

FROM YESHIVA BOCHUR TO SECULAR HUMANIST

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1. Introduction - Brief Autobiography

I was born in Brooklyn, New York, of Eastern European Jewish descent. My parents were born in the States, but their parents came from Europe, and both my parents spoke Yiddish as their first language. When I was just three my family moved to Los Angeles, California. Both of my parents were raised in Torah Jewish¹ homes, and that's how they raised my two brothers and myself.

The Torah, in the broad sense in which I intend it here, is the entire body of law, legend, and inspirational literature that encompasses the Old Testament of the Bible, the Talmud, Midrash, and numerous other religious writings down through the centuries, including today. To be a Torah Jew is to live in conformity with the Torah, and to believe its precepts. “Strictly Orthodox”, “shomer shabbas” (translated literally as “guardian of the Sabbath”), and, I would claim, “fundamentalist”, are other terms one could use to describe this way of life. While the first two are common, you don't hear “fundamentalist” used very often in connection with Judaism, though it is with Christianity and Islam. But Torah Jews really are fundamentalists; I was taught that the world was literally created in six days almost six thousand years ago, and that the theory of evolution was mistaken.

October 2, 2006

In our milieu, to qualify as a Torah Jew, one had to keep kosher both at home and when eating out, and also refrain from any of the prohibited activities from sundown Friday to Saturday evening. This means you couldn't turn on or off lights, tear anything, carry anything outside your home, light or adjust a fire on the stove, drive or ride in a car, or perform a host of other activities. When it comes to eating, no meat and milk together - you had to wait six hours after eating meat before you could eat any dairy - no unkosher meat, two sets of dishes (four actually, if you count Passover dishes).

While this may sound like an awfully restrictive form of life - well okay, it is actually - there are important compensating advantages. For instance, on the Sabbath, one spends time in synagogue with one's friends and neighbors, one has leisurely feasts with singing and a lot of fellow feeling, there are no outside distractions, and it's typical to have a nice nap or walk to round out the day. If you're used to eating only kosher food it's not that hard to refrain from eating non-kosher food, especially if you live in a community where everyone is doing the same.

Another significant feature of Torah Judaism has to do with schooling. If at all possible, a Torah Jewish family does not send a child - especially a male child - to a public school. I was sent to a religious Jewish school - a "yeshiva"² - in Los Angeles. At the age of six or seven I began to study Talmud (I was a bit precocious), along with other religious subjects. The school day was long, as half the day was devoted to Torah study and the other half to our secular subjects. We were expected to master the standard academic curriculum, and indeed yeshiva students tended to do well when applying to

October 2, 2006

college.

One significant element of my upbringing that certainly distinguished it from most others in the Torah tradition was that it took place in Los Angeles in the 1960's. From very early on I was subjected to the conflicting messages of traditional (Eastern European) Jewish life and modern American culture, in particular the cutting edge represented by 60's counterculture. As a small child this didn't affect me much, but by the age of 12 or 13 the clash of influences started to have an effect. In 1966, as the 60's political and cultural revolution was getting into full swing, I left yeshiva and went to public school, where I spent my last two years of high school. There I made friends with the hippies in the school (still a small, but growing minority), and generally threw myself into the LA 60's counter cultural scene. Needless to say, my formerly strict observance of Jewish law lapsed quite a bit during this period.

That might have been the end of the story, but instead of just going on to college and leaving the Torah tradition behind me, I decided to return to yeshiva to study full time. Though during my public high school years I had strayed considerably from the Torah path, I never really gave up my fundamental beliefs that this was the right way to live. I felt the need to give it another chance. I began by studying with the Rabbi who had first taught me Talmud when a youngster, Rabbi Simcha Wasserman. I again began to observe all the laws strictly, and now spent all day studying Talmud. I still kept the leftish political views that developed during my time in public high school, and continued my friendships with a

October 2, 2006

number of my close friends from that period (though I only saw them rarely), but mostly I became immersed in the Torah-yeshiva world much more deeply than before. I moved in to the school's dormitory, and lived and breathed Torah constantly.

I made significant progress, and in the middle of my second year there Rabbi Wasserman suggested that it was time for me to go to a bigger yeshiva in Israel. So, I left for Jerusalem, where I studied for almost two years. By this time I had decided that I would pursue Torah study as my life's work and become a yeshiva Rabbi myself. While in Jerusalem I experienced profound but conflicting emotions regarding this life choice. For instance, the first time I went to the Wailing Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem I truly believed that I experienced something like a personal revelation, though of course I couldn't really describe what I felt (and can't to this day). Also, I found the high level and intensity of study at the yeshiva exhilarating and fulfilling.

On the other hand, storm clouds of doubt and discontent were also forming on the horizon. I began to have anxiety attacks that shook me up and made me reflect on aspects of my life that I had been hiding from myself. Moral and intellectual objections to Torah doctrines began to intrude more and more on my thinking, and I found less and less personal satisfaction in the yeshiva atmosphere, to the point that I experienced it as extremely stifling. I began to seek out contacts outside the yeshiva and gradually realized that I wanted to leave and attend university. After much internal

October 2, 2006

turmoil, I decided to return to Los Angeles, where I enrolled at UCLA, became a philosophy major, and never really looked back. I suppose it took a few more years before I realized that I had lost all of my religious beliefs and indeed classified myself as a secular atheist. I also lost interest in continuing my involvement with the Jewish community, even on a purely cultural level. While never denying my past life as a yeshiva bochur, indeed treasuring it in many ways, I did definitively leave it, and Judaism more generally, behind.

2. Torah Judaism and TCA

So much for the bare bones narrative of my life as a Torah Jew; now to put some flesh on those bones and get into some detail. For this purpose, I want to organize my discussion around three key ideas that I think illuminate the structure of Torah Jewish life, and perhaps many other forms of religious life: transcendence, community, and Aristotelian flourishing. By “transcendence” I intend a connection with forces and purposes beyond one’s personal concerns and the details of one’s own life. By “Aristotelian” flourishing I intend the ability to develop and exercise one’s peculiarly human capabilities, as for instance through intellectual or artistic endeavors. “Community” is self-explanatory. To a very rough first approximation, one could say that God provides the transcendence, the Jewish people the sense of community, and Torah study the Aristotelian flourishing. These three aspects of Torah Jewish life are however interwoven in a very complicated way, which I’ll try to convey in what follows.

October 2, 2006

I'll begin with Torah study. Torah Judaism has a feature I've always admired, and, from my own limited knowledge of other religions, seems unique to it. This is the idea that what is essentially a kind of scholarly research, Torah study, counts as a form of religious devotion. In fact study of the Torah (which normally means the Talmud) is considered a duty (for males, of course), and this duty is taken so seriously that it gives rise to a corresponding sin that served in my youth as one of the principal sources of guilt, the sin of "bitul Torah". You commit the sin of "bitul Torah" when you are awake, not actively involved in "learning" (which meant thinking about, reading, discussing some aspect of the Torah), and have no good excuse for not doing so. Possible excuses are: you're eating, you're at work, in the bathroom, fulfilling some other religious obligation, fulfilling some social obligation, or engaging in necessary leisure. But the default is, if you're awake and have no other pressing need, you should be learning Torah. What an amazing constant source of guilt, and yet also a tremendous affirmation of the significance of intellectual activity.

What is so engaging in Talmud study, especially for anyone with a philosophical bent, is the emphasis on subtle conceptual distinctions and complicated inferences. You start with a passage of Talmud that doesn't make sense on the face of it, or apparently contradicts another passage. Enter the commentaries to explain it, or explain away the contradiction. Usually this involves introducing a distinction. But then the commentaries disagree with each other, and then you search among further commentaries to find even more subtle distinctions, and on it goes. One passage of a few

October 2, 2006

lines of Talmud can involve one in days of scholarly research and complex reasoning on one's own part. What's beautiful about it is that though there is on the one hand a rigid structure of authority - in the end we're trying to figure out God's word, so it has to be right - there is always room for one's own original contribution, thanks to the complexity of the dialectic.

A word about the authority structure. In the yeshiva world, one's heroes are Talmudic scholars. Greatness in learning is the key to membership in the Rabbinic "hall of fame". There are two dimensions along which "greatness", and thus authority, are measured: one that applies within a particular era, and the other that applies across time. With regard to the former, relative authority is determined by the judgments of peers concerning one's scholarly achievement, just as this is done in secular academic professions. With regard to the latter, the idea is that the farther back in time, the greater the scholar, and thus the more authority (this is a rough approximation). Moses is at the pinnacle, having talked directly to God and received the Torah directly from Him. It's significant that though Moses is the one who led the Jews out of slavery and performed all those miracles in Egypt, he is known by the name "Moshe Rabeinu", which means Moses our teacher. The prophets and judges come next, then the authors of the Mishna, the authors of Gomorrah, the early commentaries (the "Rishonim"), the later commentaries (the "Acharonim"), and then finally the scholars of the last couple of centuries. Though the most subtle intellectual work you see written down is by later authors, the idea is that all of these distinctions

October 2, 2006

and nuances were known by the early scholars, and either handed down orally or forgotten and then rediscovered. So one could always introduce a new distinction that solved a tricky problem, but have faith that this idea too was known to Moshe Rabeinu. Through this mechanism, much latitude for individual creativity was allowed while maintaining the structure of authority.

The Rabbi I first studied Talmud with, and with whom I studied immediately after high school, was perhaps the most significant influence on me during my youth. Rabbi Simcha Wasserman was the youngest son of Rav Elchanan Wasserman, who right before WWII was perhaps the most important Talmudic scholar in Eastern Europe. It's extremely hard to explain what it was like to be in the presence of a man like Rabbi Wasserman as he lectured on a passage of Talmud. Of course he had the appearance one expected from any yeshiva rabbi - beard, black yarmulka, worn suit, general Eastern European facial features. But the really special ones, like Rabbi Wasserman, had a sparkle in their eyes, and exuded a warmth and spiritual joy, that, combined with penetrating intellectual power and a keen sense of irony and humor, was spellbinding. Even as a small child I could see what distinguished him from others who looked the look and talked the talk, but didn't really have that something special that made them stand out. Having this encounter with the genuine article at this age, someone who instantiated what was best about the tradition that produced him - as it were, the "form" of the yeshiva rabbinical scholar - left an indelible impression on me. In a way that I'll try to make clear later, it was

October 2, 2006

precisely this appreciation of authenticity, instilled in me by my exposure to figures like Rabbi Wasserman, that eventually played a major role in causing me to lose my faith in the doctrines they taught me.

Of course what makes all of this intellectual activity a form of religious devotion is the fact that God commands us to engage in it, and that what we are studying is His law. Belief in God is central to Torah Judaism. For one thing, there is the Biblical fundamentalism. It is a tenet of faith that God literally created the world from nothing in six days. The waters of the Red Sea were parted by God, using Moses as his agent. In fact, every word of the Pentateuch is believed to be dictated by God to Moses. Then there's the constant praying and saying blessings, and the injunction not to take God's name in vain. The point of wearing a yarmulke, I was told when a child, is to have a constant reminder that God is above you in heaven. One even thanks God with a special blessing after going to the bathroom, because He allows your body to function properly. Nothing in one's daily life, in other words, escapes some reminder of God's authority and majesty.

Earlier I identified the source of transcendence in Torah Judaism with belief in God. In a way this is obvious, and doesn't distinguish Torah Judaism from other forms of Judeo-Christian belief. A search for transcendence, as I understand it, is a search for significance in one's life, lasting significance in particular. Well, what could be more significant than the fact that the creator of the universe, its most powerful, beneficent, and wise actor, takes an interest in you, and somehow your activity contributes to His purposes? Clearly it's also of utmost importance that belief in God turns

October 2, 2006

death from an ultimate end into merely another stage in one's journey. As a Torah Jew I felt this sense of transcendence quite palpably, especially in such moments as my first trip to the Wailing Wall. Here I am, I thought, where God's divine presence is most intensely located.

But there is a particular way that Torah Judaism links the transcendence afforded by connection to God both to Torah study and to the Jewish people, the embodiment of our third theme, community. Within Torah Judaism, world history is represented as the history of the Jewish people, which in turn is understood as the chronicle of the complicated relationship between God and his often errant, but at bottom deeply-loved children. The Jewish people constitute God's agent in the world, the instrument through which His own agency is expressed. And perhaps the most important way that Torah Jews carry out this mission is through the study of Torah. Torah study literally, on this view, makes the world go around.³

A story I heard in yeshiva illustrates this point nicely. The story involves Rav Chaim Volozhin, the most eminent pupil of the Vilna Gaon, himself the most important Rabbinic authority in Europe of his time (and for a century or two before probably). Rav Chaim was giving a lecture on some Talmudic point when all of a sudden the students in the room began running over to the window. It turns out that Napoleon's soldiers had just entered the town and were marching down the main street. The students were witnessing a small part of what was clearly a world-historical process, and it's not

October 2, 2006

surprising that they interrupted their study to get a good look. Rav Chaim upbraided them by saying they had their priorities reversed. What's going on in here, in this room where we are studying Torah, he said, is what's of world-historical importance, not what's going on out there.

One could of course just write this off as a not very convincing attempt by a frustrated professor to get his students to pay attention. I never did hear whether the students stopped gawking at the soldiers; probably the force of Rav Chaim's personality was enough to get them to stop. But the story survived two hundred years for a reason. It expresses a very deeply-held belief that studying Torah is not only a religious obligation, not only something that binds you personally to God and the Jewish people, but actually contributes to God's plan for the universe. The idea that pure intellectual activity brings you most closely in contact with the spiritual essence of the world I found, and still find, very powerful, and it shows how closely interwoven are transcendence and Aristotelian flourishing in Torah Judaism.

Let me return now to what I said above was the complex relationship between God and the Jewish people. What makes it complicated is the fact that the Jewish people are not represented as merely God's instrument and servant, but also, as mentioned above, his often-badly-behaved children, and this tension between God and the People is crucial to the dynamic of Torah life. Reading the chronicles in the Bible and the Midrashic commentaries makes it clear that the parent-child relation is precisely the right model. It's a commonplace that many parents attempt to realize themselves

October 2, 2006

through their children's lives, and then are brought up short by the fact that their children are independent people with projects and lives of their own. Similarly, God lays out a plan for the role of the Jewish People in history, and damned if His children aren't constantly rebelling and going their own way. Now of course, rebelling is "sinning", and the ideology of Torah Judaism is that we should be "good" children and follow the plan, but one can't help but notice that the streak of rebellion - as it's put in one Biblical passage, we are a "stiff-necked" people - is often celebrated, though surreptitiously - it's the "subtext", as it were.

There are instances where standing up to God is openly celebrated, though this is officially clothed in the idea that this is also what God wants. One such event, of paramount significance, is the moment when Moses defied God at Mt. Sinai in the incident of the Golden Calf. Moses, returning from his 49 days on Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah, discovers the people's rebellion in building the Golden Calf. God says in anger, "Moses, leave me to pour out my wrath on them and destroy them; I will then start a new nation from your children." Amazingly, according to the Midrashic commentary, Moshe Rabeinu (himself quite furious with the people, of course) replies to God, "If You will forgive their sin fine, but if not, blot me out of the book that You have written." God relents, and the people are saved. The idea that Moses could speak this boldly to God, for the purpose of saving his people, has always moved me greatly, and it still does. In particular, what comes across is not just Moses's daring rescue attempt, but the sense that in his view the Jewish People matter more

October 2, 2006

than God and His law. What's more, God endorses this judgment.⁴

There is a widely cited story from the Talmud that also illustrates how the People take precedence. During the days of the Sanhedrin, the Rabbinic court that decided points of Jewish Law during the period when Israel was still a political entity and the Temple was extant, the legal disputes that arose would be decided by majority, as in our Supreme Court. One such debate featured a particularly eminent scholar on one side, and everyone else on the other. He was so sure of his stand that he said, "if I'm right, let that tree over there uproot itself and jump to another spot." Damned if it didn't do just that. The other sages replied, "we don't take instruction from trees." "Okay," he said, "if I'm right let that river change course." Again, the river changed course. They replied, "we don't take instruction from rivers." "Well then," he finally said, exasperated with their stubbornness no doubt, "if I'm right let a voice from Heaven proclaim that." Sure enough, a voice from Heaven proclaimed that he was right in his interpretation of the law. At this point the others replied, "we don't take instruction from You (i.e. God) either. You gave us the Torah, and with it the rules for its interpretation, and now it's our job. So You keep out of it." According to the Talmud, Elijah the prophet was visiting with a scholar from the era after the destruction of the Temple,⁵ and was asked how God reacted when defied by the members of the Sanhedrin in this way. Elijah replied that God laughed and said, "my children have bested me."

It's this background understanding of the nature of the relationship between God and the Jewish People that has

October 2, 2006

always made me feel alienated from so-called “progressive” Passover Seders. Despite the fact that I now lead a totally secular life, and endorse leftist political views, I’ve never been able to see the story of the exodus from Egypt as a celebration of all human liberation from oppression. For me, Passover is too personal. As I see it, Passover is the story of a volatile love affair between two very particular characters - God and the Jewish people. While I understand the urge to universalize it, it just doesn’t work for me.

Despite the crucial roles played by God and Torah study in the world view of Torah Judaism, I think it’s clear that it is the People - community - that plays the most significant role. True, the source of the Jewish People’s significance is the idea that we were chosen by God to do his holy work - mainly, study his Torah. But in the end, loyalty and connection to the People becomes the most important duty in Torah Judaism; and in this sense, in Judaism more widely.

One manifestation of the primacy of community is the fact that it is common to find Jews who keep up their (relatively) strict observance of the laws of Kashrut and the Sabbath but proclaim that they do not believe in a lot of the doctrine. I remember quite well that I “came out” to my parents in stages. First I told them I didn’t believe in God, then I told them I didn’t keep the Sabbath anymore, and finally I told them I was going to marry a non-Jew. Well, the first stage made almost no impression, the second caused quite a fuss, and the third, well, you just have to see Fiddler on the Roof to imagine their reaction.

October 2, 2006

The idea I think is that ritual practice and observance, even more than a matter of obeying God, is a sign of one's commitment to community membership. The preservation of the community is of paramount importance, which is why one of the worst sins you can commit, in the eyes of most Torah Jews, is to marry a non-Jew. Sure, you are supposed to maintain your faith in God and obey His commands, but the bottom line is that you don't break with the community.

During my life as a yeshiva bochur I was completely sold on God and Torah study. I believed in God wholeheartedly, and threw myself into the study of Talmud. I also found the idea of God's relationship with the Jewish People to be a profoundly moving idea, and it was certainly important to me that I was contributing to the People's fulfillment of their divinely-ordained role. Yet, I must admit, there was always a part of the community aspect of Torah Judaism that didn't sit well with me.

It's not that I didn't share in the sense of community loyalty that all my friends and I grew up with. As the children of the Holocaust generation - many of my childhood friends were children of survivors - the idea of loyalty to the People was ingrained very deeply. Yet I never really fully internalized the sense that just because someone was Jewish I had some special connection with him or her. I mostly only knew Jews when I was very young, and I certainly felt strong bonds with my friends. But this visceral sense that many Jews have of a need to associate with other Jews was never very strong in me. Participation in many community functions was often a chore for me, something I did out of obligation. I found myself

October 2, 2006

interested in and wondering about the world outside, and drawn toward people with different backgrounds. Strong emotional bonds were always for me a function of actual connections, not a matter of ethnic identification. My sense of community identification was more ideological than it was for many of my peers, and therefore more easily weakened when the structure of Torah beliefs was dismantled, a topic to which I now turn.

4. Leaving It All Behind

In my brief biographical narrative above I told how, after significant internal struggle, I came to abandon my life as a yeshiva bochur. A lot of elements went into that sea change, and it's difficult, especially now after so many years, to present a clear and coherent picture of that process. So I'm not going to try. Rather, I'm going to indulge in some reconstructive history, telling the story unabashedly from my current perspective, relying on memory of course, but also on insight gained years after that process was completed. So what were (are) my objections to the Torah life, and to what extent do the three elements of transcendence, community, and Aristotelian flourishing play a role in my current secular life?

I'll begin with the more intellectual, or philosophical problems, though I don't want to spend much time on these. It's not that they weren't important for me, but anti-theistic arguments can be found lots of places, and it isn't the focus of my concern in this paper. Suffice it to say that I came to believe (and still believe) that the metaphysics of theism generally,

October 2, 2006

and Torah Judaism in particular, along with the fundamentalist narrative about the Bible and all that implied concerning the status of modern scientific theories, is just untenable. For many familiar reasons, which I find utterly convincing, the idea that there is a supernatural, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent deity that created and watches over the world, is one I can't now take seriously.⁶

However, one aspect of the process by which I came to this conclusion does bear elaboration. Talmud study, as I've said a number of times, involves acute and subtle forms of reasoning. As my admiration for Rabbi Wasserman makes clear, I was especially sensitive to signs of intellectual honesty and authenticity, values I saw embodied in him and other Talmudic scholars I encountered. But there was always a tension between this value of intellectual honesty and the constraint that the Torah had to be right and you couldn't question God's word. That even Jewish scholars felt the tension is evident, I believe, from the way that the People's rebelliousness was celebrated. Still, in the end, the principle that the Torah, as the divine word of God, had to be right constituted an absolute constraint on intellectual pursuit, one that for me stood in stark conflict with the values of intellectual honesty and authenticity. I chose the latter.

But the interesting question for my purposes is not really why I can't take Torah Jewish theism seriously, but why it should matter. As I mentioned above, there are many Jews who maintain varying degrees of connection with traditional practice who don't espouse the fundamentalist beliefs definitive of Torah Judaism. It was certainly an option for me to join

October 2, 2006

their ranks. Maybe I couldn't really be a full-fledged Torah Jew anymore, since that really does involve buying the fundamentalism, but I might have maintained a somewhat traditional Jewish life nevertheless. It certainly would have allowed me to maintain a normal relationship with my family, which was a pretty strong incentive. So why didn't I choose this option? This gets to the heart of the matter that I think this entire volume is about. What kind of life have we given up, why, and what kind of life have we chosen instead?

The reason I couldn't really choose the "cultural Torah-Jew" option had to do with certain deep moral objections to that way of life, together with the realization that it just wasn't personally fulfilling. I spoke above of how essential the role of the Jewish People, its special status, is to Torah Jewish life. In many prayers the phrase "and You chose us from among all the other nations" occurs, and the claim that we are the Chosen People is one of the principal tenets of Torah Jewish faith. The spirit of that claim pervades much cultural Jewish life, even for those who don't strictly believe it. Well, I just couldn't buy the Chosen People idea anymore. For one thing, it just didn't seem true. I looked around at my fellow Jews and at the other people I knew, and also thought carefully about the histories of various peoples, and this special divine spark that supposedly attached to the Jewish people just didn't seem evident. I came to the conclusion, something I believe to this day, that all peoples - not all people, because there certainly are individual differences - are pretty much the same.

October 2, 2006

But the main problem was that the doctrine of the Chosen People conflicts with very basic moral principles I had internalized concerning the value of every human life, and the general egalitarian ideals that attend a modern Western democratic culture. I had also never really abandoned the leftist political views I had acquired while in public high school, which were more radically egalitarian in nature. Torah Judaism is actually not consistent in this regard, since one can also find sources for this more egalitarian ethic, but the emphasis is clearly on our inherent special nature, and I could no longer abide that form of chauvinism.

Though just at the level of ideology this insistence on Jewish specialness bothered me, it wasn't until I lived in Israel that it began to cause serious internal conflict. It was there that I saw first-hand how Jews treated Arabs the way Jews were themselves treated in Eastern Europe. It took time for this to sink in, but the seeds of future moral outrage were planted then. I could no longer ignore how the ideology of special divine favor was being realized in practice.

I remember years ago talking with a friend of my parents about the relative virtues of various religious traditions. One virtue he maintained for Judaism was its disdain for proselytizing. "Well," I said, "this can go two ways. It might easily be seen as an expression of racial or ethnic superiority; we are the "chosen people" and won't encourage others to join us." He responded that whatever sense of superiority or exclusivity there was in Jewish sensibility was nothing for others to fear, as historically Jews have not been responsible for any of the kinds of crimes against other peoples that have been

October 2, 2006

perpetrated by others, especially against us. I replied, “perhaps historically this has been true, but then we haven’t had any power for two thousand years. Just look what happened once we got some, in Israel.”

Let’s be clear what founding the Jewish State of Israel involved, and continues to involve. We came into another people’s land - admittedly, after enduring centuries of oppression ourselves - kicked them out brutally, and treated those who remained like dirt. We continue to oppress Palestinians horribly, and shamelessly exploit our own history of oppression and guilt-trip the rest of the world into letting us get away with it. This is how God’s people act? Not any God I wanted to have anything to do with.

Of course any people, even God’s chosen people, can act badly, and this alone might not be enough to undermine the doctrine. What bothered me in particular, however, was that this didn’t seem to be an aberration. Both the role of Torah Jewry in actively participating in the oppression and subjugation of Palestinians, and the way that Torah doctrines lent themselves to be exploited for that purpose, made this evident. God gave the land to us, it’s a sin to give any of it back, Arab lives don’t have the same value as Jewish lives - all of these claims have Torah sources. It’s just too natural and easy to slide from thinking of one’s own kind as distinguished by God to thinking of others as beneath contempt.

I want to emphasize that this isn’t just a matter of how the government of Israel behaves. Unfortunately, today, especially in the US, Jewish communal life has been largely hijacked by the Zionist project. Though there are finally some

October 2, 2006

cracks in the wall of defiant support for anything Israel does, the kinds of vicious accusations leveled at anyone who shows concern for Palestinian suffering has made the organized Jewish community an unwelcome place for many who might otherwise seek fellowship there. Though there are many factors that explain this unhappy state of affairs - and again, Jews' history of oppression is clearly among them - I do believe that the chauvinistic emphasis on the People that is deeply rooted in Torah Judaism is among them.⁷

I certainly don't mean to say that I think this problem is peculiar to Torah Judaism. It seems to me history has shown all too well that when community is made a fundamental value around which a form of life is organized, there is a large risk that in circumstances of conflict with other groups things will get very ugly. Jews are no better or worse than others in this regard. My point is just that the Torah, to which I used to look for moral guidance, seemed to be part of the problem here, not the solution.

As I mentioned earlier, there were also personal issues. As long as I believed in the basic tenets of Torah doctrine, and was immersed in the yeshiva world with its intellectual fulfillment, feeling connected, indeed feeling obligated to feel connected, to the Jewish People wasn't a problem. But once the special nature of the Jewish People was no longer underwritten by divine writ, I found the communal sensibility stifling and in conflict with a sense of my own autonomy. Continuing to live as a member of the Jewish community, even those portions of it not infected by Zionist zealotry, just

October 2, 2006

wasn't for me.

Why? It's not that I see no need for community, nor that I can't understand how people who share a tradition might find fulfillment in association with each other. I certainly see nothing wrong with the idea of a modernized Jewish communal life that sheds both those chauvinistic elements to which I morally object along with the fundamentalist beliefs. But to me there isn't much point. For one thing, what kept me deeply engaged in Jewish life was so tied up with the beauty and grandeur of genuine Torah Judaism, that the available modernized replacements seem frankly shallow and lifeless to me. For another, I just don't find the kind of connection to others built on history and tradition very sustaining.

I feel very close to my friends and family, and certainly recognize special obligations to those with whom I've developed various relationships, as well as my community more broadly speaking. Indeed, my participation in the Palestinian support movement does have something to do with my being Jewish, because it seems to me that when your community makes a mess one has a special obligation to help clean it up. But in the end I mostly define myself as an individual, with my own projects and interests, and cherish the ability to associate with those who share what I value in one way or another.

I remember well one of the arguments that was often made to me for why I shouldn't marry my non-Jewish wife. "But what will your children be? They won't know who they are?" relatives would say, in a self-satisfied tone that

October 2, 2006

expressed their confidence that finally they had an unassailable argument. “What will they be? People,” I would respond; “they’ll be people and know that’s what they are.” I suppose that’s not enough for some. But for me, having spent so much of my youth tied to a community by God’s command and now finally set free, this suited me just fine.

Torah Judaism provided transcendence through God, community through the Jewish People, and Aristotelian flourishing through Torah study. My chosen profession, philosophy, clearly provides ample opportunity for Aristotelian flourishing. What’s more, I’m no longer constrained by a dogmatic bottom line, so it fulfills that need even better than Torah study. Community for me is something that must be constructed on a more voluntary basis. It’s hard, no doubt, and of course no one has found a really good substitute for age-old traditions to provide people with the means to express their fellow-feeling in structured ways. It’s hard to just make up holidays and rituals, and therefore my own communal life with friends and family relies heavily on those we were bequeathed by our traditions. Still, we can choose what we want to take from that past and with whom, and to me this is crucial.

So what about transcendence? If there’s no God in my life, how do I deal with the loss of connection to what’s beyond, the feeling that my projects and concerns lack significance? My attitude toward this question was influenced early on in my college career when I encountered Nietzsche. In fact, it was reading Nietzsche that finally put the nail in the coffin of my belief in God. From Nietzsche⁸ I got the idea that aside from the fact that it’s false, belief in God might actually

October 2, 2006

be morally wrong. This meant that you couldn't try to hedge your bets by maintaining your belief, or going agnostic (that great cop out); you really had to take a stand. It had never occurred to me before that it could be wrong to believe in God, so intent had I been on defending myself against the charge that it was wrong to lose my faith. This was a real eye opener.

So how could it be wrong? Well, of course not wrong in the stealing/murdering/raping sense of wrong. Rather, it's wrong in the sense that belief in God expresses a rejection, or denial, or perhaps subjugation of one's humanity. It involves turning one's back on the human will to overcome challenges, to create, and instead makes servility to authority the ultimate aim of human life. It projects onto an unapproachable and incomprehensible Other all that is good and magnificent in human experience and achievement. Why is it wrong? It's a sin against ourselves, that's why.

An interesting example of the kind of self-denying projection I'm talking about can be seen in the framework of Torah study itself. As I described earlier, a crucial element in Talmud study is the recognition of the authority of historically earlier scholars and sages. Every new distinction we come up with, every new argument, is supposedly just a matter of rediscovering what was there from the beginning, and was known to Moshe Rabeinu to boot. But of course this is all inverted. The Torah, as every other human endeavor, develops and grows. It's the most recent scholars, building on those who came before them, who have honed it to its finest and subtlest shape. But rather than take credit for this ever-developing body of thought, we belittle ourselves as unworthy descendants of those who had genuine wisdom and

October 2, 2006

insight.

The very idea that we require salvation from above is an idea I now find quite offensive. It's not that I see only good in human nature. Far from it. As a species we seem particularly prone to acts of savagery that distinguish us on the planet. But we must take responsibility for ourselves, and while taking responsibility for our dark side also take pride in our achievements. Theists of all (traditional) kinds often make human hubris - the urge, as it is sometimes called, to "play God" - into the source of much evil in the world. I side with (my understanding of) Nietzsche here in seeing this as the great inversion of reality that it is. For it is our unique capacity as rational beings with a moral sense to transcend mere nature. Rather than acknowledge that fundamental fact and take responsibility for it, theists redescribe it as "playing God". No, as I see it, it's God who's playing us.

In the end, I do think one loses something significant when one loses belief in God. I admit that the idea that my life was somehow a matter of concern to the ultimate power of the universe provided me with a sense of my own significance which I lost when I lost that belief. I also miss the comforting thought that however dark the world seems, the bright light of redemption may be just around the corner. (Of course we may have to do our share to attain it, but the point is we have a powerful ally on our side.) Finally, with God gone, so is eternal life. I've had to confront the reality of death in a new way.

To that sense of loss just described I have two responses. First, I say "welcome to life as it is rather than how it only

October 2, 2006

seemed to be in your fantasy.” For human beings, growing up is often a matter of facing painful truths, and the loss of this sort of transcendence and moral guarantee must be swallowed and dealt with along with many other aspects of reality; in particular, as mentioned, the ultimate nature of death. This is one way to read the story of Adam and Eve, of course. Human innocence can no longer be sustained, now that we’ve eaten from the “tree of knowledge”. So be it. The Nietzschean in me says “deal with it”.

But then, as with the tree of knowledge story, I think there’s a way in which this loss of theological transcendence can be seen as an opportunity as well. In line with what I take to be a common theme of both Nietzsche and Kant, we can turn this indifference of the universe to our lives and projects into the opportunity to make ourselves the ground of our own significance. As rational intentional agents we can see meaning and significance where we ourselves make it. To quote Kant, “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing wonder and awe: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.” What’s within us needs no validation from the starry heavens - its significance is internally certified.

So there’s no guarantee good will triumph over evil, and we must be the authors and creators of our own significance. That we can be the ground of our own significance - and, I would argue, have always been, though we hid it from ourselves behind a veil of mythology - is really a profound miracle in its own right, worthy of Kant’s wonder and awe. Once we rid ourselves of the veil imposed by religious ideology and practice, we face formidable challenges: We must

October 2, 2006

face our own death without comfort of an afterlife; we must endow our projects with significance from within; we must find it in ourselves to fight for justice though the odds may be against us; and we must self-consciously build a new sense of community based on recognition of our and others' autonomous choices. Can we succeed? I don't know, that's the whole point. Still, it's all we have, and it's a noble project to try.

October 2, 2006

NOTES

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1. I prefer this term to the more common “Orthodox Jewish”. Its significance will become apparent presently.
 2. The word “yeshiva” comes from the Hebrew word for sitting; the idea is that you are constantly “sitting and learning” when in yeshiva. A “bochur” is a young man or boy, so to be a “yeshiva bochur” is just to be a male student in a yeshiva.
 3. And I mean “literally”. I remember once having explained to me that God made the Earth round so that at every moment someone would be awake and studying Torah, for otherwise it couldn’t continue to exist.
 4. Another commentary points out that when God tells Moses to “leave me” to destroy the people, it’s odd since there’s no indication that Moses was in any way standing in His way. The implication is (this is how Midrashic hermeneutics works) that God was suggesting to Moses that he should in fact get in His way.
 5. Elijah, according to Biblical legend, never died, but ascended to Heaven alive. There are many stories in the Talmud of his appearing to various scholars.
 6. Did I ever really take it seriously? Georges Rey (this volume) will tell you I didn’t. Maybe he’s right. I certainly thought I did (which is consistent with his thesis, of course). But whatever the case about the past, I really can’t take it seriously now.
 7. What I’m describing is a central tendency of current Jewish communal life, and its relation to traditional Torah doctrine. It’s important to note, however, that there are many, many individual Jews, both in Israel and around the world, who have shown great moral courage by speaking out, and even risking their lives, to oppose the Israeli oppression of Palestinians. There are now a number of Jewish organizations, again both in Israel and around the world, who are working hard for the cause of peace and justice in Israel/Palestine.
 8. Whether this idea is actually Nietzsche’s or I read it into his work I don’t know, and for our purposes it doesn’t matter.