaves in the oven.⁶ It would be odd if the preparation of the new “mother” for all the year’s loaves did *not* have an associated custom which imparted its special significance.

The use of a key for docking (or, later, shaping loaves as keys) brings to mind the aggadic passage (*bTa’anit* 2b, *Bereishit Rabbah* 73:4, *Midrash Tehillim* 78:2, *Yalkut Shimoni* 126, et al.) regarding three keys that God holds—the key of childbirth, the key of resurrection, and the key of rain; the Sages of the Land of Israel add the key of *parnassab*, sustenance, but the Babylonian Sages subsume this under the key of rain. Certainly the “key” of childbirth has special significance for the female supplicant, and that of resurrection for the eschatological expectations at the origin of the feminine *tehinab*-devotions—but on the Shabbat after Pesah, most timely of all is the transition from *ve-tein tal u-matar* to *ve-tein berakhab*, from the key of rain to the key of *parnassab*. Docking the mother loaf with the key of *parnassab* perhaps recalls the manna in emphasizing that Shabbat is the source of blessing, *mekor ha-berakhab*. It is of a piece with *lehem mishneh* and other practices that link the Shabbat loaves with the manna and thus draw an equation between

sustenance ostensibly derived from human endeavor with that gifted to man directly from God. Understood thus, the association of *schlissel hallah* with *parnassab* is unproblematic.

Moreover, understanding the sourdough process allows us to appreciate an additional element: back-slopping brings to mind spontaneous Divine creation, whether *ex nihilo* or *ex materia*, which appears explicitly as a pair with resurrection both in the Elijah cycle and the Elisha cycle. In both, a widow is granted a miracle in which oil (and in Elijah’s case, flour) does not cease to be poured from the jug, and then the son of a widow dies and is resurrected (I Kings 17, II Kings 4). R. Nachman Levine notes⁷ that the three keys are the organizing principle of those literary units. The use of a small piece of dough to catalyze an entire leavened loaf brings to mind the miracles of regeneration of oil and flour, the most ostentatious Biblical deployments of the Divine key of *parnassab*. The point of origin for this overt manifestation of God in the baking process—*berakhab metzuyah be-‘isab*—is the preparation of the mother loaf for the first Shabbat after Pesah. It is fitting that we should roll it, pat it, and mark it with a key.



⁶ Devra Kay, *Seyder Tkbines: The Forgotten Book of Common Prayer for Jewish Women* (JPS, 2004), esp. 150-152.

⁷ Nachman Levine, “Twice as Much of Your Spirit: Pattern, Parallel and

Paronomasia in the Miracles of Elijah and Elisha,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 24(85), 25-46 (1999).