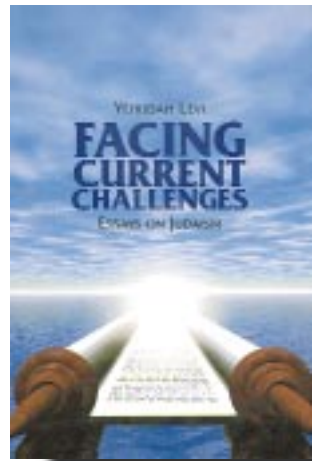


Facing Current Challenges: Essays on Judaism By Yehudah Levi



Hemed Books, Inc.
New York, 1998
502 pages

Reviewed by
Yosef Gavriel Bechhofer

I once asked the principal of a yeshivah high school why the standard curriculum does not include the study of Jewish thought, such as excerpts from *The Kuzari*, *Derech Hashem* or *Michtav MeEliyahu*. He answered me quite candidly, saying that the study of such works is likely to provoke students to raise significant questions that teachers are not necessarily equipped to answer satisfactorily. Better, he contended, not to raise questions in stu-

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dents' minds than to raise questions that will remain unanswered.

While we may be disappointed with the principal's response, we cannot deny the reality of his concern. A standard yeshivah education generally does not equip a teacher with familiarity—let alone mastery—of Jewish thought. Systematic study of the great works (such as those cited previously) is a rarity. Often, the sum total of a yeshivah alumnus' exposure to *musar* or *machashavah* is the collective wisdom contained in whatever *shmuessen* (lectures) he has haphazardly attended over the years.¹

If the educator is not educated, how can he educate others? Furthermore, can we consider a yeshivah alumnus adequately equipped to face the challenges of life if he lacks an understanding of Jewish thought? His experiences may cause him to have questions, and others may raise questions to him. How can one be a fully functioning *oved Hashem* without having a solid grounding in Jewish thought? Indeed, it is the pursuit of such grounding that Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto demands of us when he opens *Mesillat Yesharim* with these words: “*Yesod hachassidut veshoresh ha'avodah hatemimah hu sheyitbarer veyitamet eitzel ha'adam mah chovato be'olamo*—the foundation of piety and the root of perfection in the service of God lies in a man's coming to see clearly, and to recognize as a truth, the nature of his duty in the world.”

Clearly, both teacher and student need a curriculum for the study of Jewish thought, which is exactly what Dr. Yehudah Levi's book *Facing Current Challenges* provides. Dr. Levi is

ideally, perhaps uniquely, suited to provide a framework for thoughtful analysis of the issues that a Jew faces in the world. Heir to the *Torah im Derech Eretz* tradition of his German-Jewish forebears, Dr. Levi was educated in the profound approach to Talmud and Jewish thought that was the hallmark of Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner's Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin. He is also an accomplished scientist and academician. Dr. Levi's works possess a remarkable breadth and depth. (I make extensive use of his other books as well.)

Dr. Levi has taught for many years, also serving for some time as rector at the Jerusalem College of Technology, popularly known as Machon Lev. *Facing Current Challenges* consists of lectures that he gave to his students there. Dr. Levi obviously prepared extensively for the lectures, as they are rich in sources and extensively footnoted.

Unlike *Facing Current Challenges*, other compilations of Jewish thought² that are useful to educators consist of excerpted material from classic sources or summations with extensive references. *Facing Current Challenges*, however, preserves the flavor of Dr. Levi's lectures, enabling the reader to follow the logical and methodical development of his themes.³

Occasionally, Dr. Levi presents information that is so novel a reader may doubt its accuracy—that is, until he checks the reference in the back of the book. For example, we read that the Chazon Ish, *zt"l*, said, “History and world events do much to instruct the wise man on his way, and on the basis of the chronicles of the past he establishes the foundation of his wis-

dom” (225). We would not expect this statement from the Chazon Ish, who was generally opposed to learning secular studies.

More often, however, one will read the essays and emerge more educated in a broad array of issues, from “Zionism: A Torah Perspective” and “Kahanism” to “Organ Transplants” and “Ecological Problems.” A vast gamut of issues is presented by Dr. Levi in this work: issues concerning the land of Israel and the State; the relationship between Jews and Gentiles; family and sexuality; the interface of Torah, medicine and science and the role of *Aggadah* and kabbalah in Judaism, to mention a few.

It will be evident to any reader that Dr. Levi believes that the perspectives he presents are *the* authentic views of Chazal, the Rishonim and the Acharonim. To be sure, he admits that there are other views, but he explains—respectfully and politely—why they do not reflect mainstream Jewish thought throughout the ages. Not surprisingly, Dr. Levi's views are influenced by his exposure to the Hirschian philosophy of *Torah im Derech Eretz*, by his experience in the Lithuanian yeshivah world and by his scientific training.

Here, for example, are his views on Zionism:

What is Zionism? Some define Zionism as a love of Zion—on first sight quite a reasonable definition. It does not, however, fit the normal use of the word. If love of Zion made one a Zionist, the extreme anti-Zionist Neturei Karta, who loved Zion to the point that they refused to leave Jerusalem even during the War of Independence, would be the greatest Zionists of all. Few, however, would classify them as such. It follows that this is not the accepted use of the word (9).

On the topic of nationalism, he notes:

Nationalism, in general, is evil because it turns the nation into an end in itself. Judaism, however, is different; it has a higher purpose—to bring redemption to the world and actually rid it of nationalism. The nationalism called for by the

Torah—Torah nationalism—is secondary. While the Torah confirms the importance of Jewish nationhood, it values it not for its own sake, but because of Israel's exalted mission (7).

Secular Zionists, on the other hand, in a resolution adopted at the Tenth World Zionist Congress (Switzerland, 1911), divorced themselves from Torah, proclaiming, “Zionism has nothing to do with religion.” It is, therefore, a nationalism that is not rooted in Torah. What, then, is Religious Zionism? Is the term an oxymoron? The author continues:

What about religious Zionism? There are many views as to what it signifies. Based on the simple meaning of the

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words, it is Zionism . . . that favors religion and sees in it an important supplement to Zionism. It follows that the religious Zionist will wish to strengthen religion in the nation, because he sees this as being of benefit, even great benefit, to the nation. Even so, as long as he is a Zionist according to the meaning of the term as analyzed above, he will view the nation as the supreme value (10).

After noting the incompatibility of this stance with Torah-true Judaism, Dr. Levi writes:

In the religious Zionist camp there are also many who view the Torah, rather than the nation, as the supreme value. When they see themselves as Zionists, they use the term Zionism to mean something entirely different from the accepted meaning. Such usage turns the term into an obstruction to effective communication; beyond this, it may compromise the clarity of thought of those who use it (11).

Dr. Levi surmises that this need for clarity led Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik to say, “We do not believe in ‘Zionism plus religion’ or ‘religious Zionism.’ For us there is only one special noun—Torah” (12).

Dr. Levi surveys the problems facing Religious Zionists as a result of the inherent contradiction between Zionism and Torah. These problems include succumbing to the idolization of secular Zionist “heroes,” separating from heretical organizations such as the World Zionist Organization and failing to maintain good relations with religious anti-Zionists. He then states:

I believe every Torah-true Jew must take pains to free himself of these errors [problems noted above]. Then, he will no longer be a Zionist—not a general Zionist, nor even a religious Zionist. He will be a lover of Israel, of the Land of Israel, even an excellent citizen of the State of Israel. He will be engaged in the state's advancement and in straightening its path, involved with its economy and politics, and will take pains to awaken it to its purpose. A “Zionist,” however, he will not be (14).

The above will not sit well with those who identify with Religious Zionism nor with those who reject involvement in advancing the State. But the book's greatest strength is that it irritates the reader by challenging his preconceived positions.⁴ Dr. Levi did not make these assertions in a declarative, bombastic fashion. In the course of the three essays in which he formulates his perspective on the Land, State and society of Israel, he carefully musters evidence, like the good scientist that he is, from Rabbis Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, Moshe Avigdor Amiel, Eliyahu Meir Bloch as well as Achad Ha'am to prove his theses. While a reader may want to disagree with Dr. Levi, he may have to do a lot of thinking in order to effectively do so.

Similarly, Dr. Levi's treatment of secular studies will provoke both those who feel that such subjects should be afforded less significance as well as those who feel they should be accord-

ed greater weight. He writes:

To sum up our findings on the Torah's attitude toward secular studies, we must first be aware that a simplistic approach will not suffice. We cannot dispose of the whole issue with a simple "yes" or "no"; instead, we must ascertain precisely what is in question in each case. Generally speaking, the Torah's attitude toward the study of natural science is definitely positive. On the other hand it is negative, or at least reserved, toward study of the humanities based on non-Torah sources. As we have seen, this distinction is based on the difference in the methods used to formulate principles in these disciplines: whereas man was given senses to help him reveal the laws of nature and to test his findings, he has no equivalent faculty enabling him to test his conclusions in the area of the humanities.⁵ Thus there is no reliable source of knowledge in this area other than that which God reveals to man—the Torah given on Mount Sinai (221).

Again, however, this statement is backed by cogent arguments and copious references. If the reader wants to take issue with it, he will first have to engage in research and careful analysis.⁶

One flaw in the book is Dr. Levi's occasional tendency to advance opinions in areas in which one does not necessarily have the right to do so. A good example of this is his handling of Divine providence. As Dr. Levi notes: "...We find in the writings of the early authorities that only righteous individuals, each according to his degree of righteousness, merit special Divine Providence" (304). This is not the current perspective on Divine providence, which follows the thought of the Ba'al Shem Tov. A scholar of *Chassidut*, Rabbi J. Immanuel Schochet once told me that the greatest revolution that the Ba'al Shem Tov succeeded in bringing about was in the area of *hashgachah pratit* (Divine providence). Unlike the earlier authorities, the Ba'al Shem Tov promoted the idea that every individual is worthy of Divine providence.⁷ As the Rebbe Reb Bunim of Parshischah put it, anyone who does not believe that when a per-

son draws a stick out of the sand, God dictates where each particle of sand falls into the hole, denies Divine providence.

Dr. Levi, however, proposes to reconcile the above two schools of thought:

This contradiction is readily resolvable. Everything that happens is, in fact, an act of God, but God's course of action is also governed by His desire to rule the world according to the deterministic and statistical laws of nature. Generally, these laws, rather than an individual's rights and needs, determine these acts of God. However, occasionally such rights and needs do influence the course of events;

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when they do, this is referred to as hashgachah peratith. Divine Providence does in fact control everything. "Every blade of grass has an angel standing over it, telling it 'Grow.'" However, the special providence, hashgachah peratith in the narrow sense, is reserved for righteous people; only they merit a personal relationship on the part of God (ibid.).

I do not dispute the rational character of Dr. Levi's suggestion. I think it has much merit. But I do not know *mi ya'aleh lanu haShamaymah*—who will go up to Heaven for us to ascertain if God acts accordingly? By contrast, in Rabbi Shaul Yisraeli's *Perakim beMachashevet Yisrael* (see note 2), on this topic as on all others, the author presents sources that speak for themselves—from *Tanach* and *Chazal* to Rambam and the *Ba'al HaTanya*—and provides explanations and a lucid summation. Quoting extensively from sources is really not possible in a work such as Dr. Levi's. It would perhaps

have been better to acknowledge the great debate and leave it unresolved. In his book, Rabbi Yisraeli does not attempt to reconcile a theological conundrum that may be beyond human resolution.

But this is a relatively minor quibble with a major contribution to *machashavah* and *machashavah* education. Dr. Levi's work is a wonderful addition to a school curriculum, a powerful tool for teachers, educators and rabbis and a good way for anyone to broaden the horizons of his *avodat Hashem*. **IA**

Notes

1. In 1908, there was a fascinating debate between the renowned historian Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac Halevi and Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook on incorporating the study of *machashavah* into the curriculum of a yeshivah that the latter intended to found in Jaffa. Rabbi Halevi was stridently opposed to any adulteration of the traditional *Shas* and *posekim*-based course of study, while Rav Kook felt that the times made an expanded focus essential. See *Iggerot Rav Yitzchak Isaac Halevi* 80-80a and *Iggerot HaRa'ayah* 1:146, 149.

2. Including Rabbi Shaul Yisraeli's *Perakim beMachashevet Yisrael* (Pardes Chana, 1975) and Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan's *Handbook of Jewish Thought* (New York, 1979).

3. There is a slight, yet perceptible, stiltedness in the flow of the language that, I believe, is because the book is a translation of the original work, which appeared in Hebrew. (The Hebrew version bears the *haskamot* of Rabbis Ovadiah Yosef and Zalman Nechemiah Goldberg.)

4. It is worthwhile to remember that a pearl is formed in response to an irritation; an oyster secretes a thing of beauty around a piece of sand that irritates it. Often, it is irritation that makes us think and accomplish things. A good *machashavah* education will challenge and "irritate" students.

5. Dr. Levi is generally skeptical of the humanities and the social sciences including, particularly, psychology (which he treats, tellingly, not in the section on "*Torah im Derech Eretz*" but in his powerful section on "The Individual and His Soul," which focuses on the drives and inclinations with which people must contend). He makes an exception for the

study of history.

6. Of course, not everyone agrees with Dr. Levi's perspective. In an essay entitled "Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Culture," Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, *rosh yeshivah* of Yeshivat Har Etzion, takes a very different view. [The essay was published in Jacob J. Schacter, *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration* (New Jersey, 1997); see also Avodah Mailing List 3:107 at www.aish-das.org.] In the essay, Rabbi Lichtenstein argues that the *madda* that complements Torah includes the humanities as well:

And yet at bottom, the notion that Shakespeare is less meaningful than Boyle, Racine irrelevant but Lavoisier invaluable, remains very strange doctrine indeed.

... To those who extol chemistry because it bespeaks the glory of the Ribbono Shel Olam but dismiss Shakespeare because he only ushers us into the Globe Theater, one must answer, first, that great literature often offers us a truer and richer view of the essence—the "inscape," to use Hopkins' word—of even physical reality... Can anyone doubt that appreciation of God's flora is enhanced by Wordsworth's description of "a crowd/ A host, of golden daffodils;/ Beside the lake, beneath the trees,/ Fluttering and dancing in the breeze?"

... Whether impelled by demonic force or incandescent aspiration, great literature, from the fairy tale to the epic, plumbs uncharted existential and experiential depths which are both its wellsprings and its subjects... Hence, far from diverting attention from the contemplation of God's majestic cosmos, the study of great literature focuses upon a manifestation, albeit indirect, of His wondrous creation at its apex... To the extent that the humanities focus upon man, they deal not only with a segment of divine creation, but with its pinnacle... In reading great writers, we can confront the human spirit doubly, as creation and as creator."

But how does this approach complement Torah?

The dignity of man is not the exclusive legacy of Cicero and Pico della Mirandola. It is a central theme in Jewish thought, past and present. Deeply rooted in Scripture, copiously asserted by Chazal, unequivocally assumed by rishonim, religious humanism is a primary and persistent mark of a Torah weltanschauung. Man's inherent dignity and sanctity, so radically asserted through the concept of tzelem Elokim; his hegemony and stewardship with respect to nature, concern

for his spiritual and physical well-being; faith in his metaphysical freedom and potential—all are cardinal components of traditional Jewish thought... How then can one question the value of precisely those fields which are directly concerned with probing humanity?

But cannot sources for religious inspiration be found in Torah?

An account of Rabbi Akiva's spiritual odyssey could no doubt eclipse Augustine's. But his confessions have been discreetly muted. The rigors of John Stuart Mill's education—and possibly, their repercussions—are not without parallel in our history. But what corresponds to his fascinating Autobiography? Or to the passionate Apologia Vita Sue of his contemporary, John Henry Cardinal Newman? Our Johnsons have no Boswells.

To be sure, Rabbi Lichtenstein's arguments are impassioned and eloquent. I cannot speak for Dr. Levi, but I imagine that he would argue that in the absence of solid and conclusive evidence from *Chazal* and other classic sources, Rabbi Lichtenstein's position cannot be considered normative.

It is well beyond the scope of this review to contrast Rabbi Lichtenstein's *Torah Umadda* with Dr. Levi's *Torah im Derech Eretz* approach. It is tantalizing to reflect on how they approach the gap between the particular perspective they champion and the dominant "Torah-only" school. Rabbi Lichtenstein: *Advocates of Torah u-Madda can certainly stake no exclusive claims. It would not only be impudent but foolish to impugn a course which has produced most gedolei Yisrael and has in turn been championed by them. Neither, however, should exclusionary contentions be made by its opponents. While Torah u-Madda is not every one's cup of tea, it certainly deserves a place as part of our collective spiritual fare.*

Dr. Levi: *I cannot conclude without addressing the sharp contrast between what we have learned here, concerning the centrality of the Torah 'im derekh erez principle, and what we see in the yeshiva world... I have heard from several great Torah scholars that this opposition is a temporary injunction (hora'ath sha'ah). In time of emergency, it is indeed sometimes necessary to deviate from the Torah's demands in order to save the Torah itself. . . . This was especially important after the terrible Holocaust that visited European Jewry.*

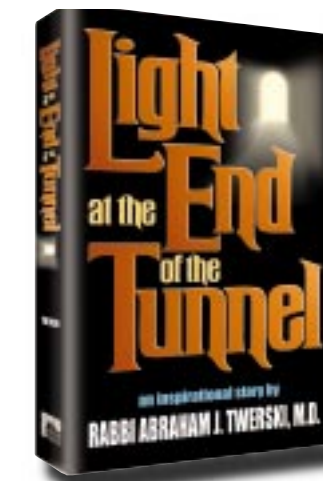
Rabbi Lichtenstein presents his approach

as a viable option to the normative schools of thought ("Torah-only" and, presumably, *Torah im Derech Eretz*). Dr. Levi, on the other hand, presents his approach as *the* normative school of thought. He therefore presents the phenomenon of mass adherence to "Torah-only" as a deviation that requires explanation.

7. In this book, Dr. Levi, for the most part, does not deal with Chassidism or Chassidic philosophy as distinct from general Jewish thought.

Light at the End of the Tunnel

By Abraham J. Twerski



Shaar Press
New York, 2003
205 pages

Reviewed by Yaakov Kornreich

While Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski's *Light at the End of the Tunnel* is written in the form of a novella (too long to be a short story and too short to be a true novel), it is accurately described

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on the book jacket as an “inspirational story” (with the emphasis on inspiration). That should come as no surprise to readers of Rabbi Twerski’s previous books. Those books, which seem to form their own genre of popular Anglo-Jewish literature, relate Torah insights to daily living in an easy-to-read format.

This book is a contemporary moralistic tale, based on the fictional story of Alan Silverman, a fifty-four-year-old workaholic head of a successful law firm. An irreligious Jew who belongs to an Orthodox synagogue, Silverman is jarred into re-examining his mostly empty spiritual life when he learns that he is suffering from non-Hodgkins lymphoma.

To his surprise, Silverman finds new meaning in the words of his rabbi’s High Holiday sermons and accepts the rabbi’s invitation to visit his sukkah. Silverman then signs up to attend the rabbi’s class in Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto’s *Mesillat Yesharim*. This allows Rabbi Twerski to devote much of the first half of the book to illuminating Rabbi Luzzatto’s approach to the fundamentals of Jewish belief. Rabbi Twerski also provides Silverman with a strong Jewish family background, helping the lawyer relate the rabbi’s lessons to his personal experiences and early memories. Silverman soon realizes that his career-centered life, devoted to the pursuit of material wealth and professional status, has been empty of meaning.

Troubled by questions of faith, Silverman is then referred by his rabbi to a Chassidic master who explains the kabbalistic teachings about life-after-death and reincarnation. Once again, Rabbi Twerski demonstrates his unique ability to relate sophisticated Torah insights to the problems of contemporary living in clear, simple language.

At the beginning of the story, Silverman is in denial and deeply resents his medical condition. “The light at the end of the tunnel” that he so desperately seeks is a cure that would allow him to continue living his life as before. But his spiritual search

leads him to an appreciation of the light of Torah, which teaches him how to accept his disease and how to get much more out of the time he has left. Eventually, Silverman sees his illness as a wake-up call and realizes that the true purpose of his life is to allow his *neshamah* to achieve spiritual perfection through *mitzvot* and *gemilat chasadim*. This spiritual reawakening also provides him with newfound joy and meaning in his personal relationships. During the two-and-a-half years following his diagnosis, as Silverman pursues newly discovered spiritual goals, he and his wife grow closer to one another through sharing acts of *chesed*

This is not a novel in the conventional sense.

and playing a more active role in their community’s religious life. He also learns to savor the approaching Jewish milestones in the lives of his children and grandchildren. As the story ends, Silverman’s medical prognosis is uncertain, but he has accepted his fate and learned to appreciate every remaining moment of his life.

While I found the book to be enjoyable and effective in conveying its inspirational message, a caveat for the prospective reader is in order. This is not a novel in the conventional sense. Rabbi Twerski provides only enough detail to satisfy the demands of his inspirational message which, rather than the story, is paramount. Eventually, we do get to know Silverman fairly well, but the other characters remain sketchy. The wealth of descriptive detail, which one would expect from a work of fiction of this length, is missing. Moreover, this book is not for readers looking for light entertainment. However, those who have enjoyed Rabbi Twerski’s earlier inspirational books will not be disappointed. **JA**