

## What Are We So Afraid Of?: The Challenge of Torah U'Madda for Our Time

*"Caesar had his Brutus; Charles the First his Cromwell; and George the Third—"*

[Cries of "Treason! Treason!"]

*"George the Third may profit by their example. **If this be treason, make the most of it.**"*

--Patrick Henry, speech to Virginia House of Burgesses, May 29, 1765

Among the many things that characterize modern Orthodox Jews: religious Zionism; engaging with the secular world; commitment to expanding religious opportunities for women within the context of halakha; perhaps the most-defining is our embrace of the Talmudic maxim *hokhma bagoyim ta'amin*: if someone tells you that there is knowledge and wisdom among the nations, believe them. We seek to encounter the wisdom of the broader world, with the conviction that our Torah learning and lives as Jews will be strengthened, rather than threatened, thereby. And yet, right now, a great deal of the nominally Modern Orthodox community, its laity and its leadership, is afraid of, and threatened by, this encounter. Not of addressing Torah and science: we're perfectly happy to talk about stem cell research, or cloning, or brain death, and its implications for halakha and Jewish ethics. But when it comes to the insights and approaches that have been at the heart of the academic enterprise in the social sciences and humanities for the last generation--approaches which question the unitary and ascertainable nature of the truth and challenge claims of authority and objectivity--sometimes loosely (and not entirely accurately) grouped under the heading of postmodernism, we lose our nerve. This fear extends beyond the Orthodox world--it is certainly apparent in the broader communal

conversation about Israel, particularly on college campuses--but it strikes at the ideological heart of Modern Orthodoxy.

Torah U'Madda is the label later attached to the early-twentieth-century attempt to craft a meaningful American Orthodoxy that could interact with the the broader world while still maintaining its fealty to Torah learning, observance, and values. In an American context and at a time when the choices seemed to be Eastern-European-style scrupulous observance and concomitant separation from broader American society; or the acculturation and assimilation of earlier waves of Jewish immigrants; Torah U'Madda offered an alternative, a way to engage with and participate in the world while maintaining one's steadfast Orthodoxy. Yeshiva University was founded during this period, seeking to avoid the alternatives of both poles and shape an integrated, committed, observant Judaism in a modern American setting.

This stance, adopted from whatever combination of principle and necessity, was bolstered by the arrival at Yeshiva University of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who assumed his role as Rosh Yeshiva in 1941. Rabbi Soloveitchik came to teach Talmud, bringing with him a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Berlin (Friedrich Wilhelm University). In his person, he embodied the synthesis of Torah U'Madda, combining as he did the rigorous Talmudic education in the Brisker method and the upbringing of his parental home with the modern secular education he had received in university. The Rav, as he became known, was the paradigm of Torah U'Madda for generations of students, who became the rabbis and lay and communal leaders for American Modern Orthodoxy. His student and future son-in-law, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, who earned a doctorate in

English literature from Harvard, continued to model the synthesis of modern scholarship with Torah study at the highest level and deep commitment to Torah values.

There is no one with a comparable background inhabiting a comparable role today. Instead of a deep, if sometimes skeptical, appreciation of the *Madda* of the day, the rhetoric we often hear about the intellectual currents in today's academy is that they pose a threat to our deepest-held beliefs and values. In the religious discourse of our community, the intellectual synthesis of Torah study and the approaches of contemporary scholarship is a dead letter. In that sense, today's Torah U'Madda is something of a zombie, its body lurching about in search of brains.

As I struggled to commit the inchoate thoughts that would become this essay to paper, I received as a gift Steven Shapin's *Never Pure: Historical Studies of Science as if It Was Produced by People with Bodies, Situated in Time, Space, Culture, and Society, and Struggling for Credibility and Authority*<sup>1</sup>--and I realized that not only did I know what I wanted to say, but that my whole graduate education had been a training to say it.

My professional training was as an historian of science.<sup>2</sup> And as I read Shapin's subtitle, I was struck (pretty astonishingly, for the first time) by the parallels between the discipline in which I was trained and the argument that I was struggling to formulate. Science is a discipline that is invested with great authority in our contemporary culture, whose practitioners claim and are accorded great deference, and who are widely

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<sup>1</sup> (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010.) Thank you, Rabbi Aryeh Klapper.

<sup>2</sup> Following the practice of the late *New York Times* On Language columnist, William Safire, I say "an historian." Many have told me it sounds pretentious; my former student Gabriel Dardik once wrote a paper making a compelling case for why it's not correct. Nevertheless.

acknowledged to be getting at and speaking a greater Truth. History of science, as a professionalized discipline, began with George Sarton at Harvard University in the early twentieth century studying the great men of science and understanding what they had thought and accomplished. He saw his role as celebrating those individuals who, through great intellectual achievement, had advanced the cause of Truth and of understanding the world. "Above all," Sarton wrote, "we must celebrate heroism wherever we come across it. The heroic scientist adds to the grandeur and beauty of every man's existence."<sup>3</sup>

And when the collective fields of science studies--history of science, sociology of science, anthropology of science, etc.--began to tell a different story,<sup>4</sup> one in which as Shapin says scientists were embodied beings, situated in particular cultural contexts, whose experiences shaped the work they did, whose worldview shaped how they understood it, and whose often-pettiness, national pride, agendas, and bureaucracy shaped how it was received by others, the response from many scientific practitioners was furious. The so-called Science Wars that raged on university campuses in the 1990s, in which science-studiers raised and discussed these questions and scientists vociferously defended both the integrity and authority of the scientists and the truth claims of science, were an outgrowth of that new approach to science studies.

What did this "tone-lowering," as Shapin terms it, consist of, and what did it attempt to introduce to the conversation about the study of science? I reproduce much of page 5 from Shapin's book to give you a sense of some of the new ways of studying science occasioned by these new approaches:

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<sup>3</sup> Shapin, p. 4

<sup>4</sup> I'm skipping the long-survey-of-the-existing-literature footnote, but it's basically the whole field for the past 3-4 decades.

- You could say that science happens within, not outside of, historical time, that it has a deep historicity, and that whatever transcendence it possesses it itself a historical accomplishment
- You could say that science similarly belongs to place, that it bears the marks of the places where it is produced and through which it is transmitted....
- You could go further and say that there is *no* single, coherent, and effective Scientific Method that does the work that genius was once supposed to do, even that there are no supposedly special cognitive capacities found in science that are not found in other technical practices or in the routines of everyday life.
- You could say that Truth (in any precise philosophical sense) is not a product of science, or that it is not a unique product. Or you could say that the historian is not properly concerned with Truth but with credibility, with whatever it is that *counts as Truth* in a range of historical settings
- You could say that science is not pure thought but that it is *practice*, that the hand is as important as the head, or even that the head follows the hand.
- You could say that making and warranting of scientific knowledge are *performances*, that those producing scientific knowledge can and do use a full range of cultural resources to produce these performances, and that these include displaying the marks of integrity and entitlement: expertise to be sure, but also signs of dedication and selflessness. The very idea of disembodied knowledge thus becomes a bodily performance.<sup>5</sup>

There isn't a word of this that couldn't be fruitfully applied to thinking about the halakhic tradition, halakhic decisions, halakhic decision-makers. For Orthodox Jews, who ascribe authoritativeness to rabbinic Judaism as it has developed over the last two thousand or so years, taking these ideas seriously, however, immediately poses tremendous religious and philosophical quandaries. Read, in contrast to Shapin, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on *hakhmei hamesora*, the Sages responsible for the transmission of the tradition of Torah from generation to generation. I quote at length because this is both so fundamental, and so widely cited:

**The truth is attained from within, in accord with the methodology given to Moses and passed on from generation to generation.** The truth can be discovered only by joining the ranks of the *chachmei hamesorah*....One must join the ranks of the *chachmei hamesorah* -- *chazal*, *rishonim*, *gedolei achronim* -- and must not try to rationalize from without the *chukei hatorah* and must not judge the *chukei mishpatim* in terms of the secular system of things. **Such an attempt, be it historicism, be it psychologism, be it utilitarianism, undermines the very foundations of torah umesorah, and it leads eventually to the most tragic consequences of assimilationism and nihilism, no matter how good the original intentions.**

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<sup>5</sup> Shapin, p. 5

Second, we must not yield -- I mean emotionally, it is very important -- we must not feel inferior, experience or develop an inferiority complex, and because of that complex yield to the charm -- usually it is a transient and passing charm -- of modern political and ideological *sevoros* (logic)...In my opinion, *yehadus* (Judaism) does not have to apologize either to the modern woman or to the modern representatives of religious subjectivism.... And of course, certainly it goes without saying one must not try to compromise with these cultural trends, and one must not try to gear the halachic norm to the transient ways of a neurotic society, which is what our society is.

...But moreover, even those who admit the truthfulness of the *torah she b'al peh* but who are critical of *chachmei chazal* as personalities, who find fault with *chachmei chazal*, fault in their character, their behavior, or their conduct, who say that *chachmei chazal* were prejudiced, which actually has no impact upon the halachah; nevertheless, he is to be considered as a *kofer*. *V'chen hakofer b'perusha v'hu torah she b'al peh v'hamach'chish magideha*; he who denies the perfection and the truthfulness of *chachmei chazal* -- not of the Torah, but of the *chachmei chazal* as personalities,...as far as their character, their philosophy, or their outlook on the world is concerned -- is a *kofer*....

**You cannot psychologize halachah, historicize halachah, or rationalize halachah, because this is something foreign, something extraneous. As a matter of fact, not only halachah -- can you psychologize mathematics? .... I cannot give many psychological reasons why Euclid said two parallels do not cross, or why the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. If I were a psychologist I could not interpret it in psychological terms. Would it change the postulate, the mathematical postulate? And when it comes to Torah, which is *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, all the instruments of psychology and history, utilitarian morality, are being used to undermine the very authority of the halachah.**<sup>6</sup> (emphasis added; all transliterations sic)

The Rav's words have been traditionally understood as an affirmation of the world-view of Brisk in which he was educated. But they are also of a piece with Sarton's early-twentieth-century approach to studying great men and their intellectual achievements.<sup>7</sup> That is, they are equally an affirmation of the milieu in which Rabbi Soloveitchik received his academic training. That everything of interest--everything worth understanding--about a great man and his great intellectual achievement took place within his cranium was indeed the assumption that underlay much of intellectual history a

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<sup>6</sup> From the website <http://arikahn.blogspot.com/2013/03/rabbi-soloveitchik-talmud-torah-and.html>: "Partial transcript of an address of Rabbi Joseph Baer Soloveitchik zt"l to the RCA Convention, 1975, on the topic of gerut. This is a preamble to the shiur. Transcribed by Eitan Fiorino.

<sup>7</sup> This profoundly internalist approach to thinking about the development of halakha is articulated by the Rav, and explicitly connected to thinking about science and its development, in the Rav's essay *Halakhic Mind*, written in 1944 (although not published until decades later.)

hundred years ago, but it is no longer. And that everything there is to know about the halakhic process and its development can be understood from within it is a claim that is untenable in light of the last thirty or forty years' of knowledge production in the academy. (This is recursive or second-order *makhish magideha*: historicizing the very claim that *halakha* cannot be historicized.)

Torah is not science. Orthodox Judaism begins with the assumption of the Divine Revelation at Sinai, and the transmission of a Divinely-authored text.<sup>8</sup> But that all of the tools of science studies may not be apposite does not mean that none of them is. Even as it begins with a Divine text, the explication of that text and the transmission and development of the corpus of the Oral Law are human activities. Indeed, the Talmud makes this precise point in an oft-cited and powerful story: Rabbi Eliezer and the Sages found themselves arguing about the ritual status of the oven of Akhnai. Rabbi Eliezer performed numerous miracles to buttress his position, which the stone-cold Sages dismissed: "We do not decide halakha from leaping trees. We do not decide halakha from reversing streams." Finally, Rabbi Eliezer summoned a Divine voice to declare that the halakha should follow his interpretation, and the voice obliged. Rabbi Yehoshua, siding with the Sages, was unmoved by this as well: "The Torah is not in Heaven. You gave it to us on earth, and You instructed us to decide following the majority." To this, a Heavenly voice was heard to reply, "My sons have defeated me, my sons have defeated me."<sup>9</sup> Human agency and choice, rather than an ultimately-ascertainable Divine Truth, are dispositive in determining the halakha.

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<sup>8</sup> I realize that this is an arguable assumption. I am assuming it.

<sup>9</sup> Talmud Bavli, Bava Metzia 59b. Loose translation and summary mine.

The *haredi* world, while acknowledging the literal humanness of the *hakhmei hamesora* of every generation, would nevertheless reject this analysis out-of-hand. The traditional approach to thinking of the Sages of preceding generations, and the more modern development of the idea of *da'at Torah*--that the study of Torah so refines a man's intellect and character that he loses his individual partiality, prejudice, and preconception and remains only a vehicle for channeling the Divine Will and the Divine Word--are completely incompatible with this thinking. In their view, through their study of Torah, *hakhmei hamesora* precisely transcend their bodies, culture, space, and time. But that world does not claim to value secular knowledge for its own sake, nor to think that it can shed light on the study of Torah. The world that does make those claims needs to figure out how to realize them.

The analogy between the technical disciplines and the study of Torah, in this regard, is not only mine: Rabbi Soloveitchik, in the final paragraph cited, invokes Euclid and his geometry as a way of challenging the whole idea of situating intellectual history in a cultural context. And yet now we have entire academic disciplines that do just that. His refutation is become a confirmation. (Or, if your preference runs more to the *beis medrash* and less to the academy, his *upshlug* is become a *raya*.)

Twentieth-century scholars talked about what Einstein knew, what he read, what he had thought about when he came up with the Theory of Special Relativity, first published in 1905. Was it the Michelson-Morley experiment? Thought experiments about the speed of light? It wasn't until the twenty-first century that Peter Galison asked us what Einstein was spending all of his days working on (reviewing patent applications in the Bern patent office,



that's what), and asked us to think about how looking at numerous patents directed towards coordinating timekeeping on the railroads, so that distant trains could be sure that they were leaving and arriving in stations on the same schedule, might have affected the ways he thought about questions of simultaneity, distance, and speed so implicated in the theory.<sup>10</sup> The purely theoretical achievement of Special Relativity turns out to have a very practical and concrete grounding. That does not change the theory, the equations, their implications--but it does force us to rethink both what science is and who are the people who do it.

We cannot have this conversation without raising yet another issue that Rabbi Soloveitchik also raises and dismisses, one which is implicated in all of these debates today, and which our superannuated understanding of Torah U'Madda does not at all prepare rabbis to address: the questions of authority and her sister concept, objectivity. The scientist claims for himself objectivity--he is purely engaged in the pursuit of truth, unaffected by his body, his upbringing, his cultural context--and because he is objective, he has a claim to authority. But in fields that extend far beyond science studies, academics have questioned those claims to objectivity, demonstrating that objectivity itself as a desideratum is a cultural construct, and that claims to authority on the basis of disinterested pursuit of truth have long been wielded as a weapon to reinforce the power of white Western men at the expense of others.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Galison, *Einstein's Clocks, Poincare's Maps* (W.W. Norton and Co., 2004)

<sup>11</sup> An enormously powerful poem, "[The Venus Hottentot](#)", by Elizabeth Alexander, a contemporary American poet, addresses just these issues.

Peter Novick addresses the question of objectivity in the historical profession in "*That Noble Dream*": *Objectivity and the American Historical Profession*.

(This does not mean that there is no expertise, or no authority. When I dropped a knife while washing dishes and severed a tendon in my foot, I consulted with an orthopedic surgeon as to how to proceed. But at the same time, I am aware that my orthopedic surgeon<sup>12</sup> has been educated in a system, professionally trained to certain practices, and views the world in certain ways. That I know this does not strip him of all authority and make him no more qualified to opine about my foot than my optician, or my automobile mechanic, but it does mean that I will not view his opinion as the absolute, unquestionable truth about my condition and the best possible path of treatment--hence the second opinion [and, increasingly, consultation with Dr. Google.] That I understand that the Theory of Universal Gravitation was the product of a specific man [Isaac Newton] situated in a particular cultural context, who was involved in some rather nasty fights about credit, priority, attribution, and authority--none of that means that I will jump out of my third-floor kitchen window because gravity is not "real" or not "true." The choice is not that either our scholars are pure, abstracted intellect or they have nothing to say that we must take seriously.)

To say these things is to immediately be guilty, in the Rav's eyes, of being *makhish magideha*. The charge of heresy, made so explicitly and definitively, has served to shut down conversation on these topics in the circles where they are most needed. And indeed, for both religious and sociological reasons, it is hard to advance these claims. The decades that have passed since the Rav's death have not displaced him from his status as a final word on halakhic and communal questions. I readily acknowledge my inadequacy to the

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<sup>12</sup> Dr. Scott Ellis, Hospital for Special Surgery. If you ever have a dishwashing accident, he's great.

task--and yet we, as a community, must collectively figure out how to do just that. If this be treason, let us make the most of it.

It is, for example, impossible to credit the claim that it doesn't matter at all to the content of the halakhic system that those admitted into the tent of Torah, those with a seat at the table, those with a voice in the conversation, have been exclusively male. What does it mean that endless deliberations about women's bodies, their processes, their effluvia have only and ever been engaged in by men who never inhabited those bodies, never experienced those processes, never checked those effluvia and brought their questions to a Rabbi? What does it mean, more, that those deliberations were engaged in by men who didn't see women as intellectual peers; equal inheritors of, deliberators about, or transmitters of the tradition? (This is not the only question of authority that is implicated here, but it is, I think, the biggest, the one most central to the debates within Orthodoxy today, and the most personal.)

Saying that these things matter, posing these questions, does not presuppose a particular set of answers or a particular set of halakhic outcomes. Orthodox Jewish thinkers have wrestled over the generations with many questions about Judaism and modernity, and have come up with a range of answers that balance fealty to faith and practice with intellectual rigor and honesty. But we have to engage with these questions, not avoid them out of fear of where thinking about them might lead us. We should have more confidence in the Torah's ability to meet the challenge of modernity than that.

And here we arrive at what is to me the void at the core of Modern Orthodoxy. Others will tell me that I am naive, that the problem with American Modern Orthodoxy is

not intellectual and academic but practical, pragmatic: a lack of meaningful engagement on the part of the laity, too many kids falling away, the materialism and shallowness of the community, the college experience as an alienator of Jewish souls. All of those things are doubtless true, and as a high school educator in the community of more than a decade's standing I have a front-row seat to all of them. But nevertheless, they do not challenge the underpinnings of the whole enterprise. And I cannot help but feel that our collective inability or unwillingness to engage with the twenty-first century questions about how to think about the body of halakha as if it *Was Produced by People with Bodies, Situated in Time, Space, Culture, and Society, and Struggling for Credibility and Authority* does.

We can--many do--dismiss the very asking of these questions as heresy, which certainly obviates the need to answer them. But Torah U'Madda, if it stands for anything, stands not for the ability to go to an excellent university, get a prestigious law degree, and make a wonderful living for a family in Teaneck, Woodmere, or New Rochelle. Torah U'Madda should mean that we believe that there is *hokhma bagoyim*, and that the study thereof can enrich and deepen our understanding of Torah. Does everything worth knowing emerge from within Torah, or are there things worth knowing that emerge from the broader world and are brought into--indeed, enhance--our study and understanding of Torah? The difference as to how one answers those questions should be one of the markers of Modern Orthodoxy.

Which brings us, inevitably, to Yeshiva University as an institution. Whenever it is mentioned, the words "flagship" and "Modern Orthodoxy" come trailing in its wake. Yeshiva University faces many challenges, some reflective of broader societal trends and

some of its own making. But at an intellectual level, the religious leadership of an institution whose motto is “Torah U’Madda” has frozen its conception of religiously permissible Madda at that with which the Rav engaged at the University of Berlin in the 1920s (or, perhaps, with that with which Rav Aharon Lichtenstein engaged at the Harvard of the 1950s.) In this, it is reminiscent of an aging Albert Einstein, whose comfort with modern physics ended with his Theory of General Relativity but never extended to the indeterminism and seeming senselessness of quantum theory. (Einstein’s famous remark that “God does not play dice with the universe” was not an affirmation of his belief in providence, but a statement of his [incorrect] rejection of quantum theory.)<sup>13</sup> We see this often in individuals--it is related to the theory of paradigm shifts advanced by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*--but it is deeply problematic in institutions. The developments in academia of recent decades--in science studies, of course, and also in legal theory, postcolonialist history, feminist studies, and a whole host of other fields and disciplines that question established hierarchies, assertion of merit, authority, and objectivity--have not only not penetrated into the thinking about halakha or the training of rabbis in any serious way; they are regularly dismissed with the epithet “postmodernism” as inimical to authentic Torah study and Torah values. That posture--that the ideas current in the world out there are *treif* (even if at some time in the past they were not), that they should be steered-clear-of and not studied and applied to our own learning--is certainly a position, one that prevails in the *haredi* world in which I was educated. And it is tenable, as long as one stays within that world. But we in the Centrist and Modern Orthodox worlds

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<sup>13</sup> Russell McCormach’s novel *Night Thoughts of a Classical Physicist* is a fictional treatment of this phenomenon, deeply empathetic to the older physicist who cannot see the world differently than he sees it.

are raising our children and educating our students towards intellectual and practical integration into the broader world, and at the same time the institution that educates most of our rabbis dismisses as “postmodernism” anything that asks these questions. If this persists, we are in for a world of hurt.

In my first semester of graduate school, I took a seminar called History 500, a requirement for all beginning graduate students in history. At the time, I was, however awkwardly, ensconced in the *haredi* world. That was my education and background, that was the world in which I was *shidduch*-dating (another story for another time.) I would never have termed myself Modern Orthodox. But in History 500, I read a paper about Spain during the Christian Reconquest. The paper dealt with the priests’ exhortations from the pulpit to the people to practice a pure Catholicism, and the people’s syncretism as they mixed official Church practice and doctrine with earlier and alternate religious practices. I read that paper, and thought, “This could be describing the Brooklyn in which I grew up as well as it describes Catholic Spain centuries ago.” From an education in which I had always been taught that the Jewish people, and by extension Jewish history, was *sui generis*, that the rules and patterns of history that apply to everyone else don’t apply to the Jews, it was a dislocating and discomfiting thought. Ultimately, a strong humanities education made me Modern Orthodox. (Mommas, don’t let your Bais Yaakov girls grow up to be academics!)

Today’s Centrist Orthodox world--the world of Yeshiva University, the world that produces the overwhelming majority of the Modern Orthodox world’s rabbis and Torah teachers--would generally be comfortable with an academic approach to Jewish history.

Normative Orthodoxy would reject historicizing the text of the Torah itself. And in between we have the *hakhmei hamesora* and the halakhic process. How we think about them, in what context we situate them, and whether we allow ourselves to think critically about them using the tools of modern scholarship is the unavoidable intellectual challenge for Torah U'Madda for the twenty-first century. We need people who are sufficiently well-versed in and committed to Torah to speak credibly in that realm, and sufficiently familiar with the current academic landscape to meaningfully bring those insights to bear. We need to believe that Torah U'Madda was not a limited-time offer that expired sometime in the last century, but that our understanding and appreciation of Torah can still be enhanced by bringing Madda to bear. And we need to not be afraid.

