



Learning, Believing, and Practicing in the 21st Century

Roshei Yeshivat Maale Gilboa Discuss
Fundamental Jewish Concepts



Our Roshei Yeshiva are known outside of Maale Gilboa for their courageous and some times unconventional stands on matters of the hour. They have spoken out on the aguna crisis, the Chief Rabbinate's stringent conversion policy, women's Torah leadership, the African refugee problem, accessibility for those with special needs, and many other pressing issues. Those outside of the Yeshiva might get the false impression that the main endeavor of the Yeshiva is social commentary and activism.

In fact, our Yeshiva, like every other Yeshiva, is a institution dedicated to opening minds to the breath and depth of Torah wisdom and to inculcating a commitment to Jewish people and its heritage. On a day to day basis, our faculty teach the classic texts, theology, and practice that have nurtured our civilization for thousands of years. One of the questions that our students often ask, is how do the traditional notions of halachah, faith, and Torah study connect to the cutting edge and innovative stands of our Rabbis.

On the first night of Hanukkah 5775, our Roshei Yeshiva gathered to share with our students their understandings of certain fundamentals of the Yeshiva. The students were very moved by the talks they heard. They transcribed the lectures and published them in a booklet for wider dissemination.* We felt that these lectures would also be appreciated by our friends overseas and so we have translated them into English. We hope you will find them meaningful and inspiring.

* Please note that the lectures were originally given orally. We have tried to preserve the nature and spirit of the original presentation while changing them to the written media.



The Yeshiva as Mt. Sinai

Rabbi Shmuel Reiner

Thirty-five years ago I went on a trek into the Sinai desert. I climbed Jabal Moussa (Arabic for the Mountain of Mosheh) in the southern Sinai peninsula, close to the famous Monastery of Santa Catarina. According to some traditions, this is the very site of Mount Sinai. There is a custom to climb the thousand plus rocky steps that are hewn directly into the mountain during the night. The idea is to reach the summit at dawn and watch the sunrise. The physical exertion required to reach the summit, the religious and historical significance of the spot, and the spectacular view from the top combine to create a one of a kind experience. To this day I have not found anything like it.

Mount Sinai is not just a geographical height; it is a peak in the life of a nation and a seminal moment in the history of humanity. And yet, it is important to remember that the whole episode of Sinai is just a moment. This moment was completely different from everything that happened before it and everything that has happened since. The preparations leading up to the revelation at Sinai powerfully reflect the extraordinary nature of this moment. Moshe instructs Israel to disconnect from the regular patterns

of life. He says, "prepare yourselves for three days; do not approach any woman" (Exodus 19:15). Experiencing Mt. Sinai properly requires an internal transformation. The ascent up to the mountain's peak is meaningless if at its top one remains the same person as at the bottom.

I believe that Sinai can serve as a powerful analogy for the ideal Yeshiva experience. The ultimate place of Torah learning should mirror the place where Torah was given. Therefore, the yeshiva should be a place completely different from the rest of the world - a miniature Mount Sinai. A student who comes to study in Yeshiva must climb a metaphorical mountain, and go to a place that is completely unique. One who makes it to the summit, reaching the highest heights, is able to gaze down upon the grand expanse of life, the infinity of the desert, and the brilliance of the sunrise.

All journeys have shortcuts. You can ascend the mount by cable car or even just watch a movie about it, but these do not compare to the highroad. Therefore, the meaning of such abbreviated journeys will be pale and insignificant. Only a strenuous effort amidst the rocks and stumbling blocks on the way to the summit brings out the full potential of the climb. The reward of the ascent is commensurate with the effort.



The Mishnah in Tractate Brachot (Chapter 9, Mishnah 5) describes the protocol for entering another mountain that symbolizes God's presence -the Temple Mount:

One should not enter the Temple Mount with a staff, shoes, belt, or dust on the feet; nor should one treat it as a short cut.

In this dry halachic description, the Mishnah explains that we must not enter the Temple Mount as we are, with a staff and wallet. If we want to create an experience appropriate to the sanctity and significance of the place, we need to approach it differently. We must behave differently than the way we are accustomed to in our everyday lives. We have to make an effort to prepare ourselves to reach those exalted heights in an appropriate state. This is what a Yeshiva is supposed to be.

There is more than one way to transform the individual and the community, but one thing is sure - if we really want the yeshiva to be a spiritual summit, it can not look like the outside world. I am not referring to its outer appearance, but rather its inner world. We need to provide a different kind of life. This for me this is the deep expression of the Yeshiva: A remote mountaintop, above the clouds, above ordinary life experiences.



The portrait of the Yeshiva presented above is different from the model that I grew up on. When I left Yeshivat Kol Torah, I was able to look back upon my experience of the yeshiva world with a new perspective, and I came to a deeper understanding of it. The classical yeshiva sees the Beit Midrash as the ideal real world. The ultimate reality occurs within the walls of the Yeshiva. This approach sees the world outside of the Yeshiva - even if it is the overwhelming majority of the globe - as missing the boat. The world outside of the Yeshiva is meaningless in comparison to what is happening in the Beit Midrash, and so this approach aspires to constantly expand the purview of the Beit Midrash.

Though I respect this perspective, today I am in a different place, and my vision of the Yeshiva is very different. The

world is not limited to a Himalayan peak, or Mt. Gilboa, or even Mount Sinai. On the contrary - the Giving of the Torah is a one-time event, and after it's over, everyone is allowed to go up the mountain. "At the blast of the horn they can go up onto the mountain" (Exodus 19:13). I believe that our mission is to ascend the mountain at night, see the sunrise at dawn, and then return to our day-to-day lives. Of course, when we return to daily life, it will be transformed! Unlike the classical Yeshiva worldview, this approach does not negate the regular natural life outside of the Beit Midrash. Rather, it seeks to instill daily life with the spiritual high of the Yeshiva, and to infuse the larger world with deep spiritual meaning.

I believe that students who now occupy our Beit Midrash will go on in the future to be successful in all their endeavors. Each student will likely take a unique path down the mountain. However, wherever our alumni go, I hope they will take with them a piece of Mt. Gilboa that will continue to reflect its breathtaking views and spiritual highs. While most of life is lived at the foot of the mountain, those whose lives continue to be inspired by the spectacular and intense experience at its peak, live it differently, more fully, and more deeply.



Halachic Multiculturalism

Rabbi David Bigman

From its inception, our vision for Yeshivat Maale Gilboa included a combination of two fundamental elements. On the one hand, we saw ourselves as a part of the longstanding Yeshiva tradition that aspires to inculcate in its students a commitment to the study and observance of halachah. On the other hand, it was essential for us that the study in our Beit Midrash be characterized by intellectual honesty, critical thinking, and multiculturalism; we envisioned our Torah in dialogue with contemporary Israeli society and world civilization. To me, these two elements - halachic commitment and open-mindedness - obviously flowed one from the other. However, after numerous conversations within the Yeshiva and outside of it, I see that for many this combination is not so straightforward. Therefore, it is important for me to share my perspective on this matter.



In the Yeshiva we are blessed with a passionate intellectual curiosity in general and a love of Torah study in particular. The atmosphere in the Beit Midrash radiates enquiry, exploration and reflection. My love for study began when I was a young student in elementary school. I was fortunate to have great teachers who nurtured this love.

From an early age, my intellectual passion for Torah study was complicated by questions over the nature and purpose of the practice of Torah - halachah. Though I never felt restricted or bothered by keeping halachah, I had existential questions about it. What was the meaning behind this grand detailed system?

With this background, I discovered in my parents' rich library the works of Echad Ha'am and his philosophy. I encountered his idea that a full and rich Jewish identity must be grounded in Jewish practice. "More than Israel has kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jews" (from the article 'The Zionist Sabbath'). Translating this into notions that I was familiar with, I interpreted his words to be referring to the observance of orthodox halachah. I heard in Echad Ha'am echoes of Rabbi Saadia Gaon's famous declaration, "we are a nation only on account of the Torah" (The Book of Beliefs and Opinions, End of Article III).

Though nowadays there is a tendency to belittle the importance of communal identity, it is a natural and vital human need. The recent reemergence of nationalities that had previously been suppressed for years under the Soviet Union demonstrates this powerfully. While communal identity is often based on shallow common denominators, it can also be based on something more significant and profound. Either way, communal identity is an essential need and is of particular importance for our generation that struggles to find a sense of belonging in an overly globalized and confusing world. This is certainly true for the Jewish community which has been struggling with issues of continuity and identity for a long time. One of halachah's great contributions to contemporary times is its ability to address issues of identity for its adherents.

Even though fifty years have passed since my initial thoughts on the subject, I still believe that Jewish continuity is of the utmost importance and that halachah is the only answer that can meet

this challenge. However, at a certain point I realized that this approach was deeply problematic. I realized that in fact, more than the Shabbat kept Israel, Israel kept the Sabbath for higher purposes. Had Israel kept the Sabbath merely to maintain a national identity, Shabbat would have lost its meaning. Even if the halachah can help us in solving our identity crisis, that alone cannot justify its observance.

As I matured I began to understand that halachah has two dimensions - a lower one and a higher one. The lower one is what I outlined above. The higher dimension of halachah is of even greater significance - halachah's deep attentiveness to the other. This begins with attentiveness to the ultimate transcendent other. Halachah's acceptance of a Divine charge from the beyond imbues the Jewish people with deep responsibility for our actions and draws us out of our mundane existence to something greater and exalted.

Moreover, halachic discourse demands of us an attentiveness not only to the Divine, but to earthly voices as well. In this sense halachic discourse is unique. The discourse typical of our times is a dialogue in which each of the participants is focused on presenting his or her own position. What is important in the discussion is the idea of each particular personal position of the individual and not that of his or her intellectual opponent.

On the other hand, halachic debate is driven by attentiveness to the other. We listen not only to what God said on Mount Sinai, but also to how Rabbi Akiva in Bnei Brak and Rabbi Akiva Eiger in Eastern Europe interpreted that word. This attentiveness includes a commitment to the halachic chain of tradition, and respect for even those parts of the system that we find distasteful or stringencies that can seem trivial. This idea is profoundly different from the individualistic conception of

discourse outlined above. It demands of us a great deal of humility and honesty. When the discourse is focused on encountering the sometimes perplexing positions of previous generations, one needs to muster a great deal of intellectual modesty.

This approach has the potential to foster a deep and rich ethos - an ethos that can incorporate and respect differing positions even if at times it is difficult to fully accept them. This applies not only to the absolutely other transcendent One and the complete commitment to His divine word as understood by the sages of the generations, but also to our fellow humans whose thoughts and positions can seem foreign and unfathomable. As I see it, the natural course of the halachic dialectic leads to a deeply broad-minded, tolerant, and multicultural world view.



Current trends put each individual's particular perspective at the centre and encourage each of us to experience reality from his or her own limited standpoint. The complexity inherent in the halachic approach rejects this narrow outlook. We do not keep the Sabbath for ourselves, nor merely to preserve Jewish identity. We keep the Sabbath because of the Divine imperative to "Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy." This is the way we reach beyond our parochial individual limitations and break through towards evermore expansive and transcendent realms.



Emunah and Ne'emanut: Foundations of Commitment to the Service of God

Rabbi Yehuda Gilad

Some time ago I attended a family sheva berachot. At one of the meals, a guest stood up to congratulate the couple and to give them marital advice. He noted that, "it is common to tell married couples never go to sleep before resolving a fight. However, my advice to you is exactly the opposite. Just as certain stains require a good soaking in order to remove them, so too there are disputes that are more easily resolved after time. Sometimes it is better to retire for the evening in the midst of the disagreement and its pain, and to settle the dispute next morning over coffee." It is the unique framework of commitment in marriage that makes this approach possible. In other frameworks, a dispute can mean the very end of the relationship. In marriage, however, the couple makes a commitment to live together and love each other in spite of the difficulties on the way. In most cases, this commitment transcends all the little quarrels.

Recently, I have given much attention to the issue of commitment in the context our relationship to God and the commandments.

In his later years, my teacher and mentor Rabbi Yehuda Amital of blessed memory was troubled by the focus in religious devotion on personal connection, and the deemphasizing of commitment. While he realized that accentuating personal connection has certain benefits, he found it extremely dangerous because it can be so egocentric. He was concerned that overemphasis on personal connection could lead to selective observance of commandments based on personal preference. However, appreciating the contemporary ethos, Rabbi Amital suggested replacing the term commitment, which can seem cold and technical, with an alternative concept - ne`emanut. Ne`emanut is difficult to render precisely into English. The term combines shades of the English words trust, faithfulness, and loyalty. According to R. Amital, ne`emanut best characterizes the ideal relationship between man and his Creator.



According to Rabbi Kook, emunah - belief in God - is a natural feature of life. R. Kook claims that we who are created in the image of God are naturally inclined towards emunah. One sense of the term emunah is a theological stance asserting God's existence. This is the common understanding of the statement I believe in God. It seems to me though, that Rav Kook is describing something beyond belief in God's existence. I would suggest that R. Kook's claim is best understood if we take the term emunah to refer to something broader. Perhaps emunah here is the willingness to rely on something external to us. It is an act of trust and faithfulness.

For example, when we get up in the morning we have no scientific proof that when we take our first step, we will not fall into the abyss, only a statistical presumption. In fact, we can not make a move in life, whether practical or theoretical, without relying on something. We are always dependent on some external entity.

This begins in our infancy, as Rashi explains, "a newborn requires the help of others to be born" (Rashi on Genesis 40:20). We rely on the midwife, our mothers and our fathers to take care of us in the beginning. They feed us and protect us from the various elements. So too relationships between adults are based on the assumption that there is a basic trust among people. This is why violations of this trust are so awful; the whole world and human life are built on this. When this basic trust breaks down so does society.

If so ne`emanut - the sense of trust and faithfulness in the other - is a natural human gesture. This gesture seems to be the foundation of faith which Rav Kook spoke about - the natural faith in God which is found in the heart and soul of every person.



Beyond what I mentioned above, the concept of ne`emanut has another advantage over the conventional approach to emunah. Emunah belongs primarily to the theological sphere and does not necessarily touch upon human relations. Ne`emanut on the other hand is deeply connected to morality. Faithfulness speaks not only to the relationship between man and God, but also to one's behavior with others, and one's attitude toward the larger society. A person who lives without ne`emanut is immoral. Because I believe that morality is the clearest expression of the Divine image in humanity, I feel that an immoral person by definition lives in alienation from himself and the Divine image. For this reason, it seems to me that religiosity that flows from the principle of ne`emanut, with its moral dimensions, is a stronger, more grounded faith.

In a religious context, the primary way to demonstrate faithfulness to God is through observance of halachah. But apart

from this, our commitment to halachah demonstrates faithfulness to previous generations, tradition, culture and the history of the Jewish people. Faithfulness to the previous generations who accepted of the kingdom of Heaven puts a person's life into a unique perspective. Life no longer begins at birth, nor does it end with death. When a person looks at him or herself as a link in the chain of generations, existence becomes ultimately significant and touches eternity.

This commitment to the chain of generations includes not only a loyalty to previous generations, but also a responsibility towards future generations to whom we must pass on this inheritance. Moses received the Torah at Sinai and passed it to Joshua; thousands of years later, I received the Torah from my teachers and bear the sacred duty to pass it on my children and students.



A few months ago I was approached by a radio program to explain why it is important for secular Jews to marry in accordance with the halachah - "by the law of Moses and Israel." I answered with a much more basic question -why get married at all? It is possible to live together and have children without marriage. What is the significance of this institution?

Marriage is much more than a technical contract. It is a declaration of loyalty between the couple, but it is also a statement about the couple being part of a cultural space, a society, a long-standing tradition, a chain of generations, and a worldview that gives the relationship between husband and wife a deeper dimension of commitment and an element of holiness.

The institution of marriage and the loving and loyal relationship between husband and wife is an apt analogy for our relationship

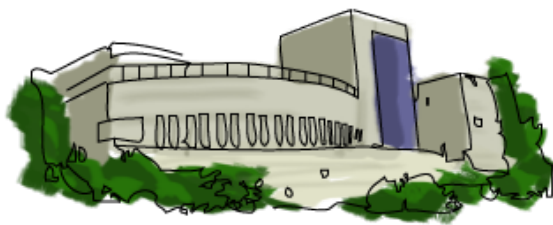
to God and a life of Torah and Mitzvot. In marriage, loyalty is based on the foundations of love, as love itself draws on the foundation of loyalty. Naturally, love is always changing, rising and falling, evolving and developing, but throughout, ne`emanut remains the bedrock that accompanies it on a deeper level.

The same is true with ne`emanut to God. This too remains steadfast throughout life's turbulent changes, and finds expression in halachic commitment and observance of the mitzvot. Difficulties often arise in a person's life, but because the relationship is based on faithfulness, the difficulties do not break down the relationship. Sometimes we go to sleep without resolving our difficulties, but our faith invites and requires us to go back and make amends later.

We are not speaking here of a technical allegiance that is expressed in a cold, empty commitment. Rather, true ne`emanut has a deeper moral dimension, and an emotional attachment that is an important and fundamental part of the fabric of the relationship between the human being and the Creator. Woe to the loveless marriage that is based solely on a cold loyalty. Trust is merely the framework in which a passionate love can be woven. So too it is with devotion to God - emotional investment and religious experience, which vary throughout life, are poured into halachic observance that reflects the basic and stable state of faithfulness.

As the prophet Hosea proclaimed:

*And I will betroth thee unto Me forever. I will betroth thee unto Me in righteousness, and in justice, and in lovingkindness, and in compassion. And I will betroth thee unto Me in faithfulness; and thou shalt know the LORD.
Hosea 2:21-22*



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