

# The Deeper Value of Talmud Torah

Michael Rosenberg

THE EMPHASIS ON the Holocaust and Israel as the two loci for Jewish engagement in the last 50 years reveals a deeply rooted attitude toward the importance of history. Jewish youth trips that take North American teenagers from Auschwitz to Tel Aviv are based on an idea that the Jewish experience is linear, from destruction to reconstruction, from *galut*<sup>1</sup> to *ge'ula*.<sup>2</sup>

While history is an important axis on which to consider Judaism, viewing it as our primary way of interacting with the Jewish narrative entails many problems. Most obviously, as we move further away in time from the experiences of the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel, the vividness of those experiences diminishes, and they become less compelling reasons to buy into Judaism. The nearly-ecstatic Jewish patriotism that flourished for Jews around the world in the aftermath of the 1967 War is hard to convey to someone my age, who has grown up knowing only an established state of Israel. Thus it should be no shock to us that these two looming historical events appear to be losing their pull on young Jews today.

There is a more fundamental problem with such a view of Judaism, however — one that cannot be addressed merely by determining some new historical locus of Jewish identity. An historicist view of Judaism rests on the idea that there is some objective narrative that we can use to order our Jewish lives. However, for young Americans educated to question historical narratives, to know that there are always multiple accounts of any story, historicist claims for Judaism will always come off as one-sided and jingoistic, no matter how contemporary those claims may be.

For a large segment of 21st-century Jewry, historical narratives are not nearly as important as methods for understanding and making sense of those narratives. The story of the Holocaust — central and important though it may be — cannot be considered properly without meaningful methods of reading. Thankfully, that may be what Judaism can most authentically offer.

Earlier this year, I was asked in a seminar to prepare sources regarding the halakhic per-

missibility of inviting another Jew for Shabbat dinner, knowing that she or he would drive home after the meal. My study began as many would expect it to — seeing relevant texts in the Talmud, following those sources through the medieval commentators, and arriving in the end with 20th-century legal decisors addressing similar situations — a mess of seemingly obscure opinions. My initial concerns were also those one would expect in the context of an Orthodox yeshiva: What have the canonized voices of the tradition said about this and related topics?

As I began to delve into the sources, however, I soon came to realize that these texts were highlighting tensions that I had failed to discern. Attempting to understand the reasoning behind each voice in the debate did not necessarily make clear to me a correct position; it did, however, lay bare the costs of any one particular approach. Those sources arguing against permitting such an invitation expressed the value of considering oneself responsible for the care-taking of others: if one truly cares about another person, how can you lead them astray? The authorities who said that “heretics” are beyond the control of adherents and, as such, the latter needn’t be concerned with leading the former “astray,” were in effect saying that respect for the autonomy of another trumps the value of community: once an autonomous individual has made a decision, his or her actions are beyond your control. Being forced not only to engage with contrasting views, but to be able to articulate each of the voices in the debate in a compelling way, allowed me to understand what was at stake in a question that had at first seemed one-sided.

We are all in search of methods of reading that will help us make sense of our world. We do not want a dogmatic religion that tells us what is moral, but rather a hermeneutic that allows us to clarify the issues in a given moral dilemma. Such a view of Judaism does not necessarily deny the existence of an ultimate truth; rather, it valorizes our own ability to perceive that truth if given the proper tools to cut through the morass.


A Jewish commitment to engagement with

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<sup>1</sup> Exile—Hebrew phrases will be translated in footnotes throughout.

<sup>2</sup> Redemption

“texts” — be they in the forms of books, conversations, or rituals — speaks to a far larger audience than a specific theme or issue. We should not think that Talmud Torah, that is, the study of text is value-neutral. The move from historical appeals for Judaism to hermeneutical ones will not interest anyone if it is

a bland, relativistic approach that validates everything and clarifies nothing. Rather, we need a passionate articulation of a Jewish mode of considering the world. The new locus of Jewish identity, then, must not be an historical event or a political entity but, rather, the value of Talmud Torah. 

## Preparing for the Pains of Peace

Keith Kahn-Harris

EVERYONE WHO CARES about Israel has their own dream about what happens when the guns fall silent. Thinking about what should follow the endless anguish of war is essential if we are to feel that the conflict has any purpose. Yet in the gaps between our dreams and the current reality, it becomes apparent just how hard it is to end a situation seemingly so entrenched. But more important, we are also forced to recognize that one person’s dream of a post-conflict Israel is another’s nightmare.


Everyone’s vision for Israel involves somebody losing, whether that vision entails an equitable two-state solution, a Palestinian entity with limited autonomy, a theocracy on both sides of the Jordan, a Palestinian-free state, a Jew-free state. The losers, whomever they may be, are unlikely to shrivel up and disappear immediately, and this seems to imply — in the best case scenario — some kind of continuing low-grade conflict for a considerable time.

Even if the Israel-Palestinian conflict could be solved to the satisfaction of all parties, this would not eliminate all forms of conflict in Israel. There are endemic problems between, to name but a few: secular and religious Jews, rich and poor, Ashkenazi and Mizrachi, Israeli Arabs and Jews, Arab Christians and Muslims. Perhaps with the larger conflict out of the way, the country would be engulfed in a series of smaller, but still potentially violent conflicts. Post-conflict Israel also faces another threat — normality. From its inception, Zionism was split between the desire to see Israel as a “state like any other,” complete with Jewish police and prostitutes and the desire for Israel to be different, a “light unto the nations.” And there is no cure for life; even without conflict, that future will only be somewhat less difficult than the present.

Any worthwhile vision for a post-conflict Israel has to be a vision for *now*. This is where

pre-state Zionism provides inspiration. From the first *aliyah* until independence, those who built Israel did not just build kibbutzim and the Haganah, they built schools, universities, cafes, and opera houses. They built all the basic elements of “the good life” in a land where simple existence was a perilous affair. This is the gift that the early Zionists — for all their mistakes — bequeathed to today’s Israel. The gift ensured that life in Israel was not simply reducible to the conflict. Israeli art, culture, and everyday life does not *only* reflect Israel’s many conflicts. Life in Israel today is full, vibrant, and culturally creative. It is worth living *now*, and thus it will be worth living post-conflict.

The raw materials for a post-conflict Israel are already in place: a lively press, a thriving arts scene, a vigorous youth culture, and intellectually dynamic universities. The key task is to keep them viable, ensuring that they are not snuffed out in the quest for simple survival. It also means avoiding the opposite problem of turning Israeli culture into a kind of escape route from reality. There are worrying signs that, for example, secular Israeli youth’s seemingly insatiable desire for clubbing stems in part from a desire to run away from the difficulties of life in Israel. Of course culture has to have some kind of distance from everyday life, but too much distance and it becomes escapism.

I can easily imagine my ideal vision of a post-conflict Israel. It actually looks similar to my current experience of Israel — the incessant debate, the street life, the bewildering diversity, the vitality that streams out of the country’s every pore. The difference is that in a post-conflict Israel these aspects of Israeli society would not be overwhelmed by the crushing weight of existential threat. Rather, Israeli life would have space to develop into “the good life.” 

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