

The Philosophy of Chanukah

■ In comparing Torah with philosophy, William Kolbrener (“Thinking Like a Jew,” winter 2002) states that the latter “encourage[s] disengagement—standing apart (or perhaps above) in the so-called detached domain of the Ivory Tower.” This is incorrect. Philosophers from Plato and Aristotle to Kant and Hegel presented ideas that influenced and shaped behavior. They did not encourage disengagement.

In America, in particular, the dominant philosophy has been pragmatism, defined by Peirce as maintaining that “our beliefs are really rules for action, and to develop a thought’s meaning, we need only to determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance.” Santayana, Royce, Whitehead and others, while not pragmatists, were not ivory-tower theorists. One can stress that “Torah commands that we listen, internalize and then practice,” without making comparisons that are false.

Benjamin Sharfman, Ph.D.
Cherry Hill, New Jersey

The author of “Thinking Like a Jew” cites modern rabbis to discuss the Greek world, but doesn’t cite contemporary sources on Chanukah (I and II Maccabees) or the critical third source from antiquity, Josephus’ *Antiquities of*

the Jews. Even a cursory look at those sources would correct much in the article about the Seleucid world of the second century BCE. Among the things we would learn is that the Seleucids respected the existing gods and cults of the Empire. What happened under Antiochus IV Epiphanes was an exception to the general pattern and a break with established relations between the Seleucid kings and Jerusalem. It was, as the contemporary sources make quite clear, not “the internal exile of assimilation” but a bitter civil war between Jews (as Jason, the brother of Onias, usurped the High Priesthood, and Menelaus then gained the same post by outbidding Jason) that caused the intervention of Antiochus.

Marc Lee Raphael
Professor of Judaic Studies
The College of William and Mary
Williamsburg, Virginia

William Kolbrener responds

Benjamin Sharfman suggests that my piece less than accurately represents Western philosophical traditions, and thus unnecessarily distinguishes between Jewish and Greek philosophical perspectives.

Sharfman is correct in asserting that there have been philosophical movements—dating back as far as the sophists—that have emphasized worldly, if not pragmatic, engagement. Yet philosophers within the Western tradi-

tion have consistently conceived of the philosophical enterprise through the paradigms of Plato’s *Republic*, where “philosopher kings” are said to aspire towards a realm of ideal forms. Western philosophy—and indeed Western conceptions of Truth—are in some sense born with *The Republic*, and the metaphor of the “Divided Line,” which distinguishes between the realms of Becoming (contingency, language and imagination), and Being (abstract, eternal, unchanging Truth). This ontology, with its conception of Truth (itself contested, most notably by Aristotle), has had amazing resilience throughout Western philosophical and theological traditions. Indeed, in Christian Europe what had been the philosophical distinction between Being and Becoming, transformed under the influence of Paul and later Augustine, into a distinction between Spirit and Body where the true life of the Spirit could only flourish in so far that it remained unsullied by the trappings (indeed contamination) of the world of Becoming. For both Platonic philosophers and Pauline theologians, Truth would only be attained through stepping outside, or beyond, the realms of worldly engagement. Social scientists of the nineteenth century (distant heirs of Plato’s hypothetical “philosopher kings”) with their models of objectivity and scholarly distance, provided only one of the more recent manifesta-

tions of this version of the Greek philosophical ideal.

Pragmatists may, as Sharfman claims, have abandoned the philosophical traditions founded in the Platonic rejection of contingency, encouraging various forms of worldly engagement. Yet the pragmatic course emerges through the denial of the hierarchies which Platonic philosophers and Christian theologians had always affirmed. For pragmatists, who are intellectual descendants of the sophists, there was no realm of the transcendent, only the realm of contingency—that is, the here and now. As Stanley Fish, a contemporary spokesman for American pragmatism, explains, legal and ethical judgments within the “pragmatist program” are not informed by what he calls an “overarching sense of principles,” not to mention “an authoritative revelation,” but only a “ramshackle and heterogeneous” set of resources and conventions. Which is to say, though pragmatists may be avatars of engagement, they are not avatars of internalization, certainly not of the sort demanded by Jewish tradition. For the kind of internalization argued in Rav Hutner’s work entails an acknowledgment of the transcendent authority of the *verbum Deum*—to be embodied in this world, not merely as manifestation of “thought” (*pace* Pierce) or “ramshackle resources” (*pace* Fish), but of *Torah itself*. Philosophers and theologians in the traditions of Plato and Paul disdain materiality and contingency (rendering the very conception of internalization problematic); pragmatists, though advocating some form of internalization, do so only through their rejection of the very conception of the Ideal. The pragmatic idealism (only an oxymoron will do) of Judaism by contrast, entails an obligation to bring the transcendent ideal of Torah within the confines of this world. Such a conception of internalization entails not only a departure from the Greek models contemporary with the Hasmoneans, but arguably, from other Western philosophical models as well

(including those espoused by American pragmatists).

As for Marc Lee Raphael’s comments, my account of the historical events surrounding Chanukah simply followed that of Rav Hutner in *Pachad Yitzchak*, which follows the account of *Chazal*.

Contesting Kollel

■ Rabbi Feitman’s article on the impact of *kollelim* (“It Takes a Kollel,” winter 2002) blends three conceptually and functionally different institutions that share the name *kollel*. The European model described in the advertisement of the *mashgiach* of Volozhin and as expressed in the *kollel* of Slabodka, is limited to a small number of outstanding scholars. Students study there for a limited number of years, and the *kollel* provides additional learning time for the future rabbinical elite. The community *kollel* combines learning and teaching and involves interacting with the broader community. It is the third type of *kollel*, one with no specific goals and time limitations, that is the source of controversy. Rabbi Feitman mentions having discussions with “many leading *roshei yeshivah*” who say that because the outside world has become so depraved, one should spend an entire life learning in an isolated environment. A meaningful analysis of this phenomenon would have to weigh the costs, the benefits to the community and whether this can remain viable as the numbers of men learning in *kollelim* increase. If the need is based on avoiding a hostile world then standards and levels of achievement in learning become irrelevant. Clearly one might favor *kollelim* for the outstanding young scholars and for those who demonstrate the personality and skills necessary to impact on the community, while not supporting a permanent *kollel* open to all.

Rabbi Yosef Blau
New York, New York

The growth of *kollelim* in North America is truly a testimony to the maturation of American Orthodoxy. Widespread learning has replaced rampant ignorance, and greater religious devotion has helped to counter assimilation. However, a few points, which the author omitted, must be kept in mind. The contemporary *kollel* system discourages its adherents from pursuing secular training...and higher secular education is thus spurned in favor of full-time Torah study. Consequently, when *kollel* members attempt to enter the workforce, they lack the capacity to do so. Those who do find employment are often forced to take jobs with inadequate salaries, no employment security and a host of other negative conditions. I know many such men who are struggling with financial woes.

At the same time, not everyone is suited to be in *kollel*, and we must ask if such *kollel* members are doing anyone a favor by placing significant financial burdens on others to support their learning.

When possible, every young man should spend a year or two learning full-time after marriage. However, the present system does a great disservice to those who should not be in *kollel*. It cripples the finances of the Orthodox community, such that *kollel* members cannot afford to pay their children’s yeshivah tuitions. And parents and communal donors must funnel resources to *kollel* members rather than to Torah institutions.

Rabbi Avrohom Gordimer
New York, New York

Rabbi Feitman responds

I would like to thank all those who responded to my article. Like many subjects that evoke passion, the image of *kollel* seems to be in the eye of the beholder. Some are fixated on seeing *kollel* as a way out of active life for lazy do-nothing yeshivah people. Others impute to *kollel* all the alleged sins of the black-hat world. Rabbi Yosef Blau, the respected *mashgiach* of Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan, makes

the valid point, as often noted in my article, that not all *kollelim* are the same. However, I believe he has misunderstood my intent when he quotes me as stating: “one should spend an entire life learning in an isolated environment.” My actual words were “significant numbers of *kollel* members study indefinitely.... The depravity of the world at large, welcomes—requires!—an ever growing cadre of Torah scholars whose contribution to the world is Torah study per se.”

I have checked with several leading *roshei kollel* and have been told that very few American *kollelim* recommend a lifetime of *kollel*. However, because of *katnut hadorot* (the diminution of the generations), it takes significantly longer nowadays to produce quality Torah scholars than it did in previous generations. This includes the training of *roshei yeshivah*, *posekim*, *rabbanim* and *rebbeim*. It is ironic that critics of *kollel* often more readily accept academic regimens that require years to earn a Ph.D. than a similar time-frame necessary to prepare the future religious leaders of Israel. Secondly, the Jewish people have always believed in the power of Torah study for its own sake. It is embarrassing and insulting to cite sources for something as ubiquitously accepted in Jewish tradition as the value to the nation at large of people studying Torah.

Rabbi Gordimer echoes a position held by many Torah leaders concerning the role of *kollel* in shaping young lives. As noted in the article, the depravities of contemporary society nearly demand that young couples begin their lives together in the atmosphere of *kollel* regardless of what the young man will do later in his career. The very existence of a *kollel* allows a family to begin its life of *kiddushin bekedushah*. The presence of more veteran members of the *kollel* establishes an atmosphere that allows these temporary *kollelniks* to develop their own family unit with the proper direction and priorities.

One People, Two Books?

■ I read with interest the review of *One People, Two Worlds* by my distinguished colleague Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein (spring 2003). I also have read the book from cover to cover. Rabbi Reinman is to be complimented on his excellent and insightful presentation of the Torah civilization on the contemporary scene. Nevertheless, I would have been less troubled had the viewpoints of the two authors been published in two separate volumes. The dilemma that we encounter in our relationship with non-Torah clergy is not a new problem. Our greatest sages since the Chatam Sofer have spilled much ink on how to balance basic respect for the individual—one’s right to determine his own lifestyle—and the integrity and demands of our eternal Torah. I follow the guidelines of my *rebbe*, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. I quote from the first volume of my work, *The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*:

Although he vigorously opposed innovations in the synagogue and the traditional prayer service, the Rav did not advocate a total break with the Reform and Conservative movements, despite their unacceptable innovations. Rabbi Soloveitchik did not agree with the public ruling issued in 1956 by eleven leading American roshei yeshiva which prohibited rabbis and synagogues from memberships in groups which also included non-Orthodox clergymen and synagogues. Over the years, the Rav clarified his position. He agreed with the roshei yeshiva that on matters of halakhah no cooperation was possible with the non-Orthodox movements. On issues involving relations with the non-Jewish world, however, matters which he termed kelapei hutz (“external affairs”), where vital Jewish interests were at stake, division in the Jewish camp would endanger the entire Jewish community. He therefore held that limited cooperation was desirable....

As he had put it years earlier, in an interview published in a New York

Yiddish daily, the Jewish Day (November 19, 1954):

“When representation of Jews and Jewish interests kelapei hutz are involved, all groups and movements must be united. There can be no divisiveness in this area, for any division in the Jewish camp can endanger its entirety.... In the crematoria, the ashes of the pious and those filled with praiseworthy deeds mingled with the ashes of radicals and freethinkers. We must jointly fight against the enemy who does not recognize the difference between one who worships and one who does not” (47-48).

I certainly believe that a dialogue on halachic matters with those who do not accept the yoke of Sinai falls under the category of *kelapei penim* (“internal affairs”) and not *kelapei hutz*. It willy-nilly leaves the reader with the impression that the discussants represent equally legitimate traditions of Torah lifestyles. It is not any different than the joint-conversion program that was attempted for a number of years in Denver, Colorado.

According to Samuel Freedman’s description of this innovation: “A panel of three rabbis—one apiece from the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox denominations—would evaluate the applicant for conversion” (*Jew vs. Jew*, 92).

Ultimately even the Orthodox rabbis who participated in this conversion program found it necessary to withdraw their support. Freedman thus described the feelings of one of these spiritual leaders: “In the cause of diplomacy, even at this moment of its failure he spoke more temperately of too many converts and too many compromises.”

There is no question in my mind that we must keep the lines of communication open with those of our brethren who do not walk along the path of Torah and tradition as practiced from generation to generation. We are certainly one people, but we must acknowledge that at times we do live in two distinct worlds.

**Rabbi Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff
Jerusalem, Israel**

Rabbi Adlerstein responds

It is always a pleasure to hear from Rabbi Rakeffet, one of the most successful and stimulating educators of our generation.

Reading his letter, however, left me with a feeling of *déjà vu*, harking back to my school days. I didn’t quite understand everything he said.

Rabbi Rakeffet writes that “the Rav did not advocate a total break with the Reform and Conservative movements” but advocated limited cooperation in certain areas of common interest. He offers this as an apparent contrast to the position of the large group of *roshei yeshivah* I mentioned in my review. There is nothing, however, to suggest that the *roshei yeshivah* ever militated for an absolute severing of relations with the heterodox movements. The question is not whether there can be cooperation, as who should be the people doing it on behalf of Orthodox interests. The ban signed by the *roshei yeshivah* applied to rabbis, but not to lay people. The last few decades were punctuated by too many instances of national crisis in which Orthodox groups did work together with non-Orthodox organizations, without opposition from the *roshei yeshivah*.

The anecdotal evidence I have heard points to no single policy of the Rav regarding the more subtle issue of rabbinic cooperation. The Rav told some people to involve themselves with certain efforts and others not to, in no uncertain terms. The difference between the *da’as Torah* of the Rav versus that of the other *roshei yeshivah* seems to be more of using fine strokes, rather than broad ones. The Rav exercised his prerogative to examine each proposed case individually; the *roshei yeshivah* saw the advantage in a public policy of uniform rabbinic non-cooperation.

I am also confused by Rabbi Rakeffet’s articulation of what the Rav approved and what he rejected. Rabbi Rakeffet seems to limit the non-approved area of *kelapei penim*—internal affairs—to matters of *halachah*. I

believe that the definition he constructed may be too narrow. The Rav appears to have opposed cooperation and dialogue in a broader area of concerns that are halachic, attitudinal and practical. I would suggest the following formulation as perhaps more enlightening:

With regards to our problem with [the Jewish community], however, our spiritual-religious interest, such as Jewish education synagogues, councils of rabbis, where unity is expressed through spiritual-ideological collectivism as a Torah community, it is my opinion that Orthodoxy cannot and should not unite with such groups which deny the fundamentals of our Weltanschauung. It is impossible for me to comprehend, for example, how Orthodox rabbis, who spent their best years in yeshivot and absorbed the spirit of the Oral Law and its tradition, for which Rabbi Akiva, Maimonides, Reb Moshe Isserles, the Gaon of Vilna, Reb Chaim Brisker and other Jewish sages are the pillars upon which their spiritual world rests, can join with spiritual leaders for whom all this is worthless... From the point of view of the Torah, we find the difference between Orthodoxy and Reform Judaism much greater than that which separated the Pharisees from the Sadducees in the days of the Second Commonwealth, and between the Karaites and traditionalists... Too much harmony and peace can cause confusion of the minds and will erase outwardly the boundaries between Orthodoxy and other movements.

The author of these words was none other than the Rav himself. **JA**

**Yitzchok Adlerstein
Los Angeles, California**

Correction:

In “The New *Olim*” (spring 2003), the graph titled “Aliyah from the US, Canada and Mexico 1948-2002” mistakenly lists *aliyah* from the US as 10%. It should have read 86%.