

Rabbi Shalom Carmy

## To Get the Better of Words An Apology for *Yir'at Shamayim* in Academic Jewish Studies

I am eager to know what university life has become for you, what is your primary occupation, and whether your academic work has become for you (unthinkingly) a required auxiliary, an auxiliary that is merely a burden. Or have you been granted, as ought to be the case, a spiritual illumination by which your own wisdom is united with that wisdom that is the heritage of the congregation of Jacob. For this reason it is very important that you choose carefully your fields of study, and with what orientation and purpose you commit yourself to them.

R. Samson Raphael Hirsch<sup>1</sup>

Yet nothing is more common than for men to think that because they are familiar with words, they understand the ideas they stand for. Educated persons despise this fault in illiterate men who use hard words as if they comprehended them. Yet they themselves, as well as others, fall into the same error in a more subtle form, when they think they understand terms used in morals and religion, because such are common words, and have been used by them all their lives.

John Henry Newman<sup>2</sup>

### I Practice and Purpose

We learn most activities by practice and by observing the practice of others.<sup>3</sup> When we first explore some complicated action, we rarely arrive at our destination right away. We learn by trial and error. And we learn

from others, not only from their teaching, but from their example. Sometimes the lesson is positive—apprenticing ourselves to paradigms of successful practice, we seek to emulate their strengths within the limits of our competence. Sometimes the lesson is negative—another’s failure, blatant or subtle, vulgar or noble, demonstrates how to avoid making the same mistakes, and why. Sometimes the practice can be mastered once and for all: once you get the hang of opening child-proof caps or the rudiments of swimming you need never puzzle over them again. But the most important practices can never be mastered. The greatest literature is a never-ending struggle with words; the most lucid *hiddushim* obsess the intellect a hundred times and then a hundred and one.

Let us discuss how to talk about the fundamental questions of human existence, our own lives and others’. More specifically, let us focus on our way of studying, talking about and thinking about the texts of Torah that address these dimensions of human existence. These sources include, on the one hand, what Rabbenu Bahya calls the “duties of the heart”: the love of God and the fear of God, prayer, concern for others, repentance, self-scrutiny—all those *halakhot* that presuppose and require the cultivation of human inwardness. On the other hand, there is much in the study of Torah, both in Halakhah and Aggadah, that demands attention to the subjective world of man, both an understanding of human folly, failure and evil, and a grasp of the moral personality, of the sublime and the noble. This intellectual dimension is especially worthwhile in the study of Tanakh. *Maran ha-Rav* Joseph B. Soloveitchik *shlita* once remarked that the halakhic bedrock for the study of Tanakh is nothing less than *yedi’at Hashem*—comprehending God’s ways and His message for mankind.<sup>4</sup>

That the practice of articulating human subjectivity cannot be mastered like the art of riding a bicycle should be obvious. The poet’s “raid on the inarticulate,” with its inescapable agony of imprecise feeling grasping at elusive comprehension, is itself a profound human experience, and the source of much great poetry. T.S. Eliot, in the lines from which my title derives, meditates upon this paradox of verbal grace: that

every attempt

Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure.

Because one has only learnt to get the better of words

For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which

One is no longer disposed to say it.<sup>5</sup>

In a more rigorous way, the inadequacy of the human mind and the human tongue to capture the quality of even our most mundane experiences was analyzed by the Rav as a philosophical principle with pervasive religious implications. Many of us recall the dialectic of advance and retreat as one of the Rav’s favorite themes: Halakhic living, he teaches, affirms the realization of man’s desires, provided that man acknowledge

the inevitability of defeat. For example, Halakhah encourages man to seek fulfillment in his married life. Yet, at the moment when the wife confides that she has seen a mustard seed of blood, the couple heroically withdraws. The Rav goes on to apply the same norm to man's intellectual quest. One element of this "cognitive catharsis" is the recognition that man's knowledge is finite. The second element goes farther: Even sensual experience—sound, color, touch—escape intellectual elucidation:

. . . the lanes of creation which we sense, feel, enjoy and fear, in which we are enmeshed, body and soul—these remain uncharted. Hence, the cognitive experience contains not only the rapture of knowing but also the terror and awe of the great mystery of the strange and uninterpretable being, namely, the universe as a qualitative rather than a quantitative entity.<sup>6</sup>

If terror and awe are engendered by the simple experiences we all take for granted, how much more so when we venture to embrace the heights and depths of human spiritual experience, our own, our neighbor's, the teachings of Torah and (an instance to which we shall return) the paradigmatic lives of the *Avot!*

Attention to subjectivity contributes directly to our understanding of Torah, while it also nourishes our sensitivity to the theological and moral commandments that so permeate our daily lives. Following common parlance, I use the term *yir'at Shamayim* as a synecdoche for that entire spectrum of religious experience which comes under the aspect of inwardness. I will also characterize an orientation to *yir'at Shamayim* so defined as a "theological" approach.

Talmud Torah is, of course, an independent value, "not merely a means of ensuring and enriching spiritual existence . . . Its *raison d'être* need not be sought by reference to other categories, moral or religious."<sup>7</sup> At the same time, it should be obvious that the proper cultivation of *yir'at Shamayim* in our intellectual life is a vital resource of religious existence. Moreover (and more important for our immediate purpose) without the capital of a fully reflective heart and mind, our study is impoverished as well. I maintain that the ability to articulate and to experience these essential components of moral, religious and spiritual life cannot be taken for granted. I believe that the disciplined study of language, literature and thought enables us better to articulate and experience these things and to liberate ourselves from distorted or inferior ways of experiencing them.<sup>8</sup> I must also, in speaking for the primacy of *yir'at Shamayim*, register my dismay with the occasional tendency of some academic Jewish scholarship to squeeze serious theological reflection to the periphery, and to intimidate and inhibit what they cannot prohibit.

As indicated at the outset, we shall proceed by illustrating practice. We shall begin with examples of defective formulation, leading to defective

thinking. We shall then sample the practice of two great Jewish thinkers who lay claim to our respectful attention, both as teachers and as candidates for our lively emulation.

## II

### Abraham at the Social Worker's

Consider the following gem, by an intelligent contemporary Rabbi Dr. These are the very words he uses to describe Abraham:

Within his own family Abraham needed desperately to improve his inter-generational skills. Even as great a personality as our patriarch Abraham had a problem prioritizing family warmth—his quality time with his son, into his life routine.

Invited to comment, I warned that reliance on psychobabble undermines even valid points. To this my colleague demurred: criticism of content was one thing; but style, after all, is a matter of taste, *n'est ce pas?* But truly it is not. Current quasi-scientific psychology talk presupposes and induces an implicit conception of human nature and human destiny and it is one that undermines the kind of awe with which one should stand before the *zelem Elokim* (the image of God), and even more so undermines our apprehension of the *Avot*, with their larger-than-life spiritual stature. Once you employ his kind of language, you have already half-surrendered to the social worker's happy thought that, somehow, Abraham's going to the right therapist could have spared us the Aqedah. Instead of trudging up Mount Moriah, we are seduced into musing, he could have been cheering Isaac at the Little League game. And afterwards they'd all go to the House of Pancakes (where they could order an Ed McMuffin).

It is common to think that our choice of English words is a matter of nonchalance. The infelicity of tone in the paragraph cited defeats this assumption. *Words convey an attitude and trail clouds of philosophy.* The alternative to serious, disciplined reflection on the language we make ours is not an artless, spontaneous innocence about language. To receive our language passively, to purchase it cheaply, off the rack, as it were, means, in our secular society, selling our souls to shoddy thinking and fashionably educated (or semi-educated) jargon.

## III

### A Royal Reach

Is the “frum” speaker safe, who deliberately avoids all “outside” culture? Is he, or she, free to do what comes naturally, exempt from the struggle

“to get the better of words”? Let us contemplate, briefly, the challenge of King Saul.

Saul’s character presents special mysteries, over and above the simple reality that no person is entirely transparent to another (or even to himself). The enigma displayed in the events of his life is also the subject of biblical and rabbinic comments about him. For the author of the book of Samuel, the highest praise of Saul is: “Wherever he turned he did evil (*yarshi’a*.)” To be sure, the Rishonim explicate this terrifying phrase: he did evil to his enemies, or, alternatively, he caused turmoil wherever he turned.”<sup>9</sup> But the word itself, however interpreted, as it confronts our ears and eyes, cannot but shock and unsettle the reader, who has just witnessed Samuel chastising the king (ch. 13) and the people narrowly averting the death of Jonathan a moment earlier. The Gemara paradoxically remarks that Saul’s house could not continue his kingship because it was flawless;<sup>10</sup> also, that he was punished for being too lenient about his honor. If we could understand these paradoxical statements, I am convinced we would have the key to Saul’s difficult behavior: the efficient humility that is soon marred by insecurity, which leads him to disobey God, which then becomes a sense of inferiority bordering on paranoia. We would understand a great deal of Torah and a great deal about ourselves. But how do we make sense of such a life?

This is not a treatise on Saul, but rather a report on one attempt to come to terms with him. And so I relay the complaint a young teacher recently made to me: His students, confronting the stories in the book of Samuel, find King Saul unsympathetic. He disobeys God, he raves, he is jealous of David, he bullies his son, etc. The teacher wishes to impart the conviction that Saul is a *zaddik* but the youngsters don’t buy it. What to do?

I suggested several works of literature that explore the psychology of the gifted individual destined for a role he has not quite sought, yet driven by a sense of unworthiness to immoderate efforts in the quest to retain his power (e.g., *Macbeth*). The details need not detain us; the teacher’s answer does: “How can we compare Tanakh to literature?” Thinking it was the fictionality he was objecting to, I engaged in historical analogies. But predictably he rejected comparing Saul, King of Israel, to anybody in the real world too. I said: If Hazal innumerable times liken the *Ribbono shel ‘Olam* to a “king of flesh and blood,” why not compare a *melekh basar va-dam* to a *melekh basar va-dam*? And he retorted: Only Hazal have the right to do that.

What was his solution, I wondered, insofar as he was unhappy with his teaching, or at least with his students being unhappy with it. He intoned ceremoniously: “I say he’s *Sha’ul Melekh Yisra’el!*” This proclamation seemed to me the prelude to an excellent point. Tanakh certainly presents the idea that the figure of the king, the person whom God has anointed,

possesses a grandeur that must be respected even when the king fails. This is clearly demonstrated, with respect to King Saul, in the way David addresses Saul whenever they meet, and in the punishment of the Amalekite who claims to have killed “the anointed of God.”<sup>11</sup>

Why wasn’t the teacher successfully getting this point across? Presumably because it isn’t easy to find the right language for that sense of reverence towards *meshi’ah Hashem*, especially when addressing congenital democrats, to whom such reverence doesn’t come naturally. Again, and without equating anointment by Samuel with the “divine right of kings,” I was tempted to suggest brushing up on Shakespeare’s historical plays (*Richard II*, for example), where a parallel conception of English monarchy appears. One also thinks of Edmund Burke, who lauds reverence for the persons of king and queen in the teeth of a very modern, virulently anti-royal public temper.<sup>12</sup> Of course one may judge the language of Shakespeare or Burke rhetorically unsuccessful or morally misguided. In that case we still benefit (and perhaps the gain is greater) from the opportunity to learn from their defects.

Meanwhile something else disturbed me about the proclamation “*Sha’ul melekh Yisra’el*”—“his Majesty the King!”—in that particular intonation. As much as the speaker wished to avoid the slightest tinge of alien accent, he had failed. It sounded like a cartoon notion of medieval pageantry. And attentive teenagers, whether or not they could put their finger on it, may well have heard a message antithetical to that so sincerely intended by the teacher: There’s a reality we encounter in high political and personal drama; then again, there’s a sense of the world one gets watching the “Adventures of Crusader Rabbit.” What we learn in Tanakh is more like what you get in the cartoons than what is found in Shakespeare. If that is the impression students carry away with them, their study of Tanakh is not contributing to their *yir’at Shamayim*. Quite the contrary.

#### IV

#### Joy and Trembling

Instructive as it may be to scrutinize the efforts of our peers, it is refreshing to meditate on the example of our mentors. I have chosen to present two writers whom we usually don’t think of as official “biblical exegetes,” and who are consequently not quite welcome in the classrooms of those preoccupied with our acceptability in the world of university Bible scholarship. My point is not, God forbid, to downplay the importance of Ibn Ezra and Radak, who are quotable in “academic” company. To the contrary, I want to remind you that the worlds of Ibn Ezra and Radak are infinitely closer to those of the *Sefat Emet* and

R. Simḥah Zisl of Kelm than to the customary pursuits of university departments.

Let us accompany these thinkers as they consider the relationship between the fear of God and the religious experience of joy. We think of fear and joy as opposites. Yet the religious individual often has the strange intuition, which he or she may not always be able to formulate, that the two religious moments sometimes (often?) coincide. This awareness is both nurtured and engendered by our reading of Ḥumash. For our patriarch Isaac is connected to both themes. Anyone exposed to Kabbalah, even at a popular level, knows that Isaac represents the *Sefirah* of *gevurah* or *paḥad* = fear. At the same time, the name *Yizḥaq* suggests laughter, joy. This combination leads the Gerrer Rebbe in the *Sefat Emet* to comment:

True fear engenders joy, and this is a sign of the fear. So too does true joy engender fear. Therefore our father Yizḥaq was named for joy, although he represents the aspect of *paḥad* and *yir'ah*. It is a sign that he exhibited true fear. So too on the *Yamim Nora'im*, when *paḥad* and *yir'ah* befall every creature, the children of Israel, who possess true fear, come afterwards to joy.<sup>13</sup>

Neither fear nor joy should be emotions complete in themselves; each religious feeling bears its greatest value in organic correlation with the other. Though the manner of expression, in this particular instance, is far from transparent to us, it furthers our understanding of how Yizḥaq was conceived by Hasidut and it adds something to our experience of *simḥat yom tov* in general and Sukkot in particular. But the words are abstract; they resist every effort to get a hold on them. Perhaps the obscurity of the language corresponds to a stubborn opaqueness of the insight with which we are invited to struggle.

Let us turn to R. Simḥah Zisl. His starting point is an oxymoron in Psalms (2:11): *gilu bi-re'adah* (rejoice in trembling). Once more we encounter the combination of fear and joy. Again the reader seeking edification strives to articulate this peculiar experiential reality. The *Sefat Emet*, we have seen, reaches for the vocabulary of Kabbalah. R. Simḥah Zisl, the classic Musar thinker, offers a slice of life:

To sit in the presence of a very revered man is a great burden to a man. It is like being in prison, where one has no freedom to turn. His conversation must follow his will, and all with apprehension. One would not freely wish to abide unremittingly among elders and sages. But whoever is accustomed to seek the improvement of his soul, will rejoice in the yoke, for thus he will acquire the habit of wise living. . . .

Hence it says that fear will become intense joy. When we observe a man who accepts the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven, although the yoke rests upon his neck, he takes joy in the true joy implanted in man. . . .<sup>14</sup>

R. Simḥah Zisl's story about the individual who, in the presence of the person he admires and reveres, feels fidgety because he cannot fidget, and finds the experience more onerous than pleasurable, is so familiar we can hardly help smiling at it. It is his genius to grasp that evoking a child's feeling when he shakes hands with Doc Gooden, or the anxiety one might feel during an audience with one's Rebbi, can point to the existential reality of man's paradoxical relationship to God. Unlike the *Sefat Emet*, R. Simḥah Zisl, in this particular case, goes "off the page" of Torah, as it were, to the dialect of daily life, in order to clarify what Tanakh is saying and what it means for us. Hence, in this particular case, R. Simḥah Zisl helps us to make the Torah's teaching our own, thus, at the same time, sensitizing our ears to the more obscure message of the *Sefat Emet* as well.

## V

### Wisdom Among the Nations

What R. Simḥah Zisl achieves in miniature is what the study of literature is supposed to do on a much larger, more complex scale, that is, to take an experience and put flesh and blood on it. The limited success we attain, as readers and as writers, is what justifies our endless efforts to get the better of words. R. Simḥah Zisl's outlook also offers an answer to a question often raised by critics of *Torah ve-Hokhmah*: why must we go to literature and thought outside of Torah when the same insights, to the extent that they are worthwhile, are presumably to be sought and found within Torah proper? It is a perennial version of the legendary problem posed by the Moslem ruler who conquered Alexandria: *Mimma nafshakh!* If the books in the Library confirm the Koran they are superfluous; if they contradict the Koran they ought to be destroyed. And so he consigned them to the flames. . . .

The straightforward answer to this question was stated by my teacher, R. Aharon Lichtenstein. He confesses, with blunt elegance, that, in the economy of this world, there are things we can best learn from non-Jews:

The explicit systematic discussions of Gentile thinkers often reveal for us the hidden wealth implicit in our own writings. They have, furthermore, their own wisdom, even of a moral and philosophic nature. . . . There is *hokhmah bagoyim*, and we ignore it at our loss. Many of the issues which concern us have faced Gentile writers as well. . . . To deny that many fields have been better cultivated by non-Jewish rather than Jewish writers, is to be stubbornly—and unnecessarily chauvinistic. There is nothing in our medieval poetry to rival Dante and nothing in our modern literature to compare with Kant, and we would do well to admit it. We have our own genius, and we have bent it to the noblest of pursuits, the development of Torah. But we cannot be expected to do everything.<sup>15</sup>



R. Simḥah Zisl's approach suggests a complementary factor. Resorting to an "external," unfamiliar perspective, can itself serve as a source of insight. Discussing the need for freshness in one's thought on religious and ethical matters, he chooses to write the following words:

See how wonderfully experience confirms this. We observe that many words, when one says them in Hebrew, fail to make any kind of impression. When he translates them into German, they make more of an impression. At first I thought the reason is that Hebrew is not, for us, the *mutter sprach* (mother tongue). But now it seems more plausible according to our approach: the Hebrew word we received in childhood without a distinctive flavor and aroma. For example, the word *Torah* spoken in Hebrew does not make the same impression that it does when we translate it into German as *Bildung*. Why? Because we associate the word *Bildung* with the savor of wisdom. The word *Torah* we do not associate with the savor of wisdom, because as children we knew nothing of the savor of wisdom. . . .<sup>16</sup>

Trying to get the better of words is a way of avoiding the rehearsed response, the recollection of formulas fated to become meaningless unless their significance is renewed and enlarged. May our actions and thoughts never degenerate into "the trained commandments of men."

## VI

### Apology? For What?

I have yet to explain the part of my title which many of you, alas, may have found most puzzling: "An Apology for *yir'at Shamayim* in Academic Jewish Studies." An apology is a justification in the face of accusation or intellectual assault. According to the received wisdom, it is "right-wing Orthodoxy" that is on the attack. Hence, one might assume, an apology for *yir'at Shamayim* in Jewish Studies is needless. If a defense is to be mounted, it is not *yir'at Shamayim* that is embattled, but my advocacy of the liberal arts as a valuable tool in our work for *yir'at Shamayim*. That indeed is the gravamen of the preceding sections of my discussion.

Contrary to that impression, it is not only our liberal arts curriculum that is under siege. The primacy of *yir'at Shamayim*, as I defined it earlier, is also under pressure from proponents of so-called "objective" or "scientific" Jewish studies.

Let me forestall possible misunderstanding: To stress the primacy of *yir'at Shamayim* is not to denigrate the value and methodology of scholarship. Theological reflection suffers to the degree that it is reflection on an inaccurate text or a misunderstood phrase or a misapprehended historical situation. I have elsewhere presented admiringly R. Yehiel

Weinberg's lucid justification for the use of the best academic methodology in Torah studies.<sup>17</sup> Here it suffices to reiterate that the alternative to competent scholarship is not pristine theological reflection. It is rather the kind of bad scholarship or pseudo-scholarship that muddies the waters of any theological endeavor it feeds. For our own community to refrain from scholarly pursuits would thus tend to undermine serious theological study, or, at best, render us overly dependent on the expertise of those outside our camp. Presumably, the degree of involvement in such matters by advanced students is affected by the usual factors: ability, inclination and need.

Many academic Jewish scholars within the Orthodox community are worthy bearers of the standard of R. Weinberg, R. David Zevi Hoffmann and other outstanding intellectual role models for contemporary *benei Torah*. Their example does not undermine the primacy of *yir'at Shamayim* but, to the contrary, affirms it, reinforces it and, whenever feasible, furthers and fosters religious sensitivity. That some of these gifted individuals regularly or occasionally grace Yeshiva University by their presence is one of our institutional strengths; I, for one, would suffer intellectual impoverishment were they absent from our "gorgeous mosaic."

Nevertheless there are attitudes and tactics prevalent in academic Jewish studies that tend to subvert, or vitiate, the proper hierarchy of religious intellectual life. I find it paradoxical that many who are attracted to academic Jewish studies are wont to cast a baleful eye on the pronouncements emanating from various spokesmen for the Yeshiva world without exhibiting equivalent wariness of academic tenets. Criticism from the "right" is sometimes ill-informed and off-target. Students react with a scorn that is both a defense mechanism and an ironic mirroring of their critics' supposed deficiencies. Yet, in seeking freedom from dubious constraints exercised in the name of Halakhah, one risks rejecting justified halakhic constraints as well, while acceding to the neutral, theologically resentful emancipation of weary academic conformism.<sup>18</sup>

When, in what follows, I appear to slight "scholars" and "academics," I refer *only* to the cultured, intolerant disparagement of the theological orientation. By isolating certain axiological and ethical faults in the position I take to task, I magnify its bellicose features, without, I hope, falsifying the crucial contrasts.

### *1. The right stuff in shallow water*

In one of his most famous poems, R. Yehudah Halevi, past his fiftieth birthday, vows to act his age. Maturity involves taking serious things seriously. For R. Yehudah Halevi this means: Stop being preoccupied

with the approval of men; turn to God instead.<sup>19</sup> The academic world is long and heavy on seriousness. The implications of “academic” maturity, however, seem to be different. *Yir’at Shamayim*—getting at the heart of religious and moral experience—is, for the would-be scholar, simply not “the right stuff.” It may be good for stirring up NCSY kids, but when we grow up, we put childish things away and become all things to all men. Traditional Talmudists are to “say Torah”; professors make footnotes. In the process of growing up, we somehow lose track of *yir’at Shamayim* as the all-important, unforgettable dimension of our vocations.

Take the question of biblical studies. How to treat prevalent views on the provenance, dating and composition of Tanakh, who should be engaged in such inquiries, and to what degree, are questions too important to adjudicate in passing.<sup>20</sup> What cannot be doubted is that such investigation is a matter of the utmost theological-halakhic gravity. The truth of Judaism and our relationship to that truth are at stake.

To encounter, within the academic community, a group of Orthodox Jews preoccupied with the question of Bible criticism, is to discover an almost frightening earnestness about many matters, all of which culminate in one great inquiry: how one is recognized in the non-Orthodox academic world. The oft-repeated interior monologue goes: We don’t want to say *apikorsut*; but we don’t want to be conspicuous when we dance attendance on other “dispassionate” scholars; how much Bible Criticism can one dutifully acquiesce in before losing credibility in the Orthodox world?

The seriousness that regards the fundamental beliefs and passions of the religious individual as if they were personal peculiarities is very different from that envisioned by R. Yehudah Halevi. A glittering sophistication proclaims the academic clique superior to the stuffy traditionalists for whom *apikorsut* is sin and misfortune rather than amusement or professional busywork. Playing at shallow-water heresy as children play with toy soldiers, one revels in the conviction of being exceptionally brave. It becomes a point of pride to succeed in discussing Jewish studies without calling attention to Torah’s unique claim on our passionate intensity.

For Kierkegaard, the truth that matters is the truth that edifies, that (in the literal sense of the word) builds up the human being as an ethical being: “For otherwise how near man is to madness, in spite of all his knowledge. What is truth but to live for an idea?”<sup>21</sup> The edifying, of course, is not synonymous with the pleasing; on the contrary, edification often results from confrontation with a severe, challenging truth: “Who adds wisdom adds pain.”<sup>22</sup> As R. Kook points out, the academician is not, as a rule, conversant with “the pain of augmented understanding.”<sup>23</sup> Hence he is tempted, in the name of cultivated professionalism, to disagree: Only the truth that does *not* edify satisfies our antiseptic non-

denominational standard. Louis Ginzberg, the great Conservative luminary, is said to have recommended that Jews eat *kosher* and think *trefah*.<sup>24</sup> A present administrator at his institution, the Jewish Theological Seminary, trying to account for the sad state of Conservative Jewry, acknowledges of the movement's mentors: "Their teaching style was detached and objective; issues of belief and existential meaning were studiously avoided."<sup>25</sup> If certain trends in modern Orthodox academic ideology succeed in controlling the advanced study of Tanakh and Jewish thought, we are liable to incur a similar fate. In that event, we may end up eating *kosher*—indeed Glatt Kosher—and not thinking at all, in our professional lives, about what matters to us most as human beings and Jews.

## 2. *Mountain and mouse*

We have maintained throughout that Rabbenu Bahya and, in his way, Kierkegaard were right: the truth that edifies is the truth most worth having. The dispassionate investigations of scholarship are incomparably less significant as ends in themselves, though their attainment is frequently of undeniable value as means.

Dr. Lamm, in discoursing on the ideas of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, mentions those who find fault with Hirsch for failing to recognize that "the ultimate goal of *Torah im Derekh Eretz* is the development of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, or the academic study of Judaica."

Undoubtedly, academic Jewish studies make a significant contribution—all the pious objections to academic Judaica notwithstanding—but to identify this as the glorious end-product of the encounter between Torah and Western culture is an instance of the proverbial mountain bringing forth a mouse. It is illustrative, moreover, of the truth of the Yiddish saying, "Yeder darshan darshent far zich," every preacher preaches for himself. . . .<sup>26</sup>

## 3. *Chess without the king*

Another academic assault on the primacy of *yir'at Shamayim* in Jewish studies withdraws, at least for the sake of argument, the kind of inflated claims for academic Judaica countered in the last section. To the contrary, it seems to adopt Dr. Lamm's critique of academic imperialism. Indeed, the academician concedes, with all the humility of fashionably post-modern relativism, that every preacher preaches for himself. The theologian is certain that *yir'at Shamayim* stands higher than mere scholarship. But not all of us are theologians! The academician may generously entertain the possibility that the kind of intellectual discipline geared to *yir'at Shamayim* is legitimate, and he or she may even be willing to set aside for that discipline a grudging corner in "his" or "her" university. But no scholarly specialty is more significant than any other.

The relativism of intellectual content inherent in this position depends upon one big, false premise: If theology is an academic specialty like any other, a scurrying to say (or pretend to say) things about God that are different from what others have said, then the capacity to “do theology” is clearly not a universal endowment, and we should be thankful that “not everyone is a theologian.” If, however, theological reflection brings us face to face with the wonder, mystery and perplexity of existence as revealed in Torah and discovered through life, then the failure to cultivate and to appreciate the theological center of human intellectual inquiry is far more than an intellectual deficiency. It is more akin to playing chess without the king.<sup>27</sup>

How “theology,” in the sense of *yir’at Shamayim*, differs from the narrow specializations of which scholars are fond, was brilliantly set out by R. Kook:

It is a question whether the study of *yir’at Hashem* (fear of God) can be set down within the framework of all the studies in the world, even if we place it at the head, as the verse explicitly says: “The beginning of wisdom is the fear of God.” Perhaps the unadulterated content of the fear of God is higher than any study, and its light pervades all the studies in the world. . . . It illuminates . . . the inner quality of everything studied and investigated. When it itself sometimes becomes a distinct subject, it is like when language becomes a distinct subject of study, among the divisions of its literature; even though the substance of literature is the substance [of language], and its true substance is illuminated throughout the literature. . . .<sup>28</sup>

In a word, *yir’at Shamayim* is both a distinct discipline and one that saturates all other studies, just as language is a specific subject of study, while, at the same time, all inquiries into literature, philosophy etc. both presuppose and constitute an inquiry into language. The analogy is particularly apt in the light of our insistence on the importance of language in the struggle to understand man’s human and theological reality.

#### 4. *By strength and submission*

Study founded upon the primacy of *yir’at Shamayim* often suffers in competition with academic orientations, because the latter appeals to an appetite for novelty; the former does not value novelty of content as an end in itself. Thus students often get the impression that scholarship, however trivial, is creative, whereas serious thinking is merely a recollection of what is already known. This is reinforced by the subject matter of scholarship, which makes a point of promoting the study of “exotic” sources (new texts, non-Orthodox scholars, newfangled angles of interest). The approach that I advocate does not romanticize that which lies outside the purview of traditional Torah learning. The relevance of novel

material must be tested: does the interest grow organically from our own existential and/or intellectual confrontation with the sources, or is it novelty for the sake of diversion?

The academician's fallacy here, to the extent that it is more than a strategy intended to pass off sterile mediocrity as a significant contribution,<sup>29</sup> is a confusion of creativity with the cult of originality. The creative religious individual aims to make the words and ideas of Torah his own. To contend with a *sugyah* or a passage of Tanakh and forge in the smithy of one's consciousness the same understanding that animated Ramban or Seforno or R. Shimon Shkop, is, from the perspective of *yir'at Shamayim*, a triumph of human creativity. Nor must the thinker despair of originality. The capable individual who works *lishmah*, without aiming at originality, will assuredly come up with ideas that are innovative as well as creative. "Bet ha-Midrash without something new is impossible."<sup>30</sup> Such hard-earned insight fuels academic advancement, of course, only if suitably disguised in contemporary jargon.

For language with which to speak of the daunting challenge of how to articulate authentically, in one's own voice, the dimensions of human existence, in the face of a seemingly overwhelming burden of tradition, we again quote Eliot:

And what there is to conquer  
By strength and submission, has already been discovered  
Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope  
To emulate—but there is no competition—  
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost  
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions  
That seem unpropitious.

For the most sustained, perspicacious vision of the ideal cooperation between academician and thinker within a comprehensive Torah framework, we shall again turn to R. Kook. He understood that the thinker needs to tap the specialized labors of the scholar for the sake of his *yir'at Shamayim*-centered vision. But he also realized that the safeguarding of that religious-intellectual primacy requires special vigilance at every educational level. In his own words:

The rich-souled individual, great in poetry and majesty, will suffer especially from the constriction of disciplines that deal with external, accidental subjects.

The pain is greatest when the men of disciplines, who have never tasted the pain of augmented understanding, who are satiated and satisfied with their lot, high and mighty in their own eyes, full of a perfection without deficiency in their eyes, offer us dry kernels of matters which are, fundamentally, full of freshness and of ultimate vision. They extend to us, for example, historical lectures based on external behavior and facts, and rip

forcefully the discipline to which they are suited, from the great fabric of being in its great majestic sublimity. . . .

In any event, they [the thinkers] need support, from great ones, masters of a specific discipline, who are usually more famous in the world, because the masses [*hamon*] grasp the glitter of the particular discipline, which multiplies faster, more than they grasp the greatness of general spiritual richness.<sup>31</sup>

Would that R. Kook's strenuous yet harmonious vision were ours, that scholarship and creative thought, mutually enhancing, integrated in the proper proportions and hierarchy, were to become our intellectual reality.

## VII

### The Beginning and End of Wisdom

In Tanakh, *yir'at Hashem* is "the beginning of wisdom."<sup>32</sup> But we would do well to note that *yir'at Hashem* is generally praised as the culmination of a long spiritual quest.<sup>33</sup> Nowhere is this more manifest than in Kohelet. This book, which more than any other, questions the value of knowledge, closes: "In conclusion, let it be heard: Fear God, and keep His commandments, for this is all of man." Not only is *yir'at Shamayim* a pre-requisite for further study, a perfunctory tax we pay at the gate of the footnote factory; not only is it merely the goal of human existence; it is *kol ha-adam*. In other words: this is what man is all about.

Let me risk repeating myself: I come not to denigrate modern scholarship. In our efforts to make our own, "by strength and submission, what has been discovered" by others before us, we may indeed come to ask questions which can only be answered by the full range of academic scholarship from Semitics to Semiotics. But we should discriminate between '*asot sefarim harbe ein kez*, the endless making of books and destruction of trees, and *sof davar ha-kol nishma*, the inquiry into who we are and what we are here for. Above all, we must not become "intellectual Marranos," so anxious to conform ourselves to the world that we relegate our beliefs and commitments to the dim periphery of our study and writing.

If I could determine the motto of Yeshiva University, it would be the statement from the Mishnah: "Who is a wise man? He who learns from everyone." If I could delineate the ideal intellectual personality, it would resemble that of the thinker extolled by R. Kook in the passage cited above. For such an individual, "each particular thing, insofar as it flows into the general soul, becomes transformed afterwards, by virtue of spiritual digestion, into something general and encompassing, all according to the value of the inclusiveness . . . of the inclusive soul." To be an

individual who can learn from everyone, to discover one's unique voice in R. Kook's symphonic poem of the universe, is not to be a passive, easily influenced conformist. On the contrary, such a thinker must be one upon whom no experience is wasted, a strong digester, transforming perception into insight, and knowledge into truth.

The thinker of whom we speak is embarked on the essential quest, the search for a way of seeing and living that can never be fully expressed, a Truth that cannot be mastered, a Love whose Name we cannot utter, though He has possessed ours from eternity. In Eliot's words:

With the drawing of this Love  
And the voice of this Calling  
We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.<sup>34</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Cited by Mordecai Breuer, "Perakim mi-Tokh Bi'ografyah," *ha-Rav Shimshon Refael Hirsch: Mishnato ve-Shittato*, ed. by Yonah Immanuel (New York [2nd ed.], 1989), 37.
2. *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (Westminster, Md.; 1966), I, 42.
3. The philosophical tradition which stresses the primacy of practice is as old as Aristotle's *Ethics*, and notably includes Newman's *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*.
4. Oral communication. Note that the Rav's statement about Tanakh can be viewed (and may have been intended) as an extension of the dictum on Aggadah in *Sifre* to Deuteronomy 11:22: "If you want to become acquainted with He who spoke and the world came into being, study Aggadah, for thus you become acquainted with the Holy One, Blessed be He, and become attached to Him." See also *Keren Orah* to *Nedarim* 62a.
5. All Eliot quotations are from "East Coker" in *Four Quartets*.
6. See his "Catharsis," *Tradition* XVII:2 (Spring, 1978), 51; also *idem.*, "U-Vikkashtem Misham," *Ish ha-Halakhah, Galuy ve-Nistar* (Jerusalem, 1979), 126, 130f.
7. R. Aharon Lichtenstein, "Study," *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, ed. by Arthur Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr (New York, 1987), 932.
8. That language does not merely "designate" reality, but also expresses a response to the world of which we are part, is the theme of Charles Taylor's masterly essay, "Language and Human Nature," *Human Agency and Value: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge, 1985), 215–47. To his exposition of the "expressive view" let me add from a Jewish philosophical perspective: 1) Taylor's stress on expression may underplay the role of language in moral deliberation (an Aristotelian might agree with this reservation); 2) some committed theists might formulate differently Taylor's alternatives (p. 238f.) concerning the relation between the self expressing itself through language and the reality to which the self stands in relation.
9. See Radak and Ralbag on I Sam. 14:47. LXX with *vorlage yivashea* and Vulgate's *yoshia* neatly simplify the difficulty.
10. *Yoma* 22b. The lack of flaw is interpreted as a reference to Saul's family background. Homilies and interpretations of these statements are legion. In addition to



those serving as commentaries to the biblical and talmudic texts, see R. Joseph Albo, *Sefer ha-Iqqarim* IV: 26.

11. This idea is dramatically brought home by the *halakhot* regarding the viewing of kings (Jewish and Gentile) and the anecdote about R. Sheshet (*Berakhot* 58a and *Orah Hayyim* 224:8–9).
12. See his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.
13. See *Sefat 'Emet* to Sukkot (Brooklyn, 1952), V, 200. He is referring there to the joy of Sukkot.
14. See his *Hokhmah u-Musar* (New York, 1957), II, 133.
15. See his “A Consideration of General Studies from a Torah Point of View” *Gesher* I (June, 1963), 11; reprinted in the *Torah U'Madda Reader*, ed. by S. Carmy, Yeshiva University Community Services Division. On the title of this essay, see Jacob J. Schacter, “Torah u-Madda Revisited,” *The Torah u-Madda Journal* I (1989), 22, n. 49.
16. See his *Hokhmah u-Musar*, *op. cit.*, I, 164.
17. See my “R. Yehiel Weinberg’s Lecture on Academic Jewish Scholarship,” *Tradition* XXIV:4 (Summer, 1989), 15–23.
18. It has been argued that *Torah lishmah*, in the classic Lithuanian sense championed by R. Hayyim of Volozhin (see his *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* V:1–2), lacks emphasis on *yir'at Shamayim* and is thus indistinguishable phenomenologically from academic scholarship, which is also indifferent to the theological dimension. Granted that one can be a *lamdan*, unfortunately, without being a profound religious spirit or even a good human being, this argument ignores the halakhic mandate that study be grounded in commitment to God, as well as R. Hayyim’s own call for reflection (albeit minimal) on *yir'at Shamayim* as part of study.  
 The entire framework of yeshiva training attempts to foster, in a variety of conscious and unconscious ways, and not without a measure of success, the integration of Torah and *yir'at Shamayim*. Two examples suffice: the normative expectation that the teacher be a God-fearing individual himself; and the confluence of Torah with other *mizvot*, especially prayer. Thus, David Singer and Moshe Sokol observe: “Anyone who has seen Soloveitchik participating in the afternoon prayers with his students (in the classroom!) following one of his Talmud lectures, knows how comical it is to think of him as a modern academic type. Such behavior is fully appropriate in ‘Brisk’ but would be unimaginable at Harvard, Berkeley or the University of Chicago.” See their “Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik: Lonely Man of Faith” *Modern Judaism* II:3 (1982), 255. For a fundamental outlook on these matters, see R. Lichtenstein’s “Study” (cited above, n. 7). On R. Hayyim’s view and Hasidic alternatives, see R. Norman Lamm’s *Torah Lishmah* (Hoboken, 1989), and the chapter on Talmud Torah in his forthcoming volume on Hasidic thought.
19. And resolve on *aliyah!* The poem is *Hatirdof Na'arut*.
20. Rabbi Parnes’s “Torah U-Madda and Freedom of Inquiry,” *The Torah u-Madda Journal* I (1989) 68–71, has provoked a good deal of healthy inquiry. See the essay by Lawrence Kaplan and David Berger in this journal and my remarks in a letter to David Debow (2/89) to be published in a later issue.
21. *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, translated and selected by Alexander Dru (New York, 1958), entry for August 1, 1835, p. 45.
22. Thus the Kierkegaardian novelist Walker Percy characteristically rejected the popular meaning of edification when he wrote, shortly before his death from cancer: “One of the tasks of the saint is to renew language, to sing a new song. The novelist, no saint, has an humbler task. He must use every ounce of skill, cunning, humor, even irony, to deliver religion from the merely edifying.” See his “Why Are You a Catholic?,” in Clifton Fadiman, *Living Philosophies* (New York, 1990), 168.

23. See his *Orot ha-Kodesh* (Jerusalem, 1963) I, #33; translated below, p. 00.
24. Cited by Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in the Secular Age* (New York, 1970), 40 (retrieved courtesy of Rabbi Joseph Wanevsky's generous memory). While I have not located these exact words in Eli Ginzberg's *Keeper of the Law* (Philadelphia, 1966) on which Neusner draws, they ring true to Ginzberg's attitudes as amply documented in the biography (see, for example, pp. 80–82).
25. Neil Gilman, "Inside or Outside? Emancipation and the Dilemma of Conservative Judaism," *Judaism* XXXVIII:4 (1989), 417.
26. See his *Torah Umadda* (Northvale, N.J.; 1990), 188.
27. This paragraph, and others elsewhere in this discussion, are identical with passages in my exchange with Dr. Moshe Bernstein in *Ten Daat* III:3. The character of my remarks there is harmonious, more like a duet than a debate, while my present observations are more polemical in tone. The resolution to this seeming contradiction should be apparent to readers as attentive as they are obsessive: the position I attack here is *not* the position of Dr. Bernstein to which I responded there. The moral for students of literature: context counts.
28. *Orot ha-Kodesh* III, Proem p. 22.
29. The deployment of academic monopoly to reward conformism and stifle dissent hardly needs documentation, especially as it affects the manifestation of Orthodox commitment in Jewish studies. How the ideal of "objective," institutionalized research helps consolidate positions of power for untalented academicians is nicely elucidated in Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), 54–55: "A second problem of the profession was to make provision for those of mediocre talents. Few members of the late-nineteenth-century profession of history—or of any profession at any time—were distinguished by the power or penetration of their insight, or by their outstanding powers of literary expression. What was to become of them? Here, too, there is a marked contrast with the ethos of the survival of the fittest, and the banishment to other fields of endeavor of the unfit, which governed in the free markets of intellectual and cultural production. This was not a viable system in a growing profession hoping to recruit new members, and provide them with activity satisfying to both themselves and their colleagues."
30. See *Hagigah* 3a; *Hullin* 7a.
31. See his *Orot ha-Kodesh* I, #33–34. The bulk of the *Hokhmat ha-Kodesh* addresses curricular-epistemological issues fundamental to educational thought. This enterprise of R. Kook deserves to occupy us more than it has.
32. Psalms 111:10; Proverbs 1:7; 9:10.
33. The alphabetic Psalm 111, meditating on God's actions, ends with fear of God, which serves as the transition to the ethical alphabetic Psalm 112. Proverbs 9:10 is part of the conclusion to the long section comprising chapters 1–9. So too the coda to Proverbs (31:30). On Kohelet 12:13 see my discussion below.
34. Oral presentation, February 9, 1989. For his well-known meticulousness and helpfulness as an editor, I am grateful to Rabbi Schacter. I would also like to thank three of my colleagues and several students for their comments and even more for their encouragement.