

Editor's Introduction to the *Sivan 5766* Edition

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Welcome to the *Sivan 5766* edition of *The Edah Journal*. The Talmud tells us that Shimon Bar Yochai cursed the culture of his day, retreating into a cave to cut himself off from civilization and study Torah exclusively. He emerged with an attitude of *contemptus mundi* and tried to destroy all non-Torah human endeavor. But the talmudic sages were spiritually healthy and rejected his outlook: "The *halakhab* does not follow R. Shimon." We have come a long way since R. Shimon—but not always for the better. A burning question before Orthodoxy today is no longer whether to engage the outside world, but whether Orthodoxy interacts and appreciates non-Orthodox Jews or isolates itself in a sectarian existence.

In "A Challenge to Orthodoxy," the philanthropist Michael H. Steinhardt issues a heartfelt plea for Orthodox leadership and *yeshivot* not to separate from the rest of the Jewish people—*Kelal Yisrael*. He issued his remarks at *Yeshivat Chovevei Torah*—"The Open Yeshiva," whose name implies that other Orthodox *yeshivot* are closing themselves off from all people and culture that are not in lock-step with *yeshiva* Orthodoxy. If this assumption is true, Orthodoxy needs to rethink whether it indeed takes the traditional concept of *Kelal Yisrael* as a serious value and still wishes to fulfill God's covenantal challenge to Abraham's descendants to "teach *tzedakah* and *mishpat*" to the world.

Edah is committed to *Kelal Yisrael*, and this means we have an obligation to positive interaction with the Orthodox community to our religious right as well as connecting with non-Orthodox Jews. For us, *Kelal Yisrael* is no mere theoretical category, but a vital ingredient of our religious life.

We are honored to publish Rabbi Daniel Sperber's article, "'Friendly' *Halakhab* and the 'Friendly' *Poseq*." A voluminous literature already exists about halakhic method. That library continues to grow, and it is doubtful that any important future article on the topic of halakhic decision-making can be written that does not reference R. Sperber's exhaustive and magisterial study. Basing himself on a wide array of traditional sources, R. Sperber finds that contemporary *pesiqab* and *pesaq* in the areas of inter-human relations have deviated from the time-honored halakhic tradition in which compassion, sensitivity to suffering, leniency, independence of thought and human values were material and often determining factors. In this article, R. Sperber also limns the personality traits and sensibilities required for a *poseq* and a rabbinic leader.

I trace the rabbinic interpretations of the divine commandments to utterly destroy the Canaanite and Amalekite nations—including innocent women and children. The talmudic and rabbinic traditions understood that these biblical *mitsvot* interpreted literally were morally problematic, entailing both genocide and unjust warfare. The traditions took responsibility for these dangerous texts and employed interpretative strategies to ensure that Jews following the *halakhab* would not engage in immoral behavior or unjustified reasoning regarding these commandments. This interpretative "moralization" is what separates Jewish tradition from other religious traditions justifying immoral acts arising out of a literal understanding of divine texts or divine revelation.



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Continuing our series of contemporary Jewish rabbinic thinkers, Alan Brill explicates the religious thought of R. Yehuda Amital, a unique figure in Israel who believes in the divine character of the State of Israel, yet rejects any messianic considerations in practical halakhic decisions or in setting national policy. Professor Brill examines R. Amital's approach to the tension between halakhic and ethical values, the development of moral sensibilities, "frumkeit" and piety, the impact of historical events on religious philosophy, messianism and the religious nature of the State of Israel. Brill illuminates the sources of R. Amital's thought that are largely unknown to American Jews. Although R. Amital has not worked out a systematic philosophy, he continues to have significant impact on the next generation of Israel's religious and political leaders.

Steven Greenberg responds to Asher Lopatin's *Kislev* 5765 (edition 4:2) critique of Greenberg's book, *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish World*. Greenberg clarifies that he did not intend his book to be either a halakhic justification for homosexual behavior or a solution for the problems, pain and frustrations of Jews who wish to stay within the bounds of Torah and the observant community while unable to deny their homosexual natures. Rather, he articulated the need for Orthodox communities and leaders to understand the existential crises of such persons and adopt sensitive policies that do not humiliate, ignore or alienate gay and lesbian Jews. He asks that halakhic and communal leadership begin a process to confront the difficult plight of homosexual Jews.

Much has been written in literature generally and in *The Edah Journal* specifically about the status and proper behavior of Jewish women. In a review essay, Alan Yuter analyzes the scholarship presented in Professor Avraham Grossman's book, *Pious and Rebellious: Jewish Women in Medieval Europe*. Yuter finds Grossman's history to be revealing regarding the actual behavior of Jewish women in medieval times and his logic to be a model of correct Modern Orthodox thinking about how normative halakhic values were applied to what would today be termed, "feminist" attitudes and actions. Grossman demonstrates that there are medieval

precedents for contemporary feminist practices, some of which achieved explicit or implicit approval of the rabbinic leaders of those times. Yuter concludes that for Orthodoxy to be true to its principles, it must display fidelity to history and normative halakhic canons, in contrast to relying on imagined assumptions about the past.

Reuven Kimelman offers a review essay of R. Irving Greenberg's, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity*. Long a *provocateur* in Orthodoxy, Greenberg has written a bold new analysis of how Jews and Christians can accept each other and their religions as divine complements to God's covenantal plan for humanity. No longer need Jews and Christians regard each other as enemies whose religions can only engage in theological duels to the death. Greenberg contends that both the Holocaust and the State of Israel are revelational events that shatter many old assumptions and that demand a new relationship between Judaism and Christianity if we are to have any hope of a future better than the past. For Greenberg, only this new relationship can realize God's plan for the Jewish people. Kimelman notes that many of Greenberg's claims are "penetrating in their audacity," and yet are open to historical and philosophic questions. Still, Kimelman concludes that anyone struggling with the role of Judaism in a pluralistic world will find treasures in the courage and power of Greenberg's thinking on theology, Judaism and Christianity.

Tsvi Blanchard writes a review of Professor Reuven Kimelman's Hebrew book on *Lechah Dodi* and *Kabbalat Shabbat*. He finds that Kimelman has given the best construction of the liturgical author's meaning, yet the full significance of those prayers elude those of us who are not intimately familiar with kabbalistic symbols and its male-female understanding of the universe.

Once again, we invite you to join *The Edah Journal* community by sending your comments and responses to journal@edah.org.

B'verakhab,

