

When Something Goes Right...

Reflections on Shabbat at Yeshiva

by Rabbi Mayer Schiller

What exactly are we up to here at Yeshiva? At times it seems that so many different things are going on here that it is almost impossible to speak of Yeshiva College as one entity. Are all the students, *rebbeim*, Roshei Yeshiva, administrators, professors, etc., all part of the same enterprise in any serious sense? These questions surely strike many of us with disconcerting forcefulness as we walk around the campus seeing, hearing, and participating in... well, most everything.

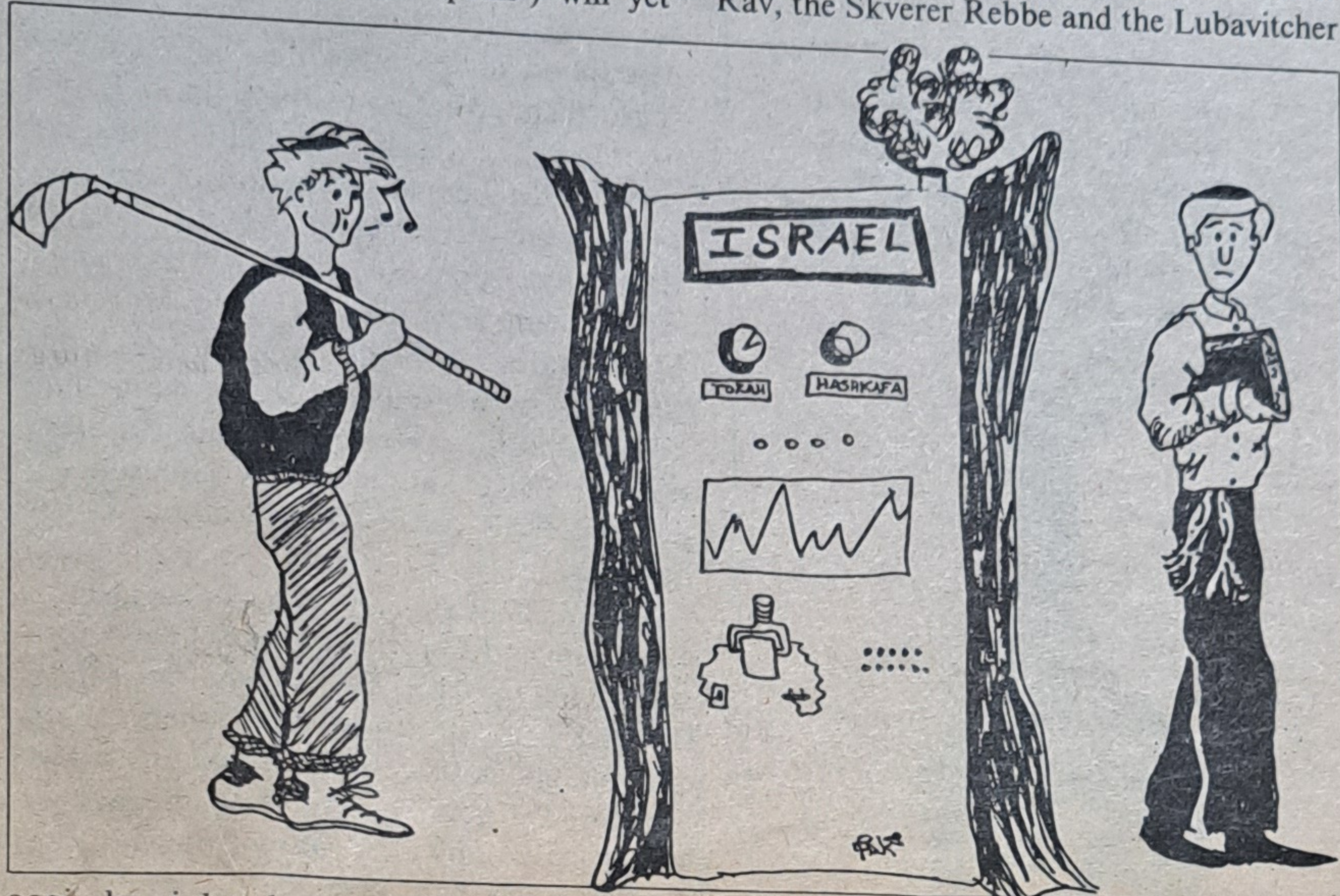
A few weeks ago I was the guest along with Rabbi Well at a joint S.O.Y. - J.S.S. "Shabbaton" (I do not know what the word means in this context and the anti-modernist in me finds it a bit distasteful, but anyway) at which both of us spoke periodically, got to sleep in the Referee's Suite, sat at the head of the table, etc. Last year I was featured at a similar event. Both years my reaction was the same. I did not want to go before the event and was most happy I did afterward. Why this reluctance on my part? Well, quite frankly, after a week of giving a high school *shiur* in a Modern Orthodox setting (or perhaps better said, after thirteen years of giving such a *shiur*) one tends at times to suffer from a bit of despair: there is a heavy sense at times that heartfelt effort and serious attempts at communication are like just so much pouring of water upon the sand, words uttered to rooms ostensibly full, but in the deeper sense, largely empty.

Of course, this feeling is somewhat errant and certainly tragically self-defeating. Much of value is accomplished in the MTA-type high school classroom both in terms of planting seeds for future flowering and in actual present effect. The outer forms of adolescent cynicism, crudity, simplicity, and rebellion are very often just that: forms of a period in a young man's life which leave little imprint on his mature self. (How many Young Israel successful professionals go about on weekends sporting The Who's 25th Anniversary Tour t-shirts?) A certain type of behavior is expected of teenagers under the dogmas of "Americanism" and those influenced by its doctrines act accordingly, at least for a brief period. After that fateful year of crossing the Rubicon in Israel in 13th and at times 14th grade, much of the situation changes... sometimes briefly and sometimes for good. (The implications of the rapid effect of Israel should send a shudder down the spine of those of us who labor in American high schools, for what exactly do we do for four years? But that is a topic for another time) In any event, despite the consolations of Torah seriously learnt (at times by some), of hopes for the future, and realization of the transient ephemerality of Modern Orthodox adolescence, teaching a quarter of one's audience at all times other than when there is a test rearing its ugly head on the horizon can, if one yields to the Tempter's promptings, produce a sense of *deja vu*, despair, boredom, and plain old-fashioned heartache.

So who needs more of the same come the weekend? *Shacharit* on Friday morning in the *Shinaver Shteibel* (continuing that tradition of the Zanser kinder's unique combination of *derekh haBaal Shem* interwoven with hard core *kana'ut*) and *Shabbat* in the warm embrace of *Rachmistrivkaism* do wonders for the soul, the heart, and one's sense of perspective in the world. Yiddish speaking *chasidisher friends*, and Rabbis, most of

whom are frightfully serious about God and His Torah, are a welcome respite from a week of wrestling in the "steel cage" with a far tougher opponent than Andre's team in the Survivor Series, namely the Orthodox adolescents of modernity's bourgeoisie.

But Rabbi Cheifetz, he always does it to me. I am always silly putty in the hands of people both nice and sincere. So, when he comes and talks about *Shabbat*, and J.S.S., and things like that, the "no, I can't's" are hard to produce, and the cardinal rule of my middle years ("no pay no speak") will yet



again be violated.

So, now it is Friday and time for *Mincha*. I, personally, do not feel particularly comfortable with the *Ashkenaz nusach* for Friday night *Kabbalat Shabbat* and *Ma'ariv*, and *yeshivishe nusach* is not what I call "home sweet home." Besides the hint of melancholy I find in it, the *tzibbur* always seems strangely quiet. So, I am laboring under a heavy burden of provinciality coming in. This is going to be disagreeable, so I must brace myself.

And yet, one cannot help but be impressed. Fact is that the *davening* in the *Beit Midrash* is most impressive. Be it a weekday *Shacharit* (sparsely attended due to its length- not a good situation in its own right) or *ma'ariv*, the mood is serious and the place is very quiet. *Shabbat*, in which a diverse crowd of YPers and JSSers were brought together, was no exception. I think we can safely say that the *ernskeit*, sense of respect, and general atmosphere of *kavanna*, right here in our own *Beit Midrash*, is the rival of — if not superior to — any other yeshiva (and I've travelled far and wide among Hasidim, Yeshiva and *Yekeshe* circles) that my path has crossed. Clearly something very grand is happening here. Why? What is the source of this most impressive happening? We are doing something right. What is it?

Davening concludes and things would only get better. We know as believing Jews that the spiritual is an objective reality. The atmosphere even in so seemingly innocuous an activity as the "Good Shabbos" exchanged is finer, better, purer when those doing it are *bnei Torah* (to use the *Misnagdic* phrase) and *yirei shamayim* (to use the Hasidic). *Davening*, learning, and the ordinary conviviality of those who labor in Torah is almost palpably different from that of those who do not. It is this mood generated by *ernster yiden* in *einen* (serious Jews together) that I have sought and sometimes found throughout my life. And I found it in our *Beit Midrash* that Friday night. Who to praise? Who to thank?

At the *seuda* I spoke of *ahavat Yisrael* and why it need not be a contradiction with a true sense of passionate *kana'ut*. For in fact, true concern for one's fellow Jew produces a sense of outrage at evil and heresy and a burning commitment to their eradication. To clearly define and abhor evil is not to care less about others or empathize less with their particular plight, but, in truth, to care more. In the end there is no conflict between the Satmar Rav, Reb Aryele Roth, and Rav Amram Blau on the one hand and the Belzer Rav, the Skverer Rebbe and the Lubavitcher

traditional anti-Zionism is of the Landau-Ravitsky-Simon *Oz veShalom* variety (with its roots, *l'havdil*, in Buber-Magnes-Brit *Shalom* visions), I suspect that all the doctrines that Rabbi Lamm presents as key to Centrist Orthodoxy can also co-exist or, in fact, be rooted in true Torah passion (witness Rav Kook, the Wurzbürger Rav, etc.). It was this hope for "tough-mindedness and toleration" that I called for at the Friday night *seuda*.

After the meal Rabbi Well and I gave brief presentations to a large crowd of *talmidim*. He spoke of the need for pride in one's Jewish identity while confronting contemporary society. I discussed a Torah approach to social questions, Gentile societies and political theory. This topic is a long and painful one, the intricacies of which are not relevant to the matter at hand (The interested reader is directed to an article of mine in the 5749 *Shavuot Jewish Action* for further details). What is relevant took place after these talks. Crowds of earnest young men gathered to discuss a wide range of serious Torah questions with obvious care and concern. Those speaking to me ranged over the topics of Jew-Gentile, Torah U'Madda, *Chassidut*, *Mitnagdut*, yeshiva high school education, general education, *derekh ha-limud*, the ideal Torah society, the ideal yeshiva, Zionism, the differences between the *Edah* and the *Neturei Karta*, and so on and so forth.

It was close to midnight when I finally had to beg off. I have had such passionate discussions in the past, with the best of Reb Shmuel Feivelson's *talmidim* in *Bais Shraga*, with the most serious *Chassidische yungerleit* in Skver, in assorted public and private meeting places of people pious, thoughtful, and deeply involved. Those young men I spoke to right here in our very own Ruben Shul (although somewhat ignorant of large segments of *Klal Yisrael*) were full of Torah, devotion to God and to the *Shulchan Arukh*, and the vital enthusiasms of youth prior to battling the vile *hergel* which drains our innards (if we be not on constant guard) in later life.

And so it went throughout *Shabbat*. There was the group of NCSY advisors who had me speak in the afternoon to their *baalei teshuva* from upstate New York. I do not know whose sincerity humbled me more, that of the upstaters or of their mentors, mentors obviously sincerely devoted to bringing Jewish souls closer to God.

Shabbat afternoon before the *seuda* came 40 odd fellows gathered around. The topic was *chinukh*, how to improve learning and piety in Modern Orthodox yeshivot. Their involvement was matched by that of the baker's dozen who sat with me after the meal discussing Y.U. in general, its strengths and its faults. What can I say? These were *bnei Torah* and their company was inspiring and delightful.

They are also, by and large, on a higher level of Torah knowledge, halakhic observance and hashkafic profundity than their parents and communities. Their current status is the result of forces to be found away from the affluent suburbs of their homes. These forces are to be found somewhere in the Day School-Yeshiva High School-Eretz Yisrael-Y.U. *shiur* experience they have all undergone. Somewhere a lot is being done right.

I don't know much about the elementary schools, but beginning in high school the educational system of Modern Orthodoxy

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provides the opportunity for those entrusted to it to opt for a *chayei Torah*. The *rebbeim* and *Roshei Yeshiva* teach by word and deed. A chance is given, a hand is extended. In high school this hand is all too frequently rejected. There, all too often pop-hedonism triumphs. There it is not a case of Torah sanctifying *Madda* (i.e. knowledge, high culture etc.), but of Torah confronting low culture amidst much noise and immaturity. In Israel, a Torah environment is introduced and the evil enemy arsenal of T.V., movies, music, and "going out" is depleted. Once this has been achieved, slowly a sub-culture of *bnei Torah* grows. They return here to Yeshiva and for them the *Rebbeim*, the *davening*, the relationships with like-minded *chaverim*, which all *bnei Torah* need, is provided right here on this campus seemingly so diverse. It is for them, or, better stated, in the hope that all *talmidei hayeshiva* be like them, that we exist. Oh, yes, we provide career training for those affluent professions so coveted by the upper class, but, quite frankly, all that is less than worthless unless eternity be first attended to.

I have my doubts and sources of confusion concerning some of what we do here. I often wonder why many basic problems are not more forcefully and clearly confronted, but one must view reality in its totality. This Yeshiva of ours, administrators and *rebbeim*, provide their *talmidim* with the tools necessary for the serious pursuit of Torah and *yir'a*. (Do some not heed that call? For sure, but then again where else in the world would they

have a place to stumble and fall against a backdrop which encourages them to rise?)

Interestingly, the good that goes on here seems to have little to do with Torah U'Maddaism (a fact which I find most ironic and somewhat sad), a lot to do with Zionism (generally not the lovey-dovey type either, a fact which I find not at all ironic and also somewhat sad), and something to do with tolerance and love (a fact substantiated by the legions of YUers in NCSY, JPSY, HASC, Kiruv, etc., etc. and certainly very grand!). So the message, if somewhat muffled, does come across.

I would like to see a bit more of an attempt to sanctify knowledge, beauty and experience in a conscious, coherent, livable way and a lot more of the "outrage" that Rabbi Lamm called for concerning a cartload of things. But this world is one forever imperfect. Institutions and dreams about them are inherently light years apart ('Bama really doesn't always win the SEC!).

But after *Shabbat* at Yeshiva, well, I'll take it. The *davening*, the *mitzvot*, the learning, the *ernskeit*, the caring... I will take it. And although I know very few of the college *Roshei Yeshiva* (and less of the *Roshei Yeshiva* in Eretz Yisrael, the absentee heroes of our tale) I would like to thank them for having given to those entrusted to their care a life of God and Torah, a life which intersected with mine for a few hours on *Shabbat*. Then there is Rabbi Lamm whose empathy, wisdom, and piety are put to innumerable tests, but manage to leave their stamp on this vast enterprise of ours. I don't envy the enormity of his task,

but I do envy the enormity of the *zekhusim* which he assuredly amasses while going about it.

So, who is doing something right here? Well, the people who should be, the *hanhala*, the *Roshei Yeshiva*, the serious *talmidim* and, indeed, the not so serious, for who is to say how *chashuv* before *Hashem* their hesitant practices are, given their own personal and environmental obstacles. Everyone who puts in serious *Beit Midrash* time during and after *seuder*, everyone who comes for *Shabbat* or to a *mesiba* (both of which there must be tons more of!), who becomes close to his *rebbe*, who writes for any of the Torah publications here. These are the good men who produce the spiritual grandeur which we confront. Some day, with God's help many of those who sit in my *shiur* will join their ranks. It is the realization of this fact, often forgotten in the haziness born of daily routine and the pain born of momentary frustrations, that enables me to endure descending once more into the maelstrom of my *shiur* with caring and hope.

This Friday I'll daven in *Shinaver* with some twenty *Va-Yoel Moshes* to choose from on the shelf. Maybe *Ha-Chomah* will come in the mail, or I'll read *Der Yid* or talk to one of my Satmarer friends who'll denounce the Sigater Rav for "softness on Zionism."

Then off to *Rachmistrivka* for *mincha*, a different Hasidic tradition there, one of humility, simplicity, sincere faith and much love. And, I am at home.

Yet, darn it, I am at home at YU, too.

I like those who flourish in it and those who flounder. I like those cadres of sincere *bnei Torah* who when they say the *Rav* do not mean the *Belzer*. I think they are doing just fine because of where they are and I think that this YU which nurtures them (despite its imperfections) is doing something very beautiful for God... So, Rabbi Cheifetz, please feel free, just call anytime. My number is listed. I will just have to make those speakers' fees elsewhere.

1 The frequent use of the word "tolerance/tolerance" in Rabbi Lamm's writings should not be misunderstood. It is used in a practical as opposed to a doctrinal sense. Civility, respect, empathy, indeed, love are to be brought to those in error. The objective nature of their error is in no way mitigated by the particular methodology we employ in addressing them or by our realization of and sympathy for the subjective factors which led to their intrinsic mistakes. Rabbi Lamm leaves little room for doubt when he writes, "The central point is this: the halakha is heteronomous, it obligates us, it is above us; we are bound by it and must live within its parameters even if doing so proves personally, politically, and even spiritually uncomfortable. It is, after all, the Word of God" (*Moment Magazine* June 1986, p. 24). He has referred to clearly differentiating between truth and falsehood as "the most important [point] of all" (*Jewish Observer*, June 1988, p.15).

The End Of Innocence

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heavenly retribution for the sin because God reserves a different punishment for them, described after the sin. Rather, Ran explains, the statement that they will die as a result of eating is simply a statement of fact. Closely following Rabbenu Bachya's interpretation, Ran writes that man was originally slated to live for eternity, as the strength of the soul would continually overpower that of emotions. When the Tree unleashed their bodily urges, Adam and Eve were no longer fit to live forever. Thus, death was but a natural result of eating from the Tree, not a punishment for such an action.

Eve sinned, Ran continues, because she failed to properly comprehend the intent of God's statement. She thought that God was warning her that the Tree was physically dangerous, its fruit poisonous. When she saw that the tree was in fact beautiful and pleasing to the senses, she could not believe that such a tree could do her physical damage. Ran defends her logic, citing the opinion of "wise men" that poison cannot have a pleasant taste or smell. Nevertheless, Adam and Eve sinned, because they relied on their own logic; based on a misinterpretation of God's words, they chose to ignore God's command. Their ultimate punishment left them in a state of

Ibn Ezra explains that God used such language to emphasize the command, or perhaps to tell Adam and Eve not to eat even a small amount from the Tree. Adam, however, understood differently, according to the *Malbim*. He thought that God would permit him to eat the fruit once it was removed from the tree; only from the tree itself could he not eat, while the fruit remained on the tree itself. God used intentionally ambiguous language, *Malbim* says, to test Adam's response. Adam sinned by relying on his own logical interpretation of God's command rather than accepting its simple meaning, or at least recognizing the possibility that he may have misinterpreted God's word.

Abarbanel seems to find the questions raised by *Akeidat Yitzchak* so compelling that he rejects the explanation of good and evil originated by Maimonides, instead agreeing with Radak and Ibn Ezra. He points out that *ta'avat hamishgal* is not inherently improper, as it leads to procreation. God only prohibited Adam and Eve from eating the fruit of the tree, Abarbanel says, because he wanted them to touch it and receive a more moderate amount of *ta'ava*. An abundance of this *ta'ava*, however, leaves man imprisoned by his desires and unable to control himself. Hence, it is called Tree of Knowledge of good and evil, because the qualities it produces in man

could not have concluded scientifically that it was not poisonous. Abarbanel's explanation of her conclusion is based instead on his novel approach to the role of the serpent in the story. Though a *pshat* reading of the Torah certainly indicates that the serpent spoke to Eve, Abarbanel claims that such a conversation never transpired; the Torah simply describes the thoughts in Eve's head which resulted from her seeing the serpent eat from the Tree and remain unharmed. In her mind, the serpent, through his actions, revealed to her that she would not die after eating from the Tree. Abarbanel feels that his explanation is textually valid because if the serpent actually spoke, the Torah would have written that God opened his mouth, as in the case of Balaam's donkey (Numbers 22:28). Though the Bible does use the verb "to say" in describing the actions between Eve and the serpent, Abarbanel brings textual supports to suggest that the serpent revealed some information to Eve, but not through speech.

Additionally, Nachmanides' question on Ibn Ezra and Radak does not bother Abarbanel. He explains that the phrase "you shall be like *Elohim*" refers to the fact that just as God creates worlds, man, too, has the ability to create worlds, through procreation. Children are called "worlds" because they are created

one with us, knowing good and evil" (3:22). Abarbanel says, he was mocking, in a sense, (*mal'ig*), what Adam and Eve thought would result from eating of the fruit.

The idea that God's words reflect a type of mocking equips Abarbanel with an explanation of another problematic phrase.

God seems to tell the angels that his reason for expelling man from the Garden is His fear that "he will send forth his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat and live forever" (3:22). Most commentators explain simply that God had originally intended that man should live forever, but after eating from the Tree, man forfeited that eternal physical existence. According to many, the Tree of Life's fruits acted to replenish life; thus, God banished Adam so that he would not be able to replenish his life, having proven himself unworthy of this boon. Abarbanel, however, considers the language of the verse odd, as God appears almost apprehensive. Therefore, he says that God mocks Adam's thoughts, as it were, acting as if He fears man's future actions.

In addition to those who understand the story of the Garden of Eden on the level of